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ENVIRONMENT-PERU: Joining Forces to Save the Mantaro River

By Milagros Salazar

LIMA, Oct 9 (IPS) - Social organisations in Peru have joined forces to save the Mantaro river, which is being killed by pesticides, untreated sewage, and the waste products dumped by the mining industry.

The river, which runs through the Andes mountain range in central Peru at between 3,400 and 4,300 metres above sea level, is one of the main sources of irrigation water and electric power in the region.

But its waters contain heavy metals like copper, iron, lead and zinc, according to studies by governmental and non-governmental bodies, which warn that the river is polluted by the mining industry and by the runoff of fertilisers and pesticides from the intense agricultural activity in the area.

Civil society groups from the six provinces through which the dying river runs have been pressing for change since July 2006, when activists from Chupaca, Concepción, Huancayo, Jauja, Junín and Yauli-La Oroya launched the "Revive El Mantaro" campaign.

The one-and-a-half-year campaign has involved monitoring of pollution in the water, soil and air in the Mantaro river valley, with the aid of the Saint Louis University School of Public Health from the U.S. state of Missouri.

Other focuses have been health care and environmental awareness-raising efforts among local populations affected by the pollution, as well as the establishment of dialogue among the various parties to agree on a common agenda.

The results of the monitoring studies will be released in a few weeks.

Government institutions have backed the studies and have signed agreements to take remedial measures.

There are 17 active mining operations in the Mantaro river valley, as well as dozens of mines that have been abandoned, all of which cause serious damage to the environment and human health, according to the Ministry of Energy and Mines.

Another source of pollution is a giant smelting complex belonging to Doe Run, a U.S. company, in the town of La Oroya.

Medical tests carried out in the smog-blanketed town have found high blood levels of lead among local children. On Aug. 31, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) asked the Peruvian state to take urgent precautionary measures to protect the health and lives of the people of La Oroya.

According to a study carried out from January to March by the General Directorate of Environmental Health, the levels of E. coli bacteria -- the indicator used to assess faecal contamination of water supplies -- and lead in the Mantaro river are higher than the internationally acceptable levels.

The report found lead levels in the river of 0.37 micrograms per litre of water, compared to the nationally acceptable limit of 0.1, and a concentration of E. coli eight times higher than the limit, as a result of the sewage and garbage dumped into the river.

A 1997 study carried out by international consultants and commissioned by the Ministry of Energy and Mines also found that the concentration of heavy metals in the river was higher than the limits set in Peru and the World Bank's environmental guidelines.

In 1999, a report by the Comptroller-General's Office warned that acid pollution and the dumping of mine waste products posed a severe threat to a chain of lakes in the area and to the biodiversity in the Mantaro river, which is a source of irrigation for an important agricultural district.

The study reported severe changes in ecosystems, the loss of flora and fauna, the pollution of rivers and the potential risk of harm to underground water systems, as well as acid pollution that is dispersed by the wind, degrading soils and grassland.

And virtually nothing has changed since then.

A 2006 report by the non-governmental Union for the Sustainable Development of the Province of Yauli-La Oroya (UNES) said the liquid effluents generated by the mining industry continue to affect water quality in the Yauli river (which flows into the Mantaro river), making the water unsuitable for livestock and irrigation.

One of the most critical points is the area around the Kingsmill tunnel, built in the 1930s to drain mine workings. The tunnel discharges water into the Yauli river, thus carrying metals like copper, iron and zinc into the Mantaro river, reported UNES.

At the government's behest, the Peru Copper Inc. company is revising a feasibility study for the construction of a water treatment plant to treat acid drainage water from the tunnel.

"The Mantaro river is actually dead from its very source," the secretary of the Huancayo environmental dialogue panel, Washington Mori, told IPS. Waste generated by the mining industry is dumped into Lake Junín in the high Andes of south-central Peru, where the river is born, marking the start of the chain of contamination.

Air pollution in the area is also alarming. The governmental National Environment Council (CONAMA) reports that the Doe Run smelter's main smokestack spews out 1.5 tons of lead per day on average.

The plant also emits 810 tons of sulphur dioxide a day, more than four times the maximum allowed by Peruvian law, according to the Ministry of Energy and Mines.

CONAMA reports that the smelter is responsible for 99 percent of the toxic gases breathed by the people of La Oroya, which cause serious respiratory ailments and learning problems among local

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children.

Studies conducted in 1999, 2003 and 2005 by CooperAcción, a local non-governmental social development organisation, and a team from the St. Louis University School of Public Health found that virtually all children in the town under the age of six had 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 had blood levels of over 40 mcg/dl.

"Due to the lack of constant monitoring, we decided to press for these technical studies to gauge the true dimension of the problem and begin to face up to the challenge," engineer Paula Meza, director of "Revive El Mantaro", commented to IPS.

In addition, 1,600 local children with high blood lead levels receive nutritional supplements and vitamin C, to alleviate the effects of lead and other toxic elements.

The dialogue panels including community leaders and local authorities set up in the six provinces that the Mantaro river runs through, to discuss possible solutions that will be taken into account by the central government, are another key aspect of the campaign.

A panel was established in late September in Yauli-La Oroya – a real achievement, given the low level of local support for environmental initiatives due to the strong backing for Doe Run, the engine of the local economy.

The "Revive El Mantaro" campaign has a budget of 1.32 million dollars from the Fondo Italo Peruano (Italian-Peruvian Fund), as well as 500,000 dollars from the Catholic Church.

"There are many things left to do, but we have realised that if we organise, we can work with civil society and strengthen local capacities to act. The biggest problem is still a lack of political support," said Meza.

But that does not mean that these non-governmental initiatives should "replace the obligations of the state; it must be clear that they are complementary efforts," said Iván Lanegra, the official in charge of natural resources and environmental management in the region of Junín.

Lanegra, one of the officials most heavily involved in the campaign against pollution in the Mantaro river valley, believes that one of the major obstacles is a decentralised environmental authority.

He recommends greater centralisation and coordination between regional and national actors, and calls for a "truly independent environmental authority, in which regional governments are the operational arms of oversight activities." (END/2007)

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