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HONDURAS ñ Clamouring for Justice

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By Sandra Cuffe, an activist and human rights accompanier working with Rights Action and COPINH in Honduras. Please re-distribute and publish this article, citing autor and source. If you want on/ off this elist: info@rightsaction.org ===

CLAMOURING FOR JUSTICE, FROM THE MOUNTAINS TO THE CAPITAL
by Sandra Cuffe

It has often been said that no scandal in Honduras lasts for more than three days. A while back one such scandal was provoked when the Honduran National Congreso passed a decree allowing itself to reinterpret the Constitution. Article 60 states that "All Hondurans are born free and with equal rights. In Honduras there are no privileged classes. All Hondurans are equal before the Law." Unless you're indigenous or poor campesinos (most of the population) and powerful landowners with guns and money want your land

SYSTEMATIC REPRESSION INTENSIFIES IN MONTAÑA VERDE

The meeting point was set for August 25th at 5am, near the entrance to La Esperanza, Intibuc from Gracias, Lempira. The judge, public prosecutor, and 2 prosecution witnesses, along with police officers for protection, had arranged to meet up with the defense along the way to Montaña Verde for the scheduled reconstruction of events. This was to be part of evidence display in the current court case against Montaña Verde council members Marcelino and Leonardo Miranda.

The two Miranda brothers have remained imprisoned for fabricated charges since their illegal and violent arrest and brutal torture by a police and Cobra operative January 8th, 2003. This was only the latest arrest in a long history of repression against Montaña Verde council members for their communities' struggle for communal land titles to the territory in which they have lived for generations, and to which powerful landowners from Gracias have made claims and illegal incursions. These would-be usurpers have now found an invaluable ally for their campaign of repression in the Honduran justice system, at the service of all equal citizens who have enough money to buy it

4:45am. 5:40am. A call to the Public Prosecutor's office ñ they'll be there any time now. 7:00am. We decide to leave for Montaña Verde. Passing by the COPINH office for another call ñ we don't know what happened ñ we are informed by a local that the vehicle transporting the prosecutor, judge, and a number of police officers passed through La Esperanza at 4:20am, headed in the direction of Montaña Verde.

We follow their lead, figuring we'll catch up with them along the hike into the community. A short while into the steep mountain trail a community member catches up to us to tell us the news. Apparently the prosecutor and gang held a meeting down below, declared that the defense did not show up, and left to return to Gracias. Considered from the site where the reconstruction was to take place, the reason for their hasty departure becomes painfully clear. The prosecution witnesses' testimonies are so full of flaws and contradictions that they could not be deemed plausible even by the most gullible (or corrupt) judge.

MORE CAPTURE ORDERS

Back in COPINH a couple days later I receive the latest updates on the Montaña Verde case. The homicide charge (homicidio simple) has been changed to murder. New capture orders have been issued for Tiburcio Bautista Bejerano, Marcos Reyes and Margarito Vargas, all accused of the same murder. It is no coincidence that all 3 are council members from Planes, the community still struggling for their communal land title.

COPINH never forgets their two compañeros in the Gracias jail, nor do they remain inactive. The demand for the immediate release of Marcelino and Leonardo Miranda has been ever present in each protest, action and communiqué since the brothers' arrest.

COPINH TAKES DEMANDS AND VISION TO THE CAPITAL

Expressing their profound conviction in their commitment to the construction of a just and humane society for all, on August 19th COPINH coordination and community members occupied the plaza below the Honduran congress, announcing the beginning of a mobilization for dignified struggle against antinational laws and policies. The catalyst for this action is the wave of new laws being rammed through congress: the recently approved law privatizing water, and the pending laws regarding civil service, the reduction of poverty, and land ownership. The powers lurking behind these initiatives — the IMF, World Bank, and IDB — do not go unnoticed, and they are denounced as such. This, however, is only one integral part of COPINH's demands.

They are calling for agreements between indigenous groups and the State to be respected, denouncing mining and tourist concessions as fatal to their cultures and resources, and demanding full recognition of indigenous Lenca territory. The destruction of the country's forests, the politicization of education, and pending hydroelectric dam projects are condemned. A call goes out to the people and organizations of Honduras to join the struggle.

Under the congress and in different locations around the capital

actions continue throughout the week. COPINH members organize meetings, crucifixions (taking turns on huge wooden crosses erected along the main street on one side of the plaza), hunger strikes outside the presidential palace, and chainings (of themselves to government buildings) to draw attention to their demands. The plaza beneath the congress, site of the 24-hour COPINH campout, becomes a sort of open discussion space for people from all walks of life to come and ask questions, inform themselves, and share their own experiences and ideas about the essential problems in the country and its government.

