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## Mexican authorities arrest Blackfire employees, following activist's slaying

### Mine ordered temporarily closed on environmental grounds

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There have been serious repercussions following the assassination of a Mexican anti-mining activist, Mariano Abarca Roblero, in Chiapas (see: <http://www.minesandcommunities.org/article.php?a=9698>).

Employees of the Canadian company, Blackfire Exploration, have been arrested for allegedly being implicated in the murder.

Blackfire's mine has also been shut temporarily by order of the Mexican government, citing environmental infractions.

**ESPAÑOL**

### Mexican authorities shut down Blackfire mine

*Officials cite environmental infractions for temporary closing of barite operation; deny action has any connection to slaying of activist*

Andy Hoffman and Gloria Galloway - Globe and Mail

8 December 2009

The Canadian mining company entangled in a murder investigation of a local activist has had its mine shut down by Mexican authorities because of environmental

violations.

The Ministry of the Environment for the state of Chiapas has temporarily closed a barite mine owned by Calgary-based Blackfire Exploration Ltd., citing several infractions, including pollution and causing toxic emissions, a government spokeswoman said yesterday.

Three men linked to Blackfire, including a current employee, were recently arrested in the Nov. 27 slaying of activist Mariano Abarca Roblero, who had publicly protested against the mining operation located in Chicomuselo, Chiapas. Ministry spokeswoman Carolina Ochoa denied the mine closing had anything to do with the killing.

Brent Willis, president of Blackfire, said the company has not been told why the mine, which has been operating since November, 2008, was closed.

"The government asked for it to be shut down today - we don't have an understanding of why it was shut down," Mr. Willis said in an interview.

Privately held Blackfire, which is controlled by Mr. Willis, his brother Brent and Mexican investor Emiliano Canales Avila, has denied any role in the death of Mr. Abarca, who was gunned down in a drive-by shooting outside his home.

Mexico's Attorney-General has said that all three men arrested in the murder are linked to Blackfire. Mr. Willis denied this. He said one man, Caralampio Lopez Vazquez, works for the company, but that the other two are no longer employees.

"We were not involved in the incident in any manner," Mr. Willis said.

The mine shutdown and murder investigation comes as Canadian Governor-General Michaëlle Jean visits Chiapas on a diplomatic tour and as Parliament considers Bill C-300, a private member's bill that would impose sanctions on Canadian resource companies that violate human rights and environmental standards in foreign countries.

The powerful mining industry is lobbying hard to quash the bill, introduced by Liberal MP John McKay, but concedes the Blackfire situation is unlikely to help its cause.

"It is a serious situation and it is a tragic situation," Gordon Peeling, president and chief executive officer of The Mining Association of Canada, said of the murder.

"It is not helpful in terms of the dynamic of the discussion for those that want to link these things. Their thinking is flawed if they try to link it to C-300," he added.

Roger Maldonado, another activist in Chiapas who knew Mr. Abarca, said Blackfire has been accused of causing environmental damage and bribing local officials and that anti-mining activists have faced threats and retaliation from mine employees.

"They feel their jobs are jeopardized by somebody protesting against the mine," Mr. Maldonado said in an interview.

Ms. Jean and Peter Kent, Canada's junior foreign minister for the Americas, were touring in Mexico yesterday as the Blackfire mining operation was being shut down.

A spokeswoman for Ms. Jean said the Canadian delegation was not targeted by protests related to either the environmental accusations that have dogged the mine or the murder charges pending against people linked to the Canadian company.

But in Canada, federal opposition members say there must be some controls placed on Canadian corporations operating abroad.

Mr. McKay, the author of Bill C-300 said allegations like those levied against Blackfire, even if unproven, damage the company, the industry and the reputation of all Canadians.

Peter Julian, an NDP MP who has put forth his own bill that would allow people who have been harmed by Canadian corporations operating in other countries to seek redress in a Canadian court, says Mr. McKay's bill does not go far enough.

"The actions of a Canadian company, good or bad, have an impact on Canada as a whole," said Mr. Julian, whose proposed legislation is unlikely to get as far as Mr. McKay's.

"There is no doubt that there are a number of Canadian companies that have been irresponsible," he

said. "That, unfortunately, gives a black eye to the whole industry and does have an impact on Canada."

The government needs a means of address for these kinds of issues to ensure that Canadian companies are always acting in a socially and environmentally responsible manner, Mr. Julian said.

