

Gabonese NGO decries effects of mining

LIBREVILLE: Irradiation, river pollution and low fish stocks are among the effects noted of mining in Gabon by the non-governmental organisation Brainforest in an investigation published on Monday (16 August 2010).

"Projects that engender billions in investment, for the most part foreign (...) with considerable economic fallout, should not be undertaken at the expense of local populations and the environment," the report concludes.

Brainforest studied the impact of mining mainly by the French companies Areva and Eramet in the eastern Haut-Ogooue region of the central African country.

It chose three sites: Mounana, where uranium was mined for more than 40 years by COMUF (Uranium Mining Company of Franceville), a subsidiary of Areva; Moanda, where COMILOG (Mining Company of the Ogooue), a subsidiary of Eramet, has been mining manganese since 1962; and Poubara, where a large hydro-electric dam is being built to meet COMILOG's energy needs.

"The lack of information concerning the radiological situation (in Mounana) is unacceptable," Brainforest said, noting the proximity of different parts of the town to zones where there is a high risk of radioactivity.

Radiation levels are in principle measured by the National Centre for the Prevention and Protection from Ionising Rays (CNPPRI), but the report said that the centre's independence "raises questions when we know that COMUF has for years been financing this organ 'independent' of the ministry of mines."

Measurements taken by the CNPPRI have never been reported to the local authorities or the population, charged Brainforest, which called for an independent study to avoid potential bias.

Areva ceased to mine uranium in Gabon about a decade ago, but mining could resume at fresh sites, the report said.

At Moanda, watercourses have become blocked and polluted by mud and waste from COMILOG's manganese mining operation. Local people have abandoned their traditional fishing haunts and now go several kilometres (miles) distant to hunt. In some districts, it is hard to find fresh water to drink.

Brainforest said that manganese mining had considerably changed the lives of people living around Moanda but the report added that COMILOG had "acknowledged the scale of the impact of its activities on the environment."

At Poubara, "the biggest hydroelectric project in Gabon (will) submerge an area of 46.2 square kilometres (17.6 square miles)" without any consultations with the local population, nor studies of "compensation, nor the inventory of planned activities," Brainforest found.

COMILOG, which wants the power from the dam, produced 3.3 million tons of manganese ore in 2007 and is the world's second largest producer of high-grade ore, according to Eramet.

Source: AFP

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