

Embattled Azacualpa community continues to resist ever-expanding, destructive mine of U.S. gold company Aura Minerals

<https://mailchi.mp/rightsaction/azacualpa-community-suffers-aura-minerals-harms>

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- Below: Article by Allison Lira, Honduras Program, Witness for Peace Solidarity Collective

There is ‘no rest for the weary’ in Honduras, as the newly elected government of President Xiomara Castro painstakingly works to undue the devastation, violence and corruption left by 12 years and 7 months of the U.S., Canadian and European backed narco-dictatorship of ousted President Juan Orlando Hernandez, now in a U.S. jail awaiting his criminal trial for over-seeing – while President – a State sponsored drug trafficking cartel.

Since before 2014, Rights Action has funded the Azacualpa land/cemetery/environment defenders, and added our voice to denouncing the corruption, harms and persecution caused by the U.S.-based Aura Minerals and its MINOSA subsidiary in Honduras.

“We Don’t Even Know Where the Remains of our Loved Ones Are”

Despite community efforts, a transnational mining company has desecrated a 200-year old cemetery in Honduras

By [Allison Lira](#), August 3, 2022

<https://nacla.org/honduras-mining-azacualpa>



Azacualpa residents protest at the site of the razed cemetery
(Movimiento Amplio por la Dignidad y la Justicia / Bufete Estudios para la Dignidad)

In a Facebook [video](#) posted on January 21, Nicolás Rodríguez motions to the injuries on his arms and legs before turning around to expose a large bruise on his lower back. A member of the community of Azacualpa in the municipality of La Unión, Honduras, he had been beaten and arrested by local police while attempting to enter the community cemetery where generations of the Rodríguez clan were buried, including his parents.

“When I arrived with my machete to the cemetery, the police were there. One police officer took out his gun and shot at my feet,” Rodríguez said. “Four of them grabbed me...they threw me to the ground and hit me with their clubs.”

Rodríguez was released the next day to find the cemetery razed to the ground, the remains of his parents and countless others taken from their burial sites.

To everyone in Azacualpa and the surrounding communities, it was clear that the local mining company, Minerales de Occidente S.V. (MINOSA) – subsidiary of U.S.-based Aura Minerals -, had finally gotten what it wanted.

In 2014, [protests erupted](#) in the municipality of La Unión as community members noticed that Aura Minerals/MINOSA’s operations were nearing dangerously close to the centuries old cemetery. Local protesters blocked the entrance to the San Andrés open pit gold mine for weeks, sustaining violent repression by Honduran security forces.

As operations continued to expand in the ensuing years, community members put their bodies on the line [again](#) and [again](#), demanding that the Azacualpa cemetery be protected. In 2015, the municipality held a *cabildo abierto*, a legally binding town hall referendum that ratified the affected communities' opposition to the closure of the cemetery.

The Honduran Supreme Court [affirmed the will of the people in November 2020](#), striking down the municipality's plans to collaborate with Aura Minerals/MINOSA on exhuming and transferring the remains buried there.

Not even the highest court in the country was able to stop the destruction. In a [March 3 meeting](#) with Isabel Albaladejo, representative of the UN High Commissioner's Office for Human Rights in Honduras, affected families spent over an hour giving testimony.

"They violated our rights by not taking what we wanted into account," said Jessica Rodriguez, member of the Committee for Peoples Affected by MINOSA. "A lot of people have called us crying. We don't even know where the remains of our loved ones are."

Manufactured Consent, Aura Minerals/MINOSA Style

MINOSA, a subsidiary of the U.S.-based multinational mining company Aura Minerals, enjoys free rein in the municipality of La Unión. Despite the legally binding decision taken at the 2015 *cabildo abierto*, the company [had exhumed over a hundred bodies by 2018](#) as part of its strategy to exploit the gold deposits below the cemetery.

The company did so in full view of municipal authorities, who on a number of occasions colluded with Aura Minerals/MINOSA to undermine community decision-making power. In 2015, the Permanent Contingency Commission (COPECO) [conducted a study](#) that found the cemetery was at risk of landslides and recommended the mass transfer of the remains buried there. Health and safety concerns, therefore, became the central pretext for closing the cemetery, despite criticism from community lawyers that the study presented serious irregularities.

While community members suspect the geological instability is a result of mining activity, an in-depth analysis of the mine's impact has not been carried out. COPECO also recommended mass exhumations without considering other avenues for preserving the cemetery as required by the 2015 *cabildo abierto* decision.

