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Responsible mining bill's defeat disappoints Canadian bishops' group

Deborah Gyapong Catholic News Service | Oct. 29, 2010

OTTAWA, Ontario -- Citing concerns about pollution and continued environmental abuse, the Canadian bishops' international development agency expressed disappointment that a responsible mining bill was defeated in the House of Commons.

"It is a very disturbing outcome," said Michael Casey, executive director of the Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace in a statement released Oct. 28. The organization had supported the legislation after its introduction in 2009.

Development and Peace had mounted a five-year campaign to ensure Canadian mining companies operating in the developing world would exercise corporate social responsibility.

"Our 11,500 members are deeply disappointed, as are our partners in the global South, who really welcomed the bill," Casey said. "For years, we have listened to their stories about how Canadian mining companies are taking over their land, polluting their water sources, destroying their environment, and often without consulting the affected communities or listening to their concerns."

Supported by the New Democratic Party, the Bloc Quebecois and liberal members of the House of Commons, the bill had squeaked through close votes to get to committee. But it was defeated in a 140-134 vote Oct. 27. Twenty-four members of Parliament were absent.

Mining companies and the Conservative Party vigorously opposed the bill.

"This is a bill that, while seeking to aim at ensuring our mining and extractive sector practices good social-good corporate social responsibility practices abroad, in fact would have the impact of putting Canadian companies on a very unlevel playing field versus other countries," cautioned International Trade Minister Peter Van Loan shortly before the vote. "The risk to Canada is thousands of jobs."

He said Canada's mining sector is a leader in the world, but most of its mines are outside of the country. He warned of untold economic damage if the mining companies moved their headquarters from Canadian cities.

Companies would find it "very challenging ... to raise finances as they will be constantly tied up dealing with frivolous and vexatious complaints that will make investors think twice about operating here," Van Loan said.

"Headquarters of companies will inevitably move to other countries where they don't face the same kind of difficulty or any kind of frivolous and vexatious complaint that could tie up an investment effort or an effort to pursue a mine elsewhere."

Claire Doran, educational services director for Development and Peace, said in an e-mail message that 40 Latin American environmental and human rights organizations had signed an open letter to Canadian members of Parliament before the vote "emphasizing the importance of this bill based on violations they had witnessed in

their home countries."

She pledged that the organization "will continue to pursue its commitment to the rights of those affected by Canadian companies."

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