

The Marmato Gold Dispute

“We are not leaving”

Third report

Text and photos: Ana María Bedoya



The idea that one's village would be moved to another place is fiction and incomprehensible to the inhabitants of Marmato. Ultimately, in its cobble streets, its buildings and houses, in the eyes of their neighbors, in the rugged mountain scenery, day after day they read their history and recognize their identity, their belonging to this place. But for Medoro Resources, which reads the destiny of this municipality from Canada, none of this is important because everything is a matter of money as a high executive of the multinational has publicly stated.

Marmato is a municipality of 8 thousand inhabitants, situated in the western highlands of Caldas, near the border with Antioquia. To get there one has first to take the main train that follows the Cauca River, which runs through a canyon in this region. Then, to arrive in the village, one takes a detour on a narrow paved road (by ladder truck or motorcycle taxi, the only two means of public transport), where the first thing noticed is a wall that reads "Welcome to Marmato, the cradle of gold."



Next the first mines of the company *Mineros Nacionales* (National Mines) can be seen. Some 5 kilometers beyond, one arrives in a small settlement where several buildings are under construction, similar to a city neighborhood.

"This is El Llano, a road to Marmato. We still have not arrived in the town," explains the motorcycle taxi driver. "Here is where the multinational wants to move us. See, they are making everything modern. They are constructing a high school for a thousand people, and also a hospital," says the man.

Passing El Llano the road gets worse and the pavement ends. The dust from a car which passes in the opposite direction rises as high as the tree tops, so the taxi driver covers his nose and mouth with a red handkerchief. "Oblivion begins here," he states because, according to him, what the government and Medoro want to do is ignore them. So they don't invest in the streets nor in maintenance of the village. "They want to make us look like the bad guys so they can remove us," he concludes.

"We're here, this is Marmato," he says, when the motorcycle, after an ascent, arrives at a site on the mountain side, a place with dump trucks, construction machines, sweating men working, a thin thread of what was water and is now a thick metallic liquid running down the side of the hill.

Different from other villages, there is no central plaza (it having been destroyed in an avalanche) and all the streets are narrow and winding. The church is small and in the middle of a block on which there are only a few eating and billiards places. "Geography makes this village special. In Latin America there are only two villages like this: Constock in Mexico and Potosí in Bolivia," says Yamil Amar, leader of the Pro Defense Committee of Marmato.

Discussion in *El Atrio (The Atrium)*

El Atrio (The Atrium) is a bakery near the church, a frequent meeting place of the leaders of the different movements struggling to prevent the village from becoming a huge strip mine. At one of the tables, around cups of coffee, several leaders are meeting with two representatives of the Social Capital Group (SCG), a company that, according to its website (<http://www.s-c-g.net>) is dedicated to social opportunity and risk management associated with large development projects worldwide, with extensive experience in the petroleum, gas, mining and ports. In other words, this business conducts prior studies on populations where large multinationals, such as Medoro, want to implement megaprojects.

The two SCG representatives (a social worker from Bogotá and a Peruvian sociologist) attempt to maintain a cordial attitude for the mining leaders. As much as they shout and insist that Medoro wants to take all the gold and eliminate the village, neither professional flinches or contradicts any claim, their best strategy being friendliness. "What we are doing is listening to the people, gathering community concerns and impressions, because we know they have their needs. We cannot be judge and jury, we would not be impartial," says the social worker. "We want to accomplish the entire resettlement process of the village, if this is what happens. We are going house to house regardless of who's who. We are ethical consultants," adds the sociologist.

One of the leaders interrupts at this point: "You say you are impartial, and only gather the thoughts of the people. Well then, you have heard what we think and know that the people here do not agree with the move, that the small miners feel run over by the multinational."





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Feelings rise, other leaders interrupt to list the pressures that the multinational puts on them. The woman of the SCG tries to calm them with these words:

"We are neither in favor nor against anyone. We listen to what the people say because it is important to us, we are independent of Medoro. We gather information, that is all."

"And who pays you?" the leader reproaches.

The woman hesitates before responding.

"Medoro," she finally says.

