Global Witness

Colombian land defenders faced "lawfare" and smears over opposition to Canadian-owned copper project

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Land and environmental defenders opposing a Canadian-owned copper company backed by commodities giant Trafigura have been subjected to “lawfare” and smears in Colombia’s Andean-Amazon region.

In the final days of September 2025, a festival celebrating water took place in Mocoa, the capital city of Colombia’s Putumayo department.

The festival included poetry, dancing and music. Community members also discussed the environmental risks associated with copper in Mocoa and the consequences of extraction in the Amazon. The impacts of mining in the Andean-Amazon have become a more pressing and divisive topic in Mocoa since a copper exploration company, Libero Cobre (owned by Canada’s Copper Giant Resources), bought concession contracts 10km north of the city in 2018.

This followed a naturally-occurring landslide that left more than 250 dead the previous year, and many in Mocoa are worried that copper mining could cause further harms to the mountains.

“Water is worth more than copper” is a popular refrain among local defenders, those who fight to protect their land, environment and human rights.



GW | Women from Pueblo Viejo, next to Libero Cobre's headquarters and mining concessions, look out over the rainforest and the river flowing below.

On the first day of the festival, Libero Cobre's country manager sent a letter to the mayor's office. It claimed that opponents of the company were coordinating with armed groups to plan an imminent takeover of Montclar, a village at the edge of Mocoa next to the company's headquarters where many of its employees live.

The letter, obtained by Global Witness from an information request sent to the Municipal Ombudsman's Office, claimed that community members were participating in the alleged takeover attempt. Its annex named an Indigenous leader and elected political representatives who have vocally opposed the company's activities.



GW | A mural in the centre of Mocoa reads: "The water in the mountains, the copper resting in their depths, and the native seeds free and sovereign."

Libero Cobre's letter copied in agencies including the army and police and requested a Unified Command Post, a mechanism that coordinates agency responses to emergencies.

Providing assistance to armed groups is a criminal act in Colombia, as elsewhere.

Global Witness sent information requests to agencies listed on the letter. In its response, the Public Defenders Office informed us that an institutional forum was convened, but did not provide any details of the process or outcome. Global Witness understands the allegations were not pursued.

An elected representative named in the letter's annex believed that it was an attempt to equate environmental monitoring with terrorism, having seen threats against other leaders in different areas of the country.

Earlier in 2025, a media outlet called *La Semana* which has repeatedly published content favourable to Libero Cobre, published an article using loaded language associated with illegal armed groups to describe protestors against the company's copper project.

Colombia is the world's most dangerous country for land and environmental defenders, according to Global Witness data, with Putumayo seeing some of the highest rates of attacks.

And defenders in Colombia have long faced stigmatisation and allusions to criminality that attempt to link their environmental defence to armed guerrilla groups and terrorism, though this discourse has been less present in Mocoa.

In response to a request for comment, Libero Cobre told Global Witness that it based its letter on its internal security reports and field information, as well as a letter filed by the Community Action Board of Montclar two days previously, which had stated that the board had learned of meetings where an illegal occupation was being organised.

It also emphasised that the letter was not a criminal complaint and did not accuse any individual of a crime.

The company provided no further details of the evidence the allegations were based on. Global Witness has not seen any evidence that suggests the allegations made in the letter were substantiated.

The company also said it regretted any perception that its letter linked peaceful environmental advocacy or monitoring with armed groups, and that this was not its intention or the company's position. Referring to the article in *La Semana*, Libero Cobre said that it does not direct the editorial content of any independent media outlet.

Global Witness does not allege that Libero Cobre has incited violence against community members.

But in a country as dangerous to defenders as Colombia, the company's allegations of coordination with armed groups carries a particularly high burden of justification, one that does not appear to be substantiated in the company's September 2025 letter.

Environmental risks and defenders subjected to "lawfare"

There is good reason for Mocoa community members to raise environmental concerns about Libero Cobre's proposed copper mine.

According to an expert analysis commissioned by Global Witness, the mine could cause water contamination and deforestation. It will most likely be an open pit mine, with the elevated environmental impacts that this brings in comparison to underground mining.

A member of the Guardians of the Andean-Amazon, the group that organised the water festival, told us: "Libero Cobre represents a threat to the territory and the natural life within it. Any extractivism, even when it's described as 'sustainable', will generate a negative impact."

Yet, according to our investigation, those raising concerns have been subjected to multiple attacks from an array of apparently connected parties.

