

August 24, 2005.

HONDURAS: Tourist 'Development,' Repression, and Garifuna Resistance

Concerned about the recent incidents of persecution against leaders of the

Honduran Fraternal Black Organization (OFRANEH), at a time when the organization has been actively denouncing a number of internationally financed 'development' projects affecting Garifuna communities in Honduras,

Rights Action organized a fact-finding delegation to the region earlier this

month. On August 12-13, community development, environment and human rights

activists from Italy, Canada and the United States traveled to Triunfo de la

Cruz and La Ceiba to meet with community and organization leaders.

Below

you will find:

∑ An article collectively written by the delegation participants

∑ A recent declaration by the National Territorial Council of the Garifuna

People

Rights Action has supported OFRANEH's important community development and

enviro-protection work and asks for your tax-deductible donations (information below) to continue to be able to do so. For more

information,

or to support the work of OFRANEH and other grassroots organizations in

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THE TOURIST INDUSTRY AND REPRESSION ON HONDURAS' CARIBBEAN COAST
... AND THE GARIFUNA COMMUNITIES' STRUGGLE IN DEFENSE OF THEIR
TERRITORY

Alfredo Lúpez remained a political prisoner for seven years, jailed on fabricated charges because of his tireless struggle in defense of the communal lands of his Garifuna community, Triunfo de la Cruz. The struggle

of Triunfo de la Cruz, located in the municipality of Tela, Atlántida, on

Honduras' spectacular Caribbean coast, is in defense of their ancestral

traditions, including communal land tenure and management.

As is the case in all 46 Garifuna communities, Triunfo de la Cruz is threatened by various actors interested in the 'development' of tourism along the coastline, where the Garifuna people have lived for over 200 years. The Garifuna are an afro-descendent indigenous people whose origins lie on the Caribbean island of Saint Vincent, where shipwrecked slaves and maroons from neighbouring islands joined with the indigenous Arawak population. As a result of their constant struggles against the British colonizers, the Garifuna were evicted from the island in 1797 and abandoned on Honduras' north coast. They have subsequently populated almost the entire coastline, maintaining their autonomy and living in harmony with the land, managing the natural resources according to their cosmovision.

With the example and presence of their ancestors, the community of Triunfo de la Cruz continues to manage the resources communally and after decades of struggle achieved a communal land title in 1992 and an extension in 1996. These communal land titles are inalienable, thus preventing their sale to outside investors.

However, in recent years the Honduran government has become interested in the lands and beaches where the Garifuna communities are located, aiming to develop the tourist industry, considered to be the upcoming principal motor of the national economy. Various national government administrations have adopted a series of policies and projects to this end, without paying the least attention to the rights of the Garifuna people. This process of reforms and privatizations has been expressly driven and supported by international financial institutions, facilitating the interests of outside investors who have coveted the Garifuna coast for decades.

In 1994, investors with considerable leverage in the government began constructing a luxury housing complex within the ancestral lands of Triunfo de la Cruz. To facilitate the Mar Bella (Beautiful Sea) project, the Municipal government of Tela granted the investors land titles located

inside Triunfo de la Cruz's communal land title, a very common – though completely illegal – practice in Garifuna communities.

The Lands Defense Committee of Triunfo de la Cruz (CODETT), led by Jes's Alvarez and Alfredo Lúpez, officially accused the Municipal government of Tela of Abuse of Authority and Embezzlement of Public Funds for its participation in and support of the project. For his actions in defense of his community's lands, Jes's Alvarez was the target of two murder attempts and died a few days after the second. During the same period, Alfredo Lúpez was detained on false charges of drug trafficking and remained in jail for seven years, despite the complete lack of evidence in the case.

In spite of the repression, the community struggle continued and managed to detain the Mar Bella project. Today, the half-constructed villas stand as monuments to the victorious community struggle. In the shadow of the abandoned structures, we see the welcoming cabins being constructed by a group of women from the community as an alternative – community-based tourism. At the same time, the women's community project is a political strategy to recuperate their lands and a physical barrier to ensure that the Mar Bella project does not advance in the future.

The cases of Jes's Alvarez and Alfredo Lúpez in Triunfo de la Cruz are far from unique; in fact, they characterize the repression carried out against leaders both of Garifuna communities and of the Honduran Fraternal Black Organization (OFRANEH). OFRANEH is a community-based organization that, since the 1970s, has accompanied the struggles of Garifuna communities and their survival as a people.

The organization's main focus is the defense of ancestral territory. In this regard, OFRANEH has been the only organization that has consistently and publicly denounced the policies and projects that aim to break up

community titles and has, at the same time, struggled for the legal titling of ancestral territory still not recognized by the State. Because of the organization's firm position, many of its leaders have been the targets for persecution, from threats and intimidation to politically motivated murders and jailings.

