

Panamanians reject mining agreement

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By María Josefina Arce

Panamanians are in the streets. They are protesting against a new mining agreement signed between the government and the company Minera Panama, which they describe as harmful to the country's sovereignty, biodiversity and the health of citizens.

This new agreement with the subsidiary of the Canadian transnational First Quantum replaces the one signed in 1997 and which was declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court of Justice in 2017, almost nine years after an appeal was filed by the Environmental Advocacy Center.

The current one allows the company to operate the mine in the Caribbean province of Colón for 20 years, with the possibility of an extension for another 20 years.

The agreement was approved in record time at the end of last week in the third and last debate of the National Assembly, amid protests, and endorsed hours later by Panamanian President Laurentino Cortizo.

The agreement, to which some changes were made in the face of questioning, described as pure make-up by various sectors, will allow the exploitation of the largest open-pit copper mine in Central America, with the usual effects on the population and the environment.

It has been proven that this mining technique, which has been implemented for decades, has disastrous consequences. Water, air and soil are polluted, causing loss of biodiversity and diseases among the surrounding populations.

Studies have revealed serious dermatological problems, eye damage, congenital malformations, miscarriages and high levels of heavy metals in the blood of people living near the mining sites.

It is also pointed out that this agreement violates the Escazú Treaty, which was ratified by the country in 2020 and which seeks that everyone can enjoy the right to a healthy environment and sustainable development.

This Treaty also calls for citizen participation in environmental decision-making processes, an aspect that, according to several organizations, was not taken into account, as the opinions of important sectors of society were ignored.

In the last few hours protests have intensified. Panamanians reject a mining contract which they point out allows the plundering of the country's natural resources and even ask for a referendum to vote on the policy in this sector.

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