

Guatemalans Resist Invasion of North American Mines

By [Helen Jaccard](#) and [Gerry Condon](#)

Region: [Latin America & Caribbean](#)

Global Research, January 07, 2013

[War Is a Crime](#)

In November we traveled to Guatemala to study Spanish and learn about the lives of the indigenous Maya people. Guatemala is an amazingly beautiful country, with countless mountains and valleys, and 22 volcanoes, the most in Central America. The people are very friendly and good humored. Traditional Mayan culture, mostly observed in the colorful dress of the Mayan women, lives side by side with modernity. Picture a traditionally dressed indigenous peasant woman tending her cattle and sheep on a hillside pasture. Now watch her pull a cell phone out of her skirt to call her children.

We are not just Spanish students and certainly not “tourists” in the usual sense. We are active members of [Veterans For Peace](#), and we are very concerned about the U.S. role in Central America. The legacy of the 36-year war waged by the Guatemalan military against its indigenous people is everywhere. A peace agreement was signed in 1996, but many people we met, especially in the mountainous Mayan communities, told us the war continues – through discrimination, poverty, lack of voice in government, and now the systematic destruction of their communities in favor of gold and silver mining, hydroelectric dams, cement plants and oil exploration.

We learned again about the [CIA engineered coup](#) that overthrew the progressive, democratically elected government of Jacobo Arbenz in 1954. Sponsored by the Eisenhower administration at the behest of the United Fruit Company (now Chiquita), the coup led to a 36-year long war of “scorched earth” genocide. More than 440 Mayan villages were destroyed and over 200,000 people died in massacres by the Guatemalan military, with aid and encouragement from the United States government.

An unjust order prevails to this day. Most of the land and wealth is in the hands of only eight families. To make matters worse, between 2000 and 2004 the Guatemalan government granted over 400 mining and extraction licenses to U.S. and Canadian mining companies who seek gold, silver and other precious metals that are right under the feet of the poor Mayan communities in the mountains. With massive profits to take away from Guatemala, the mining operations are carrying out a “scorched earth” policy of their own.

Huehuetenango

After studying Spanish for two weeks at San Pedro Laguna on Lake Atitlan (highly recommended), we stayed with a family in Huehuetenango, close to Chiapas, Mexico, which used to be part of Guatemala. We visited the small mountain town of Jacaltenango, where we met Bernardo Masariegos, a community leader who told us of the struggles in the department (state) of Huehuetenango against mines, hydroelectric dams, and petroleum

extraction. The people of Huehuetenango, the most indigenous and rural department of Guatemala, adamantly oppose such exploitation.

In successful opposition to a hydroelectric dam on the Mesté River, a grassroots movement of 9,000 to 14,000 people maintained a three year long nonviolent occupation (rotating about 100 people at a time) at the main square of Jacaltenango, swelling to more than 6,000 for every protest event. "All of the people who protest have no education," Bernardo told us, "Only ten to twelve people in the movement were teachers and two to three were university teachers. They were the real people, the poor people."

Indigenous peoples have an international and national constitutional right not to have their natural resources used without their knowledge and informed consent. This is called the *consulta comunitaria de buena fe*, or good faith community referendum. Twenty six of the 32 municipios (counties) in Huehuetenango voted against the mines in local [referendums](#).

Our visit to the Marlin mine and affected communities

The huge Marlin Gold Mine is near the town of San Miguel Ixtahuacán, high in the rugged mountains of the department of San Marcos. It is operated by Montana Exploradora, a wholly owned subsidiary of the Canadian company Goldcorp. It is both an open pit and tunneling mine. This region is already damaged by decades of war.



The massive destruction of Goldcorp's Marlin Gold Mine can be seen in this immense open pit.

On December 6, 2012, accompanied by community organizer Aniseto López, we visited people affected by the Marlin Mine, adjacent to several indigenous communities in the department of San Marcos. According to [Amnesty International](#), in February 2011, protesters in north-western Guatemala's San Marcos region were attacked after speaking out against the Marlin Mine. Aniseto López was taken to the local mayor's office, where officials beat him and threatened to kill him if he continued to speak out against the mine.

