

**Bajo Aguan Region: Laboratory for the New Global
Counterinsurgency; Laboratory for Neoliberalism
Honduran Military Commander Accuses Annie Bird & Other Human
Rights Activists of Destabilizing Honduras**

By Annie Bird, January 3, 2014

On Thursday, December 12, Colonel German Alfaro, commander of the Xatruch III operation in the Bajo Aguan region, made statements to Honduran press that Xatruch III is investigating my activities, documenting denunciations of human rights violations, accusing me of “destabilizing” the Aguan.

This is just the latest in a series of actions by Honduran officials intended to obstruct access to justice for the victims of human rights abuses, deter victims from denouncing abuses, and criminalize human rights defenders.

The Xatruch III Joint Task Force has been carrying out a particularly intense campaign to criminalize land rights movements and human rights defenders. Xatruch III hosts embedded public prosecutors, immigration officers and other justice operators.

Inter-American Development Bank Funding Xatruch III

This is the model of “stabilization policing” which was outlined in the June 2012 law proposal to create an intelligence police unit called the TIGRES. Though the bill was shelved for over a year, after widespread outcry against the melding of police and military in one unit, newspapers reported that the first group of TIGRES was already being trained and was set to graduate in August 2012, and that the unit already had \$60 million in funding from the Inter-American Development Bank.

The TIGRES were not legally constituted until a year later, June 2013. The proposal was adapted to become solely a police unit, though

mandated to collaborate with the new Military Police for Public Order (PMOP). There are grave concerns that the PMOP and TIGRES violate fundamental democratic protections. For example, judges assigned to the PMOP are allowed to preside over hearings via internet while located outside of the country.

It is unclear what happened to the initial group of TIGRES newspapers had reported would graduate in August 2012. However in August 2012 the Xatruch III joint task force was sent into the Aguan region, a coincidence of dates suggesting that the first generation of TIGRES may have become Xatruch III.

U.S. Led Global Counterinsurgency and the Inter-American Development Bank

The PMOP and the TIGRES are stabilization policing operations, a model for security promoted by the US military in Iraq and Afghanistan based on US counterinsurgency operations in Vietnam and El Salvador. Colonel David Kilcullen, the top counterinsurgency advisor to General David Petraeus in Iraq and Afghanistan, in 2004 called for a "Global Phoenix Program." The Phoenix Program was a counterinsurgency initiative in Vietnam that combined mobile, intelligence focused, rapid response armed units, similar to stabilization police forces, with local militias, similar to the 'community police' models currently being promoted. Inter-agency intelligence centers pooled and processed information.

This counterinsurgency policing model is precisely the "police reform" the Inter-American Development Bank is promoting in Honduras, drawing on experiences from Colombia. Colonel Kilcullen's Caerus Associates, a consulting firm that advises governments and private sector, according to its website, is working in two countries in the Americas, Colombia and Honduras.

The US Special Operations Command (USSOC), the unit of the US military most directly responsible for counter-insurgency, has maintained a consistent presence at the 15th Battalion military base in Bajo Aguan since 2010. Both USSOC and the Southern Command

have funded improvements to the 15th Battalion base, from which the Xatruch forces operate. It is notable that the first Honduran Task Force names Xatruch were the troops sent to Iraq in 2004.

Counterinsurgency Without Insurgents: Securing Markets And Resources

It seems clear that Xatruch III is a counterinsurgency operation. The question is, what insurgency is being countered in Honduras? Honduras has the highest murder rate in the world, matched with similarly high impunity rates. Drug traffickers and organized crime are blamed for a large part of the violence, and for the networks of corruption in the justice system, and is the most frequently stated justification for international support for Honduran security forces. Security is without a doubt a big issue.

However, in the Bajo Aguan, apparently a testing ground for the new global counterinsurgency, it is clear that Xatruch is not focused on citizen security, or on dismantling drug trafficking networks, but rather protecting palm oil agri-businessmen by combatting social movements demanding respect for land rights, respect for and reform of agrarian reform laws, and an end to violence against them from palm oil corporations.

Col. Kilcullen's website is similarly clear: the counter-insurgency firm provides "strategic design for a world of overlapping forces - urbanization, new market horizons, resource scarcity and conflict." In the Aguan, the counterinsurgency is not aimed at reducing violence or fighting organized crime, it is about new markets and resource scarcity – the growing demand for biofuels and the competition for land between transnational businessmen and hungry farmers.

