

May 22, 2007

CANADIAN MINING HARMS IN HONDURAS
GOLD, SKIN & BONES: GOLDCORP'S ADVENTURE IN HONDURAS
by Dawn Paley

Read this article and weep ...

as Canadian government and mining officials deny this gold mine causes any health and environmental harms,
as Canadian government and mining officials, politicians, experts and assorted NGOs deny that enforceable criminal and civil legislation is necessary for human rights violations and environmental harms caused by Canadian mining companies,
as Canadian investors (including the CPP – Canadian Pension Plan) profit greatly from this open pit, cyanide leaching gold mine,
as "experts" argue that the mine is bringing "development" to the poor, ...

... the health and environmental harms continue to accumulate and snow-ball, in the Valle de Siria, Honduras.

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GOLD, SKIN & BONES: GOLDCORP'S ADVENTURE IN HONDURAS
by Dawn Paley, May 22, 2007
(Full version of an article published by Canadian Dimension, May-June 2007)

‘We’ve been here for seven years,’ explains Pedro Rodolfo Arteaga, gesturing at a scattering of plain houses lining a dirt road ‘and we never thought we would find ourselves in this situation.’ A resident of Palo Ralo, in the Siria Valley in central Honduras, Arteaga explains that ‘the old village was inside the perimeter of where the company wanted to put their machinery, and we were obstacles for them.’

Palo Ralo is a village constructed in 1999 to house 14 families who were displaced from their original village to make way for the San Martin mine, an open pit gold and silver mine owned by Vancouver’s Goldcorp, one of the largest gold companies in the world.

From the front stoop of Arteaga’s house, the site of the original village is still visible, but nothing remains where the village once stood. He describes how after four years of exploration, the company, then Glamis Gold, ‘started to work with leaders in the community,

giving them money and incentives to work in the interests of the mine. Eventually, everybody left. Arteaga was one of the last people to leave the old town site, following his family out in early 2000.

The situation that Arteaga refers to could be deemed worst case: health problems, skin infections, water contamination, and miscarriages now accompany high unemployment and migration as typical conversation topics around town.

Ten people from the village are working overseas, and just a handful are employed at the mine, taking advantage of the few opportunities that the San Martin mine has opened up for their community.

For Arteaga, as for most in Palo Ralo, the nostalgia connected to their old village is made even sweeter by the current problems facing the community in their new location. The great unknowns that accompany mining mega-projects have become known in this region: pollution, contamination and displacement.

SICKNESS AND THE BURDEN OF PROOF

Leslie Yaritza Perez hasn't given up on waiting for the day when her baby, 18 month old Carla, will start walking. Carla still can't support her body weight, and has little control over her legs. Perez remains optimistic for her daughter's future, even though the doctors say we have to wait to see what happens, we still don't know if she will develop properly.

Though still unsure as to the causes of Carla's developmental problems, Perez is confident of one thing: it's related to the gold mine. Carla's father works at the mine, and their family home in Palo Ralo is a stone's throw away from where the company built a well for the displaced community, which was later found to be contaminated with arsenic.

People's lived experiences with illness, as well as their perceptions as life long residents of the area that their new illnesses are related to the seven-year-old mining project, are often dismissed as purely anecdotal evidence.

Goldcorp and their predecessor Glamis Gold have consistently denied that the health problems and allegations of water contamination in the Siria Valley are related to the mine, but the studies documenting those links are beginning to pile up high.

The results of the latest water quality and health study, which was released on February 7th of this year, show that water sources – including a domestic use well built by the company– have higher levels of copper and iron than even the generous amounts allowed by the World Bank guidelines for open pit mining areas.

This study, authored by Flaviano Bianchini, an Italian chemist working with the Siria Valley Environmental Committee, goes on to state that of the ten local people to have had their blood sampled, every single one has quantities of lead and arsenic in their blood at a level considered "very dangerous" by the World Health Organization (WHO).

Although organizations like the WHO state openly that when it comes to arsenic exposure "mining and industrial emissions may also be significant locally," Goldcorp has refused to entertain the possibility that their open pit gold operation in Honduras is linked to health problems.

BLAME IT ON HYGIENE

Tim Miller, Goldcorp's Vice President in Central America, who used to work at the San Martin project in Honduras, told the CBC in 2005 that "the mine [in Honduras] is not causing any skin damage or hair falling out" and attributed the health problems to "a lack of hygiene."

In the same 2005 interview, Miller stated that with regards to people's health concerns, "how the workers could stay healthy and children 10km away would be affected is kind of hard to believe."

Were he to return to the Siria Valley today, Miller would not have any trouble finding ex-workers from the San Martin mine experiencing the grave consequences of working as labourers at the mine.

Don Francisco, who worked handling cyanide for six years, had to stop working a year ago because of extreme pain in his legs and in his body. He explains that he was healthy before he started working at the mine, but that him and his colleagues "could smell the cyanide when we were working," and to protect themselves, they "just used disposable gloves, masks, and goggles."

Now unemployed and without benefits, Don Francisco is too sick to return to working in the fields.

UNTIL THE LAST GOLDEN DROP

According to Arteaga, Glamis Gold (acquired by Goldcorp in 2006) never told them that the project would have these effects on their communities. In fact, he says "they've had eight bosses in the last five years, and each one makes a score of promises to the people and then leaves to work at another mine somewhere else."

The San Martin mine has three years of extraction left before the company begins the process of reclamation, but the majority of residents in the Siria Valley wish that the mine would shut down sooner.

Honduran mining law stipulates that mining concessions can be cancelled if the mining activity "affects or damages water, air,

flora, fauna, the community and the general ecosystem. The government, led by President Manuel Zelaya, has shown little will to back the concerns of the communities and suspend Goldcorp's concession in Honduras.

For now, the battle lines have been drawn. Communities dealing with illness and water contamination, which is affecting their children more than anyone else, are on one side. Goldcorp, a major gold company waging an expensive public relations campaign is on the other.

If the pattern holds until the gold is gone, Goldcorp will leave the Siria Valley in a few years. Here in Canada, few people will be aware of the 10 odd years that the Canadian flag was flown high above the mining company's office. It too will be folded up and taken down when the company packs out.

The communities, on the other hand, will stay, dealing with the long-term effects of what one villager called "mining terrorism."

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Dawn Paley is an independent journalist who visited the Siria Valley in Honduras in 2007. She can be reached at dawnpaley@gmail.com.

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