

GANG RAPES, FORCED EVICTIONS & THE ENDLESS NIGHTMARE OF NICKEL MINING IN GUATEMALA

By Grahame Russell, May 2010 (info@rightsaction.org, 860-352-2448)

“When will Canadian and U.S. lawmakers pass binding criminal and civil legislation so that victims of environmental and health harms and human rights violations caused by global mining companies in places like Guatemala and Honduras can get justice, remedy and compensation for their suffering and losses?”

“When will North American investors – from private funds and investors to retirement pension funds – start demanding that basic and enforceable environmental and human rights standards attach to their investments, not just the “fiduciary duty to maximize profits”?”

Or, to the point,

“When will the Canadian mining companies stop mining in Guatemala, stop harming people's lives, communities and rivers, and just go home?”

These are some of the questions asked last week in the indigenous Mayan-Qeqchi village of Lote 8, municipality of El Estor, on the north side of Lake Izabal in eastern Guatemala.



(May 20, 2010 community meeting, Lote 8 village, with visiting UNBC-Rights Action delegation.)

Recently in Canada, CTV aired a W5 documentary “Lost Paradise” addressing many of the environmental and health harms and human rights violations being caused by

Canadian nickel and gold mining companies in Guatemala (specifically Skye Resources, HudBay Minerals and Goldcorp Inc.). To view: http://www.ctv.ca/servlet/ArticleNews/story/CTVNews/20100415/w5_paradise_lost_100415/20100417

In "Lost Paradise", W5 focuses attention on the illegal forced evictions and burning of homes of Mayan Qeqchi people in a number of poor villages in the municipality of El Estor. Some of these were documented in a 10-minute film on YouTube, the El Estor Evictions. To view: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q20YxkM-CGI>

These documentaries built on years of reports published by Guatemalan and North American human rights groups and the United Nations Truth Commission (in Guatemala) documenting illegal forced evictions, beatings, killings and disappearances against Mayan Qeqchi villagers, dating back to the 1970s, carried out by and in favor of nickel mining companies such as INCO, Skye Resources and, most recently, HudBay Minerals.

Now, add gang rape to the list of tools of repression used to try and force Mayan Qeqchi communities to bend to the will and economic interests of the mining companies, and of North American investors and governments.

IF GANG RAPE HAPPENS IN THE MIDDLE OF A FOREST, WILL THE CANADIAN MINING INDUSTRY HEAR?

Lote 8 is an isolated, poor community, high on the mountain ridge that runs east-west on the north side of Lake Izabal. No vehicles; no electricity; no running water. Much of the land here is rich; there are springs and water sources. A curse of the Mayan Qeqchi people – living here for hundreds of years – is that there are huge nickel ore deposits in these mountains.

On May 20, I visited Lote 8, co-leading a seminar of 10 undergrad and grad students from the UNBC (Prince George, Canada) who were in Guatemala on a 2 week trip with their professor Catherine Nolin. From El Estor, we drove 30 minutes west along a dirt road, past HudBay's nickel ore processing plant, past Chichipate (the oldest Mayan Qeqchi town in the region) towards Panzos.

Then, with the pickup locked into 4-wheel drive, we then drove over one hour up a rarely used, narrow dirt road, ever more steep as we climbed above where the Polochic river feeds the great Lake Izabal.

The road ends at the Lote 8 community. Out of the truck we clambered, to where 100 humble homes used to be. The villagers have lived here since the early 1950s. It is a further one hour hike to where the villagers are now living.



As part of a wave of illegal and violent forced evictions in late 2006 and early 2007 (partly documented in "Lost Paradise" and the "El Estor Evictions"), close to 800 heavily armed soldiers, police and CGN company private security guards arrived in Lote 8, for the first time, on January 9, 2007, at 4pm. (CGN is the Guatemala Nickel Company, owned by then Skye Resources, now HudBay Minerals.)

The result, that day: Tear-gas and bullets shot at the entire community (close to hundreds of villagers, young and old, men and women) who fled deep into the forest and mountain ravines; 100 homes burnt and destroyed; clothes and bedding burnt; anything of value stolen; food crops cut to the ground or stolen. By 6pm, the "security" forces drove down the mountain, leaving 100 families in a driving rain, in the forest.

Over the next week, the community re-built basic huts: four corner posts and cross beams (cut from small trees); plastic sheets for roofs; bamboo trees for walls; all roped and nailed together. They foraged, fished and hunted for food, worked desperately to recover their fields and crops.

As the week went by, the CGN/ Skye Resources company helicopter flew over a few times, saw what they were doing. What else could the Lote 8 villagers do? Where else on earth could they go? No where.

On January 17, 2007, again close to 800 heavily armed soldiers, police and CGN company private security guards arrived in Lote 8, at 930am. This time, the men were in the fields working, or hiding in the forests; villagers thought the “security” guards were coming to detain the men and older boys.

