

Coal hard facts

Amid reports of death and destruction, the owner of Salem's power plant is being called on to condemn human rights violations in Columbia.

By Dinah Cardin
North Shore Sunday

Wiping away tears - possibly caused by the biting wind he's not used to, but more likely by stirred emotions - José Julio Pérez stood on Blaney Street in Salem Monday morning, staring out at the black pile of coal at Salem Harbor Station.

"The misfortune of La Guajira," he says, referring to the region in Columbia where he lives.

With the cooperation of the government, the owners of the world's largest open-pit coalmine are systematically wiping the region off the map, he says.

"It's very sad," he continues, through an interpreter, "to see what benefits some people brings harm to many others."

Communities surrounding the mine have been subject to constant noise and dust from blasting, loss of farmland and contamination of the river that was their main source of water. According to Pérez, people in his region suffer respiratory and skin diseases, all so the Cerrejón mine can continue producing 84,000 tons of coal daily, at a price of \$50 per ton.

The Cerrejón Zona Norte mine was a joint venture between the Exxon Corporation and the Colombian government. When Exxon first came into the region in 1976, those in his village of Tabaco were told they would be able to keep their land, says Pérez. Then, 20 years later, "a sea of suffering" came to them.

According to an unnamed spokesperson at the Salem Harbor Station power plant, only about one ship a year delivers coal from the Cerrejón mine.

Karl Neddenien of Dominion Energy, the Virginia-based owners of the Salem plant, says the last time it received a delivery from the Cerrejón mine was sometime in 2005. The plant has been increasing the use of coal from South America in general, however, since last January.

The "Coal Americas" journal of April 2005 reports that Dominion has plans to significantly increase its use of Colombian coal, specifically. South America produces low-sulfur coal and Dominion, says Neddenien, is committed to reducing emissions at its power stations. The Salem plant made the conversion last fall.

Asked if it angers him to see Salem and its residents benefiting from his misfortune, Pérez says, "I feel some sadness, but we recognize that it's not the fault of the people here, but the economic powers and our government."

Pérez has the attention of Avi Chomsky, Salem State professor of history and Latin Studies and daughter of MIT professor and political activist Noam Chomsky. She is his main U.S. contact as Pérez embarks on a month-long tour that will take him across this country, spreading the message of his people.

Chomsky says, according to Department of Energy statistics, one-third to one-half of Salem Harbor Station's coal came from Columbia during the 1990s. When a power plant is sold, however, there is a period when they don't have to report such statistics, she says. The plant has been sold several times in the last few years.

"We're not trying to make the plant look bad," says Chomsky, who came to Salem State in 1997 from Bates College in Maine. "We're not asking that they stop buying Columbian coal. We're listening for them to make a statement for those whose lives are being ruined because of the coal production."

In the years since the mine opened, Pérez says people have been "bought" along the way - the lawyers, judges and community leaders. Exxon bought out some peasants, but others refused to leave. Two thousand soldiers attacked 300 families living in the village, completely destroying it in August 2001 to make way for the expansion of the mine, he says.

Last May, a delegation of 45 people from several South American countries visited the region and observed harmful coal dust blowing from the trains as they carry the coal 150 kilometers from the mine to Puerto Bolivar, the peninsula near Venezuela where ships then bring the coal to U.S. destinations, including Salem.

While the less expensive, low-sulfur coal may be more environmentally friendly and could translate to more cheaply produced energy, it could also be linked to the death squads that massacred 12 indigenous Wayúu living near the port owned by the Cerrejón mine, and to the execution of thousands of labor union leaders since the 1980s, according to the Henning Center for International Relations at Berkeley.

Following the route

Chomsky is heading up a group to follow the coal route in Columbia this August, through the grassroots organization Witness for Peace.

She hopes Pérez's talk about the other side of globalization at the First Church in Salem next month, as well as his recognition at Salem State College on Earth Day, will drum up interest in the 12-day trip to Columbia. There, the group will meet with human rights activists, trade unionists and members of Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities and others affected by coal production in Columbia.

Salem currently has a "low level of awareness" when it comes to the city's connection to the human rights violations taking place in the northeastern part of Columbia, both against mine workers and those who live there, says Chomsky.

Since 2002, local residents have been involved in bringing the case of the village of Tabaco to the public eye, creating international pressure on the mine to relocate the village's former residents.

In June of that year, the Salem City Council passed a resolution recognizing that Exxon bulldozed the empty village and that in May 2002, the Colombian Supreme Court granted the villagers their request for relocation and reconstruction of their town.

