

# A Struggle for Clean Canadian Mining in Costa Rica

BY ANA ISLA

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*Depuis 1991, lorsqu'on a instauré la politique du développement durable au Costa Rica, dans le parc de conservation de l'Arenal et de ses environs, une avalanche de compagnies minières canadiennes intéressées à l'exploitation des mines d'or à ciel ouvert ont alarmé les femmes et les hommes des communautés locales parce que ces régions n'avaient jamais connu d'opérations minières. Nous lisons ici au sujet de la bataille des femmes pour de l'eau pure et de leur résistance à l'exploitation de l'or par les Canadiens, un élément du programme de développement / mondialisation durable.*

I want you to tell Canadians that here [Costa Rica] there is a town (Miramar) that struggles against the big powers, that we are fighting desperately to eradicate Canadian powers from our lands.

—Alexander Flores Aguero (1999, Traditional Popular Culture National Award)

"Say yes to life, no to mining" was the slogan of a protest against the Canadian firm Vanessa Ventures Ltd in Costa Rica on March 22, 2002. Thousands of Costa Ricans took to the streets in Ciudad Quesada to battle the decision of their national government to grant a permit for open-pit gold mining to another Canadian mining corporation.

Why are Costa Ricans fighting Canadian mining firms? The answer involves forests, pollution, debt, water, local livelihoods, and globalization-related national policy changes. Women are central in the mining protests, both as leaders and as those whose lives are most affected.

Two periods built the Costa Rican resistance: the globalization of the debt crisis, in the 1980s, that brought International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank (WB) policies (stabilization and structural adjustment) to Costa Rica's doorstep to facilitate entry of foreign investment; and the globalization of the environmental crisis, in the early 1990s, that brought corporate environmental NGOs to Costa Rica's forest to expedite enclosure.

Costa Rica—which has one of the highest per-capita debts in Latin America—has been experimenting with sustainable development in the form of conservation areas as part of its overall strategy of retiring foreign debt through debt-for-nature swaps (Isla). The *Sistema Nacional de Areas de Conservacion* (SINAC) has divided the country into eleven Conservation Areas under the supervision of the Ministry of Environment and Energy (MINAE). MINAE has taken the right to land ownership away from owners of small- and medium-sized

farms and placed it in the hands of the government in order to promote biological corridors in the conservation areas.

In 1991, the World Wildlife Fund-Canada (WWF-C) and MINAE drafted the first step of a management plan, *El Plan General de Uso de la Tierra* (The General Land Use Plan) for the Arenal-Tilaran Conservation Area (ACA). This plan regulated land access and use. According to the WWF-C's Canadian director, Claude Tremblay, the *Land Plan* in ACA was based on the characteristics of the territory and its biophysical potentialities, and it identified the limits of acceptable human intervention for the sustainability of the area. The area is called "Costa Rica's gold belt" due to fairly large deposits of buried alluvial gold that are found there. The gold belt includes the towns of Montes del Aguacate and Cordillera de Tilaran, in the mining district of Abangares. The towns of Libano, Miramar and Montes del Aguacate also belong to this district.

The Arenal-Tilaran Conservation Area extends over 250,561.5 hectares (ha) of land. Out of this total, the *Land Plan* document recommended protecting 116,690.2 ha for sustainable development, including a research program, ecotourism and global air market (selling CO<sub>2</sub>). But by 1993, a large part of these territories had been designated for mineral exploration (*Plan General de Uso de la Tierra, Vol. II, 1993*). A pamphlet entitled, "Description of the Arenal-Tilaran Conservation Area" (made available by ACA-Tilaran's central offices), clearly underlines this contradiction: the pamphlet decries the destruction of the rain forest but also

# Water and Livelihood in the Era of Globalization

encourages transnational corporation (TNCs) investments in farming, wood and forest activities, environmental services, and the extraction of earth minerals in ACA. By 1998, at least eight Canadian mining firms were operating more than 12 gold mines in the Arenal area.