For this investigation, we interviewed over 50 people, including defenders, Indigenous leaders, public officials, elected representatives, journalists and researchers.

We found that the request made by Libero Cobre in September happened against a backdrop of years of action using legal and constitutional mechanisms against opponents of the company's copper project.

Our review of more than 25 documents including legal complaints, filings and letters, found that those questioning and researching copper mining in Mocoa have faced criminal accusations, complaints and legal threats.

The strategic use of Colombian law appears to have become a key tool used by the company and its allies to wear out the capacity of those researching and fighting against it – a tactic known as "lawfare".

Libero Cobre rejected the allegation that it has engaged in lawfare, whether directly or through third parties. The company told us that it recognises the legitimate role of environmental and human rights defenders and rejects any stigmatisation of them.



GW | A defender stands in the forest near Mocoa, Putumayo.

The company also said that it had been subject to litigation and other accountability actions from communities including a class action lawsuit requesting authorities not to allow mining to go ahead.

What is lawfare?

"Lawfare" is the strategic use of the law or legal institutions to discredit or defeat opponents, according to Merriam-Webster. One kind of lawfare increasingly used by extractive companies worldwide is strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs), in which companies carry out legal action against critics to intimidate, financially wear out or otherwise deter them from challenging the company's operations.

We also found that civil organisations apparently aligned with Libero Cobre have opposed proposals for environmental protection laws in Mocoa amidst a longstanding constitutional debate over which public bodies have the right to determine whether mining goes ahead.

According to a member of the Guardians of the Andean-Amazon, the proposed mine is also driving community conflict in the region. "What's important is how the company has generated fights among the community," they said.

This report comes at a moment when environmental defenders in Mocoa could face an atmosphere of increasing impunity around the use of litigation and criminalisation to shut down criticism.

Colombia's new President Abelardo de la Espriella, a Trump-allied right-wing lawyer, came into office in August off the back of promises to aggressively pursue mineral extraction. He is known to use lawsuits to silence critical reporting.

Libero Cobre and the Colombian government have a responsibility to respect the rights of community members, including their right to raise concerns about extractive activity that affects their land, forest and water without fear of reprisals.

It is essential that the use of legal actions and institutions to attack those questioning mining immediately stop, and stigmatisation through the association of protestors with armed groups ceases.

The Colombian government must implement the Escazú Agreement to guarantee a safe and enabling environment for defenders.

Libero Cobre and Copper Giant must refrain from and prevent the stigmatisation of defenders and their supporters and clearly communicate uncertainties and risks relating to the Mocoa project.

“Nearly insurmountable” environmental risks

Libero Cobre's proposed copper mine would be, according to its parent company Copper Giant Resources, one of the largest undeveloped copper-molybdenum deposits in the Americas. The project covers 7,847 hectares (ha) and the company claims that it holds an inferred resource of 1.6 billion tonnes of copper and molybdenum.

International commodities trader Trafigura recently made an indirect investment into Copper Giant via Denarius Metals, also securing 20% of future copper and molybdenum production from the mine.

Copper Giant is a Canadian-listed company that has carefully constructed an image of corporate responsibility and environmental credentials.

In Mocoa, Libero Cobre has claimed on Facebook that any eventual mine would be neither large-scale nor open-pit. It published posts on the platform dismissing concerns that a mine could cause harms to nearby water sources as “politicking” and lies.

But independent analysis conducted for Global Witness by mining analyst Steven Emerman has suggested that the mine would be likely to pose significant environmental risks.



*Based on 31 July 2026 press release. Denarius Metals invested in Copper Giant in August; available sources do not indicate whether this impacted Iacono’s holding.

Our review of investor and technical materials, corroborated by Emerman, finds that the only model currently being considered for the Mocoa project is an open-pit mine, comparable in scale to major copper mines that have opened globally over the last decade.

This is despite Libero Cobre's country manager Thyana Alvarez telling international media as recently as last November that the mine would "probably be underground."

Using available technical studies published by Copper Giant Resources, our analysis found that mining the current exploration site could lead to up to 78 ha of deforestation. If Libero Cobre deforested all its target areas for exploration, we found that between 1,021 ha and 1,164 ha of tree cover could be lost.

Deforestation at comparable mines globally has led to between 1,900 ha and 7,200 ha of tree loss, according to our analysis of Planet Sapling mining footprint data.

The company's titles previously overlapped with a protected forest reserve, although these were modified in April to exclude the protected forests.

