

BHP Billiton: new chair, same old story

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At today's London AGM of the world's biggest mining company, BHP Billiton, new company chair Jac Nasser and CEO Marius Kloppers spoke at length about climate change. They explained that the company fully accepts the science and believes that greenhouse gas emissions need to be limited so that the increase in average atmospheric temperatures can be held at two degrees above the pre-industrial average.

But BHP Billiton believes that it is for society and governments to decide on the way forward. Meanwhile it will continue with its plans to increase production of coal, oil and gas in the hope that currently unavailable technical solutions might one day help limit the effects of burning them. Jac Nasser did not rule out future involvement in the massively destructive and controversial tar sands exploitation in Canada or deep sea oil drilling in the Arctic.

Part of the solution to climate change, in the company's view, is increased reliance on nuclear energy – unsurprising, given its investment in uranium mining expansion in Australia, expansion opposed by Aboriginal communities in both South and Western Australia.

Not that the company wishes to go too far towards accepting Indigenous Peoples' rights. Marius Kloppers explained that accepting the right to Free Prior Informed Consent as envisaged in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples could violate the terms of company leases if it conflicted with national governments' views on Indigenous rights. The company believes only national governments have the right to decide on mineral development.

Siti Maimunah of JATAM, the Indonesian mining advocacy network, drew attention to the destructive impacts of existing opencast coal mining in Kalimantan (Borneo) and called for BHP Billiton to cancel its plans to begin coal mining in Central Kalimantan. She accused the company of trying to change the boundaries of protected forests to enable it to mine in areas currently off-limits. Both Nasser and Kloppers assured her that the company had not attempted to change the boundaries of protected forest areas and that the company would not begin opencast mining within protected forests.

Siti Maimunah accused the company of allowing its subsidiaries to continue exploring in an area where permission had been withdrawn. Marius Kloppers said that he was unaware of this; Siti Maimunah pointed out that the Indonesian Department for Forestry had made the information public in March 2009.

What the company would not do was commit to pulling out of Kalimantan: it refuses to take no for an answer.

Communities removed for mine expansion around the company's 33% owned Cerrejon Coal mine in Colombia complained of the continuing slow pace of progress in implementing relocation agreements. The mine workers' union sent a statement in which it said that an increasing number of workers are suffering work-related illnesses and the company is failing to assist them adequately, while the six thousand sub-contracted workers at the mine are denied union rights. Jac Nasser said the company would investigate the complaints and continue to work with Cerrejon Coal to improve its performance.

Questioned on the company's plans to buy Potash Corporation of Saskatchewan, Jac Nasser claimed it was too early in the negotiations to comment and so pleaded ignorance of the details of Potash Corp's involvement in phosphates mining in Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara. Ken Ritchie of the Western Sahara Campaign pointed out that buying

phosphates from an illegally occupied country is itself against international law and would be in violation of United Nations resolutions. Nasser said that the company was still conducting its 'due diligence' on Potash Corp and would avoid violating its own business principles.

BHP Billiton sees itself as indispensable to the prosperity of the world. Millions of the world's poor are apparently relying on it to help them embrace the urbanised life of high consumption which it believes to be their destiny. Those who have a different view – like Indigenous communities in Kalimantan or small farmers in Colombia – have to be moved out of the way. BHP Billiton plans to continue mining, burning and irradiating its way towards a vision of the future that its board finds inspiring and which many of its critics reject as apocalyptic.

For more information, contact London Mining Network on 07929 023214

An alternative report on some of the company's activities is available at <http://londonminingnetwork.org/2010/10/bhp-billiton-other-sides-to-the-story/>.