

Resistance by the Shuar Arutam People of the Ecuadorian Amazon against the advances of the mining industry during the Covid-19 pandemic

By: Shuar Arutam People (PSHA) in collaboration with Amazon Watch, ICCA Consortium, Fundación Tiam, LluviaComunicación, MiningWatch Canada and Witness (based on personal interviews with Josefina Tunki, president of the PSHA)

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a particularly difficult time for the Shuar Arutam People (PSHA) of the Ecuadorian Amazon in the defense of their territory and their ongoing resistance against large-scale mining. The government and mining companies took advantage of the pandemic to intensify the invasion by extractive industries on multiple fronts.

56% of the territory of the PSHA has been concessioned off by the national government to foreign mining companies without their consent: SolGold (Australia), ExplorCobres S.A. EXSA (China and Canada), Aurania Resources (Canada) and Solaris Resources (Canada). The Canadian company Solaris Resources Inc. arrived in 2019 having acquired the Warintza project through Lowell Mineral Exploration, its subsidiary in Ecuador, in order to exploit copper and molybdenum. Faced with the reactivation of this project the PSHA, which in 2006 had already expelled Lowell, reaffirmed its right to self-determination by declaring ‘PSHA as a territory of life (ICCA)’ in 2019 and launching the international campaign “PSHA has already decided: No to mining¹.”



In 2019, the PSHA reaffirmed its right to self-determination by declaring ‘PSHA as a territory of life (ICCA)’ and launching the international campaign “PSHA has already decided: No to mining”.

¹ To learn more about the struggle of the PSHA see: Bombozila (2020) “PSHA has already decided” <https://pueblosuar.bombozila.com/?fbclid=IwAR1XdXtcf5L6k1DRVuNrYxHUhhwsXpABqGxekiUee215Lfw56lAZtZnPc9E>

Due to its firm opposition to large-scale mining and to companies such as Solaris Resources (a company backed by the national and provincial government), the PSHA has been the victim of a series of abuses by the company, which has sought to divide and intimidate them in order to advance the exploration studies of the Warintza project during the pandemic.

Despite the health emergency, the government has continued to approve mining exploitation in indigenous territories and seeks to suppress social protest through the militarization of territories and police repression. These measures violate the collective rights and the exercise of the right to mobilization and resistance of the PSHA and other indigenous peoples of Ecuador.

The Governing Council of the Shuar Arutam People (CGPSHA) is made up of 47 communities organized into six associations that make up the Shuar Arutam People (PSHA) with a territory of approximately 230,000 hectares. As PSHA says: *“We are a population of 12,000 inhabitants. Our people have lived in the Cordillera del Cóndor for thousands of years, it’s where our communities are located, including on the banks and in the valleys of the Zamora, Coangos and Santiago Rivers. Our people are autonomous and ancestral, our grandparents have left us a lot of knowledge, teaching us its great value. The Cordillera del Cóndor is unique, because the headwaters of our rivers are there; our forests and biodiversity originate there. Our sacred places are also located there, as are our lakes, waterfalls and caves, which also have great tourist potential. In addition, we have our own life plan and regulations”* (J. Tunki, Personal communication, September 9, 2021).

[Canadian mining convention and the arrival of Covid-19 into Shuar territory](#)

Every year during the month of March, the world's largest mining convention is held in Toronto, Canada: the Prospectors and Developers Association of Canada convention, better known as PDAC.

Despite the fact that Canada was already registering cases of Covid-19 by March 2020, and that the World Health Organization warned of the need for countries with coronavirus cases to act aggressively "to contain it", the PDAC was not cancelled that year². Ignoring the clear infection risks, Solaris Resources brought seven Shuar representatives to the PDAC to launch its "Strategic Alliance". This was an alliance created by the Canadian company with the Warints and Yawi communities, two of the 47 PSHA communities. The Governing Council of the Shuar Arutam People (CGPSHA), the highest organizational authority and sole representative of the 47 communities and six associations that make up the PSHA, has since firmly rejected this alliance. Referring to the presentation of the Alliance in Canada, the CGPSHA stated: *“...The individuals who participated in the events and meetings in Canada are usurpers of roles and their presence is only to favour the interests of the mining projects”*³.

