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HONDURAS: of "development" and extinction of the Garifuna people

Below, you will find an article written by Gregoria Flores of OFRANEH (Fraternal Organization of Garifuna and Black Populations, Honduras), a partner group of Rights Action. As follow-up to the April 10th urgent action concerning repression against OFRANEH, this article provides background to the very tense situation that Garifuna communities in northern Honduras are confronting, including a continuing on-slaught of global tourists and tourism business interests.

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MEGA-DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS AND THE FUTURE OF THE GARÍFUNA PEOPLE

By Gregoria Flores, OFRANEH, Friday, April 22, 2005

[translated for Rights Action by Rosalind Gil]

The Garífuna people settled on the Carribbean coast of Honduras over 208 years ago. We have managed to keep our Afro-indigenous culture and respect the environment. Today, 28 of our 46 communities are located in protected areas or buffer zones.

Our cosmology underlines the importance of harmony with nature. We have a rich ecological tradition, unlike our brothers the mestizos, with their vision of development of extensive cattle ranches. This can only result in the systematic destruction of the forest.

In 2001, UNESCO declared the Garífuna culture, with its rich oral traditions and dancing, to be an intangible cultural heritage for humanity. To this day, we continue to practice our religion, DUGU, which is based on the cult of our ancestors. We are also the largest Caribbean island language-speaking group.

Little by little, our people has lost a large part of its ancestral lands to the dominant elite, which has come here to study the economic possibilities for development of tourism on the north coast. This area has lagged behind in development compared to other Central American countries. The massive appropriation of our lands goes back to the seventies, when military regimes, working hand in hand with business interests, began to expropriate beaches that had potential for development of hotel complexes.

Honduras is now undergoing serious, accelerated erosion with the destruction of its forests. This has led to sedimentation of the rivers, which in turn, has increased disasters resulting from global warming. The cutting of the old-growth forest and the mangrove swamps, as well as the devastation of coconut palms by a lethal virus has left the coast with no protection from the yearly storms and hurricanes.

Traditionally, the Garífuna informal economy was based on coconut. The disappearance of the coconut palms thus constitutes a serious threat to our survival as a distinct people. There is not enough land left to grow cassava, which we use to make casaba (casava flour fritters), a traditional food of Río Orinoco. As a result, casaba has become a luxury item.

Besides the local oligarchy's voracious appetite for our beaches, there has been an increase in the agricultural colonization of the ancestral lands of our communities. Forests have been destroyed to create pastures for extensive ranching. On the north coast, 100.000 hectares have been seeded with African palm trees. This land formed part of the functional habitat of our communities. As well, it would appear that the area contains large deposits of hydrocarbons.

Along with the destruction of the environment, there has been a massive increase in poverty throughout the country. We, the Garífunas, have lost a large part of our lands since the arrival of the banana companies at the beginning of the twentieth century. We have also seen the disappearance of our rich fish stocks, as a result of the shrimp industry in the Bahía Islands. This has had grave consequences for local fishing.

"DEVELOPMENT" AND THE MESOAMERICAN BIOLOGICAL CORRIDOR

In 2005, a number of international treaties were signed and new mega-projects were initiated in Central America. The flood of new projects and the pressure on our lands seems to be increasing at an unheard of rate. The Free Trade Agreement with the United States, the PPP (Plan Puebla Panamá), the CBM (Mesoamerican Biological Corridor), and the PATH (Land Administration Project of Honduras) are destined to affect our lands and our lifestyle.

We, the indigenous and black people of Central America, victims of internal colonialism, have been abandoned by history. Now, we have suddenly become of interest to international organizations responsible for so-called development policies that are the cause of serious environmental destruction in Central America.

As the ecocide continues, a number of protected areas have been created but we have been excluded from the planning and implementation of this initiative. This exclusion has given rise to conflicts regarding the use of natural resources and has led to the silent displacement of local fishing communities.

The CBM, financed by the World Bank, has introduced a strategy of privatization of natural resources, allowing for only symbolic participation of the indigenous and black peoples of the region and reducing the role of traditional knowledge to a mere decoration, while representatives of the bank appoint private foundations to manage natural resources. Conservation International, Nature Conservancy and the WWF are taking the control of resources out of the hands of our communities and have not shown themselves to be adverse to relocating or displacing communities.

