

## **La Puya land defender Yolanda Oqueli speaks out, three months after surviving assassination attempt**

Interview by Dawn Paley

On June 13, 2012, community leader Yolanda Oqueli was ambushed and shot by assailants on a motorcycle, as she was leaving the peaceful blockade to the entrance of the proposed site of the Tambor gold mine (owned at the time by the Canadian company Radius Gold and the American company Kappes, Cassidy & Associates (KCA), now owned solely by KCA), 28 kilometres northeast of Guatemala City.

Three months later, no justice has been done for this assassination attempt, no one has been detained. Yolanda continues in stable but vulnerable health condition – a bullet lodged dangerously close to her spine.

On Monday October 22nd, Yolanda spoke out publicly for the first time since the assassination attempt.



(October 22, 2012, Yolanda speaks with visiting North Americans. In picture, journalist Dawn Paley and Grahame Russell of Rights Action.)

Since early 2012, Rights Action has visited the peaceful blockade 5 times, with delegations of North Americans, including journalists and filmmakers. Part of our work is to document and denounce the harms and violations caused by Canadian and American resource extraction companies – such as Radius Gold and KCA – and demand political and legal accountability in Canada and the USA for the environmental and health harms and human rights violations caused by our mining companies.

Another part of our work is to provide funds, on an on-going basis, to mining impacted communities for their community and environmental defense work and for their emergency response needs, such as Yolanda's health needs.

On Monday, October 22, we were honoured to again visit the peaceful community blockade and then deeply moved when Yolanda joined other community members to speak with us. Included in our group: a Canadian film crew making the documentary film “Defensora” (view trailer at: <http://www.indiegogo.com/defensora>) about the community and environmental defense struggle of the Mayan Qeqchi people against the harms and violations caused by Canadian nickel mining companies; journalists Dawn Paley (<http://dawnpaley.ca/>, author of the article below) and Kyle G. Brown; and American photographer and writer Nate Einbinder.



(October 22, 2012. The community blockade provides shelter for a meeting place, a communal kitchen and tiny bedrooms.)

The community blockade has been maintained since March 2012, by inhabitants of two affected communities, San José del Golfo and San Pedro Ayumpac, who are protesting that - contrary to national and international law - no public consultation had taken place before the Guatemalan government gave the go ahead for the gold and silver mine on February 27th; and simply that they don't want this type of exploitative and harmful economic “development” in their lands and territory.

**BELOW:** article by Dawn Paley

**BACKGROUND ARTICLES:**

- <http://rightsaction.org/action-content/rights-action-fund-raising-newsletter-jul-2012>
- <http://rightsaction.org/action-content/letter-apology-yoli-oqueli>

**DIGNITY AND IMPUNITY**

Yolanda barely survived the June 13 assassination attempt, that has devastated her family and her own life physically and emotionally. And yet – three months later – she is back with her community, yes, more afraid, but with the same conviction as always that they have the right and the responsibility to defend their community well-being and their environment.

Her strength and dignity contrast directly with the impunity and callousness of the mining industry. Radius Gold and KCA tried their hardest, by hook, crook and violence, to begin operating this mine, regardless of the opinions or well-being of the local communities. Now, Radius has sold its interest to its partner KCA and left Guatemala, injustice and impunity intact.

**SAY YES TO COMMUNITY WELL-BEING AND TO YOLANDA;  
SAY NO TO IMPUNITY AND AN UNJUST ECONOMIC “DEVELOPMENT  
MODEL**

As distressful and painful as the attempted murder of Yolanda is, it is neither surprising nor an anomaly. The US and Canadian governments and North American resource extraction companies maintain full and very profitable economic and military relations with the Guatemalan elites, always turning a blind eye to repression, violence and impunity that are the norm in Guatemala. It is up to the people of Canada and the USA to say “no more business and politics as usual.

Grahame Russell, co-director  
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**GUATEMALA: PEACEFUL RESISTANCE IN THE FACE OF  
VIOLENCE**

by Dawn Paley, 24 October 2012

<http://upsidedownworld.org/main/guatemala-archives-33/3934-guatemala-peaceful-resistance-in-the-face-of-violence>

Telma Yolanda Oquelí Veliz, who was nearly killed for her activism against mining in San José del Golfo, Guatemala, spoke out publicly Monday morning for the first time since the attack against her in June.