Incomplete Projects

The visit of the SCG personnel was to conduct a socioeconomic study of Marmato, including the neighboring towns and settlements. In the first phase they visited 1,700 homes, of which 61 declined the visit and did not allow them to enter. They asked many questions, from how many people lived in the home to what materials were used and where in its construction: if the walls were of mud, if the floor was tiled, number of bedrooms, if it had a bathroom, etc. "What follows now is the second phase: social and economic, to see how to improve the quality of life of Marmatoans, including productive projects for the community," explains the social worker.

But although they try to appear friendly, neither SCG nor Medoro Resources is well received by the Marmatoans, or at least not how they would like. This is because the impact is still fresh, produced by the words of Juan Carlos Santos, cousin of President Juan Manuel Santos and Corporate Manager of the Medoro Company, who in an interview with the international news chain Al Jazeera said verbatim: "We can compensate them with our...basically with our checkbook. I don't want to sound omnipotent or arrogant, but I want to say it is a matter of money; also history and other things, but basically of money."

As much as Mr. Santos has tried to say that this was not what he meant to say to the Al Jazeera reporters, no one in Marmato has understood otherwise. Further, no one believes in the development plans which supposedly Medoro has for the region, especially after what happened with the Corporation for Sustainable Development in Marmato.

Soon after they arrived in the area, Medoro committed to invest capital to promote productive projects to benefit the community, channeled through the aforementioned Corporation, headed by Eulises Lemus, a person admired by the community. They began with seed funds of 15 thousand dollars, plus monthly additions of 5 thousand dollars during the time the company was in the region. Not only was the inauguration pompous, with many guests from the city of Manizales, but also the Medoro website highlighted the logo of the Corporation on their web page as demonstration of what they were doing to improve the quality of life of the inhabitants of Marmato.



Nevertheless, Eulises Lemus states that the Corporation failed in their attempts to tempt the Marmatoans. During eight months they received 126 million pesos, but when they went to the Chamber of Commerce to register the corporation they were told that it was an independent entity and therefore Medoro had no control over it. "The multinational did not like that and have provided no money since then. They left us with incomplete projects," says Lemus. For its part, the company has not responded to the complaints. The only thing they have done is remove the corporation logo from their webpage.

The Rubble left by the Landslide

Facing all these circumstances, the leaders of the Marmatoan protest have tried to talk directly with the directors of Medoro. But it has been in vain.

"We're tired of the fact that only the Medoro directors appear on television and meanwhile no one asks us anything. They ignore us. But above all, we are tired of them depicting Marmato as a town of poor people, at its end, a ghost town. That's not the truth, the abandonment is the government's fault," concludes Yamil Amar of the Marmato Pro Defense Committee.



This specifically refers to the condition of the downtown area after the landslide which occurred on May 4, 2006 when, due to the harsh winter of that year, a water supply burst on the high mountainside causing several deposits of mine waste materials to plunge downhill.

"It was like a bomb of pure debris, which came down around the houses, and as far as the plaza. Fortunately there were no dead or wounded, but several commercial establishments were heavily affected, and the city hall had to be moved to another building, while administrative offices and the hospital, as well as the homes of several families, were moved to nearby El Llano," explains Yamil Amar, who blames this on the absence of a mining and environmental authority to avoid the situation.



"It was our own community, without anyone's help, not even the Mayor's, who removed all the debris. We held parties, we met on weekends and holidays to clean the town. Another problem was that some families who lived on the plaza did not want to move, while some homeless miners invaded the hospital because it was unoccupied. When they went to move them out, we all united and did not let them move anybody out. This was how the Marmato Pro Defense Committee was created," relates Yamil Amar, for whom it is clear that Medoro wanted to take advantage of the landslide using it as another reason to move the town to El Llano. "With no justification because very few buildings were affected in the plaza," he adds.



Now and then a miner passes through the desolate plaza and the abandoned buildings. Also a man with his mules stops to rest in front of the old mayor's office. He is heading to the top of the hill where he will load his animals with sacks full of mined material to take to the mills, the constant noise of which can be heard everywhere; a monotonous and metallic noise which the Marmatoans have heard all their lives, for over 150 years to be more exact.