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CONPAH Statement About: Honduran repression against indigenous activists

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This informational communique was prepared by CONPAH, the Confederation of Autochthonous Peoples of Honduras [See information below]. Rights Action supports the work of CONPAH, and its member organizations [See information below]

THIS IS WHAT HAPPENED ON SEPTEMBER 7, 2000

On September 4th, the Maya-Chortis of Honduras gathered at the Copan ceremonial center, to demand that the government comply with previously signed agreements with respect to land. These accords were never carried out, making evident the State's lack of interest to guarantee that the problem of land tenure for the Mayan people will be resolved. At the same time, the lack of compliance with accords also means that there will probably never be justice in the cases of our assassinated leaders Cándido Amador Recinos and Ovidio Pérez.

We, the over 1000 Mayans who participated in this recent movement, are clear that the Copan ceremonial center was built by our ancestors, and that at this time it is the most popular tourist center in the country. Meanwhile, Mayans have been denied access to land for the last several centuries, turning us into foreigners in our own country. Many of the mestizos who live in this area have completely excluded us from the acquisition of land, converting Mayan people into their vassals, without hesitating to take our lives, as has happened on numerous occasions.

The "Copan Tourist Center" has become an example of the relationship of domination and racism that prevails in the tourism industry, where sacred sites are viewed as simple consumer products, and where local residents are no more than part of a zoological culture, another piece of scenery.

On September 7 at 6:00pm, the National Police, with the support of some mestizo residents from the Copan Ruins, proceeded to evict the Mayans. They dumped tear gas from a helicopter and sharpshooters took positions in the mountains. The eviction effort took place without regard for the lives of the women and children present. The attack was carried out by members of the Security ministry who charged the protesters, and continued to attack them even when they were trying to return to their communities. Some of those arrested were tortured.

It is important to point out the participation of the mestizo population of Copan, which makes this act one of the worst racist incidents in recent history.

From the first day of the protest at the Mayan ceremonial center, the protesters had requested the intervention of a government commission made up of members from the ministries of the Presidency, Tourism, the National Agrarian Institute, and Culture. This petition was ignored.

At the same time, the Maya-Chortis were expressing their solidarity with a hunger strike carried out by the Lenca people and Gilberto Sanchez. Sanchez, the state ombudsman for ethnic groups, was fired for defending the rights of the Indigenous peoples and Black population of Honduras.

On September 7, Chorti leaders began negotiating with the National Congress to try and find a solution to the problem. At 5:30 in the afternoon they reached an agreement by phone with Vice

President Billy Handal, and everyone agreed to continue negotiations the following day. At the same time, despite having reached agreements which could have resolved the conflict, the National Police proceeded to evict protesters. This act turned into a human hunt during which mestizos' ancestral hate and racism towards indigenous people became all too evident. The mestizo population was extremely resentful towards protesters because of the drop in tourism and their subsequent loss of income.

As of Tuesday, September 5, the Chamber of Commerce of Copan had filed a legal complaint against the Chorti leadership. The indigenous population has repeatedly demanded that the Chamber give them 25% of Copan Park's profits, in order to invest in basic necessities such as health care, latrine installation and education. It is important to point out that the government is violating the International Labor Organization's agreement 169, which is explicit in terms of the rights of indigenous peoples to their ancestral lands. In the case of the ceremonial center at Copan, this center was built by our ancestors, the Maya-Chortis of the Copan Valley.

After the eviction attack was over, there were at least 100 people wounded and 15 under arrest, two of whom were seriously wounded: one due to tear gas poisoning and the other with a severe blow to the head. Several people suffered fractures. The following is a list of protesters under arrest: Perfecto Amador López, Juan Manuel Pérez, Jorge Alberto López, Melington Ramírez Recinos, Pilar Pascual, José Ramón Rodríguez Roque, Joaquín Ramírez, Donatilo García, Demetrio León, Virgilio Hernandez, Jesús Hernandez, Jesús Alberto Ramírez, José García Vasquez, Perfecto Amador López, Julio Cesar Díaz.

The Maya-Chortis will not give up this struggle and we demand compliance with the May 12, 1997 accord, particularly in regards to the adjudication of 14,400 hectares of land. Thus far only 1,600 hectares have been handed over. The Maya-Chortis demand a monetary sum for the purchase of 4,834 plots of land which was already agreed upon in a Presidential Accord, the prosecution of those responsible for the assassination of our leaders Candido Amador and Ovidio Pérez, and 25% of the profits from the Copan ceremonial center which will be used to benefit our community.

The Indigenous and Black peoples of Honduras are conscious of the precarious social conditions in our country. We are very concerned that three days after this violent eviction, the Maya-Chortis are practically boxed in. The area has been completely militarized and we cannot move around freely.

Our movement is based on the reclamation of ancestral rights and to this date and as of this date we have made our demands peacefully. The events which took place at Copan were stained with racism and we condemn government authorities for taking advantage of an eviction order and carrying out racist hate crimes. It is inconceivable that the buried psychological beasts of racism are allowed to resurface in the guise of rule of law, undermining the credibility of state actions.

We demand that national authorities reflect upon their actions and the lamentable consequences. To incite racial hatred through the media, and even worse through supposedly judicial means, only worsens an already bad situation.

Given all of these phenomenon, the disinformation campaign waged by the government and business community of Copan, the persecution and repression that our brothers have suffered and the imminent social explosion that could erupt in this area if the demands of the Maya-Chorti people are not met, it is imperative that the world be made aware of what is really happening in Honduras. Until now, the world has only had access to the government's version of events through the communications media that protects business interests in our country.

We ask for your solidarity and that you accompany us in our struggle, on this path that we are now taking, so that justice is meted out to all those involved in these acts—civilians and military personnel—and so that a new relationship can be established between the Maya-Chorti people and the civil society of Copan. We demand the establishment of a negotiating commission made up of

government representatives and representatives of the Maya-Chorti people in order to guarantee compliance with ALL of our requests.

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RIGHTS ACTION

With offices in Canada, Guatemala and the US, Rights Action is a tax-exempt organization that raises funds for and otherwise supports the work of community development and human rights organizations in Chiapas, Guatemala, Honduras and Haiti.

To make financial contributions for the work of the Lenca and Chorti human rights committees in Honduras or to find out how you and your community can get involved in global human rights and development issues, contact our offices.

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