The resolution recognized a series of visits by Colombians, asking Salem residents for their support. It asked that any mine expansion be conducted peacefully and that the villagers be accorded basic human rights.

"As a community hosting a coal-powered generated facility, we condemn violations of human rights by all actors involved in Columbia's conflict," read the resolution, citing guerilla groups, military and U.S. defense contractors.

The resolution was sent to the president of Columbia, the country's minister of the interior and the Exxon Mobil Corporation.

It was sponsored by Salem resident Claudia Chuber, who was a city councilor at that time. Chuber is originally from Columbia and involved in a number of human rights issues.

"We were not advocating that they not buy the coal," she says. "We were just saying the natives were being exploited."

When passed by municipalities, such documents are not able to change much nationally, especially in another country, according to Chuber.

"It was pretty symbolic," she says, "but I was happy it was passed."

In 2006, authorities in Columbia have refused to enforce the Supreme Court decision and the displaced villagers remain with relatives or in neighboring countries. Pérez says the owners of the mine are eyeing other nearby villages for demolition.

Salem's City Council is again looking into the issue, scheduling some time with Pérez to meet with the Council Committee on Public Health, Safety and the Environment next month. They are also considering a similar resolution to the one passed in the summer of 2002.

Councilor Thomas Furey remembers signing the resolution and calls Pérez a "profile in courage." "The power plant is the goose that laid the golden egg

and we need it to stay in Salem," he says. "It's so critical that we have that, but we need to send a message that products in Columbia shouldn't be on the backs of the workers."

Furey says he is strongly in favor of continuing such a resolution and of voicing a policy of zero tolerance for accepting Colombian products as long as the mistreatment continues.

Meeting of the mine

The North Shore Columbia Solidarity Committee formed to further educate people here about the human rights violations. The group is sponsoring Pérez' visit.

Part of the group's stated demands are that representatives from Dominion meet with Perez while he is here. They are also looking for the company to issue a public statement about its intent to take reasonable action to help Colombian mine workers, and to increase efforts to seek alternative, renewable, clean forms of energy.

Although previous owners of Salem Harbor Station have met with representatives from the La Guajira region in the past, Dominion is just getting used to its new relationship with Columbia. Spokesperson Karl Neddenien says the company "would be pleased" to meet with Pérez, but Dominion is not making any more promises at this point.

"I think what we need to do is talk with the gentleman," he says, "and hear what he has to say. That's what we've committed to so far."

A spokesperson at the plant says no one at Salem Harbor Station has seen an invitation to meet with Pérez, but would be more than willing to.

A few years ago, Francisco Ramírez Cuellar, president of a Colombian mining union, came to Salem. Chomsky, who has researched the tragic history of Columbia coal mining and its affects on the country today, translated into English the labor leader's book, "The Profits of Extermination: How U.S. Corporate Power is Destroying Columbia."

In Columbia, it was published amid death threats.

Jeff Crosby, president of the North Shore Labor Council, an organization of 50 local unions from Saugus to Cape Ann, has met with Cuellar a couple of times, including once in Bogota. There, he saw evidence of something he already knew - that civil strife in Columbia preceded the growth of the infamous drug trade by decades.

Crosby compares the responsibility Salem Harbor Station has to the people of Columbia to that of huge clothing companies who rely on sweatshop seamstresses.

"Clearly, any company which receives raw materials or finished materials

from suppliers or vendors in other countries has a responsibility to see to it that the human rights and labor rights of workers involved in the production are protected," he says.

When James "Red" Simpson of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers 326, of which Salem power plant workers are affiliated, was reached this week, he declined to comment.

But Crosby plainly says even if the plant takes only a small amount of coal from the Cerrejón mine, the plant's owner still has a responsibility.

"If you're going to globalize profit-making, if you're going to globalize corporations, then you have to globalize human rights," says Crosby.

Pérez spoke to Professor Chomsky's world history class Monday morning, telling them that before the mine, his people lived a good life, but now can't even afford to send their children to school.

"That was my house," he says to students, pointing to a photo of himself in front of bulldozed rubble. "We have nothing now. That's because we tried to oppose the company, so we were punished by the company."

Pérez, a father of 10 children, has put his own life in danger by publicizing his country's message. In the summer of 2000, he was attacked by armed security officials at the mine as he tried to film the conditions surrounding his village.

When asked about his level of danger, Perez says so much has already been taken from him.

"We feel," he says, "that we have to make ourselves heard."