12-5-2014

In Ecuador, Will Mining Firms Win in Long Run?

Luis Ángel Saavedra

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur

Recommended Citation
Ángel Saavedra, Luis. "In Ecuador, Will Mining Firms Win in Long Run?." (2014). https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur/14293

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiSur by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.
In Ecuador, Will Mining Firms Win in Long Run?

by Luis Ángel Saavedra
Category/Department: Ecuador
Published: 2014-12-05

Intag, a group of several communities in Ecuador’s Imbabura province, had been seen as an enduring example of resistance to the mining industry. But its history could end up being repeated in other communities where mineral companies are granted concessions and then harassment, lawsuits against leaders, forced land sales, displacement, and other actions by government and corporations discourage the local population, weakening how people organize and struggle. Today, after 20 years of struggle, Intag is fragmented and unable to sustain its long-standing determination to defend its territories (NotiSur, March 14, 2014).

History of resistance

Approximately 17,000 people live in the Intag communities in the southwestern part of Cotacachi canton in Imbabura province, an area of cloud-covered forests and farms in the Andean highlands of northwestern Ecuador. A great variety of ecological niches in the region allow campesinos to cultivate tropical fruit, coffee, cacao, corn, beans, potatoes, tree tomatoes, sugarcane, bananas, and oranges. In addition, campesinos raise cattle, pigs, chickens, and guinea pigs, and Intag’s population has thus become alimentary self-sufficient. The region is also able to export a large part of production to outside markets such as Otavalo, Ibarra, and Quito.

Intag’s history changed in the early 1990s when the Japanese mining firm Bishimetals, a subsidiary of Mitsubishi Corp., announced the area had a 2.26 million ton copper deposit (NotiSur, Feb. 8, 1990). However, local communities forced the company to pull out before it could confirm its discovery. The communities began promoting the declaration of Cotacachi an "Ecological Canton" in 1997. They succeeded in 2000 when the municipality passed an ordinance that made Cotacachi the first ecological canton of Latin America, strengthening opposition to mining in the area.

Bishimetals sold its Intag mining concession to Ascendant Copper Corporation, a Canadian firm that resorted to violence to make the concession viable. The company’s first action was to divide the people, locating the nucleus of the opposition in Junín parish and building support in neighboring García Moreno parish and in Otavalo canton. It successfully created a paramilitary security force to subdue any opposition.

At 2 a.m. on Dec. 2, 2006, Ascendant Cooper’s paramilitary force moved into Intag with firearms and tear-gas bombs, firing on opponents of the mining operation. Many local residents were injured. A military helicopter flew over the area during the confrontations. The community radio station’s signal was silenced.

Days earlier, the Asociación de Juntas Parroquiales de Intag went before the police commandant and the Imbabura governor to complain that two officers from the Army’s Fuerza Terrestre had been planning incursions since Nov. 8, 2006, in the city of Otavalo. Gen. Luis Garzón, from the Army’s First Division based in Quito, confirmed that an Army helicopter had been hired to supply support but maintained that no military personnel were involved in the incursion into Intag.
The paramilitary incursion was initially successful when armed men detained a Cotacachi councilman, the president of the Junta Parroquial, Radio Intag staff, and other journalists in the area. However, locals responded by expelling the paramilitaries, detaining 56 persons, and confiscating their weapons. After a first delegation was blocked from the area by another attack by the mining firm’s paramilitary force, residents called for a regional and national governmental delegation to pick up the detained persons and arms. The delegation did arrive finally on Dec. 6. Intag thus achieved its strongest victory against the extractive industry, setting an example for all communities struggling to defend their lands.

**Breaking point**

While Ascendant Copper was forced to abandon Intag in 2008, before doing so the company took a series of actions against anti-mining leaders. For example, it framed a leader named Carlos Zorrilla in an alleged theft of a foreign tourist’s camera. After the complaint against Zorrilla, armed police searching for the camera staged a violent raid at Zorrilla’s farm, seizing all his records on Intag’s anti-mining struggle. It took three years to prove Zorrilla’s innocence in the courts.

The administration of President Rafael Correa, pressured by the need to raise new resources for its development package, did, however, achieve what the Canadian mining company was not able to do. In 2012, the Empresa Nacional Minera del Ecuador (ENAMI) signed an agreement with the Chilean mining firm CODELCO and, without consulting local communities, reopened the project in the second half of 2013.

Following Ascendant Copper’s example, the Correa administration pursued a two-part strategy. To begin with, it convinced the people of García Moreno that extractive activity was necessary to fund projects to benefit the public. The government went on to invest in several public works there. Simultaneously, the officials sought ways of undermining Intag’s leadership and specifically targeted Zorrilla in the attacks Correa makes against the opposition in his weekly Saturday radio and television broadcasts. It also arrested Javier Ramírez Piedra for alleged participation in a meeting in Junín that blocked ENAMI technicians from coming to confirm information provided by Bishimetals.

In September 2013, ENAMI technicians attempted to enter Intag but were blocked by the local populace. On April 10, 2014, Interior Minister José Serrano summoned Intag leaders to a conciliation meeting. When the leaders returned to their communities, the national police arrested Ramírez Piedra, president of the community of Junín. The arrest was carried out without a warrant, and Ramírez—held incommunicado without any representation—was not told of the charges against him. Later, the Cotacachi prosecutor's office charged him with rebellion and sabotage. Ramírez is still in custody.

On May 8, 2014, ENAMI returned to Intag, but this time company representatives were escorted by a contingent of 120 police. They closed all access to the area, isolating the local populace. Police roadblocks even prevented the entry of a committee of environmentalists and human rights organizations seeking to confirm allegations of police abuse in the area.

Police decided to contract room and board from local people, a strategic move that divided the population since some families decided to provide the requested services.

Ramírez’s detention, expected to continue for a considerable time, the police occupation of Junín, creating a de facto state of emergency, and the restriction of free movement and free association,
added to official propaganda has managed to finally keep anti-mining activity in Intag to a minimum to the point that police presence is no longer necessary to allow ENAMI and CODELCO technicians access to the area. Therefore, the police have since left Junín, and Intag resistance seems to have ended.

**Support from environmental and human rights organizations**

Can social organizations really slow mining-industry progress or do they merely raise the political costs for governments that insist on going this revenue route even though they buck local communities in the process? Surely this is the dilemma of environmental and human rights organizations siding with anti-mining struggles.

Organizations cannot give practical answers to development needs; they can’t guarantee large-scale economic solutions to replace the investments offered by the government. In Intag, they’ve supported fair trade organic coffee production and have dabbled in community tourism and the production of crafts and cleaning products for the export market. Nevertheless, these activities don’t cover the needs of the entire population, explaining why they have become vulnerable to the government discourse.

Meanwhile, the legal defense human rights organizations offer people who have been arrested is insufficient because of the high number of lawsuits and inadequate staffing of those organizations. As a result, people looking for personal legal advice are often unsuccessful in defending themselves in court and end up being convicted.

Together these two situations cause communities to fall in line with government policy and put aside their long-term conviction to maintain the struggle for their rights. In the end, outsiders who do not understand the communities and the reality they face should not judge the decisions Intag communities end up making.

-- End --