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## **Wealth, Waste, And Violence: Mining In Guatemala**

by LADB Staff

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During the past year, the environmental and social consequences of mining have pitted indigenous communities and ecologists against national and international parties eager to exploit Guatemala for its mineral wealth. After a year of massive protests and equally massive police response, the issue has become the subject of intense divisive debate on the costs of development.

The country is rich in lead, silver, zinc, antimony, tungsten, copper, gold, and several other metals, and no fewer than 6,700 companies are involved in some aspect of the mining business. Several thousand workers are employed in it. But the extraction of minerals is a dirty and destructive enterprise. The harvest of wealth comes only when waters are polluted, soils poisoned, landscapes exploded, communities sundered, life diminished. Thus are lines drawn in the sand and another basis for combat born.

### *The good is oft interred*

Robert Moran, a University of Texas geologist who studies these issues, was in Guatemala recently to participate in a forum on gold mining, and he commented to the local media on the consequences of mining. He said mining brings improvements in jobs, roads, provision of water, installation of social services including health clinics, and economic opportunity, but "when the mine closes, the people who operate the clinic leave, the people who operate the water plant leave, and in the end, the community is left with nothing."

In the case of gold, the metal is extracted from broken rock with cyanide and other chemicals that leave a toxic residue to combine with rain and saturate the earth with poisons. These chemicals can kill fish and wildlife over time, even when their levels are within legal limits. In time, the chemicals combine to form other toxic substances whose killing power only begins to work long after mines are played out. Residues from blasting, mainly nitrates and ammonia, also contribute to deadly pollution. Costs of cleaning up these sites are huge, and cleanup is rarely undertaken in poor countries.

Other social impacts Moran has observed are noise, dust, and traffic of earthmoving equipment and trucks disrupting rural communities. Economic impacts include distortions in land and other prices. As some benefit, others lose when local prices for commodities rise with the infusion of money into fragile local economies.

### *A boon to development*

Carolina Roca, vice minister of energy and mines, acknowledges the downside but prefers to emphasize the developmental benefits to the country as a whole, and she said she thinks an upsurge in mining can be done responsibly without ambient damage. She said Guatemala will never be a

mining country, but it cannot afford to pass up exploitation of its precious metals. "It is an economic option that can contribute to our economy and bring employment opportunity," she said. "Besides, it can produce export income advantages and improvement in balance of payments."

The mining issue has risen to the top of the public discourse in recent months and weeks, with forums pro and con being held throughout the country. Most prominent among them were the Foro Nacional de Minería on the pro side and the Foro Alternativo de Resistencia a la Minería de Metales against. The Foro Nacional was organized by several interested institutions, the Energy and Mines Ministry, the Canadian Embassy, the World Bank, and the Gremial de Minas y Canteras among them. The Foro Alternativo was organized by MadreSelva and other social and environmental groups, and by the Catholic Church, which hosted the meeting, said Cardinal Rodolfo Quezada, to give a voice to those who are not heard.

Refuting the idea that mining can be done without environmental damage, Eloyda Mejía of the Asociación Amigos de Izabel recalled that the experience with nickel mining in that department was an ecological disaster. Izabel boasts a once-pristine lake among its attractions. Mejía reminded listeners that the lake was contaminated by uncontrolled toxic wastes from the nickel operations and she had no intention of seeing the mines reactivated. Moran supported her contentions.

On the other side of the argument in Izabel, the mayor of El Astor said mining is an engine of development for the area and could be compatible with conservation of natural resources. What has been clear in all this is that no minds are being changed in the exchanges, and the people who benefit are quite distinct from those who suffer from mining operations. The Foro Alternativa ended with unanimous rejection of the resurgence of mining.

Summing it up, Juan Tema of Sipacapa, a small town in the department of San Marcos, said, "Before, we didn't hear gunshots, nor were there acts of violence, but now, since the Montaña Company started construction work, these crimes have begun." The company is gearing up to mine gold in the neighborhood.

### *Laws unenforced, promises unkept*

The Foro Nacional concluded with the conviction that there will be more forums, so that, said Carolina Roca, the doubts of the communities could be clarified. "What there is, is an issue of ungovernability, and that is what we need to resolve," she said, referring to opponents' conviction that the mining companies will end up doing as they please, leaving a wake of destruction as they sap the country of its wealth. But it is often the case in Guatemala that the history of governmental noncompliance with its own laws and the broken promises of profit-oriented enterprises lead local communities to violent means of defense against incursions on their communities.

On Jan. 11, thousands of indigenous and campesinos blocked the Inter-American Highway in Solola to prevent the passage of a gigantic steel tube being trucked in for use in the San Marcos gold- and silver-mining operation. During the action, one person died from police gunfire and about 20 were injured on both sides. Some 1,500 police and soldiers were involved in the mission to protect the tube, destined for the Marlin mine.

The mine is operated by Montana Exploradora de Guatemala, a subsidiary of Glamis Gold Ltd, a Canadian company. The project was funded by a US\$45 million World Bank loan. Guatemalan President Oscar Berger quickly denounced the mayhem and blamed the bishop of San Marcos, Alvaro Ramazzini, for failing to control the mob and orient the people to a better understanding of mining.

Quezada, the cardinal archbishop of Guatemala City, responded for Ramazzini, blaming the government for not having seen the violence coming. He told the media, "The archdiocese has knowledge that the Secretaria de Analisis Estrategicos de la Presidencia told the government clearly about the possible ungovernability that continued mining concessions would generate, but the government ignored it."

### *Wide separation of church and state*

The government and the church have been at odds over this issue since last September, when Berger accused the hierarchy of being "populists" and "antiquated" for opposing mining. Quezada responded back then, "It's not populist to be concerned for the environmental deterioration of the country. Nor is it populist to alert our authorities to these possible damages." Death and injury aside, the highway blockade represented a success for the Movimiento Indigena Sololateco, which was a coordinated activity of opposition groups from other departments.

Dominga Vasquez, president of the movimiento and community mayor, said her group, organized in April 2004, is building toward a national front to stop the mining. They have begun a countrywide system of vigilance that will give them advance notice of activities like the movement of heavy equipment and have already demonstrated the ability to mobilize thousands of supporters.

At the institutional level, the anti-mining forces have not only the church behind them but, according to Ovidio Paz Baal of the Procuraduria de los Derechos Humanos, the backing of that organization as well.

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