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Guyana

Guyana, though geographically part of South America, has colonial and linguistic links with the English-speaking Caribbean. Most of its 750,000 people live within a few miles of the Atlantic coast. A third of its population is descended from African slaves, imported by the Dutch to work on sugar plantations. Around half are the descendants of indentured Indian agricultural workers brought in by the British after slavery was abolished. 40 per cent of the population lives below the poverty line. Many Guyanese seek their fortunes outside the country. The exodus of skilled migrants is among the highest in the region. Indigenous peoples, the Amerindians, make up 60,000 people. Because 90 per cent of the Guyanese live along the narrow coastal strip, Amerindians make up the majority in Guyana's interior. Of the 111,000 km² that are claimed by the Amerindians, so far only 16,000 km² have been titled for the Amerindians. The government so far has not ratified the United Nations Declaration of Indigenous Peoples.

Mining for Bauxite, gold and diamonds

According to estimates there are approximately 12,000 small prospectors. Many of them are Amerindians, some are Brazilians who crossed the border illegally. Some 14,500 small-scale mining permits and 1,800 licences for dredges have been issued by the Guyana Geology and Mines Commission (GGMC). 25 per cent of Guyana's surface area are covered by exploration and prospecting permits for possible large-scale mines. Mining is weakly controlled by institutions. The Minister of Mining lacks any ministerial staff charged with policy development. There are widespread allegations about corruption in the GGMC.

Despite some protection for Amerindians in the law from mining such as the prohibition of small-scale mining in areas used by Amerindians, the interpretation by the GGMC is that the provision only applies to titled areas. Medium-scale mining is not allowed in titled areas but titles under the so-called Amerindian Act do not contain rivers and river banks. The government adopted a policy calling for large-scale companies to consult with Amerindians when prospecting Amerindian titled areas, but the GGMC does not control the negotiations. Only eleven mining officers are responsible for enforcing mining regulations across the country.

Endangered water resources and health of Amerindians

Excessive sediment from mining operations has turned rivers and creeks near mining sites a milky, orange color. Amerindians use rivers and creeks for drinking, cooking, bathing, washing clothes, preparation of food, fishing and transport. Alternative water supplies for all these uses are rare. Amerindians in Aishalton stated that small-scale mines operating thirty miles south in the Marudi mountains directly endanger their community. When land dredges operate in Marudi muddy water went right down into Amerindians' villages. Many fish died in the Marudi creek.

Amerindians who also do small-scale mining are rarely educated about the dangers of mercury in the gold-recovering process. They often handle mercury with bare hands or use their mouths as temporary stores of it; some even use their mouths to squeeze excess mercury out of amalgams. There is no knowledge about the use of retort recovery techniques. Often lumps of mercury amalgam is found in

river alluvium. Skin rashes, vomiting and diarrhea from polluted water abounds. Residents state that miners often defecate into rivers. The rate of malaria among miners and in districts where there is mining is widely stated and is one of the most common causes of death in Amerindian settlements. Mines and more frequent human population movements and higher densities of settlement around mines lead to an increase of breeding sites for the disease carrier Anopheline mosquito. Amerindians who work in mines bring malaria and other diseases back to isolated areas and re-infect areas where mosquito and human population densities are too low to maintain the diseases permanently.

Pollution of the Omai and the Essequibo rivers

In August 1995 a gigantic flood of sewage ran down the Omai river and Guyana's largest river, the Essequibo. Cyanide, heavy metals and sediment led to the immediate death of hundreds of thousands of fish. Some 23,000 people, the majority of them Indigenous, used the water directly from the rivers. Many of them developed serious illnesses. The poisonous sewage had been stored in a reservoir used by the Canadian mining companies Cambior Inc and Golden Star Resources. When the company tried to extend the bank of the reservoir in order to store larger quantities, but did so incorrectly, the bank broke and the sewage went into the rivers.

In January 1996 a commission of experts came to the conclusion that the companies could not be held responsible because the breaking had been an accident. A month later the mine could be used again. Guyana's High Court fended off a lawsuit by the victims. So far they have not received any appropriate compensation. The Omai mine was closed in 2005.