

June 8, 2005

**"We Have Inherited Our Lands": Community Resistance to Mining**, by Sandra Cuffe, Rights Action

**Rights Action commentary:** Often lost in the debate about the global mining industry are the historic issues of an exploitative and unjust global economic model. The underlying debate should not be so much about how to encourage or pressure global mining companies (and their North American government, private investors and World Bank supporters) to do mining in a nice way, but rather it should be about how to do work for global justice, equality and environmental well-being in a way that empowers and enables peoples and communities across the world to be in complete control over their lives, homes, communities and resources ... and all this in harmony and balance with the environment.

This article is based on work that Sandra is involved with in the region. Rights Action supports and works with the groups and networks mentioned below. Please redistribute and republish this article. If you want on/ off this elist: [info@rightsaction.org](mailto:info@rightsaction.org)

===

**"We Have Inherited Our Lands": Community Resistance to Mining**

On May 25, 2005, 51 indigenous community leaders and the mayor from the municipality of Comitancillo, San Marcos, descended on the city of Guatemala to present the results of community consultations in the municipality. In response to new mining concessions in the area granted by the government to Entre Mares, a subsidiary of Glamis Gold (a Canadian/ US company), the communities of Comitancillo immediately began organizing, raising awareness and coordinating the consultations.

The results of the consultation process - total opposition to mining exploration and exploitation - were presented to the Vice Minister of Energy and Mines Jorge García, of the Environment and Natural Resources Juan de Dios Calle, and a few representatives from Congress. The response was that the people of Comitancillo should not worry, since this was only a license for 'reconocimiento,' the first stage of several in Guatemala; however, what good is prospecting unless you have the option to continue exploration and exploitation? The community leaders of Comitancillo were also told that they had been misinformed about the impacts of mining in Honduras. According to the Guatemalan government officials referring to the mining-affected Siria Valley region, nothing was wrong in Honduras, people are doing great, and one should not turn away from the possibility that mining can reduce poverty.

The leadership and dignity of Comitancillo was reflected in the response of one indigenous community leader:

"Why would we accept prospecting when we're here to reject mining activities? This would only create more problems in the future. I came back from Honduras last night, so I know the situation of the people there and the problems mining is causing them. Insinuating that we are being manipulated is to underestimate us. We are poor, but money is not what most interests us; we have inherited our lands and we want to leave them in good conditions for

our descendants."

Just the night before he had returned from the "First Community Gathering of Resistance to Mining Exploration and Exploitation", which took place in El Porvenir, department of Francisco Morazan, Honduras, May 21 and 22, 2005. Dozens of community leaders and community-based organization representatives from communities affected and/or threatened by metallic mining in Guatemala and Honduras participated, sharing their experiences, seeing first-hand Glamis Gold's San Martin open pit gold mine and its disastrous impacts, and coordinating how together communities can face this situation.

'It's a horrible role,' Siria Valley Regional Environmental Committee members often comment, 'but our greatest contribution is being a mirror to show what can happen to other communities, so that they don't end up in our situation.' Every time I go out to the mine site, it's a profound shock to see the advancing devastation of the mountain-devourer (tragamontañas), as some refer to the mining company. One of the conclusions of medical brigades led by Doctor Juan Almendares in the Siria Valley - that aside from the proven contamination of water and land, mental health problems in the area may also be caused by the psychological impact of the environmental destruction - is easy to understand.

'The impact of the mining industry is accumulative in nature,' explains Juan Almendares in an article written for the event in the Siria Valley. The colonial and neocolonial history of Honduras is the history of export-oriented exploitation. Mining figures among bananas and other foreign-owned enclaves and industries that have controlled the land and people from the arrival of the Spanish to the present. 'The misfortune is that a century later it is not possible to make demands against a company that no longer exists with the same name,' writes Almendares in reference to the infamous New York and Rosario Mining Company that operated in different parts of the country for decades. 'Meanwhile, the contamination continues.'

'The promoters of neoliberalism,' write the Mártires de Guaymas, one of the participating organizations in the Gathering, 'have reached the extreme of proclaiming themselves the owners of our natural resources, with the right to sell them as if it were all part of their private estate.' Participants discussed the actors and ideas behind the mining legislation and policies in Central America - very much part of a global system of domination and exploitation.

'They will take away our gold and silver and will leave us the misery caused by the poisoning of the water, air and land; thus, what belongs to us will produce many riches for them but for us many illnesses, displacement of our population, destruction of our forests, and ongoing private and public repression.' In exchange for mirrors, comments another participant from Huehuetenango. It's an old story. "Three hundred years later our eyes are still closed," remarked teacher and Siria Valley Environmental Committee member Roger Escobar. "Puppies open their eyes after five days and we've taken 300 years!"

The strategies used by Glamis Gold to install itself in San Marcos (Guatemala), described by Javier de León of the local indigenous development organization Ajchmol, was almost a carbon copy of the company's tactics in the Siria Valley. Rodolfo Artiaga describes how the community of Palo Ralo was part tricked and part forced into selling their land. One of the only ones to resist, he was eventually persuaded to leave the community when it became clear that one person could not withstand the pressure of the company. The community - so

much more than the mere houses and land - has been destroyed. What is more, some five years later they still have not received proper documentation for the land and houses, which are located well within the mining concession, close to the mine. He showed the event participants the 'diplomas' for their lands and homes, signed by a Glamis Gold representative - documents with no legal validity whatsoever.

Although Glamis Gold was able to install itself in both the Siria Valley and in San Marcos, eyes have opened and resistance is growing. People from communities all over Guatemala and Honduras have learned from others' experiences and their eyes are definitely peeled. "It's not easy," says Roger Escobar. "We know that the companies have the entire government apparatus working in their favour." Indeed, the event statement and press coverage had only begun to circulate when the Guatemalan government was already promising to work at all costs against the Central American movement against open pit metallic mining, which the government claims 'shields' itself behind ILO Covenant 169.

Far from being a shield, the obligation to consult indigenous peoples prior to any projects affecting their lands or communities, as laid out in ILO Covenant 169 is law, although the right to consultations for all communities in order to decide the path of their own development is a demand heard all over Guatemala and Honduras. While the government apparatus may be working in favour of the transnational mining companies, communities are not standing around wringing their hands.

Shortly after the "First Community Gathering of Resistance to Mining Exploration and Exploitation", an open municipal hall meeting in El Progreso, Yoro decided to ban open pit mining in the municipality. Although the municipal authorities tried to shut out any room for public participation, over a hundred organizations of all sorts, led by the Mártires de Guaymas, fought to raise a motion proposing the resolution. Cornered, the authorities were forced to address the issue, and the resolution was passed unanimously.

The community-driven consultations in Comitancillo and the municipal ban in El Progreso are but two examples of the growing community-based resistance, with more actions soon to follow with similar dignity, clarity and initiative.

[The author, Sandra Cuffe, works with Rights Action in Honduras.]

\*\*\*

For more information about these issues, to participate in upcoming Rights Action delegations (July 5-13; July 9-16, 2005) dealing with these and other issues, or to make tax-deductible donations to Rights Action for the community-based organizations struggling for community development, environmental protection and rights in Honduras and Guatemala, contact Rights Action: [info@rightsaction.org](mailto:info@rightsaction.org), 416-654-2074, [www.rightsaction.org](http://www.rightsaction.org)