

WHO IS THE REAL 'PAID ACTRESS'?

Canadian ambassador to Guatemala says that an impoverished Mayan Q'eqchi' woman, interviewed in a January 2007 documentary about forced evictions in favour of Canadian Skye Resources nickel mining company, was a "paid actress".

The 9-minute documentary is available at: <http://www.rightsaction.org/video/elestor>.

A Dawn Paley article ("This is What Development Looks Like") is available at <http://www.dominionpaper.ca/articles/899>

a Jaime Rodriguez photo-essay of the evictions is available at: <http://mimundo.org>.

BELOW: You will find a public letter to the government of Canada. We ask you to read the letter, view the 9-minute documentary and the referred to photo-essay and article, and then consider sending your own letters of concern to the mentioned politicians and to your own MPs. MORE INFO: 860-352-2152, [info@rightsaction.org](mailto:info@rightsaction.org), [www.rightsaction.org](http://www.rightsaction.org)

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February 28, 2007 \*\*\* Public letter \*\*\*

Peter MacKay, Minister of Foreign Affairs, [MacKay.P@parl.gc.ca](mailto:MacKay.P@parl.gc.ca);  
James Lambert, Director General, Latin America and Caribbean Bureau, DFAIT, [james.lambert@international.gc.ca](mailto:james.lambert@international.gc.ca);  
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RE: Canadian ambassador to Guatemala says that an impoverished Mayan Q'eqchi' woman, interviewed in a documentary about forced evictions in favour of Canadian Skye Resources nickel mining company, was a "paid actress".

Dear Sirs,

We, the undersigned, write with deep concern over the recent conduct of Canadian ambassador to Guatemala, Kenneth Cook. Ambassador Cook has been misinforming people about the work of Canadian doctoral student Steven Schnoor, who has been in Central America for several months conducting CIDA-funded research, in collaboration with Rights Action and various Guatemalan organizations and communities. The ambassador's allegations also prejudice public perception of the territorial claims of indigenous Mayan Q'eqchi' communities affected by Canadian mining company Skye Resources.

Multiple sources, including Guatemalan church leaders, have now

attested that ambassador Cook has been engaging an active campaign of disinformation to discredit what Schnoor has brought to light in his recent work, which examines the conduct of Canadian mining companies operating in Central America, and traces complicity in human rights violations by such companies.

On January 8th and 9th of this year, Schnoor, Canadian journalist Dawn Paley and photographer James Rodriguez were present near the town of El Estor in eastern Guatemala during the forced evictions of several Mayan Q'eqchi' communities that had been residing on lands claimed to be owned by the Guatemalan Nickel Company -- a subsidiary of Canada's Skye Resources. The evictions were illegal, destructive and violent. Close to seven hundred police and soldiers -- many of whom were heavily armed -- encircled the communities as workers paid by the mining company destroyed people's homes.

The army's involvement in internal policing is illegal under the 1996 Guatemalan Peace Accords. Skye Resources claims that the evictions were peaceful and that the forces that carried them out were unarmed.

Schnoor captured the evictions on video, and produced a 9-minute documentary that refutes the company's claims. This video, which has now circulated widely on the internet, shows some of Rodriguez's photos of heavily armed soldiers running through the woods, as families watch their homes being burned to the ground. Also in the video, a Mayan Q'eqchi' woman furiously rails against the injustice of the situation as she and her family watch their home being dismantled by company employees, all the while surrounded by hundreds of police.

The 9-minute documentary is available at: <http://www.rightsaction.org/video/elestor>. A Dawn Paley article ("This is What Development Looks Like") is available at <http://www.dominionpaper.ca/articles/899>, and a Jaime Rodriguez photo-essay of the evictions is available at: <http://mimundo.org>.

In what can only be seen as an apparent effort to defend Skye's position and discredit the long-standing land claims, development and human rights needs of impoverished local Mayan Q'eqchi' peoples, ambassador Cook has been repeatedly spreading misinformation about Schnoor's video. Multiple sources attest that Cook has been insisting that the video lacks credibility for the following reasons:

1. The photographs shown in the video were not actually taken at the evictions; rather, they are actually old photographs -- from as far back as the Guatemalan civil war -- that have been used many times and in different places.
2. The impoverished Mayan Q'eqchi' woman who rails against the injustice of the forced evictions was actually an actress from the town of El Estor whom Schnoor paid to "perform" in this manner.

