



Virginia Pinares

Taking a stand against mining corporations can cost you your freedom – and even your life – in Peru. But that does not deter indigenous human rights defender Virginia Pinares. She tells Vanessa Baird why.

Virginia Pinares is a woman with a mission. 'I'm bringing a message from the forgotten rural women, from the most remote regions where the government has no presence. We must enter power and they have to see that we are coming!'

She does not mince her words, in a country where political and corporate corruption conspire against people like her. 'There are many things happening in Peru that should not happen! Money rules over justice! But they are going to pay, morally, psychologically,' she warns.

A Quechua-speaking farmer who represents communities affected by mining in Cotabambas in the Andean department of Apurimac, Virginia was speaking to me during a visit to London organized by the Peru Support Group.¹

As in many parts of Latin America today, physical and legal attacks on prominent human rights and environmental defenders are all too common.

Many women in Virginia's community no longer dare to stand up to the mining companies due to the way in which protest is put down and activists are criminalized.

Is she not afraid, I begin to ask...

'Yes, definitely, there is fear, but who is going to break this system if not us?' she says, her voice rising. 'They are ready to kill or disappear us. I hope to God this does not happen. But if they kill me, they

kill me; I have a clear conscience.'

For several years now Virginia has been fighting for the rights of communities near Las Bambas, Peru's fourth-largest copper mine.

Currently controlled by the Chinese company MMG, Las Bambas has been the focus of violent conflict since before it went operational in early 2016. On numerous occasions, locals have blocked the road to the mine. Some 5,000 police and soldiers were called in to break up one blockade in late 2015. As a result, three *campesinos*, or small farmers, died, 25 were arrested, and 18 still have cases lodged against them. Virginia herself has been denounced and could face 11 years in jail.

'They say we are anti-mining, that we are terrorists. We are not *against* mining,' she insists. 'We want mining that is respectful and sustainable. We want our human rights to be respected. We want a space for consultation.'

Mining companies in Peru often act unlawfully and irresponsibly, and the state does little to control them. Today, communities are up in arms over up to 300 mining lorries, going to and from Las Bambas mine, day and night, passing through small towns and farming communities along unpaved roads. The large amount of dust produced covers fields near the roadside, contaminates crops, causes livestock to die and affects human

health, too. Agricultural production has gone down. Air and noise pollution are above permitted levels.

Originally there was meant to be a mineral pipeline all the way from the mine to the coast. But MMG scrapped the proposed pipeline and is now transporting the mine's output – mainly copper concentrate and molybdenum – by road.

'Why weren't we informed?' asks Virginia. 'They changed their plans without consulting people. And the company does not answer our questions.'

The trucks now pass through 170 communities along the so-called 'southern mining corridor' and through three departments, Apurimac, Cuzco and Arequipa. Talks have been held between government departments: the company and communities. For years there has been talk of the state asphaltting the roads, to reduce the dust at least. But this would not reduce the other impacts. And so the struggle continues.

Has she always been like this? A leader, a fighter? I ask Virginia.

'Yes. I have been a natural leader since childhood. My parents were simple people, *campesinos*. My father died when I was 12 and so I did not go to college. By 18, I had a family.'

She worked in the fields, and then received some training from an NGO. She became leader of a women's

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organization and gradually took on more and more duties, finally getting elected to municipal government. Her job was to represent the interests of 48 communities to the District Mayor. 'I learned what a leader should and should not do. We questioned all sorts of things. We made demands.'

She resists 'poverty' labels. 'We campesinos are not poor,' she insists. 'We are rich. We have many kinds of potato and corn. We are not ignorant. We know about nature. We care about the air. How can you live if you don't know about all the medicines that nature gives us?'

The trouble, says Virginia, is that successive governments in Peru, and many Peruvian people too, care only about money, making money from mining. They don't care about the real natural wealth of their country.

Mining has created social conflict – between the mining companies and the communities. But, also within communities, she says. Locals too are chasing mining money. And little or none of it benefits the farming communities most affected. Las Bambas has not yet paid the

canon – a tax that mining companies pay from their profits towards local development – thanks to a honeymoon period offered by the government.

'Corruption is everywhere,' says Virginia. 'It's like a spider's web. It's in the mining companies, too. Some [community] leaders are easily manipulated. What can we do?'

I ask her what her family thinks of her political activities. She has a husband and six children, aged between 14 and 37. 'They all support me,' she says. Indeed, her 14-year-old daughter wants to study law, Virginia tells me, her firm, serious face suddenly breaking into a radiant smile.

And ultimately, what does she, Virginia, want to achieve?

'I want to create a basis for changing the laws, which currently are not in favour of people but of the great powers. We campesinos are not professionals but we know the reality of our own lives. We are the reality and we are not ignorant.'

She wants proper prior consultation with local people. Both companies and the authorities are failing in this.

She wants environmentally protected zones, so that communities can develop tourism, for example. 'Mining is not renewable. You need to think about the future. How will the children live if there is no sustainable project? The government needs to think about the present *and* the future.'

Finally, she wants the cases against the environmental and human rights defenders to be dropped. 'We are criminalized for defending the environment we live from and we rely upon. Don't denounce us, don't criminalize us, don't kill us. We are leaders of our communities and we are just trying to defend the fundamental collective rights of our communities; we are not asking for money.'

'Over the past three years we have talked and talked, to the ministry of justice, to the public prosecutor, and others. If we don't get anywhere, we will take it the United Nations. I'm serious.'

I believe her. ●

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