Why did Colonel Alfaro Target Me?

On December 10, I interviewed a local television journalist, Carlos Lara, regarding death threats against him, including one he had received from an employee of Dinant palm oil corporation, and the later kidnapping of his son. The kidnapping was part of a rash of

kidnappings which according to victims the Xatruch Operation has shown no interest in investigating, not even searching a house kidnapping victims identified as the place they had been held.

Lara then asked to interview me, an interview in which I described my activities documenting human rights abuses, and the dissemination of the documentation to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, the International Criminal Court, the World Bank and other policy makers.

Alfaro's statements also closely followed two announcements by the World Bank Group that could impact the interests of a palm oil corporation from whom Colonel Alfaro is reported to receive payments. Dozens of testimonies in the town of Panama report that Xatruch forces harvest the palm fruit in the Paso Aguan farm, what appears to be in-kind payment from the World Bank-funded Dinant Corporation.

On Wednesday, December 4, 2013, the Compliance Ombudsman Advisor (CAO) of the International Finance Corporation of the World Bank Group released an appraisal report that determined the need to audit the IFC's 2011 loan to the FICOHSA Corporation for potential violations of the World Bank's social and environmental safeguard policies. The CAO referred specifically to potential environmental and social impacts of FICOHSA's financing to the Dinant Corporation. This was closely followed on December 9 by statements from World Bank President Jim Kim, asserting that the World Bank Group is currently outlining an action plan in response to an audit conducted by the IFC's Compliance Advisor Ombudsman of the 2009 loan by the IFC to the Dinant Corporation, and audit spurred by a 2010 letter from Rights Action.

However, Alfaro's statements to the press apparently came most directly in response to several legal complaints filed with the Special Prosecutor for Human Rights in La Ceiba by residents of the communities of Rigores and Panama in Trujillo, Colon on December 11.

On October 28, 2013, Rights Action and the Unified Campesino Movement of the Aguan (MUCA) submitted a petition and a request for protective measures to the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights related to human rights violations impacting several campesino movements in the Aguan, including the Gregorio Chavez Refoundation Campesino Movement (MCRGC) in the Panama community. The community reported a series of extremely alarming human rights abuses related to the situation, and I agreed to accompany the victims to make complaints to the Regional Office of the Special Prosecutor for Human Rights located in La Ceiba.

Criminalization and Violence Against the Panama Community

In the end of November, the Aguan River flooded the Panama farm, causing Xatruch and Dinant security guards to abandon the farm. Tired of years of murder, rapes, attacks, threats, shootings and other violence that the Panama community describe as having endured at the hands of Dinant security, on May 20, 2013 the community had come to an agreement with Alfaro that security forces would not use the road through their town. Following the flooding, the armed forces again began using the road, the community reacted by blocking the entry to the town.

At 1 a.m. on December 1, 2013, multiple witnesses stated that a truck recognized as one of the vehicles that transports Dinant security forces, approached the entrance to the Panama community with the truck's bed covered by a canvas. When denied access to the community, the truck continued down the highway approximately 100 meters and then stopped for a few minutes. The following day community members found an unidentified dead body and reportedly contacted local police immediately. Before police reached the scene, Xatruch forces arrived and recovered the body without undertaking the investigative procedures mandated by law, and then turned the body over to the local police. A neighboring community then informed Panama residents that the police then summarily buried the body in their cemetery, without an autopsy. That same day, on Sunday, December 1, Colonel Alfaro reportedly

made statements on the local radio claiming residents of Panama had killed the person whose body had been discovered.

Two further complaints were filed in relation to incidents surrounding a shooting near a primary school in the Panama community, that neighbors report to have occurred at approximately 10 a.m. on Monday, December 2, forcing school children to throw themselves to the floor. Neighbors report that Colonel Alfaro then made statements to the media that a Xatruch patrol with three agents had been shot at, injuring a police officer, and that Panama community leader Santos Torres had participated in the shooting. Torres and his neighbors explain that at the time of the shooting he was in the National Agrarian Institute office in Tocoa. Neighbors suspect that the shooting incident was carried out by the security forces themselves, as it was in an area normally inaccessible to anyone but security forces.