In San Marcos, we visited:

- The community of Ágel and a group called FREDEMI "Frente de Defensa Miguelense, San Miguel Ixtahuacán" (Front for the Defense of San Miguel Ixtahuacán). They have been resisting the mining activities since 2007. In February 2010, FREDEMI organized a protest in which 700 people blocked the entrance to the mine for 13 days.



Women of FREDEMI meet with Helen Jaccard and Gerry Condon of Veterans For Peace.

- Diodora Hernandez, who was shot in the eye for refusing to sell her land to Goldcorp.
- Solomon, who worked for Goldcorp for two years. He said, "They arrived in 1996 to explore and in 2003 started to settle in with machines - now people are starting to realize how serious the situation is. There are four problems - water (contamination, dead animals, skin rashes and hair loss), cracks in the houses, explosives rocking the land, and the earth."

Our visit to the Community Occupation at La Puya

On December 10 - 12 we visited a proposed mining project, El Tambor, about an hour's bus ride from Guatemala City. Kappes, Cassidy & Associates of Reno, Nevada owns the license. Between the towns of San Jose del Golfo and San Pedro Ayampuc is an area called La Puya, and the entrance to the mining area. Hundreds of residents of local communities have maintained a successful nonviolent occupation here since March 2, 2012.



Helen Jaccard interviewed some of the community leaders at the La Puya occupation.

We arrived late and spent the first night sleeping on a wooden platform in the middle of the occupation. This and having Spanish language flyers handy to explain who we are helped us to be welcome here.

Company and police violence meets nonviolent resistance

Only days before we arrived at La Puya, on Friday, December 7, 2012, the police violently attacked the La Puya occupiers with tear gas and batons. Nearly 2,000 members of the National Police from all over Guatemala descended on the encampment. In the morning, there were only 20 people from the community - they lay down in front of the police and discreetly made phone calls - soon the church bells in the nearby town rang the alarm. By the afternoon 1,500 community members had come to support the occupiers.

Paola Aquino Gutierrez' 12 year old daughter was severely beaten by the police. "My 12 year old daughter was beaten Friday - she is still sore physically but more so psychologically," Aquino told us five days later. "I have never beaten my daughter and now a police woman did. Many people still have sore throats from the tear gas that was used against us. We were on the ground when the tear gas was thrown right over our heads. My daughter and I are even more determined than ever to continue this struggle."

Two women and a girl required medical attention after being sprayed with tear gas and four resistance leaders were arrested.

"The police captured four of us in order to scare the others, but they weren't scared, they were even more brave, so they started calling people for help", said Jorge López. "We are here to defend our water, our life and our territory." In police custody, after two hours of lying in the hot sun with no food, water, or even a chance to pee, the captives were taken to two courts that refused to hear the case because of lack of charges or evidence, and released.

This is a completely nonviolent resistance, which, according to organizers, was key to preventing deaths when the police attacked with tear gas and batons.



Nonviolent resistance may have saved the lives of many people. Prensa Libre photo.

Water shortage and being forced off of the land

The climate has become drier here. The rainy season used to start in May, but now it is dry. Lack of rain is causing crop failure in many areas of Guatemala this year. On top of that, communities that had barely enough water to survive are seeing the mining companies

steal their water for processing ore. Wells, springs, and streams near mines are drying up.

The Marlin mine had a mechanical well, but it's already dry. They are building another well closer to the spring. The people are afraid that they will soon have no water. Cristana Pérez said, "We tried to talk to the manager where they are building the mechanical well, but security people come instead and said that if we continue to fight them, they will prosecute us. The manager is saying that the well is built in consultation with the local community - it is not."

Solomon told us, "In 1987 the community bought the spring, which gave water until last year - now it is dry. The human rights commission told the company to provide water, but we got none."



