

This Is What Development Looks Like: Skye Resources and Land Reoccupation in Guatemala

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by Dawn Paley

El Estor, Guatemala – Famed for having hosted an [INCO](#) nickel mining project from the early sixties until the mid eighties, Guatemala's El Estor is back in the spotlight. Three years ago, Vancouver-based [Skye Resources](#) took up the reins of its predecessors, promising another round of development and jobs for local people.

From the ground, however, round after round of violent evictions are the most striking characteristic of the presence of the mining company in the region.

In mid-September of 2006, after years of living five or more families to a lot in the overcrowded town of Chichipate, located just west of El Estor, six groups comprising more than 400 families moved onto lands belonging to the Guatemalan subsidiary of Skye Resources, Compañía Guatemalteca de Níquel (CGN). The vast majority of the people that took part in what some have called "land invasions" are Mayan Q'eqchi' peasant farmers. Their principle desire is to have enough land to support their families through subsistence agriculture.

Barrio Revolución is one of the newly settled communities in the area. It sprang up in recent months on lands that have been unused and unproductive for decades. In the face of much adversity -- including one forced eviction on the 12th of November -- community members built and rebuilt thatched roof houses and a gathering place, organize regular meetings, and had started planting crops of corn and beans.

I first visited the community in early December, after the first eviction. People showed me their thatched roof houses, many still under construction; their gathering place, made up of a large palm roof hoisted upon beams, with a smoothed earthen floor and hand made benches; and where they had started planting crops of corn and beans. Regardless of the difficulties of the last eviction, there was a sense of hope in the community that was tangible.

Doña Fidelia, an elder living in Revolución, explained at the time that "We are recuperating our lands, not invading them. Some of us were born on these lands, before any mining company arrived in the area." Referring to EXMIBAL, the nickel company that [Canadian] mining giant INCO introduced in the region in the 1960s, Fidelia said "EXMIBAL was not here first, our parents were." In 2004, EXMIBAL was bought by Skye Resources and began exploration on the renamed "Fenix Project" as CGN.

The community cemetery bears testament to her words, with headstones dating back to the 1920s. It lies in the heart of Revolución. When EXMIBAL began to buy and clear lands in the 1960s, the people living there at the time were coaxed out, or forced out. Some were murdered. In a steady voice, Fidelia explains what happened to her parents, who "actively and physically participated in defending their lands, activities for which they paid with their lives." Stories such as Fidelia's are not out of the ordinary for the peasant population in the area, many of whom lost friends, leaders and families in the internal conflict that plagued Guatemala for 36 years.

Although some things have undoubtedly changed since the signing of the Peace Accords in 1996, a climate of fear and uncertainty has been maintained by the CNG-Skye Resources since land reoccupations began in September. Locals I met with in December told of biweekly helicopter flyovers, fruitless meetings with company representatives who will not allow community members to bring legal representation or translators, and of a horrifying night of military and police evictions that took place in November, when hundreds of police and army personnel arrived to remove people from the lands.

The first eviction took place on November 12, and was carried out without an order signed by a judge, required by Guatemalan law. In statements reminiscent of the days of EXMIBAL, eyewitness testimonies on the night of the evictions explained that groups of police and troops deployed from within the boundaries of company property -- some using company vehicles -- to evict people from their homes.

Revolución was faced with a second eviction order on December 27th, 2006. The Christmastime eviction order appeared to be an attempt on behalf of the CGN-Skye Resources to "go legal" -- to follow procedures for eviction from private land as dictated by Guatemalan law. On the morning of the 27th, the people in Revolución were organized and expecting the worst, and it was only through listening to a local radio station that residents learned that the eviction would not take place.

The sense of relief was fleeting, however. Another eviction notice was filed for January 8th, 2007. Arriving in El Estor on the evening of the 7th, it was evident that something was amiss. Dozens of police vehicles clogged the thoroughfares of the nearby town of Rio Dulce, and police were everywhere. The following morning, it was clear that evictions were imminent.

The Evictions

Having mustered at the headquarters of the CGN-Skye Resources at 8am, 430 police backed by approximately 200 members of the state military traveled the road to Barrio Unión, a reoccupied community made up of about 70 families. The police made their numbers very clear, forming a line between Barrio Union and the main road. Public prosecutor Rafael Andrade Escobar read the eviction notice.

