

ANOTHER ANTI-MINING ACTIVIST SHOT IN CABAÑAS EL SALVADOR, HITMAN TIED TO PACIFIC RIM IS DETAINED

Written by Jason Wallach

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A leader in the movement opposed to re-opening the El Dorado goldmine in northeast El Salvador was in stable condition after being shot eight times in the back and legs. Doctors at San Salvador's Rosales Hospital said it was "miraculous" that Ramiro Rivera survived the attack, which occurred in front of Rivera's modest house. Rivera identified one of two assailants as Oscar Menjívar, who was detained by police in Cabañas, where both men reside.

Ramiro Rivera is President of the local Community Development Association (ADESCO) of Nueva Trinidad, a small community located in the unpaved highlands of Cabañas Department. In 2005, as exploration permits were offered to the US/Canadian Pacific Rim Mining Corporation, the community found that it was in the crosshairs of a proposed gold mine. As the company began to drill deep holes to estimate the quality of gold deposits, residents noticed their wells were drying up. Some wells were poisoned by unknown chemicals, leading in some cases to stillborn calves and dead livestock.

Rivera was reluctantly elected to lead the group after residents accused the previous ADESCO Board of receiving hush money from Pacific Rim representatives in exchange for their silence regarding the mine's potentially detrimental impacts. When Rivera took the helm, he organized three road blockades near Nueva Trinidad that prevented exploratory equipment from being transported into remote areas. Rivera has previously reported threats against his life that he said were based on his opposition to the goldmine.

As complaints about the impacts on the region's water supply rippled, people throughout Cabañas actively confronted Pacific Rim contractors who brought heavy equipment into the backwoods. In July 2008, the company paused its exploratory work and publicly stated that its feasibility study about mining gold deposits could not

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be completed.

The accused Menjívar had previously attacked mining opponents. According to Jesse Freeston, a US-based reporter who has covered events in Nueva Trinidad, Menjívar was arrested last year for a machete attack on Santos Rodriguez, a farmer also from Nueva Trinidad. Rodriguez lost two fingers in the attack, but Menjívar was released after three days in jail and was never tried for the crime. Freeston said that Menjívar's rapid release was likely due to political connections he built with mayors in Sensuntepeque (Jesús Edgar Bonilla Navarrete) and Ilobasco (José María Dimas Castellanos Hernández) . Both mayors hail from the ARENA political party and support re-starting operation sat El Dorado.

The attack against Ramiro Rivera was another in a series of violent El Dorado-related incidents in Cabañas Department. Last month, the body of Marcelo Rivera, an outspoken mining opponent, was found in a well after he had been forcibly disappeared 12 days earlier. Marcelo—no relation to Ramiro—was founder of the Amigos de San Isidro, a local pro-ecology group which had warned residents about the poisonous impacts of cyanide-leach goldmining upon local water reserves.



Reporter at Radio Victoria

Earlier in July, a local parish priest outspoken on the mining issue



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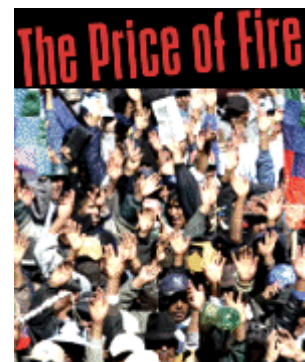
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barely escaped a harrowing kidnapping attempt by armed assailants. And reporters from the Radio Victoria community radio station have received a broad volley of death threats over the last few months. The threats are communicated through mail, text messages and phone calls. One of which exhorted the newsgatherers to “shut your mouths, or we will shut them forever.”

The National Roundtable Against Metal Mining—a coalition of local residents, environmentalists, unions and faith-based activists—has denounced the disappearances, threats and attacks. The group has mobilized public support for Cabañas activists nationally and internationally. The group recently won the 2009 Letelier-Moffett Award presented by the Institute for Policy Studies for its human rights and environmental work.

However, contrary to expectation, the group has run into a tepid response on the mining issue from Mauricio Funes’ administration. Funes made his opposition to mining a talking point in his campaign stump speeches earlier this year, but his administration has done little to ratchet down on perpetrators of violence in Cabañas. Funes himself has not commented on the future of mining under his stead, and police maintain that Marcelo Rivera’s death was void of political motives, claiming he was murdered by a local gang.

In the larger political arena, Funes seems to be acquiescing to pressure from Pacific Rim and other corporate players. When ex-President Tony Saca refused to grant the El Dorado permit citing “political” problems, Pacific Rim responded by suing El Salvador under the provisions of CAFTA to recoup \$77 million of investment. But instead of arguing malfeasance on the part of Pacific Rim, Funes’ chief Economic Advisor, Alex Segovia, lamented in a recent interview that the Salvadoran government, “is losing all of these cases, because in the first place, contracts and the rules of the game have been broken.” Such an admission was a tacit implication that the government would negotiate a settlement with Pacific Rim, though Segovia would not explicitly elaborate further. In the interim, another mining company who has been denied operating permits has filed a separate \$100 million claim against El Salvador. (Note: El Salvador has not lost a case in the CAFTA courts to date.)

Regardless of a potential deal the central government might strike with Pacific Rim, the facts on the ground relay that local opposition to mining will have to be broken before any gold could be extracted. Social opposition to mining spans the political spectrum in Cabañas, as ex-President Saca found out the hard way.

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Meanwhile, National Roundtable Against Metal Mining, has maintained its opposition to corporate control of land and resources in Cabañas. It has demanded a full government investigation of the murders, kidnappings, attacks and threats. In addition, the group has called on Salvadoran President Funes to defend against Pacific Rim's lawsuit, asserting that a nation has an obligation to protect its environment and honor the democratic will of those who would be directly affected by mining.

Perhaps the group's position can best be summed up in the words of Maria Leyva, a local resident who participated in a 2008 action: "We oppose mining because we want a good future for our children. We ask that the Government not only govern for those with power, but also for we who live in the communities, because here is where we deal with the reality [of their decisions]."

It remains to be seen if Funes and his advisors will respond to Ms. Leyva by acting to quell rampant impunity in Cabañas, or whether they will fan the flames of corporate intrusion, thus inevitably generating continued local resistance.

Jesse Freeston provided critical research assistance to this report.

