

Bolivia: Catholic Radio Station Endures Persecution Protecting Miners' Rights

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

La Paz, Bolivia--A Roman Catholic station in the highlands mining area of Bolivia has impelled government officials to respond to protests against toxic mineral waste dumping.)

In August, Jaime Villalobos, then Secretary of Mining, accused Radio Pio XII (Pius XII) of "hating mining, foreign investment and modern technology." In statements reported in the Bolivian press, Villalobos accused the station of disseminating false and incomplete information and fomenting "subversive activity.")

The accusations followed protests initiated by residents of Patacamaya, an Altiplano community near La Paz. Residents blocked traffic on the Pan American highway in protest of proposed toxic waste dump sites the government was planning to open near their homes.)

Simultaneous roadblocks at Charana, (Note: spelled with Spanish "enye") near the Chilean border, provoked violent clashes that left one woman dead.)

Radio Pius XII and other stations spoke out against a government accord to treat foreign mineral waste. The station's position reflect a theological perspective which supports peasant's rights according to Professor Don Moore, an expert on Latin American radio.

With a drop in mineral prices on the export market, Bolivia has turned to waste treatment of antimony and other "heavy metals." The government hopes that a recent contract with Germany will keep the mining industry alive and prevent mine workers from turning to Coca farming.)

Robert Durette, Director of Radio Pius XII, told NNI by radiophone from the station's headquarters at Siglo XX mine in Potosi that the protests have compelled government mining officials to revamp their plans for toxic waste dumping.)

"Jaime Villalobos has come to Siglo XX twice to meet with us and has accepted our point of view," Durette said. "He has promised to address the mining communities' grievances. In other words, no more dumping.")

The concession is particularly timely given the fact that, in November, Villalobos was elevated to the cabinet-level position of Minister of Economic Development for Bolivia.)

Radio Pius XII was founded in 1959 to eradicate "alcoholism, psychosis and Communism". At the time it was the most modern station in Bolivia with a 2,000 watt transmitter covering most of the country.

Several North American Oblate priests began the station to counter what they considered to be Communist influences heard on other miner-owned stations in the vicinity.)

However, after Latin American bishops met in Medellin, Colombia, in 1968, Radio Pius XII made a major change in broadcast philosophy.)

"We took the Declaration of Medellin as our inspiration," said Durette, an Oblate priest from New Hampshire with 30 years missionary experience in Bolivia. "Our mission to protect miners and defend their rights involved practical consequences.")

The change in programming philosophy has been strongly motivated by the Theology of Liberation. According to Durette, of the 15 Catholic radio stations in Bolivia, only Radio Pius XII and one or two others subscribe to liberation theology and its agenda of radical social reform.)

Other voices have called for radical social reform for Bolivia's miners, whose average life expectancy is 30 years. In 1967 miners strikes broke out across Bolivia. At Siglo XX when hundreds of miners and their families gathered outside the mines, the army opened fire, killing 80 persons including men, women and children.)

Officials attempted to cover up the incident, but Radio Pius XII detailed the massacre. Troops retaliated by destroying the station. Pressure from the church forced the government to allow the station to reopen.

During the recent controversy on toxic waste dumping, Radio Pius XII received support from the International Radio Broadcasting Association of Bolivia.

With reporting by David Miller in Oruro, Bolivia.)

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