

Protests in Panama do not let up

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By María Josefina Arce

Panama experienced a week of intense protests that forced President Laurentino Cortizo to sign last Friday an executive decree prohibiting the granting of new mining concessions. However, the demonstrations did not let up and continued over the weekend.

At the center of the protests is the agreement reached between the Government and Minera Panama, a subsidiary of the Canadian transnational First Quantum, to extract copper from an open pit deposit.

The Panamanians affirm that the decree is only for new concessions and does not respond to their demand that the agreement on the exploitation of the largest open pit mine in Central America, located in Donoso, province of Colon, on the Caribbean coast, which represents a danger for the ecosystem and the nearby populations, be repealed.

As the days went by, representatives of different sectors of society, such as teachers, students, health workers and transportation workers joined the mobilizations.

Throughout last week there were street blockades in Panama City and in other cities of the country, classes were suspended and clashes between police forces and demonstrators resulted in more than 200 arrests.

The Government's pretext of the profits that the agreement with Minera Panama will bring to the Isthmian nation is rejected by a large part of the citizens, who affirm that the damage to the environment will be greater, since thousands of hectares of forests will be destroyed, while the rivers will be converted into washing places for this activity.

According to experts, part of Panama's mineral deposits are in areas of great biodiversity, such as the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor, which connects natural areas of Panama and Costa Rica, Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Belize and some states in southern Mexico.

The exploitation of resources by a transnational corporation is very sensitive for the majority of citizens, as it is reminiscent of when the Panama Canal was in foreign hands. For nearly a century, the United States controlled the inter-oceanic waterway until 1999, when the Isthmian nation recovered its sovereignty after decades of struggle.

Panamanians also allege that the agreement with Minera Panama is unconstitutional. Recall that in 2017 the Supreme Court of Justice had declared the original agreement unconstitutional.

Several lawsuits have already been filed against the pact, but according to current regulations it will be necessary to wait about 10 days for any pronouncement on the matter from the judicial body.

Discontent is growing and even Panamanians living in other countries such as Canada, the United States and Spain have also staged demonstrations against the agreement, sanctioned by the National Assembly in record time.

New protests have been announced for the next few days to demand the repeal of the agreement, which has been described as onerous and harmful to national sovereignty.

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