Diario CoLatino Opions Section

Thursday, January 17, 2008

Metallic Mining: A National Threat

by the National Roundtable Against Metallic Mining's Communication Team

The possible exploitation of metallic mines does not only represent a threat for the communities of Cabanas and the other places within our national territory where foreign companies have found deposits of precious metals, really it is a danger for the entire country.

It is necessary to raise this issue because some people and institutions—including several that are aware of the dangers that these projects cause—insist when they are speaking about this problem to refer to "the communities affected by mining."

It is true that the communities close to these projects will be the first to suffer the consequences in their health and in their productive activities as a result of the immediate damages to water, soil, and air.

But these environmental, economic, and social dangers will soon reach other places, until having medium and long term negative impacts throughout the country; for example, we would have to import the water that we drink as well as the water we use to produce food.

And this is not an exaggeration.

It is easily shown if we take into account two characteristics of the extraction of gold and silver: the use of enormous quantities of water and the contamination of water sources, resulting from the runoff of residual waters poisoned with cyanide and other toxic chemicals that are used in the separation of precious minerals from the rest of the rocks.

Some of these chemicals, especially cyanide, have been prohibited in the United States, Canada, and European countries.

We will look at the first aspect: intensive use of water.

The Pacific Rim company admits, in their study on environmental impact presented to the Ministry of the Environment and Natural Resources, that it would waste 10.4 liters of water per second only at the El Dorado mine. That's 624 liters per minute, or 37,440 liters per hour, or 898,560 liters per day, over a 10 year period.

And there are 29 mining projects to be imposed by Canadian, Australian, and US companies throughout the Northern Zone of the country.

Therefore, it is realistic to warn that mining exploitation on a large scale throughout this region —that in the opinion of the National Commission on Development should be declared the "country's green zone"—would exhaust this vital water reserve.

This would cause tremendous damage to the tributary rivers that feed the Lempa River, which already have a very diminished flow—particularly in the dry season.

The diminishment of the availability of water for human consumption would put us at serious risk, taking into account the already growing water crisis.

We will revise the second element: the contamination of water sources.

In the same study on the environmental impact of the El Dorado mine project, the referred to Canadian Company declares that it will use two tons of cyanide daily in the process of leaching to extract gold. That's to say, an average of 60 tons every month, or 720 tons every year, a total of 8,640 tons of cyanide during the lifespan of the mine. We remind you that there are 29 mining projects throughout the country that would use this toxic chemical.

If all of these metallic mines use the same quantity of cyanide as Pacific Rim will use in the El Dorado project and last the same 10 years, the total cyanide used in the 29 mining projects would be 250,560 tons.

And for all the technology capable of neutralizing some of the effects of cyanide, the contamination levels would be catastrophic.

It will be the work of another article to discuss the negative impacts of cyanide on human health. However it's enough to say that it causes illnesses that inevitably result in death.

The contaminated waters coming from the mines would arrive at the rivers of the Northern Zone that eventually arrive at the Lempa River.

According to the Salvadoran scientist Dina Larios, it should be noted that the rivers of the Northern Zone would turn into the sewers of the mines since their current flow is less than the quantity of residual waters that the mines would deposit in them.

The arrival of these waters to the Lempa River, would exacerbate the dimension of the problem, since almost 50% of the drinkable water for the metropolitan area comes from the Lempa River.

This shows that if the mining projects of Texistepeque, Metapán, Nueva Concepción, and other municipalities of Santa Ana and Chalatenango are begun, half the water in the capital's pipes would be poisoned with cyanide.

Then, the problem will take on a national dimension, considering that the metropolitan area is home to the greater part of the population and is where the majority of the food and drink industries have established themselves.

The humanitarian and social crisis will be extreme. The final toll, unimaginable.

We have argued that metallic mining is a national threat due to its monumental negative impact on water resources, relating this problem with human consumption of water.

But this would also have a direct repercussion on the productivity of the country, as economic activities like agriculture, livestock, fishing, and industry are impossible if we finish off or if we contaminate the water.

Mining, as such, is incompatible with development and with life. Therefore, it is a national threat.