

Now, Even the Bones of the Dead Are Not Safe: Help Stop Aura Minerals' Honduran Mine Expansion

By Emilie Smith, August 27, 2016, emilietsmith@gmail.com
<https://canthesebonespeak.wordpress.com/2016/08/27/tearing-up-holy-land/>

The earth down below me is carved and murdered forever. Raped and left there exposed for all the world to see. And, it seems, no one in the world gives a damn.

And guess what? The rapists and murderers of this land live in Toronto. And we are them, too. We're in bed with them, sucking out the life energy of this place and leaving nothing but grief. Making money out of murder.

Here I am, again, looking into the maw of hell, the layers and layers of hell, that laugh, harshly, and burn in pools of fire and dust like Dante's Inferno.

Another damn gold mine. Another pack of lies. Another community, divided and destroyed. People intimidated, jailed, threatened. But fighting still. And, dare we hope.

I have come to Honduras because we from SICSAL (Servicios internacionales cristianos de solidaridad con America Latina – Oscar Romero) decided that we needed to come here and even in a minimal way offer an expression of love and support to this suffering, murderous and murdered land, and to its people.

So, three in the morning I hug Margarita goodbye, and await beneath a clear sky and Orion, for a yellow taxi, to take me to the comfy bus, which will take me across the border, to another bus, which will leave me in the parque of Santa Rosa Copan, where I will be rescued by Genaro and Orlando, and we drive, and drive, across hill, and dale, through the most beautiful country, corn fields and forests, green and green on green.

We stop to buy a papaya, and then we see it, still from across the valley, rising up: the San Andres goldmine, owned by Aura Minerals in Toronto.

Across the valley we go, and then up and up and up, circling. And then we are here, in Azacualpa, a town of 400 – 500 families.

The town council is out to meet me and I hear, in the flesh, the story I had read in excellent reports (see: <https://www.google.com/#q=mining+in+a+state+of+impunity>). The mine is there, just a stone's throw or two down the hill, past the green soccer field. Three Canadian mining companies have been making a mess of things here since 1998. Two communities have already been forcibly displaced.

Now Aura Minerals wants to grow more, and eat more towns, and – shockingly – a 200 year old cemetery used by five communities has now been found to sit on vulnerable come-‘n-get-it gold-rich earth.

Now, even the bones of the dead are not safe.

The Azacualpa community leaders believe that the plan is to keep moving up the hill, to their town, and that the destruction of the cemetery is just the first step.

Since a shoddy agreement was pressured on the community in 2012 between the company and a weak local government– a pact which has only been fulfilled 5% by the company—the fight has been on. In April, 2014, protests began and in 2015 blockades went up, resulting in 19 arrests, in a first round of criminalization of leaders, with an additional 10 people charged last November. A new town council was just elected this June (Orlando is the president), and the Azacualpa Environmental Committee is working in full gear.

The company has responded with divisive tactics, continued criminalization and army/police threats, visiting community members individually, and offering them large cash settlements or a new pre-fab house if they agree to have the remains of their family members moved.

The Canadian government is, as usual, in business-first mode, ‘driving the Canadian advantage’, as it has been since the Harper government supported the 2009 criminal coup which ousted a moderate president, and installed a regime more amenable to the outright and outrageous For Sale signs going up all over the country.

It is late, we part with plans to visit the mine, and the cemetery tomorrow. I crawl into a bed cleared out for me, and snooze. Just as I drift off a horse sets off neighing right outside the window. My heart leaps out of my chest, and then I laugh, and then can’t sleep but toss and turn, thinking of the carved in body of Our Mother, just below me.

Morning comes, and I am collected by women from the town council, and we walk around the community. We visit a family who is rushing to build a sustaining wall, as explosions from the mine (18,000 kilos of dynamite a day – did I hear that right?) have caused severe earth damage to the hill behind and two houses above are ready to cave down. We visit other houses with terrible cracks, through walls and along seams, and even the floor. One house is only five years old, with an irreparable wall just about to fall down -- nothing like this has been seen here before. I hear stories of sickness, and despair. The mine washes its hands of all problems, but pays six women to daily sweep up the mining dust off the streets.

This is the eternal promise of every mine in every country I have visited as the co-President of SICSAL: the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico and now Honduras.

