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DES ORGANISATIONS
NATIONALES :

No to gold industrial mega-mining in French Guiana!

The French government is quietly encouraging [1] multinational corporations to launch gigantic mining operations in the heart of the French Guiana forest. Among them, the “Montagne d'Or” project by the Russian-Canadian NordGold/Columbus Gold consortium is expected to start in 2018 [2]. It would be the largest gold mine ever established on French territory. Industrial gold mines are still the cause of serious and often irreversible human and environmental impacts [3]. We consider the destruction of a part of French Guiana’s exceptional biodiversity and taking the risk of major accidents to be unacceptable for the extraction of a material currently of secondary social and industrial utility. **Our 20 organisations [4] are therefore calling on the French government to place a moratorium on large-scale mining in French Guiana and the immediate cessation of all such projects already underway.**

Titanic mining projects

Because the quantities of gold present in the rock are minute (1 to 2 grams of gold per tonne of rock), the Montagne d'Or project would require digging a pit 2.5 km long, 500 meters wide (an area equivalent to 150 soccer fields) and 400 meters deep [5]. This will generate an estimated 400 million cubic meters of extremely toxic mine waste. The ore processing plant would also require energy equivalent to 20% of French Guiana’s annual consumption [6]. Furthermore, the Advisory Council of the Amerindian and Bushinengue Populations (CCPAB) warned of demands for the retrocession of 200,000 hectares of primary forests, including traditional lands and subsistence areas of these communities, whose wood would be then used to fuel the mine processing plant [7]. The CCPAB also denounces the fact that they have not been consulted for the Montagne d'Or project, in violation of French legislation [8].

Our organisations warn that if France was to allow this first large-scale exploitation of a gold deposit, it would set a precedent that would open the floodgates to numerous comparable mining projects. Moreover, the second wave is already taking shape: with 36 concessions or operating licenses already granted and 21 exploration permits requested or in progress, mining companies from all over the world have already staked out 320,000 hectares of the territory of French Guiana [9].

Known and unacceptable risks

Industrial sites of this type inevitably destroy the forest and ecosystems on which they are established, disrupting the environment by transporting polluted water and sludge from the worked areas and mining waste storages. In addition, the Montagne d'Or mining site would cover an area of 12 square kilometres between two protected ecological reserves and come within 500 meters of one of them.

The gravest risk arises from the tailings dams retaining millions of tons of cyanide sludge. These dams are particularly sensitive to the accumulation of water which increases the risk of failure. Contrary to the assertions of the mining companies, the risk is far from negligible: at least 25 tailings dam failures have occurred worldwide since 2000 [10]. The most recent example happened at the Samarco mining site in Brazil in November 2015, the “Brazilian Fukushima”.

Gold mining has become an industrial aberration

Most of the gold used throughout history is currently stored as bullion or jewellery. Only 8% of the gold mined annually is used for industry and 35% is for the banking sector [11]. In 2016, it has been estimated that 20% of all gold ever extracted is being held in central banks [11]. In 2015, the recycling sector – although underdeveloped in France – supplied three times more gold than needed for industrial applications [12].



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Contrary to popular belief, gold mining is therefore not indispensable to industry and the demand from the jewellery and financial sectors does not justify jeopardising the environment and human health to such a degree.

Thibaud Saint-Aubin, president of the ISF SystExt association, notes: "All these reasons justify the cancellation of the Montagne d'Or industrial gold mining project. The technical guarantees are not enough to make it a sustainable development solution for French Guiana and its inhabitants. Moreover, it opens the door to industrial mega-projects throughout the Amazon. Other economic development paths are possible, provided we do not destroy the region's irreplaceable ecological resources."

Press Contacts

Or de Question

Harry HODEBOURG: 06 94 90 90 73 (in French Guiana) - ordequestion@gmail.com

Patrick MONIER: 05 55 89 13 88 (in Metropolitan France) - patrick.monier960@orange.fr

Fondation Nicolas Hulot pour la Nature et l'Homme

Denis VOISIN: 06 98 46 00 42 (in Metropolitan France) - d.voisin@fnh.org

ISF SystExt

Thibaud SAINT-AUBIN: 06 03 19 54 56 (in Metropolitan France) - thibaud.saint-aubin@isf-france.org

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[1] *Creuser et forer, pour quoi faire ? Réalités et fausses vérités du renouveau extractif en France*. Rapport des Amis de la Terre. December 2016. 32p. [Available online](#).

[2] *La France assise sur une montagne d'or*, Usine Nouvelle, 15 december 2016. [Available online](#).

[3] *Etat des lieux des conséquences graves de l'exploitation minière ; awareness-building tool developed by ISF SystExt*, published 10 march 2016, [Available online](#).

[4] **Collectif Or de Question !** (Maïouri Nature Guyane, Ligue des Droits de l'Homme - Section Guyane, Fédération des Organisations Amérindiennes de Guyane (FOAG), Collectif des Premières Nations, Collectif Couachi, Mama Bobi, Réseau Makandi Makandra, Compagnie des Guides de Guyane, Aquaa, Réseau Colibris Guyane, Guyane mo péyi/GMP, G-Crew Music, Bouteille à la mer, GADEPAM, ICRA International) **and** : ISF SystExt, France Libertés-Fondation Danielle Mitterrand, Fondation Nicolas Hulot pour la Nature et l'Homme, Les Amis de la Terre et Sauvons la forêt.

[5] *Projet aurifère de Montagne d'Or. Étude d'impact environnemental et social (en cours). Document d'information en préparation à la 2ème série de consultations des parties prenantes du projet*, WSP, Columbus Gold et Nordgold, May 2016.

[6] *Avis délibéré de l'Autorité environnementale sur la programmation pluriannuelle de l'énergie (PPE) de la Guyane (973) pour les périodes 2016-2018 et 2019-2023, Avis délibéré n°2016-75 adopté lors de la séance du 19 octobre 2016*, Formation d'Autorité environnementale du Conseil général de l'environnement et du développement durable.

[7] La centrale à biomasse est l'une des hypothèses envisagées par l'Etat. Les autres alternatives seraient une centrale thermique ou un second barrage hydro-électrique noyant des centaines de milliers d'hectares de forêts primaires.

[8] Loi 2011-884 du, 27 juillet 2011, titre XII Chap. 1 : Art L71-121-4 et L 71-121-5

[9] *Panorama de l'activité minière en France ; interactive map developed by ISF SystExt*, [Available online](#).

[10] *Chronology of major tailings dam failures ; Database available online*, latest update on 22/09/2016.

[11] *Structure du marché de l'or et situation à mi-2016*, Minéral Info, 25 juillet 2016. [Available online](#).

[12] *Etat de la production et de la demande d'or en 2016 ou vers une pénurie d'or physique et une hausse record des cours de l'or ?*, Auplata, 11 avril 2016 (p. 9, 18 et 21 et 41). [Available online](#).