Further attempts at undermining community land rights included legally dubious agreements signed between local leaders and Aura Minerals/MINOSA in 2012 and 2016 that conditionally authorized mass exhumations. The agreements crumbled each time as the company continued its occupation of the cemetery while failing to uphold its end of the bargain. In the context of the 2016 agreement, families were torn apart by bribes given to select community members in exchange for "authorization" to exhume deceased relatives.

While such efforts ultimately failed to convince the Honduran Supreme Court, years of misinformation proved incredibly successful in suppressing resistance and facilitating the co-optation of government institutions.

At the end of 2021, a lower court in Santa Rosa de Copán, overseen by Judge Rafael Tabora, [authorized Aura Minerals/MINOSA](#) and the municipality of La Unión to exhume the entire cemetery.

In the weeks and months that followed, Aura Minerals/MINOSA seems to have given up any pretense of respect for Honduran law. Shortly after the initial mass exhumations, an appeals court overturned Judge Tabora's ruling. In March, the Ministry of Natural Resources issued a subsequent [executive notice](#) reiterating the company's obligation to halt all activity in the area. Video footage of mining activities taken after the communique's publication indicate that the company has continued to prepare the area for exploitation.

"MINOSA has demonstrated its ability to operate with total impunity, corrupting municipal authorities, prosecutors, judges and State ministers in order to crush community resistance through persecution, harassment, criminalization and militarization. They aren't sanctioned in any way," said Pedro Mejía, lawyer with the human rights firm Estudios para la Dignidad.

Will Village of Azacualpa Be Next?

"They desecrated [the cemetery] which if I'm not mistaken is a crime. So I want there to be justice for this and I want the guarantee that the day after tomorrow they won't show up with their machinery wanting to kick me out of my house. Because it's mine. It's my daughter's. I'm a single mother. I fight for my daughter," said a community member in the [March 3 meeting](#) with UN representative Albaladejo.

For decades, the San Andrés mine has destroyed everything in its path—contaminating waterways, destroying hundreds of hectares of millennial forest, conducting mountaintop removal, and causing damage to residential infrastructure. Surrounding communities have [reported](#) the fatal poisoning of [horses](#), fish, and other wildlife.

According to a [2016 report](#) by researcher and activist Karen Spring, "communities located around the mine have also reported illnesses...including skin rashes, hair loss, eye problems, and mysterious types of cancers."

For the bulk of its operation, ownership has been concentrated in the hands of Canadian or otherwise foreign companies. Like its current U.S. owner Aura Minerals, they operated with impunity.

"My house is damaged of course. Everyday, at midday you hear detonations. It even shakes the roof of my house," said one Azacualpa resident to Albaladejo.

As mining operations draw closer to Azacualpa, community members recall that a decade ago plans to expand the mine went beyond the cemetery. Spring's 2016 report notes that while the 2012 agreement was supposedly about the transfer of the cemetery, the agreement detailed the relocation of "all residents of Azacualpa" and made little mention of the "protocols and procedures of cemetery displacement."

Other affected communities were excluded from consultation, and it was "suspected that the sole focus of the negotiations with Azacualpa, rather than with all communities that use the graveyard, [was] because the mining company want[ed] to displace the entire community of Azacualpa."

Spring highlights that the threat of displacement is not without precedent. In the 1990s, at least two communities were forcibly destroyed by the mine. During the eviction of San Andrés, former residents remember that the community water source was cut off for several days before the company moved to bulldoze the water tower. Former mine manager Gerald Philips is said to have personally driven the bulldozer into the tower while local resident Wilmer Hernández was in it, causing Hernández to suffer life threatening and permanently disabling injuries.

In the [case of another community](#), the relentless expansion of [heap leach pads](#) steadily decimated San Miguel, as families were faced with the impossible choice of abandoning their homes or living in close proximity to large concentrations of toxic chemicals. Heap leach pads eventually swallowed up the community cemetery as well, and by 2010, only 40 homes were left standing. By then, families were living less than 125 meters from the company's sprinkler system of cyanide solution, and skeletal remains had been found scattered throughout the rubble that was left of the San Miguel cemetery.

Victor Fernández, of the Estudios para la Dignidad Firm, [warns](#) that community members are right to be worried. Documents solicited by their organization indicate that Aura Minerals already has, or is in the process of obtaining, concessions and operating licenses for an area that includes the community of Azacualpa.

"The cemetery, the community, and the hills that source the population's water supply are all in the process of concession and destruction through mechanisms of corruption," Fernández said.

The Ban on Open Pit Mining Falls Short

In the midst of the battle for dignity in Azacualpa, the historic election of Honduras' first female president Xiomara Castro provided a ray of hope for mining-affected communities across the country. Elected on a popular platform in late 2021, Castro and the Libre Party-led coalition promised to undo over a decade of irregular concessioning since the [2009 military coup](#), starting with a freeze on all permits and concessions for open pit mining and other natural resource exploitation.

