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Canadian mining around the world

On Nov. 3, 2004, Canada's Ambassador to Guatemala, James Lambert, wrote an article in Prensa Libre, in which he described the economic benefits and the social and environmental responsibility demonstrated by the mining industry in Canada. The history of mining in Canada, as with other industries that extract natural resources, is full of conflicts and damaging activities by Canadian companies. In Canada many advances have been made in legislation and controls that protect the environment and communities, although the mining companies did not take the lead in this process. It was civil society that pushed our government to make the needed changes. Nevertheless conflicts and "natural disasters" continue.

We do not know how the Ambassador came up with the figures on the positive impact of mining on 200 aboriginal communities in Canada. There are fewer than twenty aboriginal communities in Canada that have negotiated agreements with mining companies. According to published studies, mining activities in Canada have left thousands of abandoned mines on aboriginal territory, many of them leaking toxic waste into the water supply. Some aboriginal communities have benefited from employment and contracting opportunities but most have not.

But, as stated in the Nov. 4th issue of Prensa Libre, the situation of the mining industry in Canada has little to do with the present or future situation in Guatemala, where mining companies are not governed by the same norms as in Canada. Examining the history of Canadian mining companies in Guatemala and in other countries of the South sheds more light on the potential impact of Canadian mining companies in Guatemala. We therefore wish to show to the Guatemalan people a small part of the history of Canadian mining in the world, which is a dirty history.

In Guatemala, the documents of the Historical Clarification Commission state that during the years of violence, Exmibal, a subsidiary of the large Canadian corporation INCO, was implicated in some violent and repressive acts. (INCO recently sold Exmibal to Skye Resources, another Canadian company.)

More recently, in 1995, an ecological disaster of major dimensions occurred at the Omai gold mine in Guyana belonging to the Canadian company Cambior. Four and a half million cubic metres of residual minerals, highly contaminated with cyanide, escaped from a dam into the Essequibo River of Guyana. Eighty kilometres of the river were declared an environmental disaster zone. Fifty percent of the local residents, the majority of whom were indigenous, suffered health impacts. For example, children suffered from fainting and skin lesions, there was extensive contamination of water sources, aquatic life was lost, and three cases of death are believed to be the result of poisoning.

Today, the mining company, Glamis Gold, is developing the Marlin mine in the Department of San Marcos, Guatemala and manages the San Martin mine in Honduras. In San Martin negative impacts on the health of children, such as skin diseases and the loss of hair have been documented. A report commissioned by Caritas-Honduras documented the presence of heavy metal in the water, above acceptable levels. Communities near San Martin, with the support of Honduran Cardinal Oscar Andres Rodriguez, have protested the presence of the mine since 2002.

In the case of Peru Canadian based companies are the largest international investor in the mining industry. Working against the desires of the community, the Manhattan Minerals Corporation wanted to develop a mine in the region of Tambogrande. After demonstrations of up to 10,000 people, the Peruvian government rejected Manhattan's proposal and the company immediately sold its interests to look for opportunities in other countries. Why did the people of Tambogrande react so strongly against this proposal? They did not want to lose their water source, nor their mango and lime harvests, nor their homes. The development of the mine would have meant the destruction of their way of life. A Canadian-Peruvian research project has linked mines in Peru to the contamination of water and soils and the destruction of flora and fauna. Furthermore, there was not sufficient control over adherence to legal requirements. As a result, conflicts and tensions within local governments increased and there were no major economic benefits for the communities.

There are also many well-documented examples from the Philippines, Indonesia and Africa, of damaging impacts of Canadian mining operations. For Canadian social and environmental organizations, the situation we have described is shameful. We are struggling here in Canada to alert the Canadian people to this reality. We have called on our government to stop its direct and indirect support of companies that exploit the resources of other countries solely for the benefit of Canadian investors.

We have called on our government to recognize that Glamis Gold Ltd. was granted a mining concession by the Guatemalan government without an adequate consultative process. This clearly violated ILO Convention 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples, to which Guatemala is a signatory.

We have a dream that in the future Guatemalans will benefit from their own natural resources. We hope that the mining industry develops in a manner that respects the right of all Guatemalan people to determine their own development path and that ensures the dignity and respect of the Guatemalan people and the environment.

Sincerely,

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