

The Human Cost of Coal

by Lynn Nadeau, HealthLink

April 11, 2010



A Colombian man, Jairo Fuentes Epaiyu, has been living in my home this week. We are working together although he doesn't speak English and I don't speak Spanish. I certainly do not speak Wayunaiki, which is the language of his people of the indigenous Wayuu village of Tamaquito, where he is the Governor of Cabildo. He is on a speaking tour to tell us - the people who use the coal buried beneath his village - about how his ancestral home has been destroyed by the owners of the largest open-pit coal mine in

the world. When speaking to students and other audiences, his detailed descriptions of the devastation of his small village are translated by Avi Chomsky, Professor of History and Coordinator of Latin American Studies at Salem State College.

The removal of topsoil and enormous excavations deep into the earth have destroyed the land and rivers on which his people farmed and fished for generations. The mining operation polluted their water and made the villagers' life unsustainable. There is coal dust everywhere, especially in their lungs.



Before the mine was built, Jairo and his neighbors in Tamaquito depended on the nearby village of Tabaco for services such as health care, schooling and mail delivery. Then, tragically, the multinational corporation took over the mine and bulldozed Tabaco, scattering its inhabitants in diaspora. Now Jairo's villagers must travel great distances for these vital services and connection to the outside world. Their simple dwellings form a small island in a wasteland. Their social fabric has been ripped apart; their livelihood has disappeared.

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As I watch Jairo eat breakfast, I wonder about his mornings at home. I am nervous to ask and afraid to find out more - about the difficulty of finding fresh milk and wholesome food for his three-year old daughter, or what happens when it comes time for his wife to deliver their baby. The village elders are petitioning the mine owners and the Colombian government for relocation to a decent area, according to World Bank standards. It seems only just, yet it remains unlikely.

Then I read the morning's papers. This week, in West Virginia, 29 coal miners were killed in an explosion in the longwall mine. In China 25 coal miners died in a flooded coal mine and 13 are still missing; there were more than 2600 mining deaths in China last year. Last week the coal-

carrying ship Shen Neng collided with Australia's Great Barrier Reef, spilling fuel oil over this unique marine habitat. These recent events have brought temporary attention to the human and environmental costs of removing coal from the earth and transporting it long distances to be burned. We may not hear of it, but similar disasters occur week after week after week.



Judy Bonds of [Coal River Mountain Watch](#), Martha Dansdill, Lynn Nadeau, Jairo Fuentes Epaiyu, and Avi Chomsky

Jairo, Avi and I, along with Martha Dansdill, the Executive Director of HealthLink and Swampscott Board of Health Member, went to meet with Judy Bonds, a coal miner's daughter from West Virginia who had travelled here to speak at a conference in spite of the death of three men she knew in the Massey mine this week. Her experience in Appalachia is like Jairo's in Colombia. She and her family had to evacuate from her hometown where six generations of her family had lived because the town had been virtually destroyed by mountaintop removal mining, which involves completely blasting off the tops of

mountains, streams and forests destroyed,

the air polluted with coal dust. Slurry dams made of the 'overburden' - topsoil and dirt, thick with heavy metals, are a threatening presence. When they do overflow, they contaminate the drinking water and drive toxic sludge into residents' backyards.

"When powerful people pursue profits at the expense of human rights and our environment, they have failed as leaders," Bonds said. "Responsible citizens must step forward, not just to point the way, but to lead the way to a better world."

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“The trains carrying coal to power plants are death trains,” says James Hansen director of the NASA Goddard Institute for Space Studies. Coal not only provides electricity. It is also destroys lives. The long-range, impact of digging coal out of the earth, transporting it, incinerating it, and disposing of the waste is devastating. Gases emitted from the stacks of coal-burning plants like the Salem Harbor Station acidify our water and land. Heavy metals, when burned, enter the biosphere. Mercury builds up in fish; arsenic and lead contaminate the plants we eat. Toxic coal ash poisons the ground where it has been disposed and leaches into our water supply.

Dirty air, filled with soot and tiny particles, causes asthma, increased respiratory attacks, cancers, heart attacks and other cardiovascular diseases, resulting in premature deaths. The emissions from the stacks of dioxins, furans, volatile organic compounds and polyaromatic hydrocarbons add to the chemical toxic burden on our bodies.

When Jairo goes home to his once livable, now mortally hurt, village where the people suffer because our society uses energy as if it has no limits or consequences, I will hang my laundry and wonder why Americans refuse to take the conservation of energy seriously, why we lag so far behind other countries in switching to wind and solar power, and why Jairo's suffering does not change our political will.

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