## Costa Rica's Gold Belt

Open-pit mining in Costa Rica now uses the extremely toxic cyanide lixiviation technique, which has led to severe pollution and consequently to organized resistance among local communities. Women and men are concerned that an increase in strip mining can further destroy local rivers and lakes. The resistance to mining is therefore a struggle not only for clean water but also for the preservation of livelihoods. The government has tried to sell sustainable development as "environmental preservation" in the name of ecological conservation. However, communities in the "gold belt" understand that the "national" government cannot protect their interests and their livelihoods, because it cannot protect their environment. For instance, on the Pacific coast, MINAE granted 20 concessions to transnational mining corporations that exploit 11,697 ha. of land, while a further eleven concessions are still under negotiation. The indebted Costa Rican government's abandonment of land to mining corporations has led to the expropriation of 16,097 hectares of land from local communities. In many cases, communities have been forcibly evicted (Isla).

On the Pacific coast, the following Canadian mining companies are al-

ready in operation:

1) Las Lilas Mining Project in *Quebrada Grande de Liberia*, owner of the subsidiary Tierra Colorada S.A. of Barrick Gold;

2) Mining Rio Chiquito de Tilaran, owned by Corporation Minerals Mallon S.A, a subsidiary of the Canadian Mallon Minerals. Newmont Mining was also involved in exploring the property (*Mining Magazine* 179);

3) Mining La Union, in La Union of Montes de Oro, owned by Minerales La Union S. A., a Canadian subsidiary;

4) Mining Beta Vargas in La Pita de Chomes, Puntareanas and San Juan of Abangares-Guanacaste, owned by the subsidiary Novontar S.A of Lyon Lake Mines of Canada;

5) Ariel Resources Ltd, in La Junta de Abangares, the oldest Canadian mine in Costa Rica, extracts gold through three subsidiaries:

a) Mining Tres Hermanos, operated by el Valiente Ascari;

b) Mining San Martin, operated by Mining of Sierra Alta S. A., and,

c) Mining El Recio, operated by Minera Silencio S. A..

Ariel Resources Ltd has been operating in the area since 1986. In November 2000, it disappeared from Costa Rica, leaving debts with the Costa Rican Hydro Institute (ICE) and with its workers, who presented complaints at Cañas Tribunal against one of Ariel Resources subsidiaries (Torres).

Women and men in the area wrote a Position Paper (1999), in which they highlighted their concern with the inadequacies of MINAE. The paper describes their distress with mining and with the problems that have

been created in the area:

- The displacement from traditional ways of life and livelihood to give space to mining. "We were expelled from Rio Chiquito in Tilaran to make room for mining, because they claimed that we were causing damage to flora and fauna, water and soil";
- The suffering of women, men and children when water contamination forces them to emigrate;
- The grief and hardship due to the openings of hollows in the soil where their cattle fall and die;
- The disruption to their culture and relationship with nature by the elimination of recreation spaces; consequently, drug addiction, alcoholism and prostitution become more significant.

The Position Paper concludes

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with incredulity about the promise of job creation and mistrust that MINAE and its partners can confront the ecological crisis while simultaneously supporting the mining industries. Community members' experience has shown that the only outcomes are destruction and illusory benefits that disappear imme-

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diately once the mine closes, leaving only devastation.

Mining corporations raise significant funds in the stock markets to begin production. These are for the most part mutual funds, which collect money deposited by individuals and invest it in an array of financial assets; and pension funds, which are huge pots of retirement savings under professional investors' management. Thus, a significant number of middle-class Canadians with investments in these types of funds are implicated in the exploitation of Costa Ricans and other Latin Americans where mining has been unleashed.

#### **Organizing Against Gold Mining: The Cases of Ariel Resources Ltd and Mina Macona**

Costa Ricans are organizing and resisting in the face of these threats. In 2001, I interviewed forestry engineer Sonia Torres, who states:

We welcome investments, if they respect our identity as agricultural people and our wish to live in peace and harmony with nature. But we won't accept projects we have not asked for; we do not want them. If foreign investors want to invest here, they must accept people's participatory processes, because we won't accept projects that conspire against our well-being, even if they were accepted by the "national" government. We already have our own development based on land, clean water and air, community, and solidarity."

