

Rights Action – December 23, 2011

GOLDCORP Inc. & THE DEATH OF LESLY YARITZA

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GOLDCORP Inc. & THE DEATH OF LESLY YARITZA

By Lauren Carasik and Grahame Russell

Five year-old Lesly Yaritza had expressive brown eyes and sported an impish grin, despite the toxic stew of heavy metals and chemicals that coursed through her body and ravaged her muscles.



(2007, by Gwen Meyer)

In a tragically premature end to a childhood marked by the progressive deterioration of the musculature in her lower limbs, Lesly died a completely preventable death on September 25, 2010.

At the time of her death, tests revealed that Lesly's blood contained dangerous levels of arsenic and lead, most likely attributable to Goldcorp Inc's "San Martin" mine that blighted the landscape of her community since before she was born into the community of Nueva Palo Ralo that, years before, had been forcibly relocated by Goldcorp.

THE REAL COSTS OF GOLD MINING: GOLDCORP IN HONDURAS

Lesly Yaritza appears in a 2008 YouTube documentary film (9 minutes) - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PhV9lgZT4qg> (The Real Costs of Gold Mining: Goldcorp in Honduras). During her truncated life, Lesly lived in Nueva Palo Ralo in the lush Siria Valley where Canadian mining company Goldcorp (via its subsidiary Entre Mares) operated the least expensive, most harmful form of gold mining - mountain-top removal, open-pit and cyanide-leaching. This process leeches toxic chemicals into surrounding creeks, rivers and underground aquifers.

Advocates and community members have long documented the presence of heavy metals and chemicals in local water sources. Tests of local drinking water revealed the presence of a range of heavy metals known to damage human health, including arsenic, lead, mercury, cadmium, magnesium, chromium and nickel. These harms are documented in "All That Glitters Isn't Gold", a 10 minute YouTube film - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-tmqXc5rX8s>.

COVER-UP OF GOVERNMENT BLOOD AND URINE TESTS

Responding finally to escalating pressure to measure the environmental and human health costs of gold mining, the Honduran government in 2007 took blood samples from 62 Siria Valley residents. Many tested (including Lesly) were children, particularly susceptible to the damaging effects of heavy metals as their brains and bodies develop.

Although the 2007 test results revealed harmfully high levels of contamination in the majority of the samples, the government failed to disclose this information until April 2011, four years after the samples were analyzed, 8 months after Lesly died. For four years, local residents were in the dark about toxic levels of arsenic and lead and unable to remediate the harm, let alone fully understand the health problems they were suffering. Lesly's blood levels of lead and arsenic exceeded acceptable levels as set by the WHO (World Health Organization).

"OPEN VEINS OF LATIN AMERICA"

Foreign exploitation of Latin American resources is centuries old. As riches have flowed out of the region, generations of Latin Americans have struggled to survive in conditions of exploitation and grinding poverty usually kept in place by repression. One can read of this in Eduardo Galeano's "Open Veins of Latin America."

The current situation in Honduras did not evolve in a vacuum. Even as Hurricane Mitch was devastating the country in 1998, leaving an estimated 15,000 dead and one million displaced, the Honduran Congress passed a mining law – with no public consultation or debate –, utterly favourable to the international mining industry, setting off a piñata frenzy of handing out concessions to international, mostly Canadian mining companies. It is widely rumoured in Honduras that mining company officials actually drafted the law that Congress passed.

In 2008, the government of President Zelaya decreed a moratorium on handing out new concessions to mining companies, after the Supreme Court of Honduras found at least 13 articles of the 1998 mining law to be unconstitutional. Though the moratorium did not affect Goldcorp's mining operation (that was 'grand-fathered' into the application of the moratorium), this sent a message that mining companies were no longer going to be given carte blanche in their mining operations. Zelaya's government made particularly critical comments about the environmental and health problems inherent to open-pit, cyanide leaching mine operations.

On June 28, 2009, the government of Zelaya was ousted by a military coup. Since that time, poverty has increased even more, and State-sponsored repression has returned to levels similar to the 1980s. It is rumoured that the current, military-backed regime aims to pass a re-vamped mining law, one that again favours the mining industry.

“DEVELOPMENT”, REPRESSION AND IMPUNITY

Honduras is sacrificing the health and well-being of its most vulnerable citizens and its environment at the altar of “development”. North American corporations and investors, not the local communities, are being enriched by the mineral extraction.

As the Honduran government is unable or unwilling to enforce strict regulations and ensure full legal accountability, there is nothing to deter Goldcorp and other corporations from continuing to extract minerals at an incalculable human and environmental cost. Even if mining practices are suspended, remediation of past harm is critical. Experts note that if the environmental damage is not remediated, the once fertile Siria Valley will likely be plagued by acid drainage for generations.

Since the 2009 military coup, State repression and generalized violence are again out of control in Honduras (now known as the “Murder Capital” of the world), rendering communities further disempowered and the rule of law an unattainable ideal. Since Honduras has not effectively halted or even mitigated the damages caused by Goldcorp’s open pit mining, the international community must step up to the plate. Silence is complicit acquiescence.

Canadians must pressure their own government to support a fully independent inquiry into the health and environmental harms, and other human rights violations caused directly or indirectly by Goldcorp’s San Martin mine, to then support the implementation of a complete compensation and reparations plan.

More broadly, Canada needs to pass legislation that allows its corporations to be held legally accountable for crimes and harms they cause far from their boardrooms. North Americans must demand that pension fund managers invest their retirement funds responsibly and refuse to grow their portfolios on the backs of poor Hondurans.

No parents should bury a child because a remote corporation cared little about the heavy metals that would cause fatal damage her frail body. Lesly Yaritza could be anyone’s daughter.



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