"I want to tell the world that here in Guatemala there is a peaceful resistance that exists, and we are prepared to stay here as long as possible," said Oquelí, sitting upright on a plastic chair inside a permanent camp blocking the entrance to a proposed gold mine about 30km from Guatemala City. "We always hoped no blood would be spilled in this struggle, and personally mine did, but I think it has been a very important test and today I am back in action, and I know that they will not quiet me, while god gives me life I will continue."

While Oquelí spoke, many of those active on the blockade gathered under the cover of the simple roadside shelter to listen. Other men stacked firewood, while children played along the edge of the camp. Some of the women prepared warm drinks and food to feed everyone at the camp, which has been permanently occupied since March of this year.

"I haven't wanted to make statements or give interviews because in truth I didn't want to talk about myself, I want the focus to be on the resistance, on the people who are present here," said Oquelí.

Banners against mining and in solidarity with the blockade grace the side of the road, while a beat-up gate closes off the main entrance to the concession. Traffic on the dirt road was sparse, as it is well off the main highway, serving community members going from one village to another. Most would honk and wave as they rolled past; others would stop and say “hi” to the people on the side of the road.

Six teams of at least 10 adults take a weekly 24-hour shift and each week one team stays over on Sundays. No one lives permanently at the camp: every night, those who spend the night light a fire and rest, rising again to make breakfast for their whole group in the morning.

"The group leaders meet and they each tell their groups when their shifts will be, what is planned for the weekend, if there are meetings, and if there is new information," said Miguel Antonio Muraller, who has been active in the blockade since the outset. "That's how we communicate so that we're all aware of what's going on."

An eviction attempt by police was thwarted on May 8th, when, in the early hours of the morning, people at the blockade got word that a convoy of police and mining vehicles was headed to the site. Residents from San José and neighboring communities mobilized by the hundreds, and the police withdrew without any confrontation.

Things have been quiet at the camp since the June 13th shooting of Oqueli. She was on her way out of the camp when her vehicle was cut-off by a car and a motorcycle and her would be assassin shot three bullets at her. One of the bullets pierced her abdomen and remains lodged inside her, too close to the spinal cord to be safely removed. Oqueli suffers ongoing pain as a result of the shooting. Her attackers, who she thinks are connected to the municipality of San José del Golfo and to the mining company, have never been identified.

The proposed mine was owned by Vancouver based Radius Gold at the time of the shooting. Radius sold off its stake in the project to Nevada-based Kappes, Cassidy & Associates (KCA) in August of 2012. KCA is a privately held metallurgical services company. No stranger to violence against mine opponents, Simon Ridgway, Chair of the Board of Radius Gold at the time of Oqueli's shooting, was the front man of Fortuna Silver when Bernardo Vásquez was murdered in Oaxaca in March of this year.

If built, locals say the mine would impact lands previously used for small-scale agriculture. "We don't fight over the gold – we fight for life, for our water, to keep sowing corn and beans, which is what we campesinos live from," said Irma Esperanza, who was on shift at the blockade, preparing lunch in the kitchen. Behind her, three huge pots bubbled over small fires. "Here the mining is inside our community and there's many of us who will be impacted," she said.

Esperanza explained that while some in the community support the mining project, those who are maintaining the blockade of the access road are there with the best interests of their children in mind. "I'm 83, but here I am in the struggle – fighting for the children, and for our land, on which we were born," said Miguel Díaz Morales, who says he often spends what would be otherwise restless nights at the blockade. His eldest son stood to his side, nodding solemnly as his father spoke.

"We defend our land because we have the right to do so," said Díaz. "We're free and we have the right to defend our lands."

Regardless of the threats and the pain, Oqueli made it clear that she takes her strength from the men, women and children who make time to stand guard on the side of the road. "There are elders here; there are children that together with their moms and dads come to do a shift," she said. "This motivates us to act in a responsible way, to give a good example to the children, and to support the struggles of our elders."

The mood at the camp was uplifting, but a sense of unease was clear in Oqueli's voice when she addressed the army's massacre of six Indigenous protestors in Totonicapán, in the Guatemalan highlands, on October 4th. "We're concerned by what happened in

[Tonicapán], we can imagine ourselves in their shoes,” she said. “We are just like them, we are in resistance, and you never know at what moment repression is going to come.”

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