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PERU: Gasping for Clean Air in La Oroya

By Milagros Salazar



LA OROYA, Peru, Dec 12 (IPS) - A grey blanket of smog hangs over the mining town of La Oroya high up in the Andes in Peru, where several generations have suffered the effects of the lead dust and toxic fumes spewed out by a giant smelting complex.

A look around, and a few deep breaths, are all that is needed to understand that something is wrong in this town of 35,000 people in the central Peruvian region of Junín, where humble adobe and brick houses are surrounded by bleak hills in shades of grey -- the vegetation has been destroyed by acid rain -- and the dense air stings the eyes and throat.

The cause of the smog stands out like a sore thumb in the middle of the town: the smokestack of the multimetal smelter and refinery complex that spits out clouds of black smoke, and has been doing so for over 80 years.

Luis Saldarriaga, the head of oversight of the mining industry in the Ministry of Energy and Mines, tells IPS that 1.5 tons of lead and 810 tons of sulphur dioxide are emitted daily by the smelting complex administered since 1997 by the U.S. company Doe Run.

The factory's emissions of sulphur dioxide -- which can cause respiratory problems like bronchitis and are the main cause of acid rain -- are four times the acceptable limit of 175 metric tons a day, as set by Peruvian law.

The factory, located 180 km east of Lima and 3,300 metres above sea level, was built in 1922 by the Cerro de Pasco Corporation, a U.S. firm. In 1974 it was taken over by the state-run Centromin Perú, until it was privatised and acquired by the Missouri-based Doe Run in 1997.

The governmental National Environment Commission confirmed that the smelter is the source of 99 percent of the toxic emissions that people inhale in this town. Up to 20 metals -- including copper, lead and zinc -- are processed in the plant.

Few people make a living from farming in this area. The majority of the town's residents depend directly or indirectly on the smelting complex. Doe Run itself employs 4,000 workers, and most of the rest work in companies that do business with the plant or in the social programmes funded by Doe Run.

In 2001, the Peruvian government included La Oroya on a list of the country's 13 most heavily polluted towns and cities.

And the Blacksmith Institute, a New York-based non-governmental organisation dedicated to supporting pollution-related environmental projects in developing countries, recently included it on its 2006 list of the world's 10 most polluted places.

Medical studies carried out by the Peruvian non-governmental social development organisation CooperAcción in 1999 and 2003 and by a team from the St. Louis University School of Public Health (in Missouri) in 2005 found that virtually all children under the age of six have blood lead levels exceeding 10 micrograms per decilitre of blood (mcg/dl), the acceptable limit set by the World Health Organisation (WHO), and that a majority have blood levels of over 40 mcg/dl.

Doe Run itself acknowledged the problem in a study conducted in conjunction with the Health Ministry, which reported that only one of the 788 children tested had a level below 10 mcg/dl.

Irene Caso Huerta, a 32-year-old mother of six, is a tragic illustration of the problem. Four of her children were found to have lead levels of between 33 and 91 mcg/dl.

The highest level was found in her youngest, Stuart, who at a year and a half is smaller than the average one-year-old, and who is hyperactive and suffers chronic malnutrition.

"My children are normal. They're not 'mongólicos' (retards) or stutterers, like the NGOs say. My Stuart is even mischievous, and he only gets sick to his stomach sometimes," Irene tells IPS, belying the concern in her eyes.

"I was born here and I must be more 'leaded' than they are," she says, pointing to the smokestack that is a permanent fixture of the landscape in La Oroya.

Irene lives in La Oroya Antigua (Old Oroya), the neighbourhood that surrounds the plant, which is the most heavily affected part of town.

Maribel Chávez, an activist with CooperAcción, vehemently denies that her NGO has told people that children with high lead levels become 'mongólicos'.

Meanwhile Clemente Quincho, acting mayor of La Oroya until the end of December, attempted to play down the problem: "As you can see, they want to lower the self-esteem of local residents," he tells IPS.



