

Hundreds in Peru Balk at Relocation From Site of Mine

MOROCOCHA, Peru — High among barren peaks, a Chinese mining company has built the Levittown of the Andes. Long rows of identical attached houses face each other across wide, straight streets, one-third of them still waiting for people to walk through their varnished pine doors and make homes under their slanted red roofs.

The company, Chinalco, which is owned by the Chinese government, built the new town to relocate more than 5,000 people living in nearby Morococha, a century-old mining village. The company plans to demolish Morococha to make way for an enormous open-pit copper mine.

Chinalco has moved close to 700 families since September. But several hundred residents have resisted, staging marches and other protests even as their neighbors load their belongings into moving trucks for the trip to the new town, which has not been named yet; it may ultimately be called Nueva Morococha.

The two towns are only six miles apart — a 15-minute drive — and are at similarly lofty altitudes. Morococha is at about 14,760 feet, and the new settlement is just 650 feet lower, at a spot now called Carhuacoto. But for many, the move is like traveling between two worlds.

Morococha is old, decaying, squalid: a broken window into raw poverty and neglect. It looks as if it had been swept carelessly against the side of an ugly yellow mountain that is full of copper ore, with no regard for where cracked houses and crooked streets came to rest.

Most of the houses have mud walls and leaky, rusting corrugated metal roofs. Residents get water from taps in the streets; in the dry season the taps work only a few hours a day. Many of the townspeople use crude communal latrines.

The new town is all straight lines, fresh paint and smooth paving. There are new schools, churches, a clinic and playgrounds. Each house has running water, supplied by a just-built purification plant. There are showers (though no water heaters), and there are toilets that flush into a new sewage treatment system. Trash is carted away to a new sanitary landfill.

During the day, when most residents are away at work, it is strangely silent and sterile, with the artificial feel of a movie set. Crews of workers in safety orange coveralls and hard hats sweep the otherwise empty streets.

“You can get lost,” said Virginia Vallodolid, 45, one of the street sweepers, who moved in several weeks ago and earns \$3 a day from Chinalco. It is the first steady job she has ever had. She has a house with a toilet for the first time in her life. She turns on the tap and the water comes out clear, not yellow, as she said it often did in Morococha.

“I don’t miss anything,” Ms. Vallodolid said, reflecting on the 15 years she lived in Morococha. “I lived uncomfortably there.”

But back in Morococha, the resisters, many of them property owners, are holding out, refusing to move or sell their homes.

In an act of defiance, Marcial Salomé, the mayor of Morococha, has gone on a minor building spree, putting up better public toilets and places for people to wash their clothes.

Mr. Salomé said that he and other residents are not opposed to moving the town, but that they want Chinalco to do more in exchange. They want the company to guarantee jobs in the new mine for residents. And they want the company to pay the people of Morococha \$300 million for destroying their town.

Mr. Salomé also voiced a key complaint of many who have moved, who say the new houses, with as little as 430 square feet of space, are simply too small. Mr. Salomé pointed to another foreign mining company, Xstrata Copper, which is planning a similar relocation of a town in Peru's south and has promised to build houses several times as large.

"We want what's fair," Mr. Salomé said.

Sonia Ancieta is one of the staunchest holdouts. Her great-grandparents moved to Morococha perhaps 100 years ago. The cemetery is full of her ancestors. She has a large house that she measures at more than 2,000 square feet, including several rental rooms and a store on what used to be a busy street.