Earlier the year, on March 25, Miriam Miranda, one of OFRANEH's principal leaders, was the victim of an abusive property search in her house in the Buenos Aires neighbourhood in the city of La Ceiba. Criminal investigation (DGIC) agents entered the house, accusing Miranda of possessing stolen weapons and jewelry supposedly stolen from a La Ceiba jewelry shop, the same kind of false accusations that cost Alfredo Lúpez seven years of his life. Clearly, no contraband was found and authorities, prompted by the international denunciation of the incident, later proclaimed it was the result of an error of the State intelligence.

Not long after, on May 30, OFRANEH General Coordinator Gregoria Flores was shot in the arm with an exploding bullet in broad daylight along downtown La Ceiba's main avenue. The aggressor, a private security agent, had supposedly been in pursuit of a thief, although there has not been an adequate investigation into the incident. The three cases briefly illustrated above demonstrate the pattern of systematic repression against Garifuna land defense activists. It is important to recognize that these human rights violations against leaders are also elements of the collective repression against the way of life of a people for whom survival is impossible without their ancestral lands.

Today, the inhabitants and community authorities of Triunfo de la Cruz gather in a communal hall for an assembly to discuss new threats to community lands, among other issues on the agenda. The latest news in the ongoing series of policies and projects that pose threats is a recent executive decree establishing the Tela Bay, where Triunfo and other Garifuna communities are located, as an Area Under Special Management (ABRE).

The decree's objective is to zone and manage the entire area according to its orientation to the development of tourism, based on prior legislation that define tourist zones as public property, giving the State the right to expropriate. Concerning Garifuna communal lands, ABRE will apply Chapter III of the Property Law brought into effect in 2004, a chapter that facilitates the fragmentation of communal titles, in clear violation of International Labor Organization Covenant 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples.

Organized in a Permanent Assembly to strengthen themselves against the constant violations of their rights as peoples, OFRANEH and organizations representing the other indigenous and black peoples of Honduras continue to strongly denounce these elements of the Property Law. Accompanying the law – or, more precisely, in order to implement it – is the Honduran Land Administration Program (PATH), financed by the World Bank. Also a target of community resistance, PATH aims to "legalize" ancestral Garifuna lands to the invaders who have taken them over and, based on the Property Law, seeks to individualize existing communal land titles.

ABRE, the Property Law and PATH, along with other projects, form a regulatory framework whose main goal along the Caribbean Coast is the legal security of land tenure – in the hands of individuals, so that land may be bought or lost through mortgage – not in favour of communities but for investors, both national and international. Given their aggressive institutionalization of the neoliberal model in CAFTA, Plan Puebla Panama and other national-level projects, it comes as no surprise that international financial institutions such as the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), in the name of 'development', have had active roles in supporting the interests of private investors to the detriment of communities.

One example of the outcome of these legislation changes and

international support is the tourist mega-project 'Los Micos Beach & Golf Resort,' more commonly known as the Tela Bay Project. Without taking into account the serious concerns of the communities that will be directly affected – San Juan, TornabÈ and Miami – the Honduran Institute of Tourism and powerful private investors are moving ahead with the 'enclave tourism' project within the buffer zone of the Jeanette Kawas National Park, despite the fact that the luxury hotels, golf course and other aspects are not sustainable and threaten the communities' resources, especially water. Los Micos has had active multi-million dollar support from the Italian Cooperation, the IADB and the participation of investors who have a long history of usurping ancestral Garifuna lands and of threatening the communities and their resources, such as Miguel FacussÈ.

Faced with this situation, OFRANEH has brought several petitions to the Inter-American Human Rights Commission for abuses and violations committed by the Municipality of Tela against Triunfo de la Cruz, by the State and international 'conservationist' institutions in the Cayos Cochinos and, in the case of Punta Piedra, for human rights violations linked to territorial rights violations. In the case of Alfredo LÙpez, the sentence of the Inter-American Court will soon be made known.

Far from leaving their problems in the hands of international entities, Garifuna communities continue their ongoing struggle in defense of their territory, their natural resources and their cultural survival as a people. Nor has the intense systematic repression been able to silence OFRANEH or its leaders. Here in Triunfo de la Cruz and all along the coast, the Garifuna people, accompanied by their ancestors, is struggling for territory, justice and to continue existing as a People.

NATIONAL TERRITORIAL COUNCIL OF THE GARIFUNA PEOPLE
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II DECLARATION OF SAMBO CREEK

We, representatives of the Land Defense Committees of the Garifuna communities Plaplaya, Pueblo Nuevo, Tocamacho, Sangrelaya, San José de la Punta, Iriona Viejo, Cusuna, Punta Piedra, Limón, Sambo Creek, Punta Gorda, San Juan, La Rosita, Travesia and Masca, gathered in the community of Sambo Creek on August 20–21 to analyze and discuss the problems surrounding land tenure and territory in our communities, MANIFEST THE FOLLOWING:

