

**Rigores Community Attacked & Burned (Aguan Valley,
Honduras)**
Police Draw Guns On Human Rights Delegation From The U.S.
Rights Action report, July 1, 2011

On July 1, 2011 a group of 18 US and Canadian citizens visited the community of Rigores, Tocoa, Cortes (as part of a delegation with the Alliance for Global Justice and Rights Action) to learn about the violent and illegal eviction which had occurred there on Sunday, June 26. At approximately 9am (July 1), while the group was hearing testimonies about last weeks' attack, a group of approximately 50 security forces, principally the police special forces COBRA unit, but also including a military special forces sharp shooter moved into the community from a side street, in the style of a military assault, burning houses.

The police approached the community members gathered with the human rights observation delegation with their guns drawn. This action can only be described as a militarized assault on a civilian community, not an eviction as no notice was given to the community. Local human rights activists and community leaders discussed the legality of the action with the police.

Previous to the July 1 assault, community members reported to the human rights delegation that a truck with private security guards - who were paramilitaries trained in the Rio Claro military base - was parked out of view near the entrance to the community. Local human rights activists believe that the paramilitaries did not participate in the acts of violence because of the presence of the human rights observer mission.

The eviction is illegal not only because of the violence with which it was carried out but also because although judicial orders had been issued, no judge was present, and there had not been any investigation by the Public Ministry into the conditions that gave legitimate land rights to the families which have lived on and farmed the land for 11 years.

Rights Action is extremely concerned that once the human rights observation mission is no longer present further violence will be enacted against the community.

BACKGROUND: RIGORES COMMUNITY

The community of Rigores has lived on the farm for 11 years. Previous to this the land was fallow for many years. According to agrarian reform legislation in Honduras, land which has been fallow can be purchased from the title holder for the use of small farmers, so Rigores community members moved onto the land with the verbal consent of the title holder who hoped to be paid for the land by the Agrarian Reform Institute.

After years of petitioning for the agrarian reform program to be applied to this farm, African palm oil production has expanded in this area, making it an attractive investment property for palm oil producers that is then used in the production of diesel bio-fuel.

On Sunday, June 26, police burned two schools, a church and most of the homes of the 150 families who live in the town. Families are essentially homeless, including hundreds of young children, some women have miscarried. They are sleeping in the community meeting house, and had begun repairs on homes when they were again destroyed July 1.

During this visit, the human rights observation delegation heard testimony from residents reporting that the palm oil planters

private security forces are being trained as paramilitaries on the 15th Military Battalion in Rio Claro, Tocoa, and have been observed to participate in violent evictions wearing police or military uniforms. It is also reported that what appear to be US army helicopters, Chinooks, pass through the 15th Battalion, and that US Army Rangers have conducted joint operations with the 15th Battalion.

Palm oil company security forces that appear to act as paramilitaries are blamed for dozens of killings in the region over the past two years, eight in Tocoa over the past month. On May 15, Francisco Lopez Pascual, a member of the Rigores community, disappeared. His ten year old son reported witnessing security guards shoot his father. Nearby farmers report that police found shell casings and a trail of blood that led into the neighboring Panama Farm, a palm oil plantation that maintains heavy presence of security guards, but refused to enter the farm. Though a photograph of the Lopez Pascual's body was reportedly posted on internet, his body has not been located.

Extremely violent evictions are common since the June 28, 2009 military coup, especially in this region. On June 9, 2011, 89 year old Jose Luis Rodriguez was burned alive in the home he shared with his family in the agrarian community 28 de Mayo, a community that borders Tocoa, but is located in in Trujillo, Colon. A group of 40 police attacked the community with tear gas and burned homes. A community member is reported to have warned the security forces not to burn the houses since an elderly man had been unable to leave quickly during the rapid assault. The police responded to his pleas by beating him.

Rights Action holds the US and Canadian governments partially responsible for the on-going systemic repression carried out in Honduras by the military-backed regime that came to power

after the June 2009 military coup. Internationally, the US and Canada have been the most vocal supporters of this regime.

We also hold the OAS partially responsible, having recently re-admitted Honduras to the OAS, while doing effectively nothing to curtail the systemic repression in Honduras.

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EMERGENCY RELIEF FUNDS

Rights Action has made an initial donation to the Rigores community. To support the shelter, food and health needs of the 150 families, make your tax-deductible check payable to "Rights Action" and mail to:

UNITED STATES: Box 50887, Washington DC, 20091-0887
CANADA: 552 - 351 Queen St. E, Toronto ON, M5A-1T8

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