

“GUATEMALAN GOLD, GUATEMALAN BONES”

By KATHY RENTENBACH, <http://www.counterpunch.org/rentenbach08062007.html>, August 2007

Pedro de Alvarado, Spanish conquistador extraordinaire. First to benefit from Guatemala's gold. He has begat Mr. Ian Telfer. As CEO of Goldcorp Canada (currently mining gold for the past few years in Guatemala) his 2006 salary was \$23 million. His success is applauded. He's Chairman of the Board now.

Goldcorp's deal with the Guatemalan government? 1% of profits to the country. 99% fly out in the whipstream of the quetzal. We hope he sleeps well at night.

As well as the family who lives beside the Guatemalan coastal highway. There is a sea of large boulders there. They pay a hauler to bring them a boulder, just one. Sledge hammers, large and small will break this into gravel. Husband and wife take turns with both. They are strong and so is the sun. Tall cones of gravel pile higher at the roadside, sold by the volume. At night they sleep in a hut nearby.

They're in the business of mining too. Just like Goldcorp.

This story caught my attention as our van buzzed along on the way to Goldcorp's Marlin Mine near the pueblo of San Miguel Ixtahuacan in the municipality of San Miguel in the department of San Marcos. Northwest Guatemala. Think city, county, state.

We were a Rights Action delegation on a July fact finding trip to Guatemala. I blew out my July birthday candle early and joined in. It was to give me more mining information than I would ever need: exploration, extraction, processing and reclamation ... then take me to a forensic lab processing exhumed skeletons ... then to the Plan de Sanchez 1982 massacre site near the city of Rabinal ... the Rio Negro massacre '82 ... to the Mayans affected by mine and massacres. Rabinal is in the Baja Verapaz area north of Guatemala City.

A background note: Guatemala was in "conflict" for 36 years until 1996. The US government had a hand in funding the Guatemalan army.

Ironically, the forensic lab and people of Rabinal (and a myriad of other places) are also interested in exploration, extraction, processing and reclamation.

They want to find the massacre victims from the early 80s, from their wells, river banks, mountainsides, ie exploration and extraction; then to process the skeletons for identification and legal proceedings (all cases are pending criminal homicide trials), and to reclaim them for their families and their dignity.

Exhumacion, inhumacion (Spanish for to exhume and bury). Exhumacion, inhumacion. It goes on and on.

Exhume them from their twisted, crumpled, dismembered state (a machete = a weapon of mass destruction), identify them as is possible and rebury them with ceremony.

3/13/82. Rio Negro massacres. NW Guatemala. Jesus Tecu Osario was 9 then. The Civil Patrol attacked. Jesus was allowed to live in order to become a slave to one of the killers. (His 2 year old brother was killed in his presence.) An escape a few years later allowed him to be speaking to us (just 4 months after the remembrance of the 25th anniversary) as an activist, human rights leader, author and married father of four. 3 civil defense patrollers are spending 50 years in jail for their part. Those at the top who gave the orders continue to enjoy their freedom.

7/18/82. The Plan (meadow) de Sanchez massacre. Not too far from Rio Negro. 260 people were killed in 2 days. 130 women and children. One house, fire, grenades. Rapes. Machetes. Exhumations began 12 years later. A chapel has been built on the grenaded site.

We sat on children's wooden chairs in that same chapel. A survivor, Juan Manuel Jeronimo, told his story. How the army went from village to village and herded the people up the mountain on a calm Sunday market day. He lived for some time on his own in the mountains afterward. In '94 he took this atrocity to the courts. At that time the government said it wasn't responsible.

By 7/18/05 the VP of Guatemala helicoptered onto the mountaintop. Chickens in the street; pigs on a rope. An all night Mayan ceremony punctuated in the AM by the tactful roar of helicopters. Formal apology from the state made. No responsibility accepted. 16 promises made; none brought to fruition.

Night was falling. There were lightning bugs and jicara trees as we walked beside the long mound. It covered the trench where the dead from the Rio Negro '82 massacres were placed in a Rabinal cemetery. They were buried in tiny caskets; a non intact skeleton, a jumble of bones, fits in a tiny casket.

There is a monument inscribed with names. Separate lists for men, women, children. 98 children are tucked away here. All killed in a most vicious manner. Children who were wrapped on their mother's back, bisected by machete; thers dashed on the rocks; thers garrotted. These are just a few details.

These people had resisted the Chixoy Dam project in '82 [funded by the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank], the height of the Mayan genocide in those days. "La Violencia" they call it. They were targeted as uerrillas. Guerrillas: babies, children, women, farmers, elderly. The dam went forward. Rio Negro was depopulated and flooded over.

