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CANADA AND CHILE MEDDLING IN HONDURAS' ECONOMIC AND SECURITY POLICIES

by Karen Spring and Sandra Cuffe, 21 May 2012

<http://upside-downworld.org/main/honduras-archives-46/3645-canada-and-chile-meddling-in-hondurass-economic-and-security-policies>

Few people would likely draw connections between a Canadian diplomat, Honduran public security reform, a retired Chilean General, and an extractive industry draft law proposal in Honduras. But Canada and Chile are jointly involved in both public security reform and proposed mining, oil and gas legislation in Honduras.

Earlier this week, the Canadian government appointed Adam Blackwell as the country's representative to the five-member Honduran Public Security Reform Commission. Currently the Organization of American States (OAS) Secretary of Multidimensional Security, Blackwell was previously an outspoken advocate of mining legislation reform favourable to Canadian companies as a diplomat in the Dominican Republic.

Established by the Honduran Congress in January, the Public Security Reform Commission's mandate is to design, plan and certify a process of integral reform of public security in Honduras. The Commission's work will include investigating and evaluating the performance not only of the national police force, but also that of public prosecutors and judges.

At the same time, the governments of Canada and Chile - the origin of the other international member of the Commission - have been involved in the development of the new Honduran mining and hydrocarbons law, providing advisors and experts to the Honduran government to review the draft legislation. Both Canada and Chile have significant mining interests in Honduras. Expected to be ratified by Congress by the end of June, the law would establish a new two percent "Security Tax" on sales and exports, requiring companies to fund Honduran security forces.

Reports of the involvement of State security forces in human rights violations, organized crime, torture and extra-judicial killings continue to surface.

Four local civilian residents of the Honduran Mosquitia region - including two pregnant women - were shot and killed on May 11 in an anti-narcotics operation involving the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), military contractors, helicopters owned by the U.S. State Department, Guatemalan military personnel, and Honduran police.

On May 14, prominent LGBT activist Erick Martinez was found murdered. Two days later, the body of journalist Alfredo Villatoro was found, a week after he had been kidnapped. Dozens of journalists and LGBT activists have been murdered since the June 2009 coup that ousted President Manuel Zelaya. Many of them were actively involved in the resistance movement to the coup and in most cases no one has been brought to justice for their murders.

Arrests were made last week, however, in connection with the death of Villatoro, a close friend of President Porfirio Lobo Sosa. One of the people detained in relation to Villatoro's murder is a police officer, National Autonomous University of Honduras (UNAH) rector Julieta Castellanos told HRN radio on May 20.

"Human rights in Honduras are in a state of emergency," says Bertha Oliva, director of the Committee of Relatives of the Detained-Disappeared in Honduras (COFADEH). "There is no governance because all institutions involved in 'justice' sustain and promote injustice, and are involved in crime."

CANADIAN AND CHILEAN INFLUENCE ON HONDURAN PUBLIC SECURITY REFORM COMMISSION

The Canadian government's appointment of Adam Blackwell completes the five-member Honduran Public Security Reform Commission. The commission's other foreign representative is Aquiles Blu Rodriguez, a retired General from Chile's Carabineros national police force. Blackwell and Blu Rodriguez will sit alongside the three Hondurans on the Commission: Jorge Omar Casco, Matias Funes, and Victor Meza.

In 2011, Blu Rodriguez was accused by former Carabineros Lieutenant Alvaro Ureta Sepulveda of covering up a drug trafficking network in Chile, of being responsible for the disappearance of 20 kilograms of cocaine, and of altering a police report to benefit the son of a former military official. Blu Rodriguez retired shortly after the scandal made the Chilean news.

The Honduran government's acceptance of his appointment to the Commission by the government of Chile has been openly questioned by Honduran Congressman Augusto Cruz, among others.

In October 2011, the son of the UNAH rector Castellanos was murdered along with a friend by police in the Honduran capital city, Tegucigalpa. Their murder led to a national and international outcry for Honduran security reform. Although some restructuring of the national police force took place in late 2011, the National Congress established the Honduran Public Security Reform Commission in January 2012.

But many Honduran human rights organizations have very little faith that government-appointed commissions will produce any tangible results.

"Since the coup, the State of Honduras has received a lot of recommendations including from the Truth Commission, in which national and international representatives - including a representative from Canada - participated at the service of [President Porfirio] Lobo," explains Oliva, one of the country's most prominent human rights activists. "They gave [over 80] recommendations and none have been complied with."

"The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights has also given many recommendations and none have been fulfilled," says Oliva. "The state

has appointed two or three commissions to examine the recommendations, but they will not do anything."

Victor Meza, Minister of the Interior during the Zelaya Administration, is a well-known intellectual and has expressed critical perspectives about Honduran security forces. "With little capacity for investigation, the police do not have any public credibility. They are despised by the public since the coup for the role they played in repressing the marches [of the resistance movement to the coup]," says Meza. "When I started studying the problem, I thought that the police were part of the solution and then later I realized they were part of the problem. Now, they are the problem."

