

BBC World article:

Cemetery on Top of a Mountain of Gold, Pitting Villagers Against Aura Minerals, Backed by the Honduran and Canadian Governments

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Cemetery on Top of a Gold Mine that Pits a Honduran Community against Aura Minerals, One of Canada's largest Mining Companies

By Juan Paulier, BBC World

<http://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-36901344>



In the cemetery of Azacualpa, the dead rest on top of a mountain of gold. (Photo Karen Spring)

People in Azacualpa have been burying their family members in the same place for more than 200 years. It is unknown how many bodies rest in this cemetery, but that they rest on top of a mountain of gold.

This is pitting the members of this northwestern Honduran community against the Canadian mining company Aura Minerals.

This is just the last of a series of conflicts in Honduras, which involve low income communities and big companies [...]. In Azacualpa, the origin of the dispute is the San Andres open pit mine operated since 1983, and through the Aura Minerals and its affiliate, Minerales de Occidente S.A. (MINOSA), since 2009.



“The mining company wants to take away our cemetery and the community doesn’t want that”, explained Genaro Rodriguez Montoya of the Azacualpa Environmental Committee. (Photo AFP)

The heightened tensions between the community and the mining company today is due to an agreement reached in 2012 that has not yet materialized. “The mining company hasn’t complied with any of it. They want us to give everything while they give nothing. The mining company wants to take away the cemetery and the community doesn’t want that” Genaro Rodriguez Montoya, lawyer of the Environmental Committee of Azacualpa told the BBC World.

The agreement

The agreement established that by August 2015, Aura Minerals would have provided 396 new homes for the population living in the area of Palania, about 8 kilometers away. In exchange, people living in Azacualpa, about 3,000 people, committed to give their individual authorization to move the cemetery and allow for the identification and relocation of the remains.

Rodriguez Montoya asserts that the mining company did not comply with all of the homes promised, and those provided were smaller than what was agreed. Aura Minerals sustains that they will not give the rest of the homes until the community consents to bringing their loved ones’ remains to another location.

In conflict

Since the end of last year, a group of community members has sporadically blocked access to the mines as a means of protest, putting a hold on operations in some occasions. Since then, both parts have been tangled up in this dispute [...].

“They have never cooperated in consenting to relocate the remains,” Jim Bannantine, [then] CEO of Aura Minerals told the BBC World. Bannantine recognizes that the issue of the cemetery is “sensitive for any community” but warns that if his company is not able to exploit this area, the viability of the project that employs 900 people is at risk. [...]

“The cemetery makes the difference between a mining operation that lasts for another two or three years, and one that lasts another ten years”, he explained, “and all of the employment generated by the mine will end if [the cemetery] is not relocated”.

Aura Minerals acknowledges the cemetery’s “tremendous spiritual, religious and cultural importance”, thus they have spent “a large investment in time and resources” to investigate which would be the best way to carry out the relocation.

The company emphasizes that they will not touch the cemetery until they receive the approval of family members and the process has received the approval of CONADEH and the Ministry of Health.

The Honduran Institute of Geology and Mines (Inhgeomin) clarified to the BBC that the Ministry of Health along with the Permanent Commission of Contingencies (COPECO) determined that the “due to its physical and geological conditions, [the grave yard] has an important risk of collapse.” “If there is a proven risk, we believe the cemetery should be moved” explained the assistant director for mining of the institution, Ericka Molina. The official assured that there are records for 335 remains but they don’t rule out that there might be more since some burials have not been registered.

The Institution is part of the dialogue tables and Molina rejects the accusations by non-governmental organizations that the government always puts itself on the side of the mining companies to ensure the continuation of investments to the country. “Categorically no, as a government we are overseers and guarantors of the process of dialogue with all of the involved parties”, she signaled.

Coercion?

“It is difficult, if not impossible to call this process a “negotiation” since the community is clearly being coerced” explained Karen Spring from the Honduran Solidarity Network (HSN). Spring is the author of the report “Mining in a State of Impunity: Coerced Negotiations and Forced Displacement by Aura Minerals in Western Honduras” published jointly with Mining Watch Canada.

“Aura Minerals and the Honduran government are setting most, if not all, of the conditions of the ‘dialogue’”, says Spring, while Rodriguez Montoya describes an atmosphere of “psychological repression” during the meetings.

Molina rejects the version that authorities favor the mining companies. “If that were the case, the government wouldn’t have sat down at the dialogue table for a year and a half and would have just authorized the cemetery’s relocation.” But this official also admits that while the government shouldn’t “ignore the rights of the peoples” it is responsible for respecting “the legal security of a foreign investment”. “The country is open to mining” she added, “but under the concept of a favorable relationship with the communities where these projects are found.”

More info

Canadian Ambassador & Corporate Social Responsibility Counsellor misled Honduran villagers in community environmental defense struggle with Toronto-based Aura Minerals

<http://mailchi.mp/rightsaction/canadian-ambassador-csr-counsellor-misled-honduran-villagers-in-community-environmental-defense-struggle-with-toronto-based-aura-minerals>

Mining in a State of Impunity: Coerced Negotiations and Forced Displacement by Aura Minerals in Honduras, by Karen Spring, published by Mining Watch and Honduras Solidarity Network:

<http://miningwatch.ca/publications/2016/6/29/mining-state-impunity-coerced-negotiations-and-forced-displacement-aura>

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