

Case Study: La Puya, San José del Golfo, Guatemala

Women kneeling in prayer, singing religious hymns and clutching statues of Jesus and the Virgin Mary as their only form of protection, made up the front line of defense in La Puya for just over two years. The residents of San José del Golfo and San Pedro Ayampuc, two villages that are a 40 minute drive from Guatemala city, have been resisting the operation of the 'El Tambor' mine since 2011 on the basis that the open cast mine will cause irreparable damage to their communities, particularly, the pollution of the air and water supply, desertification and threats to the livelihoods, physical and mental health of the local communities.



The license was granted to Exploraciones Mineras de Guatemala, S.A. (EXMINGUA), a subsidiary of the Canadian mining company, Radius Gold Inc., (who in 2012 sold their interests in the mine to Kappes, Cassiday & Associates) without consultations with the local communities, as is mandated by law. The environmental impact assessment carried out by two engineers from the United States, Robert Robinson and Steve Laudeman, found serious risks to the health of the local communities due to the high levels of arsenic present, 48% of the total mineral deposits, in the land that will be mined. The presence of arsenic in the mineral deposits, at La Puya meant that exploitation of the gold and silver at the site was not pursued in the past. However, the technology now exists to extract these resources despite the continued risk of pollution.



Significant pollution to the local water supply from arsenic has already occurred. Local residents are further concerned that the mine will monopolize the local water in the extraction process and that the waste water from the mine will be even more heavily contaminated with arsenic. Much of the extraction will be carried out through open cast mining and residents have expressed further concerns about contamination of the air from the arsenic that has the potential to affect local agricultural production.

Following the failure of repeated attempts to negotiate with the government and local authorities to revoke the mining license or at the very least suspend activities at the mine, the local residents began to mobilize their communities to resist the operation of El Tambor. On March 2nd 2012 local residents closed the main entrance to the mine and for two years maintained a peaceful camp at La Puya blocking the entrance and exit of all personnel and equipment to the mine. The women of San José del Golfo and San Pedro Ayampuc have been the protagonists of the resistance and have held the frontline against state and private security forces and machinery. For two years the community withstood threats, intermittent attacks, defamation campaigns, criminalization and attempted assassinations.

Finally, on May 23 2014, the Guatemalan security forces were given the order to evict and dismantle the resistance at La Puya. Hundreds of riot police launched tear gas canisters indiscriminately into the crowd causing injuries to the men, women, children and elderly people that held forth against the eviction. Despite the presence of national and international human rights observers the police used indiscriminate force to remove the camp and the members of the community resistance. The aggression provoked a national and international outcry but there has been no change in government policy and the activities at El Tambor have been proceeding without major disruptions. The CONFREGUA (Religious Conference of Guatemala) released a statement condemning the violent actions of state forces and affirming their support for the peaceful resistance at La Puya: “We are conscious and aware of the cause that justifies the peaceful commitment of the Community in Resistance [La Puya], which is none other than the defense of their land, nature, the environment, water and above all, life itself... we also join with and support the just and human defense of the Peaceful Resistance of La Puya.”

The community of La Puya has not given up on their peaceful resistance to the mine. They are now engaged in a process of recuperation and reorganization to develop new strategies for peaceful resistance.

