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## El Salvador Turns Wary Eye Toward Up-river Guatemala Gold Mine

by Benjamin Witte-Lebhar

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No strangers to the pressures of foreign mining interests, Salvadoran activists, church leaders, and government officials have joined forces of late to keep would-be gold diggers in check. Now, however, the country's many mining opponents face a new challenge just across the border in Guatemala that is exposing the limits of their lobby.

During the past several years, El Salvador has imposed a de facto freeze on mining permits, much to the chagrin of furious foreign mining firms. But as influential as the Salvadoran anti-mining movement has proven to be, it has no real say on what takes place beyond the country's territorial boundaries, even if the mine in question is literally just upstream.

That's precisely the scenario El Salvador faces with Cerro Blanco, a gold and silver mine being launched across the border in Guatemala's Jutiapa province. Its owner, Canadian firm Goldcorp, is eager to begin extracting Cerro Blanco's estimated 1.3 million ounces of gold. Production could begin this year. With the price of gold currently near US\$1,200 an ounce, up 185% in just the past five years, the mine's deposits are worth some US\$1.5 billion a veritable treasure trove.

Guatemalan authorities have already approved the venture, despite Goldcorp's less-than-stellar local track record. Through its subsidiary Montana Exploradora, the Vancouver-based company owns a second Guatemalan mine, the Marlin, in the northern province of San Marcos. A target of local opposition since it first opened in 2004, the Marlin mine continues to attract criticism from environmental, labor, and human rights groups([NotiCen, Aug. 21 2008](#)).

A recent report commissioned by Goldcorp lambasted Montana's labor practices and its "systematic failure to address grievances in the communities, allowing them to accumulate and exacerbate." Critics point to a 2009 accident at the mine (in December a pipe burst, releasing 83 cubic meters of toxic sludge) to argue that Marlin is also a ticking environmental time bomb.

Similar complaints have been levied against another Goldcorp venture, the San Martín mine in Honduras. The British aid group Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD) claims to have uncovered Honduran government documents proving the mine has polluted area water supplies. Goldcorp acquired both the Marlin and San Martín mines in a 2006 takeover of Glamis Gold, a US company.

### *Not in our backyard*

Rattled by Goldcorp's reputation, Salvadoran mining opponents say they have good reason to fear the Canadian miners will poison their proverbial well. Gold mining relies heavily on cyanide, a notorious poison that Cerro Blanco's critics fear could make its way into the water system first to the nearby Río Ostúa, from there to the binational Lago Güija (only 18 km from the mine), and then into the Río Lempa, El Salvador's principal river.

El Salvador's nongovernmental organization (NGO) Centro de Investigación sobre Inversión y Comercio (CIECOM), a leading voice of opposition to Cerro Blanco, says the mine could release other toxins as well. Citing research carried out by Dr. Dina Larios of Ohio University, CIECOM insists Cerro Blanco would pollute the Ostúa with high-temperature waste water containing fluorine, arsenic, and boron, harming plant and animal life and posing a public health risk to people on both sides of the border.

CIECOM voiced its concerns in March before the Guatemalan Congress, where it was joined by Guatemalan groups Madreselva, an environmental organization, and the Comisión Justicia y Paz, a Catholic Church group. All three organizations called on Guatemalan authorities to suspend Goldcorp's Cerro Blanco permit.

"We Salvadorans, and CEICOM in particular, recognize the legitimate sovereignty of the Guatemalan people and government to make their own decisions," CEICOM wrote in a letter to the Congress. "But we ask you to consider the harm the Cerro Blanco mine will cause to thousands, maybe even millions, of Salvadoran inhabitants. We ask you to apply the principle of prevention and precaution to avoid repeating with this project the sad story that many other communities have already lived through."

The Catholic Church in El Salvador has voiced opposition as well, calling on Salvadoran President Mauricio Funes, a former television journalist and member of the leftist Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN), to weigh in the matter. Funes, who assumed the presidency last June ([NotiCen, June 4, 2009](#)), supports El Salvador's domestic mining freeze.

"We've always argued that gold and silver mining doesn't make sense in our country because of the serious harm it causes to the environment, to public health, and to the lives of people," El Salvador Archbishop José Luis Escobar Alas said on Jan. 31. "We Salvadorans have the sad example of Guatemala and Honduras where operations in several mines have destroyed nature and threaten us as well."

Even lawmakers from El Salvador's conservative Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA) party are showing concern. In March, ARENA officials asked the Ministerio de Medio Ambiente (MARN) for a detailed report of Cerro Blanco's potential impacts. ARENA, now the leading opposition party, governed El Salvador for two decades prior to President Funes' inauguration.

"[The mine] would use 6,000 tons of cyanide per year. It also needs 240 gallons of water per hour to separate the metals," ARENA Deputy Rodrigo Samayoa told the Salvadoran daily La Página. "These products would pollute the Río Ostúa, go on to contaminate Lago Güija, then the Río Guajoyo, which feeds into the Río Lempa... and that's where ANDA [Administración Nacional de Acueductos y Alcantarillados] gets the Salvadoran people's drinking water. That's the concern."

### *Funes firm on mining freeze*

Even without Cerro Blanco, water pollution is already a major problem in El Salvador. A recent MARN report suggests that all of the country's rivers and streams contain dangerous bacteria, heavy metals, and other pollutants. In 41 of the 55 rivers and streams MARN examined, pollution levels are so high that even heavy treatment would not make the water safe to drink, the report concluded ([NotiCen, April 22, 2010](#)).

El Salvador's precarious water situation is one of the principal reasons the movement to block metals mining has gained so much traction in recent years, even against intense pressure from companies like Canada's Pacific Rim, which has spent years and a reported US\$77 million looking for gold in its El Dorado mine, some 65 km west of San Salvador in Cabañas.

The company is chomping at the bit to begin extracting the site's estimated 1.2 million ounces of gold (see NotiCen, 2009-12-10). But so far the state has refused to let the company dig, prompting Pacific Rim to file a multimillion dollar suit via the World Bank's International Center for Settlement of Investment Disputes (ICSID). Another foreign mining firm—a joint venture between US companies Commerce Group Corp. and San Sebastian Gold Mines, Inc.—is threatening similar legal action.

Funes—who inherited the mining freeze from his predecessor, former President Antonio Saca (2004-2009) of ARENA—has held his ground. In January, shortly after two anti-mining activists in Cabañas were murdered, the president told reporters he is simply not convinced "there are ways to extract minerals and metals, especially metals, without contaminating the environment and affecting public health (NotiCen, Jan. 28, 2010)." Pacific Rim called Funes' comments "groundless and ill-conceived."

But the Cerro Blanco mine, simply because it lies just past the Salvadoran border, is a different story. While it may end up being El Salvador's problem, Cerro Blanco is, nevertheless, Guatemala's prerogative.

Foreign Ministers Haroldo Rodas of Guatemala and Hugo Martínez of El Salvador broached the issue during an April meeting. To placate mine opponents, they agreed to form a joint committee to monitor water quality in Lago Güija. So far, though, Guatemalan authorities have made no indication they will close the mine. Nor has Funes made any overt efforts to intervene.

"Even though President Funes has said that his government won't authorize mining permits, that doesn't mean he can necessarily or will choose to influence President [Álvaro] Colom of Guatemala to stop that mining project from happening. But, because El Salvador is completely downstream from that river, the effects will be much more severe in El Salvador than they will be in Guatemala," said Alexis Stoumbelis, executive director of the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES).

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