

Honduras Is Open Business ... And Repression **Report from a fact-finding delegation, March 16-23** By Grahame Russell, March 31, 2013

The June 2009 military coup that ousted the democratically elected government of Honduras brought to power the military-backed regime of President Pepe Lobo that favours the interests of the powerful economic sectors of Honduras ... and the interests of global companies and investors, while using repression against the Honduran people's pro-democracy movement and against members of the newly formed LIBRE political party.



Huge sign in the San Pedro Sula international airport. “We are the most attractive investment destination in Latin America. More than 650 kilometers of Caribbean coastline.”

Global investments and business activities in certain sectors of the Honduran economy have spiked since the 2009 coup, along with levels of violence, repression, corruption and impunity. (All photos @ Camila Rich)

Already a weak democracy with a fragile administration of justice before the 2009 coup, the overall living conditions of a majority of

Hondurans have spiraled considerably worse. Today, Honduras is known as the 'murder capital of the world' and a 'repression capital of the Americas'. Repression and violence have spiked since the 2009 coup, even as global business and investors have increased their economic activities in Honduras, in effect benefiting from the violence and repression, corruption and impunity.



Before heading off on a 6-day road trip, our group met with Berta Oliva of COFADEH (Committee of Family members of the Disappeared - <http://www.cofadeh.hn/>), who described the repression, violence, corruption and impunity. Since the 2009 coup, hundreds of civilians have been the victims of targeted assassinations. In the Aguan region alone, where we are headed to in northern Honduras, over 90 campesinos have been killed. No justice has been done for this campaign of repression; Honduran courts are dysfunctional at best, and deeply corrupted in favour of the interests of the pro-coup sectors at worst. Oliva compares Honduras today to the years of US-backed military repression in the 1980s and early 90s.

THE ECONOMICS OF REPRESSION

From March 16-23, Grahame Russell and Karen Spring of Rights Action led an educational solidarity delegation of 23 people from the US, Canada and Costa Rica on a 6-day road trip, meeting with Honduran human rights activists and experts and visiting:

- people and communities affected by the “San Martin” open-pit, cyanide-leaching mine that Goldcorp Inc. operated in central Honduras from 2000-2008, leaving widespread and now endemic health harms in its wake, on top of a wrecked local economy and poisoned environment in the Siria Valley;
- indigenous Garifuna communities along the north Caribbean coast that are being harmed, threatened and forcibly evicted from their communities and ancestral lands to make way for the expanding tourism industry (that caters to North American and European travelers) and quite possibly for the forthcoming “model cities” that will, if enacted, cater to global businesses and investors;
- people (mainly women) working in exploitative and oftentimes abusive conditions in the ‘maquiladora’ sweat shop clothing industry;
- campesino communities in the northern Aguan region suffering violent attacks by large landowners (backed by repressive private and State forces) to force them from their lands to make way for the production of African palm trees destined for the emerging ‘green energy’ markets for bio-fuels.

VICTIMS-SURVIVORS-PROTAGONISTS

During the trip, we met with family members of people who have been killed. We met with people and communities who have suffered and survived repression and health harms, and who continue to work and struggle in defense of their families and communities, in defense of their environment and community development, for truth and justice, and for the restoration of their democracy and the re-founding of their State and society.

It is an enormous struggle, not only against a repressive regime serving the interests of Honduras’ elites, but also against the interests of global companies and investors who see opportunity in the increasingly desperate situation in Honduras.

GOLDCORP AND CHRONIC HEALTH SUFFERING IN THE SIRIA VALLEY



In our bus, Rodolfo Arteaga – found by 2007 government urine and blood studies (that were covered up for over four years by the government and Goldcorp) to have dangerous levels of arsenic and lead in his blood – points at Goldcorp’s ‘heap-leach’ pile that, though mining was suspended in 2008, is still giving off cyanide and dangerous quantities of certain heavy metals (lead, mercury, arsenic) into the air and local water sources.

Cover-up: Though the blood and urine studies done by a government random sampling process in 2007 found that over 66% of the population living by Goldcorp’s mine in the Siria Valley are experiencing some degree of blood poisoning, no medical attention or compensation have been provided to the mine harmed people by the government or Goldcorp. Goldcorp continues to deny any responsibility whatsoever for the health harms, blaming them on a “lack of hygiene” in the local population.



