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Church aids Peru's indigenous communities in illegal mining fight

Rich Heffern | Feb. 23, 2011 Eco Catholic

By Barbara J. Fraser, Catholic News Service
PUERTO MALDONADO, Peru -- At a fork in a muddy road, Juana Payaba gestures to a cluster of makeshift buildings as motors rumble nearby, where wildcat gold miners are churning a palm swamp into a quagmire. Payaba, who is president of Tres Islas, an indigenous community of Shipibo and Ese'eja people in this corner of Peru's Amazon region, is determined to take on gold miners who she says are occupying her community's lands illegally, destroying the forest and poisoning the rivers and streams with mercury.

"We want to do community tourism here and put in a fish farm," says Payaba, who estimates that 200 illegal miners stand in the way of those plans.
Experts who are helping the community, including a lawyer from the Peruvian bishops' Social Action Commission, say they are willing to take the case to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights if Peruvian courts do not protect the community's land rights.

But the situation is complicated. Some of the miners have government concessions. Others have struck deals with community members to prospect for gold. Some community members also have mining concessions. Even Payaba has one, although she says she is not prospecting on it.

The convoluted case of Tres Islas is typical of the chaos in Peru's Madre de Dios region, where skyrocketing international gold prices are luring small farmers from the Andes highlands to the Amazonian lowlands in search of riches.

The gold rush is the most recent in a long cycle of booms and busts in the region, which has seen rubber, logging and oil drilling operations come and go. The families in Payaba's community are descended from indigenous people brought from other parts of the country by rubber barons more than a century ago.

Madre de Dios, which is Spanish for Mother of God, "has always been a place where people take and take and take -- gold, timber, oil, gas," said Bishop Francisco Gonzalez Hernandez, who heads the apostolic vicariate of Puerto Maldonado.

An estimated 200 people a day are flooding into the region, but many go away nearly as poor as when they arrived.

"Laborers don't earn much," Bishop Gonzalez said. "The people who make money are the ones who provide the machinery. Laborers end up losing."
Local officials estimate that less than 10 percent of the miners operate legally. Some apply for concessions, then begin mining -- or rent the land for others to mine -- before receiving final permits. Almost none has received the required environmental permits.

Regional mining officials say they lack the personnel and budget to control the mining. Peruvian Environment Minister Antonio Brack blames the lack of oversight on corruption.

In mining camps, laborers work 24-hour shifts, often up to their waists in water or muck, using motorized suction systems and carpet-lined sluices to capture sand mixed with flecks of gold. At the end of the shift, they mix the sand with mercury, which adheres to the gold, forming a soft lump. They use an open flame to burn off the mercury, which vaporizes readily, leaving behind a chunk of gold.

The miners work without safety equipment, running the risk of cave-ins from unstable banks of earth, mosquito-borne diseases such as malaria or dengue and neurological problems from exposure to mercury.

A highway through the region, linking the nearby Brazilian border with Peruvian seaports on the Pacific Coast, was recently paved, making it easier for people to travel to the region, but also bringing bulldozers and backhoes that can obliterate entire watersheds in a matter of months.

An estimated 360,000 acres have been cleared in the past several decades. Satellite photos show deforestation increasing, especially in new mining areas. Aerial photos show miners flooding into the buffer zone of the Tambopata Reserve, one of the country's premier protected areas and an important destination for scientists and nature tourism.

In the remote camps where they live in shacks or under makeshift plastic tents, "miners have only two diversions -- beer and prostitution," Bishop Gonzalez said. Clandestine bars abound, and traffickers recruit young women from the Andean highlands, ostensibly to work in restaurants, then force them into prostitution.

In Mazuko, a town near the Andean foothills, Oscar Guadalupe and Ana Hurtado once ran a home for children of families who lived far from schools. Several dozen young people lived at the home and raised vegetables in the organic garden until they finished high school.

With the renewed surge in mining, however, the home's mission changed. Guadalupe and Hurtado now shelter young women and girls -- some as young as 11 years old -- who are rescued or have managed to escape from brothels in mining camps.

Church workers are attacking the problems on various fronts. The local office of Caritas Peru, the church's aid and development agency, has monitored water quality in mining camps and is promoting tree farming as an alternative. It also published an economic and social study of mining in the region and made policy recommendations.

In an effort to stop the influx of illegal miners, Payaba and other community leaders blocked a narrow road that transportation companies used to carry supplies to mining camps. Two of the companies filed a criminal suit against the leaders for blocking a right-of-way, and police tore down a guardhouse that the community set up.

Mariela Perez, a lawyer from the bishops' conference, said under Peruvian law, indigenous communities have a degree of self-determination to decide who has access to their land. So far, Payaba and the other leaders have lost the battle against the transportation companies, but they hope Peru's Constitutional Court will rule in their favor.

A legal complaint by the community against miners who are working without official permits is pending. Perez said the community seeks to evict the illegal loggers and organize other income-producing activities, such as certified sustainable forestry, so community members will not be drawn to mining.

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