

Drummond defends mine operations in letter to Clinton

By Russell Hubbard -- The Birmingham News

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NEWS STAFF (The Birmingham News) **Drummond Co.** President Garry Neil Drummond has filed a protest with U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton about the United Steelworkers union, which earlier petitioned her to probe working conditions at the company's mine in Colombia, where the latest fatality happened last week.

The company said Thursday that Garry Neil Drummond told Clinton in a letter this week that the Birmingham-based firm is reviewing records and conduct to see if there are "ulterior motives" and a "pattern of illegal activities against the company" by the Pittsburgh-based labor union.

The flap stems from a letter the Steelworkers sent to Clinton in September, objecting to treatment of workers at the Pribbenow Mine that Drummond operates in South America. That letter stated the company planned to fire all 4,000 union-affiliated workers at the mine near La Loma, and that Clinton should investigate.

Now, the Steelworkers have backed off the assertion that the company plans to fire all union workers. The union doesn't represent the Colombian miners, but does represent thousands of miners in North America and supports overseas miners as part of an international outreach program. And the Steelworkers still say there needs to be more attention to detail at Drummond's Colombian mine.

"We are very concerned about the safety and welfare of the people working in the mine there," said Dan Kovalik, a lawyer for the Steelworkers.

The controversy has focused international attention on the 25,000-acre Pribbenow Mine, a surface operation that opened during the 1990s as Drummond's profitably recoverable Alabama coal dwindled.

The mine produces about 24 million tons a year and pays workers far above the national minimum wage. The population of La Loma has more than doubled in recent years, and investment is booming as Drummond works to develop a second mine in the area.

Critics say the mine and its dedicated seaport several hours away are unsafe, with 16 fatalities since opening and three this year, the most recent last week when 37-year-old Luis Eduardo Manriquez died under circumstances that weren't specified in a bulletin from the Colombian energy workers union. Drummond said Thursday that Manriquez was a subcontractor who worked for an outside company, and that his death was an accident.

An earlier death in March prompted a brief strike which Drummond termed illegal under its labor agreement with the Sintramienergetica union. The company's objection to that strike was filed with the Colombian Supreme Court, which led the Steelworkers to lodge a complaint with Clinton, asking her to look into Drummond's overseas conduct.

Kovalik acknowledged that the union no longer contends that Drummond intends to fire all union workers after the company complained about the contents of the original Clinton letter.

"They have said they do not intend to fire all of the workers, and we are taking them at their word on that," he said. "But the latest death is the third in seven months."

The Steelworkers also want additional investigation done in the slayings of three leaders of the Colombian energy workers union in 2001. Drummond and company officials were found not liable for the deaths in a later civil trial in U.S. District Court in Birmingham.

Dozens of Alabamians work in Colombia on rotating shifts, flying back and forth on the company's private jets for days or weeks at a time.

Company reputation

"Drummond will continue to use all legal means to assure that neither its work force nor the public continues to be misinformed and that the goodwill and name of the company is preserved," Garry Neil Drummond told Clinton in a letter dated Nov. 4.

Drummond Co. was formed in Walker County by the current president's father, who started the billion-dollar company with a mule and a wagon. The main street in La Loma is named for him, Heman Drummond.