Of potentially greater concern than the mining area itself is the infrastructure required to support it, such as roads. A recent study from the University of Sheffield found that for every hectare of active mining in Africa, an additional 34 ha of forest is lost to supporting infrastructure, with copper mining among the largest deforestation drivers.

This is on top of the "nearly insurmountable problem" of acid mine drainage, the flow of highly acidic water from mines, which can contaminate water sources used for drinking and agriculture. "There has never been a sulfide-ore mine that has been operated and closed without contamination of surface water and groundwater," Emerman says in his report.

His findings echo a study released by the Colombian Geological Service (SCG) in July that highlight the high potential of acid draining into water from the Mocoa deposit.

There are also clear concerns around the viability of how to deal with tailings, mining waste products that contain harmful substances. "It is nearly impossible to even imagine a tailings storage facility in such high rainfall on such steep slopes," says Emerman.

Environmental studies for the Mocoa project are at an early stage, and Copper Giant's current filings do not appear to outline how a tailings facility would be built or how it would tackle the potential problem of acid drainage.



GW | A Libero Cobre worker rides a motorbike over the bridge that the company completed renovations on in 2025, connecting the village of Montclar to the rest of Mocoa.

Libero Cobre has challenged the SCG's findings, claiming in several Facebook posts that the potential of acid drainage does not equate to certainty, comparing the SCG's findings with saying that firewood can generate fire.

Having met with Libero Cobre employees during a visit to Mocoa in July, Global Witness has made multiple attempts to interview a company executive, but has been unsuccessful.

Libero Cobre told Global Witness in response to a request for comment that it is developing a technical programme on the question of acid rock drainage, and that no conclusions could be made on the viability of tailings facilities without further studies.

The company told us that no tailings or infrastructure design exists at this stage, and that such designs would be assessed against international standards and subject to environmental licensing.

Referring to whether an eventual mine would be open-pit or underground, the company said that mining methods are being evaluated as part of the Preliminary Economic Assessment for the project, and that no decision has been made.

Authorities in the region have repeatedly tried to protect Mocoa from risks to its water and mountains, but our investigation suggests that the company and its allies are fighting to block these efforts.

Institutions under attack: Pro-mining civilian organisations oppose environmental legislation

This May, members of Mocoa's municipal council received a warning letter from a civilian oversight committee. It concerned a piece of draft legislation, known as Draft Agreement 003, the council members had signed that would provide greater protections against water contamination and deforestation.



GW | A sign in Pueblo Viejo reads: "Libero Cobre out!"

There has been a longstanding tug of war between municipal and national authorities over who gets to decide whether mining projects happen. The battle began in 2018 when Mocoa's municipal council banned medium and large-scale mining. In 2024, the highest administrative court in Colombia overturned the ban at the request of the National Mining Agency (ANM).

Before the ban was removed, individuals linked to Libero Cobre had been pushing a proposal for a new geological observatory in Mocoa. The observatory proposal would have come with obligations for the council to promote mining exploration, which some councillors believed would have effectively sidestepped the ban.

Libero Cobre told Global Witness that the observatory was an initiative promoted by geology professionals and provided no further comment.

Draft Agreement 003 was the latest piece of legislation that touched on the ongoing debate around powers granted to national and territorial institutions, with opponents claiming it could result in an indirect ban on medium- and large- scale mining through imposing broad restrictions on activities that affected water, the soil and forests.

The May letter to the council warning against introducing new protections individually named the counsellors who signed the draft legislation. It alleged that the counsellors could be held criminally liable for exceeding the council's powers if the resolution was passed, and was sent to the authorities in charge of criminal and disciplinary investigations.

It specifically pointed to a law that provides a prison sentence of four to 12 years and permanent disqualification from holding office.

Independent legal analysis conducted for Global Witness by the Socio-Legal Center for Territorial Defense (SIEMBRA), a Colombian legal clinic, found that the reference to criminal liability was not justified and could lead to intimidation and a "chilling effect" on the councillors' deliberations.

To commit the crime alleged, the councillors would need to issue a decision that was "manifestly" against the law, rather than one made in the context of a complex constitutional debate where different legal interpretations exist.

The civilian oversight committee that sent the letter is a Veeduria, a Colombian mechanism that allows citizens to hold public programmes and projects accountable.

However, since it was founded in 2022 and reconstituted in 2025, the Veeduria por la transicion energetica justa y la paz has often promoted copper mining in Putumayo and its members have promoted Libero Cobre's presence in Mocoa on social media.

