

Gold mine disaster in Turkey poses international public health risk

Barış Demir
14 February 2024

A massive landslide occurred around midday Tuesday at Anagold Mining's Çöpler mine, owned by US-based Canadian SRR Mining, in the İliç district of Erzincan province in eastern Turkey.

Interior Minister Ali Yerlikaya announced that nine workers were trapped. On the extent of the landslide, he said, "It is estimated that the total volume of the sliding mass—for the time being—is 10 million cubic metres and that this mass has moved 800 metres at a speed of 10 metres per second". The search for workers continues with the participation of more than 800 search and rescue workers and volunteers.

If this waste soil containing toxic substances such as cyanide and sulphuric acid reaches the Euphrates River just a few hundred metres away, it could cause an environmental disaster that would last for decades in a vast area that includes war-torn Syria and Iraq as well as eastern and south-eastern Turkey.

In its first statement on the disaster, the Ministry of Environment, Urbanisation and Climate Change said, "In order to prevent the material flowing during the landslide from reaching the Euphrates River, we had the covers of the culvert where the Sabırlı stream meets the Euphrates River closed."

However, experts say that even if the waste soil is prevented from going directly into the Euphrates, rain and groundwater will inevitably lead to an environmental disaster because it is impossible to remove such a large amount of soil.

Food engineer and academic Dr. Bülent Türk said on X/Twitter, "This statement [of the ministry] does not reflect the truth. It is impossible to prevent the spread of chemical pollution. The increase in acidity will facilitate the dissolution of toxic elements and their contamination of ground and surface water. This is an environmental disaster that will last for decades."

In an interview with the *Gazete Duvar*, Cemalettin

Küçük, a metallurgical engineer, echoed Türk's position. He said, "The waste was above the membrane. Now it has leaked out into nature below. It is also leaking underground."

He added, "If the structure of the chemical changes with the rain, it can poison people through cyanide evaporation. You should tell the public the truth. It does not have to go into the Euphrates River. It is going into the groundwater. There would be a big disaster along the Euphrates with the groundwater."

An official investigation launched after the disaster has led to the arrest of four managers and executives of the company. As in previous similar cases, this is an attempt to whitewash the political establishment from President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan at the top, Murat Kurum, the former Minister of Environment, Urbanisation and Climate, and down to lower levels, as well as corporate-financial interests.

Despite years of warnings from scientists and experts about the dangers of the mine and protests by local residents and environmental activists, the source of the disaster lies in a capitalist system that prioritises private profit over the protection of public health and the environment.

The main perpetrator of this crime is Canadian imperialism, which uses the cheapest, most profitable and risky methods and carries out colonial-type mining all over the world, destroying the areas it mines. Its junior partners are Lidya Madencilik (Çalk Holding), and the Turkish government and state institutions, which facilitate the circumvention of procedures and have a share in the profits extracted.

While the immediate cause of the landslide remains unclear, Bağıran Aksu of the Independent Mine Workers Union said, "Workers saw the cracks in the morning and warned their supervisors. Some small subcontractors withdrew their workers from the area. But the work

continued. Around 12 noon, the cyanide leaching area collapsed due to dynamite explosions.”

Construction of the Çöpler mine began in 2009 and “leaching” commenced at the end of 2010. The site, which is reportedly the second largest gold mine in Turkey, is also located in the footprint of the Bingöl-Yedisu Fault Line, an active fault.

Leaching is a process of recovering precious metals using liquid chemicals with solvent properties. The metal to be enriched is dissolved in chemicals (usually acids or bases). In gold mining, this process is carried out in large open ponds.

The Çöpler mine has been emitting cyanide and sulphuric acid for years, causing ecological destruction in the region. The capacity of the mine, which is the size of 200 football pitches and 1,280 metres deep, was to have more than trebled to 640 football pitches.

The project started in 2008 with an officially endorsed Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) report. In 2014 and 2021, the capacity was increased twice with new EIA reports. The latest EIA report, which increased capacity by 2.5 times, stated that there was no risk of landslides. Local residents and environmental activists have filed several lawsuits demanding the cancellation of the EIA reports.

Speaking to *T24*, İrfan Türkkolu, chairman of the TMMOB Chamber of Metallurgical and Materials Engineers, said, “It was a mine that threatened the health of the region not only now but since it opened. No matter how many times we said it should be closed, unfortunately the authorities responded by increasing the mine’s capacity.”

This was not Anagold Mining’s first environmental disaster. In June 2022, a pipe carrying cyanide burst at the mine and toxic waste flowed into the İliç Dam on the Euphrates River. The investigation found the company at fault and imposed an administrative fine of 16,4 million TL (about US\$1 million at the time), the maximum.

The fact that the company, whose license was not revoked, reopened and resumed operations just three months after the disaster, and that its text debt of US\$ 7.2 million were subsequently written off reveals the official patronage of the company and the government’s complicity in the disaster.

According to financial reports, Anagold Mining generated US\$322.8 million in revenue and \$46.5 million in profit from the mine in the first nine months of 2023. Since 2020, it has also generated almost \$1.5 billion revenue and \$334.6 million profit from the mine. This is

why all doors have been opened to the company, including those of the government, the judiciary and those who prepared the EIA report.

This preventable catastrophe, which threatens the health of tens of millions of people, occurred less than a year and a half after the Amasra mining disaster in October 2022 and almost exactly a year after the Turkey-Syria earthquake of February 6, 2023, which officially claimed over 60,000 lives.

The official contempt for lives and the environment is an international phenomenon rooted in the capitalist system.

In 2019, a dam owned by multinational mining company Vale collapsed in Brazil, spilling 13 million cubic metres of iron ore tailings onto farms, villages and surrounding areas, leaving hundreds dead or missing.

In 2015, a cyanide spill was discovered at the Veladero gold mine operated by Canada’s Barrick Gold in Argentina, and more than a thousand cubic metres of cyanide waste was found to have reached five rivers.

In January 2000, when the dam at the Baia Mare gold mine—a joint-venture of the Australian company Esmeralda Exploration and the Romanian government—overflowed and collapsed due to heavy rains, some 100,000 cubic metres of cyanide solution spilled into the Tisza and Danube rivers. Water sources were poisoned in the disaster, which spread to Hungary and the Black Sea. Thousands of tonnes of fish were killed and agricultural land was damaged, the effects of which will last for decades.

One of the most striking examples of this “profits before lives” policy of the ruling classes around the world is their response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Over 27 million people have died and mass deaths continue, as capitalist governments refuse to take the necessary public health measures against the pandemic. Countless others are suffering from Long COVID.

It makes clear that the fight against environmental destruction, climate change and pandemics is a fight against capitalism. The social force that must be mobilised on the basis of a socialist programme against global problems which have no national solution is the international working class.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact