

Maya Q'eqchi' land & environment defenders vs Mining A 60-year human rights & justice struggle

<https://mailchi.mp/rightsaction/qqqchi-land-environment-defenders-vs-mining>

Action & funds needed

By Grahame Russell

Greetings. I just finished an 18 day trip, mainly in the mining-harmed territories of the Maya Q'eqchi' people in eastern Guatemala.

As I complete this report / funding appeal, yet another Q'eqchi' land and rights defender – Cristobal Pop (who Rights Action has been supporting since 2017) – has been jailed on trumped up charges.



On behalf of the illegal 'Fenix' mining operation of the Swiss company **Solway Investment Group**, Cristobal Pop was arrested June 13, 2022, on fraudulent, politically-motivated criminal charges.

As many of you may know, Rights Action has been very involved in funding and supporting Indigenous land and environmental defenders, and their human rights and justice struggles in these Q'eqchi' territories since 2004.

With the immediacy of this recent trip in mind, Rights Action sends this special appeal for their work and struggles.



The Fenix nickel mine plant, first built in the 1970s by Canadian mining giant INCO (International Nickel Company) on north shore of Lake Izabal, by the mouth of Polochic River
Foreground: some of the mountain-top removal mining occurring today

For a number of complex and very unfortunate reasons, the human rights/ repression/ corruption/ impunity situation is even harder in this region, and has been going on longer, than in other regions of Guatemala – Honduras, as well - where people and communities that Rights Action supports are involved in their own community defense struggles.

Rights Action - In summary

Funding community defense struggles

Since 1995, Rights Action has been funding Indigenous and non-Indigenous community organizations carrying out territory and environmental defense struggles, and human rights and justice struggles in Guatemala and Honduras.

Emergency response funds

Rights Action provides funds to our partner groups and communities in response to climate disasters (ex: hurricanes Mitch, Stan, Eta, Iota), to the harsh impact of COVID, and to repression that they suffer on an on-going basis.



“The mask does not cover up hunger and misery”

Global north accountability

At every step of the way, Rights Action builds north-south relationships between partner groups and solidarity groups and folks in the US and Canada, and carries out education, activism and legal actions to try and hold accountable the US and Canadian governments, our companies and investors – including institutions such as the World Bank - that often contribute to and profit from the exploitation and poverty, environmental destruction, repression and violence, corruption and impunity that our partner groups are suffering.

The exploitative, violent, global economic «development» model

Across Honduras and Guatemala, like in many countries of the global south, people suffer systemic human rights violations, environmental and health harms, land theft, repression and corruption, caused by the ‘for-export’ production of African palm and sugar cane, bananas and pineapples, mineral resources and hydro-electric energy, maquiladora ‘sweatshop’ clothing, and by the tourism industry.



Much of what they suffer, year in and year out, is caused by this violently imposed economic/political order ... that many refer to as global capitalism, free markets, neo-liberalism, neo-imperialism, etc.

"Our privileges are located on the same map as their suffering, and may -in ways we prefer not to imagine- be linked to their suffering, as the wealth of some may imply the destitution of others."
(Susan Sontag)

And they resist.

They struggle, work and advocate to stay on their own lands, and for an end to the repression, harms and corruption caused by this global economic model.

They struggle for a different "development" model, one that is owned, controlled and implemented locally, based on fundamental notions of equality of individuals and peoples, one that is respectful of the environment, of Mother Earth.



"Solidarity is the virus that capitalism fears. Re-weaving our networks
Organize your community / The commons / Mutual support"

Not a "resource curse"

In certain circles, one hears of a so-called "resource curse" - ie, that people live on lands that wealthy economic interests (national and international) covet, to produce these 'for-export' products, or for tourism complexes.

The problem is not, of course, land and earth, forests, water sources and mountains.

The problem is, of course, the exploitative, oft-times violent global economic model.

The curse is the repression and exploitation, corruption and impunity with which powerful economic actors operate, backed by complicit governments, local economic elites, military and police.

Q'eqchi' territories

The Q'eqchi' territories of eastern Guatemala are rich with arable lands, fresh water, forests, rivers and mountains.



Without re-telling a 500-year story of violent dispossession during centuries of imperialism, colonialism and settler-colonialism, in the late 1800s, racist, repressive regimes (that of Rufino Barrios in particular, a military general and president from 1873 to 1885) began violently evicting Q'eqchi' peoples from their lands in the Polochic and Cahobon river valleys through to the north shores of lake Izabal in El Estor, illegally handing these lands to European immigrants who were “bringing development”.

“Glorious victory”

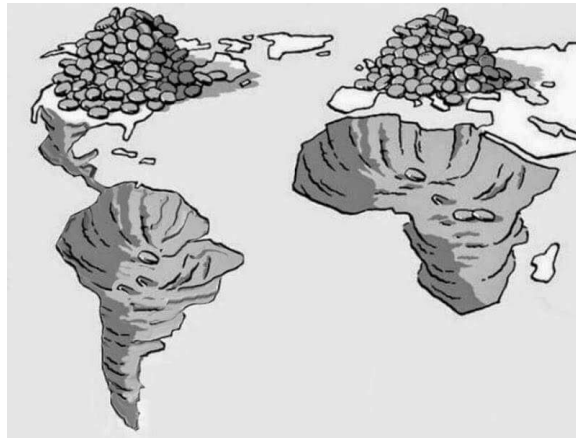
This model of violent “development” picked up ever more so after the US military coup in 1954, that ousted Guatemala’s last real democratic government.



Mexican painter Diego Rivera's mural - "Glorious Victory" – depicting the 1954 U.S. coup. In the foreground, CIA director Allen Dulles shakes the hand of coup "leader" (selected by the U.S.) Colonel Castillo Armas. Allen Dulles' left hand rests on a bomb with the face of U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower. Behind Allen, brother John Foster Dulles, head of the State Department, and John Peurifoy, Ambassador to Guatemala, hand out cash to Guatemalan military commanders. A Catholic priest officiates over the killing of Mayans and other impoverished Guatemalans, while exploited workers carry United Fruit Company bananas.)

The curse of violent, corrupt mining

While a range of powerful international economic interests (with their local economic elite partners) have long coveted the lands of the Q'eqchi' peoples, no sector of the global economy has been more dominating, violent, corrupt and destructive in this region than nickel mining.



In the 1950s, after the US-orchestrated military coup, huge nickel deposits were located in the mountains that run east-west along the north and south shores of Lake Izabal.

From the 1960s through to 2011, successive Canadian companies (INCO, Skye Resources, Hudbay Minerals) controlled (illegally, according to the Q'eqchi' peoples of the region) huge swathes of Q'eqchi' lands, backed by the Canadian government and successive Guatemalan regimes.

Since 2011, Solway Investment Group, a Swiss company, took over ownership and control of these nickel mining interests, through to today.

Since the 1960s, the Q'eqchi' people have been under siege of nickel-mining, on and off.

In the 1970s and early 80s, they experienced a serious wave of violent dispossession and repression. Then, after a 20-year lull, the dispossession, repression and harms began again in 2004, and continue through to today.

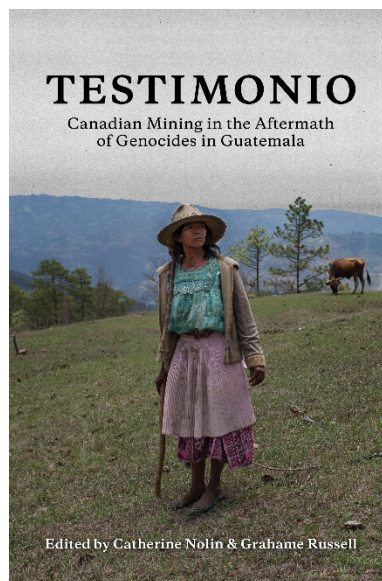
There is no end in sight.

Rights Action's archives (<https://rightsaction.org/archives>) have a fair amount of information about all of this, particularly from 2004 forward.

TESTIMONIO: Canadian Mining in the Aftermath of Genocides in Guatemala

Ever since the current wave of Canadian-led, global mining began again in Guatemala in 2004, Rights Action has been funding and supporting four community defense struggles in different parts of the country, related to companies mainly from Canada, and also from the U.S. and Switzerland.

Much of this is documented in TESTIMONIO, edited by Catherine Nolin and Grahame Russell, published in 2021 by Between The Lines (<https://btlbooks.com/book/testimonio>, <https://testimoniothebook.org>).



The community defense struggle that has gone on the longest, that has left behind the most dispossession, repression and killings, environmental and health harms, is that of the nickel mining resistance struggles in the Q'eqchi' territories of El Estor.

Forbidden Stories “Mining Secrets”

Beyond documentation one finds in the Rights Action archives and TESTIMONIO, a consortium of international media, working under the umbrella of Forbidden Stories, recently published an extensive series of “Mining Secrets” articles documenting what is going on, particularly since 2014, under the ownership and operation of Solway Investment Group.