On February 28, 2022, the Castro administration moved to make good on its promise, surprising many with an extraordinary [communiqué](#) that declared Honduras free of open pit mining. The momentum generated, however, quickly waned when the administration [walked it back](#) less than three weeks later.

In Azacualpa, visits from the Ministry of Human Rights and other concerned governmental entities demonstrate a marked break with previous administrations known to have colluded with capital interests to dispossess communities. Still, some are beginning to question the Castro government's willingness or capacity to successfully stand up to companies like Aura Minerals.

"If the new administration cannot take decisions and execute them," said lawyer Victor Fernandez in an [interview](#), "we are in a much more precarious situation than before."

What is certain is that the risk is high for the Azacualpa environmental defenders and their allies. In March, the Estudios para la Dignidad Firm and an accompanying UN mission were confronted by a large crowd of mine workers who [threatened](#) Fernández and others present.

Local environmental defenders later told the UN mission that they receive frequent harassment from company workers, as Aura Minerals/MINOSA is one of the sole providers of employment and social services in a municipality that suffers from high levels of poverty. In the post-coup period, efforts to create a business-friendly environment ensured minimal tax obligations for companies, leaving municipalities like La Unión vulnerable to corporate capture.

"There in La Ceibita, they stopped [sending] the teachers," said one local community leader to UN representative Albaladejo, "We don't have teachers anymore. Because we're in this struggle."

Further compounding the risks faced by Azacualpa land defenders are the criminalization efforts advanced by Aura Minerals and public prosecutors. According to community attorney Pedro Mejía, currently two processes of criminalization are being pursued against environmental defenders in connection to peaceful protests held in 2018 and 2021.

"In the last few days they've been saying that they're going to take us back [to jail]," said one criminalized land defender to Albaladejo. "I will say that I do fear for my life. Because they've threatened me."

According to a [UN report](#), 302 attacks against reporters and human rights defenders were recorded in Honduras in 2021. Seventy percent of these were against defenders of the environment, land, and territory.

Biden's Tired Solution to Outward Migration

To would-be migrants from Azacualpa and other Central American communities impacted by transnationally-backed extractive projects, Vice President Kamala Harris [has said](#), "Do not

come.” Her message is reinforced with the implementation of policies designed to make the migration route as dangerous as possible for asylum seekers who are depicted by the Biden administration as economic opportunists. Meanwhile, [skyrocketing death tolls and horrific headlines](#) of murder, rape, torture, and extortion are justified with the promise of a \$4 billion aid package and foreign direct investment.

Referred to as the Biden Plan for Central America, early indications suggest that rather than addressing the “root causes of migration,” the plan risks reproducing many of the same dynamics making life unsustainable for the mining-affected communities of La Unión and others.

In June, Harris [announced](#) that the White House had generated \$3.2 billion in private sector commitments for the region, touting the initiative as a strategy for stemming the flow of migration through economic development.

Among the partnerships listed, however, are SanMar, a U.S.–based apparel company [implicated in labor violations](#) in Honduras through its partial subsidiary Elcatex, and Fundación Terra, linked to Honduran businessman Fredy Nasser, whose company Hidro Xacbal, S.A. is [currently under investigation](#) in Guatemala for bribery and corruption in connection to two extractive hydroelectric dam projects.

On July 28, the Estudios para la Dignidad Firm filed a motion on behalf of the affected peoples that seeks to nullify environmental licenses granted to MINOSA under conditions of alleged fraud. In the San Andrés communities, continued efforts to recover the remains of disappeared loved ones are joined by new sites of resistance borne out of the mine’s ongoing expansion.

One such site is in the community of La Ceibita, where local residents have expressed strong opposition to mining activity near their primary water source and have blocked machinery from the access road leading up to the water spring on at least one occasion. Local residents report that MINOSA has begun to target members of the opposition for its signature program of bribery and [violent coercion](#).

“My family is scared,” [said](#) one Azacualpa resident, criminalized for his defense of the cemetery, “But we need to be brave...I tell these young people that we need to keep going.”

(Allison Lira is the Director of the Honduras Program for the Witness for Peace Solidarity Collective. She holds a BA in Philosophy from the University of California, Santa Cruz and an M.Phil in Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation from Trinity College Dublin.)

Chipping away: Send letters of protest to Aura Minerals / MINOSA, with copies to U.S. and Canadian embassies in Honduras, your local networks and media

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- Honduras Now: <https://www.hondurasnow.org/>
- Witness for Peace Solidarity Collective: www.solidaritycollective.org
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