

# **“We will continue until we win,” say the Turkish protesters taking on a major Canadian mining project**

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**At a teahouse in the tiny village of Karaibrahimler in Turkey’s lush north-western Biga Peninsula, older male residents sitting at a table debate with young environmentalists from Istanbul and the nearby town of Çanakkale about the adjacent gold and silver mining project.**

Seven of the villagers work in the project, run by the Canadian firm Alamos Gold, and the men are standoffish and leery of being lectured on the environmental and health hazards of the mine. One of them turns his back to the activists, pleading for them to leave him in peace.

Nearby stands a ‘recreational facility,’ looking out of place with its giant gold lettering and fresh coat of bright white paint. It was built two years ago by Alamos’ local subcontractor Doğu Biga. As part of the environmental impact report, the company was required to meet and consult with local villagers.

Village headman Mehmet Sezgin, who is sporting a hat commemorating the 2016 coup attempt in Turkey, explains that a representative from Doğu Biga comes around to the villages and asks them what they need.

“They’ve helped the village out a little bit. Whatever needs to be done, they help,” Sezgin says. “Whoever wants a job, gets one.”

Another man says he earns 3,000 lira (approximately €480) a month, a good salary for these parts, and has health insurance too. The villagers who don’t work for Alamos as drivers or drillers are all farmers. Times have been very tough lately, with the Turkish currency having lost over a third of its value, making imported agricultural products such a fertiliser harder to afford.

Dramatic [drone footage](#) released in late July showing the extent of the mining project’s clear-cutting of 500 acres of ecologically rich forest sparked outrage on Turkish social media, with users rallying around the hashtags #KazdağınaDokunma (Don’t touch the Kaz Mountains) and #KazDağlarıHepimizin (The Kaz Mountains belong to all of us).

[Activists and ecologists argue](#) that Alamos has cut down around 200,000 trees, far more than the 45,000 allowed by the environmental impact assessment report, but the company claims that only 13,000 have been cut, apparently not counting saplings with a diameter of under eight centimetres. Alamos also says it has already planted 14,000 trees.

## **Protests**

On 5 August, thousands of [protesters marched](#) on the site of the forthcoming mine, which is near the

small town of Kirazlı. They were supported by a wide range of groups, ranging from Turkish celebrities to local trade unions and the Çanakkale municipal government 30 kilometres away, run by the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP). Hundreds of the marchers stayed behind and are still camping out near the site, refusing to leave until the project is cancelled.

Like most gold mines, the Kirazlı project will use cyanide in the processing stage, to separate the gold from the ore, and will leave behind 'tailings' – waste products containing carcinogenic heavy metals.

When one of the activists brings this up, one man says that he already had cancer, as does his father and wife. "What if your kids get cancer," asks one of the activists. "I'll say *eyvallah*," says the villager, an expression of acceptance or resignation.

At the nearby campsite where a few hundred protesters continue their vigil, some express frustration with the villagers. "[Alamos] tricks them with job opportunities," says a 38-year-old teacher from Çanakkale, who was afraid to give her name because she works for the state. "They should also ask my permission [to build the mine]. I live here too."

Pınar Bilir, one of the anti-mine campaign organisers and chairperson of the Çanakkale city council's environment assembly, says the company used "indirect bribes" to get the villagers on their side. "They tried to convince the locals by employing a handful of villagers," she says.

A spritely 61-year-old protester from Çanakkale, who also declined to give her name (many fear the ruling Justice and Development Party, AKP, which supports the project and has previously arrested even mild critics of the party) says that she is not going home until the project is shut down.

"We just want you to take this Canadian company away from us. We will continue the vigil until we win."

### **From no gold mines to Europe's number one gold producer**

About 75 per cent of the world's mining companies are headquartered in Canada, and many of them have been involved in major scandals abroad, [particularly in Latin America](#). Regulations on their overseas activity is confined to a [a single law](#) against bribing foreign officials. "There are no laws governing finance, human rights, [or] environmental compliance," says Jamie Kneen, from the NGO MiningWatch Canada.

