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Sixth Issue of the WAMA Newsletter: Part 1

by Women in Action on Mining in Asia



As we move ahead from the chaos of the past few months of surviving an ongoing pandemic and a prolonged period of lockdown and social distancing, we take a look back at the impacts faced by mining-affected communities in Asia, many of whom were denied basic welfare services and state support to overcome the crisis while mining companies were provided a pedestal in most countries as they were deemed to be 'essential services' in order to increase their production. The corruptive nature of neoliberal crony capitalism was strengthened as states, corporations and investors underplayed or rather misguided the public and took advantage of the communication and mobilisation restrictions to hasten the process of plunder.

In Part 1 of the newsletter, we explore the conditions during the COVID-19 lockdown in the member countries of WAMA- the challenges faced by mining-affected communities and mine workers, protests organised by different groups and also understand the protection provided to mining companies by the state. Through the local updates, it can be confirmed that mining companies were responsible for the spreading of the virus in mining-affected areas where communities were already suffering from occupational health, respiratory diseases and other mining-related diseases which further lead to an outburst of cases in mining areas where the existing health facilities were also inadequate to prepare for the pandemic.

Impact of COVID-19 lockdown on Indigenous, pastoralist and rural women in mining areas

The resource curse brought out by mining had a definite impact on the vulnerability and preparedness of mining-affected communities during the pandemic. The sudden announcement of the lockdowns without preparation and adequate support from governments caused a lot of confusion and has had a long term

left many in higher debts as they have gone months without any wages or monetary support given to them. For communities having a culture of living close together as large families in these hamlets, social distancing is an alien concept which was often forced by authoritarian means such as police force or military attacks.

In India, where there are more than 4 million cases now (second highest in the world), the announcement of a lockdown four days before it was initiated led to a [massive migration exodus](#) for adivasi communities who work as unorganised, informal labourers in cities as they couldn't afford to live in cities without any protection provided by the government. The brutality of the state was seen as the government didn't provide them with transport arrangements at first, forcing a million workers to cover this arduous journey on foot with their children. Majority of stranded or starving communities came from sites of displacement, having lost all sources of livelihood and food security. Forest areas untouched by development projects remained unaffected by the pandemic and adivasis continued with their life, foraging and farming. While rural areas had the least incidence of COVID-19 cases, in the beginning, the return of migrants, traders and outsiders to these areas along with operation of mining industries has led to a [massive increase of cases in these areas](#) post the relaxation of lockdown norms which is a cause for concern due to the limited health facilities.

The lockdown was a particularly distressing situation for women living in mining areas, many of whom work as subsistence farmers and landless labour as they faced difficulties in harvesting their crops and selling their produce. Food distribution by the government was not enough to cover the basic needs of most families.

[Emergency food rations were denied to millions who have been left out of the public food distribution system](#) which was also the reason for the starvation of single, widowed, Devadasi women or women from silicosis affected families whose husbands died in the mines as they had no access to social schemes or support systems. Staying at home for women was a traumatic experience as multiple narratives of domestic violence and abuse emerged from devadasi women in Bellary district of Karnataka and other parts of the country as men underwent depression due to unavailability of work and not having access to alcohol.

In the Philippines, Indigenous women farmers struggled to sell their produce in the market due to fear of the virus and the imposition of the lockdown. Those who braved going outside could still not sell either because of the suspension of public transportation or because there were no buyers in the market. "We have vegetables and sweet potato from our backyard, but until when will this last? We have no money to buy fish or even rice," said an Aeta Abelen leader from Zambales. Since work from home is not possible for them, they went a long time without earning money while many indigenous women didn't receive their pensions as well during this time.

Within Indonesia, mining-affected communities in Samarinda where groundwater sources have dried up due to large-scale coal mining, women faced severe problems in going out to fetch water for their domestic and agricultural activities during the lockdown. The government gave them very few essential supplies like rice, oil and noodles that did not last long, leaving many families starving.

