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MINING'S EFFECTS

Activist strives against pollution

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"Persona non grata" did not need to be translated into English.

Yolanda Zurita smiled ruefully as she realized the American journalists she was addressing understood exactly how the townspeople of La Oroya, Peru, had initially treated her when she began to protest environmental conditions created by the local Doe Run mine.

Copper, lead, zinc, silver, bismuth and indium are mined at Doe Run, located 14,000 feet up in the Andes mountains. The company directly employs about 4,000 residents of La Oroya, and indirectly supports thousands more because of the businesses and services used by miners, other staff and their families.

Pollution

But the same mine's smelter spews out 167 tons of toxic gases per day. Doe Run's own data put the level of sulfur dioxide in the air at 80 to 300 times the maximum level deemed safe by the World Health Organization.

La Oroya has the dubious distinction of being one of the top-ten most polluted cities in the world.

At various points, the Mantaro River, into which 23 other rivers in the area's watershed region empty, appears brick red, a strange shade of aqua or flat brown. Rocks at the water's edge are black and oily where the water washes over them.

"El rio es muerto," said a local aid worker when asked if there were fish in the Mantaro: "The river is dead." Locals know better than to swim in the water, she added, but they still irrigate their crops with it. Produce from the Mantaro River Valley can no longer be exported to the U.S.

Impact on region

Ms. Zurita, a parishioner of Christ the King Church in La Oroya, saw her father develop nervous system problems and lose movement in his legs after working in the mine.

She said that residents of the town routinely develop headaches, respiratory problems, asthma, bone and joint pain, rashes, allergies, and cancer.

In 1998, a Eucharistic Congress held in La Oroya explored the role of the Church in human rights defense. In response, 22 laity organized a commission to look at local environmental problems and human rights. Ms. Zurita headed up the group, known as MOSAO (an acronym for its Spanish title, translated as "Movement for the Health of La Oroya").

Retaliation

It didn't take long for Doe Run officials and employees to react. Ms. Zurita received angry, anonymous phone calls, then several death threats. The mining company defamed the character of commission members.

Ms. Zurita said that local residents were even convinced that the skyrocketing lead levels in their children's blood were beneficial for developing intelligence. Workers terrified of losing their jobs said that MOSAO had no real evidence that the mine was causing serious pollution.

The worst part, said Ms. Zurita, was when parishioners of her own church sat her down and said that "Christians aren't conflictive; they don't cause problems" like the turmoil she was creating by protesting mine conditions.

Membership in MOSAO dropped to just five people, but Ms. Zurita stayed involved. "Christ was crucified; He received all sorts of false accusations," she shrugged.

Blood study

Then, through the efforts of Archbishop Pedro Barreto Jimino of the Diocese of Huancayo (which includes La Oroya), a study was set up by the University of St. Louis in Missouri to test samples of townspeople's blood.

The Jesuit-run university got the samples through Ms. Zurita's commission, but it took some convincing to get the locals on-board.

With support from Catholic Relief Services (CRS), the overseas aid agency of American Catholics; non-governmental organizations; a Presbyterian pastor; and others, commission members distributed pamphlets explaining the study.

They visited families personally, picking holidays so that Doe Run wouldn't be able to plan a counterattack, and left flyers about the study on doorsteps in the early morning, finishing before the mine opened.

Findings

One factor in their favor was that Doe Run officials had taken blood samples of workers themselves over the years but had never returned the results. Townspeople were won over by the promise that they would learn what their blood samples showed.

Dangerous levels of lead, cadmium, arsenic, mercury, uranium, cesium and antimony were found. Ninety-seven percent of local children under age six had lead levels exceeding the WHO's maximum limit.

Ms. Zurita felt vindicated. Her goals for MOSAO had been to get the Peruvian government to declare health in La Oroya to be an emergency concern, to convince the Doe Run mine to control its lethal emissions and to begin to restore the environment in the Mantaro Watershed.

"The study scientifically shows that this [pollution] is happening; it can be proven," she stated. "The situation changed from 'personas non gratas' to 'personas gratas.'"

Solutions

CRS has been supporting the commission in creating watchdog mechanisms and continuing to approach Doe Run with proposals for change.

Ms. Zurita said she doesn't want the mine to shut down, since it's the town's major employer; she wants dialogue with officials on fixing the problems.

She pointed out that the U.S. government, which has stricter environmental standards, forced the Doe Run Co. seven years ago to cut lead emissions from a similar smelter it owns in Missouri.

After interviewing Ms. Zurita, American journalists visiting La Oroya with CRS officials watched locals employed by Doe Run as they planted trees near piles of mine tailings to show care for the environment.

They were wearing surgical masks.

(The Doe Run Co. is based in St. Louis, Missouri, and owned by a billionaire named Ira Rennert, who is a native of Brooklyn. His company bought the mine from a Peruvian state-owned mining company ten years ago.)

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