General Rios Montt was in power; he crushed opposition. Miraculously, he's still in politics 25 years later. A few years ago he was hit by a thrown rock (he wasn't happy) when he had the nerve to campaign in Rabinal. He lost his hat in the fray; it's on display in a glass case in the Rabinal museum now.

A forensic team (begun in '92) can discern the manner of death and torture. Gillian Fowler, a forensic anthropologist from London, is the coordinator of the Forensic Osteology lab in Guatemala City, the capital. She explained while holding up vertebrae of an upper spine how she could tell if someone had been garrotted.

The bones tell a story of clubbing or beating, machete use, gunshots. Polyester doesn't degrade as fast as other materials, hence upon unfolding such a shawl a skeleton of a baby has been found. The bones speak from the grave, telling their story, implicating their executioners.

The forensic group has recovered 5,000 skeletons. Estimates are of 200,000 killed; 50,000 disappeared. 36 years of conflict in Guatemala.

We wandered through a large room ... incomplete skeletons laid out on tablecloths of robin's egg blue, neatly arranged from skull to toe, workers in stiff white coats at each table. Displayed also were the clothes, all a splotchy brown. Dirt and blood. Outside were ready stacks of tiny coffins.

In the highlands, site of massacres that were, most mountains are tall and green and stand out nicely, thank you, in the backdrop of a sunset.

There are some not so green, not so tall. There is gold in the sunset and gold in the ground. This is not a new story. Resistance began in '04 to what is now Goldcorp's Marlin Mine.

On the Goldcorp website is an aerial view of the open pit Marlin mine. It conjures up a serene image of a baseball sandlot, carefully groomed. Up close it is a massive area of denuded decapitated mountains with a tailings pool of water leeching cyanide.

It's not easy to get an audience with the well known bishop of San Marcos but we did. We bumped into each other on a mountainside. Our group traveled up the long steep gravel road to a hill from which we could look out at the open pit mine. We had just arrived when another group of men came toward us. We huddled together having heard what the security guards of the mine could do.

One approached us. Speaking in English, he introduced himself: Bishop Joseph Sayer, a Catholic bishop from Germany here for a conference. He was part of MISEREOR, an activist German Catholic Bishops' organization for development cooperation. MISEREOR, chosen from "Misereor super Turbam": "I suffer with the people". Jesus said that.

They too are concerned about the impact of the mine and were here to see it for themselves, just as we were. The bishop of San Marcos, Monsenor Alvaro Ramazzini was part of this group. He had a commanding presence and allowed our group videographer a short interview.

What does he want from the mine we asked: 4 things he said: 50% of profits stay in the country; proof that chemicals aren't contaminating earth, air and water; a decrease in water use or at least monetary remuneration for such use; payment for the 7 years of taxes from which Goldcorp was exempted.

They left as we congratulated ourselves. We had lingered over breakfast making our mine arrival late and thus ...the Bishop.

Bishop Ramazzini was a familiar name in international news in '05 when he ignored death threats and led demonstrations against the World Bank-backed Glamis Gold (now Goldcorp who, by the way, has already paid off the loan).

We also had appointed audiences with the people, mostly Mayan Mam, who live near the mine.

-- Hector Perez from Ajel worked at the mine for 2 years until he was fired for participating in a peaceful demonstration against it. Part of his job had been to open cyanide packages with a knife and apply metabisulfate sodium to cyanide laced earth. The chemical ate away at his protective gear. He had nose bleeds.

He told how his family was pressured to sell some of their land. The mayor threatened that the state would just expropriate it. They sold for less than it was worth. 6 wells have dried up. (The mine uses immense amounts of water: 250,000 liters/HOUR. Yes, per hour.)

-- We visited the rather new home of a family in Ajel near the mine. The house has a large crack from ceiling to floor. You can see daylight. They say this is due to the explosions in the mine.

Originally the mine was allowed 300 explosions at once. As of 1/07 after the demonstration they compromised and decreased the number.

However, damage to homes continue. Officials have visited. They say, nope, not the mine's fault. Faulty construction.

-- The Luz del Mundo (Light of the world) church has fissured walls too. The mine offered no compensation. Said it was due to their loud music.

-- A tall chain link fence encroaches on the pueblos as the mine expands its concession. (It has a 40 Kms aerial radius). Some have the fence immediately behind their outdoor latrines. Muchas gracias for leaving the toilets.

