



## For the Love of Our People and Our Community: Mining, Water and Mexico

*“There is a small group of us who are the original land-owners of Cerro de San Pedro. For us this is where our parents, grandparents and ancestors lived. The struggle for us is a question of our roots and our love for this land.” Ana María Alvarado*

LONG AGO, WHEN THE SPANISH INVADED WHAT IS NOW Mexico and began to kill and enslave the Indigenous people of the area, the newcomers discovered there was precious metal in the land. In the valley of San Luis Potosi, in Mexico’s north-central highlands, people have tried for centuries to mine those metals. But the early settlers realized that water was scarce and so some retreated out of the valley. Some stayed, however, and built a cathedral and houses for their descendants at the foot of St. Peter’s Hill.

Today the village of Cerro de San Pedro sits in a semi-desert, within a fragile ecosystem that is recognized for its bio-diversity. It is just one signature away from recognition as a UNESCO World Heritage site, thanks to a long local struggle to protect the area’s heritage, lands, and 400-year-old buildings.

This cultural heritage, along with the land and the water, is now under threat from the Canadian mining company Metallica Resources Inc. In 1994, Mexico signed the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and a year later, Metallica’s subsidiary Minera San Xavier (MSX) arrived in the community to re-open a long-closed open pit gold and silver mine. It proposed an operation that would threaten the town’s buildings, flatten the nearby hill, force relocation of some of the residents, and rely heavily on very limited local sources of water.

Metallica’s own environmental impact assessment showed that the project would contaminate drinking water with cyanide and displace local people, but it also concluded that the operation was safe. The company has forged ahead, and Canada has no power to hold it accountable for damage.

Metallica has requested a permit for daily use of 25 tons of explosives in an open pit mine in order to blast 75 thousand tons of earth and rock. The explosions could damage historic buildings and put residents at risk. After eight years, the mining activities would leave a mountain of 80 million tons of waste.<sup>1</sup>

Using a gold extraction process called cyanide leaching, Metallica will use 16 tons of cyanide mixed with 32 million litres of water each day. Research clearly shows that cyanide leaching contaminates the air, water supply, and watershed. Leaching will occur near the aquifer that provides 90 percent of the water to the San Luis valley and 73 percent of the water to the state capital. Local food crops and over 1.5 million people rely on this water.

### The community organizes

The community asks how the irreparable damage to the environment and the community can possibly be justified. Together with local environmental and human rights groups, and the communal landowners of Cerro de San Pedro, they have formed the Broad Opposition Front (FAO),

which is determined to stop Metallica’s destructive practices.

For over 10 years, the FAO has been engaged in a legal battle with Metallica. Despite a series of judgments in favour of the community,<sup>2</sup> Metallica has gone ahead with blasting and other activities.

The law is clearly on the community’s side, but the Mexican

authorities are not willing to enforce it. As a result, the people felt they had no choice but to place themselves in the path of Metallica’s machinery. Their peaceful resistance was met with violence and criminal charges against community members.



An editorial cartoon about the mine and community.



By Ana María Alvarado, Julie Graham, Rusa Jeremic, and Rachel Warden

In March 2005, at the request of human rights partners and the FAO, a KAIROS church leaders' delegation traveled to Cerro de San Pedro. They were the first Canadians not associated with mining to formally visit the community. Ana María Alvarado, a Cerro de San Pedro and FAO community leader, has since come to Canada to testify before a Parliamentary Standing Committee, calling for affected communities to be active participants in discussions about Canadian mining overseas.

Mexico is one of Canada's closest trading partners. It is a country struggling with poverty, inequality, and a fragile democracy in which human rights violations remain common. But NAFTA and both the Canadian and Mexican governments are allowing companies like Metallica to pursue operations that clearly ignore the law — and display no accountability to either national or international authority.

The people of Cerro de San Pedro will not give up, and they want us to join them. When we asked Ana María how they had managed to sustain the struggle for this long, she replied: "They are motivated by the love of their people and community, not by political and economic interest. It is concern about the planet and the environment that attracts people to our cause."

She adds, "It has been difficult, especially in the last few months. We have felt our batteries ebb. But once again [with the recent decision to annul Metallica's environmental permit] the law has come down on our side and this has given us energy to carry on. It is a huge support to have KAIROS with us in this struggle because we know that we are not alone in the world although we are physically so far away. Your good energy finds its way to our struggle and strengthens it."

KAIROS believes the Canadian government must stop Metallica from endangering the ecological and social health of this community. Canada is not applying any binding environmental or human rights standards to Canadian corporations operating overseas. It's time our government adopted such legislation, based on Canada's existing obligations under international human rights and environmental agreements, for Canadian corporations operating abroad.

The last word is the community's: "They have not defeated us legally or morally. They have not crushed our spirits. Rather we want to expand and amplify this energy

## WHAT WE CAN DO

**SIGN** the KAIROS "Counting On Water" action for legislation requiring Canadian corporations to protect water and human rights. See [www.kairoscanada.org](http://www.kairoscanada.org) or call toll free: 1-877-403-8933, extension 241.

**CONNECT** to our members' work on binding legislation including Development and Peace at [www.devp.org](http://www.devp.org), and The United Church of Canada at [www.united-church.ca](http://www.united-church.ca)

In March of each year, Cerro de San Pedro holds a cultural festival in honour of its heritage. You can **CONTRIBUTE!** Send a small solidarity banner expressing support for the community's struggle to the KAIROS office by February 1 2007, attention Rachel Warden and Rusa Jeremic. Or call toll free 1-877-403-8933, extension 225.

and support by building an international front or movement of communities resisting mining operations, so that we are no longer participating as individual struggles."

1. Statistics drawn from the company's website ([www.metal-res.com](http://www.metal-res.com)) and research carried out by Mexican NGOs.
2. A state decree from 1993 recognizes Cerro de San Pedro and the surrounding area as a protected site and outlaws any activity that would lead to changes in the subsoil, including preparatory blasting for mining. In February 2006 the courts annulled Metallica's temporary permit to use explosives because the permit clearly contravenes this state decree.

## Recommended resources

(available on the KAIROS 2006-07 CD or on the sites listed):

Information on the impacts of cyanide leach mines:  
[www.bristolbayalliance.com/mines\\_and\\_fish.htm](http://www.bristolbayalliance.com/mines_and_fish.htm)

*Canadian Mining Company at Odds with Mexican Locals:*  
[www.minesandcommunities.org/Action/press621.htm](http://www.minesandcommunities.org/Action/press621.htm)

The full interview with Ana María Alvarado, more information on the FAO's struggle, and KAIROS' submission on Cerro de San Pedro to the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade can be found on the KAIROS website and the 2006-2007 supplementary CD.