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Human Rights Body Calls on Peru to Protect Citizens from Contamination by American-owned Smelter

Oakland, CA; Lima, Peru – The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) has asked the government of Peru to take immediate steps to protect the health of inhabitants of La Oroya, Peru, who suffer severe health impacts due to contamination from a smelter owned by American billionaire Ira Rennert. Rennert's company, Doe Run Peru, owns and operates the smelter. La Oroya residents suffer health problems related to emissions of lead, arsenic, cadmium, sulfur dioxide and other pollution from the smelter. In 2006, the Blacksmith Institute identified La Oroya as one of the ten most polluted places in the world (<http://www.blacksmithinstitute.org/ten.php>).

The Commission ordered Peru to conduct comprehensive medical examinations to determine the extent of the injury to local people and to provide medical treatment to those who need it.

The Commission acted in response to a petition submitted by lawyers from the Peruvian Society for Environmental Law (SPDA), the Inter-American Association for Environmental Defense (AIDA), Earthjustice, and the Center for Human Rights and Environment. The petition was filed on behalf of a group of La Oroya residents claiming that Peru's failure to control the smelter pollution violates their human rights, and especially those of the most vulnerable population – the children impacted by the severe lead contamination.

"Controlling contamination from the smelter is crucial to protect the rights and lives of these people," said Astrid Puentes of AIDA. "The Commission's action confirms that neither Peru nor the company have taken adequate steps to protect health and human rights in La Oroya," she added.

Since 1999, the Government of Peru has known that almost all the children living near the complex suffer from lead poisoning, yet has failed to remedy the situation. A March 2005 study showed that 99 percent of the children tested had blood lead levels vastly exceeding the safe limits established by the US EPA and the World Health Organization.

"We are celebrating, with the hope that we will finally have positive results for the protection of the health of our children, and ourselves," said one La Oroya petitioner, who, like all the petitioners, has asked to remain anonymous for fear of retaliation by company workers.

"In calling on Peru to protect the people of La Oroya, the Commission is indicating its support for people throughout the hemisphere who are threatened by extreme toxic contamination," said Earthjustice's Martin Wagner. "The Commission is acknowledging that this kind of pollution violates human rights, and that international law thus requires governments to prevent such tragedies and to take steps to remedy them when they happen. The Commission's request is based on its interpretation of

Peru's international legal obligations, and it is the government's responsibility to satisfy those obligations."

"We hope to see the transparent, effective, and rapid implementation of these precautionary measures by Peruvian government authorities" declared Carlos Chirinos, from the SPDA. "The government has moved far too slow in addressing this health crisis," he added.

The Commission's decision is a preliminary step in its consideration of the petition from the residents of La Oroya. "The Commission has clearly decided that the people in La Oroya cannot afford to await the outcome of the full petition process," said Wagner. "No matter what the details of its final decision, the Commission is obviously convinced that rights are being violated and the government must act now."

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