Sonia Torres was the coordinator of the National Front Against Gold Mining between 1999 and 2000. Torres and the National Front described the struggle against gold mining, using two examples to illustrate the disaster brought by mining to their water and their lives. Both examples involve Canadian-owned mines.

The Canadian firm Ariel Resources Ltd. operated for 12 years and its subsidiaries extracted gold in La Junta de Abangares. The subsidiaries are located on a hillside where gravity helps to draw the mining contaminants toward the rivers and the areas modest homes. In this case, the gold mining is underground, and the material is extracted mechanically through tunnels developed along the gold and silver bearing quartz vein. The extraction is done by a process called cyanide lixiviation, which involves dissolving the metals using sodium cyanide. The process implies health risks for the workers in many ways, and it is deadly for the environment and local communities.

Despite the concern of local communities, the mines continue to leach cyanide into the river, streams, and soil. At the urging of women, men, and children, in 2000, the National Front organized a socio-environmental impact study that documented the alteration and destruction of the

land, biodiversity, scenery, water, air quality, and human health, and included evidence that underground water was also being contaminated. Despite the analysis, the Health Minister declared there was no contamination. Torres stated that the local river also contains 800 times more iron than normal.

As we stood outside of the "Cuatro Vientos" mine, which was abandoned by a Canadian company, we viewed the one main street of the town of Las Juntas de Abangares. It is still covered with rocks and yellow water that leaked from a chemical dump site. Torres stated that in addition to the destruction created while the company was in operation, neither the government nor the company was held responsible once the contract ended.

The destruction of the natural resources of local communities has impoverished community members at every level. They have lost fertile land to erosion and their water supplies are contaminated. *Campesinas/os* have been forced to abandon their *fincas* (farms) and emigrate to shanty towns or to the capital city of San Jose and into destructive ways of life (Torres). While walking through this land of desolation, Torres pointed out many dried-up mountain streams surrounding the mine. Water pollution and mines treated with cyanide have also been deadly for fauna and flora, and for mangrove swamps, essential to maintaining biological diversity. The worst effects can be seen in the water of the *Agua Caliente* river, which is now yellow and fetid with the odours of the chemicals used in mining (Gamboa). The *Agua Caliente* is a hot river due to geologic activity and in the past it was used for recreation, therapeutic treatment, and as a source of food. It is now terribly polluted. Local community members continue to use the waters because they do not know about the mine discharges. As a result of the poisoning of the river, aquatic life has been exterminated and community health has been undermined.

According to Elizabeth Pizarro, from the Ministry of Health of Abangares, the local population has been experiencing rising illnesses, such as asthma, allergies, skin irritation, gastritis, and neurological disorders. But the most affected have been women who suffer a high rate of miscarriages. The contamination of the water and air in the area has created much grief for rural women who also have to cope with high levels of birth defects and child mortality. The child mortality rate in Abangares is higher (15.2 per cent) than in other parts of the country (12.5 per cent) and the number of children with Downs Syndrome is double that in other areas.

A second example of the effect of mining in Costa Rica involves the Macacona mine in Esparza, Puntarenas (Fundacion Coyoche), known also as the Mondongo mine. Owned by the Canadian Barranca Mining subsidiary of Hearne Ltd., it was the first open-pit or strip mine in Costa Rica. It controlled 200 hectares of land and the mine covered 20 hectares. Open-pit mining has had a significant impact on the environment and the social and cultural aspects of local communities. The first clear threat is that it eliminates the forest and any vegetation in the area, creating conditions for mudslides, while removing enormous quantities of soil in a short period of time. At Macacona, strip mining was done for seven years until the community closed the mine down at the end of 1989. However, 12 years later, the hectares operated by the mining company are still lifeless. The forest and the wildlife that had existed on the higher ground were removed in order for the company to make a vertical cut, 150 meters deep, breaking the underground aquifer stratum for 925 metres (Fundacion Coyoche). The cyanide and other toxins used in the process of mining the gold killed the forest and contaminated the mountain streams of Turbina, Rio Paires, Rio Jesus Maria, the mangrove swamps of Tivives and the Gulf of Nicoya. The pollution

killed fish, wildlife, cattle, and even people. Franklin Casares Villalobos drank water in Turbina and died instantly (Fundacion Coyoche). Land sediments still contain cyanide and the destruction continues when the rain washes down the poison and the wind disseminates it throughout the surrounding areas. However, no one has been held responsible.

