

# Peruvian government imposes state of emergency to quell mine protests

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Peruvian president Ollanta Humala has imposed a state of emergency in the province of Espinar in Cusco to quell violent protests over a mining company's environmental destruction.

Local residents have risen up against the Peruvian branch of the mining multinational Xstrata, which they accuse of having inflicted grave damage on the environment of the province.

The state of emergency suspends constitutional guarantees such as personal freedom and security, protection against searches and seizures, and the rights to assembly and travel. The measure has been imposed for 30 days.

Until a few years ago, Espinar was projected to become a livestock-raising center in the south of the country. Since then, however, livestock has been drastically reduced. Farmers accuse the mining company of having contaminated the soil and the two local rivers, poisoning and killing their sheep and cattle.

There have also been reports of dangerous levels of heavy metals detected in blood and urine samples from the residents themselves.

One of the demands of the demonstrators has been an increase to 30 percent, from the current 3 percent, in the share of the company's profits directed to improve social conditions in the province.

Xstrata has not only completely rejected the demands, until January 2011 it denied that there existed any local environmental contamination. The Humala government backed this claim until it was torn to shreds by subsequent investigations that determined that contamination in Espinar has rendered livestock raising impossible.

The protests began on May 21 after negotiations broke down between the government and the United Front for the Defense of the Interests of Espinar (Frente Único de Defensa de los Intereses de Espinar-FUDIE). On May 28, a group of local residents decided to march against the mining company's installations, but they were brutally repressed by security forces. At least 2 people were shot to death and 13 wounded. This raised to 14 the number of people killed in protests since Humala took office.

The state of emergency and the repressive measures in Espinar represent another step to the right by the Humala government and its unmasking as a servile defender of the

exploitation of the country's resources by the multinational mining corporations.

Humala was elected on demagogic promises to call a halt to "neo-liberal" policies carried out over the last 20 years and to effect an improvement in the distribution of wealth. Peruvian press commentators have noted that in its violent response to regional protests, the Humala government is resembling more and more its predecessor: the corrupt, right-wing government of the APRA party's Alan Garcia.

Following the deaths of the protesters on May 28, residents kidnapped a local prosecutor for several hours, burned his truck and destroyed the offices of Tintaya, the NGO set up by Xstrata to embody its nonexistent "social responsibility."

With 1,200 reinforcements patrolling the city, thanks to Humala's emergency decree, the police detained 26 people, including Herbert Huamán, the leader of the FUDIE. Released the next day, Huamán denounced his detention as arbitrary and accused the police of brutality.

After Huamán, the government turned its attention to the mayor of Espinar, Óscar Mollohuanca. On May 30, some 50 heavily armed police invaded the city's municipal building, dragging Mollohuanca out by force to the screams of protest from dozens of residents who had gathered near the building.

Mollohuanca was then transported from Cusco to the coastal province of Ica—a hostage of the government—to answer for what had happened. In Ica, the Superior Court accused him of "abetting crime and disturbances" and he was sentenced to five months of preventive detention.

Mollohuanca rejected all the charges against him, denouncing them as a frame-up. He declared that during the protests, he had attempted to "calm the population" and that he was trying to "renew the dialog" with the government when he was arrested.

"This is a campaign launched against me by the mining companies," he said. The court claimed that there exists "testimony by the police" that Mollohuanca led acts of violence during the protests and that this would be used against him in a future trial.

The detention of Mollohuanca was denounced by the National Coordinator of Human Rights (Coordinadora Nacional de Derechos Humanos—CNDDHH), which includes 79 organizations from throughout the country. The group

demanded the resignation of the prime minister, the former military officer Óscar Valdez, whom it blamed politically for the deaths in Espinar “and the continually growing number of deaths in social conflicts.”

In Peru, “social conflicts” is the term commonly used to describe the frequent outbreaks of local insurrections among the rural and economically deprived sections of the country’s population.

According to Peru’s national human rights ombudsman, the “Defensoría del Pueblo,” there are 250 ongoing social conflicts, the majority of them over environmental issues, as in Espinar, that are awaiting negotiations with the government to satisfy community demands. Espinar is only one example of what could happen to thousands of Peruvians if, after these negotiations fail, they decide to take matters into their own hands.

The rise of a populist like Humala, who during his campaign toured the country promising change, has intensified the unrest and the expectations among sections of the population who want to make their voices heard by the government.

The attempt to cast Prime Minister Oscar Valdez as the villain within the government has become increasingly common, serving pseudo-left elements who want to continue promoting illusions in Humala and diverting social struggles into protests aimed at pressuring the president into keeping his campaign promises.

The reality is that Humala, himself a former military officer, chose Valdez as part of a deliberate turn toward basing his government more firmly on the security forces and suppressing the struggles of workers and the oppressed.

In the same week as the events in Espinar, farmers in the northern region of Piura blocked a highway to demand better prices for the rice and cotton that they grow; while towards the east in Cajamarca, an indefinite regional strike began over the demand that the government finally declare the massive Conga mining project proposed by the multinational Newmont unviable. Week after week, new upheavals erupt as the government’s stability is continuously undermined. The situation is unsustainable and will lead to Humala, sooner rather than later, taking broader extra-constitutional measures in an attempt to defend his rule and uphold the interests of the transnationals.

The elements in the leadership of these social conflicts, at the head of various local “Defense Fronts,” are political actors with ties to reformist parties steeped in nationalism and regionalism, as well as representatives of peasant and Indian communities. Despite their defiant attitude toward the government, they offer no genuine option to the working class outside of “pressuring” Humala to revive the “left” posture of his election campaign and “keep his promises.” Practically all of these groups backed Humala during the election, and not a few of their leaders are old friends and collaborators of the president.

This is the case with the leaders of the struggle against the

Conga project, who have allowed congressmen from the “rebel faction” of the ruling party, Gana Peru, to join their protest. Recently, Wilfredo Saavedra, an ex-member of the Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (MRTA) guerrilla organization and a leader of the Environmental Defense Front of Cajamarca, reached the point of inviting Isaac Humala, the president’s father, to come to the city and join the indefinite strike. This followed the father’s statement that he was against the mining project and was convinced that his son “shouldn’t betray those who supported him.” The trip was called off, however, after crude bombs were discovered at the local airport. The president’s father told the press that Prime Minister Valdez was to blame.

On the same day, the prime minister announced that he would send a new “high-level” commission composed of government ministers to Espinar to resume a “dialog” with the peasants once “order is re-established.”

During the upheavals in Espinar, the Peruvian press denounced the actions of the area’s inhabitants, labeling them as “irrational.”

The only thing underlying the protests that is “irrational”—from the standpoint of the interests of the vast majority of the population—is the workings of capitalism. While the Peruvian bourgeoisie and the owners of the multinationals operating in Espinar, Cajamarca and elsewhere have seen their profits soar, the inhabitants of the areas they are exploiting endure living standards that are little different than those that existed a century ago.

The social conflicts are, at their root, a struggle by largely abandoned populations for greater economic equality and a halt to the criminal operations of the mining multinationals and the impunity with which the government endows them.

These struggles pose with ever greater urgency the building of a revolutionary and internationalist party of the working class fighting for socialism, as neither capitalism nor any of its supposedly “reformist” representatives like Humala are prepared to meet these demands in Peru or anywhere else on the planet.



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