

GOLDCORP Inc. & THE DANGER OF DEMOCRACY

By Grahame Russell (info@rightsaction.org, www.rightsaction.org), June 2008

In unison, 100s of Mayan Mam community leaders raised their hands in the *Gimnasio Municipal* (municipal gym) of the municipality of San Miguel Ixtahuacan (SMI). On April 30, 2008, they voted "yes" - the municipality of SMI will hold a legally binding community consultation concerning whether or not to permit mining in SMI, department of San Marcos, Guatemala.

(Photo: Miguel Iriondo, April 30, 2008, San Miguel Ixtahuacan)

I have come to SMI with a delegation of 14 Canadians and Americans, investigating the many negative impacts of Goldcorp Inc's open pit, cyanide leaching mining operation. I feel honored to witness this decision.

After months of education work, planning and deliberations, this decision represents a rare act of democracy in a very undemocratic country. This decision is courageous in a country where repression is a predictable response of the economic and political elites to expressions of democracy. It is no small matter for the generationally impoverished Mayan Mam people of SMI to publicly say that they want a say in and control over their lives.

This decision is galling and threatening to powerful economic interests. Since 2005, Goldcorp has been operating its open-pit, cyanide leaching "Marlin" mine here in SMI, backed fully by the Canadian and Guatemalan governments, the World Bank, etc., and making multi-million dollar profits for far-away owners, shareholders and investors.

The impoverished people of SMI are going to do what the government of Guatemala ought to have done, before giving Goldcorp its licenses to explore and exploit mineral resources, and what the government of Canada, the World Bank and the Goldcorp Inc. company ought to have insisted that the government of Guatemala do – consult with the people!

(Photo: Miguel Iriondo, April 30, 2008, San Miguel Ixtahuacan)

BASIC LEGAL REQUIREMENT

National and international law requires that governments consult with and obtain the consent of peoples and communities, particularly indigenous peoples, who will be affected by economic enterprises (like mining). In Guatemala, the government has never abided by this requirement. Foreign governments (like Canada) and institutions (like the World Bank) and companies (like Goldcorp Inc.) with major economic interests in Guatemala, never insist on it; they know that their "development" projects (mining, hydro-electric dams, resource extraction, large scale tourism complexes) will likely be rejected by the populations that will be harmed; or, at a minimum, the local populations will demand stringent environmental, human rights and profit sharing conditions that global companies rarely, if ever want to agree to.

Why consult, when you can get "permission" from a few politicians behind the backs of the population, and begin your "development" project before anyone knows what is happening.

ACTING DEMOCRATICALLY IS DANGEROUS

This act of democratic empowerment increases the risk of serious repercussions. Acts of repression have already been committed in association with Goldcorp Inc's "Marlin" mine. During the December 2004 – January 2005 road blockage of a huge piece of equipment destined for Goldcorp's processing plant in San Marcos, the pro-mining government of President Oscar Berger ordered 1000 anti-riot police and soldiers to break up the protest: 2 dead and 20 hospitalized.

In March 2005, a security guard in the pay of the company left a bar one night and shot and killed a local bus driver.

In February 2007, hundreds of special police forces illegally and violently entered the homes of poor SMI farmers and detained 21 of them, based on trumped up criminal charges related to a peaceful protest against the mine in January 2007. Local communities had organized road blocks around the mine site, because the company refused to dialogue with them about providing compensation for a list of harms caused by the mining operation: forced sale of lands at shamefully low prices; damaged homes due to use of explosives; lung problems due to dust; water contamination and depletion due to mining; labor issues for mine workers; etc.

After the company refused to even discuss their grievances, company security forces attacked the community leaders (the very ones illegally detained weeks later) with rocks and sticks, firing shots over their heads. Though these attacks were properly denounced to the competent authorities, with eyewitness testimonies, no charges were laid against Goldcorp Inc's security guards.

The legal system is a tool of repression used, in this case, to defend the company's interests.

Thus, it is not surprising that the people of SMI told our delegation they feel more afraid after their vote to hold a community consultation; they are equally clear that they have no choice, given the extensive and continuing environmental and health harms and human rights violations that their mining operation is causing.