People have never received compensation for the destruction of their health, loss of life, or for the degradation of the environment on which their livelihood depends. No amount of money could recompense the losses to these communities. Sonia Torres states:

The lies are the same—that we should sacrifice our quality of life for job creation. That was never the case, because mining produces few jobs for the locals. One characteristic of mining is that the operation is short-lived (a period of ten years on average), but its environmental and social implications are permanent. Local communities are contaminated, during the operation and long after a mine company leaves, since the abandoned infrastructure continues the contamination because of tanks and deposits of acid left behind.

These catastrophic experiences have led to resistance against mining among local communities. At the same time, however, the Costa Rican government wants to impose a new round of strip gold mining projects in Miramar, Abangares, Puntarenas San Carlos, and Liberia

#### **Resistance in the Arenal Conservation Area: The Case of the Bellavista Mining Project**

Costa Rican mining company Rio Minerales S.A. and Metales Procesados M.R.W.S.A., subsidiaries of the Toronto-based Wheaton River Minerals, operate the Bellavista mine in

the Arenal Conservation Area, two kilometres north of Miramar de Montes de Oro, Canton 4 in the province of Puntarenas. They have signed a contract for exploration, granted by MINAE, and they have also received the approval of SETENA, the Costa Rican agency that approves environmental impact assessments and establishes the monetary guarantees. The corporation has special Free Zone status and is thus exempt from taxes for imports (machinery, etc.) and exports including profit remittance. Consequently, local communities both subsidize and pay the full price of the mining corporation's destruction.

In 1996, the Miramar Natural Resources Defence Group initiated a campaign against Bellavista Mining, which was then owned by the Canadian mining company, Rayrock Corporation. Fuelled by opposition to the use of cyanide in lixiviation tanks, the campaign made public the following information:

We are opposed to mining in Bellavista, because it could:

- damage 12 water springs that are used for human consumption;
- destroy 117 *manzanas* of secondary forest;
- spoil *La Plata* and *Agua Buena* mountain streams;

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- cause landslides that could deposit more than 35 million tons of material;
- contaminate fish with heavy metals, producing cerebral damage and malformation;
- cause an overflow of 1 million 17 thousand cubic litres of water contaminated with cyanide. (written on T-shirts)

Following this campaign, the Rayrock Corporation sold the project. In 1999, the Canadian company, Wheaton River Minerals Ltd., obtained a licence to operate the Bellavista mine. According to Sonia Torres, the government granted Wheaton River an even bigger area than before, so that the impact will be massive. According to the Pacific Regional Front (2001b), despite the fact that the project covers an area of 172 hectares, and 473 hectares of surrounding land are directly affected, while an area of 6,172 hectares, which includes the watershed of the Ciruelas River, is indirectly affected, the project has already begun its destruction by cutting down trees with the authorization of MINAE.

The community has to confront powerful interests in its demands for the protection of local water and subsistence. Since 1996, the Canadian mining establishment, and its figureheads in Costa Rica, Rio Minerales S.A. and Metales Procesados M.R.W.S.A., have used different strategies to harass local community members who are opposed to their project. One of these instruments is the use of legal intimidation. In 1997, Sonia Torres was taken to court by Galaxie S.A. (POGGSA), a subsidiary of the Canadian firm Rayrock which then owned Bellavista. The court declared there were no grounds for the corporation to accuse Sonia Torres.

In 2001, Wheaton River, (through its figurehead Rio Minerales), accused Marta Blanco, a teacher and municipal councillor, of defamation. Wheaton River, in alliance with three MINAE officials who assisted the cor-

poration as witnesses, accused Marta of falsely claiming that thousands of trees had been cut down for the Wheaton River project at a special municipal meeting on September 18, 2000. Blanco denied the accusations. Blanco stated that for years,

the mining company has been sending lawyers and other contracted individuals with tape recorders to every municipal meeting to intimidate the members. They pressure the municipality to keep silent about the problems they are creating. On the day of our meeting where garbage collection was discussed, a lawyer of the company was there.