Canadian mining companies sprinkling promises of shared riches and development, jobs and prosperity. And the reality: sickness, communities divided and at war with one another, as some hold out hope for a new life, and eternal contamination.

The destruction of the Earth and her waters from this kind of open pit mine can never be repaired.

Just outside Yellowknife [Northwest Territory, Canada], the Giant Mine, a gold digging project that operated for more than half a century, has left a toxic pool of arsenic so deadly it is going to cost our government, [Canadian tax-payers] that is, over a billion dollars to contain the mess. Contain it. It can never be cleaned up.

In Azacualpa, 48 people are employed by the Aura Minerals mine, and these sporadically. And no royalties or trinkets have been left in the hands of the population.

We stop for lunch, caldo de gallina, a chicken soup with big chunks of veggies and a high stack of tortillas, and then Claudia, and her crew, arrive. She is from a sensationalist Honduran TV station, nothing but blood and guts, a lot of that is available in this country declared among the most violent in the world. But she explains to me that she always has a message beneath, and works hard to slip it in. Everyone watches this channel, and it's a chance to inform the whole country about what is happening. Grimly she tells me, 39 journalists have been killed since the 2009 coup.

After lunch we pile into a fleet of pickup trucks and zip just down the hill to the cemetery, on one side, gaping mine pit on the other. We go to the cemetery first. I'm shown where parents are buried, and brothers, and up the hill, Juanita points to where her infant daughter lies. No, it makes her too sad, she doesn't want to go up there. The teenagers discuss what would be left in the ground, after 10 or 20 years.

Genaro and I sit on a heap of dirt. We just want the mining company to stop, he says. End of story, no more expansions. And an end to the criminalization of community leaders engaged in rightful protest. We don't care about money. We don't have money, and we don't want money. They cannot touch this sacred place.

We leave the cemetery and head to the very precipice of the mine. I look down, astonished, just flabbergasted about how big the damn thing is. After more than ten years supporting communities resisting in-coming mines, or trying to contain already up and running ones, studying the problem, reading, writing, campaigning, visiting, I have never stood this close to the very act itself. I am flooded, again, with shame. And fury.



Juanita brings me back to her house, it is dusk now. We make cafe de palo, from her own coffee beans, and we talk until way into the night. Ordinary things: children, grandchildren, work, dreams, hope and fear. We laugh, she is the 'First Lady' of Azacualpa, her husband Orlando, is the new president of the town council. As night settles on the town, her large living room fills up, people slip in by ones, twos, threes. Everyone is gathering here. Figuring things out. The mine is not going to take the camposanto, this holy ground. Over our dead bodies. The night is quiet, the people are solemn and determined.

Canadians, this is our problem. So here is some of what we can do.

Write to:

Aura Minerals
Jim Bannantine, President and CEO
William Monti Reed, Honduras mine manager
155 University Avenue, Suite 1240
Toronto, ON, M5H 3B7
T: [416-649-1033](tel:416-649-1033), info@auraminerals.com, www.auraminerals.com

With copies to:

- Your Member Of Parliament: <http://www2.parl.gc.ca/Parlinfo/Compilations/HouseOfCommons/MemberByPostalCode.aspx?Menu=HOC>
- The Canadian embassy in Honduras: Centro Financiero CITI, 3d Floor, San Juan Bosco, Colonia Payaqui, Box 3552, Tegucigalpa, T: (+504) 2232 4551, tg|pa@international.gc.ca

Funding for Azacualpa Environmental Committee

Since 2014, the U.S. and Canadian based group Rights Action has been funding the community development and environmental defense work of the Azacualpa Environmental Committee. Make cheque payable to "Rights Action" and mail to:

- U.S.: Box 50887, Washington DC, 20091-0887
- Canada: (Box 552) 351 Queen St. E, Toronto ON, M5A-1T8

Credit-Card Donations:

- Canada: <https://www.canadahelps.org/en/charities/rights-action/>
- U.S.: <http://www.rightsaction.org/tax-deductible-donations> (click on NetworkForGood)

Donations of stock? Write to: info@rightsaction.org

“This Will Not Stop ...” (Rights Action Newsletter, July-August 2016),

<http://www.rightsaction.org/action-content/will-not-stop-rights-action-newsletter-july-august-2016>

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