A complaint was also filed by Mario Rivera of the Panama community, reporting that approximately two hours after the December 2 shooting, without a warrant or cause presented, Rivera had been forced into a Xatruch patrol car with another young man, and that the two were questioned about community leaders while being driven around with Xatruch forces cocking their guns in a threatening manner. The Xatruch forces then drove them into a palm plantation, an action understood to be a threat to kill or torture them there. Perceiving the same threat, neighbors gathered to follow the truck, which then turned around and released the young men, threatening to arrest the neighbors concerned about the safety of the men illegally detained.

Neighbors identified the Xatruch patrol as a green Ford F350, a vehicle which matches the description of a fleet of green Ford F350s donated by the U.S. government to the Honduran armed forces in July 2010. A similar vehicle was used in the killing of teenager Ebed Yanes in Tegucigalpa.

A separate complaint came from Mario Licona, a baker from the town of Rigores with no connection to campesino movements, who had visited the town of Panama to purchase a used car part. While leaving town he was arrested without evidence and is charged in the shooting.

Psychological Operations: False Accusations Against Human Rights Defenders

The false accusations against me are just the latest in a pattern of intimidation and criminalization of human rights defenders. On December 1, Honduran press published statements by Alfaro accusing Jonny Rivas, campesino leader, and Wilfredo Paz, newly elected congressman, of having met with the Panama community on November 30 to incite the community to take actions against the military. On that date both Rivas and Paz were in Tegucigalpa participating in LIBRE political party activities.

Last February, Colonel Alfaro made threatening statements directed at Wilfredo Paz of the Aguan Human Rights Observatory, as well as Jonny Rivas and Vitalino Alvarez of the Unified Campesino Movement of the Aguan, MUCA, in reaction to their complaints of a campaign of violence against campesino organizations and their supporters.

This occurred just days before my organization, Rights Action, released the report "Human Rights Violations Attributed to Military Forces in the Bajo Aguan Valley in Honduras", the report had been extensively reviewed via internet and telephone with all three of those mentioned. Witnesses later accused Colonel Alfaro of offering to pay campesino movement members as 'intelligence sources' and assembling a group of witnesses to supposed criminal activities by movement leadership, but which were reported to have received promises of visas to the United States, an incentive with a significant financial value in Honduras.

Since the February press conference, Alfaro has constantly reached out to media and particularly local media. It is highly unusual that a

regional task force commander engage with the press to such a high degree, and would appear to be an element of a psychological operation. Psyops are a specialty of USSOC, which has had significant presence on the Rio Claro military base. Interesting US military manuals explain that the US Ambassador is the person ultimately responsible for psychological operations carried out in a country not at war, but that the ambassador must always deny the existence of the operation.

Counterinsurgency Laboratory, “Development” Laboratory

The Bajo Aguan, now a testing ground for the new global counterinsurgency model, has long been a site of social experimentation by Multilateral Development Banks. In the 1970s and 1980s, World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank programs promoted the colonization of the Aguan. In the 1960's the Banks had identified the expansion of agricultural frontiers, ie, converting forests into farmlands, as a principal development goal for Central America, alongside the development of mines and hydroelectric dams. Campesinos labored to pioneer the production of African palm oil, creating approximately 40 African palm cooperative plantations in the Aguan through the Agrarian Reform program.

Miguel Facusse, reported to have been a director of the World Bank funded, Honduran government owned, National Investment Corporation (CONADI), promoted these industrial endeavors in Honduras. CONADI owned wholly and/or partially enterprises and served as the guarantor for loans to corporations. Many of these enterprises processed or added-value to agricultural production from the Aguan. In the 1970's Facusse had founded Quimicas Dinant, a soap and detergent factory, with over \$13 million in loans from Bank of America and Lloyds Bank, guaranteed by CONADI.

Reviving Battalion 3-16: Business and Military Generated Death Lists in the Aguan

Facusse founded the Association for the Progress of Honduras (APROH), together with General Gustavo Alvarez - the infamous

military dictator and founder of Battalion 3-16 - and Rafael Callejas, among many other politically influential businessmen. APROH is accused of identifying targets for the death squad activities of Battalion 3-16, targeting those considered threats to the commercial interests of the businessmen.

It is concerning that a similar grouping of businessmen and military is being created in the Aguan. Meeting under different names, such as the 'Sala Tecnica' (technical room) or 'Crisis Table,' Colonel Alfaro and other military commanders are reported to meet with representatives of the business council, Dinant and influential politicians like National Party Oscar Najera, including some of the same people reportedly associated with Battalion 3-16 in the 1980s. On at least one occasion a list of social movement leaders to be targeted for killing was reported to have been produced in a meeting. Reports also claim that a military intelligence squad of 12 people was set up in a house in Tocoa, a chilling likeness to a death squad.