Much of the environmental and health harms and human rights violations have been documented in "Investing in Conflict" (available at www.rightsaction.org), a report by Dawn Paley with Mining Watch and Rights Action, as well as in many other news articles and reports. (For more information: info@rightsaction.org)

(Photo: Al Koehl, 2006)

DENYING DEMOCRACY

Over the past few years, many indigenous communities have held legally binding community consultations throughout Guatemala. Every time, the people have massively voted 'no' to large scale mining and hydroelectric dam projects in their regions. Every time, the government of Guatemala, along with the companies, investors and shareholders, have ignored the results.

The politically corrupted Constitutional Court ruled that indigenous communities have the right to carry out community consultations with respect to "development" projects and that the results are not binding! Like saying you have the right to vote and the results are not binding. Like saying that murder is against the law and if someone is murdered, the law prohibiting it cannot be applied.

CONTENTIOUS CONSULTATION

The SMI community consultation promises to be contentious.

Elsewhere, community consultations have been held before the mining or dam projects were constructed and operating. Even then, there has been repression associated with some of these consultations.

The people of SMI will carry out their community consultation while the mine is in full operation and wealthy people and powerful institutions in North America and Guatemala are making huge profits. The price of gold is at record highs. There are millions of dollars of incentives to block or delegitimize SMI's community consultation.

The date and details of the SMI consultation have yet to be decided. People and groups that Rights Action works with are in the planning and discussion stages with their own communities. The Traditional Indigenous leadership of SMI will play the key role in this process.

SUPPORT NEEDED

Firstly, funds and technical support are needed to pay for and plan the consultation process in the 59 rural villages of SMI. Rights Action has a full proposal available for institutions that might be able to provide funding.

Secondly, human rights accompaniers and international delegations will be needed as an international presence, in the weeks and months leading up to the consultation. The risk of tension and repression is high and international attention is crucial.

Thirdly, observers will be invited the day of the consultation to witness and report on the results. If indeed the people of SMI vote 'no' to mining in their territories, it is predictable that the company and governments of Guatemala and Canada will try and delegitimize the process and results, or ignore them altogether. Part of the responsibility of observers will be to help publish the results of the community consultation and bring pressure to bear in North America on our companies and governments to ensure respect for the democratic will of the people of San Miguel Ixtahuacan.

Stay tuned. Get involved. Thanks.

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Feel free to publish and distribute this article far and wide. Grahame Russell works with Rights Action. With tax-deductible legal status in Canada and USA, Rights Action funds and works with community-based Indigenous, development, environment and human rights organizations in Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and southern Mexico (Oaxaca, Chiapas); and educates about and is involved in activism related to global development, environmental and Indigenous and human rights struggles.

TO MAKE TAX-DEDUCTIBLE DONATIONS for indigenous and community-based organizations that are implementing their own development, human rights and environment projects, make check payable to "Rights Action" and mail to: UNITED STATES: Box 50887, Washington DC, 20091-0887; CANADA: 422 Parliament St, Box 82552, Toronto ON, M5A 4N8. CREDIT-CARD DONATIONS: www.rightsaction.org.

* EDUCATIONAL SEMINAR-DELEGATION: From July 7-12, Rights Action is leading an educational seminar-delegation to Honduras to learn about community-based resistance to the environmental and economic harms and human rights violations caused by Goldcorp Inc's open pit, cyanide leaching mine in that country; and, to learn about the territorial and human rights struggles of Indigenous/Garifuna peoples. If interested: info@rightsaction.org.

* 2nd HEMISPHERIC GATHERING AGAINST MILITARIZATION – HONDURAS, OCTOBER 3-5: Form your own group and/ or join a Rights Action delegation to come to Honduras for this continental Gathering. !Para callar las armas, hablemos los pueblos! (To quiet weapons, the people must speak!). www.antimilitarizacion.blogspot.com; info@rightsaction.org. PLACE: La Esperanza, Intibucá, Honduras.

* 3rd SOCIAL FORUM OF THE AMERICAS – GUATEMALA, OCTOBER 7-12: Form your own group and/ or join a Rights Action delegation to come to Guatemala. Thousands of people from across the Americas are expected at this gathering to debate and discuss

(and enjoy awesome music, art and theater) how Another World Is Possible ... And Necessary. For more info: info@rightsaction.org.

JOIN: Rights Action's listserv and newsletter lists.

CREATE YOUR OWN E-MAIL LIST: and re-distribute this and other information.

LISTEN: to the www.democracynow.org news program every day.

READ: Eduardo Galeano's "Open Veins of Latin America"; Naomi Klein's "The Shock Doctrine"; Paolo Freire's "Pedagogy of the Oppressed".

SMILE: And live to make another world is possible, everyday.

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