

August 9, 2003

HONDURAS: WATER, WOOD, COMMUNITY RIGHTS AND STATE REPRESSION.

An international delegation, including a Rights Action person, documents displacement of rural villages, paramilitary and military violence, government and private sector complicity, death threats and assassinations of community leaders and environmentalists in Olancho, Honduras. (This report was prepared by Brendan O'Neill, ACERCA, 802-598-8373, brendan@asej.org.)

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From July 26-27 a delegation of five social and environmental justice organizations and representatives from five countries met with community-based organizations and leaders in the state of Olancho, Honduras, finding and documenting widespread human rights violations, massive ecological destruction and accusations of a complicit and collaborative Honduran government and private sector.

The delegation was invited to observe and document the violent social and environmental reality in the state of Olancho by COFADEH, the Committee of Detained and Disappeared Families of Honduras, after Carlos Arturo Reyes, a Catholic Church representative and leader of the Environmental Movement of Olancho (MAO) was gunned down in front of his house in El Rosario, Olancho on July 18, 2003.

The state of Olancho, the largest and perhaps most biodiverse of Honduras, has seen 4 MAO activists assassinated since June 2001, while a dozen more have survived attempted assassinations, constant harassment and death threats. The rise in violence in Olancho has drawn the attention of Amnesty International who, just days before the assassination of Carlos Arturo Reyes, issued an urgent action alert for his protection and that of other activists being threatened in Olancho.

Additionally, the ecological destruction of Honduras and violence against MAO leaders was the source of inspiration for the "March for Life" that departed the capital of Olancho, Juticalpa, on June 20, 2003 and marched for 6 days onto Tegucigalpa where, on June 26, over 15,000 people converged on the Presidential palace demanding, amongst other things, a 10 year ban on all logging in the state of Olancho.

One of the Environmental Movement of Olancho's (MAO) threatened

leaders is liberation theologian Father Andres Tamayo of Salama, Olancho who told the delegates, "I've learned to live and suffer with the people of Olancho. Now I have to learn how to die for the people of Olancho." MAO has drawn national support over the past few years particularly since the June, 2001 assassination of Carlos Flores, a community leader from the village of El Ocotal, in the municipality of Gualaco who opposed the construction of a hydroelectric dam in his community. The dam is but one small part of a "Mesoamerican regional integration development project" called the Plan Puebla Panama that spans from Mexico to Panama and calls for dozens of more hydroelectric dams in the region.

The hydroelectric dam is currently being built by the Honduran corporation ENERGISA [receiving international development funding via the BCIE ñ Central American Bank of Economic Integration] inside the national park "Sierra de Agalta". The community of El Ocotal met with the delegation charging that ENERGISA is the "intellectual author" behind the assassination of Flores.

The delegation, accompanied by community members of El Ocotal, visited the hydroelectric dam site that is currently under construction, encountering armed employees of ENERGISA throughout the zone and observing wide-spread ecological destruction resulting from the construction of the dam.

The delegation also met with Gilberto Flores a community leader and MAO environmentalist who on Monday July 14 had an AK-47 pointed at him from a pick-up truck with tinted windows in front of the Catholic Church office in Juticalpa, Olancho and claims that if not for the children that surrounded him he may have been killed.

Delegates also met with former mayor of Gualaco and now MAO activist, Rafael Ulloa, who has received death threats since, as mayor, he adamantly opposed the ENERGISA project for both its social and environmental impacts.

The International delegation was also invited to visit a nearby village called Las Delicias in the municipality of San Esteban, Olancho where 23 families on July 21 and 22 were forcefully displaced from their homes and farms by Honduran national police forces as ordered in court by Judge Daniel Arturcio of Catacamas, Olancho. Judge Daniel Arturcio, according to the displaced families, actually participated in dismantling the 23 homes driving a tractor to knock the homes down. Delegates saw and photographed the remains of the homes burnt to the ground and were shown various bruises and injuries that many of the displaced families claimed were part of the 2 day violent displacement led by Honduran police forces.

According to the community of Las Delicias, Mrs. Maria Felipe de

Calderon, owner of hundreds of acres of land in the area, was recently awarded official title to the land by Judge Arturcio, yet the 23 families had lived and farmed on the land for over 20 years. Furthermore, former president of the community organization "Grupos Los Puntales" Candido Cruz explained to the delegates, with tears running down his face and balancing on 1 leg and crutches, that Mrs. Maria Felipe Calderon had hired assassins that had attempted to kill Candido 4 times for his role in opposing her bid for the land. The last attempt to kill Mr. Cruz on February 17 left him with no choice but to amputate his leg after AK-47 gunfire penetrated the driver-side of his car entering his leg. Delegates photographed bullet holes in Mr. Cruz's car.

On Sunday morning, July 27 delegates met with Father Osmin Flores in Catacamas, Olancho and with several community leaders and environmental activists in the area. Father Osmin reported that he had recently received death threats over the phone and in writing as well as being followed on July 18 by men armed with AK-47 rifles for his involvement both in opposing the hydroelectric dam in Gualaco as well as his work with MAO opposing illegal logging in the state of Olancho. According to MAO 80% of all logging in Olancho is illegal.

Later that afternoon delegates met with Father Andres Tamayo who explained that the Honduras forestry agency COHDEFOR was run mainly by individuals who were also involved in the forestry industry in Honduras. Furthermore, Tamayo explained that roughly 40% of the budget for both National and Liberal party candidates in Honduras is derived from the sale of wood and expressed doubt that anyone from within these parties nor COHDEFOR would challenge the current forestry practices in Olancho that he says have recently caused desertification in some areas of the state and are contributing to a water crisis for many communities.

When asked about the role of foreign governments and transnational corporations in the state of Olancho Tamayo asked, "If the rich countries of the world were really interested in "reducing poverty" wouldn't there be some sign that poverty was decreasing with all the investment over the past 60 years?" Answering his own question with another Tamayo said, "Might this investment be precisely to maintain the unjust system exactly how it is?"

The delegation was organized by COFADEH (Honduras), Action for Community and Ecology in the Regions of Central America (ACERCA-U.S.), Rights Action (Canada/ U.S./Guatemala), the Center for Economic and Political Investigation and Community Action (CIEPAC-Mexico), the Social Justice Committee of Montreal (Canada) and Maiz (Mexico). Participants were from France, U.S., Canada, Italy and Mexico and were accompanied by Honduran organizations.

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