Accusations that Facusse Looted Millions from Honduras

APROH is credited with being the key force that brokered the 1980 Constitutional Assembly. APROH then advocated for a development strategy of promoting loans for which CONADI became the guarantor in 1985. Later APROH was a principal promoter of the structural adjustment program in Honduras, heavily supported or promoted by the World Bank, which took place principally between 1985 and 1992.

Structural adjustment loans to the state of Honduras were used to liquidate CONADI and other state owned banks and investment funds. Debts to CONADI were declared unrecoverable and CONADI's debts to foreign banks were paid off apparently by World Bank structural adjustment loans. Dinant's \$13 million loan guaranteed by CONADI was written off.

In the same process, companies owned by CONADI were auctioned off to private investors. Another company owned by Facusse,

Comercializadora Galaxia, purchased the state owned Mejores Alimentos from CONADI for a promissory note for over \$25 million lempiras. In 1988 CONADI wrote off the debt owed by Galaxia in exchange for 'services rendered' and a supposed debt by Mejores Alimentos to Quimicas Dinant. Later that same year the CONADI board brought suit against Galaxia for the fraudulent and corrupt sale, a suit which did not prosper. A 1991 suit was filed by the General Procurator of the Nation charging Facusse and other directors of CONADI with fraud suffered a similar fate.

In 1992 and 1994, laws that regulated the Agrarian Reform program were altered as part of the World Bank sponsored structural adjustment program, allowing agrarian reform lands to be resold under a specific set of conditions. Miguel Facusse, through various legal entities including the Cressida Corporation, began acquiring African palm plantations from cooperatives in 1993. There are widespread reports that coercion and fraud leveraged these purchases. In mid-1997 the World Bank's IFC provided a loan to Cressida to expand and improve their operation, and on October 18, 1997 beloved Tocoa environmentalist Carlos Escaleras was killed; his opposition to a new Cressida Corporation palm oil processing plant is generally considered the motive.

During this time Facusse and his various corporate expressions expanded aggressively across the north coast. It is widely reported that armed thugs assisted in the process, and frequently used the 'modernized' agrarian reform, do counter-agrarian reform, as a means of taking lands from Garifuna communities and local farmers and then passing it to Facusse and other palm oil businessmen.

Given corporate legal structures, it is difficult to know if Miguel Facusse is the sole owner of the corporations he is credited with owning. Many suspect other investors may also participate in the companies, which might explain why the United States Embassy has been such a staunch supporter of Facusse, despite many incidents which suggest his participation in drug trafficking, corruption of the

justice system and violence, precisely the conditions that are used to justify US support for security initiatives in the region.

Endnote

The accusations directed at me must be understood, firstly, in the context of endemic threats and repression against community and human rights defenders across Honduras. Secondly, the threats and accusations are made against those persons and organizations that investigate and denounce the corruption and impunity, repression and violence that characterize Honduras, all of which is supported by countries like the United States, and institutions like the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank.

Rights Action

Annie Bird is co-director of Rights Action. Rights Action funds and works with grassroots organizations in Guatemala and Honduras, as well as in southern Mexico and El Salvador, that are struggling for community controlled development and environmental protection, for disaster and repression relief, for truth, memory, justice and human rights, and for democracy and the rule of law. Rights Action does extensive education and activism work concerning how the United States and Canada contribute to and benefit from endemic harms and violations in Guatemala and Honduras. Rights Action (Canada), founded in 1999, is independent from and works in conjunction with Rights Action (USA).

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Repression And Violence, Impunity And Corruption Are Policy In Honduras

Americans / Canadians: Keep on, keep on sending copies of this information, and your own letters, to your politicians (MPs, Congress members and Senators) and your own media. Since the June 2009 military coup, that ousted the democratically elected government, Honduras has become the 'Murder Capital of the world'; repression has reached the levels of the worst years of the 1980s.

Since the 2009 coup, the U.S. and Canadian governments have legitimized a succession of illegitimate post-coup regimes. North American companies and investors have increased business activities in mining, sweatshops, "model cities" and tourism. The Honduran regime remains in power due in large part to its political, economic and military relations with the U.S. and Canada.

Across Honduras, community based organizations in the pro-democracy movement need considerably more human rights accompaniment, funding, media attention on the harms and violations and education and activism in Canada and the U.S.

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