In response to a request for comment on its May letter, the Veeduria defended its argument that councillors could be criminally liable if they passed the agreement. It said that it did not intend to threaten or intimidate the council members by making this argument, but rather to provide guidance.

The Veeduria is formally independent of Libero Cobre. However, interviews with six sources across a range of positions and functions support the contention that it is an important vehicle for legal campaigning that benefits the company without involving it directly.

Activity on social media accounts under the Veeduria's name show a public position of promoting copper mining, an activity that appears to sit outside the typical remit of a civilian oversight committee in Colombia.

On Facebook, members of the Veeduria and Libero Cobre directors have also used the platform to amplify each other's posts.

One former member of the Veeduria posted regular comments attacking those questioning mining in Mocoa while part of the organisation.

The Veeduria told Global Witness that it no longer has social media accounts. Neither Libero Cobre nor the Veeduria provided comments on their members' interactions on social media.

Connections between Libero Cobre and the Veeduria

Our interviews revealed a widespread public perception that the Veeduria and Libero Cobre work together.

There are also signs of coordination between Libero Cobre and the Veeduria away from the public eye, documents reviewed by Global Witness appear to show.

In at least three cases, organisations that have received a direct communication or complaint from Libero Cobre have received a communication in quick succession on the same topic from the Veeduria. These include a university based in Sweden, where a Colombian oversight body has no identifiable role.

In two of these cases, the original communications from the company were private, meaning there was no apparent way for the Veeduria to find out about them without having communicated with Libero Cobre behind the scenes.

During an interview with Global Witness, Ferney Botina, the head of the Veeduria, denied any connection between the Veeduria and Libero Cobre, calling the idea "stigmatisation".

When later asked to comment on the allegations, the Veeduria said it engages with stakeholders like mining operators to access information as part of its oversight role.

It said it had reached out to Libero Cobre to request information that it has "likely taken into account" when sending communications to other entities, while Libero Cobre said that it does not share private correspondence with the Veeduria, or direct, instruct, coordinate or approve its filings.

The May letter was one of at least six filings the Veeduria has made to government agencies and academic institutions challenging their attempts to defend the environment or to scrutinise Libero Cobre's activities.

The Veeduria told Global Witness that it has had to resort to legal action to enforce the rights of its members, because of the lack of responsiveness of public entities in the region.

It also claimed that organisations, including academic institutions, NGOs and national ministries seek to spread misinformation in the community and stir up conflict.

The Veeduria said that the designation of areas of environmental interest and the declaration of the Amazon biome as a reserve amount to “abuse” suffered by ethnic communities, but did not provide further details of why this was the case.

A mining association with connections to Libero Cobre and the Veeduria intervenes in the municipal debate

The Veeduria has not been alone in intervening in the municipal council’s debates on environmental protection.

This May, the same month that the Veeduria alleged potential criminal liability for the councillors, the Association of Professionals of the Colombian Mining Sector (APMC) – a professional and trade organisation – formally requested that the national Inspector General exercise special oversight to stop the Draft Agreement No. 003 from going through.

It also made a request to the council to drop the proposal.

The request to the Inspector General, the national body in charge of investigating and sanctioning irregularities committed by public officials, suggested that councillors supporting the proposal may have committed a disciplinary offence through an abuse of authority.

Connections between the APMC, the Veeduria and Libero Cobre identified by Global Witness indicate that these attempts to halt the legislation may have involved coordination or overlapping interests.

The APMC’s Secretary General, elected three months before the APMC's request, is also Libero Cobre’s lawyer.

Corporate filings show that Botina, the head of the Veeduria, was a member of the Putumayo branch of the APMC in 2025. Botina denied being a member of the APMC, but was recorded in the APMC’s AGM minutes as belonging to the branch.

In October 2025, Libero Cobre posted a video featuring an interview with the President of APMC Putumayo, who was also previously a member of the Veeduria.

According to the APMC's social media, in May 2024 the organisation’s presidency established "key partnerships" with Libero Copper & Gold – now Copper Giant Resources – to drive the Putumayo chapter forward.

The APMC did not provide details on what the partnerships entailed when asked, but said that any references to “alliances” should be understood in the ordinary context of professional association, and does not denote the existence of a contractual or financial relationship.

The association also rejected any interpretation that its actions had been undertaken in coordination with Libero Cobre or any company, saying that it acts independently and that an individual professional relationship does not mean it institutionally represents the interests of its members’ employers.

