

April 18, 2005

Guatemala & mining. As lead up to the Glamis Gold company's annual meeting, May 5, Toronto (Canada), Rights Action [www.rightsaction.org] circulates this Washington Post article and Statement made by Indigenous leaders in Guatemala.

To support community-controlled development in Guatemala, to come on an educational delegation to Guatemala in July, or to be involved in efforts to educate about the harmful impacts of the global mining industry, contact: info@rightsaction.org.

To get on-off this elist: info@rightsaction.org.

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"PROTESTS FROM GUATEMALA'S PULPITS. MINE DISPUTE KINDLES RESURGENT ACTIVISM IN CATHOLIC CHURCH", by Kevin Sullivan, Washington Post, April 13, 2005; Page A10

SAN MIGUEL IXTAHUACAN, Guatemala -- The Rev. Eric Gruloos strode around a church classroom in this hillside hamlet, holding up a melon-size rock. "They have not told us the truth about the mine!" he charged, as nearly 30 Catholic parishioners took notes.

[PHOTO: The Rev. Eric Gruloos leads a service in San Miguel Ixtahuacan, in an area where a mining project has upset church leaders. (Kevin Sullivan -- The Washington Post)]

The rock, he explained, was the kind that comes from the big open-pit gold mine that huge bulldozers are carving out of the mountains nearby, a multimillion-dollar project that Catholic Church officials have vehemently protested from the pulpit, on a church-owned radio station and in street demonstrations led by the local bishop.

Gruloos rattled off statistics about arsenic and other contaminants that can come from rocks like the one in his hand. He spoke of the potential environmental dangers of mining, slowly explaining basic science to his indigenous parishioners, almost none of whom had finished primary school. "We have to be strong so we are not manipulated," Gruloos said. "Some are upset that the church is speaking out against the mine. But we are doing what Jesus did. He came to wake people up to injustice."

The Catholic Church's aggressive opposition to the mine project, being built by a Canadian company and backed by the Guatemalan government, is the kind of grass-roots political and social activism by clergymen that dominated Latin America a generation ago, when outspoken priests and bishops openly challenged authoritarian governments.

During the nearly 27 years of Pope John Paul II's tenure, such aggressive social agitation faded with the arrival of a new generation of more conservative priests more closely aligned with the Vatican. While liberal as well as conservative clergymen campaign for Latin America's most marginalized people, they have markedly different philosophies about how to do it. Both sides stand with the poor, but the liberals are far more likely to march with them, too. Reconciling the differing approaches to the church's role in social justice issues in Latin America will be a major challenge for John Paul's successor, according to interviews with clergymen and church scholars.

"We need to examine our consciences and change. We have forgotten our fundamental commitment to poor people," said Bishop Alvaro Ramazzini, the activist in charge of the diocese that includes San Miguel, a small town tucked in a valley surrounded by mountains and reachable by a single dirt road.

In January, Ramazzini led an anti-mine protest through the streets of San Marcos, the provincial capital. He told protesters that the foreign interests behind the mine profited from Guatemala's natural resources while bringing little benefit to poor residents.

The march was a direct challenge to President Oscar Berger, whose government says the mine is environmentally safe and will bring hundreds of much-needed jobs and millions of dollars in tax revenue. Michael Steeves, a mining company spokesman reached in Reno, Nev., said he was "baffled" by the church's opposition to the mine and cited the same benefits mentioned by the president.

In a rare public spat with the church, Berger accused Ramazzini of organizing a second anti-mine demonstration, in which one protester was killed in a confrontation with police. Ramazzini said he does not advocate violence and had nothing to do with that incident, and Cardinal Rodolfo Quezada Toruno of Guatemala City publicly rebuked Berger, saying his comments made it seem that "the government only responds to the interests of transnational companies." Shortly afterward, Ramazzini received a death threat; he is now accompanied by government bodyguards round-the-clock.

"Even some of my colleagues tell me not to become so involved, to be quiet," said Ramazzini, 57, who has led previous protests over working conditions in the huge coffee plantations in his diocese and over land rights issues plaguing his indigenous parishioners. "But for me it is a matter of conscience," he said. "If we don't evangelize to help poor people, it's not the evangelizing of Jesus Christ, and we have to ask ourselves what kind of evangelizing we are doing."

