

Ecuador: Mining Protests Marginalized, but Growing

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January 21, 2009

On Tuesday, nation-wide protests over large scale metal mining called by the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE) demonstrated growing, broad-based participation. Roughly 12,000 people from indigenous, environmentalist, human rights, campesino and rural water organizations participated in diverse actions across eleven provinces of the small Andean nation.

Taking place only a few days after the popular President Rafael Correa celebrated two years into his first mandate, government and media reactions aimed to diminish the day's significance. The press and government insisted that protests were poorly attended trying to infer that national consensus has been reached over a new mining law.

Ecuador has been an oil producer for over forty years. Although large scale metal exploration has been ongoing since the early 90s, no project has yet reached production. Mining activities are currently suspended until the new law is passed.

Attempts to minimize conflicts aim to clear the path for largely Canadian transnational corporations to bring gold and copper finds into production. Future mining revenues are promoted as the next source of state revenue for recently expanded social programs.

Thousands protest in the central highlands

Particularly strong participation took place in the central highlands where around 9,000 indigenous people shut down transportation along the Panamerican Highway in the provinces of Cotopaxi and Tungurahua.

In Cotopaxi, men and women of all ages maintained blockades in high spirits animated by jokes and even laughter as they faced police and angry bus drivers. These demonstrations passed without serious incident.

While Cotapaxi is not the focal point of major mineral exploration, indigenous people in the area showed solidarity with communities in other parts of the highlands and the Amazon affected by large-scale metal mining. Defence of their right to water, enshrined in Ecuador's newly approved constitution, unites them.

Nancy, a young woman from the community of San Juan, emphasized the importance of access to clean water for indigenous communities. "In San Juan, we already have poor access to water. Without water, what can we do?"

President of the CONAIE Marlon Santi pointed out that the "majority of mining concessions are on indigenous and campesino lands." He also challenged President Correa's program of "change," saying that "the people who grow potatoes, who grow maize, who live in the Amazon and the mangroves, we are where change is coming from."

Santi added that today's mobilizations shows that the opposition to mining is not relegated to "four nobodies," as Correa has charged.

Protesters violent and subversive

However, while government declarations and media coverage downplayed the day of action, they also portrayed activists as subversive and police as victims.

The President and the Minister of Government Fernando Bustamante were quoted by various national press saying that the indigenous confederation is trying to destabilize Correa whose popularity hovers around 70%. These unfounded allegations are based on the fact that the national indigenous movement has played an important role in the overthrow of two past governments, most recently in 2001.

The CONAIE emphatically denies that this was part of their objectives. Rather, the day of action was carried out in the spirit of building alliances between urban and rural organizations, as well as indigenous and non-indigenous communities. Demands focused on the need for greater democracy and respect for the collective rights of communities.

But media coverage emphasized injuries and arrests, emphasizing injuries sustained by eleven police in isolated confrontations with protesters. Police forces were more than doubled Tuesday and came into conflict with activists during efforts to reopen highway transportation north of the capital and in the Province of Imbabura.

"At the end of the day, we are always painted as the bad guys," says Janeth Cuji, Director of Communication for the CONAIE. The CONAIE reported ten arrests as well as two hospitalized with injuries. They added that several buses of activists were held back from attending demonstrations taking place in Quito and denounced heavy police presence saying that "repression and detentions aim to silence voices in defence of life."

Various Ecuadorian human rights and urban-based organizations also denounced the detentions. They expressed their solidarity with demands for debate over the country's dependence on extractive industries considering the social and environmental costs of large scale metal mining.

A long term struggle

Tuesday's mobilization is also seen as just one more step in lengthy struggles by communities already affected by large scale mining.

These groups, many of which have been struggling against mining at the local level for years, first coalesced in a national movement shortly following Correa's inauguration in 2007. Their key aim was that Correa declare Ecuador free of large scale metal mining. Most recently, ongoing efforts have taken place in protest of the new mining law which they say privileges transnational companies.

Within the last two weeks in the South of Ecuador, three days of road blockades were sustained in the Province of Azuay followed by a six day hunger strike in the provincial capital of Cuenca with participation from the highlands and the Southern Amazon. Demands focused on dialogue with the government and reiterated opposition to gold and copper mining in headwaters in high wetlands (paramos) and Amazonian rainforests. As a result of these earlier actions, two activists remain imprisoned and many others face charges.

Yet despite further anticipated repression this week, around 2,000 people from across the province joined a peaceful march Tuesday. A wider range of organizations and communities participated than has been seen for about a year and a half. The demonstration concluded with a pampamesa, or a mass communal lunch, in the city's central park.

Nidia Soliz from the Peoples' Health Movement of Cuenca outlines some persistent concerns with the new law.

She observes that it gives top priority to mining activities by declaring them a public utility in all phases of development, guaranteeing access to infrastructure, water, and energy for companies which could come in conflict with needs of local communities and lead to expropriation of their land. She concludes, "The bill pertains to an economic objective of the government, as well as the greater interests of multinational organizations and transnational mining companies, regardless of possible impacts on remarkable biodiversity and headwaters, as well as community health and well being."

Despite growing dissent, the government says community needs will be met and that the new mining law is ready for final approval this week. But hopes that those involved will simply accept that decisions around mining are already made is wishful thinking. Instead, it appears that a broader movement based upon the defence of water, nature and collective rights now enshrined in the country's constitution is emerging to continue the struggle for more profound changes in Ecuador.

Daniel Denvir contributed reporting from Cotapaxi.