



Human Rights Law Centre

Bougainville communities file human rights complaint against Rio Tinto for impacts of mine waste pollution

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Today 156 Bougainville community members have filed a complaint with the Australian Government against Rio Tinto for environmental and human rights violations caused by its former mine on Bougainville in Papua New Guinea.

The complaint, filed with the Australian OECD National Contact Point, alleges that the massive volume of mine waste pollution left behind by Rio Tinto's Panguna mine is putting communities' lives and livelihoods at risk, poisoning their water sources, flooding their lands and sacred sites and causing a range of health problems.

The copper and gold mine was majority-owned by the British-Australian mining giant for forty-five years, but in 2016, Rio Tinto divested from the mine.

An estimated 12-14,000 people live downstream of the mine along the Jaba-Kawerong river valley.

The complaint alleges that Rio Tinto's failure to clean up the billion tonnes of waste pollution left by the mine and mitigate the risks it poses to these communities breaches human rights and environmental standards set out in the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises, a leading international standard on responsible business conduct.

Theonila Roka Matbob, a traditional landowner from Makosi village who has recently been elected to the Bougainville parliament, said Rio Tinto's failure to act had left communities with no choice but to escalate the complaint to the international stage.

"We live with the impacts of Panguna every day. Our rivers are poisoned with copper, our homes get filled with dust from the tailings mounds, our kids get sick from the pollution. Every time it rains more waste washes into the rivers, causing flooding for villages further downstream. Some communities now have to spend two hours a day walking just to get clean drinking water because their nearby creeks are clogged up with mine waste."

"These are not problems we can fix with our bare hands. We urgently need Rio Tinto to do what's right and deal with the disaster they have left behind," added Mrs Matbob.

The communities are seeking commitments from the company to engage with them about these problems and contribute to an independent fund to address the immediate health and safety dangers being caused by the mine and assist with long-term clean up and rehabilitation.

Keren Adams, Legal Director at the Human Rights Law Centre, which filed the complaint on behalf of the communities said Rio Tinto's failure to address its legacy in Bougainville was shameful.

"This is a company that holds itself out as a global leader on human rights, and yet as we saw at Juukan Gorge in Australia and we see here in Bougainville, there is a total disconnect between Rio Tinto's rhetoric and the reality experienced by Indigenous communities impacted by the company's operations. If Rio Tinto is serious about learning lessons, it needs to listen to communities and take responsibility for the human impacts of its activities."

Panguna was previously one of the world's largest copper and gold mines. During its operation from 1972 to 1989, the mine generated almost \$US 2 billion in revenue for Rio Tinto and the Papua New Guinea Government. In 1989, an uprising by local people against the mass environmental destruction caused by the mine and inequities in the distribution of its profits forced the mine's closure and triggered a brutal decade-long civil war. The mine has never been reopened.

A clear path had been identified to deal with the environmental devastation at Panguna in 2014 but despite being aware of this, Rio Tinto divested from the mine before this could be implemented. The company passed on its shares in the mine to the Bougainville and PNG Governments and side-stepped entirely the cost of clean-up.

The Australian OECD National Contact Point, based in the Department of Treasury, has the power to investigate complaints made against Australian companies operating overseas, to issue findings on whether companies are in breach of their obligations under the OECD Guidelines and recommend actions to address any breaches that have occurred.

A copy of the [human rights complaint](#) can be found here. A [list of the complainants](#) from the community can be found here.

The Human Rights Law Centre's recent report *After the mine: Living with Rio Tinto's deadly legacy* about the impacts of the Panguna mine can be found here.

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