

Rights Action

www.rightsaction.org • December 2006

KEEPIN' THE SPIRIT

Dear friends and supporters,

We recently received a small donation with a note:

"Thanks for the mailing, and thanks for keepin' the spirit. We do what we can. John"

We are thankful for your support for another year of good work, supporting and working with amazing people and grassroots organizations in Guatemala and Honduras, in Chiapas and Haiti, and also in El Salvador, Nicaragua and Colombia!

"There are no magic answers, no miraculous methods to overcome the problems we face, just the familiar ones: search for understanding, education, organization, action ... and the kind of commitment that will persist despite the temptations of disillusionment, despite many failures and only limited successes, inspired by the hope of a brighter future." (Noam Chomsky)

In this newsletter, we set out a smattering of projects, organizations, education work and struggles we are supporting and involved with.

In 2006, we channeled over \$800,000 of your donations and grants to dozens of organizations in Guatemala, Honduras, Chiapas and Haiti, as well as in El Salvador, Nicaragua and Colombia.

At www.rightsaction.org, you will find a complete list of projects, organizations, education work and struggles supported.

Come see your funds at work: We invite you to join our July 2007 Education and Activist Seminar to Guatemala and/ or Honduras; or, form your own group and we can plan and host your education-activist trip.

Keepin' the spirit into 2007, we are definitely doing what we can to slowly and surely build the kind of global community and world we want to live in.

Un abrazo fuerte.

– Annie Bird & Grahame Russell

TAX DEDUCTIBLE DONATIONS:

Make checks payable to "Rights Action" and mail to our US office.

For donations of stock, contact:

Grahame Russell, 860-352-2152, info@rightsaction.org

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Go to our website at www.rightsaction.org.
This can be done anonymously. CFC #9414

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GUATEMALA

ARREST WARRANTS AGAINST FORMER MILITARY

On November 6, the Guatemalan Court (Tribunal Quinto de Sentencia) issued arrest warrants against 6 former high ranking military officials, paving the way for their possible extradition to Spain. Mejia Víctores, Angel Aníbal Guevara, Benedicto Lucas Garcia, German Chupina Barahona, Donaldo Alvarez and Pedro Garcia Arredondo have been charged with the burning of the Spanish Embassy on January 30th, 1980, and of terrorism, homicide and kidnapping, but not of genocide.

Repression and genocide survivors in the Association for Justice and Reconciliation (AJR) are involved as co-plaintiffs in this case alongside the Rigoberta Menchú Foundation. The AJR has presented national genocide cases against the former high military commands, with legal support from the Center for Human Rights Legal Action (CALDH).

Rios Montt Escapes Arrest

The court did not issue an arrest warrant for former General Efraín Ríos Montt. The judges stated that the Spanish investigation did not provide sufficient evidence to prove participation of Rios Montt in the burning of the Spanish Embassy and resultant deaths. Any final extradition order must be signed by President Oscar Berger of the GANA party. With the influence that Rios Montt's party, the FRG, has in Congress it is unlikely GANA will jeopardize good relations with the FRG by extraditing the party's leader.

Rights Action support:

This courageous and crucial legal work does NOT address the role played by the U.S. government – and other government and actors in the “international community” – in designing and supporting the genocide and state terrorism in Guatemala. Work to hold Guatemala's partners and supporters accountable needs to be initiated in the U.S. and elsewhere.

Since the mid 1990s, Rights Action is continuing to support numerous courageous organizations founded by victims of Guatemala's repression and genocide. Overcoming huge obstacles – including trauma from the years of genocide and state terror, and continuing poverty, exploitation, impunity and repression – ‘victims’ have become ‘protagonists’ in legal and political struggles to build a decent society characterized by, amongst other things, a fair and equitable rule of law.



Post-Hurricane Stan housing reconstruction supported by Rights Action.



GUATEMALA

WATER PRIVITIZATION, DEVELOPMENT AND HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

XALALA Dam Project = CHIXOY Dam Revisited!

In our October 2006 newsletter, we reported on the forthcoming Xalala hydro-electric dam project that, if it proceeds, will be built down river from the infamous Chixoy dam, funded by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and World Bank (WB), that resulted in the forced displacement of dozens of Mayan-Achi communities and the massacres of hundreds of Rio Negro villagers. To this day, neither the IDB nor the WB has given the affected communities due compensation or reparations for their forced evictions, and loss of life, home, property and land.

Yet, the IDB is promoting the Xalala dam project in forums with private investors, who would build and own the dam, and government representatives in charge of providing the concessions. If it proceeds, the project could destroy the lands and livelihoods of 6,000 to 8,000 Mayan-Qeqchi farmers. The affected population lives along the Chixoy river, between the municipalities of San Miguel Uspantan and the Ixcán, department of Quiché, and in the municipality of Cobán, department of Alta Verapaz.

