

# **British aid agency report leads Honduras to charge three linked to mine**

LONDON - Honduras' environmental prosecutor has filed criminal charges against two mining executives and a former government official after a British Catholic aid agency provided evidence to show that they ignored the alleged pollution of rivers.

The mining officials, Christian Pineda and Renan Santamaria, could face up to six years in jail if convicted of contaminating water and polluting the environment around the San Martin gold mine, the largest open-cast gold mine in Central America until its closure in 2008.

Pineda and Santamaria are employed by Entre Mares, a wholly-owned subsidiary of Goldcorp Inc., a gold-mining company based in Vancouver, British Columbia.

Tanya Todd, Goldcorp's corporate communications manager, said Aug. 17 that the company would defend the criminal action against its two employees. She also denied information in the December report by the English and Welsh bishops' Catholic Agency for Overseas Development.

In addition to charges against the two mine employees, the Honduran prosecutor charged Gustavo Torres Garay, a former senior official within the Honduran Department for the Administration of Mineral Resources, with breach of official duties for failing to act on evidence of pollution, which could result in a three-year jail term.

All charges were filed in early August. CAFOD said Aug. 16 that a date for a first hearing has yet to be set.

CAFOD said its report had noted that official records had shown there were "dangerously high acidity and metal concentrations in water flowing into a local stream."

The aid agency said the information had been included in a water monitoring report by the Honduran Center for the Study and Control of Pollutants but that neither Goldcorp nor the Honduran government had acted upon it.

CAFOD also cited the findings of scientists from England's Newcastle University who visited the site in the Siria Valley in 2008 and found such evidence of acidic mine drainage as the discoloration of streams.

Goldcorp used "acid mine drainage" to extract precious metals by exposing sulfides in rock to oxygen and water, producing sulfuric acid.

Scientists say that unless the byproducts of the process are properly disposed of, they can cause long-term contamination of groundwater with toxic heavy metals and cause the premature deaths of plants and animals for many years.

Local people have also complained of respiratory, skin and gastrointestinal diseases, which some believe came from drinking polluted water, according to CAFOD.

Sonya Maldar, a CAFOD policy analyst, said in a statement e-mailed to CNS Aug. 17 that CAFOD had "facilitated the official involvement of Newcastle University and uncovered further evidence of acid mine drainage at the site."

"This new evidence enabled the prosecutor to build up a strong case and file charges against the Goldcorp staff," she said. "This would have not been possible without CAFOD's evidence."

Although mining ceased in 2008, CAFOD argues that Goldcorp has an ongoing public responsibility to monitor the area for poisonous byproducts.

"It is essential to get to the bottom of events at San Martin and ensure that the people of Honduras don't pay the price of pollution in the long term," Maldar said.

Company officials have continuously denied that the activities of the firm have ever polluted the area around the mine, however. Executives also have refused to admit any of the charges made in the 2009 report, CAFOD said.

Paul Younger, professor of hydrogeochemical engineering at Newcastle University,

who contributed to the 2009 report, said such denials had “done the company no favors.”

“If Goldcorp had been open about the problems, they could have avoided this action by the Honduran environmental prosecutor,” he said in an Aug. 16 CAFOD press release.

But Goldcorp immediately rejected CAFOD’s claims as “incomplete, inaccurate and biased.” In an Aug. 17 statement to CNS, it said that officials found acid only “within the mine operations” and that “local streams were not affected.”

“Goldcorp will not compromise on its commitments to its employees, the communities in which we operate, the environment and being a positive contributor to sustainable development,” Todd said.

“Goldcorp respects the right of all people to express their opinions. We expect those opinions to be based on facts, not speculation, conjecture, or unfounded allegations,” she said.

“We believe that an unbiased examination of the facts related to the activities and closure of the San Martin mine supports Goldcorp’s view that this mine honors the company’s commitment to conducting business in a socially responsible manner,” she added.

In 2007, following tests on water around San Martin, the Honduran Secretariat of Natural Resources and Environment fined Goldcorp \$42,000 for pollution. A Honduran court dismissed the action on the grounds that the water sample was unreliable; the court’s decision was upheld on appeal.