In Mongolia, a survey conducted by MONES amongst 100 women in two provinces to assess the impact of COVID reveals that women's livelihoods, especially those employed in part-time jobs, retail shops, or handicrafts could not get any incomes as these facilities were totally stopped due to the lockdown. Nomadic pastoralist families found it difficult to repay bank loans as the sale of cashmere was frozen due to market collapse. The rearing of goats and processing of cashmere where women's work is involved was badly affected and many women reported facing psychological stress due to income losses. Women were also further isolated from society and social support due to the lockdown, which led to an increase in cases of domestic violence at home and in some cases, the police did not provide women who were victims of violence with access to a temporary shelter making it harder for them.

The impact of the outbreak in Cambodia while was minimal compared to the other countries, however, its economy did suffer huge economical losses due to which many workers especially those working in the informal economy lost their jobs. [The worst affected was the garment industry of Cambodia](#), as a sector that contributes to half of its GDP with the closing down of factories. Many of the women workers in these factories who became jobless are indigenous women and young girls who migrate to cities for work, and with factories shut down they found it harder to pay debts and [with an absence of a clear government policy on debt relief](#), the workers and families faced greater risk and insecurity during the pandemic.

With the rise in state authoritarianism during the lockdown, there were many instances of violence and criminalisation faced by indigenous communities in the Philippines, India, Indonesia and Cambodia, which was done to ease the operation of extractive industries, plantations and agribusinesses. Instead of protecting the community and suppressing the spread of an epidemic, the number of victims of COVID-19 and protecting medical personnel at the forefront, governments, military, police and other security apparatus and law enforcement agencies in these countries were seen to be more actively involved in repression of peaceful actions by indigenous communities and arresting human rights and land defenders working with these communities. The restrictions placed during the lockdown were also violated and misused by state authorities to threaten and attack those who have questioned the government, mining companies and such industrialists in the past.

- The lockdown in the Philippines witnessed [exasperated threats to environmental activists and land rights defenders](#) with reported cases of 10 defenders arrested during the two-month lockdown period. There was also a rise in [smear campaigns and red tagging of indigenous organisations involved in relief work such as Cordillera People's Alliance](#). A prominent activist Jose Reynaldo "Jory" Porquia was gunned down in Iloilo City in the central Philippines by unidentified assailants on April 30 2020 after providing relief assistance to urban poor communities.
- [In Cambodia, individuals spreading information about the pandemic were arrested](#). Human rights Watch documented arrests of 17 people from January to March 2020. The Cambodian government also engaged in [unauthorized phone tapping](#) of civil society activists and political opposition members.
- In Indonesia, indigenous communities, human rights defenders and journalists who spoke out against mining and plantations were threatened and arrested. One such instance occurred in Central Kalimantan in August 2020 where six indigenous villagers, including Kiniupan community leader and two indigenous youth were arrested by the Central Kalimantan Police for defending their customary forest against the expansion of PT Sawit Mandiri Lestari (PT SML), a palm oil company. While they were later released, they still face alleged criminal charges for alleged theft of the chainsaw owned by the company which the villagers confiscated to stop the company from destroying their forests. You can read the case and sign the petition to drop the charges against them [here](#).
- In India, there were many instances of forest clearance and violent displacement of indigenous communities during the lockdown. [In July 2020, women from the Koya Adivasi community in Bhadrachalam district were violently beaten and evicted from their lands, had their kitchen items and vegetable crops destroyed by the local police to clear their land for a tree plantation drive](#)

Mining as an Essential Service and Resistance by Mine Labourers and Mining Affected Communities

Research done by experts have traced the origin of zoonotic diseases such as COVID to the clearing of forests for mining and other industrial activities yet these activities continued with even more vigour during the lockdown. While the lockdown restricted the movement of most people, mining companies were allowed to operate with limited or no restrictions, and even cracked down on communities who protested against lockdown restrictions being violated by them, a stark example being the Oceana Gold brutality on the indigenous women's barricade. While mining-affected communities were already affected by the lockdown, they were put at a higher risk with mining being deemed as an essential service especially in Indonesia, Philippines and India. This has led to many cases of outbreaks in mining-affected areas arising from mining operations. With the movement of capital and labour within countries and often from outside, mining companies are also responsible for spreading this disease to indigenous lands. With

the lack of health infrastructure to deal with the outbreak, the crisis is only escalating in mining areas. State support and protection for mining companies is allowing them to not be held accountable while affected communities who are speaking out are being arrested or being dealt with violently.

