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Land Struggles in Honduras

Cover Page Footnote
This article is from an earlier iteration of Diálogo which had the subtitle "A Bilingual Journal." The publication is now titled "Diálogo: An Interdisciplinary Studies Journal."

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On an April afternoon in 2002, about 40 members of the San Juan Bautista Garifuna community gather under one of the few remaining trees in a dirt lot next to the emerald waters of the Atlantic, on the north coast of Honduras that their people have occupied for over 200 years.

Suddenly, a spark seems to run through the crowd, there are pointed glances and quick exchanges in their native language, and the teenage boys instinctively slide to the outer edges of the group, standing relaxed but at attention, machetes that moments earlier blended seamlessly with their US-style clothing now held prominently in view. Some of them dash off to shrubbery at the side of the field and come back with sturdy branches in hand; some of the older women do the same, moving slightly slower but with no less agility or determined strength.

Scenes like this are part of the fabric of life for the Garifuna community, people of African descent who came to the Atlantic coast of Honduras after being shuffled around various island territories by the French, English and Spanish.

The Garifuna originated with Africans on Spanish slave ships who ended up landing or wrecking on San Vicente island in the mid-1600s. From there they moved to surrounding Caribbean islands and intermarried with local Caribbean people and Europeans. They became successful farmers and warriors, later aiding the French in attempting to fight off English invaders. But they were eventually defeated and the British exiled about 5,000 Garifuna to the island of Balliceau, where many died of yellow fever and hunger. Those who survived were brought to the Honduran port of Trujillo in 1797, and many made their way to Belize, Guatemala and Nicaragua. Today there are about 100,000 Garifuna in Honduras, as well as large diaspora populations in US cities including Miami, New Orleans and New York.

In 1937 the local government tried to roust the Garifuna community from San Juan, massacring 25 and causing many others to flee. But despite the massacre the community survived, and they have been in an ongoing struggle to hold on to their territory ever since.

Today, they are fighting an army of would-be developers and tourism outfits, who would like to see the idyllic coast lined with five-star hotels, diving operations and safely contained examples of the "warm and colorful" Garifuna people as advertised in a guide circulated to business travelers at the airport.

On this April afternoon, it turns out the police have been called by someone connected to Saturnina Jeronimo Martinez, the woman who owns these nine hectares of land, or National Party Senator Dario Munquiu, who Martinez is selling the land to for a reported $3.8 million US. Martinez was given the land by the municipality in January 2002, as part of 63 hectares that were awarded to the Garifuna in response to their request for legal title to 328 hectares of traditional land. Once Munquiu buys the land, the community fears, it will soon be turned into a hotel or resort. Nearby, in the Triunfa de la Cruz Garifuna community, a resort called Marbella stands half-built, a monument of both victory and foreboding. The Garifuna stalled the construction of the resort about five years ago through legal challenges. But they know they will not always be so lucky.

One of the poorest countries in Latin America, there is so far relatively little large scale tourism in mainland Honduras. But still suffering the effects of Hurricane Mitch five years ago as well as an ongoing drought and a legacy of international debt as old as the country itself, the government and
speculators are desperate for profit. And anyone who has seen the lovely sunsets or swum in the warm waters of the Atlantic coast would find them hard to resist, including major resort developers and their potential guests.

The Honduran constitution, specifically Article 107, protects the land rights of indigenous people -- the Garifuna are generally considered to be indigenous. Among other things, the article stipulates that a foreign company cannot own land within 40 kilometers of the coast. Honduras is also supposed to be bound by Convention 169 of the International Labor Organization, which the country signed onto in 1995. The convention, which was also ratified by Mexico, Argentina, Norway and other countries, gives indigenous people strong rights to their traditional land as well as a say in how the land is used and a share of any profits from the land. But the Honduran government, which has been labeled the third most corrupt in Latin America by the international agency Claritas, has both ignored the convention and Constitution and found ways to get around them. For example, Saturnina Martinez, the woman who owns the nine hectares, is Garifuna but leaders of the San Juan community say she is not from the area and that she has a history from other areas of acting as a middle-person in selling land to outsiders.

"The government will buy out indigenous people who don't represent the community or have any contact with the grassroots level, and claim they are acting on behalf of the indigenous people," said Nathan Pravia, president of CONPAH, the National Confederation of Autonomous Indigenous People of Honduras (Confederacion Nacional de Pueblos Autconos de Honduras).

"CONPAH is resisting these projects that we know won't benefit indigenous people, so the government wants to undermine us and replace us with their own indigenous leaders."

