

YOUR LAND IS OUR LAND: THE GARIFUNA OF HONDURAS AND THE UNTOLD COST OF TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

Below, an article by a Deborah Frolick who travelled to Honduras on a Rights Action delegation-seminar to visit and speak first hand with people and communities being harmed by large-scale "development projects.

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By Deborah Frolick, deborah.frolick@yahoo.ca,
[http://www.thestrand.ca/home/index.cfm?
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(In coastal Honduras, an entire people's way of life is being upset. For the Garifuna people, the Tela Bay region of Honduras represents more than stunning beaches and lush forests. Home to over 53 small communities, the land is essential to the groups' identity. For over two hundred years, these people lived in regions that had been thought too remote to inhabit. This has changed. With new legislation, the Honduran government is opening the picturesque Garifuna land up to mega-developers. But the Garifuna are not going to be silenced. Deborah Frolick reports.)

While Cancun-style developments now blankets the beaches of most Caribbean shorelines, some localities have remained under the investment radar. Through decades of regional development most of the beaches in Honduras have remained undeveloped.

But the developmental tide has been changing at the beaches of Tela Bay. In 1994, the construction of luxury resorts began on ancestral Garifuna land for which the state had just recently granted communal titles. In an about-face, Honduran government officials enacted a privatization bill, opening the land up to business interests. Together the government and the private sector envisioned a different Tela Bay: one that would transform the landscape of subsistence village life into a luxury tourism hub.

The Garifuna are an afro-descendent, indigenous people living along the Caribbean coast of Central America, with community settlements stretching from Belize to Nicaragua. Their heritage is rooted in a union between an

indigenous group living on the island of St. Vincent, and African people who were shipwrecked there during the 17th Century. In their early existence, tension and threat characterized their relationships with other groups. It would continue to do so right through to the 21st Century. Today, however, the powerful alliance between state and corporate actors poses the greatest threat to the Garifuna. They face forceful evictions from their ancestral lands to make way for mega-project tourist development.

Today, development along Tela Bay charges ahead, building up speed as construction of a multi-million dollar development project is underway. The Los Micos Beach and Golf Resort promises to deliver five-star hospitality, a golf-course, and an equestrian centre among other high-end tourist amenities. This, all on land currently inhabited by the Garifuna, meaning that the Garifuna of Tela Bay must be relocated.

Of course, moving an entire people is no easy task. The Honduran government declared Tela Bay an Area Under Special Management. Under this decree, the region was formally classified as a tourist zone, making it land for which Honduran law regards as public, rather than subject to communal titles.

In the community of Miami in the Tela Bay area, pressure tactics have been so effective that residents sold their plots one by one. Many of them believed the state would seize their land if they didn't cooperate. The town of Miami, now free-reign territory for developers, serves as a harsh warning of things to come for other Garifuna communities.

Still, the Garifuna are all but quiet about their refusal to cooperate. They say theirs is a history of being shuffled around, forced to rebuild their lives in new and foreign territories, finally settling where they are today. More than a mere re-shuffling, some fear that this dispersal may mean the end of the Garifuna as a community.

Still more worrisome are the allegations that surround the government's reaction to Garifuna protests.

The state response reportedly targets leaders that emerge from communities to speak publicly and critically about the corporate project. The local 'rebellion' is said to be confronted with unannounced visits by privately contracted agents, sent to make clear either with violence or the threat thereof, that anti-corporate activism will not be tolerated. It is believed that government action has led to the death of a least three Garifuna activists. Today the murder cases of Oscar Bregal, Jesus Alvarez and Santos Zacarias - each an activist for the Garifuna cause - remain unresolved.

One man in the community says he escaped a similar fate and has become a prominent leader in the resistance movement at Triunfo de la Cruz, a Tela Bay community. With his warm presence and magnetic personality, one would

never know that Alfredo Lopez spent seven years in jail, he says wrongfully convicted.

Accused of a charge of a drug-related offense, Lopez says he was the victim of a state attempt to thwart local activism; to shut down the mechanism of free speech. But years after being released, Lopez continues to speak out against the state, publicly and critically, refusing to fade into the background. As the host of a local radio program, he keeps the community at large informed and the spirit of resistance alive. His commitment to the resistance is explicit: "They'll never stop me." He has told reporters. "This is a struggle to the end... We will do whatever it takes to win. We have the moral authority".

Importantly, it is not tourism per se that Lopez resists. Like many others, he is not entirely opposed to it. But their model of successful tourism is based on the tenet of self-determination. Those Garifuna leaders who would welcome tourism say they would prefer a celebration of the local culture, not a destruction of it.

On the beaches of Tela Bay a group of local women have brought this model to life. They have built cabin-style tourist facilities which offer charm, beautiful beach, and complete relaxation in any one of the shaded hammocks.

Tactically built in the path of the development project, the very nature of its placement stifles further mega-project development. This action, however, only slows the impending project. The development of the Los Micos Beach and Golf Resort will continue.

What the women of this project are hoping for instead is a change in attitudes. They are hoping that tourists will be boycotting resort-style tourism and that they will consider an alternative form of development. One that they offer local control, indeed local empowerment, is central.

Stories like the one of the Garifuna marks the true costs of development: the human costs. Under the current model where the value of all is measured in dollars, it amounts to mere pocket change.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE GARIFUNA PEOPLE and their struggles for the defense of their homes and communities:

info@rightsaction.org

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