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Mine Conflict Leaves 16 Dead, More Wounded

by LADB Staff

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A conflict in the Bolivian department of Oruro resulted in at least 16 deaths and dozens of wounded in early October as two different factions of miners attacked each other with dynamite and firearms at the site of the world's richest tin deposits. On Oct. 4, conflict rocked the town of Huanuni in the department of Oruro, as unionized miners working for the state-owned mining company battled independent miners for access to Huanuni mine. The conflict, marking the most violent period in President Evo Morales' nine-month-old administration, led the president to replace the minister of mining and the head of the state-owned mining company. The country's top union group called for Morales to be prosecuted for the deaths, and the event joins several ongoing tumults in Bolivia that are putting political pressure on the president.

Huanuni turned into a battlefield

The conflict is centered on Posokoni hill, where mining groups estimate that there are 1 million tons of tin Bolivia's richest deposits. In the hill is the Huanuni mine, about 290 km south of La Paz and about 50 km from the departmental capital city of Oruro, where approximately 1,000 salaried miners working for the Corporacion Minera de Bolivia (COMIBOL) have access to the deeper, richer tin deposits. Currently, Posokoni produces about 10,000 fine metric tons of tin annually, a little less than half of Bolivia's production and 5% of world production.

About 4,000 more "independent" miners organized into cooperatives also want access to the mine and currently work shallower, less rich veins of tin. They are paid according to their production level, putting extreme pressure on the cooperativists to churn out ore. The unionized COMIBOL workers, by contrast, have an interest in mining more steadily, saying they can keep the community viable for 30 years while cooperativist mining, they claim, would deplete the mines in two years and leave Huanuni destitute.

Tensions between the two mineworkers' factions have been simmering for months, but they exploded into an open exchange of explosives and bullets on Oct. 4. Cooperativists advanced on Posokoni hill, attacking union miners, while the COMIBOL unionists fought back from the neighborhood below. Reports mentioned the two sides hurled dynamite and shot at one another. The cooperativists, positioned further up the hill, reportedly filled tires with dynamite and ammonium nitrate, known as anfo, which is a chemical that increases the explosion's force. They rolled the tires down the hill toward the salaried workers, in one case hitting a shop stocked with dynamite and causing a chain reaction that destroyed several houses, leaving many families homeless.

Vice President Alvaro Linera Garcia defended the government's decision not to send the military into Huanuni, saying it would be like, "throwing gasoline on the fire." The government did move 700 police into the town armed with non-lethal weapons like tear gas to try to quell the battle. Medical teams were also dispatched to treat casualties. Hostilities between the miners ended in a tentative truce Oct. 6 after the government sent the police to Huanuni. Official figures counted 16 dead and 61 wounded, while reports of higher numbers also came out.

Federal officials refused to confirm an Oct. 6 count of 21 dead that people's defender Waldo Albarracin announced. Government spokesperson Alex Contreras was willing to confirm "some inhumane actions" like the explosion of water reservoirs. Some injury reports were also higher than official numbers, reaching as high as 200. Oruro newspaper La Patria said on Oct. 6 it had found 109 casualties that could be named. Government efforts to mediate a truce were halting and hampered by bad communication within the community.

Bolivian newspapers La Razon and Los Tiempos reported that negotiations were not even started in the days after the open conflicts. Presidential spokesman Alex Contreras said both sides agreed to allow humanitarian aid to enter the town of Huanuni. "We're only in a truce to give our families a burial," said Roxana Mercado, a leader of the mining cooperatives. "We haven't stopped the fight. Now the government will say if it will have a solution."

Morales hints at expropriating mines

Morales avoided taking sides, and instead directed comments against a third actor in the mining industry saying, on Oct. 7, the government should expropriate mines where private owners have not invested sufficiently. "Mining concessions where there has not been investment must return to the hands of the Bolivian government," Morales told Indian coca farmers in the central Chapare region.

Journalists April Howard and Benjamin Dangl wrote in the political newsletter Counterpunch that the conflict is due in part to the leftover ravages caused by "neoliberal" policies previous Bolivian governments imposed on the mining sector. After a severe decline in tin prices in 1985, the government began a process of privatizing COMIBOL's operations and cutting some 25,000 jobs (see Chronicle, 1986-10-30, 1990-05-22, 1992-01-14, 1992-10-29, 1994-07-21 and 1995-06-15).

Bolivian mines once produced more than 30% of the world's tin. But production came to almost a complete halt following a collapse of the world metal market in 1985. The decimation of COMIBOL left thousands of miners jobless and desperate, leading some, in many cases, to form independent cooperatives like those in Huanuni, especially after metals markets began recuperating in the 1990s. Howard and Dangl report that a recent study had found "more than 80% of Bolivian miners are now cooperativists, due mostly to the privatization of the industry. Until 1980, the FENCOMIN [Federacion de Cooperativas Mineras] contained approximately 17,000 miners. Recent estimates put the levels of cooperative miners in La Paz, Oruro, Potosi and Cochabamba at 63,000."

Morales' administration came under fire from COMIBOL union leaders since his Minister of Mines Walter Villarroel was a registered member of one of the cooperative groups that make up FENCOMIN. On Oct. 6, Morales replaced Villarroel with Jose Guillermo Dalence, a former leader of the salaried leaders. Morales was short on good options, since both factions had been supporters of his presidential campaign and whichever one did not have representation at the top spot in the mining ministry would express dissatisfaction. Morales also replaced the head of the state mining company Hugo Molina with Hugo Miranda Rendon.

COB union critical of president

The Central Obrera Boliviana (COB), the main union group in Bolivia, turned against Morales on Oct. 11, saying he should be prosecuted for the deaths in Huanuni and calling for the militarization of the area. The COB is advocating on behalf of the salaried COMIBOL workers and calling for indemnification for victims' families. COB leader Pedro Montes said, "We are demanding the government pay attention, that it sit down at the table and give solutions. They have never invited us to be able to dialogue and propose all of the workers' demands."

Accusations against the Morales government also included criticism that it had ignored the Huanuni mining dispute in favor of gas nationalization and an Asamblea Constituyente to rewrite the Constitution (see NotiSur, 2006-08-04). Morales nationalized the country's petroleum reserves on May 1, giving all foreign oil companies six months to negotiate new contracts that cede majority control of their Bolivian operations to the state or leave the country (see NotiSur, 2006-05-12). Morales faces a number of political uproars, a traditional condition for Bolivian presidents, in addition to the bloodshed in Huanuni.

Autonomy-seeking organizations in four eastern departments the seat of the country's natural gas wealth have been conducting road blockades and strikes against the government. And, the week after the violence in Huanuni, a strike by drivers, teachers and campesinos on the streets of the capital La Paz increased tensions in the capital. Additionally, a Sept. 29 confrontation between campesinos in Morales' home department of Chapare left two residents dead and two police officers wounded. Local residents there had confronted coca-eradicator brigades, leading to the deaths and injuries. Cocaleros also took seven police officials hostage during the confrontation. Morales has allowed an increase in the amount of land where coca can be legally cultivated, but thousand of hectares are still set to be eradicated.

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