In Garifuna and other indigenous areas, the government has also used the tactic of declaring areas protected forest preserves in order to wrest them from indigenous and campesino control, then use them for whatever they please. This strategy has been used in Trinunfa de la Cruz, where a lush pocket of land on the ocean has been labeled Punta Izopo National Park, and contrarily marked with one of the Private Property signs that are becoming more and more common in the area.

On a shack in the park is a banner advertising "Garifuna Tours."

"None of these tours you see advertised are run by the community," said Gregoria Flores, a resident of San Juan and president of OFRENAH, the Black Fraternal Organization of Honduras (Organizacion Fraternal Negra de Honduras). "This one is run by Italians. These are outsiders coming in."

Bitter and bloody land struggles like the Garifuna are involved in are raging all over the country of Honduras, unknown to most of the world. At the same time the Garifuna, Lenca, Misquito and other indigenous people are fighting for the right to remain on their traditional land, campesinos, many of whom are also indigenous, are struggling to establish or hold on to communities where they can plant enough food to feed their families and eke out a meager survival.

The country is full of landless peasants, many who end up fighting with each other or with indigenous groups for small areas of farmable land. For example, four tribes of indigenous Tulopane people who live in the high, remote Montana de la Flor area say their land has been invaded by a group of campesinos, many of them also indigenous Tulopane, calling themselves "Los Invincibles." Cipriano Martinez, cacique (or leader) of one of the tribes, said they have been pleading with the government for years to provide them basic health and education resources and emergency food aid, as well as police protection from Los Invincibles and other invaders.

"One of our biggest problems is invasion by people who are settling in the land owned by the four tribes," said Martinez during a meeting in April 2002. "They are making it hard for us to live, work and raise our animals. We need a police post in the area and a doctor, but we are ignored. There was a missing person in the area and the body was found, but when we brought it to the authorities, they didn't want to even look into it."

Other campesino and indigenous leaders note that situations like that at Montana de la Flor are complex and hard to negotiate, since there is an overall lack of land available for farming, while much land stands fallow, held but unused by the government or large landowners. Under agrarian reform laws originally passed in the 1960s, land that is not being used for 'production' or 'social purposes' can be legally reclaimed and redistributed by the National Agrarian Institute (INA). In typical fashion, however, the government has been reluctant to carry out agrarian reform. The Modernization of the Agriculture Sector law passed in 1992 and other recent reforms have also watered down the original reform laws. So it is regular practice for campesinos and indigenous people to take matters into their own hands. Honduran peasants are actually among the most organized in Latin America, with a wide range of campesino organizations such as the CNTE, ACAN and ANACH supporting groups of peasants in establishing communities complete with homes, farms and schools on unused "reclaimed" land.

Once they have occupied the land, the campesinos can file for legal title with INA and in many cases they are awarded the deeds. Things are never that simple, however, and often the original owner, be it an individual, government entity or corporation, will resurface demanding the land back. Evictions of the community will then be carried out, usually with the aid of police, often turning violent. At least 43 campesinos and indigenous people have been killed in land struggles since 1985.

On May 4, 2003, a member of the Montana de la Flor community, Teodoro Martinez, was "brutally decapitated," in the words of a press release issued by the indigenous organization CONPAH. The release noted that his head still had not been found, and his son Santos Modesto Martinez was also severely beaten.
CONPAH representatives said that the attacks were carried out as part of an ongoing campaign to terrorize and displace the Montana de la Flor community. Almost exactly a year earlier, on May 1, 2002, another member of the community, Luis Soto, was also brutally murdered. CONPAH notes that his murderers, like the murderers of various other compañeros, are still enjoying complete impunity.

"In 20 years, approximately 40 Tolupanes have lost their lives in defending their natural resources and the land which is the mother of creation, defending the forests which are poorly preserved and at this point almost extinguished, and defending the water," says the press release from CONPAH (in Spanish). "The list will continue to grow, with these names written to refresh the memory of our towns that have paid with blood for the defense of our land and our natural resources.

The press release says that the government and military have become "deaf" to the rights of the Tolupanes "in the face of the power of the landowners, loggers, cattle ranchers and now foreign miners who want at any cost to seize the natural resources of the land that ancestrally belong to the Tolupanes."

In July 2003, at least four activists were assassinated; local organizations blame gunmen hired by large landowners and representatives of timber companies. On July 18 environmental activist Carlos Arturo Reyes was shot and killed in his home in the Olancho region, and on July 20 campesino leaders Fabian Gonzalez and Jose Santos Carrillo were shot and killed in the La Paz province.

