

ARGENTINA - Gold Mine in Suspense (by Marcela Valente, IPS)

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IPS - Officials in the Argentine government have thrown their support behind local residents and environmentalists in the western province of San Juan who are opposed to a mega-gold mining project in the Andes Mountains along the border with Chile due to the environmental risks it poses.

Because of that support, progress on the project has been temporarily suspended. President Néstor Kirchner himself traveled to San Juan this month, where he called for the continued development of the mining industry, "but with respect for the environment.."

His statement heartened local residents and farmers in the area, who had already voiced their concerns in a more than two-hour meeting with the secretary of the environment and sustainable development, Romina Picolotti, in Buenos Aires.

"Picolotti is helping us. We have her encouragement to continue our fight," Andrés Molinara, a member of a group of local residents of Calingasta who have organised in defence of the environment, told IPS.

Calingasta is a district in San Juan located near the huge Pascua Lama mining project on the Argentine-Chilean border. There are already 10 other mines active in the area.

The open-pit gold mining project, an initiative of Canada's Barrick Gold Corporation, would involve the exploitation of one of the world's largest intact gold reserves — an estimated 17.5 million ounces (600,000 tons).

The deposit is located 150 km southeast of Vallenar, in the northern Chilean region of Atacama, and 300 km northwest of San Juan, the capital of the Argentine province of the same name.

The company estimates that the mine, which straddles the Argentine-Chilean border at 4,600 metres above sea level, will produce 750,000 ounces of gold and 30 million ounces of silver a year.

Although roughly 75 percent of the deposit lies on the Chilean side of the border, Argentina would bear the brunt of the impact of the cyanide used in the leaching process, according to experts.

Barrick plans to invest 1.5 billion dollars in the binational Argentine-Chilean Pascua Lama mining project, which is one of the largest investments in Argentina.

By comparison, that sum is three times what was invested in Veladero, another gold mine run by Barrick in San Juan.

In Chile, where the project has run up against stiff opposition from environmentalists and local farmers, it has been approved by the regional environment authorities, with the condition that it will not destroy three glaciers in the area — Toro I, Toro II and Esperanza — which Barrick had suggested could be "moved" to get at the gold underneath.

The glaciers are a major source of water for some 70,000 small farmers in the Huasco Valley in Chile.

The Interdisciplinary Environmental Assessment Commission in San Juan, which was to issue its report in September, asked for an extension of the deadline, after Argentina's Ombudsman's Office warned that Barrick and other mining companies were offering "gifts" to hospitals and schools in the region to win

local support.

Picolotti, meanwhile, has stated that she is opposed to the use of cyanide in mining, and has met with lawmakers to ask them to revise Argentina's mining legislation, which in her view is tailor-made for the mining companies.

"We have no confidence in the parliamentary commission that must approve the Pascua Lama project," said Molinara. He argued that the mine will become "a new 'country' between Argentina and Chile, where we will lose our national sovereignty."

He was referring to fears of a repeat of what happened in Veladero, Barrick's other gold mine in San Juan. Near the Veladero mine, the Canadian mining giant set up a guard post along the highway that leads to the San Guillermo National Park, thus cutting off traffic. "To get to the park, we have to take other roads," Molinara said indignantly.

The local environmental group Madres Jachaleras, in the town of Jachal, 200 km from Veladero, has turned to the local courts arguing that the Jachal River has been polluted with arsenic, which remains suspended in the air after dynamite is used in the mining operation in the mountains, and eventually ends up in the water.

Before the Veladero mine began to operate, there were only 69 mg of arsenic per litre in the Jachal River, and now there are 260 per litre, the organisation points out. In addition, laboratories hired by the Madres Jachaleras found 120 mg per litre in the town's piped water.

"The secretary of the environment, who is a lawyer, recommended that we ask the courts in Jachal to request that the Secretariat of the Environment take a hand in the matter," said Molinaro.

The Madres Jachaleras hope that with the support of the national Secretariat of the Environment, they could obtain funds to send water samples to a lab that has equipment capable of detecting the presence of cyanide.

The local residents and environmentalists in San Juan, meanwhile, plan to ask President Kirchner to overturn the country's mining laws and the Mining Integration and Complementation Treaty signed by Argentina and Chile in 1997. "We know it's difficult, but we have hope. We want to keep living here, but Barrick Gold is going to destroy everything, and no one is going to do anything about it," said Molinaro.

Raúl Estrada Oyuela, the Foreign Ministry's director of environmental affairs, told IPS that the province of San Juan "has to carry out an environmental impact study" of the project.

"What they have is a 1,800-page technical report which makes no assessment of the impact," he said.

According to Estrada Oyuela, the only serious evaluation was one that was carried out in Chile, which states that the damages will be greater for Argentina, especially with respect to the cyanide used in the gold leaching process.

But "The report does not explain why the country will use cyanide to extract the gold rather than centrifuge technology, which is a cleaner technique," said the official.

Estrada Oyuela, who sent a note to Foreign Minister Jorge Taiana on the issue, said that although the natural resources belong to each province, the national government has authority over environmental issues and questions related to the Mining Integration and Complementation Treaty signed by Argentina and Chile.

But he also admitted that the Kirchner administration "does not have a strategy" on questions involving the mining industry's impact on the environment.

While the Secretariat of the Environment and the Foreign Ministry are opposed to the project, the

Ministry of Federal Planning — to which the Secretariat of Mining answers — continues to encourage it.

This week, provincial mining ministers, who sit on the Federal Mining Council, met in San Juan to back the Pascua Lama project after the position taken by Estrada Oyuela and Picolotti — which led the Interdisciplinary Environmental Assessment Commission to postpone the release of its report — was made public.

The meeting was also attended by San Juan Governor José Luis Rioja and the federal Secretary of Mining, Jorge Mayoral, both of whom are staunch proponents of the mining projects.

Estrada Oyuela said "the national government does not intend to block the Pascua Lama project, but it is clear that there is an aim to delay the decision to simply approve it without further ado."

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