

The Right to Protest, for an Ecuador Free of Large Scale Mining

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By Jennifer Moore
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A growing coalition of organizations opposed to large scale metallic mining in Ecuador will return to the streets on Monday April 21st, in a follow up to an April 2nd strike called by the National Coordinating Committee in Defense of Life and Sovereignty. The newly established People's Assembly includes the National Coordinating Committee, along with a wide variety of groups from across the country. Rejecting the heavy repression faced by protestors on April 2nd, they will exercise their right to protest. Despite a new mining decree being debated this week by the National Constituent Assembly, the protesters are standing by their demands. The decree could revert up to 80% of the mining concessions across the country, but critics doubt that it will impact the projects that concern them most.

April 2nd

“We don't have arms, our weapon is the word, so let us protest,” said one rural resident from the Southern Ecuadorian dairy farming community of Victoria del Portete. He declined to share his name because of the strong politics presence. Later that day, on April 2nd, an Armoured Personnel Carrier shooting rounds of tear gas drove through the peaceful blockade in which he was participating. A couple of hours earlier, the Provincial Governor had visited the blockade and tried to convince protesters to leave the highway junction in order to let a long line of vehicles pass.

“We want to protest so that it's made very clear in our new constitution that we don't want mining because of the damage it will do to our environment,” the protester continued, referring to the large scale gold mining project being developed by IAMGOLD in the high grasslands, or *páramo*, that cover over farm-checked river valley. Several hundred local residents and university students from the nearby city of Cuenca came out to support the strike. They are concerned about impacts that gold mining could have on the headwaters serving the city of over 200,000 and the surrounding area.

Similar blockades took place the same day along several highway junctions in the Southern Amazonian region where Canadian-financed companies Ecuacorriente and Aurelian Resources have large mineral concessions. Aurelian Resources' *Fruta del Norte* Project aims to extract what is considered one of the largest recent discoveries of gold in the world. *Fruta del Norte* and Ecuacorriente's Mirador Project both operate along the Condor mountain range close to the border with Peru. The Condor range was recently declared part of a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve due to its tremendous cultural and ecological diversity. Both projects have been the site of serious conflict in the region.

We can't drink gold

Residents from the rural parish of Jima also came out for the protest in Victoria del Portete. Jima is located near a gold reserve toward the eastern part of the central-southern Province of Azuay, where residents mounted a major resistance to the presence of mining giant Newmont during the early 1990s. “Ecuador is cursed for being a country rich with gold, and also with water,” said one middle aged man

who has been involved since that time. “But what are we going to be left with, gold or water?” he asked the several dozen men and women gathered around. Speaking over the cheer that rose up in favour of water, he continued, “I think the answer is that we’re going to stick with water because we can’t drink gold.”

As the situation grew tenser, a group of women stood out in front of the several hundred protestors chanting “Let’s go people, we won’t be put under!” and “Long live nature!” They held their position behind the line of rocks and burning tires separating the protestors from dozens of soldiers. The police dislodged the blockade through the use of tear gas, which made it impossible for protestors to remain in the area.

Government orders

The day before the strike, Minister of the Government Fernando Bustamante called on security forces to take all necessary measures to prevent the strike, saying that such a demonstration is “absolutely inadmissible.” Bustamante was quoted in *El Mercurio*, the Cuenca area’s main newspaper, calling protestors “antipatriotic.” He accused the protestors of acting irresponsibly in a time of national crisis, referring to the massive coastal flooding and the diplomatic crisis with Colombia. Ecuador is in a standoff with its Andean neighbour following Colombia’s March 1st bombardment of a FARC encampment in Ecuadorian territory. It appears that the Ecuadorian government may be using the crisis to clamp down on domestic protest. Bustamante claimed that the protestors were “carried away by their ideological obsessions.”

