

Haiti: Grassroots Groups Afraid “Attractive” Mining Law Could Open Country Up to Systematic Pillage

By [Haiti Grassroots Watch](#)

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As the government works on preparing “an attractive law that will entice investors,” Haitian popular organizations are mobilizing and forming networks to resist mining in their country.

Already one-third of the north of Haiti is under research, exploration, or exploitation license to foreign companies. Some 2,400 square kilometers have been parceled out to Haitian firms fronting for U.S. and Canadian concerns. Some estimate that Haiti’s mineral wealth – mostly gold, copper, and silver – could be worth as much as US\$ 20 billion.

The awarding of permits behind closed doors, with no independent or community oversight, has angered many in Haiti, who fear that the government is opening the country up to systematic pillage.

But the head of the government mining agency does not appear concerned. To the contrary, he told Haiti Grassroots Watch (HGW) that Haiti must be made more “attractive” to potential investors.

“We need an attractive mining law,” Ludner Remarais, head of the Bureau des mines et de l’énergie (BME – Mining and Energy Agency in English). “A mining law that will entice investors. That’s what we need.”

The current law is obsolete, according to Remarais.

The “gold rush” in Haiti has been going on for the past five years or so, since the price of gold and other minerals rose. Until last year, the government and the companies cut their deals behind closed doors. After an investigation revealed that 15% of the county was under contract, on Feb. 20, 2013 the Haitian Senate adopted a resolution demanding all activities cease in order to allow for a national debate and for analysis of all contracts.

According to the BME, all mining activities are currently suspended.

“The parliamentary commission voted a resolution,” Remarais said. “We are scrupulously respecting the decision,” but, he added, the resolution does not annul the rights already acquired.

Mobilizations in the gold-rich regions



Participants at the July 5 2013 meeting near Grand Bois discuss concerns

at a sweltering tin-roofed church. Source: HGW/Lafontaine Orvild

Peasant, human rights, food sovereignty, and environmental organizations are worried about the disastrous effects the mining industry could have on water quality, farmland, and on the affected regions in general.

Tèt Kole Ti Peyizan Ayisyen (“Small Peasants Working Together”), the Défenseurs des opprimés (DOP or “Defenders of the Oppressed”), the Mouvement démocratique populaire (MODEP or the “Democratic Popular Movement”), the Plateforme des organisations de défense des droits humains (POHDH or Haitian Human Rights platform), the Plateforme haïtienne de plaidoyer pour un développement alternatif (PAPDA or “Haitian Platform for an Alternative Development”) and the labor organization Batay Ouvriye have formed the Collective Against Mining. The network assists local associations with information and consciousness-raising sessions.

On Jul. 5, over 200 farmers from the area around the Grand Bois deposit – about 11 kilometers south of Limbé, in the North department – got together at Machabiel to discuss the mining operation and their futures. For three hours under a blazing sun, they spoke of their worries.

“When someone talks about mining, our history makes us think of slavery, of the take-over of our farmlands,” said Willy Pierre, a social sciences teacher from a nearby school. “We could lose our fertile fields. We will be forced off our land. Where will we live?”

The Grand Bois deposit is rich in gold and copper, according to tests carried out by the Canadian mining company Eurasian Minerals. Eurasian owns the license given by the BME to its Haitian subsidiary, Société Minière Citadelle S.A., which works with the Haitian firm Ayiti Gold.

In June, unidentified persons broke into and sacked Ayiti Gold’s office at Camp Coq, near the deposit.

During the Jul. 5 meeting, many people said they were nervous. The prospect of open pit gold mines reminded them of the hundreds of thousands, or perhaps millions, of indigenous people who died in the Spanish gold mines or from diseases brought by Spaniards in the 16th century.

“This mining business should be a lesson for all of us,” warned Jean Vilmé, a farmer from the Bogé region of Grand Bois. “Not only will those of us who live around the mineral deposit perish; the entire country will be swallowed up!”

Batay Ouvriye member Emmanuel Dalès shouted: “Let’s pledge to say ‘no to mining, yes to life!’”

Two weeks earlier about 50 members of local and national organizations met in Jean Rabel, an impoverished town in the Northwest department with poor roads, and no water system or health facilities. Participants watched and debated a video on mining in Haiti and discussed their next steps.

Earlier that month, some 60 representatives of the associations in the Collective Against Mining organized a day-long meeting at Montrouis, northeast of the capital, to plan out the

main strategies of their mobilization. Of particular concern are the protection of ground water, food sovereignty, agricultural land, biodiversity, health, and land ownership.

