

Voices on the Border's Fact Finding Mission Returns from Cabañas

By voicesfromelsalvador

Last week, an independent, international fact-finding delegation led by Voices on the Border, traveled to El Salvador to investigate the increased levels of violence in the province of Cabañas. The delegation, comprised of concerned citizens from El Salvador, the United States and Canada, interviewed over 30 people, including victims and their families, representatives from the police and judiciary, public officials, human rights and environmental experts, and religious leaders. Delegates also reviewed documents, past testimonies, and other evidence related to the Cabañas violence.



Meeting with Francisco Pineda from the Environmental Committee of Cabañas

In Cabañas the delegation found a climate of intimidation and insecurity that reflects a culture of chronic impunity. Such a climate has resulted in three homicides; attempted kidnappings and other violent attacks; and constant threats against citizens engaged in a local and national debate on Pacific Rim Mining Corporation's (Pacific Rim) efforts to mine gold. These attacks on citizens attempting to influence public policy are nothing less than terrorism. The delegation found that this climate of impunity and violence has resulted in obstruction of justice, inadequate investigations by government authorities, and a chilling affect on civic participation. Delegate Julia Kaminsky stated, "The consequences are ruinous to civil society and impede democracy."

With regards to the debate over mining, delegates found existing environmental damage from Pacific Rim exploration projects, a fatally flawed environmental assessment, insufficient public consultation on proposed mining projects, and attempts by Pacific Rim to curry favor among segments of the government and local population. Pacific Rim's activities have created deep divisions in Cabañas. For example, in an interview with the delegation, the Mayor of San Isidro, Cabañas admitted that his government accepted significant financial support from Pacific Rim. Accepting financial contributions makes

it difficult for the Mayor to remain objective when considering the needs and demands of his constituents, and deepens the fissures between those who are pro- and anti-mining. The debate over mining is healthy, but it cannot be held in a climate of impunity, where intimidation and violence prevail.



Meeting with the Mayor of San Isidro

Delegates also found that Pacific Rim's promise of "green mining" remain unfounded, and that they have failed to meet standards set forth in the Salvadoran law. Most proposed mining sites are in the northern regions of El Salvador, within the Lempa River watershed. According to hydrologist Dr. Robert Moran, "if high environmental standards are not demanded... it could spell disaster for the hundreds of thousands of Salvadorians that rely on the river for their livelihoods and basic needs." Though Pacific Rim has claimed that they will achieve such high standards, they have yet to provide details of how they will do so, justifying the government's stand that they will not grant exploitation permits. Pacific Rim responded by filing a complaint under the DR-Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA)

Based on its findings, the delegation has identified several actions that should be taken by Salvadorans and their government, Pacific Rim, and members of the international community.

Most importantly, the delegation calls on those perpetrating the violence to stop immediately. While they are likely motivated by short-term economic or political gains, using violence and terror to influence a public debate undermines El Salvador's democracy. In the long-term, an instable democracy will only undermine any economic or political gains that the perpetrators achieve in the short-term.

The delegation also calls for an independent investigation into the violence. A broad consensus of Salvadorans does not trust government authorities to conduct a thorough investigation, believing that their economic ties to Pacific Rim and the mining industry create a conflict of interest. The Salvadoran Government should request that an international body conduct an independent investigation in coordination with the Ombudsman for Human Rights. In addition to identifying those committing the violence and terror, the independent investigator should identify the intellectual authors of the

attacks and any government officials who have been complicit or interfered with an investigation.



Meeting with Police Investigators

In order to ensure sustainable development, the delegation calls on all corporations that conduct business in El Salvador to demonstrate that their activities would not or do not jeopardize public safety, or harm the environment. Corporations should comply with Salvadoran law and ensure that citizens have a voice in determining whether proposed economic activities would have an adverse impact on their community.

Similarly, the delegation urges Pacific Rim to respect the rights of the citizens of Cabañas to determine the course of their own development, and stop contributing to a culture of division and instability in the region. This includes abandoning its CAFTA arbitration proceedings. Delegate Jim Munro states “these proceedings attempt to by-pass democratic processes in El Salvador, and ultimately place the decision in the hands of appointees of the World Bank, which would set a dangerous precedent.” In the alternative, the delegation supports Salvadoran civil society that seek *amicus curiae* standing at the CAFTA proceedings to ensure that the environmental concerns of the people in Cabañas are given due consideration.

The delegation joins other civil society organizations in calling for the repeal of CAFTA provisions that prioritize foreign investor rights over government interests in preventing environmental degradation or jeopardizing public safety. The right for a corporation to sue a sovereign nation compromises the government’s ability to enforce its environmental and public safety laws, creating tension and fissures between government agencies and the communities that they serve. In the alternative, the delegation supports Salvadoran civil society organizations in their constitutional challenge to CAFTA.



Entrance to Pacific Rim's El Dorado Mine

The delegation left El Salvador today, and will continue working together in the coming weeks to complete a comprehensive report, which it will share with all stakeholders in El Salvador, and distribute widely in the United States and Canada.

See the [Co-Latino's story](#) on the press conference in Spanish from the same day, Feb. 15 2010.
