

Shredding Social Fabric

Company promoters "contaminate" communities in El Salvador

by [Jesse Freeston](#)



Canadian mining company Pacific Rim is featured on a mural in El Salvador, where company promoters are being blamed for dividing the community.

PHOTO: [JESSE FREESTON](#)

SAN ISIDRO, EL SALVADOR—In El Salvador, the residents of one community are feeling the impact of mining long before any ground has been broken. Locals are talking about contamination – but not the kind caused by environmental pollutants – it is "social contamination" that is tearing apart the village of Trinidad, and a Canadian mining company that is being blamed.

Vancouver-based Pacific Rim operates the most advanced exploration project in El Salvador. Although the project is still in the exploratory stage, they have already spent US\$77 million in the small Central American country. Some of this money has been used to hire mine "promoters."



José Santos Rodríguez blames Pacific Rim for the conflicts in his community, which have included an attack by his neighbour that resulted in the loss of two of his fingers. PHOTO: [JESSE FREESTON](#)

Promoters are local people hired by a company to promote the best interests of the mine. Thus, the company voice comes from the face of a trusted neighbour or community representative, often without the community being aware of the promoter's status as a paid employee of the mine.

A promoter serves a variety of purposes in a community, including encouraging locals to sell their land to the mining company, denying and denigrating legitimate concerns about mining, spreading the company's story about development and "green mining," and sometimes even intimidating those who pose a threat to the company's plans.

This scenario has played out in countless mining-affected communities around the world. The resulting divisions and conflicts are what people in the village of Trinidad – a village in the gold-rich region of Cabañas – are calling "social contamination."

Trinidad resident Fermán Menjívar found out that his community was of interest for mining when, "They entered people's lands without the permission of the owners ... they went around breaking fences and cutting barbed wire. We didn't even know who they were." "They" were a team of Pacific Rim geologists, who were hacking up surface rocks for clues to the region's geology.

Trinidad is located two hours by truck from the nearest paved road. When the company first arrived, people in the village knew little about what gold mining would mean for their community.

Distrusting information from Pacific Rim employees, and lacking knowledge of their own, the Environmental Committee of Cabañas organized a tour of the San Martín gold mine in the Siria Valley, in neighbouring Honduras.

A group from Trinidad was on that tour. What they saw and heard in Honduras left them with serious reservations about having a gold mine in their community.

The group returned to Trinidad with stories of rashes and skin disorders that resulted from people bathing or washing clothes in the Honduran river polluted by the mine. Studies, including one by the Honduran government, have indicated dangerously high levels of arsenic and other chemicals in the blood of people living in the Siria Valley.

Of all mining's potential consequences, it is the fact that 10 rivers have dried up in the Siria Valley that scares people in Trinidad the most.

Trinidad gets almost all of its water from wells that already often run dry due to a crippling water shortage that is affecting the entire country. In fact, according to the Consumer Defense Center, Salvadorans have the worst access to potable water in all of Latin America.

Through the delegation to Honduras, and the screening of documentary videos about mining by the Environmental Committee of Cabañas, many community members have educated themselves about the potential impacts of mining.

The community is now divided between "those in the know and those with the dough,"— those who believe that mining will destroy their community and those who are benefiting financially from Pacific Rim.

"Before the company arrived, life in Trinidad was great," Menjívar remembers. "Our whole family used to get together often, along with friends from all over the region. But now my father and I do not speak and my grandparents won't talk to me. All because my father's side of the family is supporting the company. They tell us that we are stupid for fighting."

When asked why his father supports Pacific Rim, Menjívar imitates his father's raving about the money and free rides into town he has received from company representatives.

By contrast, Menjívar's other grandfather was one of the community members who visited the San Martín mine in Honduras, and returned urging the village to stop the exploration immediately.

Armed with his grandfather's testimony, Menjívar joined with many of Trinidad's inhabitants to oppose the incursion of the Canadian mining company. When Pacific Rim ignored their opposition and brought in heavy drills to carry out exploratory drilling, the residents unified with those opposed to the mine in neighbouring communities to physically stop the machines

from entering the region. They occupied the highway on three separate occasions between November, 2006, and March, 2007, in order to stop the exploration.

In response to these direct actions, Pacific Rim put more resources into hiring grassroots promoters to convince the community from within.

