

# Canada: The Practices of Corporate Mining

By [Michael Werbowski](#)

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*Canadians are have at times been led to believe how their role in Afghanistan is based on humanitarian principles. "Our troops" are supposedly there to promote women's rights, chase out the evil Taliban and restore the country to peace and stability. It is all put forward by officials in an over simplistic, fairy tale like- good and evil narrative. The ends justify the means. That's why it was perhaps so jarring and deeply disconcerting for some of us reading the news, when damning testimony was revealed, that accused the country's military (one of its most respected institutions) of possibly being implicated in torture or the cruel mistreatment of Afghan prisoners. Such stories highlight that at times, when it comes to Canadian foreign policy, there appears to be a huge disconnect between the lofty goals on one hand espoused by those in charge, and the harsh truths on the ground on the other. Another example of this policy schizophrenia or Jekyll- Hyde dichotomy is in mining. The very international industry often boasts of job creation in local communities wherever they operate abroad and benevolent actions. At home it also makes up a huge chunk of all registered companies on the Toronto and Vancouver stock exchanges. Many Canadians (whether they like it or not) depend on mining for their income in mutual funds and other investments. But there's a slight flaw to this almost perfect picture. Mining is environmentally speaking anathema to the notion of "sustainable development". There is also above all a high human cost, in terms of displacement of communities and corruption and bribery which undermines democracy in the third world.*

## **Painful Extraction**

In November, while the country was still reeling from the revelations of one of its top former ambassadors to Kabul, in another wing of parliament a rapt house of commons committee sat spellbound listening to testimonials and gory blood curdling tales of gang rapes in places like Papua New Guinea (MPs told of gang rapes at mine-Toronto Star, 24-11-09) and of underworld like intimidation of a former Argentinean minister (Mining companies threatened me: Ex Argentinean Minister, Toronto Star, 24-11-09). There are so many egregious cases of corporate social irresponsibility and wanton plunder coming home to roost now in Ottawa , from far off places most Canadians haven't even heard about. The accounts of corporate misdeeds, would take reams of reports maybe as high as the peace tower on the hill to mention them all. Some examples exist in remote "no go zones" like in central Africa (Congolese Corporate responsibility, Financial Post, 18-11-2009), where the gains from "conflict mineral" finance endless civil wars. Or in Latin America where decades long ownership battles over huge untapped gold mines lead to international arbitration diplomatic tensions and all kinds of treachery ("The Saga which is Las Cristinas", [www.worldpress.org](http://www.worldpress.org). Or parts of the Far East such as the Philippines , where lawsuits against Canadian mining companies remain unresolved and drag on for years, ("Appeals court reinstates Philippines pollution lawsuit against Barrick.Placer Dome, AP- 09-30-09).

## **The methodology of mining**

These documented case studies reflect poorly of on the countries increasingly sullied and blood soaked international image and on its “good” corporate citizens as well.

Mining in order to be profitable must be done on the cheap and in places where labour laws and environmental standards are far below Canadian standards. The methods used to extract the earth’s wealth use toxic chemicals (arsenic, mercury, cyanide) and by means of “heap leaching”; a process which uses huge amount of chemically laced water which then separates the worthless mineral ore waste from the coveted precious gold or silver dug from the ground. As a result, tons of rock removed from an open pit mine site for instance, is then stored as ‘tailings’ in toxic sludge like sewers or cesspools to stagnate and seep into groundwater forever. The poisonous remnants contaminate the land (above and below) for generations. These practises are as the MP’s and mining executives, lobbyists listening to the litany of complaints from foreigners affected by mining, quite unpopular among local communities both on the ground and in the field. When resistance is unremitting then the companies (often in complicity with the local authorities) resort to more sinister methods to clear the land. They hire armed goons and with the help of the “security forces” they displace the “trouble makers” in order to make room for an open pit mine. Or worse contract mob like hit men to do away with local mining activists opposed to their activities (“Anti Mining Activist Mariano Abarca Assassinated in Chiapas , The Dominion”, 28-11-09). Over the years, this gives both the Canadian based miners and the host country, the quasi status of a pariah or rogue state in the rest of the developing world.

## **What can be done?**

A private member’s bill baptized C-300 which was introduced by Toronto Liberal MP John McKay (For details of this bill listen to: “Discussion of Bill C-300 and Corporate Accountability at [www.fridaymorningafter.wordpress.com](http://www.fridaymorningafter.wordpress.com)) seeks to tighten scrutiny of mining companies’ operations offshore. The bill although unlikely to ever pass both houses of parliament would create an ombudsman to examine the complaints for both Canadian citizens and foreigners regarding corporate mining maleficent. But more menacing to the mining operatives is it would cut of taxpayers’ funding for overseas mining ventures which the industry now enjoys by means of EDC (Export Development Canada) and the CPP (Canada Pension Plan).

This given the huge efforts by mining industry minions or lobbyists to bury the bill even before it gets a second reading in the house, seems to be a pie in the sky idea. But it is a first very small step in the right direction. No matter what the good intentions of corporate bosses seeking to assuage the concerns of nervous investors and pension fund holders maybe, or even those of bold men like John McKay, who wish to clean up the dirty industry, there is still this irksome notion: if the mining industry is not reigned in soon, then the evil Mr. Hyde may get the better of the good Dr. Jekyll and more mining horror stories will told on parliament hill to the discomfort of many in the future.

**Michael Werbowski** is an award winning environmental journalist and former business editor at “The News” in Mexico City .

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