Forbidden Stories articles:

<https://forbiddenstories.org/kiosk/mining-secrets-all-the-articles/>

What we have been funding

Since 2004, Rights Action has been the principal grassroots supporter of projects and resistance struggles planned and carried out by Q’eqchi’ land, rights and environmental defenders in this El Estor region.

- Emergency support for victims of forced evictions and land dispossession. Funds for: food and water, clothing and shelter, and minimal re-building material.
- Emergency support for victims (and family members) of repression, including killings, physical attacks and persecution; including criminalizations of land defenders on fraudulent charges and unjust jailings, including one land defender who spent 6 years in jail as a political prisoner. Funds for: family needs and security, getting people to safety from possible illegal detention, supporting people who have gone into exile in other countries, supporting people detained facing trumped up criminalization charges.



Ramiro Choc, Q'eqchi' land and rights defender, who spent 6 years in jail as a political prisoner

- On-going support for people who have suffered permanent health harms due to mining repression. Funds for: victims of shootings, rapes, physical attacks and woundings.
- Support for community defense organizations of the Q'eqchi' people. Funds for: community organization, education, mobilization, and communication/ outreach costs.
- Legal defense work for 'criminalized' land and rights defenders. Funds for: criminalization victims in jail, having to go to court, lawyers, human rights accompaniers.
- Support for landmark lawsuits in Canadian courts against Hudbay Minerals to seek justice for some of the mining-linked harms and violence.
- Support for these same community defenders, their families and communities, ravaged by over two years of COVID. Funds for: survival food and water supplies, medicines.
- Support for community defenders, their families and communities devastated by climate disasters such as Hurricanes Eta & Iota (2020). Funds for: survival food and water supplies, re-building housing supplies, re-planting crops, etc.

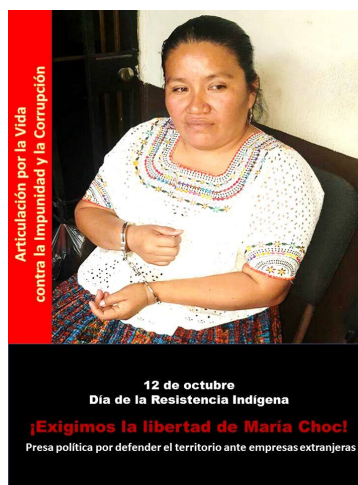
On request, Rights Action can provide more information about these 18 year of community funding and other support work.

Current funding priorities: \$61,000

Based on funding we have been doing in recent years, I summarize here the priority areas of work and struggle for 2022-23, and an estimate of an optimal amount of funds we would hope to raise.

Rights Action will continue with grassroots funding, to the best of our financial ability, in all these areas. (For interested foundations and institutional donors, I would be glad to put you in direct contact with the key people in these organizations.)

- Work of the “Gremial” (Union of Fisherpeople and Campesinos) organizing and working since 2017 to document and denounce the on-going mining harms and violence. Many Gremial leaders (such as Cristobal Pop, arrested on trumped charges on June 13, 2022) are now criminalized: \$10,000
- Legal struggles in Guatemalan courts, since 2018, to support victims of ‘criminalizations’ of land defenders, having to defend themselves from spurious, trumped up criminal charges: \$10,000



Eduardo Bin and Maria Choc, criminalized Q’eqchi’ fisherman and land and rights defender

- Legal efforts in Guatemalan courts to try to oblige government authorities to suspend the illegal mining operation of the current owners, as ordered by the Constitutional Court: \$10,000
- The work of the newly formed Consejo Ancestral de Pueblos Q’eqchi’s, organizing and working since 2020 to document and denounce the on-going mining harms and violence. Many members of this Consejo are ‘criminalized’: \$10,000
- The on-going legal struggles in Canadian courts, initiated in 2010: \$15,000
- On-going, periodic health needs of victims of mining repression: \$6,000

Thank-you for considering on-going – or first-time support for these struggles and work. Please send me your questions and comments

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Tax-Deductible Donations (Canada & U.S.)

To support the Q’eqchi’ community defenders, make check to "Rights Action" and mail to:

- U.S.: Box 50887, Washington DC, 20091-0887
- Canada: (Box 552) 351 Queen St. E, Toronto ON, M5A-1T8

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Donations of securities in Canada and the U.S.? Write to: info@rightsaction.org

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