Solomon turns on the spigot at his house near the Marlin mine, but there is no water.

The Marlin mine has also displaced communities. For example, there were at least 60 homes on the hillside that is now a hole in the ground.

At the El Tambor site, people are also concerned about lack of water and being forced off of their land.

"For me, the motivation is life - life itself. I've been here for 71 years and managed to live a tranquil life. I've been able to live my life being happy, so I want my children also to be able to live a happy life. If we don't have water, if we don't have trees, and all of that, it's just going to be a desert," said one man, "We struggle for life, water, and peace. If we don't have this gold, we'll still be able to live. But if we don't have water, we'll die."

Milton Carrera explained about the water shortage, "We are fighting because if they come here, we won't have water. We are very, very short on water. Some communities only have water maybe one hour a week. Other communities, like the big town, we only have water for one hour a day. The company is located where all of the wells are - right here. The water for the town, the wells are close to here. So what's going to happen for us, if in 5 or 10 years we don't have water?"

Water contamination, health problems, dead animals

Mines also contaminate the water. The Marlin mine has a tailing pond containing the acidic mixture of cyanide, arsenic, heavy and radioactive metals, explosives, and other chemicals - normal for a mine using cyanide to extract gold. On September 23, 2010 at night, this contaminated water was [discharged](#) into the Quivichil River, which runs into Mexico.



Tailing ponds at the Marlin Mine contain cyanide, arsenic, heavy metals and explosives.

Crisanta Pérez told us, "On Nov 29, 2012 we went to look at the spring and found pipes from the mine discharging into the river that goes through the community - it is now a contaminated river."

Both FREDEMI and Solomon told us about a lot of skin problems and hair loss. According to Solomon, "In 2008-09 various people have had skin problems - two of them died. Their bodies were covered with painful rashes, and then they died."

Cattle have been dying from drinking the water from the river. Diodora Hernandez told us, "The mother of a calf was poisoned. The water was pure white, like milk." Her horse also died from the poisoned water. There are many other reports from shepherds whose cattle have died after drinking water downstream from the mine.

Division and Conflict

When mining companies start their propaganda campaign near a mining site, they cause divisions - in families and in communities. Aniseto López told us, "In the community, they are always in conflict - the environment is so thick with conflict that you can breathe it - conflict between those that support and those that are against the mine."

"We were peaceful communities before all of this", said one 71 year old man at La Puya, referring to the mining license.

Among 75 local men who work at the Marlin mine, many have left their wives and children for other women, without paying anything to help support their original family - something they would not do had they not had more money in their pockets, said Crisanta of FREDEMI. "We are really sorry about this, because a long time ago it was better - we went to the farms - men and women worked together to pick the coffee - there was no division between families."

Many of the miners and affected community members turn to heavy drinking and drug use, Solomon told us. "There had been only 4 bars/liquor stores - now there are 100."

At a [Health Tribunal](#) held at San Miguel Ixtahuacán on July 14-15 2012, one man testified: "There is prostitution, crime, pollution of Mother Earth. The workers, the Cocodes (local authorities), have beaten me up. When they are under the influence of alcohol, they come to my home and threaten me"

Intimidation, violence and corruption

The Marlin mine bosses will stop at nothing and have an arrogant attitude toward the Mayan people whose land they are destroying. They force entire villages to leave their land and pay very little for the land they buy, according to FREDEMI. When met with resistance, they falsely accuse people of crimes, and even shoot and kill them. They intentionally poison animals - dogs, horses, cows, and chickens.

The mining explosions rock the area. Together with tunneling and the constant traffic of heavy trucks, over 100 homes have been severely damaged with big cracks. The big trucks drive fast and run over the chickens and dogs. People are pressured to sell their land, and to stop talking about the effects of the mine. The police are bought off by the mine, so do not prosecute these crimes. The Minister of the Environment, in charge of making a report about the contamination, was being hosted by Goldcorp.