It said that requesting the intervention of a supervisory authority is not intended to impede legitimate civic participation or democratic debate.

Libero Cobre contested any suggestion of coordination and said that it did not author the Veeduria or APMC's letters.

Academics under attack: Supporters of defenders receive legal threats

In June and July this year, Libero Cobre sent a series of petitions to the legal clinic of the Andes University, which has provided legal support to defenders in Mocoa.

The petitions, signed by the company's country manager Alvarez, pointed out technical errors in contextual information submitted as part of filings by the clinic as a third party in legal proceedings, including a class action lawsuit against Libero Cobre.

Libero Cobre claimed that this was a sanctionable breach of the lawyer's code. Two days later, it referred the three lawyers to the Colombian disciplinary authorities. It also referred two of the clinic's students to the head of the university's legal clinic for investigation and "corrective measures".

Libero Cobre's petition included more than 100 detailed requests for information. It demanded documentation justifying the clinic's claims of environmental risks relating to the company's activities, as well as information on whether the clinic had represented or worked with any community, claimant or Indigenous authority within the class action lawsuit.

Two weeks later, the university received a letter from the Veeduria with a similar list of questions, also asking the clinic to specify which communities, Indigenous and peasant authorities the clinic had consulted, and requesting the same documentation on environmental risks.

One of the lawyers at the clinic believes the impacts of an action like this burden both the lawyers and the defenders they are supporting.

By asking for information on communities and Indigenous people the clinic is supporting, the company could "deepen the exposure of defenders in Mocoa and Putumayo."

They said that the requests for a disciplinary investigation from Libero Cobre could have serious consequences for the legal clinic. "The worst case scenario is that our licenses as lawyers would be cancelled. This is super serious."

"It's very exhausting," they said. "We spent two weeks just answering this, time we need to spend with the legal cases and accompanying communities".

Libero Cobre said the company's complaints sought information relevant to the proceedings brought against it and did not seek to expose any community member or defender. It rejected any inference that the letter from the Veeduria was sent in coordination with Libero Cobre's letter.

Civil society under attack: A lawsuit designed to intimidate

It's not just academics who have been targeted. In May 2024, Libero Cobre filed a criminal complaint against two international NGOs for what it said were false statements about the company in an invitation they had sent for a workshop.

The company took issue with a claim in the invitation that Libero Cobre aimed to develop an open-pit copper mine in Mocoa, and a reference to “other territories that have faced similar challenges in the context of large-scale mining.”

Libero Cobre’s complaint to the Attorney General claimed that the invitation contained "ideological” falsifications. It argued that the company’s activities were limited to exploration, that it had announced studies for underground mining, and that labelling the company a “large-scale mining multinational” fuelled misinformation.

The maximum sentence associated with a successful falsification complaint in Colombia is six years in prison, though independent legal analysis from SIEMBRA suggests this outcome was extremely unlikely and the case never made it to court.

Their strategy is to create fear in the local community

ANONYMOUS LEGAL EXPERT

The legal analysis also found that the complaint could be understood to have the potential to intimidate organisations carrying out legitimate civil society activities.

An expert familiar with the case told Global Witness that he considered it a SLAPP (strategic litigation against public participation). Many organisations receiving an action like this could not afford to fight it, he said.

“It's not just the legal case,” he said. “They want to create pressure among the organisations’ allies in the [Mocoa] territory and within communities ... Their strategy is to create fear in the local community.”

Libero Cobre said that the complaint objected to being falsely accused of developing an open-pit mine and that the company sought no damages or restriction on publication through the criminal complaint.

Of all the complaints reviewed by Global Witness, none have been successful. The apparent lack of legal foundation for the complaints and requests made by the company and the Veeduria suggests another intention behind the legal action: wearing down the groups and individuals who take on the company.

“Open pit mining is not an option”: Conflicting narratives told to the community and investors

The arguments made by Libero Cobre in its criminal complaint also underscore the remarkable inconsistencies between how the company presents the size and nature of the mine to the community in Mocoa and how its parent company Copper Giant Resources presents it to investors.

Two months after Libero Cobre filed the legal complaint, Copper Giant Resources was referring to Mocoa as “the largest copper resource in Colombia”, reflecting consistent claims the company has made to investors since 2022 that Mocoa is one of the largest copper deposits in Colombia and the Americas.