These accusations are extremely serious and entirely, unequivocally false. They discredit the legitimate voices of the Mayan people depicted in the video, and depict Schnoor as a manipulative propagandist. They deny the ugly reality on the ground, and imply that the indigenous peoples' voices of resistance and the images of the illegal evictions cannot possibly be real.

On Thursday, February 21st, Schnoor wrote an e-mail to ambassador Cook, insisting that the allegations are false and asking that Cook provide an account for why he, as a high-ranking representative of the government of Canada, would make such egregious statements. Schnoor respectfully asked Cook to cease making misrepresentations that cast aspersion on his work and interfere with his constitutionally guaranteed rights of freedom of expression.

To be absolutely clear: all photographs in Schnoor's video were shot by photographer James Rodriguez at the evictions near El Estor on January 8th and 9th, 2007. In fact, one particular photograph which Cook claims to have seen many times before -- of an indigenous man burying his head in his hand in a gesture of despair -- is currently on the cover of Guatemalan magazine *Este País* (February 2007, Vol. 2, No. 8) for a feature story on the recent evictions. Several more of Rodriguez's photos from the evictions can be found inside the magazine. Dawn Paley, the Canadian journalist who was also present at the evictions and was also photographing the events, has photographs of the very same individual. All are willing to testify and provide evidence that Cook's allegations are entirely false and that all photographs included in the video were indeed taken at the evictions.

Cook's allegation that the Mayan Q'eqchi' woman in the video was actually a paid actress is so absurd that it almost might not merit a serious response, were it not for the damage such a claim can do to Schnoor's reputation, to say little of how insulting such a claim is to the woman in question.

We hereby call upon the Government of Canada for an explanation, apology and inquiry into this matter. We are very concerned that such behaviour is symptomatic of a larger policy position which privileges Canadian extractive industries operating abroad over concerns for the rights and well-being of local communities.

Those familiar with Guatemalan history know that the country is infamous for its record of repression, corruption and flagrant violations of human rights. During the 36-year armed conflict, which officially ended 10 years ago, it is estimated that over 250,000 people were killed or disappeared -- 80% of whom were indigenous people.

Canadian mining investment is implicated in this bloody history.

Subsoil rights to the lands where the recent evictions took place were granted to INCO by a Guatemalan military government in 1965. INCO's activities were facilitated by brutal and repressive military dictatorships that massacred and repressed the local indigenous people. Both the United Nations Commission for Historical Clarification in Guatemala (CEH) and the *¡Nunca Mas!* ("Never Again") report by the Human Rights Office of the Archbishop of Guatemala, found INCO (through EXMIBAL -- the Guatemalan mining company 80% owned by INCO) complicit in grave human rights violations against opponents of the mining project, including threats and assassinations.

It is within this historical context and through the recent illegal evictions that Skye Resources advances its plans for the Fenix nickel mine in the region. It does so despite local indigenous peoples' claims that they were never previously and freely consulted, as required by the International Labor Organization's Convention 169 concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries, ratified by Guatemala in 1996. Furthermore, Skye has never produced property titles to many of the lands it claims to own -- casting doubt upon the legality of the recent evictions.

The serious human rights violations and developmental harms that for decades have accompanied nickel mining near El Estor are but a few examples amongst many -- from Guatemala to Ghana, from Colombia to the Congo -- of the complicity of Canadian mining companies, the Canadian government and by extension, the Canadian public, in political, socio-economic and cultural rights violations. For years, Canadian governments have promoted and funded harmful mining operations through the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT), the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), Export Development Canada (EDC) and the Canada Pension Plan (CPP).

Many of the mining activities supported are at complete odds with the locally-controlled integral development envisioned by local communities and indigenous peoples.

We call upon Ambassador Cook to provide an account for why he made his statements and to publicly retract them. We call upon the Government of Canada for an inquiry into this matter, investigating the broader implications of the ambassador's actions -- actions that are symptomatic of Canadian government policy that privileges Canadian extractive industries operating abroad over the human rights and development needs of local communities. Cook's predecessor, James Lambert, also made public statements defending Canadian mining investments while dismissing concerns over human rights violations in the process.

We also add our voices to the others that are demanding the ratification of binding legislation in Canada that would hold Canadian

mining companies and governmental institutions legally accountable for their complicity in human rights violations abroad.

We look forward to hearing from you and will respond to any questions you might have, provide further information about these issues and participate in any hearings your offices and parties might organize.

Respectfully,

ï Steven Schnoor, independent filmmaker & PhD candidate, York/Ryerson Universities, [steven\\_s@yorku.ca](mailto:steven_s@yorku.ca);

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