

# JOHN KIRIAKOU: Neither Rain, Sleet, nor Snow Will Stop the Post Office From Spying on You

It's called the "Mail Cover Program" and it's run by the U.S. Postal Service (USPS). Yes, even the Post Office is spying on us, writes John Kiriakou.

By **John Kiriakou**

*Special to Consortium News*



You may remember that last year some nut was arrested for mailing bombs to prominent Democrats, media outlets, and opponents of Donald Trump. Less than a week after the bombs went out, a suspect was arrested. Almost immediately, video turned up of him at a Trump rally, wearing a "Make America Great Again" hat and chanting for the camera. He was soon tried, convicted, and jailed. End of story.

But it wasn't the end of the story. The investigation into the bomb incidents focused attention on an almost unknown federal surveillance program—one that poses a direct threat to the privacy and constitutional rights of every American. It's called the "Mail Cover Program" and it's run by the U.S. Postal Service (USPS). Yes, even the Post Office is spying on us.

The Mail Cover Program allows postal employees to photograph and send to federal law enforcement organizations (FBI, DHS, Secret Service, etc.) the front and back of every piece of mail the Post Office processes. It also retains the information digitally and provides it to any government

agency that wants it—*without a warrant*.

In 2015, the USPS Inspector General issued a report saying that, “Agencies must demonstrate a reasonable basis for requesting mail covers, send hard copies of request forms to the Criminal Investigative Service Center for processing, and treat mail covers as restricted and confidential...A mail cover should not be used as a routine investigative tool. Insufficient controls over the mail cover program could hinder the Postal Inspection Service’s ability to conduct effective investigations, lead to public concerns over privacy of mail, and harm the Postal Service’s brand.”

### **Return to Sender**

Not only were the admonitions ignored, the mail cover program actually expanded after the report’s release. Indeed, in the months after that report was issued, there were 6,000 requests for mail cover collection. Only 10 were rejected, according to the Feb. 2019 edition of *Prison Legal News* (P.34-35) .

I have some personal experience with the Mail Cover Program. I served 23 months in prison for blowing the whistle on the CIA’s illegal torture program. After having been locked up for two months, I decided to commission a card from a very artistically-inclined prisoner for my wife’s 40th birthday. I sent it about two weeks early, but she never received it. Finally, about four months later, the card was delivered back to me with a yellow “Return to Sender – Address Not Known” sticker on it. But underneath that sticker was a second yellow sticker. That one read, “Do Not Deliver. Hold For Supervisor. Cover Program.”

Why was I under Postal Service Surveillance? I have no idea. I had had my day in court. The case was over. But remember, the Postal Service doesn't have to answer to anybody – my attorneys, my judge, even its own Inspector General. It doesn't need a warrant to spy on me (or my family) and it doesn't have to answer even to a member of Congress who might inquire as to why the spying was happening in the first place.

The problem is not just the sinister nature of a government agency (or quasi-government agency) spying on individuals with no probable cause or due process, although those are serious problems. It's that the program is handled so poorly and so haphazardly that in some cases surveillance was initiated against individuals for no apparent law enforcement reason and that surveillance was initiated by Postal Service employees not even authorized to do so. Again, there is no recourse because the people under surveillance don't even know that any of this is happening.

Perhaps an even more disturbing aspect of the program is the fact that between 2000 and 2012, the Postal Service initiated an average of 8,000 mail cover requests per year. But in 2013, that number jumped to 49,000. Why? Nobody knows and the Postal Service doesn't have to say.

The question, though, is not how many cases are opened under the Mail Cover Program or even how many requests there are for the information. The real question is, "How is this constitutional?" Perhaps a secondary question is, "Why hasn't anybody challenged the program in the courts?" In general, Americans don't—or at least haven't—objected to a gradual loss of civil liberties and constitutional rights.

That has to stop. When even the Post Office is spying on you, you know the republic is in trouble.

**John Kiriakou is a former CIA counterterrorism officer and a former senior investigator with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. John became the sixth whistleblower indicted by the Obama administration under the Espionage Act—a law designed to punish spies. He served 23 months in prison as a result of his attempts to oppose the Bush administration’s torture program.**

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## Small Farmers Vs. Big Mining in Central America

Heavy-metals pollution threatens indigenous agriculture throughout the region, reports Edgardo Ayala.

