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MAUDE BARLOW BEARING WITNESS TO GUATEMALA'S DESTRUCTIVE MINING INDUSTRY

By [Maude Barlow](#), National Chairperson, Council of Canadians

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In early September I had the honour of taking a memorable trip to Guatemala; strikingly beautiful, but haunted by a violent past and a troubled present. I was the guest of Asociacion Aqua Rios y Pueblos (Water, Rivers and People) based in Zaragoza, Spain and run in Guatemala by American activist Heidi McKinnon who also tours a spectacular exhibition on water struggles around the world called Agua, Rios y Pueblos.

Heidi had organized a two-day conference on water and women with several other groups and brought together women from across a wide spectrum of Guatemalan society. Here they discussed networking to address the myriad problems of water pollution, inequitable access to water and sanitation by the poor and the particular issues facing indigenous women. I presented information on the recent UN recognition of the human right to water and sanitation and what it might mean for Guatemalans struggling to move forward in the area of human rights.

The dialogue was intense and sometime painful as some indigenous participants understandably have such a distrust of other sectors of society and of any law that might give governments more authority to intervene in their lives. Nevertheless, inroads were made into the need to build trust and set underlying guidelines to move the process forward. These included agreeing that water is a human right, a public service and a public trust, not an economic good, and that any "development" on indigenous territory must be sustainable, just and fully accepted by an informed community.

As I learned more about the people, their history and the plight of indigenous peoples, the more I admired the courage and tenacity of the oppressed to continue such a struggle. The 36-year Guatemalan civil war has been named a state genocide against the country's indigenous people by the United Nations; more than 200,000 perished in the years between the mid-1950s and 1993, most of them Mayans.

But the oppression and intimidation did not stop when the peace accord was signed. Successive governments have promoted aggressive development of the country's mining sector, inviting foreign mining companies to come in and giving them a *carte blanche* to work where and how they want. The government has handed out over 250 new mining concessions in recent years, many to Canadian mining companies, most on indigenous lands.

These operations are engaging in open-pit, mountaintop removal and using cyanide leaching processes to extract the gold and nickel from the ore, contaminating local waterways. They are also turning a blind eye to both the environmental and health damages they are causing as well as the human rights abuses being perpetrated in their name.

On the first evening, a few of us gathered in a hotel room to hear stories of [atrocities](#) and intimidation at the El Estor nickel mine, until recently owned and operated by Canadian mining company HudBay.

Everyone you see in this photograph of Qeqchi people from the community was affected by beatings, killings, imprisonment, rape or intimidation by local thugs terrorizing anyone who resists or even questions the mine.

Most heartwrenching for me is the young man in the wheelchair, German Chub Coc, who was playing soccer with friends two years ago when a gang of armed thugs entered the village and opened fire, paralyzing him from the waist down. His young wife has since left him and he now lives with his parents trying to raise his three-year-old child.*



On the third day, a group of us set off on a site visit to the infamous Marlin Mine, which is run by Vancouver-based Goldcorp. We were in the capable hands of Canadian Grahame Russell of Rights Action, a grassroots activist organization working to bring the light of day to the behaviour of Canadian mining companies operating in Central America to the people and media of North America. Grahame is a tireless advocate for the oppressed of this region and a thorn in the side of both the Canadian and Guatemalan governments.

About a dozen indigenous women leaders, Grahame, Heidi and I travelled high up into the country's western highlands to visit the site and met the people who are resisting it.

It must be said that there exists ample, independent documentation on the harmful environmental and human rights practices of the Marlin Mine, so much so that in 2010, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights called on the Guatemalan government to [suspend operations at the site](#) pending a full and independent investigation into allegations of abuse.

The government refused to comply with this ruling, which is considered mandatory by the Organization of American States.

One look at the mine site itself tells a huge part of the story; there is the razed mountaintop, surrounded by huge lagoons of poisoned water.



We met Diodora Hernandez, whose only crime was refusal to sell her small property so the mine could expand. On July 7, 2010, a man hiding behind a tree on her property shot her in the face and left her for dead. The local police refused to take her to hospital so her daughter (and screaming granddaughter) had to take her in a taxi. Miraculously she has survived but recently, the water on her property has dried up, forcing her to buy from a private vendor.

We also met Crisanta Perez, who was arrested at a peaceful demonstration against the mine and taken away by police. Unarmed fellow villagers stopped the truck on a dirt road and politely told the police they were free to leave but Crisanta was staying behind. Now she is being stalked by men in a car with tinted windows and has had to move out of her home.



Thankfully, these and others have Rights Action and a local organization called ADISMI, whose brave leaders such as Carmen Mejia and Javier de Leon fight for justice and work to take the perpetrators to court.

The morning I left I presented at a large breakfast gathering of environmental, human rights groups and government officials and I told them I was ashamed to be Canadian that day and called on our movements to form alliances to expose this situation internationally. The people of Guatemala have absolutely no recourse from this continued abuse, either from their own police, the courts or government, or from the Canadian government whose sole mandate around mining is to promote the interests of our mining industry around the world.



It is documented that Canadian mining companies are among the worst in the world in terms of environmental and human rights abuses. Companies such as Goldcorp and Pacific Rim in El Salvador are tarring Canada's reputation internationally.

This mine and others doing similar damage must shut down their operations while an expert, independent and public commission be established to carry out a full and impartial investigation of the abuses of which they are accused, and if necessary, be prepared to pay full reparation to the communities they have harmed.

As I sat on the plane that carried me home, I remembered the beautiful faces of the brave and proud people I met in Guatemala and I vowed to go back and deepen out work with groups such as Mining Watch, Common Frontiers and Rights Action, to expose the role of Canadian mining companies in Central America (as well as the investments of Canadian pension plan in these operations) and to bring the rule of law to their industry.

*(German has no means of livelihood and does not read or write. I have established a fund through Rights Action to help him set up a small store. Donations of any amount would be very welcome.)

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By Maude Barlow

www.canadians.org/righttewater

Photos courtesy of Grahame Russell

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For more information about these gold and nickel mining related struggles in Guatemala for the environment, justice and reparations:

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