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Indigenous of Honduras Protest, Pledge to Continue Resisting Colonialism

(This article was written by Mateo Ginsberg-Jaeckle and Della Moran, Rights Action collaborators working with COPINH in Honduras. E: mateogj@yahoo.com; dellamoran@yahoo.com)

Close to a thousand fists gripped polls, raising burning Pepsi cans filled with gasoline high into the darkness of the Tegucigalpa night. As descendants of the Lenca indigenous people of Honduras marched past the U.S. and Spanish embassies, on August 2nd, the eve of the anniversary of Columbus' arrival to Honduras, their burning Pepsi torches served as a reminder that colonialism has not ended. "They tell us that colonialism is over, but they try to control us now as much as ever, through an economic model they call 'neoliberalism' and 'globalization'. But that, we know, is neo-colonialism," said Salvador Z'ñiga, member of COPINH, the Civil Counsel of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras. This was the final night of three days of protest by COPINH and its supporters.

COPINH, an organization that unites campesino and indigenous peoples in struggle from around Honduras, has its base in La Esperanza, Intibucá. Its primary constituents are descendants of the Lenca people that populate this mountainous western region of Honduras. Though COPINH was initially founded during the struggle in the early 90s against loggers in the region, members will tell you that resistance has been running through their blood since the days of Lempira, the famed anti-colonialist combatant, national hero, and a Lenca himself. Many of the members of COPINH have long been organizers in the struggle for land and Agrarian Reform that became famous in the 1970s and 80s.

In the face of corporate globalization, however, problems such as loss of land, lack of health care and education, destruction of the environment, and repression of popular organizations have increased both in severity and complexity. Along with the local and national elite who have long been in conflict with the indigenous and poor throughout Central America, international financial institutions, banks, and multinational corporations have been launched into the brawl between popular and elite control.

"With the ancestral force of Lempira, Iselaca and Etempica (Lenca gods/heroes), we raise our voices for life, justice, liberty, dignity, and peace," opens the list of demands from the recent COPINH

demonstration, which lasted from July 31st to August 3rd. The document makes demands regarding land, the environment, protection of culture, health care, education, infrastructure, and agriculture. The specific demands include, among others, the granting of land titles, the non-construction of the El Tigre, Susuma and Chaparral dams, the end of logging in their region, the liberation of Lenca political prisoners, the non-enactment of the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), and a national consultation on the controversial Plan Puebla-Panam. (PPP).

Corporate globalization, based on the neoliberal model of development, is a process through which development is placed in the hands of corporations, national and international investors, and international financial institutions, reducing trade barriers and social and environmental restrictions. It involves processes such as privatization of health and education services, liberalization of trade, reduction of government services, increased power for investors, and devaluation of national currency. While investment and growth sometimes increase in certain sectors of the economy, for poor and indigenous communities, the results can range from loss of legal control over their lands and environment, threats to their culture, reduction of funds for community-based projects, and economic pressure to move to cities to work in sweatshops built by multinational corporations.

Perhaps the most important element to understand regarding globalization, however, is the secrecy and non-participatory methods through which its various projects are imposed. As the former Chief Economist of the World Bank, Joseph Stiglitz, once wrote, "Secrecy provides some insulation against being accused of making a mistake. ... Secrecy provides the opportunity for special interests to have greater sway."

The El Tigre dam is a good example of such secrecy. Though initial plans for the dam were made many years ago, communities have not been consulted or informed about it and very little information has been made public. The dam, which, if completed, will provide electricity that will flow into El Salvador, would force the relocation of thousands of campesinos and Lenca descendants who live in the flood zone. The non-consultation of indigenous peoples around an issue that so directly affects them is a clear violation of Covenant 169 of the International Labor Organization, to which Honduras and El Salvador are signatories.

The government has tried to justify the project, however, using the rhetoric of globalization, saying that increasing energy production for industrial zones will attract investment to the area. While repeated protest has thus far stalled the project, the emphasis on energy generation in Plan Puebla-Panam., which is being imposed throughout the region, makes many community members fearful that it

will be implemented in the future.

Refusing to let such lack of information about plans that affect its peoples keep them in the dark, COPINH has conducted workshops with its over 250 base communities on the threat that corporate globalization represents for their communities and strategies for organizing to protect indigenous society and fight systematic poverty. They have achieved the support of not just Lenca communities, but indigenous and ladino communities around Honduras. A statement from the Confederation of Aboriginal Peoples of Honduras from the beginning of the recent protest says, "we express as indigenous and black peoples our unconditional support for the struggle of our partners from COPINH."

As a result of three days of pressure, marches, sleeping underneath the congress, and protests in front of the congress, the presidential palace, and the United Nations, COPINH received a meeting with the president and achieved several of their demands. During the meeting, President Ricardo Maduro finally gave COPINH its long overdue (after 7 years of petitions and protests) legal recognition (personería jurídica), promised to resolve several of their land conflicts, and promised to arrange encounters with their communities regarding the problems faced by the indigenous in Honduras and the position of the communities on corporate globalization.

While COPINH members at the meeting agree that the initial attitude seemed conciliatory and open, they are approaching negotiations with a reasonable skepticism. After all, President Maduro's government, in its initial six months, has already been characterized by increasing levels of repression, particularly against the teacher's movement in Honduras. Furthermore, as former president of the Honduran branch of the Inter-American Development Bank, Maduro is a well-known neoliberal and supporter of corporate globalization. Some speculate that his initial openness may be a tactic for postponing conflict since he is already under fire by protests, road closures, and strikes from the teacher's union.

Regardless of the outcome of the negotiations with the president, however, the struggle continues to expand, as more communities continue to integrate into COPINH. As a representative from a newly-integrated COPINH base community said at a recent meeting of the General Coordination, "Our community knows that the little aid we receive from aid agencies will not lead to development; we need to organize and struggle to reclaim our rights."

Calling out to all of the peoples of the world, Bertha Cáceres, founding member of COPINH said, "instead of capital, we need to globalize solidarity, only then will the peoples of the world be able to regain control over our lives."

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