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El Salvador: Two More Anti-mining Activists Slain

by LADB Staff

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An already bloody 2009 ended on a particularly macabre note for activists involved in a grassroots movement to block multinational mining companies from tapping El Salvador's valuable gold and silver resources. On Dec. 26, Dora Sorto Recinos, a 32-year-old mother of six, was gunned down near her house in Nueva Trinidad, Cabanas, some 80 km northeast of San Salvador. Alicia, as she was known to her friends, was eight months pregnant at the time. The Salvadoran press reported that the attack occurred while the victim was walking home after washing clothes in a nearby river. Sorto Recinos was carrying her two-year-old son, who received a bullet wound to the foot but survived the attack. Her unborn child did not. Sorto Recinos's death occurred less than one week after another Nueva Trinidad resident, Ramiro Rivera, was ambushed while driving his pickup truck. The hooded attackers riddled both Rivera and a female passenger with M-16 bullets, somehow eluding police who had been watching Rivera since August, when he miraculously survived a prior attempt on his life (see NotiCen, 2009-12-10). During that first attack, the would-be assassins shot Rivera eight times in the back. Opposition to mining risky business In addition to the timing and location of the two hits, much suggests the murders are linked, particularly as both Rivera and Sorto Recinos were members of the local environmental group Comite Ambiental de las Cabanas (CAC). Like dozens of other organizations in the influential Mesa Nacional Frente a la Mineria Metalica (known simply as La Mesa), the CAC opposes plans by foreign mining firms to dig for gold and silver in El Salvador's mineral-rich northern departments. That opposition has proved to be extremely risky business for the movement's many integrants. Sorto Recinos's widower, CAC board member Jose Santos Rodriguez, has received death threats, as have local journalists. A priest, Father Luis Quintanilla, was also targeted. On July 29, Quintanilla narrowly escaped a kidnapping and assassination attempt. Another outspoken activist, Marcelo Rivera (no relation to Ramiro Rivera), was not so lucky. On June 18, Rivera, a community organizer in San Isidro, Cabanas, disappeared. His lifeless body was discovered two weeks later at the bottom of a well (see NotiCen, 2009-12-10). An autopsy concluded Marcelo Rivera was tortured and then strangled to death. "People are terrified, especially since Ramiro Rivera had police protection because of an attempt on his life earlier in the year, and he was killed nonetheless," Theodora Simon, a grassroots coordinator with the nongovernmental organization (NGO) SHARE, told NotiCen. "Many people are also more resolved to continue the fight. For them and their families, mining would be a death sentence. Many of those who participate in the anti-mining movement are coming together to support each other, to support the families of those who have given their lives to stop what they refer to as this 'project of death,' to support and encourage those who continue to receive death threats." The Canadian connection Of particular concern to activists is the El Dorado project in Cabanas, owned by Canadian firm Pacific Rim. The Vancouver-based company believes the mine contains more than 1.2 million ounces of gold, worth an estimated US$1.35 billion at today's elevated prices. Gold currently sells for roughly US$1,130 per ounce, up from just US$300 per ounce a decade ago. But, after spending years and a reported US $77 million exploring the mine, Pacific Rim has not managed to convince Salvadoran authorities to issue extraction permits. Much to the company's chagrin, the Salvadoran government has instead shown itself sympathetic to the concerns of La Mesa and its allies in the Catholic Church, who worry about the effects El Dorado and other mines planned for the area would have on the environment.
and public health. Gold mining, critics point out, relies heavily on cyanide, a notorious poison that could make its way into the water system. Pacific Rim denies any involvement in the murders, suggesting instead that the Trinidad victims may have been involved in an ongoing family feud. In a press release posted on its Web site Jan. 4, the company blamed local activists for falsely portraying what it calls a national "debate" regarding mining as a full-blown "conflict." "PacRim has recently been the target of false accusations made by certain anti-mining groups, which wrongfully suggest PacRim's involvement in a series of murders in the area of Trinidad, El Salvador. PacRim unequivocally denies these accusations," the statement reads. "There is no evidence indicating these violent acts bear any relations whatsoever to the debate over mining in the country." The mining company also refutes claims its El Dorado mine would in any way harm the environment or pose a public health risk. In addition to employing state-of-the-art technology to oxidize and destroy the cyanide it would use, Pacific Rim also promises to build a treatment plant to purify the mine's discharge water. Pacific Rim outlined its arguments in an Environmental Impact Report it submitted four years ago. El Salvador's environmental authorities, however, never processed the report, adhering instead to a freeze on mining permits established by then President Antonio Saca (2004-2009) of the conservative Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA). Since taking office last June (see NotiCen, 2009-06-04), President Mauricio Funes, a member of the leftist Frente Farabundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN), has maintained the freeze, which Pacific Rim considers both unfair and illegal. Frustrated by the government's recalcitrance, Pacific Rim turned to a powerful intermediary, the World Bank. Last April, the company filed a multimillion-dollar lawsuit against the Salvadoran government with the bank's International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes (ICISD), which agreed in November to hear the case. Pacific Rim insists that, if El Salvador refuses to allow access to its gold, it should at least compensate the company for the millions it spent prospecting at the El Dorado site. Pacific Rim bases its suit on Chapter 10 of the US-Dominican Republic-Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR), which allows foreign companies that feel their profit potential is threatened by local governments to sue their host country for cash compensation. El Salvadoran is party to the treaty. Pacific Rim's home country, Canada, is not, which is why the company filed its ICISD suit via a fully owned subsidiary, Pac Rim Cayman, headquartered in the US state of Nevada. President Funes takes a stand The Pacific Rim suit, coupled with a threat by US-owned mining firm Commerce Group Corporation to pursue the same legal strategy, has put President Funes in an uncomfortable position. His anti-mining campaign promises aside, the popular leftist leader, in refusing to negotiate with the multinationals, risks losing a series of costly court battles that El Salvador, one of the poorest and most violence-ravaged countries in the hemisphere, can ill afford. If anything, however, the December murders appear to have stiffened the president's resolve on the issue. Funes made his position crystal clear when, in the wake of Ramiro Rivera's death, he told reporters that his "government is not approving any mining exploration or extraction projects." He also promised a full investigation into the case, a pledge he reiterated after Sorto Recinos was killed. "I promise my friends in the environmental movement that we'll get to the bottom of these murders. These people offered their lives to fight for a better environment and a better quality of life for Salvadoran men and women, especially for the communities that are affected by mining projects," Funes said during a Jan. 11 event in Las Cabanas. "No one has convinced us that there are ways to extract minerals and metals, especially metals, without contaminating the environment and affecting public health." Representatives from the anti-mining movement applauded the gesture but insist they need more than presidential promises to protect themselves from further violence. Given the current climate of violence and threats, the murders of Riveras and Sorto Recinos, they point out, were classic chronicles of death foretold. And
with the activists resolved to continue their struggle, even the best of government intentions may not be enough to prevent such violence from being repeated.

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