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Local Communities In El Salvador Fight Gold Mining

by Mike Leffert

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The community of San Jose Las Flores in Chalatenango, El Salvador, is sitting on a gold mine. The discovery of the metal beneath their feet is seen by most here as a disaster in the making, however, and they want no part of it. The Canadian company Au Martinique has other ideas.

The company has announced it has obtained a new license to find and mine the stuff. Au Martinique president Paul Pitman said from his headquarters in Brampton, Ontario, that a rock-sampling program has been completed, and they are now about the business of working out details with another company, Intrepid Minerals Corporation, whereby Au Martinique Silver Inc. will have a 50% interest in all licenses.

Au Martinique holds exploration licenses in several large tracts. One, of about 15 sq km, has been identified in a stream-sediment survey as having gold values of 3 grams per ton (3g/t), and two others, measuring 29.75 sq km and 15 sq km, have been acquired. Together, the joint venture between the two companies holds rights to 149.45 sq km in the area. Gold values are highly variable within the area, from trace amounts up to 52.2 g/t.

The company's announcement is rich in technical details, the upshot of which is that the work to date "suggests that the mineralized area can be expanded further." Pitman is quoted as saying, "We look forward to advancing our activities hand-in-hand with the local communities to assure partnership in economic development and good environmental stewardship."

Official statement of local communities

The local communities are far from convinced. They issued the following statement: "Public statement from the affected communities about the danger of mineral exploitation in the north of the Department of Chalatenango " To the national government, and especially to the Ministries of the Economy and Environment; to the international community; and to the mining company Martinique SA and others we declare the following:

"Being informed about the problems that mineral exploitation generates, projects that are attempts against the life and health of humans because of environmental contamination of rivers and waters, to the contamination of the air with the destruction of the forests, hills, and lands, and because of the social problems that are generated from division, prostitution, vices, and sicknesses such as AIDS and others;

"Being informed that the offers of betterment are false promises, and surprised that all the benefits will leave the Country, without leaving real benefits for our Communities; aware that they want to take our riches and leave us destruction and problems;

"We declare our total and energetic rejection to the introduction of mining projects in our region, declaring that these lands are the fruit that has been left us after twelve years of war suffered in El Salvador because of the great social injustice that reigned here, evidenced by the fact that we as farmers did not have land, among other injustices. "These lands are ours because of the blood of the people of Chalatenango and the fruits of the peace accords under the land-transference program that was achieved through the solidarity of many countries and committees. "If the company continues insisting, ignoring our decision, we reserve the right to take the necessary measures to defend our lands and natural resources, our right to life, and the right to life of our future generations.

FOR THE RIGHT TO LIFE ORGANIZATION AND STRUGGLE NO TO MINERAL EXPLOITATION

"Signed: Association of Communities for the Development of Chalatenango: CCR; Associations for Communal Development (Adescos) of San Jose Las Flores, San Antonio Los Ranchos, San Isidro, Los Amates, Guarjila, Ignacio Ellacuria, Nueva Trinidad, Carasque, Arcatao, Potrerillos, Nombre de Jesus, Las Vueltas, La Ceiba; Municipal Councils of Arcatao, Nueva Trinidad, San Isidro, Nombre de Jesus, San Jose Las Flores, San Antonio Los Ranchos; Parish of Arcatao, Nueva Trinidad, Nombre de Jesus, San Jose Las Flores; Sisters of Assumption; Oblatas of the Sacred Heart."

Gina Hernandez, head of the Direccion de Minas of the Ministry of Economy, said the licenses are for four years, with provisions for renewal. A total of 36 licenses have been granted to 15 companies, including Pacific Rim El Salvador, which holds rights on territories abutting those of Au Martinique. Pacific Rim is in the process of obtaining environmental permits to start mining El Dorado, in the municipality of San Isidro, Cabanas department. It expects to invest US\$50 million more in the stake in the next six years and to start production in 2007.

In Cabanas, where Pacific Rim is operating, the Asociacion de Desarrollo Economico Social (ADES), together with other organizations, has concluded that mining in the Canton San Francisco El Dorado "will provoke an unprecedented environmental catastrophe," contaminating the land, the rivers, and the aquifers. ADES points especially to the extraction methods that utilize cyanide and lead that will leave residues of these products as well as other heavy metals, even if detoxification methods are efficient. The Copinolapa, Los Pueblos, San Francisco, San Isidro, Titihuapa, and Lempa rivers, some of which are used for drinking water, are especially vulnerable.

The organization said the basic industries of the region, agriculture, cattle, and fishing, are all at risk. Pacific Rim has 75 sq km under license and is filing for more. Its present permits will extend its rights for a decade, during which time, it has been estimated, it has the potential of extracting 394,190 ounces of gold and 2.3 million ounces of silver. Plans call for two years of installing infrastructure, six years of mining, and two years of shutting-down operations. The company is committed to sharing 1% of profits with the municipality and 1% with the central government.

ADES contends that employment will be minimal and the damage to health and environment irreparable. "They'll have to kill us all" The government's issuance of permits and licenses is

no sure sign that mining development will proceed unimpeded. The organized communities of Chalatenango have been at least temporarily successful in recent months in stopping operations.

In October 2005, the Asociacion de Comunidades para el Desarrollo de Chalatenango-Coordinidora de Comunidades Rurales (CCR) formed a human chain in the community of Guarjila, blocking the entrance of Au Martinique workers, including two Canadians. The Canadians tried to convince the residents that the mines would be good for them and that they had authorization from the government to start their explorations, but, said a CCR document, "We the communities declared that the government never consulted us about the decision, thus we are ready to make our own decisions and we will make them responsibly. We asked that they leave the region, and a group of citizens accompanied them out of Chalatenango, to be sure that they would not return." The protesters have charged the government and President Antonio Saca with violating the Constitution for not protecting the health and well-being of inhabitants and have called upon international organizations to come to their defense. In the meantime, the mining company personnel have not returned.

In February, CCR members formed into small groups to search out and remove markers and other evidence of the exploration work from the area. People from San Jose Las Flores, Los Amates, San Isidro, Ignacio Ellacuria, Las Limas, and Guarjila destroyed or removed the markers the company used to identify mineral veins. At the end of the operation, the people gathered in San Isidro, where Lisandro Monges of Las Flores said, "Surely there are many more markers hidden in the hills, but let this be yet another message of sound rejection to the mining company." The markers include colored tapes with maps and coordinates written on them and metal survey plaques. The day's search turned up bags full of tape and 21 plaques, as well as a collection of US-made machine-gun rounds, reminiscent of another time of invasion of their lands. In addition to removing all this, the dissenting residents erased or otherwise obliterated numbers marked on trees and rocks.

CCR members have also been successful in persuading other residents not to sell their land to the company or to work for them, or otherwise cooperate. They have given every indication they are deadly serious and are in this fight for the duration. At the same time the mining company is threatening, the government has taken preliminary steps to divert the Sumpul River for hydroelectric production, this too without consultation. Said one resident to a reporter, "If they want to divert the Sumpul, they will have to kill us all first."

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