

INDIGENOUS COUNCIL'S FIRST ENVIRONMENTAL MONITORING REPORT PROMPTS PRESIDENTIAL ACTION IN GUYANA

SRDC Calls For Government Recognition and Collaboration To Combat Threats Posed by Mining in Wapichan Territory

(Aishara Toon, Guyana—Nov. 20, 2018) Mining activities pose a serious environmental and cultural threat in the South Rupununi, according to a groundbreaking environmental monitoring report released today by the South Rupununi District Council (SRDC), a legal representative institution of the Wapichan people in Guyana. This report is the product of the SRDC's cutting-edge territorial mapping and monitoring program that leverages the power of advanced digital mapping technology and smartphone applications to expose the mining industry's disregard of the laws of Guyana and the rights of indigenous communities. To date, the SRDC's monitors have documented hundreds of instances of illegal and/or destructive mining activity on their ancestral lands and witnessed widespread contamination of the region's forests and river systems.

Moreover, the SRDC report shows that mining activity has been almost exclusively concentrated on Marutu Taawa, also known as Marudi Mountain, a place of great spiritual significance to the Wapichan people in Guyana that stands deep in their traditional territory at a crucial watershed. "The destruction of this culturally sensitive and important place is of serious concern and threatens our efforts to keep our heritage and traditions alive," said the SRDC.

The SRDC presented its report to President David Granger of Guyana in September, calling on the government to formally recognize and collaborate with the SRDC's monitoring program. In response, President Granger pledged to not "sweep the problems under the carpet" and ordered a multi-agency task force be created to holistically address the issues raised by the report. The President [likewise called on](#) the Minister of Public Affairs to organize a stakeholder roundtable. Despite these calls for action, however, President Granger's administration has thus far failed to put these promises into effect. Similarly, the government has remained silent on whether it will stand up for the rights of the Wapichan people of Guyana by entering into formal collaborative agreements with the SRDC's monitoring program.

The SRDC established its Monitoring Program in 2013 to document the serious consequences of external activities to the health, safety, and way of life of the Wapichan people in Guyana. Since its inception, SRDC monitors have made over 250 observations of activities that are harmful, illegal, and/or violations of their rights. In addition, the Monitoring Program has documented over 380 instances of environmental degradation. This destruction has included the pollution of critical river systems, the destruction of local fishing grounds, and significant deforestation.

These findings are consistent with conclusions reached by both governmental agencies and international non-profit organizations. For example, the Ministry of Natural Resources observed in May 2016 that "burning of amalgam was done openly [by miners] leading to atmospheric pollution and pose[ing a] serious threat to the health of the miners and residents of the area." In addition, a 2017 study performed by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) found that residents of Parabara Village had hair mercury levels that greatly exceeded the recommended levels of the World Health Organization (WHO). Of particular concern is the finding that women of childbearing age in Parabara were at risk of inadvertently passing mercury on to developing fetuses, which could cause neurological damage to their children.

In light of the serious health and safety risks posed by mining, the families who live in the villages directly impacted by these activities have begun speaking out in defense of their communities. Caroline Winter, a member of the Aishara Toon Village, expressed her concern that "miners from outside are . . . making the mountains and forest disappear" and that as a result "the rivers are all dirty." In addition, Luisa Laita, also

of Aishara Toon Village, warned that “[i]f this continues without any control, we will all pay the price for the destruction.”

These concerns were echoed by government officials following the President’s meeting with the SRDC in a Department of Public Information [press release](#). Specifically, the Minister of Indigenous Peoples’ Affairs, Mr. Sydney Allicock, described the threats as “very serious” and expressed his belief that they must be promptly addressed. Likewise, the Minister of Public Affairs, Ms. Dawn Hastings-Williams, affirmed the need for a proactive approach to tackle the many issues raised by the monitoring report.

The SRDC urges President Granger’s administration to:

- Refrain from issuing any concessions on the Wapichan’s traditional lands and revoke those issued without free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) as required by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and [recommended](#) by the UN Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination;
- Respect the Wapichan’s right to effective consultation and participation by ensuring that the SRDC is involved in any decision-making process related to Marudi Mountain, including by immediately rejecting the defective draft environmental and social impact assessment (ESIA) for the proposed Romanex Guyana gold mine project, which was illegally conducted without the SRDC’s participation. For more information see the SRDC’s recent [press release here](#);
- Protect the Wapichan’s right to their lands, territories and resources by granting them legal recognition to their ancestral lands and territory;
- Ensure the protection of a healthy and safe environment by enforcing its own mining and environmental laws and regulations;
- Respect the Wapichan’s right to cultural heritage and their way of life by halting the destruction of Marudi Mountain; and
- Enter into a formal agreement to recognize and collaborate with the SRDC’s monitoring program.

The full report can be accessed [here](#).

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