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Indigenous Communities Living Near Industrial Gold Mine in Papua New Guinea Struggle to Find Clean Water

New report by experts from Columbia University and Pennsylvania State University calls on PNG government and mining companies to take action to ensure the human right to water

NEW YORK, MARCH 12, 2019 - Communities living near an industrial gold mine in Porgera, Papua New Guinea (PNG), lack enough clean water to meet basic needs and are exposed to concerning levels of chemicals linked to mine operations, according to a report released today by the Columbia Law School Human Rights Clinic and the Advanced Consortium on Cooperation, Conflict, and Complexity (AC4) of Columbia University’s Earth Institute. The interdisciplinary team of human rights experts and environmental scientists concluded that the Canadian and Chinese companies operating the mine and the PNG government should take urgent action to fully investigate the effects of the mine on human health and to ensure that families have sufficient access to safe water.

“People in Porgera live in fear about whether they will have enough water to last the week and whether their water is poisoning them,” said Professor Sarah Knuckey, Director of the Columbia Law School Human Rights Clinic and a lead author of the report. “The mine emits a giant red river of tailings waste through the Porgeran Valley. Porgerans often have to wash their clothes, dishes, and bodies in rivers that reek of chemicals. All across Porgera, residents told us that they want facts to help them better understand and respond to the water risks.”

The mine, jointly owned by mining giants Barrick Gold Corporation of Canada and Zijin Mining Group of China, dumps its tailings waste directly into the river system, leading to the contamination of major rivers with chemicals such as arsenic and lead. Locals call the iron-rich waste stream the “red river.” Residents, who use the river system waters for washing, recreation, and panning for gold, told the research team that they are very concerned of potential harm to their health and their children’s health, but they have not received adequate information from either the mine or the PNG government explaining any risks of contact with the water. The research team collected water samples to begin to investigate these risks.

“Several of the water samples from specific rivers and creeks in the area showed high concentrations of heavy metals, at times exceeding national and international drinking water guidelines,” stated Joshua Fisher, Director of AC4 and a lead author of the report. “Residents of Porgera frequently interact with
these sources of water, raising significant health concerns that need to be better studied by the mining companies and the PNG government.”

Through over 175 interviews and meetings, the study also found that the quantity of collected rainwater—the main source of water for basic needs such as drinking and washing—is too often inadequate, particularly during prolonged periods without rain. When rainwater is lacking, residents must resort to water sources that are poor quality, costly, or difficult to access.

“While our analysis of the rainwater found no evidence of heavy metal contamination from the mine above international drinking water guidelines, we did identify organic matter and micro-organisms in rainwater containers which could be ingested due to lack of proper storage, filtration, or treatment methods,” said Tess Russo, the chief water scientist and a lead author on the report.

The study concludes that the mining companies and the PNG government should take more steps to support Porgeran residents’ right to water, including providing emergency access to safe water meeting minimal basic needs during periods of low rainfall. Although the mining companies have provided residents with rainwater barrels and tanks, these efforts have not been enough to ensure adequate access to clean water. And while the PNG government has made important commitments to sustainable and responsible development, it has largely been absent from efforts to improve access to clean water in Porgera.

“This report seeks to support the mining companies and the PNG government in advancing the human right to water,” said Benjamin Hoffman, Deputy Director of the Human Rights Clinic and another lead author of the report. “The government should undertake an independent audit of the mine to examine all social, environmental, and health effects. The mining companies should pledge their support for the audit and commit to working with communities to develop a human right to water policy for the mine.”

The report additionally urges the PNG government to adopt regulatory reforms and to work with the mining companies to improve water infrastructure. If core human rights requirements cannot be met, the report recommends resettling Porgeran residents away from the mine in a manner that meets strict international human rights standards.

The multi-year interdisciplinary study involved experts in human rights law, hydrology, geochemistry, environmental science, and forensic architecture. Team members from Columbia University and Pennsylvania State University worked directly with local communities to monitor and analyze dozens of water sources near the Porgera mine and conducted interviews and focus groups with hundreds of individuals affected by or involved with maintenance of water in Papua New Guinea. The Research team has also engaged with representatives from the mining companies and the PNG government to discuss the study’s findings and recommendations. This study is part of many years of ongoing investigations of human rights violations in Porgera related to the mine’s activities and personnel.

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The Columbia Law School Human Rights Clinic works to advance human rights around the world, and to train the next generation of strategic advocates for social justice. The clinic works in partnership with civil society organizations and communities to carry out human rights investigations, legal and policy analysis, litigation, report-writing, and advocacy.

The Advanced Consortium on Cooperation, Conflict and Complexity (AC4) at Columbia University’s Earth Institute works to bring sustainable solutions to the issues of violent conflict, peace, and sustainable resource management. The Earth Institute, founded in 1995, leverages the expertise of its research centers, scientists, postdoctoral fellows, and staff at Columbia University to generate solutions for sustainable development. This unique institute brings together the intellectual, practical and theoretical resources needed to address some of the world’s most difficult problems including environmental sustainability, climate change, and poverty.