

**Declarations of Oruro Gathering on Environmental Justice and
Mining in Latin America
Monday April 9, 2007 12:16 PM
Oruro, Bolivia, March 9-11, 2007**

This past March 9-11, representatives from civil society organizations and churches throughout Latin America met to share and discuss the situation of environmental injustice which communities and organizations are confronting as a result of the activities of transnational mining corporations.

Over 40 people from Argentina, Bolivia, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, the United States, Perú, and Guatemala discussed the realities of mining in Latin America, focusing on the conflicts which are evidence of the unsustainability of mining activity in the region.

The host organization, the Centre for Ecology and Andean Peoples (CEPA), of Oruro, opened the event to the public by organizing a roundtable discussion on the night of March 9, with four representatives from different parts of Latin America. The issues discussed related to the strategies that mining companies are utilizing in the face of community opposition and resistance, and the responses of communities to these corporate strategies.

Mining Conflicts

Common elements that stand out in mining conflicts are the violations in the rights of local communities and the lies and frauds disseminated by mining companies in order to achieve the support of the population and the criminalization of those opposed to mining.

A second period of growth in mining investments in the region threatens to become an extended concentration of conflicts between mining companies and affected communities. The location of orebodies in the headwaters of river systems and the pressure on water resources is generating a strong rejection on the part of communities and human settlements.

In all of the countries of the region where mining companies have appeared, there is opposition and conflict. It is the reality today in Latin America and there is no apparent way out of this problem as long as the mining companies consider themselves to have the right to carry out mining operations anywhere that minerals are located, without consideration of the threat to water, the forced displacement of communities, and the opposition of persons affected by the risks to ecosystems and public health.

It is becoming more and more difficult for the mining companies to sell the benefits of their activities as local communities and support organizations become more and more informed about the negative impacts of mining.

Adding to this are the scant or non-existent contributions from taxes and royalties, the undermining of already-weak national institutions, and the creation and use of political and social corruption and illegitimate pressures which weaken the democracies of the region even further.

In the face of community opposition, the response is co-optation, threats, militarization, and the use of force.

Projects such as Pascua Lama on the Chile-Argentina border are being forcefully questioned from technical, environmental, economic and ethical points of views. The smelter in La Oroya, Peru, has turned the town into one of the most contaminated places on the planet – evidence of the difficulty of living alongside mining.

Observatory of Mining Conflicts in Latin America

In this context, the participating organizations have agreed to formalize the Latin American Observatory of Mining Conflicts and to strengthen the relationships between those fighting for environmental justice, the rights of communities, and the defence of ecosystems affected by mining in the region.

The participants from the Churches – priests, clerics and lay persons – demonstrated their commitment to the rights of the poorest victims of the mining companies in different countries of the region, and their desire to join with the struggle of communities and organizations in defence of their rights, their ecosystems, and the integrity of Creation.

The Observatory has a web site which is making information available on mining conflicts in the region, campaigns underway, and solidarity actions in the face of the aggression of mining companies and their allies against community leaders and experts opposed to mining (www.conflictosmineros.net).

Solidarity With Those Threatened

The participants, representatives of churches and organizations of the region, agreed to join together in solidarity with those who are being threatened for their activities criticizing mining.

This the case of the priest from Limón, Ecuador, Juan de la Cruz Rivadeneira, facing baseless accusations of violent acts against a hydroelectric company, and the priest Marco Arana, who has been subject to harassment, threats and surveillance over his

environmental and social defence work in Cajamarca, Peru, where the largest gold mine in the continent, Yanacocha, operates.

The paramilitary actions and intelligence operations carried out by mining companies, with the silent complicity of governments, have become generalized strategies of intimidation in a great majority of the mining conflicts in the region.

Every day there are new reports of harassment, persecution, unjustified legal harassment, and threats of all kinds against leaders who are denounce the unsustainability of mining.

This reality demands a wide range of solidarity actions to protect the safety of those who are exercising their right to oppose mining, and in defence of affected communities and damaged or threatened ecosystems.

This Gathering enabled us to reaffirm our desire to strengthen the work of our organizations and to better link local initiatives and struggles, giving them a regional character which will permit us to deal with the conflicts between communities, organizations, and mining companies in the best manner possible.

Latin American Observatory of Environmental Conflict

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Oruro Declaration

"Unity, Solidarity and Defence of Our Rights Against the Mining Industry" Bolivia, March 11, 2007

We meet in Oruro, Bolivia, a country with a long tradition of mining, a country now contaminated and impoverished by the indiscriminate plunder of its resources. We are organizations, communities and peoples affected by mining, we are ecological and human rights institutions and churches, and we meet as the Latin American Gathering on Environmental Justice and Mining, carried out between March 9 and 11. Based upon our shared experiences, we believe:

That the aggressive expansion of mining industries in Latin America, under the premise of "sustainable development," is generating conflicts and affecting the rights of a growing number of communities and populations, stripping lands, causing forced displacements, migration, and irreparable damages to the environment – the fundamental foundation of life;

That the mining industry has been responsible for the plunder and destruction of natural resources for over 500 years, for generating an enormous ecological debt, and for the appropriation of common resources such as water and land, and is affecting national sovereignty and causing the loss of values and cultural identities;