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Dr. Hugo Villa, a neurologist who has attended the cases of lead poisoning in the social security system's only hospital in La Oroya, explains that hyperactivity is one of the symptoms of high lead levels, "because what the metal does is modify the metabolism of the neurons. This can also cause learning difficulties."

Other symptoms of lead poisoning are headaches, insomnia, abdominal pain, irritability, weight loss, anemia, fatigue, weakness in the extremities, dizziness, poor attention span and slowed speech development.

An epidemiological study conducted by the Health Ministry in 2004 and 2005 also found that 50 percent of minors in the region of Junin had asthma.

Concern over the situation in La Oroya has led Congress to introduce a censure motion against Minister of Energy and Mines Juan Valdivia.

And civil society organisations, with the assistance of some government authorities, are designing an action plan that would entail clean-up agreements and health care for affected residents.

The Constitutional Court handed down a verdict recommending that the action plan be implemented.

But the government has never considered closing down the smelting complex.

A full 50 percent of the income taxes that go into Peru's state coffers come from the mining industry. Doe Run buys an average of 432 million dollars worth of metals a year from 30 mining companies in central and southern Peru.

At any rate, most La Oroya residents would not back a shut-down of the plant. "How can I support my family without work? The land is 'dead', what could we plant?" Ronald Parra, with the Frente de Desempleados, a local group of unemployed people, says to IPS. But although his young daughter has a blood lead level of over 30 mcg/dl, he still hopes to be hired by Doe Run.

The mere idea of a shut-down would bring the people out into the streets to protest, as occurred in December 2004, when Doe Run warned that it would pull out if the government did not extend a deadline for it to build a plant to capture sulphur dioxide and convert it to sulphuric acid.

The company won an extension of the environmental mitigation plan to which it had committed itself in 1997, promising to live up to the original commitments, and additional ones as well, by 2009.

But not everyone thinks like Irene or Ronald. A small group of social activists like Eduardo Mayta talk about the people's rights.

According to Mayta, "The company remembers the concept of private property when the state demands something of it. But when the lead dust falls on our houses, are they respecting our private property? Or are Doe Run's rights more important than ours?"

The action plan to improve air quality in La Oroya includes measures aimed at protecting the health of local residents, such as a contingency plan during peak emission periods.

But local residents are worried that certain measures, such as the use of masks covering the mouth and nose when air pollution is at its worst, would scare off visitors and hurt business.

The National Environment Council (CONAM) has begun to inform the local populace on the importance of the contingency plan. "We have told them that children's health is non-negotiable, and that they themselves should decide on the protective measures that they will adopt," the head of CONAM's climate change and air quality unit, Patricia Iturregui, told IPS.

Fausto Roncal, director of ecology and protection of the environment at the government's General Office on Environmental Health, told IPS that under the proposed contingency plan, La Oroya would have been declared in a state of emergency up to 11 times in October and 15 times in November due to the level of sulphur dioxide emissions.

The president of Doe Run Peru, Juan Carlos Huyhua, told IPS that until just a few years ago, the country's environmental legislation only focused on the maximum permissible limits, rather than on the need to curb health risks.

"The company, to the contrary, has taken a proactive stance in terms of health programmes," he said, ensuring that lead levels have been lowered among the company's workers, and blaming Centromin Perú for the accumulation of lead in the environment.

The company's web site describes a range of social responsibility programmes that it has carried out in La Oroya, including the construction of proper sanitation systems, a hand-washing campaign, a community education programme, vocational training for local women, the provision of clean uniforms to workers, and a preschool programme that removes children from the polluted area around the plant.

According to a Doe Run report, blood lead levels among the plant's workers were reduced by an average of 34 percent between 1997 -- when the company took over from Centromin Perú -- and September 2006.

However, Huyhua failed to mention that in Doe Run's lead smelter in the U.S. state of Missouri, emissions are 20 times lower than those of its plant in Peru. (END/2006)



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