

Ore & building materials extraction

Keywords

- > Gold mining
- > Colombia
- > AngloGold Ashanti
- > Food
- > Large-scale mining
- > Open pit mining

Introduction

Once declared by former Colombian President Alvaro Uribe as being “the greatest gold mine in the world”, the open pit mining project is located in Cajamarca, Tolima in Colombia. It is situated in the Andean region in the north-central part of the country. In 2007, Tolima had a population of 19,789.

Due to its importance for national markets, Tolima is known as the “agricultural belt of Colombia”. Some of the major tributaries of the Magdalena River flow through it. The area adjacent to the Central Magdalena River is characterised by its gold, wood, oil, carbon and uranium (PASM, 2009), and consequently disputes arise between various multinational companies who run exploitation projects, and farmers who cultivate and trade many agricultural products. Tolima is also home to three national parks: Los Nevados, Las Hermosas and Nevado del Huila.

The municipality of Cajamarca covers an area of 51,528 hectares (127,328 acres) in Tolima, and 79 percent of it belongs to the Central Forest Reserve, created by Law 2/1959. South African company AngloGold Ashanti has a mining concession of 515.75 hectares (1274 acres) in Cajamarca, that comprises La Luisa, Paloma, Bolivar and Diamante, where the La Colosa Project is being developed.

Background

AngloGold Ashanti (AGA) is the third largest gold exploitation multinational company in the world. In Colombia, it is present in 20 departments of the country. It holds rights to 9,920 square kilometres (3,830 square miles) in mining titles in Colombia; a territory that is seven times the size of Ibagué, capital of Tolima.

Project

The exploration phase at La Colosa revealed the presence of a gold vein system at a grade of 0.3 grams/tonne stretching 1,500 metres (4,921 feet). The inferred reserves are 381.4 million tons with an average of 1.00 grams/tonne (or



In Cajamarca, Tolima, 1,300 march against large-scale mining

Source: Territorio Centro, 4 August 2012

12.3 million ounces). Currently, the company has limited exploration permits.

The exploration phase of the mine will end in 2015 and the first gram of gold from La Colosa will be extracted, at best, in 2019 and not in 2016 as originally planned. If things go as intended, it is estimated that the mine could reach an annual production between 600 and 800 thousand ounces, and have a life span of 15 years.

The gold discovered in the area is relatively close to the surface and disseminated all over, which means that it would be necessary to extract the gold by an open pit mine. In 2012, the company presented new results of the exploration phase showing that the mine holds 24 million ounces in reserves, doubling the original estimate.

Impacts

The communities in the region claim that with the expansion of the mine, 161 water sources would be threatened as a result of contamination by the leaching process and the use of water for extraction.

According to calculations, over 4 million kilograms of cyanide would be used every year in the process of leaching. The toxic waste generated would contaminate the Bermellon, Cuello and even the Magdalena Rivers. In addition, the ground would be affected by heavy metals such as arsenic, cobalt, mercury, et cetera that will continue to contaminate the water for over a century.





Colombian landscape in the La Colosa area . Source: Soto Hoyos, 28 February 2011.
stopsecrets.ning.com

Carl Brechtel, director of the La Colosa study stated that “(the company) considers that it would need approximately one cubic metre of water every second to process each ton of mineral, or between 631 to 946 million cubic metres of water annually. If the lifespan of the mine is between 15 and 25 years, then the total use of water would be around 9.5 billion and 23.6 billion cubic metres”. (Observatorio Nacional de Paz, 2010). It is important to note that the Corporación Autónoma Regional del Tolima, Cortolima (Autonomous Regional Corporation of Tolima, Cortolima) is clear on this issue: water resources in the area have been exhausted for these types of industrial activities.

In this area, water plays a fundamental role for human and agricultural use. In 2009, the Comité de Arroceros de Ibagué (Committee of Rice Producers of Ibagué) spoke out against these projects, citing damage caused to 11,000 hectares (27,181 acres) of rice fields that supply the Riego de Coello District. The Committee also argued that such harmful effects would spread by 4,000 hectares (9,884 acres) annually and impact arracacha (*Arracacia xanthorrhiza*, an Andean tuber popular in Colombia) in Anaimé and Cajamarca, as well as other crops such as fruits, coffee, plantain, yucca and beans. The production of these crops would be affected by water scarcity and environmental changes induced by the

