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## **GUATEMALA -- WHO IS EMETERIO PEREZ?**

Below: An article by Grahame Russell (with photos by Eliza Strode) about the on-going health harms caused by Goldcorp Inc's "Marlin" mine in Guatemala.

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## **WHO IS EMETERIO PEREZ? AND WHY GOLDCORP INC. SHAREHOLDERS & INVESTORS OUGHT TO KNOW**

By Grahame Russell ([info@rightsaction.org](mailto:info@rightsaction.org), [www.rightsaction.org](http://www.rightsaction.org)), Guatemala, January 2009

I first met Emeterio Perez in May 2008. 70 years old, this Mayan Mam man lives with his wife and extended family in a little home, on a tiny plot of land, in San Miguel Ixtahuacan, Guatemala, on the edge of Goldcorp Inc's "Marlin" mine. He has lived in the village of San Jose Ixcanique his whole life, like his parents before.

(All photos by Eliza Strode, Jan.28, 2009)

On January 28, 2009, I met him again. He aged much more than 8 months since May. Now, he passes the day in a chair, in pain, too weak to get up and walk alone.

With a group of Canadian students from the University of Northern British Columbia, I came here in May 2008. They were on a fact-finding visit to speak with people whose lives and rights were being harmed and violated by Goldcorp's open-pit, cyanide leaching gold mine. The mine is still expanding.

San Jose Ixcanique is a Mayan Mam village in the path of the mine. Water wells and small rivers have dried. Dust from the mine is omni-present; trucks rumble by all day. The earth shakes when Goldcorp uses explosives to break up earth and rock. 100s of local adobe houses have cracked.

In May, Emeterio told us how the company, in the late 90s and early 2000s, pressured his family to sell their plots of land one by one. Campesinos throughout this region were told that if they did not sell, the government would evict them.

Barely recovering from the Guatemala's State repression and terrorism and the armed conflict that lasted from 1960-1996, it is not surprising that isolated, impoverished campesinos can be pressured to sell their land. The government is not here to promote and defend their rights and well-being.

Emeterio did not move far away. With the small amount they were paid, he bought a much smaller plot ... and has spent the last 5 years caring for his wife. When they sold their land, she suffered what appears to be a stroke. She lives doubled over in pain. Her hands shake. Over the past year, she had contracted skin rashes, like an increasing number of the elderly, children and new-borns in communities close to the mine.

Whether from the waste by-products of the cyanide and other chemicals used to separate the gold and silver from earth and rock, or from the heavy metals (mercury, arsenic, lead) released into the air and water from the use of explosives and open pit destruction of hills and mountains, no one here doubts the skin problems are due to contaminated water sources and air.

Over the past few years, Emeterio has spent most of his time and money caring for his ailing wife. Nothing helps. As with mining-affected persons around the world, who contract skin diseases and rashes, the only thing they usually get prescribed – if they get medical attention at all - are skin creams and antibiotics. These never help.

The skin problems are due to blood poisoning.

Before we arrived at his home on January 28, hiking up from a visit to another family whose livelihood and health had been seriously affected, I had been warned that Emeterio himself was now suffering skin rashes. Last May, he was vibrant and healthy, if not angry about all that his family had lost and suffered. I was not prepared for the person we found waiting for us, in pain, too weak to get up.

Speaking with our group, he explained how his health problems began, stopping a few times as his eyes welled up with tears. First, he experienced swelling and pain in his feet, that spread up his legs. The pain spread through his body – he indicated his arms, shoulders, torso, legs and feet.

Skin rashes broke out, from the feet up, through his legs to his torso and arms.

Then, beyond belief, his stomach began to swell and swell, even as he got weaker and weaker.

All of this, he showed us. Gingerly, he lifted his pant legs and opened his shirt, presenting swollen legs, a huge, bulging stomach and painful looking cracked skin.

Has he received medical attention? Emeterio went with his son to Goldcorp's health clinic. His son does part-time cleaning work on the roads around the mine. The clinic would not attend to him. Suggested he go to a hospital in Huehuetenango.

2000 quetzales later (US\$250), nothing came of the visit to Huehuetenango. He was sold creams and antibiotics that could not and did not help. Now, he is home, broke, and probably dying.

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On November 21, 2008, 140 individuals and organizations signed a 14 page report ([http://www.rightsaction.org/urgent\\_com/Canada\\_Goldcorp\\_Guate\\_111208.html](http://www.rightsaction.org/urgent_com/Canada_Goldcorp_Guate_111208.html)) that was sent to Leeann McKechnie, the new Canadian ambassador to Guatemala. In that report, we summarized some of the major concerns with Goldcorp's mine:

"The Guatemalan Ministry of Energy and Mines granted a license to Glamis Gold in November 2003 to engage in open-pit cyanide leach gold mining in San Marcos, the Marlin Project. license was granted in violation of the State's obligation to seek the consent of the affected Mayan communities under ILO Convention 169. The Government did not even attempt to fulfill this obligation. Goldcorp and its shareholders are taking advantage of this legal vacuum.

