

Bolivian activists push back against mining industry

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A twilight view of a dirt road in the indigenous community of San Jose de Uchupiamonas inside Bolivia's Madidi National Park

La Paz, November 17 (RHC)-- Activist Ruth Alipaz has watched with alarm as the mining industry tightened its hold on protected lands and Indigenous territories across Bolivia. Late last month, the Bolivian government approved the gold-mining industry's demands to update the management plans for three national parks: Madidi, Cotapata and Apolobamba. By recognising the rights of miners in these protected areas, the deal drew sharp criticism from opponents and led to debate over the potential

environmental fallout.

mid public pressure, the agreement was annulled days later – but activists say the threat of further encroachment by the mining industry looms large. “Mining will destroy our territories, will force us to leave,” Alipaz, who is from the San Jose de Uchupiamonas Indigenous community in Madidi National Park, told Al Jazeera. “Our villages will be invaded and filled with other people, and we’ll simply disappear as a culture.”

Bolivia is internationally recognised as the first country to enshrine the rights of nature as equal to human rights, with Indigenous peoples and their territories protected in the constitution. But critics say this is all just rhetoric, as threats to Indigenous lands continue to mount.

The government’s recent concessions to the gold-mining industry – which activists say has already illegally infiltrated at least half of the country’s national parks – were quickly rejected by Indigenous and environmental groups, who note that the livelihoods of entire communities depend on the health of these protected areas.

“[The agreement] facilitates the entry of mining in areas that, until today, protect the cultural, religious and natural heritage of the country,” the College of Biologists of La Paz and several other professional organisations noted in a statement before the deal was annulled.

According to Alipaz, Bolivia’s National Service of Protected Areas (SERNAP), a government agency, “has become an operational arm of extractivism.” Madidi, Cotapata and Apolobamba are home to dozens of Indigenous communities, where thousands of residents depend on the natural environment for their lives and livelihoods. Many are concerned about the effects of ongoing illegal mining, with an estimated 85 percent of mining cooperatives across Bolivia falling into this category. Along with large-scale deforestation, mining activity can pollute rivers with toxic mercury, threatening the health of local communities.

Before last month’s agreement was annulled, SERNAP’s executive director, Teodoro Mamani Ibarra, told members of the media that its aim was to curb illegal mining and institute new controls – although it was not clear exactly how this would be done. He rejected criticisms that the deal would open up three of the country’s national parks to exploitation, telling reporters: “Regarding the environmental issue, the care of our protected areas, we are going to demand that [mining cooperatives] comply with the current regulations.”

Environmental groups, meanwhile, dispute the contention that the October agreement would have instituted stricter controls on mining. Operations are often set up in secluded areas that are hard for authorities to reach, compounding the difficulty of enforcement operations, which are also plagued by bureaucratic lethargy.

“The legal framework for mining in Bolivia is very flexible and has become increasingly so,” Gonzalo Mondaca, a researcher with Bolivia’s non-profit Documentation and Information Centre, told Al Jazeera. “These mining operations are not obliged to comply with all the environmental protection regulations [amid a lack of monitoring and control] ... It is very unusual that, here in Bolivia, mining can be done in a protected area or an Indigenous territory without complying with strict rules.”

As for SERNAP’s assertion that miners who were already operating in protected areas before they became protected can be grandfathered, observers have responded furiously. “It seems a legal contradiction, but also a conceptual one,” Rafael Anze, a representative of the College of Biologists of La Paz, told Al Jazeera. “A protected area is not an area for mining. So how do they have these rights?”

Alipaz also rejected the notion of pre-existing miners’ rights, noting: “We [Indigenous communities] existed here and had these territories long before Bolivia was Bolivia. Therefore, no other right should be imposed.”

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