

HONDURAS: PROTESTS MOUNT AGAINST GOLDCORP (FORMERLY GLAMIS GOLD) MINING GIANT

by Stephen Leahy, <http://www.ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=36717>

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BELOW

An article about: lead and arsenic found in the blood of Honduran villagers living downstream from a gold and silver mine owned by Canada's Goldcorp Inc. (formerly Glamis Gold).

For the past 4 years, RA has supported community based development groups in Honduras working to defend the environment and promote community develop, while working to expose the serious environmental and health harms, and human rights violations caused by the open-pit gold mining operation of Goldcorp (formerly Glamis Gold).

The Canadian government has been a major supporter of, and the Canadian Pension Plan (CPP) has been a major investor in and profiteer from this gold mining operation.

SPEAKING TOUR

"On the Road to the Goldcorp (formerly Glamis Gold) Annual Shareholder's Meeting", May, Vancouver, BC, Canada. With community development leaders from Indigenous and campesino communities in Guatemala and Honduras negatively affected by open-pit gold mining, Rights Action is organizing two speaking tours (on the west coast of the USA and in western Canada). To organize events in your community, contact Sandra Cuffe (west coast of USA tour, caminando27@yahoo.es) or Dawn Paley (western Canada tour, dawn@reportero.org).

WHAT TO DO: See below.

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For more info about these issues: info@rightsaction.org

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HONDURAS: PROTESTS MOUNT AGAINST GOLDCORP (FORMERLY GLAMIS GOLD) MINING GIANT

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TORONTO, Feb 24 (Tierramérica) - Dangerous levels of lead and arsenic have been found in the blood of Honduran villagers living downstream from a controversial gold and silver mine owned by Canada's Goldcorp Inc. (formerly Glamis Gold), the world's third largest gold mining firm.

According to the ecologists who organised the study, lead and arsenic levels in the blood were higher than the maximum recommended by international standards (70 ug/dl) in a sample of 10 people who live near the San Martín mine, in San Ignacio, a municipality located in the central Siria Valley.

The study, presented last year and downplayed by the mining industry, is just one more item in the growing file opened in Honduras against the company operating the mine, which has been the target of local and international protests since it opened in 1999. Although it is operated by Entre Mares, a Honduran company that is a subsidiary of the Canadian Glamis Gold Ltd., it is now under Goldcorp Inc., based in the western Canadian city of Vancouver, which bought out Glamis in November. That takeover makes Goldcorp the third largest gold producer in the world, with mining concessions throughout the Americas and Australia.

One of the firm's most ambitious projects will be launched in Mexico, in Zacatecas state, for which Goldcorp obtained mining permits in mid-January in an expedited way. At a cost of 882 million dollars and proven and probable reserves totalling an estimated 9.98 billion ounces of gold, Peñasquito would be Mexico's largest gold mine.

Goldcorp, which proudly proclaims on its website that it is "The world's lowest cost gold producer", maintains several conventional open-pit mines, like San Martín in Honduras, which use a water-based sodium cyanide solution poured over huge piles of ore to separate the gold.

The used cyanide solution is a deadly toxin and has to be carefully stored. This process is in common use, but environmental experts says it consumes huge amounts of fresh water and generates highly toxic by-products, including heavy metals like mercury and arsenic, and can contaminate water sources that are used for human consumption.

The people living in the Siria Valley have long complained about the effects on their health and the water shortages resulting from the San Martín mine, from which Glamis has extracted 529,088 ounces (about 15,000 kg) of gold out of the ground since 2001, worth approximately 412 million dollars.

The most recent studies that detected arsenic in the blood (which can cause serious problems in the gastrointestinal, cardiovascular and nervous systems), were done at the behest of environmental groups, among them the Siria Valley Environmentalist Committee, by Italian activist Flaviano Bianchini, who has conducted studies of this type in several Central American countries.

But Bianchini's tests have come under fire from government officials and from mining executives who say they lack scientific rigor. The Honduran Ministry of Environment plans to send samples to experts in Colombia to confirm Bianchini's results indicating blood contamination. "We are studying the case and are awaiting the results from Colombia to take a final decision," Environment Minister Mayra Mejía told Tierramérica.