² PDAC (March 4 2020). “PDAC 2020 Convention exceeds 23,000 attendees” <https://www.pdac.ca/communications/press-releases/press-releases/2020/03/04/march-4-2020-pdac-2020-convention-exceeds-23-000-attendees>

³ PSHA Communications (March 13, 2020). “The Shuar Arutam people denounce the participation of illegitimate representatives in an international mining event” <https://www.facebook.com/cgpsha/posts/2335329343440110>

This alliance is just one example among many of how Solaris Resources *"generates division in our communities, disregards our systems of government and violates our right to self-determination."*

Infections and deaths: the legacy of the Canadian mining convention in Shuar territory

Evidence shows that, upon their return to Ecuador, the seven conference attendees did not follow isolation protocols (they visited their elderly parents, took internal flights without masks, and shared enclosed places with women and children in their arms). There was no monitoring by local authorities or by the company, who were the ones who paid for the trip to Canada. During the first month after the trip, three of the parents of those who travelled died and the pandemic spread throughout the Cordillera del Cóndor territory.



Cordillera del Condor. Photo: PSHA Communication

At the beginning of April 2020, PSHA local leaders began to receive news about sick people in their communities. Given the lack of certainty about what they were facing, the communities requested information to treat their patients.

The first person who died from Covid-19 in the territory was the mother of one of the people in the conference delegation⁴. On the way from Macas to Warints, she met someone who, seeing her in poor health, assisted her until she reached the Maikiuants community, headquarters of the PSHA organization. The person who helped her got sick, as did her family and her community.

Although the departmental health authorities never formally investigated how the Covid pandemic entered the territory, the consensus among local organizations is that the virus arrived

⁴ PSHA Communication (April 13, 2020). "Urgent call to the national COE [Emergency Coordination Committee] and the Ministry of Health in the face of the health emergency".
<https://www.facebook.com/cgpsha/photos/pcb.2363827103923667/2363824987257212>

with the delegation that travelled to Canada, sponsored by Solaris. Despite this, the Canadian company has never taken responsibility for the trauma generated by the pandemic in the communities and, on the contrary, has denied everything⁵.

In monitoring the beginning and expansion of the pandemic in the province of Morona Santiago, it was revealed that most of the first cases were also imported by doctors, soldiers, etc., such as in Tiwintza and Taisha, as well as extractive industry workers who came and went from the territory.

In May 2020, more than 100 national and international organizations signed a letter of solidarity with the PSHA condemning the company's actions and demanding immediate attention from state authorities to the possible COVID-19 outbreak⁶.

Tania Laurini, an investigative journalist for the 'LluviaComunicación' collective, based in this area of the Ecuadorian Amazon, followed up on the case and concludes that: *"It is not untrue to say that mining takes lives; mining directly or indirectly takes lives with irresponsible actions like this. The Shuar are people that are in constant movement/displacement between communities. So when a pandemic enters, it spreads more quickly"* (T. Laurini, personal communication, August 23, 2021).

During the first months of the pandemic and despite the fact that the communities were confined, Solaris continued with its advanced exploration studies:

"The government announced the curfew, and we began to take extra care measures. Unfortunately, the Solaris, Solgold and Ecuasolidos companies continued to work by means of helicopters, they continued to enter... they never had to stop, they did not comply with the added care demands, and the curfew decrees that the government imposed. I don't know why the law doesn't apply to them. Only for the communities and towns... For the company there is no law." (J. Tunki, Personal communication, September 9, 2021).

Attempts to hide the pandemic: Burglary, hacking and intimidation

When the pandemic began to spread, PSHA President Josefina Tunki gave instructions to the territorial authorities and executives to return to their communities. Shirap Pascual Nantip Santiak, former head of education, was in Sucúa (the administrative headquarters of the PSHA) but was unable to comply with the directions, given the distance between Sucúa and his community on the border with Peru. During this time Pascual - being one of the few people who had remained in Sucúa, isolated but with an internet connection - became a key person in reporting on the Covid-19 cases in the territory.