The result, this day: 100 make-shift huts burnt and destroyed – the corner posts were chain-sawed to the ground; all remaining personal belongings stolen or burnt. And, at least 5 women were gang-raped by soldiers, police and private security guards working for Skye Resources (now HudBay).



Speaking in Qeqchi, 5 women give testimony of gang rape to Magdalena Maria, who then translates to Spanish; Grahame Russell then translated to English. Magdalena is the sister-in-law of Adolfo Ich, the teacher and community leader who was assassinated on September 27, 2009, by Skye Resources/ HudBay Minerals private security guards.

Over the past year, Magdalena has worked with a project collecting testimonies and providing support to women (including rape victims) in various mining affected communities in this region. It is for this reason that the 5 women felt confident enough to tell their stories, for the first time in public. (Testimony photos by Claudette Bois, UNBC)





Two of the 5 women who spoke with the visiting UNBC-Rights Action delegation were pregnant at the time of being gang raped, and lost their babies.

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Anyone familiar with Guatemala's war against its own people in the 1970s, 80s and early 90s (over 250,000 killed and disappeared), knows that rape was used a tool of State repression and terrorization.

Now, rape was again used as a tool of terrorization and repression, this time in the context of forcibly evicting Mayan Qeqchi communities to make way for nickel mining. (Women were also raped, in other illegal forced evictions in early January 2007.)

THE ENDLESS NIGHTMARE OF DENIAL & IMPUNITY FOR GLOBAL MINING COMPANIES

These gang rapes and illegal, forced evictions are one more story of harms and human rights violations linked to the global mining industry.

With unquestioning support from the governments of Guatemala and Canada, and with a compliant, corrupted legal system in Guatemala, Skye Resources / HudBay Minerals have never had to answer to charges that their private security guards participated in gang rape and illegal forced evictions. They will, of course, deny this.

On September 27, 2009, HudBay private security guards assassinated Adolfo Ich, a teacher and community leader in the nearby community of Barrio La Union (that also suffered 3 forced eviction attempts). HudBay denies this. (See the W5 "Lost Paradise" documentary.) The case of that political murder is going absolutely nowhere in the Guatemalan courts.

Mining companies get away with their violations and denials in countries like Guatemala, firstly, because the Canadian media provides rare coverage, at best, of mining related harms and violations. (CTV-W5's "Lost Paradise" is a notable exception.)

Secondly, they get away with committing harms and violations because they act with effective immunity from criminal or civil prosecution or accountability.

At the same time that Canadian law enables and promotes the expansion of the Canadian mining industry across the globe, Canadian law bars victims of environmental and healthy harms and human rights violations caused by Canadian mining companies (like, for example, women victims of gang rape in Lote 8) from any legal recourse in our courts.

At the same time that Canadian law enables and promotes investment in the global mining industry, Canadian law bars any environmental, health or human rights standards from attaching to investments. The only responsibility investment fund managers have is the "fiduciary duty to maximize gains".

A CANADIAN PROBLEM

For dozens of Mayan Qeqchi towns and villages of eastern Guatemala, there is no end in sight to the nightmare of nickel mining. HudBay and other global mining companies have their ill-gotten concessions for years to come.

Until Canadians across the country demand from our "lawmakers" and politicians serious legal reform and full accountability for and punishment of environmental and health harms and human rights violations, these abuses and violations will continue.

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WHAT TO DO

Write your own letter of complaint and denunciation to your own politician and to the offices below, denouncing the rapes and forced evictions, to make way for nickel mining, demanding: -1- a cancelling of ill-gotten nickel mining licenses in Guatemala. (As in the case of Goldcorp's gold mining in Guatemala, community consultations were never held in Mayan Qeqchi communities to get their consent as to whether mining could proceed or not); -2- a public international inquiry into the illegal forced evictions and repression (including rape); -3- the passing of comprehensive criminal and civil law reform in Canada, so as to be able to hold Canadian companies and investors accountable for environmental and health harms and human rights violations; -4- compensation and reparations for Mayan Qeqchi communities harmed by illegal evictions and repression.

EDUCATIONAL DELEGATIONS TO CENTRAL AMERICA: Form your own group or join one of our delegations to learn first hand about community development, human rights and environmental struggles (info@rightsaction.org)

EDUCATION IN YOUR HOME COMMUNITY: Contact us to plan educational presentations in your own community, school, place of worship, home (info@rightsaction.org)

TO MAKE TAX-DEDUCTIBLE DONATIONS for indigenous and campesino communities resisting the harms and violations of mining projects and carrying out their own

environmental justice, community development and human rights projects in Guatemala and Honduras, 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://rightsaction.org/contributions.htm>

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- RECOMMENDED BOOKS: 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"; Paolo Freire's "Pedagogy of the Oppressed"; Dr Seuss's "Horton Hears A Who"

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CONTACT YOUR MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT:

<http://www2.parl.gc.ca/Parlinfo/Compilations/HouseOfCommons/MemberByPostalCode.aspx?Menu=HOC>

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