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Statement from the

**I Regional Conference of Indigenous Authorities from the Western Highlands:
"MINING AND THE PATRIMONY OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES"**

March 31st and April 1 in the city of Totonicapán (Guatemala), with participation of representatives from the departments of Huehuetenango, El Quiché, San Marcos,

Quetzaltenango, Totonicapán and Sololá.

TO: the Central Government, Municipal Governments, Guatemalan Society, Indigenous Peoples, and the International Community.

WE DENOUNCE

1. The intentional unfulfillment of President Oscar Berger's commitments to indigenous peoples, proven by actions contradictory to his promises. We also denounce the misleading attitude of Vice President Eduardo Stein, whose lies to the population of Sololá became clear when he did not attend a meeting on February 6th. This February 6th dialogue had previously been arranged with the population of Sololá in order to clarify the government's decision to use excessive force and repression instead of open dialogue.

In the same vein, we denounce the farcical participation of the Vice Minister of Energy and Mines March 3rd in an audience with the Inter-American Human Rights Commission regarding the human rights violations related to metallic mining; the deception of Presidential Human Rights Commissioner Frank La Rue, who did not follow through with his commitment to attend a dialogue March 16th with indigenous authorities, campesino, indigenous, union, social and teacher organizations in El Quiché, regarding the reasons behind a protest March 15th in the same city.

2. We denounce: the repression, persecution, threats, jailing and assassination of our indigenous brothers and sisters who demonstrated their inconformity with the actions of the current government, exercising their rights as citizens and indigenous peoples. Also, we denounce the State security forces' violent repression of the multiple and frequent expressions of discontent all over the national territory; the current Minister of the Interior's strategy of repression against the just demands of the indigenous peoples for their natural resources; the threats of detention of indigenous, campesino, union, popular and social movement leaders; the assassination of our indigenous brothers and leaders Juan López (Huehuetenango), Raúl Castro Bocel (Sololá) and Álvaro Benigno Sánchez López (San Marcos).

3. We denounce the racist strategy driven by the President of the Republic to manipulate indigenous peoples by offering direct dialogue with the indigenous peoples - a dialogue that is never carried out. Instead of dialogue, at the same time as these empty promises, activities to de-legitimize and criminalize the just demands of indigenous peoples are implemented. We also denounce the unnecessary High Level Commission on Mining; the creation of 'Indigenous Advisors' (Asesores Indígenas) that have no legitimacy; the contracting of bilingual promoters to promote mining in indigenous communities; the lack of clarity in the suspension or cancellation of mining licenses for exploration and exploitation. As well, we denounce the transport of another cylinder or filter on March 31st to the Marlin project in San Miguel Ixtahuacán, accompanied by an excessive deployment of State security forces all along the stretch between Sololá and Totonicapán.

WE DEMAND

1. The fulfillment of agreements on the identity and rights of indigenous peoples, and strict respect of ILO Covenant 169.
2. An immediate halt to the criminalization of the right to protest and the use of the term

'terrorist' to de-legitimize the just demands of indigenous peoples and campesino, indigenous, union, popular and social movement organizations.

3. We hold the President of the Republic for the social polarization and the increased impunity of security forces in their actions against demonstrations, ending in the assassination of indigenous leaders.

4. Clarification of the assassinations of our brothers Castro, López and Sánchez, as well as fair reparations to their families.

5. The recognition and respect of indigenous authorities who are the legitimate representatives of indigenous peoples.

6. Respect of indigenous peoples' territory and institutions, as well as our use and administration of our natural resources.

WE AGREE

1. To create the Regional Council of Indigenous Peoples of the departments of Huehuetenango, El Quiché, San Marcos, Quetzaltenango, Totonicapán and Sololá.

2. To realize the Second Conference in the department of San Marcos, May 31 and June 1, 2005.

3. To continue with the firm commitment to defend our rights as indigenous peoples within the framework of democracy and the right to express ourselves and to protest.

In the city of Chuimekena, on the day Kiejib' K'awuk' (April 1st, 2005). The Indigenous Mayors of Huehuetenango, El Quiché, San Marcos, Quetzaltenango, Totonicapán and Sololá.

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