⁵ Business and Human Rights Resource Centre (June 19, 2020). "Press release: Lowell Mineral Exploration Ecuador S.A. complies with all health protocols to prevent the spread of COVID 19". https://media.business-humanrights.org/media/documents/files/documents/20200619__Solaris_Resources_Response_to_BHRC_1.pdf

⁶ MiningWatch Canada (May 14, 2020). "COVID-19 in the Ecuadorian Amazon: Over 100 Organizations Show Solidarity With Indigenous Shuar Arutam, Repudiate Mining Companies for Putting Communities at Grave Risk" <https://miningwatch.ca/news/2020/5/14/covid-19-ecuadorian-amazon-over-100-organizations-show-solidarity-indigenous-shuar>

In the middle of one night in May 2020, the day before Pascual was due to return to his community, 40 police personnel raided the school where the leader was sleeping with his own and two other families, including a woman who had just given birth. The raid, characterized by the use of force, was carried out under the pretext of a complaint of harassment of minors online; this accusation was later rejected by the prosecution after acknowledging that the leader's cell phone had been hacked. The violence with which the police raided the school caused great shock and trauma among the families, mostly women and children - a violation for which they have received no redress.

Similarly, in September 2020 the personal Facebook accounts of the President and Communications leader Eddy Nawech were hacked, and personal content posted online in an attempt to discredit PSHA organizational processes⁷.

Public accusations against President Josefina Tunki, and attempts to make the pandemic invisible

President Josefina Tunki has also had to face accusations and public insults from the Governor of Morona Santiago. Observing the high number of people falling ill, and given her obligations as President, she asked the Government and corresponding ministries for support with medical personnel to diagnose and assist sick people. She also requested information on the health protocols followed upon the return of the seven people who attended the mining conference in Canada.

In response to these requests, the governor accused President Tunki, in a press conference in April 2021, of being "irresponsible" and of "having lied", according to him, about the presence of Covid in Shuar territory⁸. This attempt to make the pandemic invisible at its inception was a pattern that was repeated by many authorities and countries around the world.

The government's actions in the midst of a pandemic represent a serious violation of several rights. In a country like Ecuador where "449 people have been systematically threatened, harassed and persecuted for the control over their territories in the last ten years"⁹, this type of public accusation during a pandemic was very worrying for the PSHA.

"Different ways to weaken us"

Given all the tangible and intangible violations against the territory and collective ways of life of the PSHA, on November 23, 2020 the PSHA Governing Council announced the filing of a

⁷ Ecuador Human Rights Alliance (June 2021). "Situation of defenders of human, collective and rights of nature defenders in Ecuador: Challenges in building comprehensive and differentiated systems for their protection". <https://amazonwatch.org/assets/files/2021-06-informe-defensores-ecuador.pdf>

⁸ PSHA Communication (April 8, 2021). "El Pueblo Shuar Arutam Da la Réplica del Rueda de prensa Ralizada el 06 de Abril que hizo el Gobernador de Provincia de Morona Santiago" The Shuar Arutam People's response to the Press Conference Held on April 6 by the Governor of the Province of Morona Santiago <https://www.facebook.com/cgpsha/posts/2359113407728370>

⁹ Plan V (June 15, 2021). Josefina Tunki and the women defenders attacked by the mining companies and the Ecuadorian State <https://www.planv.com.ec/historias/sociedad/josefina-tunki-y-defensoras-atacadas-mineras-y-el-estado-ecuatoriano>

complaint with the International Labor Organization (ILO) against the Ecuadorian State for breach of Convention 169¹⁰.

Not long before, on November 6, President Josefina Tunki received a death threat over the telephone from the Vice President of Operations of Solaris Resources, Federico Velásquez¹¹.