In retrospect, and disregarding the injustice of the eviction, what happened at Unión was carried out in a measured manner. The community was given time to vacate, and the housing structures were dismantled carefully by groups of workers employed by the CGN-Skye Resources.

A second eviction happened later that day in a community called La Pista, where the community had decided to vacate before the police arrived. Their structures were dismantled with a less care, and some were burned. As night fell, locals speculated about the eviction of Barrio Revolución, one of the largest and best-organized of the communities.

The morning of the 9th, the police and army mustered again at the CGN-Skye Resources headquarters. Police trucks lined the road in a grim parade, stretching for hundreds of metres, each carrying four or more heavily armed, black-clad policemen. Armed private security guards rode in a white pickup, wearing company t-shirts. Other security guards were positioned on the cliffs along the roadside, and from up above, a helicopter carried out flyovers of Barrio Revolución and Barrio La Paz. At about 9:45am, the convoy began to roll towards Barrio Revolución.

Instead of sending a public prosecutor to read an eviction order, elite squads of riot police entered Revolución, moving up the river that runs through the centre of the community. Once the river was secured, police began to encircle the area, closing the people of Revolución into the western portion of the area, where many were mustered in their gathering place, awaiting the arrival of the public prosecutor.

Surrounded by police, about 50 people waited for the public prosecutor to read them the eviction notice. Among them were about a dozen women, including a mother holding her infant child and a few younger children. Time passed, and the police completely sealed off the area where people were gathered.

Burning It All

In the distance, an orange spot appeared. As it grew, brown smoke began to rise up into the air: a house on the other side of the river was burning.

Public Prosecutor Andrade Escobar stood aside while a second house was set on fire, and a third. He claimed that there was no signal on his cellphone to call over and order his men to stop burning. Andrade Escobar continued to claim that the order to stop the burning had not arrived to the other side of the community. He claimed that he would have the Public Ministry press charges against the company employees that were burning the houses of the families of Barrio Revolución.

When asked why company employees were burning homes when it is the public ministry that was to carry out the eviction order, Andrade Escobar responded: "I handed authority over that section of the area over to a [CGN-Skye Resources] lawyer, therefore those responsible for this are company employees, not the public ministry."

After nearly every home in the eastern section of Barrio Revolución was on fire, the two dozen people hired by the company to destroy homes were stopped. While heat continued to radiate from the smoldering structures, approximately sixty members of the army filed across the field and into the forest surrounding the community. César Bora of the Indigenous and Peasant National Coordination (CONIC) described the situation as having "the same characteristics that we saw in many other cases during the internal conflict."

Their houses now replaced by charred wood, the community remained sealed in by police and army, while Andrade Escobar read the eviction notice. He ordered the residents of Barrio Revolución to dismantle their homes if they hadn't already been burned.

"Development Brings Eviction, Development Brings Displacement"

Some community members fought back tears, others stood quietly. Speaking as tears ran down his face, one man said, "They just burned my home. Where will my children sleep tonight?" Having obeyed and respected orders from the police, people's houses were burned illegally in a show of force by company employees.

After reading the eviction order, Andrade Escobar quickly left the area to carry out a fourth eviction, in Barrio La Paz. After the disaster in Revolución, the eviction in La Paz seemed peaceful, though the legal grounds for it were heavily contested.

More evictions are planned in the coming days, and hundreds of peasant families have been made homeless in less than 48 hours. As the long afternoon wore on, the people of Barrio Revolución and Barrio La Paz worked tirelessly dismantling the remaining homes, under heavy police supervision. A sprinkle of rain turned into a heavy afternoon shower, and there was nowhere to go for shelter. The refrain of these communities, as they stood alongside the highway with their belongings, was unanimous.

"Development brings eviction, development brings displacement."

The future is uncertain. Even as community members deal with the loss of their homes and possessions, the depth of their desire to live off the land remains profound. Unless the company and the state of Guatemala change their strategy radically, or the Canadian government steps in to intervene in the activities of Skye Resources in Guatemala, the ramifications of this conflict will continue to intensify.

Welcome to 2007: this is what development looks like.

What To Do:

Show your support for communities defending their right to life by contacting Skye Resources, as well as the other contacts listed below, and demanding that they stop the evictions of impoverished Mayan-Q'eqchi' communities in El Estor, Guatemala.

Write to:

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With copies to your own politicians and to:

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