

Rights Action  
June 26, 2012  
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## **THEY SHOT MY FRIEND YOLANDA**

By Grahame Russell, June 26, 2012

I send you this sad update about work I am involved with in Guatemala and Honduras. Please consider donating 'humanitarian relief' funds for the needs of Yolanda Oqueli, and other folks mentioned below. Please re-send this letter to family, friends and colleagues. ☺

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I was recently in Guatemala, leading a 10-day educational seminar of students and their professor (Catherine Nolin) from the University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC), visiting communities that Rights Action funds and works with on a range of community development, environmental, human rights projects. Joining us on the trip were Emilie Smith (Canadian Anglican priest) and James Rodriguez (Mexican-American photo-journalist). For the students, this trip is part of their studies of issues related to global poverty and development, human rights and the environment.

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### **MINING versus COMMUNITY NEEDS**

On May 26, we visited the campesino (small farmer) community of San Jose del Golfo / San Pedro Ayumpac just outside of Guatemala City, where local residents are working peacefully and diligently to prevent the illegal entry of a Canadian mining company – Radius Gold Inc. – onto their community lands to mine for silver and gold. (This is just one of four very serious Community versus Mining related struggles that Rights Action is involved with, in Guatemala alone)

We were met by Yolanda Oqueli, a recent friend of mine and one of the main community leaders. Over the course of 3 hours, we had a wonderful exchange with hundreds of community members. We then enjoyed a small meal they provided us with from their road-side communal kitchen.



(May 26, 2012, Yolanda Oqueli addresses the Archbishop of Guatemala, who also visited the community blockade that day.  
Photo@James Rodriquez, [james@mimundo.org](mailto:james@mimundo.org))



(May 26, 2012, I address the community members; Yolanda is standing to the left. As with all our solidarity-educational visits, I explain the work of Rights Action, in general, and the purpose of this visit with the UNBC delegation. I expressed our concern, as Canadians (and some Americans), about the human rights violations and environmental and health harms being caused, directly and indirectly, by (mainly Canadian) mining companies, not only in this community, but across Latin America.  
Photo@James Rodriquez, [james@mimundo.org](mailto:james@mimundo.org))

## **ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT**

On June 13, assassins on a motorcycle shot multiple times at Yolanda. Today, 2 weeks later, one of the bullets remains lodged in her body, close to her spine. She is in stable, but risky condition.

There is no doubt in my mind, or anyone's working on these issues, that the attempt on Yolanda's life was carried out by paid assassins and she was targeted due to the leadership role she has assumed in opposing the illegal and unwanted entry of Radius Gold into their lands.

## ***'MINING AND REPRESSION HALL OF FAME'***

Over the past 8 years, I have been involved (with Rights Action) in a growing number of community based struggles in Guatemala and Honduras, as well as in El Salvador and Chiapas and Oaxaca, Mexico, dealing with serious human rights violations and environmental and health harms caused by North American (mainly Canadian) mining companies.

Here is a list of some of the cases of repression committed against people in the communities where I work – these are people I know and respect and regularly visit with:

- Radius Gold, in Guatemala: Yolanda Oqueli was shot and wounded, June 2012;
- Goldcorp, in Guatemala: Diodora Hernandez was shot in the right eye, and miraculously survived, July 2010;
- Hubday Minerals/Skye Resources, in Guatemala:
  - Adolfo Ich was shot and killed, September 2009;
  - German Chub was shot and left paralyzed from the waist down, September 2009;
  - 11 women villagers were gang-raped in January 2007;
- Pacific Rim, in El Salvador:
  - Over the course of 2009-2011, 5 community members were killed;
- Blackfire Exploration, in Chiapas, Mexico: Mariano Abarca shot and killed, November 2009;
- Fortuna Silver, in Oaxaca, Mexico:
  - Bernado Mendez, shot and killed, January 2012;
  - Bernardo Vasquez, shot and killed, March 2012;

**This list does not include a litany of:** health harms (including miscarriages in women and cows, and death to animals) due to the consumption of water contaminated with chemicals and heavy metals (iron, mercury, arsenic); cracked homes due to the use of explosives for open-pit mining; laying of trumped-up criminal charges against community leaders who oppose the harms and violations caused by mining; etc.

## **YOLANDA SPEAKS**

On May 18, one month before Yolanda was shot, Rights Action circulated a communiqué titled “Radius Gold in Guatemala: More mining related repression waiting to happen” that addresses the growing tension and threats of repression caused by Radius Gold’s attempts to push ahead with its mining interests, despite widespread community opposition.

- To read: <http://rightsaction.org/action-content/radius-gold-inc-guatemala-more-mining-related-repression-waiting-happen>

In it, we include a link to a 7-minute film (in Spanish) called “OTRA VEZ LA MINA” (Once Again, Mining). To view: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gq5wA0XGrEg>.

In this short film, you will see Yolanda speaking articulately about her community and why they are resisting the actions of Radius Gold. The film was shot during and after the May 8, 2012, attempt by Radius Gold’s subsidiary in Guatemala (EXMINGUA) to enter community lands in a convoy of 25-30 mining company trucks full of equipment, escorted by 25-30 trucks of heavily armed National Police. As you will see, they attempted this entry at 1:00am in the morning, so as to try and slip (!) by the villagers of San Jose del Golfo / San Pedro Ayumpac who were never consulted about this mining business and who never gave legal permission for a mine to operate in their lands.

## **NO END IN SIGHT**

In the near future, there is no end in sight to this repression that is linked to, and in the service of North American mining and investor interests. There is, as of yet, not enough widespread concern or political will in Canada and the USA to bring about the legal and political changes needed so as to properly monitor and then hold accountable our mining companies when they operate in ways that contribute directly and indirectly to crimes, human rights violations and other harms in far off places.

## **FUNDING NEEDS**

Rights Action is one of the few organizations I know of that is providing humanitarian relief and emergency funds to the families of the victims of the abuses set out above (let alone victims of other similar struggles and problems). Funds are being used, on an on-going basis, for the health needs of the victims and for the economic survival of the families of victims of the killings and other abuses.

## **WHAT TO DO – TAX DEDUCTIBLE DONATIONS**

Please make financial contributions (tax-deductible in Canada and USA) for the medical costs and family needs of Yolanda Oqueli, as well as other victims (some of whom are listed above). 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 can be made (anonymously): [www.rightsaction.org](http://www.rightsaction.org)

DONATIONS OF STOCK can be made (anonymously): [info@rightsaction.org](mailto:info@rightsaction.org)

### **WHAT TO DO - WRITE & KEEP ON WRITING**

Please send your own letters, with copies of this information, to your own elected politicians and government officials, and to your local media. This on-going mining related repression is a “Canadian” and “North American” problem. Mining related repression *will not stop until* Canadians and Americans hold our governments, our pension funds, our companies and investors accountable for promoting and benefiting from the relentless expansion of our companies and investors around the globe, directly and indirectly causing and then turning a blind eye to repression, forced evictions, environmental harms, etc.

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Thank-you for reading through this. Please send any questions or comments to me. Please keep Yolanda Oqueli in your thoughts and prayers.

Grahame Russell

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