

Government needs mining watchdog with real oversight: Amnesty York Region

I am a member of Amnesty International in York Region and Amnesty has been in the forefront of speaking out for human rights in Canada and abroad.

During the month of May, we are concentrating on the actions of Canadian mining companies internationally. Unfortunately, there have been several instances in the past few years where these companies have been in the news for environmental degradation or human rights abuses. Often, in these countries, the symbol of Canada is not that of the maple leaf or the Mountie, but a ruined landscape, polluted water sources, or workers killed or injured.

Canadian mining interests are huge global financial players and our federal government rightfully wants to encourage and protect these players, however, in the long-run Canadian economic interests will be harmed.

Reputation still matters.

The government's response has been to ask Canadian mining companies abroad to engage in voluntary mediation processes in the case of any alleged wrong doing, which they rarely if ever do.

The watchdog appointed by the government to oversee this mediation process has no civil or criminal enforcement powers and cannot impose any remedies or any sanctions. Needless to say, this system hasn't worked.

The government did take the step last year of informing Canadian mining companies that they wouldn't be able to piggyback on the government's efforts such as trade missions if they were not willing to voluntarily participate in the mediation process.

We believe our government should go further and legislate a watchdog with real oversight and the ability to impose penalties.

When you and I display our maple leafs wherever we go abroad it should be seen as a symbol of justice and fair play, not one of making money on the backs of locals, while ruining their environment, and disregarding the basic rights we expect here at home.

Len Bulmer

Aurora