Josefina Tunki, President of PSHA, and her collaborators in front of the Sucúa Prosecutor's Office in Morona Santiago, after filing a complaint against the Vice President of Operations of Solaris Resources for death threats. November 2020

According to President Tunki, the objective of said threat was to intimidate the PSHA and force them not to take the case before the ILO:

I did receive the threat. Velásquez threatened me and said that “if in the future I see more complaints at the national and international level - because they are already publishing that Solaris is doing a lot of damage in their territory - I am going to have to cut the throat of one of them”... cut someone’s throat, what does that mean? To kill a chicken. I have received other threats, disrespectful comments, they are looking for different ways to weaken us, not only me but the entire group of us who are defending our territory... any leader who opposes them, whether male or female, is always persecuted and threatened. So there will always be threats for being a leader and opposing these companies, and that is what I have received. I understand that it is not just me, my colleagues, other grassroots leaders, my colleagues who resist, women in Maikiaunts and elsewhere are always threatened. (J. Tunki, Personal communication, September 9, 2021).

¹⁰Witness (23 November 2020). “Shuar Arutam people announced that they will initiate a lawsuit before the ILO against the Ecuadorian State”. <https://es.witness.org/2020/11/pueblo-shuar-arutam-anuncio-que-iniciara-demanda-ante-la-oit-en-contra-el-estado-ecuatoriano/>

¹¹ ICCA Consortium (8 March 2021). “Shuar representative and defender denounces threats from Canadian mining company”. <https://www.iccaconsortium.org/index.php/2021/03/09/shuar-representative-and-defender-denounces-threats-from-canadian-mining-company/>

Tania from ‘LluviaComunicación’ highlights that, given how it was expressed and who is mentioned, *"the threat against the president and her collaborators is a gender-based threat"* (T. Laurini, personal communication, August 23, 2021).

In order to make this and other violations of rights visible, the PSHA asked the Canadian embassy, via a letter signed by 137 organizations from around the world, to publicly condemn the Canadian firm Solaris Resources for such violations¹². To date, they have not received a response to this request.

Donations and militarization

Another example of the violence faced by the PSHA has been the use of militarization as a means of advancing the copper project. The governor and the company have made use of medical assistance to provide Solaris with good publicity and paint them as a beneficial actor for the communities, while at the same time attempting to militarize the territory.

Despite the PSHA authorities formally requesting support to care for the sick and access Covid-19 tests, the governor has coordinated the entry of donations¹³ and health personnel with the Ecuadorian Health Ministry, the Canadian company and the army, without consulting the territorial authorities.

On November 22, 2020 the PSHA publicly denounced a military incursion while a women's empowerment workshop¹⁴ was taking place. According to the Governor of Morona Santiago Province, this militarization was carried out in the context of the "Strategic Alliance" and demands for guarantees of protection against alleged threats that the Shuar people would invade Warints in order to remove the mining company. In this way, the government and the company manipulated the Shuar, Warints and Yawi communities in order that they be the ones to request military assistance (protection) and so justify the military/police entry into the territory. It should be noted that this request was generated after the CGPSHA announced that it would file a complaint against the Ecuadorian state before the ILO for violation of their collective rights.

On September 8, 2021, still in the midst of the pandemic, the PSHA publicly denounced Solaris again for attempting to violently bring heavy machinery into the Maikiuants community (where PSHA headquarters is located) for the construction of the Warints-Yawi road project. At the time, road machinery was set on fire and PSHA members were accused - without evidence – of causing the fire. In the statement, the PSHA said that the State used the fire to justify measures such as the militarization of their territory. The CGPSHA demanded that the Ecuadorian government suspend "the large-scale mining activities of Solaris Resources since it violates our right to self-determination." They also requested that "the right to peaceful resistance be

¹² Letter to the Canadian embassy (August 26, 2021).