Violence and social conflict in Honduras are often presented as being largely a product of gang violence, organized crime, and drug trafficking. But Meza points out that social conflict is most often related to the country's natural resources. In fact, a 2008 study by the Honduras Documentation Center found that the source of 52% of all conflict in Honduras was the management of natural resources, including lands, water, forests, and mines.

A CANADIAN DIPLOMAT'S CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

Adam Blackwell, the Canadian representative to the Honduran Public Security Reform Commission, is currently the OAS Secretary for Multidimensional Security. Prior to his post at the OAS, Blackwell was the Canadian Ambassador to the Dominican Republic from 2002 to 2005.

During his diplomatic term in the country, the government of the Dominican Republic began bilateral Free Trade Agreement negotiations with Canada, reformed its mining legislation, and signed several deals for Canadian corporate investment projects in various sectors - including a permit allowing GlobeStar Mining Corp to mine the Cerro de Maimon gold and copper deposits.

According to the DR1 news compilation service, the El Caribe newspaper reported that at a February 2003 'Canada and Dominican Republic: Closer than ever' trade seminar in the Dominican Republic, Blackwell said that "certain changes in the mining laws are required to entice serious investments in this area [...] Blackwell said that Placer Dome, the massive Canadian mining consortium, is holding back a US\$300-million investment in Pueblo Viejo, Azua until these changes can be effected."

On April 14, 2003, during an official visit to the Dominican Republic by then Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien, Congress passed changes to the country's mining legislation. The congressional act formalized approval for a 25-year lease agreement with Vancouver-based Placer Dome for the Pueblo Viejo gold deposit, which had previously been exploited as a state-run mining operation during the 1980s and 1990s. The mine is now jointly owned by Toronto-based gold mining giant Barrick and Vancouver-based Goldcorp, with production slated to commence in mid-2012.

"This is now the green light," Ambassador Blackwell said back in April 2003, according to the Globe and Mail. In 2004, El Caribe reported that Canada had become responsible for ninety per cent of all investment in the mining sector in the Dominican Republic.

MINING, OIL AND GAS COMPANIES TO FUND STATE SECURITY

While Blackwell and Blu Rodriguez represent Canada and Chile on the Honduran Public Security Reform Commission, both governments have also been involved in the development of a new mining, oil and gas law in Honduras, slated for congressional approval by the end of June.

In March 2012, while in Toronto attending the Prospectors and Developers Association of Canada (PDAC) convention, Cuellar told El Heraldo reporter Claudia Gamez that SERNA had sought the review of the proposed Honduran law by international experts, made possible through the agreements signed with Chile and Canada.

The same El Heraldo reporter writes that the Secretariat of Natural Resources and the Environment (SERNA) made an agreement with the Canadian government to contract international advisors - to be paid by Canadian government funds - to review the proposed General Law on Mining and Hydrocarbons before it is ratified. In January 2012, Chilean Vice Minister of Mines Pablo Wagner San Mart n signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Rigoberto Cuellar, Secretary of SERNA, to begin a process of technical cooperation on mining.

In its current draft form, Article 70 of the General Law on Mining and Hydrocarbons would establish royalties in the form of a monthly tax, requiring mining, oil and gas companies to pay four and a half per cent of

the value of their sales and exports. Two percent would be paid to the municipality in which the extractive activities take place, a half percent would be destined for the Mining Authority, and the remaining two percent would be paid to the national treasury as a 'Security Tax' (Tasa de Seguridad).

Legislated direct funding of Honduran State security by mining, oil and gas corporations is not contemplated in previous proposals of extractive industry legislation nor does it exist in the current law.

The existing General Mining Law of Honduras was ratified by Congress without debate in 1998, while the country was scrambling from the devastation of Hurricane Mitch. Diverse campaigns on mining issues gathered steam a few years later, after Canadian mining company Glamis Gold - now Goldcorp - developed the San Martin open pit gold mine in the Siria Valley, an hour and a half northeast of the capital.

Honduran and international non-governmental organizations (NGOS) have engaged in their own campaigns on the issue, for law reform and corporate accountability; however, the grassroots movement in Honduras has largely been led by local community members from the Siria Valley and other areas directly affected by mining projects and concessions. The latter, a movement of popular resistance, has fought for an outright ban on large-scale metallic mining in the country.

In March 2006, lawyer Clarissa Vega brought a case to the Supreme Court of Honduras on behalf of members of the Siria Valley Environmental Committee, the Mother Earth Movement, the Committee for the Defense and Development of Flora and Fauna of the Gulf of Fonseca (CODDEFFAGOLF), and others. They sought to have the 1998 mining law declared unconstitutional. Some NGOs had cautioned that the initiative was unrealistic and opted not to participate, choosing instead to continue their campaigns for more moderate legislative reforms.

But the grassroots groups' Supreme Court case was ultimately successful.

On October 4, 2006, the Supreme Court ruled that 13 different articles of the General Mining Law contravened the Honduran Constitution and were thus declared null and void. The articles in question dealt with

issues including the forced expropriation of lands in the name of public interest, royalties, workers' rights, and environmental impact assessments. The Supreme Court ruling also set important jurisprudence in the country, recognizing the right to a healthy environment, the precautionary principle, the importance of consultation, and the fact that mining is "highly contaminating and damaging to life."

