

GUATEMALA - Divide and rule in the land of gold

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«In San Miguel Ixtahucán, Guatemala, the Mina Marlin gold mine, operated by Goldcorp, has divided indigenous communities through gifts, benefits, and violence. The mine has caused a lot of damage. It has not only had a profound impact on the environment but also on the social cohesion of communities and families in the area, and on their cultural ties with the land.»



Doña Deodora has only one eye. She lost her other one night in 2010 when locals, employees from a mining company, came to her house and shot her. This was not the first time she had seen violence. Some years ago a local official authority held a machete to her neck. He did not hurt her because Doña Deodora was holding her little girl in her arms.

Doña Deodora tells her story in broken Spanish interwoven with her native Mam language. She is 58 years old, and appears humble and poor. Deodora survives by running her livestock on the lands of her community in the municipality of San Miguel Ixtahucán, which is in the San Marcos department of Guatemala, near the Mexican border. San Miguel has always been an isolated mountainous region where the indigenous inhabitants mainly live from subsistence agriculture and migrate for temporary work to the coffee plantations on the coast. Things began to change in 1996, when the Canadian mining company Goldcorp started to eye up the land. Coincidentally, it was that very year when the civil war ended and the Peace Agreements were signed. [1] By 2005 Goldcorp, through its national subsidiary, started to dig up gold and silver in what it called the “Marlin Mine”.

“Attacks from our own brothers”

A few metres from Doña Deodora’s house one can see an enormous hole in the mountain. Deodora is the only one in her hamlet who has not sold her land and who does not work in the mine. Pleas and threats to make her sell her land come almost daily. She cries “They want to kill me and my family. We lived here in peace. Now there is so much fear, loneliness, pain and sadness.” A local activist clarifies, “These attacks come from our own community, from our brothers. Brothers who do not own the company but defend her.”

The strategy to divide a population, to break its resistance, is common in Guatemala. It is also not a new

strategy. On the other side of Guatemala, on the border with Honduras, where communities also confront the intrusion of mining companies, an indigenous Chort'í exhorts his companions to remember the Spanish conquest. "They co-opted leaders, and the ones killing native people were the same natives. The mines are buying our leaders, to divide us and break our struggle."

Dividing with gifts

San Miguel Ixtahucán is poor, inhospitable and cold. Approaching the mine one sees new schools, councils, and health centres and barely anti-mining graffiti. What is less visible, though just as intrusive as the new roads, is the social division caused by the presence of the mine. "There are three groups" explains Carmen Mejía, a young mother and one of the women at the forefront of the resistance against the mine. "Some are with us and others are with the company, there are not many but they have great resources. Another group, the majority, is scared to give an opinion." Carmen admits there were also disagreements within the indigenous community before the arrival of Goldcorp "but there was harmony. There was peace between the communities and the families. Through deception the company was able to settle here."

Salomón Bámaca is a tall poor peasant in his forties, wisdom radiates from his expressions and words. He lives so close to the mine that when they use explosives his land trembles. "In 1999 when the company arrived to buy land they brought many things. One could hear parties where the mine now is." Bámaca, who was an indigenous mayor for a year, asserts that the company offers presents, money, and infrastructure projects to the local authorities in order to gain their support.

The local priest is not an indigenous Mam, but Belgian. After 27 years in the village he speaks Spanish with more ease than Flemish. Erik Gruloos thinks that Goldcorp has divided the community too much. He is opposed to the mine but understands why many people are not. "The people who speak up against the mine cannot find work, or they lose it, not just within the mine but also within the municipality, the local justice department, or even as a builder or schoolmaster. The mine is omnipresent. It gives work and presents where there is resistance. Some communities are now in favour of the mine. It is understandable, almost nobody can resist so much pressure. The people have to surrender so their children can study, eat, and have a brighter future."

Developmentfor who?

Proponents of responsible mining argue that if the mine offers work, promotes local development, constructs schools and health centres, and has a good relationship with the local authorities, this is "responsible mining" .

"The company is not here to do social work and lift people out of their poverty" says Javier De León from the organisation ADISMI [2] , a driving force behind the resistance against the mine. "It is here to make a profit". In 2011, according to the reports of Goldcorp to its investors, the Marlin Mine generated 607 million dollars of profit. It gave 1% - less than 9 million dollars - in royalties to Guatemala. The amount of taxes it paid is not on public record. A young peasant, Noe Navarro, also from ADISMI, adds, "there are about 35,000 people in San Miguel, about 700 work for the mine. The company is offering development to some. Goldcorp says that there is no longer extreme poverty here but we experience and see another reality. We remain poor. There is no general benefit."