A First Killing

On October 21 and 22, campesino residents in the area witnessed a group of men, claiming to be teachers in search of jobs, pass through villages. The next day, residents learned the men had been contracted by INDE (National Institute of Electricity) to gather information about community leaders opposing the dam. Then, residents learned that the men's INDE supervisor reported the disappearance of two members of the four person team he had sent to the area, accusing the campesinos of the village of Margaritas Copon of this crime.

Community leaders immediately and voluntarily presented themselves in the District Attorney's office on October 27, accompanied by members of the municipal government and social organizations, to deny these calumnious accusations.

The Body

On November 1, authorities from 29 villages in the region organized a search for the missing men and discovered the body of one of them, Jose Manuel Ordon. They immediately called upon the District Attorney's office to collect the body, but were shocked when justice officials told them to bury the body in the nearest cemetery, which they refused to do and insisted the authorities investigate the scene. The communities have issued a communiqué denying the charges and expressing concern that this situation could become a pretext for repression against their peaceful opposition to the dam and their peaceful defense of their land; they have requested the presence of human rights observers.

Rights Action support: RA will continue to support the community- and church-based organizations that are working for peaceful resolution to these conflicts in the Ixcán and who are working to implement development projects designed and controlled at the local level.



Rights Action/ UNBC delegation visiting Mayan-Q'eqchi' community of Chichipate, to hear testimonies of repression, human rights violations and enviro- and development harms caused by 40 years of nickel mining: first, the INCO (Exmibal) company; now Skye Resources (CGN).

GUATEMALA

MINES, DEVELOPMENT AND HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

Skye Resources Inc and Security Forces versus Mayan-Q'eqchi Communities

With some edits, we present this report of the Defensoría Q'eqchi' (a development and indigenous rights organization in El Estor, Izabal) concerning recent violent and illegal evictions of Mayan-Q'eqchi' families in an on-going dispute caused in large part by the Canadian Skye Resources mining company.

A First Violent & Illegal Eviction

On November 11, at 2am, 60 Mayan-Q'eqchi' families entered Chupon, a property allegedly owned by the Canadian mining company Skye Resource Inc. (via its wholly owned subsidiary Compañía Guatemalteca de Níquel (CGN)). At 3am, the same morning, National Civilian Police (PNC) forces entered the property (with no court order) to evict the local families. Oscar Chub Tiul y Santiago Ical were taken to the local health centre for treatment.

On November 12, at 9am, Rafael Andrade Escobar, district attorney from the municipality of La Tinta, Alta Verapaz, arrived to evict the families occupying the property. The attorney was asked to produce an eviction court order, which he did not do, arguing – incorrectly – an order was not necessary because the families were 'flagrantly' committing a crime.

The Defensoría Q'eqchi' intervened to prevent authorities, especially the PNC, from committing abuses against members of the families, convincing the families to leave the property. The families reorganized themselves and protested that the eviction had

been illegal; this led to a confrontation with the PNC forces. As a result of the ensuing confrontation, two individuals were detained by the PNC: Martín Che y Gilberto Hun Pop. They are currently imprisoned in the Río Dulce substation of the PNC.

In addition, two other people, José Chocooj Pan y Carlos Caal Tiul, disappeared during the altercation. On November 13, José Chocooj Pan was found unconscious and severely beaten on the side of the road in an area owned by the mining company CGN.

A Second Violent & Illegal Eviction

November 12, 7pm, PNC forces illegally entered the community of Chichipate (at a time of day outside that permitted by law, and without a court order) and forcibly evicted 200 families from a piece of land called Barrio Revolucion that they had been occupying since September. The PNC wounded a number of local Mayan Q'eqchi individuals occupying the site. One was a pregnant woman taken to the health centre for an examination after she was overcome by tear gas fired by elements of the PNC. Shots were fired from distinct types of guns during the confrontation, and officers of the PNC robbed community members of money and other goods.

In reaction to the abuses of the PNC and the district attorney, the population organized itself in protest. During the night of Sunday, November 12, the group took action against the Skye Resources mining company [CGN], burning part of the buildings that house the company's community relations office.

Rights Action support: RA will continue to support community education, development and enviro-protection projects of indigenous and campesino communities being negatively affected by North American companies, not only in Guatemala but also Honduras and El Salvador.



Unveiling of monument commemorating life and work of Herbert Anaya, husband of Mirna, father of 5 children, lawyer and human rights activist who was assassinated in San Salvador in 1987. Rights Action supports the now annual Herbert Anaya Human Rights Congress.

HONDURAS

UNCONSTITUTIONAL MINING LAW AND ONGOING ENVIRO-HEALTH CRISIS

In October, the Supreme Court declared unconstitutional 13 articles of Honduras' General Mining Law. Written in the interests of Canadian and U.S. mining companies (such as Glamis Gold), and approved in the wake of Hurricane Mitch in 1998, this law has been the subject of multiple denunciations, protests and reform attempts over the past few years.