On March 12, 2007 [Alvaro Sánchez](#), a Mayan villager living near the Marlin mine was murdered by mine workers during a heated discussion.

Diodora Hernandez refused to sell her land to the company and in 2010 two mine employees came and shot her in the eye. "I won't sell my land - never. If I sold, where would I put my animals?" In another incident, she went to a meeting and a man threatened to kill her with a machete.



Diodora Hernandez in her pasture, telling us about the struggle to keep her land and animals

Solomon worked for the company for two years, and then started speaking out against it when he saw the problems. He said that the company comes to his home - sometimes at night - to intimidate him. He has been falsely accused of five crimes, a common tactic against mine resisters.

Crisanta Pérez of FREDEMI was also falsely charged her with a crime. "Because of the arrest warrant, I left my family and moved from place to place, hiding out for six months. When I returned home, they captured me - but by that time, people were more aware, and they blocked the police car and freed me after two hours." Another man in the community was beaten to death.

Milton Carrera at La Puya said, "We used to have a little goat farm. They killed all my animals - about two months ago. Another of my family has a fish farm and a few months ago they put poison into the fish pond and they killed about 2,000 fish. Another lady had chickens at her house and they threw in poisoned corn.

"They shot one lady June 13...she still has the bullet, only two inches from her spine... Only God knows how she's still walking. She has nerve problems, but she's a very strong lady. She stopped the confrontation last Friday - if it wasn't for her, there would have been a bunch of people killed here."

We spoke with Yolanda "Yoli" Oquely Veliz, 33 years old, the community leader who survived the [assassination attempt](#) of June 13, 2012 after receiving death threats. She was shot three times while leaving the La Puya resistance occupation.

Communities are fighting for their survival

There are seven communities within 700 meters of the proposed mine. The Environmental Impact Study proposes removing these communities. The people have been living here for 300 or 400 years. "How can they expect us to move, when we don't even know where we would go?"

Deodora Oliva lives about 700 meters from the mine. "See that hill there?" She points to a hill about 100 yards from the camp. "I live on the other side of that hill and they're going to disappear that hill. I'm afraid that my village is going to disappear eventually, because the hill is right in front of my village." In just two of the closest villages there are about 150 houses, about 1,000 people.

Milton Carrera told us, "We told the government they have to kill us. The government has to kill us in order to go inside. A lot of people decided, if they have to die, they will, to save the land for the next generation. Please tell your government that we're humans, not animals and should have our rights respected."

Being killed for this struggle is no idle concern. On October 4, 2012 at least seven people were killed and more than 30 injured by soldiers of the Guatemalan army near Totonicapán, about 90 miles west of Guatemala City. Unarmed indigenous people there were blockading the Inter-American highway to protest against changes in the constitution, changes to education laws that make teaching careers impossible for poor people, increasing energy

prices, inadequate services, and being forced to pay for street lighting that doesn't even reach them. According to [Al Jazeera](#), "The indigenous community in Totonicapán is well organized, widely respected, and has historically pursued a strategy of engagement and negotiation with the government to resolve disputes. That the state would respond with violence on such a scale sparked fears about its willingness to brutally suppress protest and flout human rights." Fortunately, a colonel and eight soldiers have been arrested and President Otto Perez Molino, former general, who was trained at the School of the Americas, has said that he will no longer deploy the army to protests. It was the National Police, not the Army, who recently attacked the people at La Puya.

Neoliberal trade agreements: intervention by other means

According to ["Open Doors to Resource Extraction"](#) by Guatemala's Pastoral Commission for Peace and Ecology (COPAE), translated by Network in Solidarity with the People of Guatemala (NISGUA):

"In 1524, the pillaging of the natural wealth of Guatemala and Central America began with the arrival of the imperial interests of Spain. Today, the United States is intervening in a similar fashion, although more discretely, by way of imbalanced neoliberal trade agreements such as the Central and North American Free Trade Agreements (CAFTA, NAFTA).