In Mocoa meanwhile, assertions that open-pit mining is not an option have been a core part of Libero Cobre's messaging in the community.



GW | A post published on Libero Cobre's Facebook saying that open-pit mining was not an option. Corporate filings from the time show that it was never off the table.

In Facebook posts across 2023 and 2024, the company called claims that open-pit mining was an option "false" and "fake news", a narrative reinforced by its claims in international and Colombian media that the mine is more likely to be underground.

Corporate filings by Libero Copper (now Copper Giant Resources) appear to show that open-pit mining was never off the table.

Libero Cobre told Global Witness that no mining method was defined at the time of the posts, and that they were responding to claims that an open-pit mine had already been decided.

However, the wording in posts reviewed by Global Witness said that "open pit mining is not an option" and "will not exist".

The open-pit question is emblematic of the way that Libero Cobre has used media and social media to enact its "buen vecino" (or "good neighbour") strategy in Mocoa, constructing a reputation as a green, community-minded company.

In a landscape with scarce funding for journalism, and where "most regional media are co-opted by funding from the public sector or local companies", the company has created an image of itself as a positive actor through community events and a loud media and social media presence – all while legally pursuing those who seek to scrutinise or research its activities.

According to Facebook data that the company shared with Global Witness, the number of posts it shared grew from 172 in 2022 to 520 in 2025, with appearances on 200 radio programmes.

It also has a strong presence in local media. Several outlets have published a large volume of posts that feature positive messaging relating to the company on themes like family, children and celebrating women.

We have identified numerous posts where digital media outlets have spoken in the first person as Libero Cobre, without declaring that the post was sponsored.

Libero Cobre said that the company contracts advertising and communication services under written agreements but does not control the editorial content of independent outlets.

Referring to the messaging the company uses online to link copper exploration to development, an Indigenous representative from Mocoa said: "They come with their *buen vecino* speech, they say they explore to advance, that they are the ones that will solve needs.

"But they don't recognise the value that we give to water, and animals and mountains. The tree is a brother to us."

A rupture in the social fabric of Mocoa

In the communities closest to the copper concessions themselves, Libero Cobre's presence has led to a profound rupture in the social fabric.

In the villages of Montclar and Pueblo Viejo, through which the only road to the company's site runs, the presence of Libero Cobre has generated divisions.

Tensions peaked in March 2025, when residents of Pueblo Viejo carried out a peaceful protest triggered by an alleged failure by the company and municipal government to repair the road. It escalated into a social movement known as the Resistance Tent, where the community denied access to company cars in a wider protest against Libero Cobre's presence.



GW | Mules are used to transport materials between the Montclar neighborhood and Libero Cobre's copper concessions in the mountains.

A short walk away, neighbouring Montclar was not part of the protest. It has benefited economically from the company's move into the area, seeing employment benefits and infrastructure investment such as the renovation of a bridge connecting the village to the rest of Mocoa.

A Montclar resident who is also a Libero Cobre employee told Global Witness: "This company has created jobs because the mayor and the provincial government aren't providing [enough]."

Beyond direct employment, residents also make money from activities such as transporting materials through the forest on mules.

During the Resistance Tent, two *tutelas* were filed about the protest. A "tutela" is a special Columbian legal mechanism forcing an urgent response via a court for an alleged infringement of essential constitutional rights.

One *tutela* was sent by workers of the company against the Community Action Board of Pueblo Viejo. The other was from a resident of Montclar against local authorities for an alleged failure to effectively respond to the protest. The resident who filed the *tutela* is also an employee of Libero Cobre although this was not declared in the legal correspondence.

Libero Cobre told Global Witness it was not a party in either *tutela*.

The *tutelas* claimed that the blockades by the community of Pueblo Viejo violated the rights to work and freedom of movement of company employees and Montclar residents. Members of the protest maintain that they allowed all vehicles except company cars to pass through.

According to independent legal analysis conducted for Global Witness by SIEMBRA, the case filed by workers presented significant weaknesses in demonstrating that the claimants' fundamental rights were violated, or any evidence that the employees stopped receiving wages as a result of the blockade.

The court initially ruled in favour of the *tutela* filed by Montclar residents, but the ruling was later nullified due to procedural flaws.

The conflict between the neighbouring villages reveals how Libero Cobre has been able to capitalise on Colombia's lack of infrastructure in remote areas, and the lack of employment opportunities that exist for rural communities, said a Pueblo Viejo resident and environmental leader.

For her, the two sides share a common understanding.