By [Edgardo Ayala](#)

in San Salvador

[Inter Press Service](#)

Like an octopus, metals mining has been spreading its tentacles throughout Central America and dealing a blow to the region’s agriculture and natural ecosystems, according to affected villagers, activists and a new report on the problem.

“Where the mining company is operating was land that peasants leased to plant corn and beans, our staple crops.

But since the company came in, there is no land left to farm,” said Lesbia Villagrán, who lives in the municipality of San Rafael Las Flores in eastern Guatemala.

Minera San Rafael, a subsidiary of the Canadian company Tahoe Resources, set up shop in this rural municipality of just over 9,000 people in 2007, and since then local residents in different villages scattered throughout this municipality and nearby areas have been organized to bring its operations to a halt. Villagers have been fighting the El Escobal silver mine arguing that it will affect their livelihood in agriculture, as well as local water sources and biodiversity.

“When I was little, my father leased four or six manzanas (a little more than four hectares) of land and for us it was a joy to work in the abundant harvest. But when the owners of the land sold it to the company, my father was no longer able to plant our staple crops,” added Villagrán, 28, in an interview with IPS from San Rafael.

The mine changed ownership in January, and now the company is called Minera San Rafael El Escobal, a subsidiary of Canada’s [Pan American Silver](#), which according to its website, is the world’s second-largest producer of silver. It owns and operates six mines in Argentina, Bolivia, Mexico, Peru, and now Guatemala.

“The situation in agriculture is complicated by the company’s operations,” said Alex Reynoso, a coffee grower from a municipality near San Rafael.

## **Fears of Heavy Metal Contamination**

According to Reynoso, the country's markets do not want produce harvested near the mine because of fears that they are contaminated with heavy metals used in the extraction process.

"The country's most important markets flat-out avoid buying our products," he told IPS from his hometown.

IPS attempted to get comments from both Tahoe Resources and Pan American Silver with respect to the criticism by San Rafael Las Flores residents against the mine, but had received no reply by the time this article was published.

Mining operations have been suspended since July 2017 while the Guatemalan Constitutional Court studied a complaint by organizations of local Amerindian Xinca residents that they were not consulted about the project as required by law.

The Court issued a ruling upholding the suspension of mining activity in September 2018.

This case in Guatemala is an example of the tensions caused in Central America by metals mining, an activity that has been ongoing in the area, albeit in a rudimentary fashion, since the time of Spanish colonialism in the sixteenth century.

### **Recent Expansion**

In the last few decades it has expanded with the arrival of transnational mining corporations to the area.

The arrival of foreign corporations generated social conflict, as local residents in the villages and towns where the mines are active began to organize, especially in

Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua.

The consortia that win the mining concessions have been grabbing up traditional farming and forest land, while monopolizing water resources that local communities, especially indigenous ones, depend on, putting their food security at risk.

A study released Feb. 11 in San Salvador, gives an account of this expansion and its impacts. Published in Spanish by the [Central American Mining Alliance](#), a conglomerate of environmental organizations in the region, its title in English is,

In Honduras, up to January 2017, 172 mining concessions had been granted, covering a total area of 7,275 square kilometers, equivalent to 6.47 of the country's territory.

In Guatemala, up to the same date, 55 concessions had been granted, covering an area of 4,143 square kilometers, or 3.81 percent of the national territory.

And by May 2017 Nicaragua had granted 146 mining concessions, and is still processing 20 more applications. Altogether, including the pending applications, they cover 11,143 square kilometers, or 8.55 percent of the country.

El Salvador made international history by being the first country in the world to ban all forms of mining in March 2017. But as of 2006 there were 31 mining concessions, covering an area of 1,088 square kilometers, 5.17 percent of the national territory.

Central America is a region of great social deprivation,

with a population of 48 million inhabitants and an area of 524,000 square kilometers, also made up of Belize, Costa Rica and Panama.

