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'According to some, the Canadian mining industry is my new best friend'

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Bev Oda, Canada's minister of international development, was one of five federal cabinet ministers on hand at the opening reception of the Prospectors and Developers Association of Canada 80th anniversary conference in Toronto last month.

"You are probably asking why of all the members of the Canadian government, is the minister of international cooperation here speaking tonight?" Oda said to the assembled group, according to a copy of her speech. "Well, according to some, the Canadian mining industry is my new best friend."

The relationship between CIDA – which is facing significant budget cuts – and the Canadian mining industry has come under scrutiny since Oda announced last fall that CIDA was partnering with mining companies and NGOs in a series of joint development projects in Africa and South America. One of those companies – Barrick Gold – was recently ranked the 7th most controversial mining company in 2011 by an organization called RepRisk, which cited numerous complaints against the company in Africa, South America and Papua New Guinea.

CIDA has been criticized for using shrinking international development dollars to support the corporate social responsibility projects of Canadian mining operations overseas. And, although the reference of the Canadian mining industry as her "new best friend" was no doubt intended as a joke, the minister in charge of CIDA didn't do much to debunk the notion in her effusive speech to the industry.

Oda has promised that there will be more such projects using private industry for Canadian development projects. She noted that mining companies are "making significant investments in development projects and improving the quality of life for thousands in countries where you work."

"It is mining that can raise the standard of living for thousands of impoverished people who struggle to get by on less than \$2.50 per day, sometimes much less. The mining industry is a huge contributor to a nation's wealth and is one of the main building blocks of civilization."

And, beyond projects that help communities, Oda told the conference that "your interests and our interests at the Canadian International Development Agency can come together."

CIDA, she noted "takes an active part in cross-government efforts to support Canada's interests abroad. One way CIDA is doing that, she said, is making "demand-driven vocational and skills training" a main area of development work in its economic growth strategy. In other words, CIDA trains people to work in and around mines or in businesses that support mines.

Any doubts that CIDA will be even more closely aligned with Canadian mining interests overseas in the future should have been put to rest by Oda's speech which ended with this:

"I look forward to learning from your industry on how to improve the effectiveness of Canada's development

work internationally, and to working more closely together to create a better life for those living in poverty.”



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