



FRENTE POPULAR EN DEFENSA
DEL SOCONUSCO 20 DE JUNIO

The environmental and health impacts of mining in Chiapas

POPULAR FRONT IN DEFENSE OF SOCONUSCO “20 DE JUNIO” (FPDS)

In 2015, the inhabitants of the municipalities of Escuintla and Acacoyagua formed the Popular Front in Defense of Soconusco “20 de Junio” (FPDS) and joined the Mexican Network of People Affected by Mining (REMA) to demand the cancellation of the 21 authorized concessions on their lands and suspend the exploitation activities of 3 mines that were established since 2012.

Since its creation, the FPDS has been dedicated to information sharing and raising awareness among the population and authorities about the harmful impacts of mining on the environment, health and food. Its members, campesino men and women representing some 30 communities, organize to defend themselves against the extractive model and protect the Cacaluta, Doña María and Cintalapa rivers that supply water to around 42,000 people and were contaminated by mining.



Since 2009, most of the concessions located in this region have been approved, which cover at least 51,000 hectares of a portion of the El Triunfo biosphere. Most of the titles of the concessions are held by Mexican individuals presumed by foreign companies, such as the Chinese "GTM Mineral" or the US "Honor Up Trading". The largest concessionaire is Tristán Canales Reyna, patron of Minera Caracol S.A. de C.V., son of Tristán Canales Najjar, vice president of Grupo Salinas and TV Azteca. Tristán Canales was associated for a long time with the Canadian company Blackfire, implicated in the murder of the social fighter Mariano Abarca from the municipality of Chicomuselo. In 2012, the delegation of the Environmental Secretariat in Chiapas authorized the exploitation of ilmenite from the “Cristina” project, which until 2015 exploited 49,000 tons of material. At that time, the “El Bambú” and “Casas Viejas” projects looted material, arguing that they were only in the exploration phase.

In 2013, some members of the FPDS began to notice drastic changes in the rivers and their water, but especially in their health, among them that the tap water came out a rusty yellow color and the water from the wells was muddy and greasy. They detected the presence of skin diseases due to contact with the water which was being consumed in their homes. When women, girls and boys came into contact with river water, they had itching, dryness, cracking, spots and welts on the skin, as well as redness, burning and conjunctivitis in the eyes.

A doctor and a community nurse observed an increase in colon, stomach, liver and kidney cancer. The doctor affirms that the death rate from cancer in the Cacaos ejido rose from 7% to 22% between 2012



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and 2015. The information gathered also showed that the inhabitants suffered from hair loss and abscesses in their arms and the buttocks.

Among the environmental impacts, it was found that mining was deforesting the El Triunfo biosphere forest, a water recharge area of great importance for the basin, as well as producing biodiversity loss in the region (among other impacts). This was occurring despite the fact that the environmental impact declarations ensured that the mining activities would not cause harm.

In August 2016, the FPDS managed to get the Acacoyagua City Council to sign a Declaration designating it as a Municipality Free of Mining wherein it promised not to grant any mining licenses or to contemplate mining in its social and economic development plan. The municipality did not fulfill its promises, so the members of the FPDS decided to install two camps on the access roads of the “Casas Viejas” mine, operated by El Puntal S.A. de C.V. to block the passage to mining plunder.

During this period, they verified that this project did not count with the necessary permits leading them to demand that the Federal Attorney for Environmental Protection (PROFEPA) carry out the proper inspection and supervise the environmental mitigation measures. They demanded the government of Chiapas, the Ministry of the Environment and Natural Resources (SEMARNAT), the Ministry of Health of the State of Chiapas and the National Water Commission (CONAGUA) carry out a toxicological study to find out the link between mining activity and the increase in cancer cases, geological studies to identify possible radiation levels in the ilmenite extraction faults, and water quality studies to recognize the contamination levels of the Cacaluta, Cintalapa and Doña María rivers.

None of these demands were met by the Chiapas government, on the contrary, the company El Puntal S.A. de C.V. and the state government carried out a criminalization campaign against the FPDS: they delegitimized its members through defamatory notes in local newspapers, threatened and intimidated the presence of the Army and the State Police, blocked access to water wells and infrastructure in the ejidos; as well as they made direct threats in the camps.

Despite this, the FPDS continued to condemn the impacts and violations of their rights to clean drinking water and a healthy environment. They also encouraged communities to consolidate a prevention strategy, avoid activating other concessions, and look for alternatives for health care and water sanitation. The camps persisted until the beginning of 2018 with the presence of many families who did not tire ensuring that no truck would transport ilmenite, and to prevent that the business people would not return. Since 2016, no business person has returned to Acacoyagua to try and lie to the population.

In 2019, the character of the “Anti-miner” was included in the parade on September 15 as one more hero to commemorate. Currently there is a network of inhabitants who organize themselves through an assembly and discuss other extractive projects that threaten their territory. Today dams, gas pipelines and monocultures are the subjects of analysis. The resistance activities do not stop because it is recognized that the struggle is long. Now that the pigüas (crawfish) have returned to the river, there is hope.