

Abra Pampa Poisoned by Lead

The negligence of the Argentine government violates the human rights of a mining community in Jujuy

For more than 25 years, problems of health and environmental degradation have had enormous affects on the mining community of Abra Pampa, in the province of Jujuy. Lack of access to information and the inaction of the government, at the national as well as provincial levels, prevent the situation's improvement.

(Buenos Aires, October 29, 2009) – The residents of Abra Pampa, Argentina, a poor and largely indigenous mining community near the Bolivian border, suffer dire mining-related health and environmental consequences. This was revealed in a report published yesterday by the Human Rights Clinic at the University of Texas Law School, which documents the Argentine government's repeated failures in dealing with the environmental and health crises in the town.

The report explained that Metal Huasi, a lead smelter that operated in Abra Pampa for approximately 30 years, emitted pollution that caused environmental degradation and health problems, including lead poisoning in more than 80% of the children of Abra Pampa. The federal and provincial governments did not even react to improve the situation in the late 1980s when the company closed, leaving more than fifteen thousand tons of waste in the center of Abra Pampa, of which at least 900 tons contained high concentrations of lead.

The Association for Civil Rights (ADC, or Asociación por los Derechos Civiles), in the framework of its work on the right of access to public information and in collaboration with the Human Rights Clinic, has submitted various requests for public information directed at the national executive branch as well as the province of Jujuy. All of these requests were aimed at obtaining environmental studies, agreements, and governmental actions regarding the plans of reparation and clean-up in the region. However, of eleven requests for information submitted, which contained 44 questions, in only one case was the requested information provided. None of the requests sent to provincial bodies in Jujuy saw a response, and only the National Ombudsman provided access to the complaints related to the case. In the context of Abra Pampa, the denial of public information regarding the harmful effects of the pollution by lead smelting plant Metal Huasi restricts the basic rights possessed by all citizens, especially in the area of public health.

The report also reveals that although the Argentine government was aware of the problems in Abra Pampa, both local and national representatives have minimized the importance and seriousness of the health and environmental situation in the city. The State has not taken charge of providing significant medical treatments, educating the community about the health consequences of exposure to the toxic heavy metal residues, or taking pro-active measures to avoid continuing pollution. The only measure taken by the governmental authorities to contain the toxic residues that remain in the town, the report concludes, was the installation of a chain-link fence to keep residents away.

As Ariel Dulitzky, Director of the Human Rights Clinic, explains: "The Argentine government has been slow to acknowledge problems in Abra Pampa. And when it finally did so, it responded inadequately, contributing to the environmental problems with poor environmental clean-up practices, allocating insufficient resources for monitoring and remedying health problems, and operating with an overall lack of transparency that keeps the community in the dark about what is going on in their town."

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