1. Today, more than ever, the life of the Garifuna people is endangered by the voracity of the economic power groups of the country, which are being supported and protected by the government currently in power. This is demonstrated by President of the Republic Ricardo Maduro's recent passing of an executive decree, creating the Tela Bay 'Area Under Special Management' (ABRE), which is nothing more than a mechanism to expropriate our areas of tourist interest to hand them over to investors, both national and foreign, in the name of the so-called 'development' of the tourist industry.
2. The Garifuna communities have been emphatic in their opposition to the implementation of the Honduran Land Administration Program (PATH), a project financed by the World Bank of which the fundamental objective is the privatization and individualization of land, contravening the collective property system of the Garifuna people's lands. Despite this clear opposition, the Property Institute is implementing a process of measurement in the communities belonging to the districts of Iriona and Gracias a Dios without the consent of the communities, supported only by a few Garifuna pseudo-leaders who do not care about the future of the generations to come.
3. The municipalization of our communities has played a fundamental role in the accelerated loss of our territories, as the municipal governments have

dedicated themselves to measuring, registering and legitimizing the invasions that have taken place in our communities. Ever since he took power, the mayor of Juan Francisco Bulnes, Antonio Vialta, took over the lands of the community of Batalla as though they were his personal property. Without respecting the ancestral possession of the community, in an arrogant manner he has clearly abused his position of power by expropriating lands to develop his municipal projects. The municipal mayor of Puerto Cortés, Marlon Lara, recently inaugurated a sewage treatment plant – financed by the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) – in lands belonging to the Garifuna community of Travesia. When members of the community denounced the situation, Lara simply responded that Travesia is a neighbourhood of Puerto Cortés and therefore that the Municipality of Cortés is authorized to develop whatever project they wish in the community.

4. An accelerated process of the loss of our communities' water resources is taking place, as many of the water sources have been invaded. Such is the case in San José de la Punta, where the water source has been invaded for more than 10 years, with grave consequences on community health as contaminated water is being consumed. In the same manner, the construction of an illegal road leading to the Sico Valley affected the water sources of more than 8 Garifuna communities. Worsening the problem, the municipalities intend to privatize our communities' water.

For all of the above, the members of the Garifuna People's Land and Territory Defense Committees participating in this II Gathering DECLARE:

1. Land and natural resources are the fundamental base of our people's cultural and socioeconomic survival. In this sense, the Land and Territory Defense Committees of the Garifuna people declare ourselves in permanent struggle and resistance against the intensions of the government, International Financial Institutions such as the World Bank and IADB, landowners and servile politicians, who are planning and implementing projects and programs to expropriate our lands and territories.

2. We assume and support the reforms to chapter III of the Property Law – concerning the property regime of indigenous and black peoples' lands –

contained in the Reform Proposal presented by OFRANEH to the National Congress. At the same time, we call on the Congress to adopt this proposal.

3. We reiterate the right of our communities to control and administrate their water and reject all attempts to privatize this resource.

4. We condemn and repudiate the action taken by President Ricardo Maduro in emitting the executive decree that creates ABRE and from this moment we express to him that we will not allow this regime to be implemented in our communities. They would have to disappear us completely in order for their objective to be carried out.

5. The municipalities must not continue to take decisions about our territory. We are ready to continue our struggle against abuses of power that reduce our territories.

°°With the Force of Barauda and Satuye, Our Resistance Continues!!

In the Community of Sambo Creek, on August 21, 2005.

Sambo Creek: LuÌs Fern·ndez, Elena Guity, Nahun Lalin

Tocamacho: Maria Celina Centeno, Emiliano Arriola

Pueblo Nuevo: Jorge Ortiz

TravesÌa: Cesar Mariano, Margarita Videa Martinez, Denia Cacho ìvila, Milton

Javier SolÌs ìvila, Selvin LÙpez, Gilmer N·òez

Plaplaya: Porfirio Casildo, Eulogio Montero

Iriona Viejo: Pastor Suazo Mejia, Victoria Suazo

LimÙn: Lilian Rivas

Cusuna: Raquel Castillo, Altagracia ìlvarez, ZacarÌas Bernardez

Punta Piedra: Benito Bernardez, Roberto Mejia

San JosÈ de la Punta: Dami·n Suaso, Rosario Bernardez

Punta Gorda: BernabÈ GarcÌa, Kendra Leiva

San Juan: Wilfredo Guerrero, MarÌn Ellis, Jessica GarcÌa

Masca: Amada LÙpez

Sangrelaya: Magda Batiz, Edna Ismena Martinez

La Rosita: Justina Flores

Rights Action is a development, enviro and human rights organization, with

its main office in Guatemala. We: channel your tax-deductible donations to over 50 community development, environment and human rights organizations in Guatemala, Chiapas, Honduras, Haiti; provide accompaniment for 'at risk' community development leaders; carry out education & activist work with partner groups about global human rights, environment and development issues. www.rightsaction.org, info@rightsaction.org.

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* United States: Box 50887, Washington DC, 20091-0887.

* Canada: 509 St. Clair Ave W, box73527, Toronto ON, M6C-1C0.

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