Five years after suspension of the cyanide-leaching gold mining operation, re-vegetation has still not taken, though Goldcorp claims it has completed its mine closure plan and restored the local environment.



We visited Panchita in her home. She has chronic, painful skin problems. When the rashes disappear from one part of her body, they crop up soon in another.



Carol received us in her family home. At the age of 19, her twin babies were born prematurely (at 6 months) and died within 4 minutes of birth. The 2007 government blood and urine studies found she had dangerous levels of lead, arsenic and mercury in her blood.



As we walked through the communities of El Pedernal and El Escanito, near Goldcorp's mine, led by Rodolfo and Olga (left side of photo) of the Siria Valley Environmental Defense Committee (<https://www.facebook.com/ComiteAmbientalDelValleDeSiria?ref=ts&fref=ts>), people came spontaneously out of their homes to show us family members suffering chronic health harms.



“The health of our youth and of Mother Nature are integral, and have no price. ... No to transnational mining companies.”

ROBBING FROM THE POOR TO GIVE TO THE RICH

Since the early 2000s, Goldcorp has denied all claims of harms and violations, arguing repeatedly that it has brought “development” to the Siria Valley, knowing that it can be held legally accountable neither in Honduran nor Canadian courts.

The Canadian government has remained complicitly silent. During this same time period, Goldcorp and its multi-millionaire executives have given well publicized “charitable” donations of tens of millions of dollars to the University of Ottawa, Simon Fraser University, University of British Columbia, and more.

OWN A “PIECE OF THE CARIBBEAN”:

A slow ethnocide against the indigenous Garifuna people



Along Honduras' northern Caribbean coast, we visited the indigenous Garifuna communities of Triunfo de la Cruz and Sambo Creek. Here, Adolfo Lopez explains how the Triunfo community recently knocked down this cement wall that wealthy land invaders had installed, after effectively stealing their coastal land, with the hopes of building a tourism enclave.

For over 20 years, Alfredo and the Triunfo community have led a peaceful, relentless struggle in defense of their communal lands that they have lived on, uninterrupted, since the late 1700s. For his community defense work, Adolfo spent 7 years (1997-2004) in jail on trumped up criminal charges of being a narco-trafficker – one more example of how the wealthy sectors use the legal and penal systems as a tool of repression to criminalize community and human rights defenders.



Early the next morning, Alfredo and his partner Teresa brought us coconuts to drink before we headed off to visit the destructive “Micos Golf and Beach Resort” project (part of the larger “Tela Bay” tourism project) that is disappearing, in whole or in part, the Garifuna communities of Miami, Tornabe, Barra Vieja and San Juan. The Honduran regime hopes for the Tela Bay tourism project to be the “Honduran Cancun”.



Inside this fence, that illegally blocks the Garifuna off from their ancestral beach front lands, one finds a monument ...



... announcing the inauguration of the “Tela Bay Tourist Project” during the period of government of the now militarily ousted President Zelaya. Repression and violence against the Garifuna people did not begin with the 2009 coup; they have gotten worse since then.



Guided by Alfredo Lopez, we crossed the fence that illegally closed off not only ancestral community property but also the shoreline to local citizens. We walked along the beach to where the Micos golf course is being built. The entire Micos projects (5 star hotels, pools,

time-shares, tennis, golf) is being built illegally inside the Jeannette Kawas National Park, named after Jeannette Kawas, an environmental defender who was assassinated in 1995, for trying to preserve the coastal environment from large-scale “development” projects!

The Micos project is trucking in earth to fill in large extensions of wetlands and a lagoon, in order to build the golf course. (Golf legend Gary Player of South Africa has endorsed the building of this highly destructive golf course.) Major investors and supporters of this “development” project include the Inter-American Development Bank and the World Bank.



In Sambo Creek, Miriam Miranda, long-time president of OFRANEH (Organization of Black and Garifuna People of Honduras - <http://ofraneh.org/ofraneh/index.html>), spoke with us. Last year, Miriam was the target of a violent attack by the Honduran police that left her hospitalized.