In the wake of the Supreme Court decision, mining concessions in Honduras were suspended and a temporary moratorium on new concessions was enacted. The grassroots movement of resistance to mining held demonstrations and actions throughout the Zelaya Administration both to ensure the ongoing renewal of the moratorium and to demand a new mining law banning open pit metallic mining. Work on draft legislation to that effect, developed by affected communities and NGOs alongside presidential advisors, was cut short by the 2009 coup. A Congressional Committee had also been working on a mining law proposal requiring fifty per cent State involvement in all mining ventures.

With advisors reviewing the current draft General Law on Mining and Hydrocarbons, Canada and Chile are the origin of extractive industry corporations with interests in Honduras. As is the case around the world, Canadian companies in particular have dominated the mining industry in Honduras. Vancouver-based Goldcorp's San Martin gold mine in the Siria Valley is now closed, but the affected communities continue to fight for justice for ongoing environmental and health impacts. The company also has several other concessions in the country.

Canadian company Aura Minerals acquired the San Andres open-pit heap leach gold mine in western Honduras in August 2009. The El Mochito zinc mine in western Honduras was previously operated by Canadian company Breakwater Resources Ltd before the company was taken over by European Nyrstar in August 2011. Mining concessions are also owned by several Canadian junior companies engaged in exploration.

The involvement of Canada and Chile in extractive industry legislation development and public security reform is clear. How their interventions unfold in Honduras, however, remain to be seen.

[Currently in Honduras, Karen Spring is a human rights and mining justice activist working with Rights Action. She lived and worked in Honduras from 2008 to 2011 and is now based out of Vancouver. Karen can be reached at: spring.kj@gmail.com. Sandra Cuffe lived in Honduras from 2003 to 2007, working as a human rights activist and researcher with Rights Action, and returned in July 2009 as an independent reporter for several months. She is currently a Vancouver-based freelance journalist and can be reached at: sandra.m.cuffe@gmail.com.]

TWO MORE KILLINGS IN THE AGUAN: Jose Efrain Del Cid and Juan Jose Peralta Escoto

By Annie Bird, annie@rightsaction.org, May 19, 2012

On Friday, May 18 at approximately 7:30pm, Jose Efrain Del Cid, a member of the Nueva Panama Campesino Business, one of the 14 campesino organizations that make up the Campesino Movement of the Aguan on the Left Bank (MUCA-MI), was shot while sitting in a car in the municipality of Sonaguerra, Colon. He was shot several times in the face. He was traveling with a fellow campesino who had just gotten out of the car moments prior to the killing.

This killing occurs just three days after Juan Jose Peralta Escoto, a member of the 21 of Julio Cooperative, also one of the 14 cooperatives and campesino businesses that form the MUCA-MI, was shot and killed in Tocoa near the town of La Confianza on May 16 at approximately 9:30am. Witnesses report that the car in which Juan Jose Peralta, his son of the same name, and Antonio Velez were traveling was pursued by Dinant Corporation security guards firing at them. Juan Jose Peralta son and Antonio Velez were also injured in the attack.

MUCA-MI is currently in the final stages of negotiating terms for the purchase of a portion of the lands the government and palm oil planters have promised to sell the campesinos in an agreement signed April 17, 2010. Lands demanded by campesinos were agrarian reform lands taken from them in many cases through fraud, violence and threat in the 1990s after changes in Land Reform legislation opened allowed agrarian reform laws to be resold.

Over the past two years of extreme violence against over 60 land rights activists in the Aguan and people associated with them have been killed, most in what appear to be death squad style assassinations in which private security forces hired by palm planters, principally the Orion Security Company, the 15th Batallion and 4th Naval Base, and the Tocoa Police have been particularly blamed by area residents for the killings.

The 15th Batallion and 4th Naval have received training from the U.S. Army Rangers and the Marines.

On May 11, 2012 a U.S. State Department helicopter carrying Honduran and Guatemalan security forces, private contractors and DEA in the nearby region of the Mosquita fired on a canoe carrying 13 Miskitu villagers local authorities and neighbor affirm were not involved in drug trafficking activities and were unarmed.

Four were killed, including two pregnant women and a 15 year old. U.S. official responses have implied that local officials who denounced the massacre are involved in drug trafficking and to implicate the local indigenous population in drug trafficking activities.

WHAT TO DO

NO MORE POLITICS AND BUSINESS AS USUAL

Rights Action asks North Americans to donate funds to the courageous grassroots organizations in Honduras (see below), ... and to keep on, keep on, keep on sending copies of this information, and your own letters, to your own elected politicians (congress members, senators, members of parliament) and to other government officials and your local media. Since the June 2009 military coup, that ousted the democratically elected government of President Zelaya in Honduras, the governments of the USA and Canada are the governments that have most supported and legitimized the post-coup, military-backed regime of Honduras. North American companies and investors have increased their business activities in Honduras since the coup. In no small part, this illegitimate, repressive regime remains in power due to its political, economic and military relations with the USA and Canada.

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