

Social conflicts erupt in Peru following bloody mine clash

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After the settlement of a strike against the Las Bambas mining mega-project in which police shot and killed four workers, over 200 similar social struggles are continuing across the country, according to a government report.

The *Defensoría del Pueblo*, a semi-autonomous agency that is charged with the protection of constitutional and basic rights, issued a report this week that listed 150 “active” struggles and another 64 that it described as “latent.”

The largest number of them stem from environmental and social dislocations created by the rapacious activities of major mining corporations, which enjoy the full collaboration of the government of President Ollanta Humala.

On October 6, a high-level delegation representing the Peruvian government reached an agreement with protesters against the Las Bamba project. The residents of the Challhuahuacho district in the southeastern Peruvian region of Apurímac ended their strike and dismantled roadblocks in advance of the talks. The Peruvian government subsequently lifted a state of emergency it had imposed upon the region.

On September 28, two days after the strike began, a violent confrontation lasting six hours between miners and indigenous people opposing the mainly Chinese-owned Las Bambas project left four protesters dead from gunshot wounds, as well as 15 protesters and eight policemen wounded. At least 21 people were detained.

The day after the violent confrontation, the right-wing newspaper *El Comercio* recounted how the police initiated the violence: “Yesterday 2,000 *comuneros* [members of peasant communities] gathered by the Challhuahuacho bridge in an improvised meeting in favor of continuing the protests. ... Suddenly, the police

began firing tear gas and the *comuneros* dispersed.” The newspaper quotes Henry Vasquez, representative of the NGO Cooperación: “The residents never said they would take over the mining installations. They were in the middle of a discussion making a statement,” when the police attacked.

Following the clash, the number of police and armed forces on the scene was increased to 1,750, which was to be joined by 500 more that were undergoing training.

The entire southern region of the country reacted in anger over the police killings. On October 6 there was a 48-hour strike across the department of Apurímac. Two thousand people marched on the streets of Abancay, the department’s capital, successfully closing down commercial activity in the city.

The Abancay mobilization was composed mainly of construction workers, defense fronts, the teachers union Sutep, administrative workers of the Regional Government of Apurímac and the Municipality of Abancay, and other public sectors workers.

What prompted the government to agree to the protesters’ demands was fear that the conflict was expanding to all of the southern region of the country, which includes an area with 80 of the 150 active mining conflicts: the departments of Cusco (16), Puno (19), Apurímac (22), Ayacucho (12) and Junín (11).

It required the presence of several cabinet members to meet a delegation of the strikers to cool down, at least for the moment, the most significant struggle of the 150 outstanding active conflicts in Peru.

In exchange for lifting roadblocks and ending the threat to occupy the Las Bambas mine site, the government delegation, which included several cabinet ministers, agreed to the immediate demands of the strikers, while committing to an orderly withdrawal of the armed forces and riot police.

According to the Peruvian daily *El* main points of the agreement include: Contabambas, where the violence took place, is to be recognized as a peaceful province and the stage of emergency lifted; the Ministry of Housing will provide houses to the families of the three miners shot dead; and the Ministry of Health will guarantee taking care of the wounded. In addition, workshops on the environmental impact of the mine will be held for residents in Quechua, which is the predominant language in the area.

According to *Defensoria del Pueblo*, there are two ongoing conflicts over Las Bambas. The first is the lack of an agreement between MMG, a Chinese consortium formed by metal giant, Minmetals Corporation and two investment firms, that is now the majority owner of Las Bambas, and the local indigenous communities.

The second is described as an attempt by the Progreso and Challhuahuacho communities to invade the zone because they claim their area of the Challhuahuacho River basin was contaminated during the exploration and construction stages of the project. Nothing of the second conflict was mentioned in the current agreement reached by the government and protest leaders.

Anger among local residents was also reportedly fueled by the cutting of jobs after the construction phase at the mine came to an end.

The Las Bambas mining project, at US\$10 billion, is the largest foreign investment in Peruvian history. It has been in the works for 11 years. According to *Defensoria del Pueblo*, the first violent conflict dates back to May 2011, when the project was under the control of the Swiss-based international mining conglomerate Glencore.

There are presently 15 projects paralyzed by social conflicts across Peru, which together are worth an estimated US\$67 billion. The largest and most politically visible that could damage the already wounded Peruvian reputation in world investors' circles include, in addition to Las Bambas:

- * Tia Maria in Arequipa, worth US\$1.4 billion and owned by Southern Peru of Grupo Mexicano (third largest copper company in the world). A five-year conflict saw violent confrontations two months ago, with six dead.

- * Conga in Cajamarca, worth US\$4.8 billion and owned by the Canadian Newmont. It was put on hold by the mass mobilization of Cajamarca's mainly rural

population.

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- * Galeno, worth US\$ 2.5 billion, where MMG also has the controlling stake. It has been postponed until 2016.

- * Cañariasco, Lambayeque, worth US\$1.8 billion and controlled by Canadian Candente Copper.

The Las Bambas megaproject is different from the others as 98 percent of it has been completed and it was scheduled to begin operations in early 2016. The project consists of seven deposits. Three will begin operations next year, and four are in the exploration stage. It is expected to have an economic impact equivalent to 1.4 percent of Peru's GDP.

According to mining.com, "Las Bambas will produce 400,000 tons of copper per year during the first five years of production placing it within the top three copper mines globally." The mine will also produce "silver, gold and molybdenum over its 20-year mine life." Two of the three largest copper mines in the world are located in Peru: Las Bambas and Cerro Verde, the latter owned by US company Freeport.

Las Bambas has significance in the geopolitical arena because it is emblematic of the growing Chinese penetration of Latin America. The Asian giant has already replaced the US as the main trading partner in four South American countries.

Peru's development confirms that many of the so-called emerging market countries are based on their old dependence on the export of raw materials. Mining accounts for 12 percent of Peru's GDP and 57 percent of its exports.

With the recent falloff in Chinese demand, Peru's economy has faltered, with its growth rate cut in half last year. The Peruvian economic deceleration is accompanied by an immense growth in social inequality. *Gestion* reported that 50,000 Peruvians have net worth over \$1 million; a good deal of that money is overseas and comes from the mining sector. According to official figures, 7 million Peruvians are living in poverty, nearly 23 percent of the population. The Andean mining areas are among the country's poorest.



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