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ENVIRONMENT: Gold Jewelry - World's Dirtiest Valentine's Gift?

Jim Lobe

WASHINGTON, Feb 14 (IPS) - Two U.S.-based development groups are warning Valentine's Day shoppers that the gold jewelry they buy for their sweethearts may be a lot dirtier than it appears.

Marking the second anniversary of their "No Dirty Gold" campaign, EARTHWORKS and Oxfam America are reminding consumers that the production of a single 18-carat gold ring weighing less than one ounce generates on average at least 20 tonnes of mine waste that may prove very harmful for local communities and the environment.

"Gold loses its luster when it is produced at the expense of healthy communities, clean water and human rights," according to Payal Sampat, the international campaign director for EARTHWORKS, which is based here. "Retailers and consumers are saying this price is too high."

Valentine's day is the biggest holiday for gold jewelry sales in the U.S., and particularly for the three biggest sellers of gold jewelry, Wal-Mart, Zales and Sterling.

To mark the day, campaigners, including a giant puppet called "Ms. Goldzilla," will be distributing Valentine's cards with the message, "Don't tarnish your love with dirty gold," in front of major jewelry and watch stores along New York City's Fifth Avenue.

Consumers will be asked to sign a pledge calling on gold mining companies to use cleaner alternatives in mining, particularly in developing countries where regulations are generally more lax or less enforced than those in wealthy western countries where gold is still mined.

In a major scandal that surfaced last year, an independent study completed by Indonesia's Environment Ministry found that waste generated by Colorado-based Newmont Mining Corporation at its Minahasa Raya gold mine had contaminated Buyat Bay in Sulawesi province with mercury and arsenic at levels that pose a human health risk, particularly to young children.

Newmont has rejected the report's conclusions, but investigations by the New York Times, which consulted independent experts, backed up the Environment Ministry's findings.

In addition to the pollution, mining often creates serious social problems. Governments eager to attract foreign investment will often sell concessions to major companies without consulting local communities that are most affected by the mining operations..

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"We want buyers and sellers of gold jewelry to hold mining companies accountable to the communities where they operate," said Carrie Dann of the Western Shoshone Defence Project in Nevada.

Worse, gold mining has become increasingly mechanised so that communities often don't receive many new employment opportunities despite the enormous capital costs involved in mining.

Metal mining currently employs less than one-tenth of one percent of the global workforce, but consumes seven to 10 percent of the world's energy.

But the major impact is environmental and the huge amount of waste generated by mining.

"Mining companies have polluted our water resources and violated our right to a healthy environment in their rush to riches," said Kalia Moldogazieva, a mining activist from Kyrgyzstan whose open-pit Kumtor mine, owned and operated by Canada's Cameco Corp. and partially financed by the World Bank's International Finance Corporation and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, has suffered a number of toxic spills and a 1992 cave-in that killed one worker.

In the United States, mines generate an amount of waste equivalent in weight to nearly nine times the garbage produced by all U.S. cities and towns combined, according to the two groups.

Based on gold-sales projections for the first two weeks of February, the two groups estimate that Valentine's Day sales of gold jewelry in the U.S. will have produced 34 million metric tonnes of waste worldwide.

The two groups say that their campaign has gained momentum since its launch on Valentine's Day 2004, with groups in Germany and three gold-producing nations -- Ghana, Kyrgyzstan, and Peru -- starting their own campaigns.

In response to the campaign, leading jewelry and electronics retailers, including Tiffany & Co, Cartier, Helzberg Diamonds and Harry Winston, have issued public statements in support of its goals.

"As consumers and retailers learn about the true cost of gold, they are calling for it to be produced in ways that do not harm people and the environment," said Keith Slack, a senior policy advisor with Oxfam America.

The "No Dirty Gold" activists are drawing heavily on the experience of other recent consumer efforts to end sweatshop labour in the apparel industry, combat the trade in so-called "blood diamonds", and promote Fair Trade coffee and cocoa products to press retailers of these products to press their suppliers -- mainly multinational corporations responsible for most of the world's gold production -- to ensure that they do more to reduce waste and protect the environment, health, and human rights of communities where they operate.

Most consumers, according to the groups, are unaware of the social and environmental impact of most gold-mining operations.

Like the other campaigns, the gold campaign also enlists students in their efforts. The two groups noted that students at about a dozen colleges in the United States and Canada have been organising to clean up "dirty gold" used in class rings.

In addition to Wal-Mart, Zales and Sterling, the top 10 U.S. jewelry retailers

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include QVC, JC Penney, Sears, Tiffany, Finlay Fine Jewelry, Fred Meyer Jewelers, and Friedman's.

The world's top six gold mines by production in 2003 included Freeport's Grasberg mine in Indonesia, Newmont's Yanacocha mine in Peru; Navoi's Muruntau min in Uzbekistan; Barrick's Betze-Post mine in Nevada; and Gold Fields' Driefontein and Kloof mines in South Africa.

The next biggest include Newmont's Carlin Trend mine in Nevada; Placer Dome's Cortez mine also in Nevada; Barrick's Pierina mine in Peru; and Barrick's and Newmonth's Kalgoorlie mine in Australia. (END/2005)

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