-- 7 women (holding 3 children) and 2 men speaking the Mayan dialect, Mam, told us their story in the Nueva Jerusalem church one stormy night.

Rosa Hernandez told of a strange man dressed in black who was lurking one night near their home. They chased him away.

(Our interpreter and guide informed us that there is an ancient myth: the mine sacrifices humans to the earth to ask the earth to give up its gold.)

Regina Bamaka told of her nephews who ran a small eatery. In early July mine representatives lured them to another area of Guatemala with an offer of jobs in a dam project. The two haven't been seen since.

They told of animals dying, more vehicle accidents due to increased traffic, structural damage to their small homes, skin infections, stunted vegetable growth, dry wells. Separation of families, higher divorce rates. Disappearance of small pueblos completely.

The mine had promised a health clinic. It's not there. Promised money to women for micro businesses. That didn't happen.

A severed head appeared in Huehuetenango, NW Guatemala. The body of a decapitated older man appeared in San Miguel, miles away from each other. The Minister of Justice of Huehuetenango contacted the mine, the mine called the family. The deceased had not been a mine worker.

The people want to know why the mine was in the middle. So did we.

Fernando Suazo met with us over dinner and Gallo beer our last evening in Rabinal. (Jesus Tecu Osario was with him.) They sat at the head of the table.

He is an ex priest of the Dominican order from Spain; he arrived in Rabinal in '84. He courageously gave mass at the Plan de Sanchez massacre site in 7/18/85; met Juan Manuel Jeronimo (see above) on the zigzag up the mountain, a 3.5 hour hike. A dozen people and 3 dogs were present for that anniversary. "It was the same people, the same misery."

"Un silencio terrible se infuso" ("a terrible silence was infused." Said in Spanish these words are more dramatic, emphatic. It's the firm accent on "se infuso". You had to be there.) Jesus Tecu Osario at age 16 asked this then-priest if he told his story, what would happen? Jesus was encouraged to talk. Other witnesses began to come forward in '95.

In his opinion the Peace Accords may have been signed in '96 but the "pueblo" (ie the people of the land, mainly Mayans) did not participate. So who did? International corporations, financiers he said. "It was a geopolitical strategy developed in the context of silence."

The signers: the Army, Guatemalan government, representatives of guerrilla organizations.

However, he sees that what is happening now is the implementation of worse repression. By whom? In his view: international corporations, North American geopolitical interests, people who made deals with the army and are

now trying to make sure this continues, drug traffickers.
"This is a colonialism more savage than the 70s, the 80s."

Let's repeat that: More savage. Again, savage, "salvaje" pronounced in Spanish is a strong word that can be almost spat out. It says what it is.

He said high school students are taught that Pedro de Alvarado was the first conquistador of Guatemala. But, Sr. Suazo said with emotion, "At least Alvarado had to have his horse and a sword. Now company heads have dinner and quietly conquer the country."

"Una colonizacion en pacifica" he called it. (In English, peaceful colonization.) A peaceful takeover. A conquering. A new conquistador.

The Canadian Mining Journal, in a 6/07 article by Jane Werniuk, "The New-look Goldcorp", she writes that among Goldcorp's key priorities are "to ramp up production at Marlin Mine".

Gold is making screaming headlines: "Dollar's declines revives prospects for gold in '07", International Herald Tribune. "Gold stocks set to glitter", Canada.com. "Goldcorp declares Seventh Monthly Dividend Payment for 2007", CNN Money.com. "Order of Canada - Rob McEwen honoured", Canadian Mining Journal. See TheStar.com. "Peak Gold Theory" of 7/9/07.

Rob McEwen, founder of Goldcorp and ex-CEO says: "My concern is that our children will no longer be the owners of the country. They'll be the tenants. There are pools of capital that are growing in lower tax regimes, less regulated regimes, and those monies are coming unimpeded into this country and buying anything and all they want."

It's enough to make your head spin.

Rio Negro pueblo still exists. Further up the mountainside, smaller, poorer. It can only be reached by boat. The original is under water thanks to the Chixoy Dam. There are no roads. Rio Negro is an 8 hour hike from Rabinal, 18 miles as the quetzal flies.

A Mayan woman had a nightmare a few days before Rio Negro massacre in '82. She said, "If I am killed and only my bones are left, You must tell the world what happened."

No doubt there are others having nightmares. They have yet to speak of them.

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Kathy Rentenbach's last essay for CounterPunch was "The 100 Days of Rafael Correa."

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WHAT TO DO: "ANOTHER WORLD IS POSSIBLE"

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