

Press release

28 April 2020

“Liberate the Bruno Stream”

Indigenous Wayuu and Afro-Colombians demand that Anglo American Mining Corporation returns the Bruno, diverted for the extraction of coal, to its natural course

On 5 May 2020, Anglo American, a London listed multinational mining company (MNC) will hold their AGM behind closed doors. Anglo-American are one of three MNC that jointly own the Cerrejón Open-Pit Coal mine in La Guajira, northern Colombia.

Communities around Cerrejón have struggled in the courts to prevent the destruction of their rivers. At least 19 rivers and flood plains have been impacted by the mine. In an area that suffers from drought the Cerrejón mine uses 16 million litres of water per day.

The government’s directive to self-isolate has been issued amid deep inequalities. Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities face this pandemic without water, without food and without the minimum guarantees for subsistence. A pre-existent humanitarian crisis has been exacerbated by COVID-19.

The key challenge for the communities in this coronavirus pandemic is **access to water**: handwashing is one of few protections against the virus. Despite a constant legal struggle to uphold their rights, communities around the Cerrejón mine, and those relocated to other areas, struggle to meet their basic needs. The communities’ own sources of water are being cut off making them dependent on the company for handouts. As COVID-19 hits Colombia the lack of access for these communities to food and clean water in the lockdown becomes a matter of life or death.

“Coal is not a human right, we can live without the exploitation of coal, but we cannot live without water and culture.” **Luis Misael Socarras, Fuerza de Mujeres Wayuu**

“What the Wayuu and Afro-Colombian communities demand is that the company allow the waters of their rivers and streams to flow freely along their natural course. Because they are sacred and provide for well-being - they are their sources of drinking water, cultural practices, crop cultivation and washing. In line with the Constitutional Court Judgment, the communities are urgently calling on Cerrejón to remove the tap placed on the Arroyo Bruno that is redirecting the river and return it to its natural course”. **Luisa Rodriguez, Researcher, CINEP.**

Although Cerrejón is supporting the distributing water and humanitarian aid the denial of communities’ right to water in the first place makes them more dependent on aid. Instead of having access to clean water from the main rivers and tributaries, water is having to be manually distributed to communities in self-isolation.

“Water is a human right and essential in the Cosmovision of Wayuú traditional culture. Defending rivers, water, territory is a practice that costs lives in Colombia. Indigenous leaders and environmental defenders protesting against the mine have been threatened and killed and this is totally unacceptable”. **Carlos Mejia, Executive Director, OXFAM Colombia**

With scant regard for the health of the communities and their workers, Cerrejón announced that it would resume operations from 27 April 2020, even though COVID-19 has not reached its peak in Colombia: the government has ordered a population lock-down until 11 May. Cerrejón will also bring people in from outside La Guajira to continue mining activities. This will expose the Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities and the local workers, with little access to health facilities, to the COVID-19 virus.

Protection of the communities' rivers has not been prioritised either by local authorities or by the Cerrejón mine. There are more and more sentences from the Constitutional Court and local courts in which Cerrejón is sanctioned for the damages caused by open-pit mining. But Cerrejón persistently fails to comply.

For press interviews

For virtual interviews with **Luisa Rodriguez** (Spanish and English), **Luis Misael Socarras** (Spanish only) and/or **Carlos Mejia** (Spanish and English), contact:

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Notes:

- **Luisa Rodriguez Gaitán**, Researcher and Advocacy Advisor on Intercultural work for CINEP/ Program for Peace. For the last 5 years with the Wayuu and Afro-Colombian communities affected by Cerrejon's open pit mining.
- **Luis Misael Socarras**, Wayuu leader, coordinator of the *Fuerza de Mujeres Wayuu* (Strong Wayuu Women's Movement) and environmental defender. He was one of the plaintiffs in the Arroyo Bruno case and the legal action against *Carbones de Cerrejón* environmental license.
- **Carlos Mejia**, Executive Director, OXFAM Colombia He has worked in humanitarian field and on developmental issues for the last 25 years leading programmes and teams worldwide.
- **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 has over 100 partner groups in Colombia, including CINEP. www.abcolombia.org.uk
- **CINEP (Centre for Investigation and Popular Education) is based in Bogota**. Established in 1972 by the Jesuits. CINEP is a leading independent 'think tank' engaged in investigation and advocacy work on issues related to the conflict and social policy in Colombia. It has developed one of the most highly respected data bases on the conflict situation in Colombia. CINEP carries out important research on the conflict, human rights, poverty and development.

Further Information

Carbones de Cerrejón is one of the largest open-pit coal mines in the world covering an acreage of 69,000 hectares of land in the middle of indigenous Wayuu and Afro-Colombian farming communities' territory. These communities have for years been struggling against forced relocation, health issues, environmental degradation and destruction of their rivers allegedly caused by the mine. Between 2010 and 2018 over 4,770 indigenous minors in La Guajira, died from malnutrition, yet Cerrejón in a 'slow' year made a profit of six billion Colombian pesos (2017).