

INDUSTRY AGAINST NATURE – PEACEFUL PROTESTS IN THE NORTH OF PERU



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In 2011 the region of Cajamarca in the north of Peru was the stage for peaceful protests against a new and uncertain mining project. Thousands of Peruvians demonstrated on the streets to speak their minds. Instead of introducing negotiations with the local population, the government reacted by proclaiming martial law over the protest regions.

Peru is rich in natural resources particularly gold and copper. For decades various mining companies from all over the world have been interested in this South American state. The opportunity of making big money combined with the old saying “a penny saved is a penny earned” leads to an ambivalent situation. Countries such as Peru negotiate contracts with big international

Even the North for instance Cajamarca is not uncharted on the map of gold seekers. Francisco Pizarro motivated his troops to fight against the Inca in Cajamarca by mentioning the gold in that region. Back then, the Inca lost the war due to ignorance about the invasion. Hence the Spanish exploited the country. Nowadays the Peruvian state is to be made responsible by respecting the



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companies based on the wish to improve the national economy. The international stakeholders and the general national economy make a lot of money by exploiting nature. Unfortunately nature gives but seldom (if ever) receives. Mining processes pollute the environment and ecological damages are a common and well known result.

The Andean country has always been in the focus of gold diggers since the discovery in 1526 by the Spanish.

rights and interests of its citizens. In 2011 the people in Peru, mostly in Cajamarca, peacefully protested against a new mining project called “Minas Conga”. It’s run by the Minera Yanacocha Company which is owned by the Newmont Mining Corporation, an US-American company. The new mining project is expected to generate billions of US Dollars in the next two decades¹. Quite often the local people do not benefit from the economic gains. Moreover, up to 8,000 people living in the districts

1) estimated 15 billion US Dollars within 19 years.

of Huasmín, Sorochuco and La Encañada (all of them part of the region Cajamarca) will be directly affected by the project and will have to be relocated. Misfortune seldom comes alone and realizing “Minas Conga” would also damage the environment in this region. The company wants to mine for gold and copper and therefore it is planning to relocate four lakes in Cajamarca. Objectors of the project expect ecological damages for the water circulation and the water level of the regional rivers. The mining company states that the “Minas Conga” project will not cause environmental damages and promises to create new lakes. However, this is doubtful since no research studies have been conducted to survey the effects on the water, says Sergio Sánchez Ibáñez who is the former head of the department for natural resources in Cajamarca. For the last 20 years the company has been responsible for environmental damages in that region. Similar projects in the past have shown that the water quality of the region, and directly linked to this, agriculture is negatively affected.

It is the right of the local people to protest. In November 2011 up to 6,000 people demonstrated in the streets of Cajamarca. A general strike brought the whole city to a standstill. It stopped all traffic while shops and institutions were closed down. Highways and airports were blocked by the protesters. Although the media called the demonstrators “radicals” and “terrorists” the protests remained peaceful without making any use of violence. These protests were assisted by demonstrators in Lima. People were speaking their minds against the new project and letting the company know that they will not remain silent. Another remarkable peaceful protest took place one week later when more than



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50,000 [!] people came together at the main square in Cajamarca. The masses made their opinions heard by shouting “Water yes. Gold no.” and “No to Conga!” which illustrated the objection against the mining project very clearly. On banners the demonstrators reminded people of negative effects caused by other mining projects. As a result of the protests, the mining company suspended the project until “tranquility and social peace are reestablished in Cajamarca”².

Contrary to expectations, the demonstrations continued on the ground as the protesters wanted a complete stop of the project and not only a politically motivated delay. On December 4, 2011, the president Ollanta Humala proclaimed martial law over the protest regions for 60 days. This enacted decree meant that no protests were allowed and the Peruvian military enhanced its presence in the region to “protect the public

order”. Being put in this situation, the local population of Cajamarca felt threatened and punished by the government. As silence was not an option, the protesters continued. On December 16, the president repealed martial law in the protest regions due to an end of the demonstrations and the renewal of negotiations between all stakeholders.

Finally the round table convened again and all participants are being given the chance to reach a settlement in the topic “Minas Conga”. The mining company and the Peruvian state want to make a fortune in Cajamarca. As long as this is in harmony with nature, it is permissible. But nevertheless it is to be hoped that the local population of this region is able to assert its position. After all the citizens of Cajamarca are living in this region and have to deal with ecological damages in their daily live. ■

2) Yanacocha informs the public opinion that, „on demand of the government and in the interest to re-establish the tranquility and the social peace in Cajamarca, it was decided to suspend the activities of the project.”

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