

## Peru town copes with being devoured by mine

April 18 2010, By ANDREW WHALEN , Associated Press Writer

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In this photo taken Sept. 15, 2009, a nurse draws blood from an elderly woman who came to the public hospital for respiratory problems in the mining town of Cerro de Pasco, Peru. Peru's congress passed a bill in 2008 to condemn and relocate Cerro de Pasco, based on U.S. Centers for Disease Control studies that found soil, homes and water saturated with toxic levels of lead. (AP Photo/Martin Mejia)

(AP) -- The mile-wide gash grows almost daily with each dynamite blast, slowly devouring this bleak provincial capital high in the Andes.

The half-century-old, open-pit zinc and lead mine belches streamers of dust that coat homes. The soil is so contaminated, indigenous Quechua communities on the city's outskirts have quit growing potatoes and lettuce. Local taps run for six hours on a good week; 80 percent of available water goes to the mine.

As the government continues its aggressive push to extract Peru's vast mineral and oil reserves, communities such as Cerro de Pasco are caught in a conflict between environmental contamination and jobs that is fueling violent protests - some deadly - from the Andes to the Amazon.

Critics say the town of 70,000, one of Peru's first industrial mining complexes, embodies 100 years of unregulated extraction, toxic dumping and illegal land grabs.

"As my life has gone by, I've watched the mine swallow the city," says Cerro de Pasco congresswoman Gloria Ramos, 54, gazing across the void from a rocky outcrop above the tangled streets and remnants of her hometown. "There has been a great exodus, but the poor stay."

In late 2008, city officials gave the mine owner, Peru-based Volcan Compania Minera S.A., permission to take another 28 acres (11.33 hectares) of the town, including the center square and its colonial church, rebuilt in 1748 after an earthquake. If not, the company threatened to close the pit-mine, putting 4,000 jobs at risk.

About the same time, Peru's congress passed Ramos' bill to condemn and relocate Cerro de Pasco, based on U.S. Centers for Disease Control studies that found soil, homes and water saturated with toxic levels of lead. Nine of 10 children have elevated blood levels of one of 14 [heavy metals](#), including lead, cadmium, and arsenic, according to the CDC.

But more than a year later, President Alan Garcia's government is nowhere near providing the \$500 million the regional governor says is needed. Officials say technical studies will take three years and building a new town a decade beyond that.

"It's affecting our health, especially that of our women and children," Ramos said, "and we can't go on living with it anymore."

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Mining accounts for 60 percent of Peru's exports and was the motor behind the country's 6.7 percent annual growth from 2002 to 2008. Even with the global recession, the Peruvian government expects \$30 billion to be invested in new mining projects by 2017, spearheaded by Chinese, Swiss and British-based companies hungry for copper, gold, zinc and silver.

In nearby La Oroya, the congress recently granted the U.S.-owned Doe Run Peru smelter two-and-a-half more years to reduce toxic emissions at its facilities, allowing the company to miss a second deadline - but saving 3,500 jobs.

The company agreed to clean up the town, considered one of the world's most polluted, when it bought the plant from the state in 1997.

More than 100 other communities are fighting oil and mining companies over contamination and use of land and water, according to the government's ombudsman - up from just 14 when Garcia took office in 2006.

Last June, a government clash with Awajun Indians blockading a key transport highway in the Amazon left more than 33 people dead. Protesters were trying to stop Canadian gold miner Dorato Resources Inc. from exploring on Indian hunting grounds. They were also fighting federal decrees requiring Indians to grant oil and mining companies access to communal lands.

While critics accuse the Garcia government of forsaking environmental protection in pursuit of foreign investment, it did recently kick Dorato off Awajun lands to show it was serious about regulation. And last week, six minors died in clashes over government efforts to restrict unregulated

gold mining in large swaths of the [Amazon](#).

But in cases like Cerro de Pasco, Garcia has largely sided with big mining companies, saying technological advances have rendered industrial mining contamination "a topic for last century."

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For four centuries, the silver, copper, zinc and lead unearthed in Cerro de Pasco - more than 14,300 feet (4,380 meters) high in the mountains - built the capital, Lima, and countless cities across Europe and North America.

Dubbed "The Royal City of Mines" by the Spanish, Cerro de Pasco drew miners came from all over the world, and at one time, the city had nine consulates catering to Yugoslavs, Austrians, British, Americans and more.

After sweeping the Spanish out of Pasco, the army swore in the first mayor of the Peruvian Republic on Dec. 7, 1820, in Chaupimarca plaza, the central district about to be devoured by the mine.

U.S.-owned Cerro de Pasco Corp. started to buy up the mines in 1902 and brought industrial mining, creating a boomtown. A half century later in 1956, the company turned to strip mining and started gouging the pit, which has since swallowed more than half the original urban center. State-run Centromin continued the pit expansion after a 1973 expropriation of the U.S. company; Volcan since 1999.

