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Guest Author

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Once-Clear River Spreads Toxins Across Borders in Bolivia

by Guest

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[The following article by Mike Ceaser is reprinted with the permission of Noticias Aliadas in Lima, Peru. It first appeared in the June 14, 1999, edition of the weekly publication Latinamerica Press.]

The Pilcomayo River begins near the southern Bolivian city of Potosi and winds for about 900 km to the Paraguay- Argentina border. But while other rivers provide bountiful harvests, cleansing waters, and fish-filled nets, the Pilcomayo is a source of concern to people living along its banks. "It flows black," said Joaquin Palenque, a storekeeper in Puente Sucre, a town on the Pilcomayo between Sucre and Potosi. "Before, the water was crystal clear."

While some question Palenque's memory of a clear-flowing Pilcomayo, most agree the river is now a disaster. The upper reaches are poisoned by mining and municipal waste, and downstream the river is disappearing under its own silt. Newspapers often describe the Pilcomayo as "the world's most polluted river." "It's completely lost its naturalness," said environmental engineer Rene Jesus Mendez. "It's a dead river."

Experts say the Pilcomayo's problems stem from a combination of natural and human factors. About 42 mineral processing plants near Potosi dump 1,200 tons of tailings daily into the Pilcomayo watershed. Leaching from abandoned mine tailings adds to the toxins. Cities along the river lack sewage treatment facilities and dump their refuse into the river. Several changes in past decades have worsened the situation. Twelve years ago, COMIBOL, the government mining corporation, was broken up and privatized.

Eager to cut costs, the new private mines around Potosi slashed environmental safeguards and began dumping their tailings directly into the Pilcomayo's tributaries, Mendez said. In addition, a 1985 drop in tin prices led miners to switch to mining more-toxic lead and zinc. In 1996, a dike broke at El Porco mine, owned by then president Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada (1993-1997), sending 330,000 metric tons of toxic mud flowing down the Pilcomayo into Paraguay and Argentina and drawing international attention to the river's condition. Campesinos living along the Pilcomayo are advised not to drink the water.

Residents opposite Puente Sucre get drinking water from a well but bathe and wash their clothes in the river's water. But Palenque said Puente Sucre residents use water from the Pilcomayo for drinking and crop irrigation after letting solid waste settle out. People living near the river say crops irrigated with river water are stunted. Palenque blames the water for stomach pains and more serious ailments suffered by Puente Sucre residents.

Government officials, however, say there is no proof that health problems are caused by pollution of the river. Sediment buildup is creating additional problems. Sediment buildup in the Pilcomayo

along the Argentina- Paraguay border has ruined Paraguayan irrigation canals and created other problems. The river's lower reaches fill with silt and become dry beds at an average rate of 5.3 km a year. Between 1970 and 1995, 200 km of the lower Pilcomayo disappeared. The river's retreat could have international repercussions, says Agustin Cardenas of the Sustainable Development Ministry, who suggested that Paraguay and Argentina might take legal action. Fish survive further downstream, in the department of Tarija, where pollutants in the Pilcomayo are diluted by tributaries.

Residents along the river, mostly Guarani indigenous people, depend on fish from the Pilcomayo for food and income, but it is a precarious economy. A decrease in the number and size of Pilcomayo fish in recent years has been blamed on a combination of factors, including pollution, overfishing, and construction of dams in Paraguay and Argentina, which block young fish from swimming upstream.

In addition, in 1997 a team of Dutch and Bolivian researchers studying shad, the river's most economically important species, found the fishes' livers contained three to four times the concentration of zinc and copper found in fish from unpolluted rivers. The bones and intestines also contained high concentrations of heavy metals. While none of the 40 fish sampled showed dangerous heavy- metal levels in their muscles, 10 had concentrations in fatty tissues that exceeded Dutch health standards.

Researchers say the shad are edible as long as the bones and entrails are not eaten, but consumers' fear about eating fish from the Pilcomayo has affected the income of the Guarani, who depend on selling their catch in city markets. Studies by the Center of Regional Studies for the Development of Tarija between 1995 and 1997 showed people living near the Pilcomayo did not have dangerous levels of lead in their blood, although they found a 25% increase in lead levels in fish bones and entrails.

Center director Miguel Castro Arze said pollution is forcing Guarani people to migrate from the Pilcomayo's banks to Bolivian cities and Argentina. Solutions require commitment by government and miners Mendez said the first step to cleaning up the river is simple. "You have to cut off the source (of pollution), and the source is Potosi," said Mendez, who has proposed that Potosi's fabled Cerro Rico, which has been mined since before colonial times, be designated a protected area.

That label, more commonly used for pristine natural areas, would require mining companies to clean up their operations, Mendez said, adding that inexpensive techniques, such as installing filters and reusing water, could dramatically reduce contamination.

The city of Sucre has received German aid to install a sewage-treatment facility, and Potosi plans to build a dike that will hold mine tailings for about 15 years. Reforestation in the Pilcomayo watershed would reduce desertification and decrease erosion. But Mendez said miners oppose his proposal, fearing it would put an end to their industry. Many Bolivian miners still work the shafts of Cerro Rico under the primitive conditions of colonial miners. Cardenas said miners have made plans to clean up their operations. "The question is whether they'll comply," he said, "because it requires a lot of resources."

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