

Newmont officials huddle with activists over environmental issues

By Sandy Shore
Associated Press
26 April 2005

DENVER (AP) - Executives from Newmont Mining Corp. met behind closed doors Tuesday with community representatives from Nevada and Peru as the world's largest gold mining company tries to answer concerns about its environmental practices.

Newmont spokesman Doug Hock characterized the talks as "very good, very productive meetings," though he declined to be specific about what was discussed. An additional meeting was set Wednesday with residents of Ghana.

The sessions were held on the eve of Newmont's annual stockholders meeting, which is expected to draw residents and activists from at least four countries where the company has been targeted by pollution allegations, including Indonesia.

Nur Hidayati of Jakarta, a member of the Indonesian Forum for Environment, said she plans to attend the meeting to demand that Newmont be accountable for alleged pollution at its mine on Sulawesi Island.

"We still hope that Newmont will be responsible for this," Hidayati, 31, said. "We want them to stop the intimidation that is going on everywhere. I think it is time for the world to tell Newmont to stop such action."

In two sessions Tuesday, four Newmont executives met with two representatives with Peru and separately with four representatives of the Western Shoshone tribe in Nevada. Some members of non-governmental agencies sat in on both sessions.

Hock said there were no surprises. "It was good to sit down and hear from them and we look forward to constructive dialogue," he said.

Environmental concerns also have been raised about mines near Cajamarca, Peru, in Nevada and western Ghana that are operated by the world's largest gold producer. The most publicized case involves Newmont's closed mine on Sulawesi Island, about 1,300 miles northeast of Jakarta.

Five Newmont executives have been accused of corporate crimes involving alleged pollution. If convicted, they could face up to 15 years in jail. In addition, the Indonesian environment ministry is suing Newmont's Indonesian subsidiary, Newmont Minahasa Raya, for \$133.6 million in compensation over the alleged pollution.

Authorities have claimed the company dumped heavy metals into Buyat Bay, causing residents to develop skin diseases and tumors.

Newmont has admitted releasing 17 tons of waste mercury into the air and 16 tons into the water over five years but says the totals were within Indonesian government standards.

The World Health Organization and an initial Environment Ministry report found the water unpolluted but a subsequent ministry study found arsenic levels in the seabed were 100 times higher at the waste-dumping site than in other parts of the bay.

Newmont CEO Wayne Murdy said Monday he believes the company will receive a fair trial if the case progresses.

"This case has obviously gotten a lot of notoriety," he said. "The message we've heard back is they want it to go through a process. We have no basic complaint with that. The unfortunate thing is it's taken so long."

In Peru, Newmont and its partner Buenaventura have operated an open pit mine near the small Spanish colonial city of Cajamarca since 1993. Last fall, they dropped exploration rights to another joint venture on the Cerro Quilish mountain following protests by area residents worried about water supplies.

The company started work late last year on a mine near Battle Mountain, Nev., where opponents have been concerned about the long-term impacts to water and acid rock damage.

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