"The consequences of this prior, fundamental and ongoing violation are threefold:

"**Arrested development.** Before Goldcorp's arrival, the Mayan communities now affected by gold mining operations were already weakened by chronic poverty and the legacy of the internal armed conflict. The Western Highlands was a region gripped by terror in the 1980s.

"Goldcorp effectively took advantage of this weakness and has robbed the affected communities of the opportunity, slowly, at their own pace and through their own mechanisms, to heal the social fabric, strengthen indigenous organization and leadership, and direct their own future, on their own terms. This is the spirit of the 1996 Peace Accords and international law on indigenous rights.

"In violation of the letter and spirit of these agreements, Goldcorp offers individual contracts (for jobs and land) in place of collective decision-making; privatized social assistance in place of public and collective ownership of the development process.

"**Grave risks.** The environmental, health, social, and cultural impacts of the Marlin Project were never properly explained, considered or understood locally before Goldcorp's predecessor, Glamis Gold Inc., was given an exploitation license in November 2003.

"You are aware of the controversial and high-risk nature of cyanide leach mining. Independent assessments have raised concerns about the Marlin Project in this regard. Given these risks, as the party interested in the profitability of the mine, Glamis Gold Inc.'s own public relations efforts could never credibly amount to what the State failed to do: seek the consent of the affected communities through indigenous institutions.

"The result has been a legal and human rights abyss in which it is impossible to adequately assess and respond to the risks posed by the Marlin Project.

"**Conflict and the Criminalization of Resistance.** Families and communities are divided. Poor householders, men and women living hand to mouth, face prosecutorial action

initiated by Goldcorp. Acts of intimidation and violence and the heavy presence of police and military trigger fears from the recent past of internal armed conflict.

“Only a good faith suspension of operations followed by compliance with Guatemala’s Constitutional and international obligations can reasonably address the stalemate. Failure to do so risks further violence as the interests of transnational extractive industries and Mayan communities remain on a collision course. Criminal prosecutions fit into a national pattern of State criminalization of resistance in defense of community rights.

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We sent this report to the Canadian ambassador because, from Ottawa through to the embassy in Guatemala, the Canadian government is an unquestioning supporter of the spread of Canadian mining companies in Guatemala (and beyond).

We did not hear back from the ambassador.

On December 18, 2008, the ambassador came to San Miguel Ixtahuacan. She did not visit Emeterio Perez. As far as we know, she did not investigate the many allegations of environmental and health harms and human rights violations.

In the San Miguel Ixtahuacan town center, 45 minutes from Emeterio’s home, she stood with the Guatemalan First Lady and company representatives, as Goldcorp handed a check over to the Mayor of the municipality of San Miguel, part of the 0.5% royalties Goldcorp pays.

The Canadian government and Goldcorp are not indifferent to the allegations of harms and violations. It is worse. When pressured, they actively deny the veracity of reports, studies, urgent actions and articles. The mine continues to operate at maximum capacity; gold prices remain at near record highs.

Over the next 2 weeks, Rights Action will distribute testimonies, photo-essays and articles from Emeterio and other people whose health has been harmed by the gold mining.

If Goldcorp and the Canadian government even pay attention to these articles, they will deny their accuracy or truthfulness. They will refer to ‘a lack of base line studies’. They will say we are not trained health experts (we are not). That we are “anti-mining” or “anti-development” (we are neither). That the people were poor and lacked hygiene before the mine arrived.

Yet, I challenge anyone to come and listen to the stories and hear the testimonies of people like Emeterio. It does not take a medical school graduate or environmental expert to believe them when they say:

- their water wells and small rivers were not dry before the mine arrived
- their homes did not crack and crumble, before the mine began using massive amounts of explosives (above ground and in the labyrinth of tunnels below)
- their animals did not die of unknown causes because they continue to drink from the same rivers, down stream from the plant, that they have been drinking from for generations
- people’s hair did not fall out before the mine

- people, mainly elderly and young, did not get rashes all over the bodies before the mine came

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What will come of Emeterio? I fear the worst. Emeterio and other villagers accompanying us house to house in San Jose Ixcanique, told us of the recent death of another older man, with the same skin and swelling symptoms, including the bloated stomach. They point down the hill, to his home in the distance.

Emeterio's story is one of many near the Marlin mine, or near Goldcorp's "San Martin" mine in the Siria Valley, Honduras, or near mine sites around the world.

