

June 11, 2005

HONDURAS: MASS TOURISM A MENACE FOR GARIFUNA PEOPLE

Rights Action COMMENTARY: Below, you will find a "Reuters" article about how the global tourist industry is contributing to serious violations of the rights of the Garifuna people in Honduras; indeed, this global business threatens their existence as a people.

The current development and human rights struggles of the Garifuna people, against the business interests of the so-called "international community" (including the World Bank, Inter-American Development Bank, etc.) and the wealthy sectors of Honduras, must be understood as part of a centuries-old struggle of the Garifuna people for survival and control over their own lives, always being attacked by outside, wealthy/ selfish interests.

TOURISM AS "DEVELOPMENT"? With respect to the comments, below, about whether tourism can help the Garifuna, it can be beneficial IF AND ONLY IF the Garifuna have clear title to their lands, are the owners of the tourism businesses and have complete control over them. The type of tourism being forcibly imposed on the Garifuna is harmful and has nothing to do with "development" - it has to do with business interests.

Rights Action seeks further funding, and lots of international attention, for OFRANEH, a community-based Garifuna organization that works to defend the development, environment and land rights of the Garifuna people.

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MASS TOURISM LATEST MENACE FOR HONDURAN GARIFUNA,
June 9, 2005, by Catherine Bremer

MIAMI, Honduras (Reuters) - Without tap water or electricity, Chaves Sanchez lives happily by a Caribbean beach that for generations has provided

ample
fish to feed his family and keep a palm-frond roof over their heads.
Yet
the powder sand, turquoise sea and sun of this unspoiled corner of
northwest
Honduras have investors salivating. Planned tourist complexes could
spell
the end of the centuries-old way of life of the black minority here
known as
Garifuna.

Sanchez fears a \$100 million luxury hotel complex and golf course to
be
built next to his tiny wooden-shack village will destroy the local
habitat
and turn his sons from traditional fishers into low-paid menial
workers.

"This is paradise. But in the future, who knows?" said Sanchez at his
palm-fringed village, ironically named Miami, typical of the laid-back
Garifuna communities dotting Central America's Caribbean coast.

"Tourism is
OK if it's done properly, but these developments won't benefit us," he
said.

Descendants of Arawak Indians and African slaves who were shipwrecked
near a
Caribbean island in 1635, the Garifuna were (*) deported to Honduras
in 1797
by British colonialists and soon spread to the coasts of Belize,
Guatemala
and Nicaragua.

(* Rights Action note: The Garifuna were FORCIBLY removed by British
slave-trading imperialists trying to take over the island now known as
the
Grenadines)

Two centuries on, numbering roughly 250,000 in Central America, they
are
battling to keep ancestral lands where generations of Garifuna have
fished
from dugout canoes, harvested food crops and woven baskets from local
vines.

With those livelihoods under threat from big business, and
discrimination a
barrier to the mainstream economy, their future may hinge on getting
full
land rights and developing small-scale tourism, experts say.

"The Garifuna are certainly in danger. They have some very powerful

enemies," said anthropologist Edmund Gordon, head of African-American studies at the University of Texas. "Getting titles to their land and jurisdiction over their fishing areas is vital to their survival. Developing alternative economic schemes to use those resources is absolutely necessary as well."

LANDS UNDER THREAT

In Honduras, where their numbers are highest, the Garifuna fought to win communal land rights in recent years, only to have investors trample over them, rights groups say. They say corruption helps foreigners buy and develop Garifuna land and say all-inclusive resorts and water-guzzling golf courses will worsen deforestation, drain drinking wells and further marginalize the Garifuna.

"They seize our land and do what they want with it," said Gregoria Flores (*), spokeswoman at Garifuna rights group OFRANEH. "We don't say 'no' to tourism but we do say 'no' to enclosed resorts that are unsustainable and bring us nothing."

(* Rights Action note: Gregoria Flores was recently shot and wounded in her arm. More information available from inf@rightsaction.org)

For the government, tourism is the obvious way for Honduras to claw its way out of poverty. A scattering of resorts in the northeast are already drawing in vital tourist dollars.

The jungle-rich country has huge ecotourism potential, but resorts catering to wealthy sun-seekers are bigger earners. "What tourists want are four or five-star hotels facing the beach," said Hector Rodriguez, a government official working on the planned 350-room hotel and golf course complex near Miami. Financed by local and foreign investors, it could be open in three to five years for package tourists and cruise ships.

Resort planners say they are encouraging local Garifuna to start small businesses to cater to the tourist influx. They say the project will

create thousands of jobs that could stem the flow of Garifuna to the United States and will bring power, running water and a paved road to Miami. But they also want to run tours for tourists to come and peek at Miami and watch the Garifuna perform their rhythmic bottom-wiggling "Punta" dance -- an idea many find offensive.

"All the community will get is the odd tip," said Flores, who also fears beaches will be fenced off like at gated resorts in places like Cuba and Jamaica.

"They are right to resist gated resorts that will only employ them as bartenders or cultural performers," said Gordon. "A bigger problem is the resorts will permanently disqualify their claims to the land they have historically inhabited."

BANE OR BOON?

Rather than mount protests, which in the past has led to violence and prolonged legal spats, communities should turn to business: run beach cabins, boat tours or cafes, anthropologists say. Such projects could help the Garifuna preserve their vibrant music, their cassava and coconut-rich cuisine and their language -- a singsong African tongue blended with Arawak, which originated in the Amazon, and a hint of French.

In Belize, while some isolated Garifuna live in poverty, reliant on remittances and washing in well water, others run beachside cabins and eateries in low-key resorts, having used money sent from relatives in the United States as investment.

"These aren't luxury hotels but places that are comfortable and can sustain the Garifuna in jobs other than servile ones," said Gordon. "It's a viable model. It has to be worth a try."

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For more information about these issues, to participate in upcoming Rights

Action delegations (July 5-13; July 9-16, 2005) to Honduras and Guatemala to learn about these issues, or to make tax-deductible donations to Rights Action for the community-based organizations struggling for community development, environmental protection and rights in Honduras and Guatemala, contact Rights Action: info@rightsaction.org, 416-654-2074, www.rightsaction.org