That the State and governments have abandoned their role as protectors of human rights and their responsibilities for regulation and environmental oversight in mining operations. They have instead served to generate favourable policies to attract foreign investment;

That the powerful influence of transnational mining firms in all levels of government, their direct interventions in the lives of communities, and their control of a large part of the communications media are some of the strategies of domination, corruption, and public campaigns against our organizations and institutions;

That harassment, threats, physical aggression, and murders of social leaders in regions where conflicts are developing between mining companies and communities are growing practices in Latin American countries; and

That the criminalization of our legitimate actions in defence of our rights is part of the mining companies' efforts at territorial control. The most clear manifestation of this is the militarization of conflicts, as mining companies are using public and private security forces against communities affected by their extractive projects. The corruption and cooptation of local leaders and NGOs are a frequent complement to these operations.

We therefore declare that:

We reject the criminal practices and the impunity of companies, governments and institutions against the rights of communities, and we add ourselves to the growing response of civil society and the resistance of communities.

We advocate for the strengthening and linking together of the diverse experiences of struggle that are raising consciousness and advancing the recuperation of rights and territories throughout many sectors of the population.

Based on these experiences and in the attempt to bring these processes of resistance together, we hereby constitute ourselves as the Latin American Observatory of Mining Conflicts, to strengthen our unity, our solidarity, and the defence of our rights.

We express our solidarity with social leaders, environmental and human rights defenders, and institutions throughout Latin America who are suffering from harassment and repression on part of the mining companies and States.

We call upon the national governments of Latin America and United Nations institutions to adopt and implement policies and mechanisms to guarantee the protection and respect of the human rights of communities and populations affected by mining, and to prevent the carrying out of programs which facilitate and legitimate the bad practices of the mining industry.

Conscious that people and Peoples throughout Latin America are rising up to defend their rights, we reaffirm our hope and our choice for the defence of the dignity of life, and the right to land, territory, water, forests, and air.

Calling Upon the Bishops to Pay Heed to the Pastoral Guidance They Can Give in La Aparecida

The priests, nuns, members of religious orders, laypersons, and Methodist minister who met in the Latin American Gathering on Mining and Environmental Justice, in Oruro, Bolivia on March 9-11, 2007, direct this letter to the bishops of our continent who are going to participate in the Fifth General Conference of the Latin American Episcopal Council in Aparecida, Brazil, this May 9-13. We ask them to take into consideration some of our pastoral worries and incorporate them into guidance which they can give us to bring life to our witnessing of Christian life within our towns and villages.

In Latin America we are experiencing a period of intensive growth of investments in extractive industries, which is generating destructive impacts upon the environment and causing the growth of social conflicts, threatening people's very lives. In the face of this, the Church will reaffirm its forces to continue educating and working for justice, the fruit of which will be peace.

Being that these activities are causing the suffering of the earth and making persons suffer, especially the most poor who have less resources to protect themselves, our Church will have to keep deepening its commitment to Life, preferential options for the poor, and the defence of the environment.

Communion with God has been broken, as has communion with men and women, as well as communion with creation. The Church will have to deliver its prophetic message, denouncing what is happening and announcing a message of hope, promoting actions which will lead a pastoral reconciliation with God, men and women, and creation.

Ecological leaders and movements have emerged in this continent who are defending and protecting life, and their dedication to life is being threatened by those forces who destroy creation. In some cases, these leaders have been killed, because they defended the threatened creation. As a Church and as defenders of life, we are compelled to act in solidarity with those who are persecuted.

The destruction of lands and waters puts life itself into danger, as well as the sustainability of native communities, indigenous persons and campesinos. The Church must deepen its commitment to the defence of the rights of the most excluded and threatened communities whose very existence is in danger.

We are called to cherish the culture and wisdom of the indigenous communities who live in contact with the earth, and in whom we recognize the presence of God; our evangelical task is to announce the gospel and strengthen the spirituality of the defence of Life.

From the word of God of Life who gives us strength, enriches our celebrations and our sacred life, always open to the worship of the gift of creation, which was a good thing and which we have disfigured.

Signed,

Father Eduardo Chepillo – Chile

Father Juan de la Cruz Rivadeneira – Pastoral Shuar – Ecuador

Father Erick Gruloos – San Miguel de Ixtahuacan – Guatemala

Father Marco Arana Zegarra – Perú

Father Miguel Córdova OMI – Perú

Daniel Le Blanc OMI – Perú

Father Seamos P. Finn – OMI, Washington USA

Sister Isabel Ramírez – Centro Vicente Cañas – Cochabamba, Bolivia

Brother Gilberto Pawels OMI – Oruro, Bolivia

Luis Faura – Pastoral "Safeguarding Creation" – Chile

Pastor Modesto Mamani – Evangelical Methodist Church in Bolivia

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Related links

- **El Observatorio de Conflictos Mineros de América Latina, OCMAL Latin American Mining Conflict Watch is a network of 18 organisations active in the region, from Mexico to Chile and Argentina. In Spanish only.**
- **Mines and Communities** Information and analysis to support communities affected by mining around the world. Much material in Spanish. An excellent resource.