<https://miningwatch.ca/sites/default/files/pshalettertocanadianembassy.pdf>

¹³ Infórmate y Punto (October 15 de 2020). "Lowell Mineral exploration delivered two fully equipped health posts on the southern border". <https://informateypunto.com/2020/10/15/lowell-mineral-exploration-entrego-dos-puestos-de-salud-completamente-equipados-en-la-frontera-sur/>

¹⁴ PSHA Communication (November 22, 2020). "Public complaint. Military incursion and national police in the ancestral territory of the Shuar Arutam People" <https://www.facebook.com/cgpsha/posts/2548718725434503>

respected by the Maikiaunts Women's Collective who, protected by their right to self-determination and self-government, defended our territory and prevented the entry of the machinery".¹⁵



Military helicopters flying over PSHA territory, August 2021. Photo: Still image of the Audio-Visual Report: Humanitarian Mission to Maikiuants". Photo: PSHA Communication and LluviaComunicación

As a result of this situation, authorities from the province of Morona Santiago, the Ombudsman's Office and the Alliance for Human Rights of Ecuador carried out a humanitarian verification visit to listen to the Maikiuants community. During the visit, the women of Maikiuants denounced the use of verbal assault and threat against them by the male employees of Solaris and complained that the company "creates conflicts, divisions between families, communities and organizations"¹⁶.

¹⁵ CONAIE (September 8, 2021). "Shuar Arutam People (PSHA) Denounces the Violent Attempt by Solaris Resources Inc. Mining Company to Bring Heavy Machinery into Our Territory"
<https://conaie.org/2021/09/08/pueblo-shuar-arutam-psha-denuncia-el-intento-violento-de-ingresar-maquinaria-pesada-por-parte-de-la-empresa-minera-solaris-resources/>

¹⁶ Ibid



On October 11, 2021 the Governing Council of the Shuar Arutam People (PSHA) convened national and local authorities in an Assembly in Maikiuants, headquarters of the PSHA, to deal with the complex issue of mining in Warints (provoked by the company Solaris Resources and Lowell); the breakdown of the social and organizational fabric among Shuar families; and the issue of heavy machinery being brought in for mining which, according to company personnel, is for the Warints-Yawi road project. Photo: PSHA Communication

[The 'green' mining of copper promoted by the Ecuadorian State and mining companies in Shuar territory during the pandemic](#)

Copper is considered one of the critical metals needed for low-carbon technologies (such as electric cars, solar panels, and power grids) and for the energy transition and the fight against climate change. Many governments and mining companies have declared that the pandemic will serve to accelerate the energy transition and reduce CO2 emissions. In this way the Ecuadorian government, the mining industry associations and the mining companies are further promoting the extraction of copper in the Cordillera del Cóndor¹⁷.

According to the Ministry of Energy and Non-Renewable Natural Resources, "the rise in the price of copper, anchored to the 'bull market with a tint of green'... will undoubtedly favour the countries that produce this metal. This is the case of Ecuador, and the benefits will be reflected in a higher payment of royalties to the State for its copper"¹⁸. Along the same lines Daniel Earle, president of Solaris, has stressed that: "Ecuador has an important role to play in supplying the current energy transition to electrification, in which copper is essential and increasingly scarce"¹⁹.

The company has also taken advantage of the pandemic to reinforce the idea that it is in a perfect position to capitalize on the demand for metals necessary for the energy transition, since Warintza is a copper project that can contribute to decarbonization projects and to electric cars in the future²⁰. Likewise, the company has taken advantage of Covid-19 and the latent concerns of Covid infection to promote the project to its investors in terms of the supposed benefits of copper as an antibacterial agent. Earle has tweeted, "Antibacterial copper surfaces, decades of growth to come in this space."²¹

This boom in mining for the energy transition occurs at the same time that the PSHA has reiterated its opposition to mining in the Amazon. As President Josefina says: *"We ask that our rights be respected. We have only one territory - that is the Amazon; we know that the rivers are born in the mountain ranges and also the springs from which we all drink, and our biodiversity, the forest, the lakes and waterfalls depend on it. We protect all of this... and we know that it contributes to the care of the planet.... Although we must fight against climate change, this fight must be fair and must not be carried out by violating our collective rights and destroying our territories"* (J. Tunki, personal communication, September 9, 2021).

