

September 23, 2006

GUATEMALA: More Mining Problems

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`MORE MINING PROBLEMS: METAL MINING IS CAUSING INCREASED CONFLICT AND THE SITUATION IS GETTING OUT OF CONTROL`

by Magali Rey Rosa, Prensa Libre, September 22, 2006 (Translated for Rights Action by Rosalind Gill)

The situation is getting difficult for mining companies that plan to exploit minerals in the Department of Izabal.

This week, a delegation of representatives from various Q'eqchis communities appeared before the Energy and Mining Commission of Congress. The delegation stated that they had bought land from INTA but that they had never received titles for the properties.

They also stated that the land that was recently granted to the Guatemala Nickel Company (CGN) [subsidiary of Skye Resources] when the Eximbal mining concession [former subsidiary of INCO] was re-negotiated included the properties that these communities had already bought and paid for.

Furthermore, they said, local communities had never been informed or consulted regarding the granting of this land to the CGN [Skye Resources].

"Some years ago, Eximbal [INCO] invaded our lands. These properties are the legacy of the work of our grandfathers and grandmothers; they worked, sweated and sacrificed themselves for these lands over a long period of time. Suddenly the CGN appeared and was able to appropriate part of our lands. This was an unjust blow to the Maya Q'eqchi people. As we have been unable to find a solution to this problem, we have no other option but to occupy the following areas as of September 17, 2006: Barrio la RevoluciÙn, Chichipate, 200 families, Comunidad la Paz Quebrada Seca, Santa MarÌa, 80 families, and in Colonia la Pista,

100 families." (From a press release issued recently)

The delegation also stated to members of Congress that mining is not a mode of development that is compatible with their lifestyle. They are very concerned about the future of the fisherman of Izabal.

In Morales, to the south of Lake Izabal, a strong movement against metal mining is growing. BHP Billiton, through its subsidiary, MayanÍquel S.A. (formerly Jaguar Nickel), is attempting to start working in this area. The local population does not want to lose the lake. Although the process for separating metals uses fire, and not water, they know that water will be used to cool down the machinery and that the water will be sterilized by high temperatures, which is lethal for the biodiversity of the lake.

They also know that mining will have an effect on water sources and put an end to the development of ecotourism, for which there is a high potential in this department.

To avoid future confrontation, local residents invited the Mining Commission to visit the area and see for themselves what is happening.

According to a study carried out by the University of San Carlos, in San Marcos, there is concern that Montana [Glamis Gold Inc.] may be extracting mercury. This information appeared in a bulletin issued by Congress on September 6th. The bulletin also says that this information will be shared with human rights institutions and the local population. We are still waiting for this to happen!

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İMAYANS OCCUPY CANADIAN-OWNED MINE IN CAMPAIGN FOR FARMING LANDİ
by Andrew Buncombe of The Independent, September 22, 2006

Hundreds of families of Mayan Indians have occupied part of a large nickel mine owned by a Canadian company in Guatemala and demanded they be given land for subsistence farms.

Concerned about the threat that the mine allegedly poses to the environment and land rights, about 2,000 Q'eqchi Indians moved on to three separate areas of the mining complex and began setting up makeshift camps.

Campaigners say the UN-sponsored Truth Commission – part of a 1996 peace agreement that ended Guatemala's brutal civil war – demanded that indigenous communities with historical claims to land have the right to determine how it is used.

The Indians moved on to the currently inactive mine site near Lake Izabal in north-east Guatemala, owned by Vancouver-based Skye

Resources, at the weekend. Father Dan Vogt, a Catholic priest and co-ordinator of a community development group, Aepdi, said they had long been campaigning for the company to provide them with land to farm.

Speaking from El Estor, the nearest community, he told The Independent:

"They got fed up and decided to take action. There were around 350 families – around 2,000 people. They are still there, building houses. The company has told me they are not willing to negotiate until they move."

Skye bought the site from another Canadian mining company, Canadian International Nickel Co, which had operated the mine from the 1960s until 1981. Skye hopes to begin producing up to 11,000 tonnes of ferro-nickel by the end of 2008.

Campaigners say the plans fit a pattern across other countries in Latin America where foreign and multinational companies have secured rights to exploit mineral and other natural resources, with local communities receiving little in exchange. Elsewhere in Guatemala, and in neighbouring Honduras, protests have recently been made against the US-Canadian mining company Glamis, while in Chile protesters have sought to stop the building of a gold mine by another Canadian company, Barrick.

Grahame Russell, a spokesman for the Canadian-based group Rights Action, said: "Skye Resources is just one more example of what North American companies are doing through Latin America. The patterns are being repeated everywhere and the problems go from A-Z. It starts with a complete absence of consultation with local communities, which they have a legal right to. Before people know anything about it they are in the back door with a mining exploration licence."

A recent report by Oxfam about the El Estor Mayan community said: "Rigorous strip mining has already degraded the fragile ecosystem, eroding the thin topsoil in mountain passes inhabited by Mayan communities. The mountainsides have been deforested, causing landslides and a litany of environmental hazards. In addition to the environmental threat, there is a long history of political violence between the mining companies and the indigenous communities who resist."

Ian Austin, chief executive officer of Skye, said his company was keen to defuse the tension and avoid confrontation. "Our approach has been to try and talk with the community and the people in the area and to develop a win-win situation." He added: "Groups are opposed to mining and that is a fact of life in our industry."

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WHAT TO DO:

- The #1 line of work in favour of global justice and equality is to directly support local organizations so that they can continue to lead their own struggles in defense and promotion of development, the environment and human rights. MAKE TAX-CHARITABLE DONATIONS to Rights Action in Canada and the U.S., to help support community-based organizations in countries where we work (Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Haiti, Chiapas (Mexico));
- Get involved in education and activism work in your home community concerning the negative impacts of North American mining companies on development, the environment and the human rights of local populations in places like Guatemala and Honduras. North Americans must pressure our media and politicians to honestly address this issue and then to bring about changes to Canadian and US laws and development policies that promote and enable the unjust and harmful global mining industry. We must directly pressure the companies, investors and shareholders so that they are made fully aware of how their companies are making their profits;
- Consider coming to these countries on an educational-activist delegation;
- Get on our email and snail-mail lists: info@rightsaction.org.

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