There are, however, general damages, highlighted by both locals and studies from national and international organisations. [3] The walls of adobe and earth houses are cracked, there are also fissures running in the ground for kilometres. Water is becoming scarcer and in some places it is contaminated with arsenic. Skin diseases and hair loss have been reported. Enough complaints for the CIDH [4] to order a temporal suspension of activities in the Marlin Mine in 2010. The inhabitants also face various indirect damages. The cost of housing and basic food staples rose, the price of land tripled. More money for some also meant more bars, weapons, violence, robbery, and crime.

Dividing with violence

“When we realised how much money and gold the mine was producing and how, apart from the presents, it was leaving us with big damages, we started to organise. From then onwards there were more attacks, repression, and threats” recounts Javier De León.

Peaceful protest was criminalised and met with disproportionate force. The company persecutes numerous activists, some are imprisoned, others have detention orders hanging over them. The justice department, however, does not act upon accusations against the company or its workers. If it does, the punishment is light. Additionally, the Guatemalan government and Goldcorp ignored the measures ordered by the CIDH.

The impunity and repression of the company and the government, demobilises the protesters and reinforces the acts of violence by workers or other inhabitants in favour of the mine. The majority of the activists have been intimidated on various occasions through vigilantism, insults, humiliation, and death threats. Many were beaten, others like Javier De León had shots fired at them, some, like the Bamacá family, were terrorised.

“Through violence they hope to evict us. Three surrounding communities are against me and some local leaders threatened to kill me.” Florenzo Yuc, everyone calls him Lencho, is 46 years old and has 12 children. He is a very poor peasant but owns a bit of land left to him by his deceased grandfather. The mine acquired hundreds of parcels of land from peasants, offering them work, money, and threats of eviction. But Lencho will not sell. “They searched for my family to convince me. I got into a fight with my father and brothers. My whole family is with the mine, most of them work there. They do not consider me as family anymore. This happens in a lot of households. This is the ‘development’ brought by the company.”

The land cannot be sold

Lencho is clear. “I do not want to sell my land, I do not want to sell myself, my children, my community, my people. We do not have money to buy things but the land covers everything. If the company comes to take this away, where will we go? Money goes quickly but the land will always be there.” Javier from ADISMI explains that the mine is not only bulldozing the social cohesion of communities and families, but also the traditional culture of self-sufficiency. “They convince us that we need many things and therefore salaried work. They want to convert us to mere consumers. We are displacing ourselves from our own identity.”

You cannot fully understand the resistance of the inhabitants of San Miguel Ixtahucán against the mine without first understanding the very specific and sacred relation indigenous people have with the land. The words of Noe Navarro from ADISMI are illuminating. “When the Spanish arrived they took the coastal and fertile regions and we had to move to the mountains. Now they come again to push us away, to take the gold under our lands. They simply want to eliminate the indigenous peoples.” Unfortunately, many see this as a valuable exercise, for between 2006 and 2011 the price of gold rose by more than 150% and silver by 480%. “This is another incentive to not respect the lives of the people affected by mining”, concludes the former indigenous mayor Bamacá. “It demonstrates also shareholders and buyers of gold have a social responsibility.”

The resistance against the Marlin Mine has been enormous and an inspiration for the many similar struggles of indigenous peoples inside and outside of Guatemala. They are known at a national and international level. Yet, locally, Salomon Bamacá, the former indigenous mayor, says they feel abandoned. “The resistance has diminished greatly because of all the money, the work offers, the presents, the violence, the intimidation and impunity.” Eliminating them, as Noe Navarro fears, will not be easy though. Lencho repeats a phrase often heard in San Miguel and Guatemala, “If I have to shed my blood it will be for the land and the right to live.”

«In April 2012 Goldcorp presented to its shareholders a plan for the restoration of San Miguel when the mine closes in 2018. Goldcorp forecasts that it will spend 29 million dollars but has only set 1 million aside so far. According to Amnesty International independent experts estimate the true cost of restoration would amount to at least 49 million dollars.»

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Notas

[1] The people of Guatemala lived through 36 years of armed conflict where, according to the United Nations, 250,000 people died and acts of genocide took place. 93% of the crimes were committed by the army. One of the main causes of the conflict was unequal land distribution where 2% of the population controlled 70% of the fertile land. A number of these big landowners were multinational companies. Not much has changed in Guatemala.

[2] “Asociación para el Desarrollo Integral de San Miguel Ixtahaucán” or Integral Development Association of San Miguel Ixtahaucán

[3] For an indepth analisis about and bibliography on the Mina Marlin case, see 2011 , United Nations, James Anaya, A/HRC/18/35/Add.3
<http://unsr.jamesanaya.org/special-reports/observations-on-the-situation-of-the-rights-of-the-indigenous-people-of-guatemala-with-relation-to-the-extraction-projects-and-other-types-of-projects-in-their-traditional-territories>

[4] Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos or (IACHR) Inter-American Commission on Human Rights