The Supreme Court decision comes during a time of intense advocacy and activism for the derogation and reform of the mining law by directly affected communities, such as the Siria Valley Environmental Committee, and by national movements such as the Civic Alliance for Democracy, the National Coordination of Popular Resistance and the Civic Alliance to Reform the General Mining Law.

At the grassroots level, the Siria Valley Environmental Committee continues struggle for justice for the local communities affected by Glamis Gold's San Martin gold mine, demanding mine closure, comprehensive environmental mitigation and indemnification for the serious health impacts in local communities.

Glamis Gold subsidiary Entre Mares denies the existence of contamination, despite evidence to the contrary presented both by government institutions and by an independent report revealing alarmingly high levels of contamination of cyanide and heavy metals in water sources, as well as arsenic and lead concentrations in local community members' blood of up to triple the levels considered high and dangerous by the World Health Organization.

The struggle to pressure Congress to ban open pit metallic mining, to prohibit the use of harmful chemicals such as cyanide and to include fundamental guarantees for environmental protection and the respect of communities' rights continues.

Rights Action support: The Siria Valley Environmental Committee is in urgent need of funds [proposal available from RA] to support further studies into the contamination of water and people in their communities and the serious health crisis affecting the local population. This study will serve to support and substantiate community and national advocacy for radical mining legislation and policy reforms, as well as for future legal actions.

HONDURAS

COPINH DEFENDS COMMUNITY RIGHTS AGAINST THE TIGER(S)

Hundreds of people affiliated with the Civic Council of Grassroots and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (COPINH) from communities in the southwestern departments of La Paz, Intibucá and Lempira participated in three days of education and community organization strengthening activities in Tegucigalpa leading up to and including October 12.

A large contingent from the communities threatened by the bi-national El Tigre hydroelectric dam made presentations about how the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) and Central American Bank for Economic Integration (CABEI) provide frequent loans for these destructive mega-“development” projects.

The communities also protested the Salvadoran government for its promotion of the El Tigre dam, despite the lack of consultations with the estimated 20,000 people of indigenous and campesino communities in southern Honduras who will be displaced and otherwise affected by the 70 square kilometer reservoir.

Rights Action support: RA will continue to support community education and organization efforts to promote and defend community development and the environment.

HONDURAS

WOMEN’S SHELTER AND ARTS WORKSHOP BURNS FOR THE SECOND TIME

3 Women and 6 Children Dead

On October 5th, a fire consumed the women’s shelter run by the Association for the Development of the Population (ADP), along with Luciérnaga, the decorative candle-making workshop run collectively by the safe-house beneficiaries. Three women and six children died in the fire. They had come to the safehouse to break free of the cycle of gender violence and start new lives. Luciérnaga was only beginning to recover its capacity in the shelter’s temporary location being used since a fire also consumed the previous building in 2004.

Despite high levels of violence against women, the shelter was one of very few in the country. Attention, services and support for domestic violence victims are rare outside of the main cities. Women who make formal accusations are usually confronted with more abuse and lack of action by police and judicial authorities.

The relatives and family members of the victims were accompanied by friends, representatives of several women’s and human rights organizations and the general public on October 6th beneath the National Congress building, where they demanded that the government take serious action to investigate the incident and bring those responsible to justice.

Rights Action support: Over the past years, RA provided significant support to the ADP – including emergency support in 2004 – that is in urgent need of emergency support to re-establish the safehouse and workshop.

WHAT TO DO

MAKE TAX-CHARITABLE DONATIONS PAYABLE TO "RIGHTS ACTION". Getting funds to community-based organizations is the front-line of work for global justice, sustainable development, defense of the environment and equality. For donation of stock: info@rightsaction.org. Credit card donations: www.rightsaction.org.

JULY 2007 - EDUCATIONAL SEMINAR. Come to Guatemala, Honduras and/ or Chiapas, on our annual July 2007 Educational Seminar to learn more about all these north-south and national issues of "development", human rights and the environment and about how you can get more involved. Or, organize your own group to come on an educational seminar that Rights Action would plan with you, and host.

JOIN OUR LISTS. Receive 1-3 emailings / week: articles and analysis; urgent actions; announcements of educational delegations and speaking tours; etc. Receive by mail 4 newsletters (like this one) / year.

ALTERNATIVE INFORMATION. Set up your own e-mail and mailing lists and re-send our information to your lists. On request, we provide extra copies of our newsletter. Countering and getting around the dominance and distortions of the corporate-dominated media is a major challenge for work for global justice and equality.

RIGHTS ACTION – CONNECTICUT. After spending 6 years in Canada, establishing Rights Action in Canada, co-director Grahame Russell now lives and works in Connecticut and is available for educational presentations; Grahame continues to direct Rights Action-Canada.

KEEPIN' THE SPIRIT IN 2007

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