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## Mexico: Opposition to Blackfire mining operations ends in murder

A full 41% of the Sierra Madre region in the Mexican state of Chiapas – 227,000 square kilometres of land, equivalent to one half of the whole of Central America – has been turned over to Mexican and foreign corporations through mining concessions. Mining companies from Canada, the United States and Australia extract gold and silver from this mineral-rich region with the consent and protection of governments and the backing of free trade agreements.

Mining companies have expanded their operations throughout the country, invading cooperatively and communally owned lands, subjugating local and state authorities, and violating the rights of indigenous and peasant communities on a daily basis, as well as regulations governing public land, protected natural areas and areas with deep significance in terms of religious traditions and cultural heritage. The environmental, social and cultural consequences of open-pit mining are drastic. The destruction of mountains permanently scars the once majestic landscape, while the basins of the region's most important rivers are severely contaminated.

The high toxicity of metal mining derives not only from the metals themselves, but also the methods used to extract them (see WRM Bulletin N° 71). In the first place, the thousands of kilograms of dynamite used daily to demolish the mountains result in large amounts of ammonium nitrate and diesel fuel dust being spewed into the atmosphere. In the meantime, sodium cyanide, used to “leach” or dissolve metals from the rock containing them, washes into rivers and aquifers, causing fatal diseases like leukaemia and other forms of cancer.

The escalation in mining operations and the resulting environmental impacts has also brought about an escalation in opposition to these activities. In June of 2008, hundreds of individuals representing social, indigenous, peasant, community-based, human rights, education, communications, students' and academic organizations from 12 states throughout the country joined together to form the Mexican Anti-Mining Network (REMA).

REMA works to expose and denounce the consequences of mining: the displacement of millions of tons of soil and rock with heavy machinery; the contamination of springs, rivers and basins with toxic chemicals; and the destruction of farmland and displacement of local communities. Wherever the mining industry goes, it leaves in its wake a devastating legacy of mountains of waste, barren land, contaminated water, disease and desolation.

The militarization of the region, stepped up in the framework of the so-called “Merida Plan” – technically, a security initiative for which the United States released millions of dollars in equipment, computer technology and training in Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean to fight drug trafficking and organized crime – has proven highly beneficial to mining companies. Large contingents of hooded and heavily armed soldiers and federal and state police officers who set up roadblocks and force people out of their vehicles for interrogation provide the mining companies with greater freedom to seize land and keep protestors at bay. Ongoing surveillance and control of local communities serve to uncover members of any type of opposition organization.

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Against this backdrop, the Canadian mining company Blackfire Exploration, which holds 10 concessions for open-pit barite, gold and antimony mining in the region, has been the target of fierce protests by the inhabitants of the Grecia farming cooperative, who accuse it of polluting the area and illegally seizing land. Numerous members of REMA, including Mariano Abarca Roblero, staged a sit-in at the company's local headquarters, followed by another in front of the Canadian embassy in Mexico City, to demand the transnational's withdrawal from the state of Chiapas. Following these protests, Mariano Abarca began receiving threats, until finally, this past 27 November, he was murdered, presumably by a hired killer.

REMA blames this crime on the governor of Chiapas, for failing to take the necessary measures to prevent Abarca's murder. It also places responsibility on "Blackfire, its general director Artemio Ávila Cervera, its public relations manager Luis Antonio Flores Villatoro, and the government of the state for the acts of violence against those involved in the struggle to defend the water, land, territory and environment."

REMA further demands, in addition to immediate justice and punishment for those who ordered and carried out Abarca's murder, the immediate withdrawal of Blackfire and its mining concessions from Chiapas, under the slogan:

"Canada and Canadian transnationals out of Chiapas and Mexico!"

Based on the following sources: Nace la Red Mexicana de Afectados por la Minería (REMA) <http://www.otrosmundoschiapas.org/analisis/REMAI.pdf>; Asesinaron a Mariano Abarca Roblero, líder opositor contra la minera canadiense Blackfire en Chiapas, <http://rema.codigosur.net>