



Rainforest Action Group

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Mining camps in Ecuador a potential breeding ground for coronavirus. Companies take advantage of state of emergency to escalate controversial mining operations.

Despite mining companies saying they are suspending operations in Ecuador due to Covid-19, on the ground work continues to take place, angering at-risk local communities and indigenous groups.

“The Rainforest Action Group is concerned that miners moving through the region are putting locals at risk. Four miners located at Rocafuerte, the operational base for Solgold's Cascabel concession in northern Ecuador, have apparently tested positive for the virus.¹ On Monday 30th March, the entrance of a hostel in Ibarra was blocked with dump trucks out of fears authorities were transferring COVID-19 patients to the hostel,” says Ms Liz Downes, a member of the rainforest Action Group.

“Indigenous groups and local communities are furious that mining employees are continuing to enter their communities despite the risks of coronavirus. It also appears that mining companies are taking advantage of curfews to install machinery at controversial sites without resistance,” says Ms Rebekah Hayden, another member of the Rainforest Action Group.

On March 18, environmental group Acción Ecológica denounced Codelco and ENAMI for capitalising on the state of emergency to put in machinery at Cotapaxi, south of Quito.²

Chinese mining companies TerraEarth S,A., and Ecuacorriente have also been denounced for continuing operations despite the high risk to local Indigenous groups. A camp in the San Carlos Panantza mining complex was intentionally set on fire and destroyed.

“Many of the Indigenous tribes in Ecuador have already been devastated by epidemics, such as polio which wiped out around two-thirds of the Waorani in the 1950s. Another epidemic in the region would decimate these groups further,” says Liz Downes.

¹ <https://www.eluniverso.com/noticias/2020/03/31/nota/7800594/comuneros-imbabura-carchi-rechazan-llegada-posibles-infectados?fbclid=IwAR0xRcvDrEMszvg88LTE-E170WsrHRhWqgQdOAmT6csck08omoAZix6A-A>

² <https://twitter.com/AcEcologica/status/1241481792584105989>

“The surge in mining activity is also putting water sources at risk. The residents of the northern area of the Esmeraldas province stated on April 4th that mining activities have intensified since the announcement of the state of emergency, contaminating the rivers that constitute their drinking and washing supply³,” Liz Downes says.

“The government’s inability to act effectively should crisis hit is apparent at Ecuador’s main port, Guayaquil, where bodies were piling up in houses and apartments. At least 550 bodies were not collected for up to eight days. Inhabitants were forced to make posts of their plight on social media in an effort to draw the government’s attention to the situation,” Liz Downes says.⁴

Mining and petrochemical companies in Ecuador are deemed essential services and are exempt from the suspension of normal work. Fruta del Norte has reduced its workers from 1,080 to 400-500, and Mirador is working with 800 from a usual 2400.⁵ At the Mirador mine in south-east Ecuador, Ecuacorriente is constructing their massive tailings dam rather than continuing with mining operations as local authorities have suspended general mining activities to avoid transportation of ore and movements on and offsite.

“Although SolGold and Lundin Gold have announced employees would be largely working from home, this appears to largely refer to professional-level employees. On the ground, it appears that many contractor companies are continuing with usual operations, while a reduced number of employees are working onsite,” Rebekah Hayden says.

“Soldiers have effectively trapped an undisclosed number of miners in the mining camp at Mirador. Whether they are able to isolate effectively is not clear. This was as a result of a move by local Emergency Operations Committee (COE) of the canton El Pangui on March 19 to restrict the movement of miners,” Rebekah Hayden says.

“As MiningWatch Canada has pointed out⁶, mining camps are often congested and located far from adequate medical facilities and often have reduced access to clean water. Managing and containing coronavirus under these conditions is very unlikely. The risk to locals from soldiers who may have contracted the virus, or any employees entering or leaving is very high. Mining activities should not be allowed to continue at this time,” says Rebekah Hayden.

FOR MORE INFORMATION PLEASE CONTACT

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³ <https://ddhhecuador.org/2020/04/04/documento/denuncia-publica-01-poblaciones-de-san-lorenzo-denuncian-contaminacion-en-sus>

⁴ <https://www.eluniverso.com/noticias/2020/03/31/nota/7800594/comuneros-imbabura-carchi-rechazan-llegada-positivos-infectados?fbclid=IwAR0xRcvDrEMszvg88LTE-E170WsrHRhWqgQdOAmT6csck08omoAZix6A-A>

⁵ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-ecuador/ecuadors-largest-gold-and-copper-mines-scale-back-as-coronavirus-cases-rapidly-grow-idUSKBN21912K>

⁶ <https://miningwatch.ca/blog/2020/3/31/covid-19-mining-companies-putting-workers-and-communities-greater-risk>