

PRESS RELEASE

Colombia: Indigenous Peoples struggle for a dignified life against Giant Nickel Miner South32

This week, after decades of suffering from toxic waste emissions, the Zenú and Emberá Indigenous Peoples of Colombia are pinning their last hope on a legal case they believed they had already won. They will stand vigil in front of the High Court as it decides on 8 August on the appeal by BHP Billiton's spin-off company South32's. They are appealing against the decision that the company must pay compensation and undertake remedial activities due to the deadly heart and lung problems caused by contamination from the Cerro Matoso mine.

In April 2018, the Colombian Constitutional Court published its decision stating that during the last 30 years the Cerro Matoso nickel mine's waste emissions were causing serious and long-term heart and lung problems for local Zenú and Emberá indigenous communities. This mine has been owned and worked by South 32 since May 2015, its previous owner being BHP Billiton, which held the concession for approximately 30 years.

"We cannot breathe properly because of the mine's emissions and we have been suffering from a wide range of health problems. We are worried, because children and animals in our community are born with malformations and there are many miscarriages. When the Constitutional Court ruled in favour of our community last year, we were hopeful, because we thought that after decades of ignoring our concerns, the company would provide us with the medical attention we need. All we want is justice," said Irrael Solano, Zenú Indigenous Chief from the Indigenous Reserve of Alto San Jorge.

South 32, a British registered multinational company was ordered by the Court to pay damages to the indigenous people diagnosed with serious heart and lung problems, including lung cancer. According to the medical survey presented to the Court by the State Legal Medical Services the indigenous peoples living around the mine had extremely high levels of nickel in their blood and urine, exceeding by far the levels recommended by the WHO. This historic sentence ordered Cerro Matoso S.A. to pay for medical bills and providing integrated and permanent health care to the communities affected.

"We need support from international agencies working on human rights because this multinational company BHP Billiton, now South32 Cerro Matoso mine want to exterminate our Zenú indigenous community in the south of the Department of Cordoba," said Irrael Solano.

Furthermore, the environmental licence did not reflect Colombian constitutional standards for environmental protection and South32 must re-apply for this licence. Also, South32 must initiate procedures to address the environmental impacts of its operations and to decontaminate the ecosystems they have polluted (air, soil and water).

Despite the Cerro Matoso mine being the world's second-largest producer of nickel and boasting some of the lowest production costs, it is appealing this decision.

"The decision by South32 is particularly concerning considering that the Zenú are one of the Indigenous peoples at risk of cultural and physical extinction in Colombia. Putting their health at risk is threatening their survival. Cerro Matoso, on the other hand, is the world's second largest nickel producer; in just the second half of 2017, it made USD 244 million in revenue. These huge amounts of profits are made on the backs of local communities. South32 should accept its responsibility towards the people who are suffering the consequences of its operations," said Louise Winstanley, ABColombia Programme and Advocacy Manager.

The Zenú and Emberá indigenous peoples will hold a vigil outside the Court on Wednesday, 8 August 2018, the day that the decision is due.

For press interviews in English and Spanish:

Contact Communications Coordinator **Irina Muñoz** at assistant@abcolombia.org.uk; Office Number: 0207 870 2217 or UK mobile phone number: +44 (0)7522 329 258.

- **For press interviews in English** with Louise Winstanley, ABColumbia's Programme and Advocacy Manager
- **For press interviews in Spanish** with Irrael Aguilar Solano, Zenú Indigenous Chief of the Alto San Jorge Resguardo. **If you wish to interview Irrael by Skype ABColumbia can provide interpretation.**

We can also provide photos of the vigil that started today and will go on until the decision is taken on 8 August 2018

Notes:

Irrael Aguilar Solano is a Chief of the Zenú Indigenous Reserve of Alto San Jorge, Córdoba. He has received numerous threats and suffered severe harassment against him as Chief.

The Zenú Indigenous Peoples are one of the 34 groups of Indigenous Peoples that – according to the 2009 ruling by the Colombian Constitutional Court – are at risk of cultural and physical extinction. The Court stated that “(...) *they have suffered horrendous violations of their collective and individual fundamental rights and have been the victims of breaches of International Humanitarian Law, which has resulted in collective and individual forced displacement.*” Since 2000, there have been countless acts of violence against the members of the Zenú Peoples, due to their endeavours to remain in their ancestral territory. The presence of the extractive industry in its territory has generated socio-environmental and health impacts.

Louise Winstanley is ABColumbia Programme and Advocacy Manager. She has worked on Colombia for the last 15 years, initially in-country with PBI and for the last eight years with ABColumbia. **ABColumbia is the advocacy project** of a group of five leading UK and Irish organisations with programmes in Colombia: CAFOD, Christian Aid UKI, Oxfam GB, SCIAF and Trócaire. Amnesty International and PBI are observers. ABColumbia members have over 100 partner organisations in Colombia. Since 1997, ABColumbia has been working on promoting the voice of the most marginalised grass-roots groups in Colombia, mainly, Afro-Colombian, Indigenous, Peasant Farmers and women to the attention of the UK and Irish Governments and the European Union. We have accompanied our Colombian partners through some of the most intense moments of the conflict.

Cerro Matoso S.A. is an open-cut mine and smelter plant in Córdoba, close to the town of Montelíbano, northern Colombia. It is one of the world's major producers of ferronickel and nickel iron alloy, which is used to make stainless steel. BHP Billiton had been mining nickel here for over 30 years, before it spun off the subsidiary company South32 in May 2015 and with it the control of the Cerro Matoso S.A. Mine. This mine is in the centre of the Zenú Indigenous Reserve.