At every turn, we must do what we can to support local organizations that are fighting to stop the harms that mines are causing and to remedy the human rights violations and health and environmental harms. They need funds ... redistributive justice, as so much of their wealth flows north!

They need our solidarity visits. They need to tell us their stories and us, in turn, to tell their stories to people back home in Canada and the USA. They need human rights accompaniment, as local leaders are often targeted for repression, simply for denouncing things like ... Demeterio's health situation.

At a fundamental level, they need our support so that they can fully exercise their individual and collective rights to say no to mining, or to accept mining but only on terms that they fully agree on and control, according to standards and conditions they can enforce.

Much more work needs to be done in Canada, in the USA, and in other home countries of global corporations. While the harms and violations caused by mining are experienced by people like Demeterio, in poor, mining-affected communities, almost 100% of the benefits from the mine flow back to Canada, the USA, etc. – to company directors, shareholders and investors.

Investors in Goldcorp Inc. include the CPP (Canadian Pension Plan), and most pension funds you can find across Canada and the USA. If you have money saved and being invested, you are probably making a profit (tiny, medium-sized or large) from Goldcorp's mine near Demeterio's home.

Emeterio's story is a Canadian and American story.

North American governments implement policies, established years ago, to support the expansion of our companies and investors to have control over resources and markets worldwide.

North American corporations decide to mine in the most "cost efficient" (low cost) ways, advantageous to investors and often harmful and damaging to local populations and the environment.



North American investors vote and approve with their dollars when they invest in these corporations and when we don't hold our investment funds accountable to the highest standards of respect for human rights and protection of the environment.

North American, particularly Canadian politicians continue to block the passing of even minimal legislation that would enable affected parties to try and hold our companies criminally and civilly liable if/ when they operate their mines in ways that harm the environment, people's health and violate human rights.

The North American media, for the most part, does not report fully and properly on the harms and violations caused by our corporations.

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We chat on a bit more. Nearby, Emeterio's grand-daughters run around. They have rashes on their skin. The younger girl is too shy to lift the back of her shirt to show us.

As we get up to leave, Emeterio tells us he would gladly receive more visits – he wants to tell his story. There is nothing else he can do, he says. Our group leaves him a small donation. Again, he cries, thanks us for the visit, thanks god for the donation, and tells us to come again.

Rights Action will be back with more delegations. I hope he will be well enough to speak with more good-hearted and open-minded visitors.

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## **WHAT TO DO?**

There is no magic formula to help Emeterio's situation, or to hold Goldcorp Inc, investors, shareholders and North American governments accountable for the environmental and health harms and human rights violations occurring in Guatemala.

These are not unique situations. They are being repeated to varying degrees where many companies are operating across the world.

US and Canadian citizens should write to and keep writing to their own politicians, making them aware of these situations, demanding that our governments prioritize global human rights and environmental concerns over global business interests, demanding that our politicians use their power and authority to help hold our corporations accountable if/ when they violate human rights and/or cause environmental and health harms.

This is slow, long-term work. We need to make our governments accountable to us in all facets of global economic relations and policies.

US and Canadian citizens should write to and keep writing to their own Pension Funds and Investment Brokers, to find out what types of corporations and businesses they are investing in, to demand that our investors prioritize global human rights and environmental concerns over profits, to insist that investments be withdrawn if/ when

profits are being made at the expense of environmental and health harms and/ or human rights violations.

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TO MAKE TAX-DEDUCTIBLE DONATIONS for Indigenous and community-based organizations resisting the harms caused by large-scale "development" projects (mining, tourism, hydro-electric dams) and implementing their own community development projects (schools and scholarships, health clinics, solidarity economy productive projects, etc), human rights and environment projects, make check payable to "Rights Action" and mail to:

\* UNITED STATES: Box 50887, Washington DC, 20091-0887

\* CANADA: 552 - 351 Queen St. E, Toronto ON, M5A-1T8

CREDIT-CARD DONATIONS: [http://www.rightsaction.org/Templates/donations\\_index.html](http://www.rightsaction.org/Templates/donations_index.html)

TO JOIN Rights Action's email list and/or quarterly newsletter list: [info@rightsaction.org](mailto:info@rightsaction.org)

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

DAILY NEWS: Watch & listen to [www.democracynow.org](http://www.democracynow.org); Read [www.upsidedownworld.org](http://www.upsidedownworld.org), [www.dominionpaper.ca](http://www.dominionpaper.ca)

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

[www.rightsaction.org](http://www.rightsaction.org) - 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 Oaxaca, Chiapas, El Salvador, Peru, Haiti and Nicaragua; and educates about and is involved in activism related to global development, environmental and Indigenous and human rights struggles.