

Peru: Violence targets anti-mining activists

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By Jennifer Moore
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Local leaders call for dialogue and a full investigation after two campesinos were killed by police in north-western Peru last week.

On Wednesday afternoon, Vicente Robledo Ramírez, aged 55 and father of eight children, and Castulo Correa Huayama, aged 36 and father of six, were shot dead in a confrontation with national police. Another six campesinos were wounded and two detained. The police report that they also sustained several wounded, but further details have not been released.

Over the weekend, a reported 2,000 campesinos turned out to mourn the death of the men in the remote rural province of Huancabamba where campesinos have been opposing a Chinese and UK owned mine for the last six years. The Rio Blanco project is principally owned by the Chinese Zijin Consortium together with the UK's Monterrico Metals.

Juan Amancio Romero, son of Vicente, asked authorities “to investigate what took place and to respect the decisions of the people who don't want the mine to continue in the area, nor a NGO [believed to be closely linked to the company] or police.”

The Front for the Sustainable Development of the Northern Border of Peru (FDSFNP by its initials in Spanish) also called for further investigation and reiterated “its will to dialogue” with the government.

The incident brings the death toll in the area to seven. On November 1st, two security guards and the mine site manager were killed in an armed attack by unidentified perpetrators at the Rio Blanco mining camp, now the subject of reserved investigations involving national police. Also, in 2004 and 2005, two campesinos were killed as result of repression against protests.

According to the People's Ombudsman (Defensoria del Pueblo), police report that the deaths last week took place after they detained a man in the area of the community of Cajas-Canchaque. The regional police chief Walter Rivera said that the detention was part of investigations into the November attack on the mine camp and that those implicated in this prior incident had been refusing to cooperate. President Servando Aponte of the campesino community challenged the police version saying that officers acted “arrogantly” and that when they entered the home of Lorenzo Rojas to detain him that his neighbours came out in his defence because there was no official warrant for his detention.

For the last six years, the Rio Blanco project, a proposed open-pit copper and molybdenum mine, has generated opposition from campesino communities on whose land it would be located given potential impacts on water supplies and agricultural activities taking place within the watershed. As a result, the company has never obtained the two-thirds approval from local assemblies that it is required to have by law in order to operate in the area. On September 16th 2007, three rural districts in Huancabamba and Ayabaca participated a popular referendum and reaffirmed their opposition to the mine in which a majority voted against any mining activity in the area.

Earlier attempts at dialogue broke down because of government refusal to discuss the results of the 2007 referendum. Since then, around 300 local leaders have faced legal processes believed to be a means of political persecution for their role in the referendum. Most recently, tensions have risen following the November 1st attack on the mining camp for which it is believed that those opposed to the mine are being principally targeted as part of investigations by national police.

A single hypothesis

Javier Jahncke of the Ecumenical Foundation for Development and Peace (Fedepaz) whose organization is part of a national network that promotes the sustainable use of natural resources and the rights of rural and indigenous communities says they have concluded that police are leading investigations into the November incident “with a single hypothesis in which they assume that the campesinos were the authors of the crime.”

The day following the attack the FDSFNP, a coalition of local community leaders opposed to the mine, expressed its condolences for the deaths and urged that thorough investigations take place. According to the Peru Support Group, the UK company Monterrico Metals was also “quick to distance itself from any accusations blaming local community groups for this latest violence and indeed thanked local communities for the help they showed the mine camp's employees who escaped the attack.”

However, Jahncke is concerned that police have set aside other possible explanations for the attack to focus on the possible involvement of the mine's opponents. He suggests other theories, such that Rio Blanco's workers might have been killed as part of an attempted robbery or that there was a dispute among workers that led to reprisals, are being ignored. He notes that they have not been privy to evidence being considered as part of investigations since they have been reserved by police.

A congresswoman from the northwestern department of Piura has also received testimonies that police have detained and tortured people in local communities as part of efforts to gain confessions concerning the attack.

Jahncke further questions the timing of the recent violence given that a judge in the English High Court has only recently upheld an injunction to freeze the assets of Monterrico Metals saying that 29 men and women from Piura have a “good arguable case” against the company for allegations of abuses which took place at the Rio Blanco mine site in 2005.

“This lawsuit has seriously affected the image of the company Monterrico Metals,” says Jahncke, “and by extension, Zijin.” This raises questions in his mind about the recent violence and how it is being dealt with “because of who is being affected by this situation, and if it isn't the same campesinos that have been resorting to international channels to be able to be heard since such a process has not begun in their own country.”

Fears militarization

As a result, Jahncke sees last week's violence as part of a “clear effort at any cost” to make way for the mine. He fears that by creating the public perception of a rural population that is “unmanageable” and “violent” that the state will be able to “justify the militarization of this area.”

Only days after the November attack on the mining camp, Peruvian Prime Minister Velásquez Quesquén indicated that the government was evaluating the possibility of installing a military base in

the area. The General Manager Jian Wu of the principal stakeholder in the Rio Blanco project, the Chinese Zijin Consortium, was present at the meeting.

However, says Jahncke, “These conflicts cannot be resolved with the military protecting the company operations. This will just put more fuel on the fire and generate more conflict... For this to go ahead would be the worst thing possible.”

Overall, he is concerned that the government continues to favour the company's presence “over the property rights of the communities.”

He concludes, “Until this situation is seen as the rights of some being preferred over the rights of others, in a situation that is not legal, and in which rights have been violated for a long time, the problem will not be solved and you will see decisions that will collide with community rights and the conflict will continue to grow, which is what we least want and what hopefully the state least wants to see happen as well.”