

RIGHTS ACTION

August 20, 2008

BELOW: A BBC news article about Goldcorp Inc's mining operation in Guatemala. (Where is the in-depth Canadian and USA media coverage about this Canadian/ USA mining company?)

Rights Action, a USA/Canadian NGO, has supported and worked with a number of the Mayan and community based organizations and people referred to and interviewed in this report.

Please re-distribute this article all around.

WHAT TO DO: Contact Rights Action to help fund and support Mayan and community based organizations in Guatemala and to get involved in efforts to demand accountability for the health and environmental harms and human rights violations caused by this gold mine: info@rightsaction.org / 860-352-2448 (USA) / www.rightsaction.org

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BBC NEWS -- Unease over Guatemalan gold rush

By Bill Law, BBC Radio 4's Crossing Continents

* With gold prices skyrocketing, the Mayans of Guatemala find themselves caught up in a new rush for the precious metal. *

Mario Tema sits across from me, a Mayan with a mission. We are in the town of Sipacapa in the Western Highlands of Guatemala, washing down a breakfast of tamale and beans with a cup of freshly brewed coffee. As he tells me of the town's fight against a huge open pit gold mine, that famous picture of Che Guevara gazes at us from the wall. Here in Sipacapa, Mario Tema is an anti-mining icon.

Last year he travelled to Vancouver, where the mine's Canadian owner, Goldcorp, has its headquarters. He went to speak out against the mine at the company's annual shareholders meeting. "After I spoke at the meeting," he says, "a shareholder approached me and he told me 'I don't care about your cause, all I care about is the money in my pocket.'"

Mr Tema tells me the story with a shake of his head. Do shareholders not know that his country was wracked by decades of civil war that saw more than 200,000 people killed, one million displaced, and that most of the victims were Mayan? Do they not understand that the war was about land, how it was used, how it was exploited? Do they not know about the massacres of entire Mayan villages by paramilitaries and right-wing death squads?

* Jobs and development *

What shareholders do know is that Goldcorp is delivering in a style they could probably only have dreamed about. When the Guatemalan project was first costed, it was based on gold selling at \$350 (£190) an ounce. Gold is now selling for nearly triple that amount. That means huge dividends for shareholders and a massive windfall for the company. In the first quarter of this year alone, Goldcorp's worldwide profits were \$229m (£120m).

* We are paying on the order of \$10-12m just in salaries for people in the local community * (Tim Miller, Goldcorp)

Tim Miller, a senior executive in the company's Guatemala City office, says the company has brought many benefits to the region. Foremost among them are jobs, he says. "We are paying on the order of \$10-12m just in salaries for people in the local community and Guatemala in general." He also cites improvements in health facilities and education, including a project that is paying the wages of two teachers.

As far as he is concerned, people like Mario Tema are being stirred up by what he calls "advocacy" NGOs, some of them from outside the country. But the Catholic Church in Guatemala has also spoken out strongly against the mine. And the Bishop of San Marcos, in whose diocese the mine is located, has led protest marches.

Vinicio Lopez is the coordinator of Copae, a Guatemalan Catholic charity that has been vocal in its opposition.

He says the mine has created tensions between communities who support it and those that do not. It has split families. "It's very worrisome for us because here in Guatemala the social fabric is very fragmented," Mr Lopez says.

* Tensions *

A climate of distrust, fear and resentment between the company and Mayan activists continues to fester. Local people have been barricading roads. One blockade was in early 2006. It was broken up with a massive show of force from the military and police, intervening on behalf of the company.

Mayans have voted in consultas, or referenda, saying no to the mine. The company insists the consultas are not legal.

The indigenous people point to cracks in their houses and say they are caused by mining activity. They show us rashes they say are the result of contamination from the mine. Goldcorp hired experts to prove the mining operations could not have caused the cracks and to show the rashes have nothing to do with the mine.

Gregoria is a tiny, feisty woman who lives in a village adjacent to the mine. Like her neighbours she is a subsistence farmer, growing corn and beans on terraced fields cut into the cliffs. She shows me three huge pylons part of a grid that holds cables stretching for miles, carrying electricity supply to the company's Marlin Mine Number One.

I look a little closer and see a thin wire running across the cables. That in turn is attached to ropes at either end and the ropes are tethered to trees, holding the wire tight to the cables, temporarily shorting out the electricity.

How did she do this? "I tied a rock to the rope and I slung the rope across," she says, in Spanish. I ask her why she is taking on Goldcorp. She tells me that one of the pylons, the one closest to us, is on her land. "The company didn't ask for my permission. They just stuck it there."

Tim Miller sighs when I ask him about it later. "Not true," he says. "We had a written, signed agreement with her." "Can she read?" I ask him. Miller tells me it was read out to her in Mam, the local Mayan dialect but he is not sure if Gregoria actually signed the document. "I can't tell you exactly who signed it," he says.

* Concern *

The altercation with Gregoria reveals a larger clash of cultures and values. As the two sides feud, ethical investors are becoming nervous. In part because of concerns that the company was not doing enough to address Mayan complaints, Goldcorp was kicked off Canada's respected Jantzi Social Index for ethical investment.

At this year's shareholders' meeting, several pension fund investors only withdrew a motion of concern after the company offered to underwrite the cost of an independent assessment of the impact on human rights. The results of this investigation will not be available for at least a year.

In the meantime the pension funds are keeping their money in Goldcorp. And Goldcorp continues taking the gold out of the ground, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. With prices running close to \$1000 (£540) an ounce, it is good for business.

But increasingly questions are being raised about just how good the gold business is for the indigenous Mayans of Guatemala.

/ * BBC Radio 4's Crossing Continents: Guatemala and Canada gold rush will be broadcast on Thursday, 21 August, 2008 at 1102 BST. It will be repeated on Monday, 25 August, 2008 at 2030 BST. * /

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WHAT TO DO

TO MAKE TAX-DEDUCTIBLE DONATIONS for indigenous and community-based organizations that are implementing their own community development projects (schools, health clinics, solidarity economic productive projects, etc), human rights and environment projects in Guatemala and Honduras (as well as El Salvador and Chiapas), and resisting the harms caused by large-scaled "development" projects (like mining), 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: http://www.rightsaction.org/Templates/donations_index.html

HUMAN RIGHTS DELEGATIONS TO "DEVELOPMENT" PROJECT-AFFECTED COMMUNITIES: Consider forming your own group and coming on an educational seminar trip to learn more about community and Indigenous resistance to mining, dam, tourism and other large-scale "development" projects in Guatemala and Honduras.

2nd HEMISPHERIC GATHERING AGAINST MILITARIZATION – HONDURAS, OCTOBER 2-6: Form your own group and 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 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 our email list: <http://www.rightsaction.org/lists/?p=subscribe&id=3>

RECEIVE OUR QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER: info@rightsaction.org

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

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

READ: Eduardo Galeano's "Open Veins of Latin America"; Naomi Klein's "The Shock Doctrine"; Howard Zinn's "A People's History of the United States";

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

RIGHTS ACTION -- Based in Guatemala, Rights Action (with tax-deductible legal status in Canada and USA) funds and works with community-based Indigenous, development, environment and human rights organizations in Guatemala and Honduras, and also in El Salvador, Oaxaca and Chiapas; and educates about and is involved in activism related to global development, environmental and Indigenous and human rights struggles.

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