[Reactivate the post-Covid economy via mining decree 151](#)

¹⁷ EJAtlas. "Warintza Mining Project by Solaris Resources Inc., Ecuador" <https://ejatlas.org/conflict/la-lucha-del-pueblo-shuar-arutam-psha-contra-solaris-resources>

¹⁸ Ministry for Energy and Non-Renewable Natural Resources (March 1, 2021). "The price of copper is projected to rise". <https://www.recursosyenergia.gob.ec/el-precio-del-cobre-se-proyecta-al-alza/>

¹⁹ Miningfeeds (January 28 2021). "Solaris Resources (SLS.V): Mining Will Be the Winner in Ecuador's Presidential Election". <https://miningfeeds.com/solaris-resources-sls-v-mining-will-be-the-winner-in-ecuadors-presidential-election/>

²⁰ MiningFeeds (April 8 2021). "The Copper Boom Has Only Just Begun". <https://miningfeeds.com/the-copper-boom-has-only-just-begun/>

²¹ <https://twitter.com/DanielEarle3/status/1368271179124006912?s=20>

Since the pandemic began the Ecuadorian government, together with mining companies, have positioned mining as a fundamental industry for "economic reactivation" after Covid-19.

Although during the elections the current president of Ecuador had promised to promote "human rights and the rights of nature... and the protection of the environment with a sustainable agenda"²², after his election he issued decree 151, which seeks to accelerate mining in fragile places such as the Amazon and moorlands, and provide legal certainty to mining companies²³ to show a welcoming and favorable environment for investors.



Women from the PSHA and other indigenous organizations in Ecuador in a sit-in in front of the Ministry of the Environment protesting against the mining decree. October 2021. Photo: PSHA Communication

Decree 151 includes the acceleration of environmental permits for mining projects without taking into account the socio-environmental impacts. As President Josefina Tunki stated during the mining law reform forum in the city of Macas in September 2021: *"This mining law project has no benefits for us, for our bases, for the Ecuadorian people, ... development is not only mining... Mining is going to poison our water... The content of this decree is all in favor of the companies"*.

The company has also used the discourse of economic reactivation in press conferences, interviews, on social media and on local radio in our territories. Their message has been: *"In Ecuador, mining is an industry that is emerging as one of the economic engines of the country's*

²² <https://twitter.com/LassoGuillermo/status/1378844209457811461?s=20>

²³ Acción Ecológica (August 9, 2021)/ "Executive Decree 151: Lifeline for mining companies".

<https://www.accionecologica.org/decreto-ejecutivo-151tabla-de-salvacion-para-las-empresas-mineras/>

*development.*²⁴" The company has held several events with local suppliers, putting forward the message that there is work for the communities that are part of the "Strategic Alliance" (Warints and Yawis), and for all other communities. These speeches seek to promote the expansion of pro mining ideas and to position them in the territory of the Shuar people, taking advantage of the pandemic to interfere with the life plans of the PSHA.

In conclusion, during the pandemic - and with the backing of the national and departmental government - rather than stopping activities and taking care not to bring in more personnel to protect the indigenous communities, and responding to their requests to respect their decision of No to mining, the company intensified its activities and promoted mining in the framework of the post-pandemic economic recovery. Likewise, it not only increased the number of mining personnel in the Warints and Yawi communities, but also openly summoned personnel from all the communities in the area, considerably increasing mobility between communities in the middle of a pandemic, while at the same time increasing social conflict as a result of actions that divided families, communities and organizations. As *"Shuar Arutam People, we reaffirm that we have already said NO to mining and that this is a mining project that violates our collective rights, pollutes our territories, destroys our harmony as peoples and affects our ways of life. We know that companies never bring development, only problems"*.



²⁴ Solaris Resources (July 29 2021). "Did you know?".
<https://www.facebook.com/SolarisResourcesInc/photos/a.172819027671893/346288466991614/>



Visits to our communities in Numpatkaim (photo above) and Sinip (photo below) together with our people experiencing their daily reality, their sacrifices and their needs. Listening to their ideas and proposals and their firm position of territorial defense. Photo: PSHA communication