Blanco maintained that during the special meeting on mining,

...I said that strip-mining projects are synonymous with the total destruction of nature, because they cut down thousand of trees. For these words, I was taken to court, despite the fact that I did not refer to the Wheaton River Minerals project. The company claims that I lied that it had cut down thousands of trees and, furthermore, that it operates with MINAE and SETENA permits; therefore, I was making false statements, since the project is operating legally. We went to a conciliation meeting at the Puntarenas Court. At the court, the lawyer for the company told me that the conciliation consisted in my resignation from the municipal post. The conciliation should be seen as a warning to the municipal office to stop speaking about their project. I made it explicit that my position was not going to change and that I was not going to resign.

Blanco was then taken to court by the corporation. In October 2001, the Puntarenas court, under Judge

Antonio Rodriguez Rescia's direction, declared Blanco responsible for defamation of Rios Minerales S.A. and ordered her to pay the equivalent of Cdn. \$ 3,250 in fines, damages, and court costs.

Blanco, with the support of the municipality and the Front Committee of Opposition to Mining in Miramar (Miramar Front), appealed this decision to a final constitutional court of appeal, and won. On March 1, 2002, Judges Javier Llobet Rodríguez, Fernando Cruz Castro, and Rafael Sanabria Rojas, rejected the previous verdict, finding a lack of grounds for the corporation to accuse Marta Blanco who, as a municipal councillor, was only carrying out her responsibilities and her rights to defend the environment.

### **The Case of Vanessa Ventures Ltd.**

On March 16, 2002, the Northern Front in Opposition to Mining (Northern Front) called a press conference to announce a protest to be held in Ciudad Quesada on March 22, 2002. It demanded that the national government "*say yes to life, say no to mining.*" The reason for the protest was another agreement between MINAE, the Costa Rican government, and another Canadian corporation. This time Infinito Industry S.A., a subsidiary of Vanessa Ventures Ltd. of Vancouver, received a ten-year licence to mine in Las Crucitas, obtaining approval for a 1000-hectare exploitation area.

The Crucitas Project is located in Alajuela Province, Canton San Carlos, District of Cutris, 95 km north of Ciudad Quesada and 20 km northeast of Coope Vega community. The San Carlos Municipality had rejected the idea of mining in Las Crucitas de Cutris de San Carlos, on September 11, 1995. When it became known in January, 2002 that MINAE had approved the Crucitas mine the previous December, students from elementary schools, high schools and universities; teachers,

members of unions, ecologists, *campesinas/os*, officials of the Catholic church, women's groups, members of parliament, and municipal governors took to the streets of Ciudad Quesada to say "No to mining." Balbina Gonzales, a *campesina* from San Carlos, demanded that water be protected. She stated "I would rather live without electricity or roads in good condition, but I cannot live with mining because it will destroy the water, which is vital for life and livelihood." She also demanded the protection of her subsistence economy. In addition she denounced the blackmail by this corporation in her town and manifested her decision to fight hard to defend her and her family's livelihood (Hernandez).

### Local Municipalities Versus National Government

Since 1996, led by affected women and men who have seen their health and their lives damaged, local municipalities have increasingly rejected mining projects in open confrontation with MINAE and its environmental approvals branch SETENA.

Abangares Municipality, in a historic special session in October 1998, made the decision to oppose strip mining in open confrontation with the national government (Frente del Pacifico de Oposicion a la Miniera; La Voz de la Pampa). In that session, the municipal government lamented the loss of lives of community members caused by the greed of the transnational companies operating in the area, supported by a few local miners and greedy politicians.

The Abangares Council stated it:

- is against every practice of mining exploitation whether strip, tunnel, or gallery mining in Abangares and in the entire country;
- encourages similar statements by other municipalities in the country;
- authorizes communities and

members of the National Front in Opposition to Strip Mining to release media communiqués;

- approves the initiative to translate the decision into many languages and to distribute them nationally and internationally;
- promotes an Action Plan to socio-economically transform Abangares.