Azuay Governor Osvaldo Larriva justified the use of force used to dislodge the blockade, saying that he had tried to “dialogue” with protestors but that it is “not acceptable to have a closed road.” The governor refused to respond to claims that his government has ignored the unconstitutionality of mining concessions. Protestors charge that the lack of consultation with local communities over large scale mining developments renders the deals illegal. The governor evaded the question, claiming that “the interests of the protest organizers should be investigated” and that “the government is doing everything it can...together with the National Constituent Assembly to improve the situation around mining concessions that were granted under a previous government.”

By the end of the 12 hour strike on April 2nd, 17 people had been detained and two hospitalized. A vigil and peaceful protest to support the liberation of those detained the following day was also met with heavy force. Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa also made comments during his weekly national radio broadcast lambasting protestors. The National Coordinating Committee for the Defense of Life and Sovereignty has also reported that several local leaders have received death threats.

High profile propaganda

There has been little coverage in the local and national media on the protests or the protestors concerns. Nevertheless, transnational mining corporation Ecuacorriente S.A., a fully owned subsidiary of Canada’s Corriente Resources, entered into the debate.

Just two days before the April 2nd strike, Ecuacorriente S.A. released a full colour magazine that was distributed along with the national newspaper, *El Comercio*. Entitled “Mining: Equitable Community Relations,” the magazine highlights a series of the company’s supposed community projects. Ecuacorriente’s gold and copper Mirador Project in the Southern Amazonian region has been suspended by the government for over a year.

While the company claims that its investments in local education, health care and cultural activities constitute good mining practices, one resident from Victoria del Portete, reflecting on similar practices by mining interests in the area, calls such handouts “crumbs under the table” next to company profits. He also notes that activities like this “divide families and communities,” tying handout recipients to support for mining projects.

The day after the April 2nd strike, National Chamber of Mining President César Espinosa was quoted in *El Comercio*, emphasizing that Ecuador could stand to lose \$220 billion if it does not proceed with mining. Reuters has reported that reserves in Ecuador are worth \$130 billion. It is also infrequently mentioned that Espinosa was also Minister of Mines and Petroleum when radical reforms deregulated the country’s mining law. The recommendations were part of a World Bank funded study in the 1990s.

The right to protest

Members of the newly established People’s Assembly have called for a 24-hour strike to take place on April 21st. The Assembly is made up of a number of organizations, including the National Coordinating Committee for the Defense of Life and Sovereignty, the National Environmental Assembly, the Southern Front of Resistance Against Large Scale Mining, other provincial coalitions, as well as indigenous organizations such as the CONAIE and ECUARUNARI.

Along with demanding the annulment of all mineral concessions, social movement organizations are also fighting for the right to protest. They demand “support for the social and environmental rights of people and organizations acting in defence of the environment” and reject the heavy repression of April 2nd.

In March, the National Constituent Assembly granted amnesty to over 350 activists across the country, including those participating in nine mining conflicts. The Assembly stated that they were “acting in defence of their communities and the environment.” These proclamations are seriously undermined by the repression of protestors, which organizers are afraid might be repeated this Monday.

Convenient timing?

Coming just a few days before the April 21st strike, protestors are questioning the timing of the National Constituent Assembly debate over a mining decree. Announced Tuesday, the Assembly has been promising to issue a decree for over two months that could revoke the vast majority of mining concessions. A committee of assembly members from President Correa’s political movement *Acuerdo Pais* presented the proposal for debate.

While the draft decree contains provisions that revoke up to 80% of the mineral concessions, Southern Front of Resistance Against Large Scale Mining Coordinator Salvador Quishpe says the announcement is actually intended rather to demobilize the movement before the upcoming strike. Even if approved, he is doubtful that it will be implemented or effect current projects.

The Monday strike is going forward as planned. In addition to seeking the annulment of all current mineral concessions by the National Constituent Assembly, protestors will also demand that hydroelectric concessions be revoked where they have generated conflicts, and that the Copper Port project planned for Port Bolívar near the city of Machala should be blocked. Most importantly, these people claim that they have a right to defend their homes and their land in the face of environmentally

destructive mega-projects.