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Barrick dealing with crime claims at Porgera site

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Gold miner working with police in Papua New Guinea to investigate accusations

Barrick Gold Corp. ABX-T says it has been working with police in Papua New Guinea to investigate allegations of violent crimes at one of its mines that were first brought forward by activist group Human Rights Watch.

Toronto-based Barrick, the world's largest gold miner, said it has already taken action at the Porgera gold mine as a result of an independent investigation, which has led to the firing of some employees and changes to security at the site.

The allegations include gang rapes and beatings of people caught on the site's waste dumps by private security personnel employed at the mine, according to Human Rights Watch, which has interviewed some of the alleged victims.

In a report released Tuesday, the rights group said police last month arrested three current and former mine employees. It said two people were charged with rape and the third with "inflicting grievous bodily harm." More charges could be laid.

Human Rights Watch said Barrick has responded to the reports "with appropriate vigor," including prompting a criminal investigation with police in Papua New Guinea. However, the group also criticized Barrick for not acting sooner.

The rights group also called on Ottawa to better regulate activities of resource companies overseas. Tuesday's report comes after politicians in Ottawa narrowly rejected a proposed bill late last year that would have forced Canadian mining companies to toughen their human-rights and environmental standards when working abroad.

In a statement released Tuesday in anticipation of the Human Rights Watch report, Barrick said it conducted an independent investigation last year of the alleged abuses, the results of which it called "disturbing."

The company said it took action by reporting its findings to the police. Barrick also said it terminated staff that violated the company's code of conduct. Employees were also fired who knew about, but didn't report, the misconduct of others.

"Further terminations and other disciplinary actions may occur pending the results of police investigation," Barrick said in its statement.

Barrick, which operates 25 mines worldwide, said it has a "zero tolerance approach" to human rights abuses at all of its locations.

"These allegations run contrary to everything we stand for as a company firmly committed to protecting human rights and human dignity," the company stated.

"Our deepest concern is for the women who may have been the victims of these alleged crimes."

Barrick owns 95 per cent of the Porgera mine. The rest is held by state-owned Mineral Resources Enga.

Barrick chief executive officer Aaron Regent vowed in an interview late last year to "step up our game" on social responsibility and take a series of steps to deal with social and environmental issues at its mines.

Barrick said it will set up an external advisory council and appoint an independent director to its board with experience in corporate social responsibility issues.

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