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Police violence and illegal evictions near Papua New Guinean gold mine must be investigated

The government of Papua New Guinea must investigate the conduct of police who burnt down homes and threatened people with guns while illegally evicting them from land next to one of the biggest gold mines in the country, Amnesty International said today.

Amnesty International's report, *Undermining Rights: Forced evictions and police brutality around the Porgera gold mine, Papua New Guinea*, documents police violence and the forced eviction by police of families living alongside the Porgera gold mine.

Amnesty International also has concerns regarding ongoing support to the police by companies involved in the mine after the companies became aware of the police activity in the area.

The mine is 95% owned and operated by subsidiaries of the largest gold mining company in the world, Canadian-based Barrick Gold Corporation (Barrick), as part of the Porgera Joint Venture (PJV). PJV supplied accommodation, food and fuel to the police under an agreement that PJV claims was conditional on the police abiding by national laws and international standards, including the Voluntary Principles on Security and Human Rights. Amnesty International does not allege that either company is responsible for the police violence or the forced evictions, however it believes Barrick and PJV failed to respond adequately when company personnel became aware of the police activity in the area.

"Instead of being able to rely on the police to protect them, people who were living next to the mine's facilities have been the victims of human rights violations by police who illegally burnt down their houses and destroyed their belongings and gardens," said Shanta Martin, Amnesty International's mining and human rights specialist.

The report documents how between April and July 2009 police raided villages in the highlands of Papua New Guinea, burning down at least 130 buildings and forcing out families from their homes, including young children, pregnant women and the elderly.

Residents of the area where most of the evictions took place, Wuangima, told Amnesty International that they had no prior warning that their homes would be demolished and in many cases had no opportunity to take their belongings before their houses were burnt. No alternative housing had been provided to them by the government and many families from the area now depend on their relatives for shelter and food.

"As soon as PJV became aware that the police were burning down people's homes right next door to the mine's facilities, they should have recorded and reported the activity to the Papua New Guinean authorities and urged an investigation, as recommended by the Voluntary Principles," said Shanta Martin. "Instead, PJV is continuing to support the police, and Barrick has publicly defended the police activity."

Amnesty International's report urges the Papua New Guinean government to carry out a full investigation into forced evictions and police violence. The report urges the prosecution of those responsible, and for victims to be provided with remedies. It also calls on Barrick and PJV to provide information regarding the police conduct to the Papua New Guinean authorities and to urge the authorities to investigate.

Background

On 11 May 2009, Amnesty International issued a Public Statement regarding police activity that resulted in the forced evictions of people living in villages in Porgera.

On 16 June 2009, Barrick publicly condemned Amnesty International's public statement as "ill conceived and erroneous" and claimed that the buildings which had been burnt down were only temporary makeshift shacks and crude shelters inhabited by a transient population.

Between 18 August 2009 and 2 October 2009, Amnesty International conducted further investigations into the human rights of those affected by the forced evictions, including by undertaking a visual inspection of the burnt remains of houses and conducting 27 meetings involving over 180 people. Amnesty International's further enquiries confirmed that at least 130 buildings were destroyed, including solidly constructed permanent homes, however, it was not possible to determine exactly how many houses were destroyed and how many people were affected.

In early November 2009, Amnesty International communicated the initial findings of its research to the Papua New Guinean government and to Barrick and PJV. At a meeting between Amnesty International, Barrick and PJV on 3 December 2009 and in correspondence on 7 December 2009, Barrick acknowledged that earlier public statements by the company that only temporary structures were burnt down were inaccurate. Barrick and PJV told Amnesty International that they now agree that further investigation is warranted. As at 10 December 2009, despite requests from Amnesty International for the companies to urge an independent investigation, neither company had done so.

Notes to Editors:

- ***Undermining Rights is launched as part of Amnesty International's Demand Dignity campaign which aims to end the human rights violations that drive and deepen global poverty. The campaign will mobilise people all over the world to demand that governments, corporations and others who have power listen to the voices of those living in poverty and recognise and protect their rights. For more information visit <http://demanddignity.amnesty.org/campaigns-en/>***
- **Through the Demand Dignity campaign, launched in May 2009, Amnesty International is calling on governments globally to take all necessary measures, including the adoption of laws and policies that comply with international human rights law, to prohibit and prevent forced evictions.**