The objectives of the PPP and the CBM are diametrically opposed but the PPP is taking over the territory. Financed by the Inter-American Development Bank, the PPP is presently building an infrastructure of roads and will soon be introducing telecommunications, and gas lines.

This project, like that of the CBM, is characterized by an absence of consultation with the local people. Any so-called consultation there has been is a mere mockery of process.

Last year, Honduras passed the Property Law, which stipulates that the State must carry out a consultation with our people. During this consultation, we expressed a strong demand that land titles previously granted to communities not be diminished and that, to avoid loss of our

ancestral lands, property titles not be individualized. Unfortunately, the State paid no attention to our demands. In fact, the World Bank has agreed to finance the PATH project, which aims to split community land titles and open bidding on Garífuna lands. This opens up a lucrative market for sale of our lands, a market that had been previously blocked by Article 107 of the National Constitution, which precluded the sale of coastal lands to foreigners. However, Article 107 has been erased by the elites, through Article 90-90, which does allow for the sale of land to foreigners.

Article 90-90 was elaborated in the nineties by the same people who are involved with the Bahia de Tela. This group, associated with the party in power - the National Party - divided up 300 hectares of land and sold it to foreign investors.

Italian investors are using their relationship with the Berlusconi-Fini regime to gain control of tourism and of the resources of the north coast of Honduras. Bahia de Tela is a perfect example of the expropriation of our lands by business interests working hand in hand with corrupt politicians.

BAD GOVERNMENT, BAD "DEVELOPMENT"

It is not surprising that Honduras finds itself in such a terrible situation. Honduras is rich in resources, but unfortunately, there is no real planning for the future of the country. In the meantime, the intellectual authors of the disaster continue to follow a course of destruction and surrender.

The signing of the Free Trade Agreement with the United States signals the destruction of what is left of the security of our food supply and forces the country to enter into competition with an imperial power.

BAD ADMINISTRATION OF JUSTICE

The absence of law enforcement in the country works well for those who use the system, making it possible for them to find ways of displacing communities and evading the law. The justice system is completely politicized. Corruption in the justice system and in security forces is a constant threat to all of society. At this time in history, Honduras leads the world in "disappearing" and executing minors.

For many Hondurans, the state of terror that grew up during the cold war is still a reality and impunity continues to reign. The persecution of leaders of indigenous, campesino and union organizations is used by the State as a way of avoiding its responsibilities vis a vis the people. The State creates myths to terrorize the population and justify repression.

GANGS - CHILDREN OF NEOLIBERALISM

The failure of the neoliberal model can be seen in the growth of crime and in the exclusion of the people. The gangs - children of neoliberalism - are the result of the fact that no opportunities for education or for work are provided for the population.

In the meantime, the economy of the country is dependant on remittances sent by migrant workers in industrialized countries. This makes for an unstable and volatile form of economy.

The Garífuna people have undergone a huge migration to the United States and this has created serious economic and cultural changes in our communities. Despite this, we the

Garífuna people have not abandoned our lands. But in an attempt to steal our land titles, local politicians are asserting that we have given up possession of the lands.

The mega-projects of international organizations will bring radical change to the whole continent. The process of decolonization overseen from Washington reduces indigenous and black people to mere objects with no role to play, in a situation in which leaders are bought and communities subjugated.

The deposits of hydrocarbons on the Caribbean coast of Central America is an issue that can cause instability and is a major issue for the PPP. Natural gas is sought after by multinationals and the deposits in Sambuco are prime material for exploration and exploitation.

The struggle to recognize our title to our land is of great importance to the Garífuna people. Unfortunately, the environment is at serious risk. As well, the existence of deposits of hydrocarbon and the natural beauty of the area have become obstacles that prevent us from gaining respect for our rights and protection against losing the community land titles we presently possess.

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RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

1- Send tax-deductible donations for community-development work of OFRAQNEH - make check payable to "Rights Action" and mail to: UNITED STATES: 1830 Connecticut Av, NW, Washington DC, 20009 / CANADA: 509 St. Clair Ave W, box73527, Toronto ON, M6C-1C0. Donate on-line in the USA and Canada: www.rightsaction.org.

2- Come on our July 2005 Delegation-Seminar to Guatemala: info@rightsaction.org/ 416-654-2074.

3- To help build awareness and strengthen work for global justice and equality, organize educational and activist oriented events in your own community. For more info: info@rightsaction.org/ 416-654-2074.

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