



The Right Livelihood Award

for outstanding vision and work on behalf of our planet and its people

Birsel Lemke (Turkey)

(2000)



...for her long-standing struggle to protect her country from the devastation of cyanide-based gold mining.

Photo: Ulrike Altekruise

Birsel Lemke was born in 1950 and studied political science at Ankara University and in the USA. She lived and worked in Germany from 1975-85, before returning to Turkey. From 1987-90 she was a Board member of the Green Party in Turkey. In 1990 she founded the Citizens' Initiative HAYIR (No) against gold-mining projects.

The immediate cause of this initiative was the proposal by the companies TUPRAG and EUROGOLD to establish two gold mine pilot projects at the Bay of Edremit and in Pergamon, using them as a base to develop 62 mining projects from Troy to Pergamon in the Turkish Aegean and finally 560 projects all over Turkey. The proposed extraction technology uses cyanide, which has been responsible for numerous environmental and human disasters worldwide. The most recent of these occurred in Romania in late January 2000, when 3.5 million cubic feet of mine waste contaminated with cyanide and heavy metals was released into a tributary of the Danube, killing practically all aquatic life along a 250-mile stretch of the river. Lemke was determined to defend her homeland - with its agricultural wealth and natural beauty - from this ecologically barbaric technology, which Friedhelm Korte, professor of ecological chemistry at the Technical University of Munich, has described as 'disastrous and unacceptable' on scientific grounds.

Lemke began by convincing the farmers in the locality of the first proposed project to resist the proposal. She then persuaded the 13 mayors of the province to oppose it. She took them to Germany (whose Dresdner Bank was due to provide funding for the mines) and showed them the Rhein biosphere reserve as an alternative destiny for their own municipalities. They won support in the Hesse parliament and the Dresdner Bank withdrew. HAYIR also won support in the European Parliament and made the issue of cyanide-based gold mining the first national focus of popular environmental concern in Turkey.

In 1994, HAYIR sued the Turkish Environment Ministry and EUROGOLD in the courts. Three years later the Turkish Supreme Court found in Lemke's favour and prohibited gold mining with cyanide in Turkey. Clearly, Lemke did not achieve this on her own, but she was recognised as the moving spirit of the campaign. Her house was its informal headquarters and her financial resources its main source of funds.

EUROGOLD did not accept the judgement of the Turkish Supreme Court. It persuaded the Turkish government to carry out another environmental risk assessment and to submit the mining project to international arbitration, which opponents feared would be excessively influenced by corporate interests and ignore the strong public feeling against it.

Quotation

"I regard our resistance as a triumph of friendship and of love of one's native country and culture over the plans of a billionaire industry, which we would have liked to persuade to grow olives instead of mining gold."

Birsel Lemke

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