

Welcome to Guatemala: gold mine protester beaten and burnt alive

Written by Joan Russow

Thursday, 21 August 2014 11:04 -

Indigenous people speak out against the Marlin mine run by Canadian company Goldcorp

- Surge in deaths of environmental activists over past decade, report finds

The Marlin mine in western Guatemala owned by Canadian firm Goldcorp. Photograph: David Hill

“They took him and poured gasoline all over him. Then they struck a match and lit him.” Doña A – not her real name, for security reasons – was standing up, arms crossed, lightly leaning against a ladder, and speaking in her language, Maya Mam, while a friend, a relation by marriage, translated into Spanish. There were 20 or so Mams in the room – mostly women, some children, one elderly man – and we were in an adobe-brick house in the highlands of far western Guatemala, not far from the border with Mexico, and just around the corner from an open sky and underground gold- and silver-mine called Marlin.

The Mams had gathered there – at some personal risk – to speak about the mine and how it impacts them. “Her husband was killed by workers of the company,” someone had said suddenly, meaning Doña A, “but she doesn’t speak much Spanish”, although it was quickly suggested she could talk in Mam and a friend would translate for her.

“We heard the screams and the yellings but we didn’t know what was happening,” she continued.

Her husband’s two brothers were with him: they had to run away or would be burnt alive too.

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“He didn’t want to die,” she said. “It was the rainy season. There was a little bit of water which he tried to jump into and the fire sort of went away.”

This was 2009: Doña A named the month and the date. Her husband didn’t survive. He was eventually taken to hospital, she said, but died there. Although a formal complaint was filed with the Attorney-General’s regional office, it wasn’t followed up because Doña A was “scared” of the consequences.

“They said that they would lynch [“lynchar”] us,” she said.

Why had her husband been killed?

“He was part of the struggle,” said Doña A’s friend, answering directly. “He was defending our rights. He was informing the communities about the problems the mining company brought with it, and performing a community consultation.”

A lawyer from Guatemala City was in the room with us. He said the consultation process had been a grass-roots initiative which managed to consult 23 communities in the region – all of which pronounced against the mine – but “death threats”, among other things, had put an end to it.

But how could Doña A be sure this had something to do with the mine, the company? She had answered that earlier:

“They asked him, “Why are you against the mining?” They were wearing hoods. They asked him, “Why are you against the company?” That’s why we knew they were members of the company.”

This is just one of many horror stories that many Maya Mams, as well as Maya Sipacapenses, from the neighbouring district, could tell about Marlin – which they have been speaking out

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against, resisting and protesting for over a decade. Speak to others and it's the same, desperate complaints: intimidation, threats, social division, violence, bribery and corruption of local authorities, destruction and contamination of water sources, livestock dying, houses shaking, cracked walls, the criminalization of protest, forest cleared, and appalling health impacts such as malnutrition and skin diseases.

In 2010 Guatemala was urged to suspend operations at Marlin by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) because of concerns about the impacts, as well as the failure to properly consult the Mams and Sipacapenses, but that request was ignored and the IACHR later backtracked. Indeed, in allowing the mine to go-ahead in the first place the government also ignored an international treaty, the International Labour Organization's Convention 169, which Guatemala ratified in 1996 and which recognises, among other things: 1) indigenous peoples' rights of "ownership and possession" "over the lands which they traditionally occupy"; and 2) indigenous peoples' rights to be consulted about "legislative or administrative measures which may affect them directly", and which must be carried out "with the objective of achieving agreement or consent to the proposed measures" – something many Mams and Sipacapenses say wasn't done regarding Marlin.

That failure to properly consult the Mayas also means that the World Bank's International Financial Corporation (IFC) violated its safeguards – no surprise at all – when it provided a catalytic loan of US\$45 million back in 2004 to kick-start operations. The Bank's "Operational Directive" on indigenous peoples stated that "direct consultation" must be done.

The company running Marlin is Montana Exploradora, a subsidiary of Goldcorp, based in Vancouver, Canada. I asked Goldcorp to comment on Doña A's allegation that company workers had been responsible for setting fire to her husband and received this response from the Communications Director, Christine Marks:

The allegation is patently false. Goldcorp and its subsidiary Montana Exploradora do not condone violence of any kind, against anyone. We respect the right of all individuals to voice their opinions respectfully. Goldcorp and Montana Exploradora have adopted the internationally-recognized standards of "Voluntary Principles on Security and Human Rights." These standards provide the guidelines for security policies which include and demonstrate respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. All of our security personnel are trained in the 'Voluntary Principles', as are the local members of the Guatemalan police and army.

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Asked about the other allegations – the intimidation, the threats, the social division. . . – Marks directed me to a Goldcorp webpage where “you’ll find common myths that have been exposed repeatedly as falsehoods.” This lists eleven such “myths”, which Goldcorp refutes, including ones that the company contaminates the local water supply, that it doesn’t consult local communities, that it doesn’t respect human rights, that communities around the mine are negatively impacted, and that it intimidates opposition.

Goldcorp is just one of many Canadian companies currently operating in Latin America amid growing concern about their social and environmental impacts. Earlier this year the IACHR was presented with a report written by more than 30 civil society organizations about 22 large-scale mining projects in nine Latin American countries – Marlin among them – which argues that between 50% and 70% of Latin American mining is now done by Canadian firms and that Canada’s authorities, while aware of the projects mentioned in the report, continue “to provide political, legal and financial support to companies which commit or tolerate human rights abuses.”

“Canadian mining is getting a really bad reputation,” someone in Guatemala, who I won’t name either, told me. “Canada is hell.”