Menjívar lives with his grandmother, Luciana Vela, who was unavailable for an interview due to lingering effects of a stroke she suffered after her first encounter with Pacific Rim, two years ago.

Vela's daughter, Edelmira Menjívar, recounts the story in her mother's absence. "Employees arrived asking for permission to enter our land, and my mother refused. Some days later another man returned to explain that 'whether she liked it or not they were going to enter her land.' After that discussion my mother suffered a stroke and lost her ability to speak."

In response, the company offered money. "They wanted to pay us for what happened to my mother, but we didn't accept any money, we asked them to leave instead."

Pacific Rim did not leave. With the price of gold hovering around \$1000 per ounce, Luciana Velas's family was becoming an obstacle because they wouldn't leave their land. That is when, in January, 2008, a member of the community's Board of Directors brought a series of allegations forward against Edelmira Menjívar, including the attempted murder of a board member's husband.

Edelmira's charges came only months after Fermán had 15 accusations leveled against him by a paid Pacific Rim promoter. Despite the promoter's claims at an earlier date that he had no connection to the company, Pacific Rim representatives accompanied him to court.

Although Fermán and Edelmira could not afford legal counsel – something the company was likely banking on – the Environmental Committee of Cabañas stepped in to provide a lawyer.

Every one of Edelmira and Fermán's charges was dismissed in court due to "lack of evidence." The board member who charged Edelmira resigned from the board after the trial and now, like Fermán's accuser, works openly as a promoter for Pacific Rim in the community.

A short walk from Fermán and Edelmira's house stands the home of José Santos Rodriguez, a corn and bean farmer. Santos lives here with his wife Dora and their six children.

"We were good friends; we used to go fishing together in the Lempa river," says Santos. He is talking about his relationship with Oscar Menjivar. Oscar is Santos' neighbour, Fermán and Edelmira's cousin, and a paid promoter for Pacific Rim. "The problem started when the miners arrived," he says.

Three weeks prior to the June, 2008, interview with Santos, Oscar attacked his lifelong friend Santos with a *corvo* (small machete), cutting off two of his fingers and making it nearly impossible for Santos to provide for his family.

When the memory becomes too difficult for Santos to continue, Dora takes over. "[Santos] came home and told me that Oscar had attacked him... there was blood everywhere."

Ramiro Rivera, President of Trinidad's Community Board, explains the reason for the attack. "Santos went to Honduras and told us all about the situation there.

"For that, his life was threatened, and for that, they almost killed him."

Ramiro claims to have received death threats as well. "We all do," he says. "You have people coming up to you saying that 'I heard something bad is going to happen to you if you continue, but you will be fine if you support the mining.' And you know they are for real because of what they did to Santos."

Santos tells me that when Oscar approached him, weapon in hand, Santos said: "We have the right to defend our environment. This country is so small and it deserves our respect." According to Santos, it was then that Oscar attacked.

With her husband bleeding profusely and without access to a vehicle, Dora called the police to bring Santos to the hospital.

Santos believes that what happened next was evidence of the pervasiveness of the mining company's influence.

"They brought me there as a victim," Santos recounts. "But once we arrived they handcuffed my arm to the bed, as if I was the bad guy." The police never formally put Santos under arrest nor informed him of his rights, illegally detaining him under Salvadoran law.

In contrast, Oscar was released after three days and had his assault case thrown out for "lack of proof." Santos was never approached to testify.

Although Santos does not excuse Oscar's actions, he repeatedly says "It is Pacific Rim who is responsible for this, because Oscar and I were great friends before they arrived. They are the source of all of this."

After recounting a series of harrowing tales from his visit to Honduras, Santos points to Cerro Pelón, a hill less than one kilometre away and one of the potential mine locations being considered by Pacific Rim.

"These people [promoters] go around dividing families, siblings, mothers and fathers. They don't care how much we lose, they get their cheque at the end of the month and with this they are happy for now, because they have no idea that they will contaminate this country."

To some, it appears that they already have.

Just one week after these interviews were conducted 18-year-old José Dolores Velasco committed suicide after his family threw him out of the home. He wasn't thrown out for coming home too late or using drugs, but for joining the Environmental Committee of Cabañas in their campaign against Pacific Rim.

Jesse Freeston is a freelance journalist whose upcoming documentary project, ¡Fuera!, deals with the ongoing confrontation between Canadian mining companies and communities in El Salvador.