Questions surround police shooting at Australian-operated Indonesian mine

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On the morning of January 7, Indonesia's notorious Mobile Brigade riot police, known as Brimob, opened fire on a demonstration outside the Toguraci open-cut gold mine on Halmahera Island in the Indonesian province of North Maluka. One person was killed, another seriously injured and at least six arrested, including a priest.

According to Igor O'Neill, a spokesman for the Mineral Policy Institute (MPI), a non-government mining monitoring group, hundreds of people had rallied from local villages in order to protest against the mine's operator, the Australian company Newcrest Mining, and to demand compensation for the damage it has done to their land.

Friends of the Earth Indonesia, the Mining Advocacy Group and the Indonesian Centre for Environmental Law accuse Newcrest of violating Indonesian laws prohibiting mining in protected forests. Along with local villagers, the organisations held a demonstration in Jakarta in December to demand that Newcrest repair the damage done to forest by the Toguraci operation and the company's nearby, but now abandoned, 32-hectare Gosowong mine project.

The Toguraci mine is believed to hold over 250,000 ounces of gold, worth $96 million at current prices. Newcrest's leases to mine on Halmahera Island were granted under the Suharto dictatorship without any consultation with the local inhabitants or any provision for them to share in the mining profits. O'Neill told journalists: "The company has been there for years, but these villagers have nothing to show for it. I have never seen a more impoverished community, and they are sitting on a gold mine."

O'Neill reported that on January 7, the villagers had informed the police they would be coming to the mine. When they arrived, however, they were confronted by up to 100 armed Brimob personnel, who fired into the crowd and then charged in to disperse them. Villagers involved in the incident told the Mineral Policy Institute that police beat dozens of people.

The Indonesian authorities and Newcrest have told a completely different version of events.

The Indonesian police claim that those involved in the January 7 incident were not local people, but "illegal miners" armed with spears and mining tools, who had come to Halmahera from Sulawesi and other islands to fossick for gold. North Maluka provincial police chief Andi Bambang Sky told journalists that Brimob had blocked the way into the mine and fired warning shots; one of which ricocheted off a rock and hit a man in the head.

Newcrest's mine general manager Peter Blake alleged the incident was "between Brimob and a bunch of these criminal illegal miners". A Newcrest spokesman in Australia, Peter Reeve, told the press: "It isn't associated with compensation claims when they have mining implements. What these people are doing is illegal mining—stealing gold."

Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) supported the Indonesian authorities and Newcrest spokesmen, reporting that an armed mob of illegal miners had attacked the police. According to the newsagency Inter Press Service, however, when the DFAT spokeswoman was asked for the source of the department's information she said she was unsure.

The contradictory stories raise all the more questions due to two admissions: one by the Australian embassy in Jakarta that it had petitioned the Indonesian government to take action against protests by local landowners on Halmahera and another by Newcrest that it was paying Brimob to protect its operations.

Last October, Newcrest was forced to delay work at

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Toguraci for five weeks after 1,500 local residents occupied the mine area. On November 28, in a speech to the Brisbane Mining club, Newcrest chief executive Tony Palmer complained that the Indonesian police and army had been slow to act against the protestors retarding the development of the mine's operation.

The Australian government has admitted that during the October incident, its embassy contacted Indonesian government ministers to request that they help Newcrest get its operations going again. A DFAT spokeswoman told Inter Press that the embassy had met with the Minister for Energy and Resources, the Coordinating Minister for Economic Affairs and, most significantly, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, the Coordinating Minister for Political and Security Affairs.

The Indonesian government answered the requests in late November when the Army personnel guarding the site were replaced by the Brimob contingent.

On January 8, Newcrest spokesman Reeve denied that the company had been paying the wages of the Brimob police guarding the mine, but he revealed to the press that the company had "contributed" to paying the force's expenses. How much Newcrest has paid Brimob is not known but this admission is significant. In other mining operations in Indonesia's remote provinces, the police and the Indonesian armed forces (TNI) have competed with one another to provide security for resource companies. In exchange for cash, they have suppressed local opposition.

One indication of the scale of corporate contributions to the Indonesian security forces emerged following the August 2002 murder of three people who worked for the Papuan Grasberg mine operated by the American Freeport-McMoRan Corporation. Under pressure from shareholders, the company admitted that in addition to paying $US37 million for a base for the Indonesian military, it had secretly made payments of more than $US11 million to the security forces over the previous two years, in order to protect its operations against local landowners.

Australian academic Damien Kingsbury, who is researching the business interests of the TNI and Indonesian police, told the Mineral Policy Institute: "Newcrest claiming it is not involved in the killing is not correct ... If this latest violence was not at the direct and specific order of Newcrest, then it was by officers employed by Newcrest, acting on Newcrest's behalf."

The Halmahera incident is not the first time that an Australian embassy call for police action to secure the interests of Australian companies has ended with the killing of local residents. In May 2001, Ambassador Richard Smith called for a crackdown on the "illegal occupation of mining leases". Ten days later, a Brimob unit killed two people at the Mount Muro mine in Kalimantan, operated by the Australian company Aurora Gold.

The evidence surrounding this month's incident on Halmahera Island points to the intimate relations that exist between Canberra and the Indonesian state in ensuring that the social demands of ordinary people do not interfere with the plunder of the country's resources by Australian-based mining corporations.

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