India

In iron ore mining region of Bellary district, single cause of the high community spread of COVID-19 cases is reported to be from the Jindal mines and Sandur mine sites which had continued to operate during the lockdown until they were forced to shut some of their operations after the [media exposed the crisis](#). The villagers from the surrounding villages have been protesting against Jindal and are restricting the entry of Jindal employees or trucks. They are holding Jindal accountable for the outbreak as the company didn't follow social distancing rules within their operation and due to the constant entry of trucks from outside.

With mines operating, mineworkers gathered in various parts of the country to demand proper sanitisation and health check-up facilities in the mines. The situation was more dire in underground mines where due to cramped up narrow spaces it was harder to follow physical distancing as was [reported by workers in Raniganj Coalfields in West Bengal](#). In Chattra district of Jharkhand, many labourers such as contract workers, truck drivers and loaders who could not reach the mines due to transport restrictions were not being paid their wages which led to protests by trade unions for demanding full wages to be paid to mine labourers.

Mineworkers in Jodhpur, Rajasthan who lost their jobs complained of not getting support from the government relief packages or the funds of the District Mineral Foundation (DMF) which has been constituted for welfare of mine labourers and affected communities and to rehabilitate the damage done by mining. The mineworkers who were suffering from silicosis faced more problems as their silicosis certification process and treatment was further delayed due to the lockdown.

On March 26th 2020, the finance minister announced that [District Mineral Foundation funds should be used for COVID relief work by states to augment health care preparedness](#). On the occasion of World Environment Day on June 5th 2020, women from mining-affected communities of Raigarh, Bellary, Zawar, Panna and Rewa districts initiated a poster campaign called 'DMF ka Hissa' through which they raised slogans on the implementation of DMF and their entitlement to it. They also wrote local level representations on how they have been impacted by mining and now COVID lockdown putting forward their demands on how DMF funds should be utilised. Supporting organisation Dhaatri also conducted a social media campaign documenting the slogans and the demands raised by the women and sent a [joint petition](#) to the Finance Minister with recommendations.



Mining affected women from Bellary participating in DMF ka hissa campaign. Image Source: Sakhi Trust

Indonesia

The region of West Papua, which is home to isolated indigenous communities with minimum health

shut down and also threatened its workers by making them sign agreements that said they will lose their jobs if they choose to leave the premises forcing them to risk their lives by working in the underground mines where physical distancing is not followed, especially in the buses that transport mineworkers.

A worker who returned from India in the mining complex of Kaltim Prima Coal (PT KPC) in East Kutai province was exposed to COVID-19 while travelling back and exposed the workers in the mine. Mineworkers were also exposed in North Maluku, which is the centre of nickel mining.

The entry of trucks and labourers from outside made mining-affected communities anxious and many of them protested against the continuation of the operations. In East Java's Tumpang Pitu region, local communities erected protest tents against operation of two mines, PT Bumi Suksesindo and PT Damai Suksesindo from March onwards. They were also protesting against the permit given to PT Damai to extend its mines to the till now unspoiled Mount Salakan. The government cracked down on their protest justifying the coronavirus lockdown measures while the same rules were not applied to the mining companies which was seen to increase its production during the lockdown.



Women and student protests against nickel mining. Source: JATAM

In Pati and Rembang regencies in Central Java, peaceful protests were organised by Kendeng women against illegal limestone mining operations, In Samboja, East Kalimantan, locals were angered by the dredging machines reaching the Samboja Reservoir, which was the main source of irrigation and so they burnt the coal mining excavators of the illegal operators. In both areas, instead of the closing of these illegal mine operations, the local community was intimidated by local thugs and police forces.

