

Ore & building
materials extraction

Keywords

- > Gold
- > Water March
- > EIA
- > Assassinated activists
- > Marco Arana

Introduction

This is an ongoing conflict, although there is some evidence that the project has been suspended since August 2012. The project is situated in northern Peru, in the Cajamarca and Celendin provinces (Sorochuco and Huasmin districts) Cajamarca, 48 km north of the provincial capital Cajamarca City. An extension of the Yanacocha mining project, it the second largest gold mine in the world in terms of its production volume and field size, and exports five times more than all the gold mines in Peru combined.

The Conga mine is situated between 3,400 and 4,120 metres (11,154 and 13,517 feet) above sea level in the Andes, 24 kilometres (14 miles) northeast of the Yanacocha gold mine. Both Conga and Yanacocha are a joint project by Newmont and Buenaventura, with International Finance Corporation/World Bank involvement.

Background

On 9 February 2010, the Yanacocha Mining Company submitted an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) for the mining exploration of Conga. The Ministry of Energy and Mines approved the study on 27 October 2010, and issued Resolution No. 351-2010 MEM/AAM to that effect.

The project

Material that contains gold is crushed and transported to a leaching pad, while the rest is transferred to a deposit and stored for subsequent discharge. A 50 mg/L cyanide solution is applied to the material that contains gold by a sprinkler irrigation system that dissolves the rock. This cyanide-gold mixture, called “rich solution”, is sent to the leaching pool through a piping system, and pumped to the processing plant.

This process makes it possible to gather the gold from the rich solution in the pools. The liquid gold in the rich solution is then recovered by converting it to solid gold through a precipitation procedure. The last phase is the refinery, where various other processes are applied to



Local protests lead by Marco Arana (centre)
Source: *Tierra y Libertad Cajamarca.*
tylcajamarca.blogspot.com

the precipitated gold to create gold or silver bullion bars.

According to the submitted and approved EIA, the mine has two open cuts, one of them 2 kilometres long and 1 kilometre deep, over the Perol Lagoon. For 17 years, 92,000 tons of rock will be removed daily, and its wastes discharged in the blue lagoon. This lagoon and the surrounding wetlands constitute the lifeline of the Jadibamba River.

In addition, approximately 85,000 tons of toxic wastes will be generated daily throughout the project, and deposited in a 700-hectare area where the Jadibamba River originates. The main river in the Huasmin District, its water is used for agriculture, livestock husbandry and human consumption. According to the EIA, “the tailings produced by the concentrator plant will be compressed to 62 to 65 percent (mass of solid/total mass) and transported to the tailings deposit located in the basins of the Toromacho Ravine and the Alto Jadibamba River” (Yanacocha mining company, 2010:30).

The company expects to produce 11,800,000 ounces of gold, at a cost of \$250 per ounce. While investment costs might exceed \$4,500 million, the project plans to generate employment for 5,000 to 7,000 people.

Impacts

The natural landscape of area exploited by the Yanacocha mine has been totally altered. The Conga area to the east and northeast has not yet been affected.





"National Water March demands to end the Conga Mining Project and recognise water as a human right".
 En Marcha. pcmlle.org/EM/article.php3?id_article=5006

Mining exploitation, especially open pit mines, cause severe changes. The high-Andean "jalcas cajamarquinas" ecosystem not only possess spectacular landscapes, but are home to great biodiversity and significant populations of local endemic species. Among them are the medicinal plants that grow nowhere else on Earth but here. These grassland ecosystems provide valuable environmental services such as air purification, nutrient cycling, water supply and water regulation.

Among all environmental services that populations rely on, water supply is the one most vital. The "jalcas" influence the quantity of water generated in the basins and regulate the water, which implies continuity of the water flow.

Close to the Conga project, there are 40 lagoons and more than 100 hectares of watersheds that would be lost forever should the project continue.

Conflict and consequences

The controversy generated by the Conga Mining Project stems from many years of conflict caused by the Yanacocha Mining

Company. Communities not only made democratic demands to be consulted in mining activities, but also to exercise their right to stop them and to benefit from mining investments.