Eleanor Johnston, a spokeswoman for Mr. Kent, confirmed that no protesters greeted the Canadian dignitaries yesterday. "A crime has been committed and the appropriate Mexican authorities are investigating," said Ms. Johnston.

With files from The Canadian Press

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### **Activist's murder 'deplorable,' G-G says during Mexican visit**

Dominique Jarry-Shore, The Canadian Press

9 December 2009

San Cristobal de Las Casas, Mexico — Governor-General Michaëlle Jean condemned the killing of an activist opposed to a Canadian mine during the last day of a state visit to Mexico while protesters chanted "Canada, get out."

About 50 supporters of Mariano Abarca Roblero were kept about 200 metres from a Mayan women's collective where Ms. Jean visited the colonial town of San Cristobal de Las Casas, about five hours from the mine's location.

"We find it deplorable, inexcusable," Ms. Jean said in a statement Wednesday.

"We will be following this situation closely with the firm hope and conviction that justice will be served."

Mr. Abarca Roblero was gunned down in front of his home in southern Chiapas last month. The community leader had been campaigning against a barite mine operated by a subsidiary of Calgary-based Blackfire Exploration. Three men arrested in Mr. Abarca Roblero's death have ties to Blackfire, either as current or former employees.

State authorities, citing environmental concerns, temporarily shut down the mine this week.

In Canada, Blackfire president Brent Willis said the Mexico mine was run in an environmentally responsible way and the company was in no way connected to the killing.

Mr. Willis said the mine was shut down by state authorities because the company was not properly removing dust from the roads, the company did not obtain proper permits for both a road and CO2 emissions from new mining equipment.

He said the company is working on getting those problems fixed and expected the mine to reopen by Monday.

He denied activists' claims that the mine was harming the environment in any way, saying Mexico has very strict laws that his company has followed to the letter.

Rather than open-pit mines and heavy chemicals used by some companies, Blackfire mines the barite with excavators along the surface of the ground, he said. "We're running our company ethically and to Canadian standards and we're following all the environmental guidelines," he said. "We're not involved in any type of pollution."

Of the three men arrested in Mr. Abarca Roblero's death, Mr. Willis confirmed one is a former employee, one worked as a contractor doing dust control on the roads and one is currently employed as a supervisor at the mine.

He denied that any of the men had ever acted as security or strongmen for the company and said Blackfire hasn't even been contacted by local authorities about Mr. Abarca Roblero's death, which he called a tragedy.

"The authorities won't talk to us in regards to the investigation," he said. "They're investigating a crime and they're moving forward to find a resolution to this thing."

Mr. Willis said Blackfire has tried to work with local members of the community, many of whom appreciate the company and the employment and local business it brings.

The company invited protesters, including Mr. Abarca Roblero, to come to the site to see environmental safeguards in place, but none would come, he said.

The company policy was to let local Mexican authorities deal with any problems that arose with protesters and employees would have known that, he said.

"Our employees do not get involved with protesters."

The company is now considering hiring security to make sure its employees are safe, he said.

"We want everybody to feel safe, we want everybody to be safe, both employees and people in the community."

Family and supporters of Mr. Abarca Roblero had requested a meeting with the Governor-General, but Minister of State of Foreign Affairs Peter Kent, who was also on the state visit, said it was impossible to schedule.

"The program has been set up and pretty finely engineered over the past several months with regards to the Governor-General," Mr. Kent said. "I think that the time schedule simply being what it was, it didn't work out."

Mr. Kent said Canada is proud of the more than 2,000 Canadian companies currently operating in Mexico.

"A couple of dozen are working in the resource area, specifically in the operational mining area," he said. "In many cases our companies are held up and recognized as virtual models of corporate social responsibility."

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### **Canadian mine staff questioned in activist's slaying**

3 December 2009

The Associated Press

The killing of an anti-mining activist by a motorcycle gunman has led investigators to question staff at a Canadian-owned mine in southern Mexico, a spokesman for the company said Wednesday.

Mariano Abarca Robledo was shot in the head and chest on Friday in the town of Chicomuselo, near the Guatemalan border, said Gustavo Castro, an activist who worked with Abarca Robledo organizing opposition to barite mining in the region.

A spokesman for Calgary-based Blackfire Exploration Ltd. said the company had no involvement in the death. He spoke on condition of anonymity, citing advice from his attorney.