## **Vulnerable to Climate Impacts**

It is also one of the regions most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, with high annual crop losses, either due to excess water, during the rainy season, or due to droughts in the dry season.

Following the Salvadoran example, “there are cases of movements that are demanding mining-free territories” in neighboring countries, Nicaraguan researcher Angélica Alfaro, one of the chief authors of the new study, told IPS.

“But the reality is that countries like Honduras, Guatemala and Nicaragua have passed laws aimed directly at promoting the mining sector,” said Alfaro, who worked on the document as a consultant for the [Association for the Development of El Salvador](#).

The mining industry jeopardizes food security in Central America because it directly impacts agriculture, as it affects several watersheds, Julio González, of the Guatemalan group Madre Selva, told IPS.

For example, the Cerro Blanco mine, located in the Guatemalan municipality of Asunción Mita, bordering on western El Salvador, is part of the Ostua-Guija-Lempa basin.

The pollution generated by the mine runs into Lake Guija, in El Salvador, and from there to the Lempa River, which winds through this country, supplying water that is processed for use in irrigation and for human consumption.



“Water, apart from daily use, is vital for agriculture, and is affected by the presence of metallic minerals, like cyanide, all of which will alter food production,” said González, who participated in the presentation of the study in San Salvador.

He added that the land used by the mining industry is not the enormous extensions of land owned by large landowners, but rather the areas used for subsistence agriculture, especially in the territories of indigenous people, historically expelled from their land and pushed into forested areas. “But that’s the agriculture that sustains food security,” he said.

The report [“Impacts of metal mining in Central America,”](#) published in 2011, warned that “access to the geographical space available to mining is twice that dedicated to the production of basic grains, that is, for every square kilometer that is planted with basic grains in Central America there are two square kilometers controlled by the mining industry.”

**Edgardo Ayala covers El Salvador for the Inter-Press Agency.**

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## Agribusiness Is the Problem, Not the Solution

Current policies often favor large farms at the expense of small growers who produce most of the world’s food, writes Jomo Kwame Sundaram.

By **Jomo Kwame Sundaram**

in Kuala Lumpur

*Inter Press Service*



**F**or two centuries, all too many discussions about hunger and resource scarcity has been haunted by the ghost of Parson Thomas Malthus.

Malthus warned that rising populations would exhaust resources, especially those needed for food production. Exponential population growth would outstrip food output.

Humanity now faces a major challenge as global warming is expected to frustrate the production of enough food as the world population rises to 9.7 billion by 2050. Timothy Wise's new book "[Eating Tomorrow: Agribusiness, Family Farmers, and the Battle for the Future of Food](#)," argues that most solutions currently put forward by government, philanthropic and private sector luminaries are misleading.

### **Malthus' Ghost Returns**

The early 2008 food price crisis has often been wrongly associated with the 2008-2009 global financial crisis. The number of hungry in the world was said to have risen to over a billion, feeding a resurgence of neo-Malthusianism.

Agribusiness advocates fed such fears, insisting that food production must double by 2050, and high-yielding industrial agriculture, under the auspices of agribusiness, is the only solution. In fact, the world is mainly fed by hundreds of millions of small-scale, often called family farmers who produce over two-thirds of developing countries' food.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, neither food scarcity nor poor physical access are the main causes of food insecurity and hunger. Instead, Reuters has observed a [“global grain glut,”](#) with surplus cereal stocks piling up.

Meanwhile, poor production, processing and storage facilities cause food losses of an average of about a third of developing countries’ output. A similar share is believed lost in rich countries due to wasteful food storage, marketing and consumption behavior.

Nevertheless, despite grain abundance, the 2018 [“State of Food Security and Nutrition”](#) report – by the Rome-based United Nations food agencies led by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) – reported rising chronic and severe hunger or undernourishment involving more than 800 million.

Political, philanthropic and corporate leaders have promised to help struggling African and other countries grow more food, by offering to improve farming practices. New seed and other technologies would modernize those left behind.

But producing more food, by itself, does not enable the hungry to eat. Thus, agribusiness and its philanthropic promoters are often the problem, not the solution, in feeding the world.