As noticed in the rest of Asia, Indonesia also saw a [spike in deforestation during the lockdown](#) with forests cut down for mining, palm oil plantations and other industrial concessions.

Cambodia

In Ratanakiri province of Cambodia, [Vietnamese rubber company Hoang Anh Gia Lai \(HAGL\)](#) was found clearing hectares of land and bulldozed two sacred mountains, wetlands, traditional hunting areas and burial grounds. While doing so they destroyed old forests and lands of spiritual value to the indigenous communities. The areas cleared were among those designated to be returned to the Ratanakiri indigenous peoples, as established in 2015 through a mediated agreement. In 2019, however, HAGL had unilaterally pulled out of the mediation process, which was then re-opened this year.

Around April 2020, the [Ministry of Mines and Energy called on both national and foreign companies to bid for mining exploration licences](#) for potential metal, copper, coal and gold in the provinces of Oddar Meanchey, Preah Vihear and Mondulakiri. Currently, a total of 39 companies are in possession of mining exploration licences in Cambodia. Amidst the pandemic, extraction from the [first gold mines at Okvau Gold Project in Mondulakiri province](#) owned by Australia listed Emerald Resources will begin this year.

The Philippines

[In the Visayas, the centre of the Philippine archipelago, residents of Homonhon Islands exposed via social media, what was happening in their community in midst of a global pandemic.](#) The Philippine government had given the green light for the cargo ship MW VW Peace carrying 13 Chinese and 4 Myanmar nationals to dock at the Cantilado Pier. This vessel was said to load 7,000 metric tons of Chromite ores from the island which will be shipped to China. TechIron Mining Corporation applied for its mining permit in 2012 but started its operation in 2015, to mine 1,500 hectares for chromite. The Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) suspended the loading of the chromite on April 7 2020 but lifted the suspension order 4 days later.

Also in the Visayas, one of the biggest open-pit coal mining in South East Asia has continued to operate amid a series of confirmed COVID-19 cases originated from the site. Throughout the enhanced community quarantine period, many residents have reported private planes, motorboats and vessels loading coal for export to China which is basically prohibited in the guidelines set by the government to stop the spread of the Corona Virus 2019.

Communities decided to set up protest barricades In order to monitor the movement of mining operations and prevent the entry of outsiders during the lockdown. The local community of Brooke's Point Palawan set up a protest barricade in the mining site of Ipilan Nickel Corporation on March 7th 2020, after which the site was declared as permanently closed by the local government.



*Mining watch outpost in the Ipilan Nickel Mine site in Brooke's Point Palawan.
Image Source: Rowena Combang, MKE BICAMM*

[On April 6th 2020, three diesel tankers belonging to Oceana Gold](#) were found to be forcibly and illegally entering the premises of the mines in Nueve Vizcaya region of Philippines. The tankers were escorted by more than a hundred police personnel from Quirino that violently dispersed the ongoing people's barricade at the site which has been there since June 20th last year as an extra-legal measure when the FTAA of the company was suspended. According to testimonies on the ground, they were pushed to the side by police shields, tackled to the ground and handcuffed by the police. DESAMA Chairman Rolando Pulido received the most injuries. The violent dispersal not only left physical injuries but also trauma to the women and the community. When a young Tuwali woman was asked about her wounds she said, "The wounds on our body will heal but what they did to us will remain in our memory for a long time". Find LILAK's statement on this issue here: https://www.facebook.com/katubonglilak/posts/3019092664779458?__tn__=K-R

deregulation of the mining sector and removal of environmental protection policies in many of our countries justified in the name of 'economic revival'. Continue reading Part 2 of our newsletter where we look into some of the new policies that have emerged after reopening of lockdown. We also look at how indigenous and rural communities in mining areas worked together to stay resilient and survive through the pandemic.

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