I have heard evidence of the widespread discontent and anger even in random conversations with taxi drivers, cornerstore owners, newspaper vendors and potato farmers. Without any suggestion on my part, these people have launched into discussions of government oppression, poverty, and the destructive IMF policies governing their government. There is a sense of urgency in their voices ñ whether to let me know what really goes on in their country, or due to a need to tell someone.

Voicing these kinds of opinions isn't always the safest option here. Another of COPINH's demands is an end to the persecution and assassination of environmental and other activists, and an end to the campaign of persecution against their organization. COPINH members and activities have been the target of increased surveillance and control lately. Intelligence officers are pointed out to me under the congress. On August 25th Cobra (a special strike force) and other police officers were posted directly outside the entrance to COPINH's office in La Esperanza and on nearby street corners, and busloads of COPINH members headed towards the capital were subject to numerous roadblocks, searches, interrogations and delays. One evening as I left the congress and walked along the deserted downtown streets, I noticed a dark vehicle with tinted windows crawling along at my heels. The window rolled down. "Hey Baby! I love you!" "La "gringuita" could laugh later.

THE PEOPLE OF HONDURAS CAN'T TAKE IT ANYMORE

This phrase ("el pueblo ya no aguanta m'sí) became the slogan August 26th, when 25 000 people converged on the capital, heeding COPINH's call to join the struggle against the antinational laws. Beginning at 4am all highway routes in and out of Tegucigalpa were blocked by teachers, indigenous groups, campesinos, environmentalists, students, doctors, and members of pretty much every other public and popular sector in the country. Another 25 000 were mobilized in other parts of the country, carrying out similar actions. At midday those in the capital began converging on the city center in the area surrounding the congress. Marching and chanting continued as the heavy police and military presence surrounded the area, blocking off access to the

congress. As per usual, the government did not budge from its undemocratic proceedings, although the clamour at the congress door must have tipped them off to the little secret that the population of Honduras is a wee bit unhappy.

Although people fought back in self defense, they were repressed with tear gas and police and military brutality. Many were seriously beaten and 7 were arrested. The strongest part of the repression, however, was to come later, in the massive disinformation campaign spread by the government and mass media. Protestors were portrayed as a violent minority, incidents were downplayed, demands ignored. Organizers were accused of inviting the gangs to participate and 2 of the arrested are accused of belonging to a gang (under the recent anti-gang law essentially anyone fitting the profile of "young and tattooed" can be arrested for "association"). You know, the usual "they're all terrorists" story, well known in all of the Americas.

Those arrested are being charged with sedition, and the government warns that organizers are being investigated. It seems that the Honduran government has decided to teach its public a lesson: "If we don't like what you have to say, we'll charge you with treason (unless the bullets get you first)." Especially targeted are the organizing members of the recently born National Coordination of Popular Resistance, formed by the wide spectrum of organizations in the country. In a recent open letter to the president (Sept 2), the new Coordination addresses President Ricardo Maduro: "You, Sir President, have given ample proof that you do not want to listen to the voice of the people due to your ears being occupied listening to the voice of international financial institutions and their national clientele." August 26th was only the beginning, they reiterate, and more actions will follow shortly.

TOWARDS A NEW INTERPRETATION

Back inside the congress they are busy at work. One might imagine them poring over the Constitution, scrawling notes in the margins and between the lines. A new "interpretation" of Article 60 might read:

- All Hondurans are born free and with equal rights. As soon as you learn to speak, however, you may lose these rights if someone rich and powerful doesn't like what you say.
- In Honduras there are no privileged classes. That said, equal citizens can essentially be divided into two categories: the rich and powerful (landowners, government representatives, national links to foreign investment, military and police officers, mining, electric, and banana company representatives, etc etc etc) and potential subversives. There are no privileged classes; however, there are rights. Members of the first category have them. Potential subversives don't.
- All Hondurans are equal before the Law. "Equal is so relative" see

above.

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Sandra Cuffe is currently working with Rights Action and COPINH in Honduras, where she may soon be charged with sedition for the views expressed in this article.

HOW TO HELP/GET INVOLVED!

Educate yourself and others around you! Contact Rights Action, to learn about the direct negative impacts of foreign governments, multinational corporations, and international institutions at home and in the Global South, and about the myriad of grassroots resistance struggles for justice, peace, land, and the environment.

To learn more about and support the work of COPINH, other popular organizations in Honduras, to volunteer, be a human rights accompanier or to participate in a human rights delegation to Honduras, Guatemala, Chiapas, contact Rights Action: info@rightsaction.org, t: 416-654-2074, www.rightsaction.org.

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