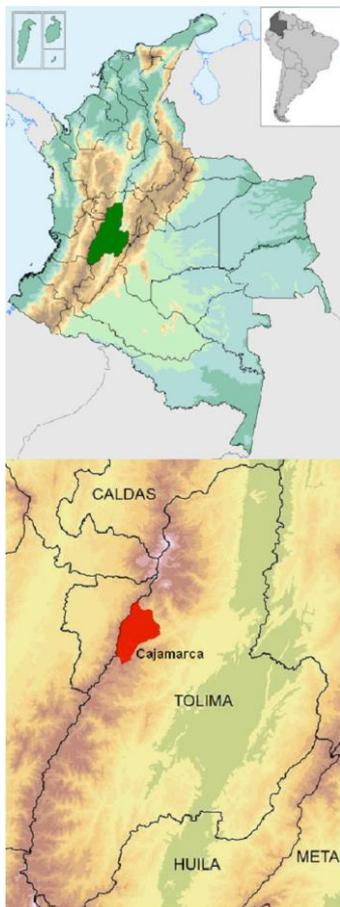
removal of the vegetation cover in the concession areas (FEDEARROZ, 2009).

In the social sphere, the communities mentioned two direct impacts. First, people stand to lose their livelihoods due to being displaced, environmental damage and the destruction of other income-generating alternatives. Second, increased militarisation in the area and other social problems are likely, as a result of the security companies, paramilitary forces and regular members of the army (Rivillas, 2009).

Conflict and consequences

Several international organisations such as Human Rights Watch, and Mines and Communities, have documented the arrangement between AGA and armed groups, and the crimes executed in different countries where AGA works to guarantee it enters a nation and develops large-scale operations. AGA has been denounced for violating human rights and damaging the environment in several countries (Mines and Communities, 2005).

Furthermore, national organisations have established that the areas where AGA asks for concession contracts are the same areas where paramilitary forces and members of the National Army, acting together, have been violating human rights since 1995.



Location of La Colosa

Source: *La colosa: la búsqueda de el dorado en Cajamarca, Colombia, Versión 1* Fecha: 4 June 2011. colombiasolidarity.org.uk/

As stated on the website of the Observatory of Mining Conflicts of Latin America, from 1988 to 2006, 5,438 people have been victims of human rights violations and 610,110 people were displaced by paramilitary organisations where the mining company has or is planning to run projects.

In addition, activist organisations, including Amigos de la Tierra Colombia (Friends of Earth Colombia) and CENSAT have confirmed that social, political and community leaders continue to be arrested as a strategy to weaken and break the organisational process. Leaders of groups opposed to mining activities in the area have been subject to intimidation tactics, while the region suffers from blockages and displacements.

Additionally, the State uses violent repression, assassination and litigation against organisations and leaders who are opposed to being displaced or attempt to acquire titles for the mines they have worked for generations. In some cases, requests to legalise titles are rejected because there are previous requests by the multinational company (Red Colombia, 2007).

Similarly, leaders of groups opposed to large-scale mining activities or people who run small-scale mining operations have been targeted with charges of illegal mine exploitation. By July 2012, 57 people had been arrested (El Nuevo Día, 8 July 2012).

In 2010, the Environmental, Housing and Development Ministry imposed a USD 140 million fine on the company for violating environmental laws while exploiting a natural reserve. It is important to note that this penalty is pecuniary and does not influence in the project's execution (OCMAL, 2010).

The report titled "*La Colosa, in search for the El Dorado in Cajamarca, Colombia*" revealed important findings and irregularities at the legislative, politic, environmental and moral levels in the awarding process of the project and the exploration phase that is currently ongoing.

One of the main organisations that work on this issue in the area is the Minga de Resistencia Social y Comunitaria del Tolima (Minga Social and Communal Resistance of Tolima). Opposition groups organise pacifist citizen protests, among other activities. In June 2011, 1,200 demonstrators gathered for the third Defence of Life Carnival March against the La Colosa Project (Comité ambiental en defensa de la vida, 2011). In August 2012, 1,300 protestors from different organisations denounced the threats that mega-mining poses to Cajamarca (Territorio Centro, 2012).

More on this case

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At the national level, CENSAT Agua viva – Amigos de la Tierra Colombia (CENSAT Water Alive – Friends of the Earth Colombia www.censat.org) and the Red Colombiana Frente a la Gran Minería Transnacional (RECLAME Colombian Network Against Transnational Large-Scale Mining www.reclamecolombia.org) supported the consolidation of a network of communities that, similar to Cajamarca, are affected and threatened by large-scale mining.

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