Clébert Duval, a member of Tèt Kole from Port-de-Paix, noted that a state that is working in favor of its people could use mineral resources to “change the conditions of the popular masses, peasants, vulnerable people, and could give this country a new face.”

However, he added: “If the state is a predator that is working for the multinationals, for the capitalist system which, since it is in crisis, is taking over the riches of poor countries to fight the crisis, then that state will always encourage mining. But all the money that should go to the people will go to the foreign firms, except for a few crumbs for the local guys who are serving as go-betweens. The mining companies will get all the riches, just as they have in the past.”

Many rejected the officials’ arguments that mining is important for the country’s development and economy.

“In 2012, some companies did prospecting,” said Vernicia Phillus, a member of the Tèt Kole women’s coordination in Baie de Henne. “They took away soil and rock samples. Each person who worked for them got between 200 and 250 gourdes (US\$4.65-US\$5.81) a day. We in Baie de Haine are against any eventual mining because we will not profit one bit. It will have harmful impacts that destroy our fertile lands and our fruit trees and dry up our aquifers.”

Government and World Bank also Organizing



A 2011 map of the Grand Bois project. Source: Eurasian

To accomplish what the BME head called “leaps forward” with its plan to encourage foreign mining companies, the Haitian government together with the World Bank organized a “Mining Forum” on Jun. 3-4, 2013 that had as its objective to “develop the mining sector in a way that makes it a motor for the country’s economic takeoff.” Some Haitian media lauded the event.

One of its principle objectives was to sketch out the general contours of a new mining law for the country, even though in May, the bank had announced it was already working on the law’s rewrite.

Haitian media coverage neglected this calendar issue and also failed to note that the involvement of the World Bank in writing Haitian mining law appears to be a conflict of interest.

In 2010, the International Finance Commission (IFC), a branch of the bank, invested about US\$5 million in Eurasian Mineral’s Grand Bois operation, receiving Eurasian shares in exchange. Thus, the bank is helping to write a law that is meant to regulate it and protect Haiti.

The World Bank is often criticized by organizations like Mining Watch Canada, Earthworks, and others for being lax where the protection of poor countries is concerned, and for its role in the “continuation of colonialism” in Africa, Asia, and Latin America through its important

loans to mining companies.

In March, the U.S. government representative to the World Bank abstained in a vote to approve a Bank loan for US\$12 billion to a mining operation in the Gobi Desert, citing concerns over potential negative environmental impacts. The bank loans were approved anyway, according to Inter Press Service.

During the Jun. 3-4 forum, Haitian authorities said that the new law should “allow for transparent contracts.” And, according to the Associated Press, Prime Minister Laurent Lamothe said his government was working with “competent experts who have [Haiti’s] national interests at heart.”

But the Bank is a Eurasian shareholder. Also, most of the speakers at the conference were from foreign institutions and companies. Parliamentarians, local elected officials, independent geologists and researchers, representatives of the people from the regions concerned, and grassroots organizations did not address the room.



The Yanacocha open pit mine in Peru. The World Bank’s IFC is an investor.
It is about 250 square kilometers. Source: Elbuenminero

The BME is moving forward despite the fact that its “forum” was more like an “insider’s club” meeting.

“Our mining law is preventing us from making a leap forward,” Remarais said a few days after the meeting, without hesitation. “Through the forum, the Haitian government has decided to rewrite the mining law. That is what is happening at this moment.”

(Remember that the Bank announced it was already involved in rewriting the law before the conference took place.)

Asked about an eventual new law that would be “attractive” and capable of “enticing investors,” the director of DOP, a member of the Collective Against Mining, said he was concerned.

“Mining legislation that is ‘attractive’ will open the country up for ‘business,’” wrote attorney Patrice Florvilus on Jul. 14, 2013, making reference to the government’s slogan “Haiti – Open for business.”

“Business, without considering the deleterious effects on community life and on the environment which is already deteriorating at a worrying pace,” he added.

In a Jul. 22, 2013 note, the Collective wrote the following: “We want a truly national law and international conventions that protect life, water, land, and the environment, and that outlaw mining which brings with it pollution, destruction, contamination, and more hunger.”

Haiti Grassroots Watch is a partnership of [AlterPresse](#), the [Society of the Animation of Social Communication](#) (SAKS), the [Network of Women Community Radio Broadcasters](#) (REFRAKA), community radio stations from the [Association of Haitian Community Media](#) and students from the [Journalism Laboratory at the State University of Haiti](#).

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