"We want to get close to the people from Montclar again, because we understand what they need and we understand them," she said.

A leader of the Resistance Tent echoed the resident's empathy for her neighbours.

"We know the work situation in Colombia is not the best and we understand people need to meet their family needs," they said.

Politician under attack: Complaints against a Congressman

The actions came in the context of a previous complaint ostensibly made by community members in support of Libero Cobre. In 2023, a group of anonymous families filed a disciplinary complaint against Congressman Andres Cancimance, who has been a vocal supporter of defenders in Mocoa.

The families – alternately identified in the text of the complaint as 420 and 720 in number – claimed that Cancimance had deliberately used his position to defame and intimidate Libero Cobre through social media posts and statements expressing opposition to the company and supporting community members opposing the project. The people bringing the complaint were never identified.

The claim argued that this conduct endangered the lives and reputations of the company and its supporters. The complaint did not progress, although had it done so it could have led to fines and disqualification from public office.

A legal assessment of the complaint by SIEMBRA shows that it did not include any initial evidence that his conduct amounted to a disciplinary breach. It also highlights that the complainants made claims about alleged harm to the company and its workers without indicating whether they were acting on its behalf.

Libero Cobre said that it did not file the complaint.

However, two years later the company directly petitioned Cancimance to retract similar social media posts. According to SIEMBRA, the company's complaint, like that two years prior, was also undermined by weak evidence.

Cancimance said he considers the combined attacks on vocal critics like himself and the communities opposing the company as "legal persecution" and a tactic that generates "enormous wear and tear."

He believes that accusations against opponents by the company "generate a fracture of the social fabric, because they put [the community] to fight among ourselves."

An uncertain future for Mocoa

The dispute between a section of the community and Libero Cobre is now unfolding against an increasingly volatile political backdrop, raising the stakes for defenders challenging mining in the region.

The future of the mine itself remains unclear. In his analysis of the Mocoa project, Emerman estimated that there is a low probability of the project becoming a mine. Only 20% of mining projects at the Preliminary Economic Stage – the current status of the Mocoa project – reach operating stage.

The combination of a lower ore grade than is usually found at comparable mines and the topographical challenges of mining in Mocoa contribute to the lower viability of the project, he found.

But the political environment in Colombia may have become more favourable for Libero Cobre. Newly-elected President De la Espriella has made clear his intent to expand mineral extraction. And the company's recent offtake and financing agreement with trading giant Trafigura suggest a level of investor confidence.

The new government has not made any statement regarding the Libero Cobre project specifically, but a number of the company's directors publicly supported Abelardo's campaign. Copper Giant Resources has also highlighted his victory in presentations to investors.

In August 2026, Copper Giant announced the appointment to its board of a lawyer who led the design and execution of De la Espriella's presidential campaign, but he did not end up joining due to a potential future conflict of interest.

Both the CEO and a key shareholder of Denarius Metals, Copper Giant's new investor, are also reported to be allies of De la Espriella.

Libero Cobre told Global Witness that its employees and management express political views in a personal capacity, and that the company itself is politically neutral.

Many in Colombia fear that President De la Espriella's promises to abandon peace talks and pursue a military response to Colombia's decades-long armed conflict could threaten human rights and set the position of defenders back.



GW | Banners with environmental and anti-Libero Cobre messages hang at the site of the Resistance Tent, a protest that began in March 2025 in the Pueblo Viejo village of Mocoa

In this new and uncertain political landscape, the Mocoa copper project will become an emblematic case of what the future of critical minerals extraction could look like in Colombia's Amazonian regions.

Methodology

- Visits to Bogota and Mocoa in July 2026, conducting interviews with defenders, community members, journalists, public officials, researchers and company employees
- A review of scores of documents, including more than 25 directly relating to correspondence and legal actions against defenders, and organisations supporting defenders or conducting research on the Mocoa project
- Independent legal analysis of selected documents
- Independent environmental and economic analysis of the Mocoa project conducted by mining analyst and groundwater specialist Steve Emerman
- Internal deforestation analysis of the Mocoa project

Recommendations:

Colombian government:

Protect the right to water and the Mocoa and Caquetá river basin and protect the Amazon from the expansion of extractive industries:

- Protect communities' right to water and the ecological integrity of the Mocoa and Caquetá river basins by preventing mining activities from contaminating or restricting access to water.
- Apply the principles of environmental precaution to mining concessions in the municipality of Mocoa and the Amazon.
- Ensure environmental and human rights laws are strictly enforced against this and all other mining projects.