Throughout the long history of the exploitation of Central America, among the only challenges to this system were the ones implemented during the 10-year period in Guatemala known as the "October Revolution" (1944-1954). At that time, two social-democrat presidents enacted laws in favor of the nation and the people of Guatemala. During that period, resource extraction by foreign-owned companies was banned. Part of the "development" strategy designed by the United States and implemented as part of the counterrevolution throughout Guatemala's 36-year internal conflict (1960-1996), involved strengthening the private business sector and promoting foreign investment, which served to lay the groundwork for the all-out exploitation that we are facing today.

With CAFTA, Central American countries are essentially concessioned off for 50 years, rendering governments effectively powerless, without the right to supervise or regulate foreign companies. Chapter 10 of CAFTA, the chapter related to foreign investment, sets an unequal legal playing field- it is very difficult for a state to take legal action against a multinational company, while investor companies can sue the state as they please for loss or potential loss of profit caused by any change in regulation, law, or policy.

The Mining Law in Guatemala, implemented by the neoliberal government of President Alvaro Arzu (1995-1999), dictates that 99% of revenues be repatriated by multinational companies, leaving royalties in Guatemala of only 1%, a reform based on the neoliberal ideology that aims to attract foreign investment by creating favorable conditions for investors at the expense of the benefit to the population."



La Puya Community in Resistance to the El Tambor mine

La Lucha Continua

Clearly, imperialism's war against Guatemala and its indigenous people has not ended. U.S. and Canadian mining corporations, aided by unfair trade agreements and collaborators in the Guatemalan government, are systematically destroying Mayan communities, while taking 99% of the enormous profits back to North America.

The resistance of Mayan and other Guatemalan communities also continues. It is no longer an armed resistance, but it is strong, deep and broad. Rural communities, such as at La Puya, are employing nonviolent strategies, while the government prefers to portray their resistance as violent and to meet it with violence.

The government is frantically attempting to isolate community leaders, accusing them of being manipulated by NGOs and funded by foreigners. Apparently, the government and the communities in resistance agree on one thing. International solidarity strengthens the resistance movement.

Toronto based [Rights Action](#) and Oakland-based [NISGUA](#), which maintains an office in Guatemala City, provide regular updates, action alerts, organize solidarity delegations and even provide nonviolent "accompaniment" for community organizers whose lives are at risk. Solidarity actions are also aimed at culpable corporate executives and shareholders in Canada and the U.S. Another organization, Guatemala Human Rights Commission ([GHRC-USA](#)) based in Washington, D.C. has been working since 1982 to support asylum seekers and to defend the rights of women and indigenous people in Guatemala.

For the last four decades, many members of Veterans For Peace have taken bold actions in solidarity with the peoples of Central America, and we will continue to do so. We look forward to returning to Guatemala. In the meantime, there are many mining companies to visit in North America.

The 1954 coup against Guatemala's fledgling democracy was organized in order to halt land reform and to guarantee that a U.S. company would be the primary beneficiary of Guatemala's fertile earth and ideal growing climate. The CIA coup was also meant as a warning to governments in the region who might be so reckless as to put the needs of their own people first. Apparently however, the people of Nicaragua and El Salvador did not heed the message, and neither have the people of Guatemala.

Thirty-six years of genocide has not put an end to deep-rooted resistance in Mayan communities who wish to live free and healthy lives. Riding through the beautiful countryside, we often saw signs along reading "No a la mineria. Guatemala no se vende." *No to the mines. Guatemala is not for sale.* Perhaps that was our best Spanish lesson of all.

The original source of this article is [War Is a Crime](#)

Copyright © [Helen Jaccard](#) and [Gerry Condon](#), [War Is a Crime](#), 2013

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: [Helen Jaccard](#) and
[Gerry Condon](#)

Disclaimer: The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). The Centre for Research on Globalization will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. The Centre of Research on Globalization grants permission to cross-post Global Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Global Research article. For publication of Global Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: publications@globalresearch.ca

www.globalresearch.ca contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.

For media inquiries: publications@globalresearch.ca