Turkey went from zero gold mines in 2000 to being Europe's number one gold producer by 2015, thanks in part to revised laws making it much easier for foreign companies to operate. After [a new mining law](#) was introduced in 2004, many foreign companies started coming in. The law reduced taxes and allowed operations in previously protected areas. At the same time, the General Directorate of Forestry was reduced in size, according to the Foresters' Association of Turkey.

Though Alamos, which didn't respond to multiple requests for comment, insists the use of cyanide will be perfectly safe, experts say it's very risky. "These things almost always leak. Whether there's a spill doesn't matter because it still ends up in the water table," says Kneen. "It doesn't degrade as reliably as the industry says it does."

One of the reasons the Kirazlı mining project has garnered so much attention is because of the importance of the region, known as the Kaz Mountains in Turkish and Mount Ida in English.

"The Ida Mountains are iconic in the imaginations of the people of this country. Iconic because they represent a paradise, an Eden in a world that's increasingly being ecologically threatened," says Üstün Bilgen-Reinart, a Turkish-Canadian author who's written books about ecological battles in both Turkey and Canada. "To see this threatened is very deeply disturbing. I despair at the thought."

The forests of Ida - containing pines, oaks, spruces, alders, firs, chestnuts and other types of trees - are referred to as the lungs of Turkey's Marmara region. The forests are renowned for their clean air, as well as their rich biodiversity, home to about 180 animal and 280 plant species, seven of which are only found in Turkey.

Mount Ida is also near the site of ancient Troy, and the mountain plays an important role in the Greek classical poet Homer's *Iliad*, which chronicles the mythical Trojan War. The Gods watch the battles from Ida's summit, and Zeus uses his aegis to veil the mountain in a cloud, from where he lobbs his terrible bolts of lightning at the Trojans' enemies.

### **"A frenzy of extractive projects"**

Bilgen-Reinart [wrote a book](#) in 2003 about [a grassroots struggle](#) in the 1990s against Turkey's first gold mine in Bergama. The mine eventually became fully operational in 2005, even though the European Court of Human Rights ruled that it violated the right to a healthy environment.

"[Bergama] was considered a fortress, because a lot of companies held licenses, but they didn't dare start operations because there was very serious resistance. We knew that if the resistance at Bergama were to be defeated, [the mining companies] would descend upon the country. And they did," says Bilgen-Reinart.

Now the Kirazlı mine is just one of many recent environmentally destructive projects in the country. The government has recently started filling a massive dam on the Tigris river in the country's south-east that will flood the [12,000-year-old town of Hasankeyf](#). The huge, country-wide anti-government [Gezi protests in 2013](#) were also in opposition to a central park in Istanbul being transformed into a shopping mall.

"Turkey has been in a frenzy of extractive projects, fossil fuel burning, power plant building, urban transformation [and] terrible deforestation," Bilgen-Reinart tells *Equal Times*. There are [29 gold mining projects](#) that have been licensed in the Mount Ida region alone. Alamos itself has two more mining projects in nearby Çamyurt and Ağidi.

Experts say disagreements over the exact number of trees destroyed miss the point that 500 acres have been levelled, and trees aren't the only important component of forests. "An ecosystem is the relationship between animals, plants and non-living elements in a region," says Güneşin Aydemir, a biologist who lives in the nearby town Küçükkuşu. "Deforestation is much more than just losing trees. We're losing soil, and we are losing one of the big carbon [sinks]."

Environmentalists say that [forests play an invaluable role in reducing carbon](#), and that with the global climate crisis, every country should be planting forests, not cutting them down.

Alamos insists it will replant the trees it cut down, but Aydemir says that won't even come close to repairing the damage. "It won't work. Old growth forest is an ecosystem created by nature over hundreds of years [...] If they reforest the area, it won't be a forest, but a group of trees. It'll take hundreds, maybe thousands of years to become a forest."

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**Nick Ashdown**

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