Executive Summary - National ASGM Situation Report: Bolivia

Bolivia has a long mining history dating back to the colonial era, when Cerro de Potosí was a world center for silver production. Currently, Bolivia extracts nearly two dozen minerals that are critical to its economy. The mining sector is divided into state-owned, private-sector, and cooperative mining, with the latter experiencing significant growth in recent decades. However, the lack of transparency and accurate production data, especially in the cooperative and artisanal sectors, poses challenges for assessing the economic and environmental impacts of mining.

Artisanal and small-scale gold mining (ASGM) is one of the main sources of employment in Bolivia, with more than 135,000 cooperative members and approximately 300,000 people indirectly involved. ASM accounts for 58% of the value of the country's mining production, with gold being the main mineral extracted. However, the widespread use of mercury in ASM has generated serious environmental and health problems, particularly affecting indigenous communities and aquatic ecosystems.

Bolivia is one of the largest importers of mercury in South America, with imports reaching 200 tons annually. It is important to note that mercury imports increased in 2015, shortly after Peru, one of the world's largest gold producers, banned mercury imports into its territory. Despite recent regulatory efforts, such as the creation of the Single Mercury Registry (RUME) under Supreme Decree No. 4959 of June 13, 2023, mercury trade and use remain largely unregulated. Mercury smuggling to neighboring countries such as Brazil and Peru are also a significant problem.

The Minamata Convention, ratified by Bolivia in 2016, seeks to reduce mercury use and emissions. However, the lack of a timeline for phasing out mercury use in ASM and the continued international trade in mercury have limited its effectiveness. Bolivia has yet to develop a National Action Plan (NAP) to address mercury storage and disposal, leaving the country without adequate facilities to manage confiscated or declared mercury.

Additionally, the combination of state weakness in several areas of the country and historic gold prices have led to an onslaught of mining cooperatives in areas where they previously did not operate. This has already led to conflict and violence, and these conflicts only promise to intensify as ASGM moves into protected areas and Indigenous territories, and as ASGM receives greater support and influence from external actors.

Key Recommendations:

1. Strengthen mercury regulation: Bolivia should implement more effective mechanisms to regulate the trade and use of mercury, especially in ASGM.

2. Develop a National Action Plan: The government should accelerate the creation and dissemination of a National Action Plan to align with the Minamata Convention.

3. Support Mercury-Free ASM: Efforts to transition ASGM to mercury-free methods are crucial to reducing environmental and health impacts.

4. Amend the Minamata Convention: Bolivia should support amendments to the convention to prohibit international trade in mercury and establish a target date (2032) for phasing out its use in ASGM.