One by one, municipalities that have experienced the devastating activities of mining have gained courage and rejected mining in their territories. Since 1996, local municipalities are fiercely fighting against the impoverishment of the people and ecological destruction in Costa Rica's gold belt. The following municipalities have rejected mining projects:

- September 11, 1995, San Carlos Municipality rejected the exploitation of mining in Las Crucitas de Cutris de San Carlos;
- September 16, 1995, Sarapiquí Municipality repudiated strip gold mining in the country, in particular in Arenal Huetar Norte;
- August 1996, Montes de Oro Municipality opposed the Bellavista Mining Project;
- June 26, 1997, Abangares Municipality requested Puntarenas Municipality to nullify the permit to Beta Vargas Mining;
- September 10, 1997, Puntarenas Municipality countered gold strip mining;
- March 27, 1998, Abangares Municipality declared itself against all practices of mining exploitation, metallic stockpiling, and underground and tunnels in Abangares and any part of the country;
- July 14, 1998, Puntarenas Municipality ratified the opposition to Beta Vargas Mining and solicited authorization from the Supreme Court of Justice to immediately stop the mine;
- August 13, 1998, Montes de Oro Municipality rejected Bellavista Mining exploration and exploitation in

Bellavista and other parts of the Canton;

- October 1, 1998, Abangares Municipality vetoed metallic strip mining in its territory;
- October 29, 1998, Montes de Oro Municipality declared foreign and national mining corporations '*persona non grata*';
- November 2, 1998, Liberia Municipality rejected Las Lilas Mining;
- March 24, 1999, Tilaran Municipality, requested examination of Rio Chiquito Mining;
- July 24, 1999, Montes de Oro Municipality repeated its disapproval of Bellavista Mining and warned and denounced the work of the corporations;
- January 2000, Montes de Oro Municipality declared its solidarity with the North Zone Municipalities opposing metal mining in Crucitas;
- February 22, 2000, Upala Municipality requested that the Central government stop providing permits and confront the pressure for mining the area;
- September 4, 2000, San Carlos Municipality rejected gold mining in Crucitas and Conchito.

### Conclusion

Costa Ricans have been living with the devastating consequences of an experiment in sustainable *corporate* development, in which nature is controlled and managed for profit in conservation areas and biodiversity preserves. The Costa Rican government has allowed mining to be carried out everywhere in the Arenal Conservation Area, despite the knowledge that mining destroys nature and people. The government further knows that women and men are fed up with its compromise with capital, in which open pit mining in conservation areas is called 'sustainable development.' Costa Rican state officials receive international prizes recognizing them as top-rate 'conservationists.' At the same time, mining project approvals have been kept secret from the local Costa Rican

population as well as from the international public. But the effects of mining cannot be kept secret from the communities who are expropriated and burdened with ill health and degraded environments.

Costa Rican women and men, with the support of local municipalities, are no longer silent. They are on the streets, defending their rights to clean water and a secure livelihood. In their battle against mining, women have uncovered the colonial relations of sustainable development in the alliances between their "national" government and international mining capital. At the same time, women have shown that politics is not separate from subsistence and everyday life. By confronting corporations' harassment and court actions, women active against mining have empowered and united local community members as well as local municipalities against the perpetrators of grievous wrongdoing. Costa Rican women's courageous confrontation against Canadian mining corporations suggests to us that local and international communities can be united against corporate globalization. Internally, women are building resistance. Internationally, they request solidarity from Canadian women, especially middle-class women whose stocks, mutual funds, and pension funds directly contribute to the exploitation of nature in Costa Rica. By pressuring investors in Canada, by writing to the Canadian government and by exposing the fallacy of "sustainable development," Canadian women can join their Costa Rican sisters in their struggle for a just and healthy world.

*Ana Isla is a member of Toronto Women for a Just and Healthy Planet. This paper was written as part of her post-doctoral research awarded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), Canada.*

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## ABOUT THE ARTISTS

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