

## **SAN MIGUEL IXTAHUACAN AND THE POLITICS OF THE ABYSS: FOUR WOMEN AND A GOLD MINE**

By Grahame Russell (January 2008)

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### **THE CLASH**

The San Miguel Ixtahuacan municipality is remote by any standards, nestled way up in Guatemala's Western Highlands and, until recently, little known to anyone except its mostly Mam indigenous inhabitants.

It is now emblematic of a clash between global corporate/ investor / consumer interests and community development, environment and human rights interests, a clash that goes hand in hand these days with the global business sector's plans to capitalize on Guatemala's natural resources with a long line-up of mega-"development" projects.

### **A FIRST LADY AND AN AMBASSADOR**

On Thursday, December 18, 2008, the Primera Dama (First Lady) of Guatemala, and Leeann McKechnie, newly appointed Canadian Ambassador to Guatemala, stood side by side in San Miguel as representatives of Goldcorp Inc. handed a check over to the Mayor of the municipality of San Miguel, part of the royalties Goldcorp pays, with a well-coordinated publicity campaign.

By a law passed at the same time gold was being discovered in San Miguel in 1997, Goldcorp pays 1% of profits to Guatemala as royalties, half of that going to the municipality.

Mining here is a steal, even without getting into the multiple human rights violations and health and environmental harms.

The First Lady and Canadian Ambassador were there as a photo-op for Goldcorp Inc., helping the company look good for the media, and for investors and politicians back in Canada. This event shows the marriage of interests and values of global corporations, investors and governments of a pro-"free" trade ilk.

### **TWO MAM-INDIGENOUS WOMEN**

Just before the visit of the First Lady and Canadian Ambassador to the impoverished Mam regions of San Miguel, a visit unimaginable before Goldcorp began extracting gold and silver in 2005, a friend also made the same journey.

Driving in a pickup along a bumpy dirt road, through the mining-affected village of Agel that borders the open pit mine, my friend spotted two local Mam women that I have met on a number of occasions in the course of my work with Rights Action.

My friend had met them at the Social Forum of the Americas last fall, as part of a group of 8 Mam indigenous women now under arrest orders, accused by Goldcorp Inc. of sabotaging its gold mining operation.

The women, among many others, point out that Goldcorp never asked permission to enter their lands in the first place. Before the Permanent People's Tribunal at the Social Forum of the Americas, one of the two Mam women described the dilemma: "We didn't have the resources to go looking for the law, and they said there was no law for us."

## **POLITICS OF THE ABYSS**

We might follow the writer Sousa Santos in suggesting that only a 'politics of the abyss' makes these kinds of situations possible and tolerable to the Canadian ambassador. Sousa Santos is referring to the abyss between places like San Miguel, where illegal appropriation, violence and impunity dominate, and more familiar places of the so-called West where, inside our countries, we have rules that in many, though not all situations, can be peacefully challenged on a more or less level playing field in the name of human rights. (See: <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2007-06-29-santos-en.html>)

One problem with the Canadian government's role in Guatemala – as manifested by Ambassador Leeann McKechnie's performance as a public endorser of Goldcorp Inc. – is that it participates in this politics of the abyss: we are to believe that by a repetitive chirping the phrase 'rule of law', one can make the realities of illegal appropriation, violence and impunity invisible.

But the realities of illegal appropriation, violence and impunity, along with environmental harms and human rights violations, are very visible if you spend any time in San Miguel.

My friend had no sooner stopped his pick-up truck to say hello to the two women in Agel, when they ran off in the opposite direction, in full flight, disappearing down the other side of the narrow ridge.

Fear.

A week later, the visiting First Lady and new Canadian ambassador congratulated the Canadian gold mining company, Goldcorp Inc., for its contribution to local development.

## **"DEVELOPMENT" OF THE ABYSS**

Across Guatemala today, enormous billboards proclaim the equivalence (with big 'equal' signs) of Goldcorp's mining activities with "development". In this equation – Goldcorp = Development - local indigenous leadership is erased; violence and impunity are denied. This simple equation, shouting from the Goldcorp billboards, makes an offer that grinding poverty and fear cannot refuse. Clearly, the Canadian Ambassador was not here to learn of the poverty and fear, but rather deliver the check.

I presume the Ambassador did not notice the absence of Mayan leadership during her visit, the kind of leadership represented in the indigenous 'Casa del Pueblo' (People's House) of San Miguel, estranged from the State municipal and development council structures.

Casa del Pueblo leadership has expressed concern that San Miguel communities were not consulted before the Government licensed the Goldcorp to establish an open-pit, cyanide-leach operation; that the informed consent of the San Miguel communities was not sought or obtained.

They, and many in solidarity, are outraged that Goldcorp was free to buy out any local opposition with what amounts to loose change for the company, but amounts to an irresistible and exploitative offer to the chronically poor who have been consistently abandoned or repressed by their own State.

This willingness to play on local poverty, lack of information and repression and fear, is one of the more reprehensible aspects of the whole story, one that the Canadian government has encouraged with abject passivity and moral duplicity.

Local residents who have expressed opposition have been frozen out of these handouts and, in some cases, paralysed and intimidated by unfair and arbitrary criminal prosecutions, and other acts of repression.