Recognise communities' right to say no:

- The government must recognise that meaningful participation in decision-making includes the right of Indigenous Peoples, local communities and other affected groups to withhold consent to projects that may affect their lands, territories, resources, livelihoods, cultures, health or environment.
- Ensure that defenders who raise concerns about the Mocoa project can do so safely and without fear of intimidation or reprisals.
- While the implementation of Free Prior and Informed Consent remains essential, governments

and companies should move beyond a procedural understanding of consultation and recognise communities as rights-holders with agency to determine their own futures.

Implement directives against the stigmatisation of defenders and communities at risk: According to the Inspector Officer Directive 002 of 2017 and the Presidential Directive 07 of 2023, government officials should:

- Support and recognise the work of defenders to make sure that all authorities refrain from questioning the legitimacy of individual defenders, groups, and organisations
- Promote recognition of their work in their statements
- And take action to combat stigmatization through a gender-based, ethnic, territorial, and intersectional approach

Implement Escazú Agreement Road Map: Fully implement the Road Map, especially Article 9 of the treaty, which guarantees a safe and enabling environment for defenders and implements measures to prevent attacks and intimidations suffered by human rights and environmental defenders.

Full implementation of Ombudsperson Office Early Warning 007 of 2024: Early warning focusing on the risk of environmental defenders in the Colombian Amazon, including the implementation of collective protection measures with full support of the Ministry of Interior and the timely and transparent investigation of the threats defenders in the region face.

Adopt robust anti-SLAPP protections: Governments should enact and enforce legislation to prevent Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) intended to intimidate or restrict the activities of individuals or groups raising concerns about or debating the Mocoa project and other extractive projects.

Integrate defenders into human rights due diligence: Explicitly assess risks to human rights defenders and affected communities in human rights and environmental due diligence. Adopt proactive harm-prevention actions, including suspending or modifying activities when meaningful consultation has not occurred or when there is evidence of violence, intimidation or imminent danger to defenders.

Establish safe, accessible, and community-controlled grievance mechanisms: Create grievance mechanisms that are:

- Independent (with safeguards against company retaliation or interference)
- Accessible and culturally appropriate (including Indigenous and Afro-descendant community needs)
- Safe for defenders to use (confidentiality protections, secure channels, trusted local procedures)

Canadian government:

Align its corporate accountability framework with the "Voices at Risk" approach:

Canada should require Canadian companies to:

- Treat defenders and complainants as a high-risk category
- Implement “do no harm” measures tailored to intimidation patterns
- Ensure meaningful participation without exposing people to retaliation

Require companies to pause, modify or suspend activities when:

- Meaningful consultation is not taking place,
- There is credible evidence of intimidation or violence connected to the project, or
- Communities refuse/withdraw consent or participation due to safety concerns

Copper Giant and Libero Cobre:

Prevent intimidation and stigmatisation: Refrain from stigmatising defenders and publicly commit to non-retaliation against defenders, Indigenous Peoples, community leaders and organisations raising concerns with the Mocoa project.

Prevent the use of legal action to silence public participation: Refrain from pursuing legal action or threats intended to restrict public debate, support for defenders or environmental advocacy.

Respect communities’ right to say no: Ensure that communities’ participation in processes around the Mocoa project is informed, meaningful and free from consequences. Respect communities’ decisions to oppose the project and rights to protest.

Disclose environmental and social risks: Publish environmental and social impact studies in full and ensure they are independently reviewed. Clearly communicate uncertainties and risks to communities in accessible formats.

Establish safe and accessible grievance mechanisms: Create grievance mechanisms that are independent, accessible, culturally appropriate and safe for defenders to use. Include guarantees against retaliation and allow communities to raise concerns collectively.

Ensure fair benefits sharing: Ensure communities receive a fair share of benefits from mineral extraction through transparent and enforceable benefit-sharing arrangements.

Copper Giant investors:

Make investment conditional on human rights and environmental safeguards: Require Libero Cobre/Copper Giant to demonstrate respect for community rights, effective prevention of harm to defenders and environmental due diligence. Engage with defenders in decision-making processes and integrate defenders into human rights due diligence.

Prohibit retaliation: Assess SLAPP-related risks as part of investment due diligence and make public commitments to zero tolerance for reprisals against defenders.

Ensure safe grievance mechanisms: Require independent oversight, accessible grievance mechanisms and effective remediation.