Miriam explained that Garifuna communities are living through a worsening time of slow, deliberate ethnocide, due to the global tourism industry, including the interests of the infamous Canadian tycoon, Randy Jorgensen dubbed the “porn king” by Canada’s MacLeans magazine in 1993; and due to the recently conceived “model cities”, more aptly described as ‘gated communities on steroids’.

The poster:

“From Banana Republic to Model Cities. In 1911, Honduras was invaded by Manuel Bonilla, father of the actual National Party, and [American] Sam Zemurray, resulting in the dishonorable Banana Republic of the 20th century. Zemurray said: “In Honduras, a mule is worth more than a member of congress.”

“In June 2009, Honduras suffered a coup promoted by Congress, the Supreme Court, the economic elites, with the support of the Southern Command of the United States.

“One century after the invasion of Zemurray-Bonilla, the current Congress has approved the RED law (special development regions) or “model cities” with the goal of handing over pieces of water front territories to foreign investors.

“For a Honduras free of neo-colonialism and mining, NO to the model cities.”

KILLING AND EVICTING, IN THE NAME OF ‘GREEN ENERGY’



In Tegucigalpa, members of our delegation visited with a judge of the corrupted Supreme Court of Justice, handing him a letter concerning the on-going incarceration of Jose Isabel Morales Lopez (“Chavelo”), a political prisoner jailed on trumped up charges due to his work in defense of his home community.



Along the north coast, near the city of La Ceiba, we entered the prison to speak directly with “Chavelo”. Efforts continue to secure his release from this unjust jailing. Information:

<http://freechavelo.wordpress.com/>.

In the Aguan region, near the city of Tocoa, we visited two communities that had suffered direct and deadly repression linked to Miguel Facusse, the largest land-holder in Honduras. A military coup supporter and uncle of a former Honduran President, Miguel Facusse’s Dinant Corporation receives investments from the World Bank as he tries to increase production of African palm trees, destined for the production of ‘green energy’ bio-fuels, and uses military and police forces and his own armed men to attack local communities, pressuring them to leave their lands.

This first community we visited, San Isidrio, recently won a (very rare) court case confirming they were the owners of the San Isidrio African palm plantation (photo above). This case serves as a precedent for countless other land struggles in the Aguan region, wherein Facusse is using extreme violence and falsified legal arguments to try and take over vast stretches of community owned property.

In September 2012, after the San Isidrio legal victory, their lawyer – Antonio Trejo – was assassinated. Early in 2013, Trejo’s brother Jose was also assassinated while investigating his murder.



Here, one sees the lean-tos where San Isidrio villagers camp out. They take turns living on their plantation so as to sound the alarm if and when Miguel Facusse again orders his armed forces to force them from their land.



On the San Isidrio plantation, Filiberto Lopez shows our group where he had been operated on to remove a bullet after he had been shot in the back by armed forces that shot and wounded 5 members of the San Isidrio community on July 29, 2012.



Jose Chavez received us on his family property in the Panama community. He recounted how, on July 2, 2012, his brother, Gregorio Chavez, was illegally kidnapped from their family property, beaten to death and then dumped in a clandestine grave on property under the control of Miguel Facusse and his armed men. It was five days later that the family was able to locate and recover Gregorio's body.



Gregorio's children, Melki and Glenda (on right), spoke with our group about their father and about the Panama community struggle to keep their lands and community intact.



In the middle of the Panama community's African palm plantation, Pedro Angel Lobo told us how his son was killed on August 14, 2011,

and that his son's body was recovered on lands under control of Miguel Facusse's armed men. "At least", he said, "I was able to get my son's body back and give him a proper burial."

Besides the people killed over the past few years, there are at least 3 other members of the Panama community who have been "disappeared" by Facusse linked armed men since 2007 – their bodies as yet unrecovered.



Community kitchen – “la cocina” – on the Panama plantation. Food and rest for Panama community members working the plantation or taking their turn guarding the property.