"We're proud to have given so much to our country, but our town has little to nothing to show for it," says Dimas Pena, 50, who heads a group of shopkeepers and vendors organized against the mine's expansion.

"What has all this exploitation brought us? It's going to send us off to

live in the hills, where we don't have water, light or any basic services,"

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The bulldozers have yet to come for Chaupimarca, the last of Cerro de Pasco's colonial center, but the district already looks like a war zone. Inch-thick cracks run through the brick homes. The rancid dust filling the air burns the eyes like smeared sunscreen.

Volcan has already bought up most of the three-block strip of pit-front real estate it will tear down to get at new zinc and lead deposits. Several blocks from the pit, a safe distance from the demolition zone, sits the office of Mayor Tito Valle.

As a young man, Valle left the peasant community of Uchumarca, 12 miles (19 kilometers) outside of Cerro de Pasco, to study mechanical engineering in Lima, returning to work for one of the area's principal miners, Minera Atacocha S.A. When he left mining, Valle expanded the family business distributing meat to markets and restaurants that feed the city's legions of hard hat and goggle-toting workers.

Two weeks before Valle took office in January 2007, his predecessor shocked the town by green-lighting Volcan's expansion with no concessions from the company. Valle repealed the agreement in his first week in office and spent the next year and a half negotiating a compensation package for the expansion.

The mine now must rebuild the plaza, church and infrastructure destroyed for \$10 million, and spend another \$10 million on roads and water and sewage systems for the city.

Valle said rejecting the pit's expansion was out of the question.

"Like it or not, we depend on this main industry to maintain any semblance of development," Valle said.

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Just a dirt road stands between a chain-link fence on the northern edge of the pit and San Juan de Pampa's orderly rows of houses. When former owner Cerro de Pasco Corp. started building the community in the 1960s to replace homes destroyed by the mine, it was a half mile (0.8 kilometers) from the edge of the pit.

Volcan started buying up those houses when metal prices shot up in 2007. Doors and window are removed from homes already sold, their frames stuffed with cinderblocks.

Still, highland peasants continue to flock to toil in the mines of such soot-choked towns. Their chief alternatives: subsistence farming or hawking goods on the streets of Lima and living in its shantytowns.

A Quechua family rents a three-room home at the end of a ravaged street in San Juan de Pampa.

Marilyn Huaman, 24, says all nine live off the \$400-a-month of her father, a contract miner. Her mother, Catalina Calzada, runs a small shop out of the house. They all sleep in the same bedroom.

"We only stay out of necessity because my children need to study," said Calzada, 45, noting there is no high school in their native village of Alcacocho, an hour away.

Like many parents in the Cerro de Pasco area, Calzada hasn't had her children tested for lead contamination, which can cause behavior disorders, stunt growth and impair learning, according to the CDC,

which was invited by the Peruvian Health Ministry to do studies.

"What are we going to do about it, if we have to be here?" Calzada asks.

But the tests have given other miners second thoughts about an extended stay.

Hugo Minalaya, 32, a Quechua Indian, left his village two hours north two years ago after he ran out of money to fertilize his crops.

Though the shantytown where he settled sits up on a hill, dust from explosions still floods his home, and his boys, ages 7 and 1, breathe it.

"After I make some money maybe I'll go somewhere else," the contract miner says. "I can't contaminate my family, especially the children."

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Quiulacocho sits on the shore of a shriveled lagoon filled with red-orange [mine](#) tailings dumped by Centromin. When the wind picks up, the community is showered with its heavy metal dust.

"We can no longer grow lettuce or shiri potato in the yard," says shepherd Raul Herrera.

Tailings are an inevitable byproduct of mining and, under sound environmental practices, are typically diluted in ponds far from residential areas. Once full, the ponds are supposed to be filled with topsoil and re-vegetated.

Centromin - now defunct - left scores of untreated tailings ponds across Peru's Andes.

A few hundred yards behind Quiulacocha, Volcan is dumping its tailings in a second slurry pond it built in 1999 with mining ministry approval.

Residents say at least 20 sheep have died drinking from that pond. They blocked the highway into town to protest. Volcan spokesman Luis Pariona says only one sheep died, and the family was compensated. The company is doing its best to manage the mess Centromin left, he added.

That's little consolation for Primitivo Condeza, 47, who guides his flock of sheep and alpaca down a rocky hill behind the village, his 12-year-old son Wilder shuffling silently behind. He's got four kids and says doctors have confirmed that all suffer from chronic lead contamination.

"The contamination has taken away his memory," Condeza says, gazing at Wilder. "Year after year I put him in school, but he's still in the first grade. He should be done by now."

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Citation: Peru town copes with being devoured by mine (2010, April 18) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-04-peru-town-copes-devoured.html>

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