

Honduras, November 10, 2005

Rights Action distributes the following urgent action regarding yet another incident of repression against yet another Garifuna community leader, Wilfredo Guerrero, an active participant and leader in the community-based struggle to defend Garifuna territory - lands, natural resources and cultural survival. In July 2005, Guerrero spoke to the participants of Rights Action's annual Human Rights Seminar about the situation and repression facing Garifuna territory, communities, leaders and the afro-indigenous Garifuna people.

Earlier this year, well-known Garifuna leaders Miriam Miranda and Gregoria Flores were the targets of repression; Miranda's home was subject to a violent intrusion by State authorities and subsequent defamation, while Flores was shot in the arm in the city of La Ceiba during the course of her work as General Coordinator of the Honduran Fraternal Black Organization, OFRANEH. (Rights Action brought Miriam Miranda on a speaking tour to the north-east USA a few years ago)

Contacts for urgent letters and messages denouncing the latest incident against Wilfredo Guerrero and the ongoing repression against Garifuna community leaders and OFRANEH are below. A translation of OFRANEH's communiqué circulated by is included at the end of this message.

Please forward, circulate, publish and re-distribute widely. To get on/off the Rights Action e-list, for more information, or to support OFRANEH and Garifuna communities' struggle and work to defend their territory, culture and locally controlled development, contact Rights Action: info@rightsaction.org, 416-654-2074, www.rightsaction.org

SYSTEMATIC REPRESSION AGAINST GARIFUNA LEADERS CONTINUES:

San Juan community leader Wilfredo Guerrero's house and archives destroyed

During the night of this past Monday, November 7, Garifuna community leader Wilfredo Guerrero's house was set on fire in the community of San Juan, municipality of Tela, department of Atlántida, on Honduras' Caribbean coast. Luckily, Guerrero was not at home that night and thus no-one was hurt or killed. However, all of his documentation and archives related to the community of San Juan were completely destroyed along with the house.

Wilfredo Guerrero is the current president of the San Juan community Lands Defense Committee and has been extremely active in the struggle to defend Garifuna territory and community lands in the Tela Bay from the covetous land speculators, investors, politicians and businessmen seeking to appropriate the bay's beaches and lands for enclave tourism complexes.

Earlier this year, in July, Wilfredo Guerrero traveled to El Estor, Guatemala, to meet with the participants of Rights Action's annual Human Rights Seminar and to discuss the problems facing his community and the struggles of the Garifuna people. He also discussed the constant repression against Garifuna community leaders and OFRANEH (Honduran Fraternal Black Organization).

Guerrero himself is no stranger to persecution. He and numerous other Garifuna community leaders have been arrested and jailed on false charges (such as 'land usurpation' in his own community) related to their work to defend the lands and communities of the Garifuna people. Alfredo López, a community leader from Triunfo de la Cruz, also in the Tela Bay, spent seven years in jail on false charges of drug possession.

San Juan and the other Garifuna communities of the Tela Bay have been struggling to defend their resources and communal lands from the avaricious plans of the tourist industry, luxury housing contractors, real estate speculation, and private foundations controlling 'protected' areas. Numerous hotels, mansions and other projects have already illegally taken over areas within the communities' inalienable communal land titles.

With Inter-American Development Bank and other multilateral and international financing, the multi-million private-public mega-project Los Micos Beach & Golf Resort threatens to privatize and degrade the Tela Bay and the Garifuna communities who have inhabited the coastal region for centuries. In San Juan, powerful banker, landowner and politician Jaime Rosenthal Oliva and the real estate company PROMOTUR have usurped a significant part of the community's territory and it is suspected they are behind much of repression against community leaders. At the same time, the Honduran Lands Administration Program (PATH) of the World Bank is working to implement Chapter III of the recent Property Law, promoting the individualization of indigenous and Garifuna communal land, in direct violation of the ILO's Covenant 169.

Also in violation of the international convention on indigenous and tribal peoples, without informing or consulting the Garifuna community, in the 90s the (ladino) municipal government of Tela extended the urban radius of the city to include San Juan and other rural Garifuna communities, thus granting itself control over community lands. A frequent occurrence along the northern coast, this maneuver favours the outside landowners, businesses and elite to whom the municipal and judicial authorities are frequently tied.

To add insult to injury, in 1997 the government 'lost' the communal land title to the community of San Juan. On April 18, 1997, the document was transferred from the National Agrarian Institute to the Honduran Forestry Development Corporation (COHDEFOR), the government entity in charge of the country's National Protected Areas System, as 'protected' areas have been declared in the ancestral territory of over half of all Garifuna communities. The land title (document # 27660) that entered into COHDEFOR in April 1997, according to the institution's registry, never left, but has never surfaced.

The land title, however, only included a small part of San Juan's ancestral territory and of the community's ancestral title. This is a frequent situation in Garifuna communities, where often only the residential centre is titled, leaving out the agricultural areas, forest reserves, water sources and other crucial elements of Garifuna territory - zones where medicinal plants and materials for traditional housing, boats and drums are collected; spiritual and sacred sites; etc.

In fact, when the Garifuna people were forcibly deported by the British from the island of Saint Vincent in the late 1700s, the community of San Juan was founded beside Triunfo de la Cruz, on the other side of Tela. When the United Fruit Company entered the area in the early

1900s, the UFCO began to take over community lands until the remaining families were forced to leave, founding the new San Juan in its current location. Later, in 1937 under the repressive dictatorship of Tiburcio Carías Andino, General Caquitas ordered a massacre in San Juan, murdering 29 community members.

Repressive and racist State policies continue today, as do their links to powerful business interests. As a Garifuna leader committed to defending his community's territory, history and culture, Wilfredo Guerrero is a target of this ongoing repression, as is demonstrated by the fire incident of November 7.

PLEASE TAKE ACTION!

Send letters expressing concern about the persecution of Garifuna community leader Wilfredo Guerrero and the destruction of his home and archives on November 7; demanding an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation into the incident and that those responsible be brought to justice; and showing support for OFRANEH and Garifuna communities and the defense of their territory.

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Court Authorities (Juzgado de Letras): fax (504) 448-2089

Public Prosecutor's Office (Ministerio Público/Fiscalía): fax (504) 448-1758

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