EXPLOITATION AND LABOUR RIGHTS VIOLATIONS IN THE ‘SWEATSHOP’ INDUSTRY



Driving back from the north coast towards Tegucigalpa, Maria Luisa Regalado of CODEMUH (Colectiva de Mujeres Hondureñas) spoke of the systematic labour and human rights violations occurring at sweat-shop companies owned by Hanes Brand Inc., Gildan Activewear, and other textile companies. For information about the wide range of human rights and health issues CODEMUH is working on: <http://www.codemuh.net/>.

OUR PROBLEMS

From mining, tourism and so-called “green energy”, to Hanes underwear and Gildan t-shirts, these are global stories of economic exploitation benefiting from repression and impunity in Honduras. While the roots of all this go back at least through the US-backed militarism and repression of the 1970s, 80s and early 90s, violence and repression have again returned to all time high levels since the 2009 coup.

2013 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

Despite this, there is a chance for some positive political change in 2013. The wife of the militarily ousted President Zelaya has been chosen to lead of a new political party – LIBRE. Whereas many Hondurans, now in the National Resistance Front, were not Zelaya supporters before the coup, they have been moved by the dignified

and courageous positions that Mel Zelaya and Xiomara took since the day of the coup.

The 2013 presidential elections will pit the pro-coup, pro-oligarchy parties (to be backed openly or indirectly by the governments of the US and Canada and by global investors and companies) against the LIBRE party that has grown out of civil society's courageous opposition to the military coup and on-going repression, and out of the desire of Hondurans to re-found their State and society and restore a truly democratic order.

LIBRE would win truly democratic elections, given the chance. However, these elections will undoubtedly be characterized by electoral corruption and are already characterized by threats against and killings of people aligned with the LIBRE party.

This is at once a struggle for democracy and human rights in Honduras and across Latin America. It is also, deeply, a struggle for North Americans to hold our governments, companies and investors to account for 'legitimizing' the illegitimate, for empowering a repressive and undemocratic regime.

WHAT TO DO?

- 1- North Americans must pressure and keep on pressuring our elected politicians and government officials, and our companies and investors. Public pressure on and shaming of North American governments and businesses is vital if we are to stop empowering and 'legitimizing' the illegitimate Honduran regime. This is particularly important in this 2013 election year.
- 2- It is crucial to provide funding and material aid (computers, phones, cameras) to civil society groups in Honduras that are courageously struggling to denounce the abuses and human rights violations, all the while working to restore their democratic order and to re-found the State and society.
- 3- And, it is crucial to organize as many human rights accompanier projects and solidarity-educational delegations to Honduras as possible, on an on-going basis.

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RIGHTS ACTION

The roots of Rights Action's work go back to 1983 in Guatemala. Since then, and particularly since 1995, Rights Action has been funding grassroots organizations working for community development and the environment, for disaster relief, for truth, memory, justice and human rights, and for democracy and peaceful resolution of conflicts in Guatemala and Honduras, as well as in southern Mexico and El Salvador. The Canadian Rights Action Foundation, founded in 1999, is independent from Rights Action (USA). Grahame Russell and Annie Bird are co-directors of Rights Action (USA); Grahame is director of Rights Action (Canada).

TO MAKE TAX-DEDUCTIBLE DONATIONS (in Canada and the U.S.) to support the community development, environmental and human rights work of the groups highlighted above, make check payable to "Rights Action" and mail to:

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

CREDIT-CARD DONATIONS can be made (in Canada and U.S.):

<http://www.rightsaction.org/tax-deductible-donations>

- be a monthly credit card donor (Canada and U.S.)
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- SPEAKERS: Contact us to plan educational presentations in your community
- JOIN A DELEGATION: Form your own group or join one of our delegation seminars to Guatemala and Honduras to learn first hand about community development, human rights and environmental struggles
- NEWS SOURCES: www.democracynow.org / www.therealnews.com / www.upsidedownworld.org / www.dominionpaper.ca / www.rabble.ca / www.fsrn.org /
- GOOD READING: Eduardo Galeano "Open Veins of Latin America" / Howard Zinn "A People's History of the United States" / James Loewen "Lies My Teacher Told Me" / Ronald Wright "Stolen Continents" / Naomi Klein "The Shock Doctrine" / Dr Seuss's "Horton Hears A Who" /

MORE INFORMATION/ QUESTIONS

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