The spokesman said Blackfire has asked the Canadian Embassy in Mexico to intervene after receiving allegations that their Chiapas mine employees were being attacked and beaten in response to the killing.

Canadian Embassy spokeswoman Gabriela Hernandez in Mexico City said that Canada "regrets this act of violence but the Embassy of Canada is not involved in the investigation. It is a matter for Mexican officials."

Robledo feared for his life

Activists said that Abarca Robledo feared for his life and recently told police that Blackfire mine officials had threatened him. "This murder dramatically illustrates the terrible situation that confronts human rights advocates both in the state of Chiapas and the rest of the country," said Marie-Dominik Langlois, who heads the non-profit Montreal-based Committee for Human Rights in Latin America, a group that monitors labour practices of Canadian mining firms.

In Chiapas, the Fray Bartolome de Las Casas Center for Human Rights issued a statement condemning Abarca Robledo's murder. The statement said Abarca Robledo was sitting in a van in front of his home on Friday night, talking to a friend when a motorcyclist passing by opened fire. "We demand that the Mexican government immediately end all acts of aggression and start protecting defenders of human rights," the statement said.

The southern state of Chiapas, rich in oil and gas, was opened to mining concessions about 10 years ago by the federal government. The leases, mostly held by Canadian firms, have been challenged by residents who are concerned about environmental damage and say they have a right to their own land.

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## **Open Letter To the Right Honourable Michaëlle Jean**

8 December 2009

Your Excellency the Right Honourable Michaëlle Jean,

As Canadian-based organizations that have been working in Central America for extended periods of time, we write with great concern on the eve of your official visit to Mexico, Guatemala and Costa Rica.

We are particularly concerned about the recent murder of Mariano Abarca Roblero who was shot in the head and chest November 27, 2009 outside of his home in the town of Chicomuselo, Chiapas. There are allegations that employees of a Canadian mining company, Blackfire Exploration were involved in the incident. Given your strong interest in the rights and protection of indigenous peoples, we would ask you to inquire into the situation while you are meeting with the Mexican authorities.

In another incident in Guatemala, allegations are that security guards employed by a Canadian mining company, Hudbay Resources Inc. and its subsidiary Compania Guatemalteca de Niquel, were recently implicated in the murder of Adolfo Ich, in the community of Barrio La Union in the department of Izabal on September 27. Seven other people were injured in the same incident. Mr. Ich was a school teacher and community leader. He did not deserve to be hacked with a machete before being shot to death in broad daylight for protesting the presence of a Canadian mining company.

Further, in June, 2009, Marcelo Rivera was kidnapped, tortured and killed in El Salvador. He, too, was opposed to a Canadian mining operation attempting to exploit a mineral deposit in his community.

Three men were killed and others wounded over a few short months, all for their opposition to Canadian mining projects. We strongly urge you to look into this matter when you speak to civil society groups and other heads of state during your tour. Indeed, we urge you to discuss this matter with Canadian diplomats in Central America.

We are concerned that Canada's reputation as a human rights defender and safe-haven for the world's vulnerable has been tarnished by these heinous crimes. In addition, as concerned organizations with a history of working with indigenous peoples in communities affected by mining companies, we would like to strongly encourage you to ask questions about the presence of Canadian mining companies in the region and the implications of their operations on the internationally recognized rights of indigenous people,



the rights of women, health and the environment.

Again, these incidents continue to tarnish the image of Canada overseas and we would strongly urge you to inquire into this strong act of violence. We do not believe that Canadians wish these acts to be occurring in their name. We do not believe that Canadian mining companies should violate the rights of Central America's most vulnerable peoples, and get away with it.

We thank you for your interest in these cases.

Regards,

BC CASA  
Community Solidarity Response Toronto  
Maritimes-Guatemala Breaking the Silence Solidarity  
Network  
MiningWatch Canada  
Rights Action

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### **Demonstrations at Canadian embassy in Mexico**

The Canadian Press

3 December 2009

MEXICO CITY - Dozens of people protesting the killing of an anti-mining activist demonstrated outside the Canadian embassy on Thursday, blaming the death on a Canadian-owned mining company operating in southern Chiapas state.

Supporters of the Mexican Network of People Affected by Mines claim employees of a mine owned by Calgary-based Blackfire Exploration Ltd. were involved in the shooting death of activist Mariano Abarca Friday.

Blackfire has denied the company had any involvement in the killing.

Fellow activists said Abarca's death had been foretold.