Yet, the Canadian ambassador was made aware of these facts. On Friday, November 21, 2008, a 14-page letter-report, signed by over 140 concerned individuals and organizations, was delivered to her.  
([http://www.rightsaction.org/urgent\\_com/Canada\\_Goldcorp\\_Guate\\_111208.html](http://www.rightsaction.org/urgent_com/Canada_Goldcorp_Guate_111208.html))

She has yet to respond.

### **THE REAL "PEACE" AGREEMENTS**

On the face of it, the First Lady and Ambassador Leeann McKechnie seemed only too willing to celebrate along with Goldcorp yet another repetition of the historical marginalization of Mayan peoples. Twelve years after the Peace Agreements were signed in Guatemala, promising something completely different, they were celebrating:

Goldcorp's monopoly on local power, with help from the State's continuing absence and entrenched impunity – and the support of the Canadian government, the World Bank, and more;

the abandonment of recognition of and protection for Mayan culture, lost in exchange for individually negotiated contracts for jobs and land obtained without free, prior, or informed consent to the process; and

a further surrendering of hope that Mayan communities can recover from past harms and build again their collective strength rooted in an ineffable but enduring link to the land.

What gives Goldcorp and its backers and profiteers the right to violate and steal that hope?

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As for the two women who fled from my friend's pick-up truck, they later approached him in the Casa del Pueblo (the People's House) to apologize. They had not been able

to see the occupants of the pick-up, and feared it was driven by men from the mining company. The families and communities of both these women have been deeply harmed by Goldcorp's mining operation, since well before the mountains began to be exploded in 2005.

The fact that the company and the State have become indistinguishable agents of arbitrary prosecution and repression speaks to the larger story of impunity in Guatemala, and to the shameful role that the Canadian embassy continues to play in this politics of the abyss.

Of their new Ambassador in Guatemala, Canadians ought to demand accountability. The role of the Canadian government should not be to promote corporate and investor interests, but to promote and defend the human rights of all people.

Of Goldcorp, and all the individual and institutional investors in Goldcorp (from the Canadian Pension Plan, through multiple pension funds, through RSPs, RESPs to individual investors), Canadians should demand a suspension in mining, until a fully independent commission carry out an investigation into the range of environmental harms and human rights violations going right back to the lack of initial consultation with local Mam communities.

Such a commission would have to determine the reparations and compensation to be paid to the affected communities and families. It would have to be premised on the principal that any future mining could only be carried out after fully informed consultation with the affected communities and that their informed consent has been obtained.

We are tired of the politics, "development" and profiteering of the abyss. A different global ethic and development model is needed. That is what we are working for, with partner groups in North America, Central America and with the courageous people of San Miguel Ixtahuacan.

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## **WHAT TO DO**

Please read the 14-page letter-report delivered to the Canadian Ambassador ([http://www.rightsaction.org/urgent\\_com/Canada\\_Goldcorp\\_Guate\\_111208.html](http://www.rightsaction.org/urgent_com/Canada_Goldcorp_Guate_111208.html)) and then consider writing her, with a copy to your own politician and media, asking her why she would not respond to such a letter-report, and yet accept an invitation to publicly endorse Goldcorp Inc. – without considering or responding to the serious allegations related to Goldcorp's operation.

Ambassador Leeann McKechnie  
Karin Reinecke, Assistant to the Ambassador  
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TO MAKE TAX-DEDUCTIBLE DONATIONS for Indigenous and community-based organizations resisting the harms caused by large-scale "development" projects (mining, tourism, hydro-electric dams) and implementing their own community development

projects (schools and scholarships, health clinics, solidarity economy productive projects, etc), human rights and environment projects, make check payable to "Rights Action" and mail to:

\* UNITED STATES: Box 50887, Washington DC, 20091-0887

\* CANADA: 552 - 351 Queen St. E, Toronto ON, M5A-1T8

CREDIT-CARD DONATIONS: [http://www.rightsaction.org/Templates/donations\\_index.html](http://www.rightsaction.org/Templates/donations_index.html)

EDUCATIONAL DELEGATION-SEMINARS: Form your own group and come on an educational seminar trip to learn more about community and Indigenous development, human rights and environmental issues in Guatemala and Honduras.

JOIN Rights Action's listserv: <http://www.rightsaction.org/lists/?p=subscribe&id=3>

JOIN Rights Action's quarterly newsletter list: [info@rightsaction.org](mailto:info@rightsaction.org)

CREATE YOUR OWN E-MAIL LIST and re-distribute this and other information

DAILY NEWS: Watch & listen to [www.democracynow.org](http://www.democracynow.org); Read [www.upsidedownworld.org](http://www.upsidedownworld.org), [www.dominionpaper.ca](http://www.dominionpaper.ca)

BOOKS TO READ: Eduardo Galeano's "Open Veins of Latin America"; Howard Zinn's "A People's History of the United States"; Naomi Klein's "The Shock Doctrine"; Paolo Freire's "Pedagogy of the Oppressed";

[www.rightsaction.org](http://www.rightsaction.org) - Based in Guatemala, Rights Action (with tax-deductible legal status in Canada and USA) funds and works with community-based Indigenous, development, environment and human rights organizations in Guatemala and Honduras, and also in Oaxaca, Chiapas, El Salvador, Peru, Haiti and Nicaragua; and educates about and is involved in activism related to global development, environmental and Indigenous and human rights struggles.