Opposition groups had different visions and claims; while some locals petitioned the loss of water resources and lands, and mistreatment by Yanacocha throughout the region, other local environmental organisations such as GRUFIDES, lead by Marco Arana, enjoyed strong international support (and a prior victory, where they stopped Yanacocha from exploiting Cerro Quilish, close to Cajamarca City).

In terms of the public administration, a leftist local government was elected to power in 2011, and promises current Peruvian President Ollanta Humala made to oppose the Conga project in his presidential campaign were influential to this end. In addition, the new Minister of the Environment has been reviewing the previously approved EIA, Vice Minister of the Environment Jose de Echave has resigned, and Robert Moran's expert report against the EIA was published in February 2011.



In November 2011, there was a widespread strike across Cajamarca to protest the Conga Project. The Peruvian Police intervened violently, wounding 19 people. Army presence in Cajamarca and the declared State of Emergency were intended to intimidate those opposed to the mining company in the area. Several leaders were arrested (Presenza, 2012).

In March 2012, Marco Arana led a Pacific Water March from Cajamarca to Lima. The march set off from Cortada Lagoon, situated at an altitude of approximately 4,000 metres, where local farmers and residents performed an Andean ritual to defend the “pachamama” (mother earth in Quechua).

The EIA approved in 2010 generated many complaints and demonstrations, and in 2012 the central government decided to respond to them with several actions, including De Echave’s resignation, Robert Moran’s intervention and efforts to recruit other international experts to evaluate the 2010 EIA. The expert report (contrary to Moran’s report) validated the EIA (with some observations and recommendations); therefore President Humala decided to support the project’s execution.

It is important to note that in 2012, research company GFK ran a survey to determine the extent to which the general population approved the mining project. According to *El Comercio* (2 May 2012), survey results showed that 54 percent of the nation’s urban population supported the project while 36 percent opposed it. At the regional level the results were even more stunning. A survey by the company Ipsos showed that 78 percent of respondents in the Cajamarca province were opposed to the mine (Mineweb, 24 August 2012).

In early July 2012, the central government decreed a State of Emergency in three provinces in the Cajamarca Department to confront the protests that left five civilians dead and

20 injured by police bullets in Celendin and Bambamarca (*El Comercio*, 5 July 2012). The State of Emergency brought restrictions to the inviolability of the home (police could enter homes), as well as the freedom of assembly and mobility.

Marco Arana, a former priest and leader of the Tierra y Libertad (Land and Freedom) movement was violently arrested in Cajamarca City on 4 July 2012, as he was peacefully seated on a bench of the plaza, holding a poster that read “Life yes, Gold no”. The video of his detention spread worldwide, and some journalists have called him the “Peruvian Gandhi”. He has been accused of not respecting the State of Emergency. The government and the people against Conga agreed in July 2012 that Monsignor Cabrejos and Father Gastón Garatea would act as arbiters to reach an agreement. The “Conga Won’t Go” movement is still strong. It is possible that Yanacocha might accept to postpone the project.

This case, together with the opposition to copper mining in Xstrata, Tintaya, Espinar, Cuzco, could be a deciding factor in defining Peruvian politics. Humala has made two cabinet changes in a year due to the mining conflicts.

The main organisations that work on this issue in the area are GRUFIDES, Frente de Defensa Ambiental de Cajamarca (Environmental Defence Front of Cajamarca); Frente de Defensa de Bambamarca (Defence Front of Bambamarca). The organisation Rondas Campesinas is also active.

More on this case

- Newmont’s South America website: newmont.com/south-america

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Carbonell, M. H., 2014. Yanacocha Mining Company in Conga – Cajamarca (Peru), EJOLT Factsheet No. 006, 4 p.

Due to the constant social resistance and adverse public opinion, in August 2012 Newmont announced the suspension of its mining activities. Financial analysts speculate it will be cancelled, while the Peruvian Prime Minister declared “We have entered a different scenario, the project has entered a new phase of suspension that the company already decided on and the government of course asked for” (Mineweb, 24 August 2012).

Mining opponents have cautioned that the company will look for a political solution, and try to influence citizens through water management measures. They also continue to demand legal action against those responsible for the death of five demonstrators, and an end to the State of Emergency and militarisation in Cajamarca.

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