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Columban priest tackles a mining giant

by Ellen Teague

A Columban priest has challenged the appalling environmental and human rights record of the world's biggest mining company at its recent AGM on 29 October. Attending alongside other justice and peace activists and indigenous Wayuu people from Colombia, he called on BHP Billiton to respect the human rights of local people in mining areas around the world. Also, to care for water, air and biodiversity which are often polluted by large scale mining, thus destroying livelihoods.

Tackling BHP Billiton at its recent AGM (l-r) Fr Nally, Colombian Wayuu Indigenous People Karmen Ramirez, Wilman Palmesano.

Fr Frank Nally, who worked in the Philippines with indigenous peoples, challenged BHP Billiton's Hallmark project in the Philippine island of Mindanao. In mining for nickel, it poses significant risks to the environment, particularly because of the large amounts of water required, the transportation and containment of acid, air emissions, and the storage, treatment and disposal of mine waste. CAFOD agrees that the community are worried about the impact that the proposed mine could have, and feel they have not been properly consulted about it.



London-based BHP Billiton is not a household name in Britain, but the activities of the BHP Billiton group have a massive impact on communities all around the world. These are part-funded by high street banks and pension funds investing money provided by millions of individuals, church and other groups in the UK. An alternative report released at the offices of Amnesty International outlined the negative impacts of the company's operations in Australia, West Papua, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, South Africa, Canada, Colombia and Chile. The report was the work of organisations from many countries, including church-based groups, working with affected communities.

"Our Columban mission is to support the local people and care for the natural world around them" says Fr Nally.

The report catalogued abuses of human rights concerning worker health and safety, livelihood and food security, and environmental problems. It also raised issues around climate change and BHP Billiton's commitment to increased extraction and promotion of both coal and uranium for power production.

Representatives of communities in Colombia, displaced to make way for expansion of the world's biggest opencast coal mine, Cerrejon, which is one-third owned by BHP Billiton, complained of the company's practices. Farming families in villages around the mine have been deprived of their livelihoods as the mine expands and they accuse Cerrejon of failing to negotiate in good faith or offer sufficient assistance or compensation. The Wayuu indigenous people also fear the militarisation of the area around the vast mine.