

Ore & building
materials extraction

Keywords

- > Cross-border Conflict
- > Gold
- > Silver
- > Water Contamination
- > Goldcorp
- > Biosphere Reserve

Introduction

Situated about 153 kilometres (95 miles) east of Guatemala City, Cerro Blanco is in Asuncion Mita, Jutiapa. Asuncion Mita covers an area of 174 hectares (429 acres) and is 45 minutes from the border with El Salvador and Honduras.

The mining project is located in the Trifinio Biosphere Reserve that covers a 221-kilometre (137-mile) area on the Guatemalan side of the Montecristo Massif. It was created by Government Resolution 939-87 on 19 October 1987 to protect the Montecristo Cloud Forest and its flora and fauna. concurrently with the Montecristo National Park in El Salvador, the Biosphere Reserve La Fraternidad in Guatemala and the Montecristo Trifinio National Park in Honduras (CNPT, 2011).

The Montecristo Protected Area is home to three main watersheds in Central America (Lempa, Ulúa and Motagua) and boasts a unique biodiversity. The mining project poses a threat to this particularly valuable natural area, which is one motive for the conflict; local, national, and international opposition to it has been strong. Civil society organisations in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador reject governmental intentions to allow mining projects in Cerro Blanco.

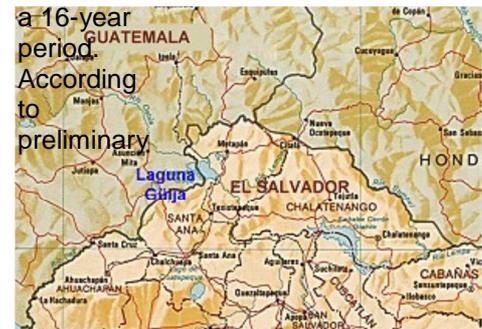
Background

Former Guatemalan President Oscar Berger's administration authorised the project on 22 September 2007, even though there was already an exploitation licence in effect issued in 1997. Originally the exploration and exploitation permit was for 25 years.

The Project is run in Jutiapa by Entre Mares S.A., a subsidiary of Canadian corporation Goldcorp that also owns the controversial Marlin Project also located in Guatemala.

The project

The project concerns the exploitation of Cerro Blanco to extract gold and silver. Its exploration, construction, operation and technical closure is planned to span



Location of the cross-border Cerro Blanco Project

Source: noalamina.org/mineria-latinoamerica

estimations by the company, there is a potential of 1,579,959 ounces of gold and 4,486,632 ounces of silver.

The Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) submitted by the company states that due to the geological conditions of the area, the mineral is distributed in veins. Therefore, its extraction would be underground, not at an open pit mine.

The project was under construction until 2012 Preparatory efforts included the construction of several facilities, among which are an exploration tunnel, an underground mine (to extract the minerals), and a plant to process the mineral (using sodium cyanide leaching techniques and its later adsorption with activated carbon). Subcomponents such as access roads, tailing dams, dry stacks, and processing plant facilities will also be built, in addition to support facilities such as administrative and staff offices, storage areas, internal roads, fuel depots, storage for explosives, power supply equipment, radio communication system, landfill and a control guard post.

Impacts

According to studies conducted by the communities, the Project will affect 39 farmer and indigenous communities in Asuncion Mita, Jutiapa (Guatemala) and Metapan (El Salvador). One direct consequence would be the contamination of water sources; in particular, the Ostua and Lempa rivers that flow in the border area between Guatemala and El Salvador, respectively. Also, the project is located





14 kilometres (8 miles) from Lake Güija, a large freshwater source in the area.

Depletion of water sources is also a matter of concern for the communities. The company plans to drill wells close to the Ostua River, which is used for agriculture and livestock in the area. Moreover, the Ostua River flows into Lake Güija, and the studies argue that if the mining project continues for 12 to 15 years (its estimated lifespan), the depression cone formed by the mine over the years will cause pressure variations in the aquifers. As a result, the water levels in the wells for domestic use and agriculture would be affected.

The communities state that the EIA lacks a plan to mitigate the contamination of water used in the leaching process, and the depletion of water sources. Because the Ostua River (that feeds Lake Güija) may be directly or indirectly contaminated, the EIA should include an international agreement with El Salvador, where over two-thirds of the lake is located.

From a cultural heritage point of view, the affected communities in Guatemala state that there are archaeological

remains in the area that will be affected by Cerro Blanco. The submitted EIA lacks a plan to mitigate or prevent the damage that could occur.

Conflict and consequences

Representatives of the Centro de Investigaciones sobre la Inversión y Comercio (CEICOM Centre for the Investigation of Investments and Trade) analysed the waters discharged by the mine in the ravine El Pedregal del Río Ostua and found high concentrations of cyanide, mercury, arsenic, and lead among other heavy metals that are directly related to illness such as cancer, kidney failure, central nervous system diseases and genetic alterations (ASANOVA, 2012).

The company Entre Mares S.A. states that since exploitation activities have not yet begun, water sources should not already be contaminated (the main claim of the communities), and claim that they plan to comply with the local regulations.

In response, the governments of El Salvador and Guatemala created a Binational Commission to study the impact of the metal extraction process

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that would take place close to Lake Güija.

Meanwhile, citizens have organised several demonstrations. In 2009, there were three pacifist marches to protest the presence of the company. Colectivo Madre Selva de Guatemala (Madre Selva Association of Guatemala); Comunidades en Resistencia Contra la Minería de Cerro Blanco, de Guatemala (Communities in Resistance against Mining in Cerro Blanco Guatemala); Centro de Investigación sobre Inversión y Comercio (CEICOM Centre for Investigation of Investments and Trade) and Centro Hondureño de Promoción para el Desarrollo Comunitario (CEHPRODEC Honduran Centre for the Promotion of Communitarian Development) were among the main protestors.

The communities claim that the company is employing intimidation tactics against people who are opposed to the Project. In November 2010, five people were arrested by agents who identified themselves as police officers and taken to a farm where they were abandoned without their belongings. Demonstrations against the Project are still ongoing.

By the end of 2014, activists still wait for the decision of the Human rights authorities in Guatemala and Salvador to be certain about the definitive cancelation of the project.



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More on this case

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