

Catholic station faces opposition for social stance

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

La Paz, Bolivia--A Roman Catholic station in the highlands mining area of Bolivia has faced official opposition for speaking out against toxic mineral waste dumping.

The government Ministry of Mines has accused Radio Pio XII (Pius XII) of "hating mining, foreign investment and modern technology." A government official accused the station of disseminating false and incomplete information and fomenting "subversive activity."

The accusations followed an uprising in August which left roads blocked and one man dead. The conflict over toxic waste came to a head when residents of Patacamaya and nearby Siglo XX blocked traffic on the Pan American highway in protest of open dump sites near their homes.

Radio Pio XII and other stations spoke out against a government accord to treat foreign mineral waste.

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

Radio Pio 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 Canadian Oblate priests began the station to counter what they considered to be Communist influences heard on other miner-owned stations in the vicinity.

There was much conflict in the early years as miners dynamited the antenna towers twice.

Radio Pio XII changed its broadcasts in 1964 when the station's owners and managers became more sensitive to the living and working conditions of Bolivia's miners. Making a 180 degree turn in broadcast philosophy, they became strong defenders of the miners, who had a 30 year life expectancy, and their rights.

In 1967 miners strikes broke out across Bolivia. At Siglo Viente when hundreds of miners and their families gathered outside the mines, the army opened fire, killing men, women and children. Officials attempted to cover up the incident, but Radio Pio XII detailed the massacre. Troops retaliated by destroying the station.

Pressure from the church forced the government to allow the station to reopen.

In its recent controversy, Radio Pio XII has received support from the International Radio Broadcasting Association of Bolivia.

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