Aldo Santos, from the Attorney General's Office, stated "There is strong evidence pointing to high contamination in the area."

Goldcorp also owns a similar gold and silver mine in Guatemala, the Marlin, also from Glamis, and located in the municipality of Sipakapa and San Miguel Ixtahuacán. Local protests have left two people dead and many injured.

But Goldcorp denies the accusations. "Goldcorp already operates Marlin and San Martín at North American standards," Jeff Wilhoit, the company's vice-president of investor relations, told Tierramérica.

In the case of the Marlin mine, the study indicating contamination of the Tzalá River "has been refuted and disproved," and the "communities closest to the mine voted in favour of the mine," Wilhoit said.

With respect to San Martín, the executive maintained that the mine has not caused water shortages or contamination: "The water pumped from our wells in no way impacts the water being used from springs or wells outside the project area." And as for charges that waste from the mine had caused health problems in nearby communities, he stated, "Not true. There is a national study that refutes this allegation." The company also refutes complaints from representatives of communities neighbouring San Martín and Marlin who say they were not consulted about the mines beforehand.

"Goldcorp is very active in working with communities where our mines are located... We contribute immensely to the education, health and safety of those communities, which has been misrepresented by some non-governmental organisations which have their own agendas," Melanie Pilon, director of investor relations, told Tierramérica.

Wilhoit added that in the case of the Marlin mine, "Goldcorp endeavoured to include all interested parties in the consultation process. Particular attention was paid to overcoming the language barrier. All communications were carried out in Spanish and Mam (a local indigenous language)."

Nearly 60 percent of the mining and exploration companies in the world are Canadian. They generate more than 40 billion dollars annually, representing about four percent of Canada's gross domestic product (GDP).

"Canadians are appalled when they find out what some Canadian companies are up to in the South," but few Canadians know what is going on at mine projects in South America or elsewhere due to limited media coverage, says Karyn Keenan, programme officer with the Halifax Initiative, a coalition of Canadian environmental and human rights NGOs.

But little by little, media attention has grown, especially recently, when people from Latin America affected by mines appeared in 2006 at a series of public forums about the corporate social responsibility of Canada's mining, oil and gas sectors.

For the first time, Canadian government officials had direct contact with the people who have been impacted by Canadian companies, Keenan said.

Activists have long claimed that the inability or unwillingness of local governments to enforce international human rights and environmental standards should not give Canadian companies license to ignore these standards.

An official report on regulating the sector's out-of-country operations will go before the Canadian government shortly. The report is "unprecedented in Canadian history," says Keenan, because it represents a consensus between NGOs, mining industry and government officials. "Industry doesn't want strong, binding Canadian laws on their operations overseas, but there are some who know they need to do more than publish codes of ethics on their websites," she added.

Although the content of the report remains secret, it is expected to recommend that an independent dispute mechanism and ombudsman office be established to investigate complaints and conduct audits of Canadian mining, oil and gas operations abroad. Whether the current conservative Canadian government will act on the report's recommendations remains to be seen.

(*With reporting by Thelma Mejía from Honduras. Originally published by Latin American newspapers that are part of the Tierramérica network. Tierramérica is a specialised news service produced by IPS with the backing of the United Nations Development Programme and the United Nations Environment Programme.)

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WHAT TO DO:

* A fundamental element to work in favour of global justice, equality and the environment is to fund and support local organizations leading their own struggles in defense and promotion of development, the environment and human rights;

* Get involved in education and activism work in your home community concerning the negative impacts of North American investors and mining policies on community-controlled development, the environment and the human rights of local populations in Central America and southern Mexico;

* Consider coming on our educational-activist delegation, July 22-28, 2007, to Guatemala, including visits to mining-affected communities;

* Get on our e-mail and snail-mail lists.

To support mining affected communities carrying out their own enviro-defense and development projects, TAX-DEDUCTIBLE DONATIONS: Make check payable to "Rights Action" and mail to: UNITED STATES: Box 50887, Washington DC, 20091-0887; CANADA: 509 St. Clair Ave W, box73527, Toronto ON, M6C-1C0.

CREDIT-CARD DONATIONS: www.rightsaction.org.

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