"They had threatened him, they had beaten him, and the only thing left for them was to kill Mariano, they had said that, and the authorities knew it," said Gustavo Castro.

Abarca long opposed the mine. But in September he

upped the stakes in the battle when he led other residents of the township of Chicomuselo, near the Guatemalan border, in blocking an access road to the open-pit mine where Blackfire extracts barite, a nonmetallic mineral used in oil drilling projects.

The blockade was intended to press demands for 3 million pesos (\$235,000) that residents of a nearby hamlet say they were owed for ore taken from land outside the company's concession area.

With jobs at stake, the conflict grew heated.

Castro alleged that mine employees had come to Abarca's house, beaten him and his children, and threatened to kill him.

Requests for comment from the company Thursday were not immediately answered.

Police in Chiapas are still investigating the drive-by shooting, in which a man on a motorcycle riddled Abarca with bullets as he sat in a vehicle near his home in Chicomuselo.

Demonstrators at the protest outside the embassy Thursday held banners reading "Justice!" and "Transnationals out!"

Luz Perez Torres, 38, a Chicomuselo homemaker and mother of two, said the mine had tainted local water supplies, preventing residents from using local streams for fishing or bathing.

"We get welts on our skin from the water," she said.

Abarca's death, she said, was the last straw: mine opponents are now demanding the company withdraw from Chiapas.

The southern state of Chiapas, rich in oil and gas, was opened to mining concessions about 10 years ago by the federal government. The leases, mostly held by Canadian firms, have been challenged by residents who are concerned about environmental damage and say they have a right to the land.

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### **Mexicans protest activist's death**

Rally urges Ottawa to regulate mining firms in the developing world

Brett Popplewell Staff Reporter, Toronto Star

4 December 2009

Inspired by grief and driven by anger, about 250 Mexicans descended on the Canadian embassy in Mexico City on Thursday to protest the recent murder of a Mexican activist who opposed a Canadian mine in the south.

The protesters, mostly local farmers and activists who travelled overnight from the province of Chiapas, approached the embassy around 11:30 a.m. to call on the Canadian government to investigate the recent murder of Mariano Abarca Roblero, an anti-mining activist who was shot and killed on his doorstep last week.

Abarca was standing outside his house in the town of Chicomuselo near Mexico's border with Guatemala when an unknown gunman approached him and shot him in the head and chest, before fleeing on a motorcycle driven by a second man.

He had asked for police protection days before the attack, alleging that he had been threatened by a Mexican employee of a nearby Canadian-owned mine.

Waving Mexican flags and placards denouncing Canadian mining companies in their country the protesters, who have urged the government in Chiapas to investigate Abarca's death, called on the Canadian government to enact legislation to hold the mining sector accountable in the developing world.

Abarca's murder and the subsequent protest come at a time when MPs in Ottawa continue to hear evidence in a Commons foreign affairs committee examining a Liberal private member's bill designed to regulate the actions of Canadian mining companies abroad.

An employee of Calgary's Blackfire Exploration Ltd. said Thursday the company was cooperating with authorities and that Blackfire was not involved in any criminal activity. The employee, who declined to give his name, advised that all other inquiries be directed to the company's public relations firm in Mexico City. Emails there went unanswered.

A Blackfire spokesman acknowledged Wednesday that company officials were being questioned in connection with Abarca's death, but said the firm is not involved in

the incident.

The spokesman said the company had asked the embassy to intervene after hearing allegations that their Chiapas mine employees were being attacked and beaten in response to the killing.

Claudia Campero, a local environmental advocate, was present at the protest in Mexico City. She said protesters gathered outside the embassy for hours, hoisting placards calling for an end to violence against activists like Abarca.

Others carried signs with words they attributed to Abarca, which read: "If anything happens to me, I blame the Canadian Mining Company Blackfire."

MiningWatch Canada and other watchdog groups in Canada and Mexico have also attributed the quote to Abarca.

"We are asking on the government of Canada to really look at the kind of activities that these mining companies do here in Mexico and make them accountable," said Campero.

Laura Dalby, spokeswoman for the ministry of international trade, said embassy staff met with the protesters but that the embassy is not involved in the investigation into Abarca's death.

Abarca, who alleged the Blackfire mine was contaminating the local water supply, led a campaign to block access to the site last June.

He was arrested in August after the company accused him of affecting its economic interests, but the charges were dropped.

With files from the Associated Press

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