“Eating Tomorrow” addresses related questions such as: Why doesn’t rising global food production feed the hungry? How can we “feed the world” amid rising populations and unsustainable pressure on land, water and other natural resources that farmers need to grow food?

## **Family Farmers Lack Power**

Drawing on five years of extensive fieldwork in Southern Africa, Mexico, India and the U.S. Midwest, Wise concludes that the problem is essentially one of power. He shows how powerful business interests influence government food and agricultural policies to favor large farms.

This is typically at the expense of “family” farmers, who grow most of the world’s food, but also puts consumers and others at risk, e.g., due to agrochemical use. His many examples not only detail and explain the many problems small-scale farmers, but also their typically constructive responses despite lack of support, if not worse, from most governments:

- In Mexico, trade liberalization following the 1993 North American Free Trade Area (NAFTA) agreement swamped the country with cheap, subsidized U.S. maize and pork, accelerating migration from the countryside. Apparently, this was actively encouraged by transnational pork producers employing “undocumented” and non-unionized Mexican workers willing to accept low wages and poor working conditions.
- In Malawi, large government subsidies encouraged farmers to buy commercial fertilizers and seeds from U.S. agribusinesses such as now Bayer-owned Monsanto, but to little effect, as their productivity and food security stagnated or even deteriorated. Meanwhile, Monsanto took over the government seed company, favoring its own patented seeds at the expense of productive local varieties. A former senior Monsanto official co-authored the national seed policy that threatens to criminalize farmers who save, exchange and sell seeds instead.

- In Zambia, greater use of seeds and fertilizers from agribusiness tripled maize production without reducing the country's very high rates of poverty and malnutrition. Meanwhile, as the government provides 250,000-acre "farm blocks" to foreign investors, family farmers struggle for title to farm land.
- In Mozambique too, the government gives away vast tracts of farm land to foreign investors. Meanwhile, women-led cooperatives successfully run their own native maize seed banks.
- Iowa promotes vast monocultures of maize and soybean to feed hogs and produce bioethanol rather than "feed the world."
- A large Mexican farmer cooperative launched an "agro-ecological revolution," while the old government kept trying to legalize Monsanto's controversial genetically modified maize. Farmers have thus far halted the Monsanto plan, arguing that GM corn threatens the rich diversity of native Mexican varieties.

Much of the research for the book was done in 2014-15, when Barack Obama was U.S. president, although the narrative begins with developments and policies following the 2008 food price crisis, during the last year of former President George W. Bush. The book tells a story of U.S. big business' influence on policies enabling more aggressive transnational expansion.

Yet, Wise remains optimistic, emphasizing that the world can feed the hungry, many of whom are family farmers. Despite the challenges they face, many family farmers are finding innovative and effective ways to grow more and better food.

He advocates support for farmers' efforts to improve their soil, output and wellbeing.

## **Eating Better**

Hungry farmers are nourishing their life-giving soils using more ecologically sound practices to plant a diversity of native crops, instead of using costly chemicals for export-oriented monocultures. According to Wise, they are growing more and better food, and are capable of feeding the hungry.

Unfortunately, most national governments and international institutions still favor large-scale, high-input, industrial agriculture. This neglects more sustainable solutions offered by family farmers, and the need to improve the wellbeing of poor farmers.

Undoubtedly, many new agricultural techniques offer the prospect of improving the welfare of farmers, not only by increasing productivity and output, but also by limiting costs, using scarce resources more effectively, and reducing the drudgery of farm work.

But the world must recognize that farming may no longer be viable for many who face land, water and other resource constraints, unless they get better access to such resources. Meanwhile, malnutrition of various types affects well over 2 billion people in the world, and industrial agriculture contributes about 30 percent of greenhouse gas emissions.

Going forward, it will be important to ensure affordable, healthy and nutritious food supplies for all, mindful not only of food and water safety, but also of various pollution

threats. A related challenge will be to enhance dietary diversity affordably to overcome micronutrient deficiencies and diet-related non-communicable diseases for all.

**Jomo Kwame Sundaram, a former economics professor, was United Nations assistant secretary-general for economic development, and received the Wassily Leontief Prize for Advancing the Frontiers of Economic Thought.**

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