Then on September 16, 2003, the CNTC reported, in the province of Yoro one campesino was killed and a father and son were kidnapped by hired thugs. The father’s body was later found. Though CNTC members know the identity of the killer, the police have not arrested him and at the time of the CNTC’s report the families still had not been allowed to claim the bodies.

"We report with much sadness that our compañeros continue to be assassinated by the landowners, for the sin of working the land," wrote CNTC representative Ivan Romero Jimenez.

In some cases, U.S.-owned or multinational companies bear responsibility in the killings. For example on March 28, 2002, four campesinos in the Empresa Campesina 1 de octubre organization were murdered by guards hired by Standard Fruit de Honduras, a subsidiary of U.S.-based Dole, as they walked along a trail to work in the Belfate municipality of the Colon province. The 20 guards, armed with AK-47s, were lying in wait on land owned but largely unused by the US-based company and occupied since October by the campesino community. In a brief statement issued to press, Standard Fruit said the deaths occurred in a mutual confrontation between armed peasants and the guards. Four guards were jailed for the killings, but were released a week later.

Meanwhile, days after the 1 de octubre campesinos were killed, 220 women who in June 2001 established the country’s largest community of all female-headed households on land owned by the CURLA institute of the National Autonomous University of Honduras in the Atlántida state were fearing a violent confrontation of their own. The women, mostly single mothers who work together to plant crops and care for and educate 350 children, were in the process of filing for legal title to the 69 hectares of land known as Jardín Clonal after the agricultural experiment the university was supposed to be carrying out there. The university never started the project, according to INA, and instead the land was being used for small dairy and other projects for the personal profit of local officials. A March 13, 2002 letter from INA to Congress notes that the university was using only 14 manzanas (less than a hectare each) for a dairy and one for citrus. The letter said the land had been "deficiently managed" and "not fulfilling its purpose" since at least March 2001, leading INA to support the women’s right to the land. "They need the land for agriculture, horticulture, aviculture and the construction of homes," the letter said.

INA also noted that CURLA owns two other parcels in other states that are likewise unused.

But in early April 2002 INA was overruled by the Agrarian Council, another governmental body, which decided in favor of the university. The university had filed criminal charges of usurpation against 48 members of the community, including minors, and there are four arrest warrants out. Blanca Portillo and other women from the community who visited INA and Congressional offices on April 4, 2002 seeking support said they have received numerous death threats and expect there to be violence if the eviction order handed down by the Agrarian Council is carried out.

“This is the first time women have led a struggle like this in Honduras," said Maria Alicia Calles, president of COCOCH (Consejo Coordinadora de Organizaciones Campesinos de Honduras). "This should not just be a local issue but an international issue. We need the solidarity of everyone, especially the percent of the population that are women."

Evictions have increased since President Ricardo Maduro took office in early 2002, according to campesino leaders. On March 26, 2002, 111 families in the indigenous Lenca community of 20 de abril were evicted from beautiful mountain land in the La Paz province by over 100 police officers who removed the tin roofs from houses and burned them to the ground with all belongings inside. Community leaders think the eviction was ordered by the owner of the land, the widow of wealthy Honduran Nicolas Alvarado de Gasta, who they say violates land reform laws by owning more than the allotted number of parcels for one individual.

A week later, with the support of the militant CNTC organization, the 20 de
IN 1937 THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT TRIED TO ROUST THE GARIFUNA COMMUNITY FROM SAN JUAN, MASSACRING 25 AND CAUSING MANY OTHERS TO FLEE. BUT DESPITE THE MASSACRE THE COMMUNITY SURVIVED, AND THEY HAVE BEEN IN AN ONGOING STRUGGLE TO HOLD ON TO THEIR TERRITORY EVER SINCE.

Cipriano Martinez speaks of the community’s struggles with “The Invincibles,” a group of neighboring campesinos. Photo by Kari Lydersen

Indigenous and campesino leaders expect the land crunch to get even worse under the Maduro government, with free trade agreements like the Free Trade Area of the Americas (called ALCA in Spanish) on the table.

As the San Juan Bautista community waited for the police to arrive at the disputed lot on April 2, 2002, they brought out traditional African drums and the electric tensions morphed into a scene of celebration and resistance as the men and women, boys and girls danced the traditional hip-gyrating “punta” and chanted in their native tongue under the shade of the tree. Eventually Gregoria Flores left with members of Pastors for Peace, a U.S.-based solidarity group visiting the community. Later in the day six police officers and a government attorney named Nelly Vallejo came to the site with an arrest warrant for Flores. At a press conference in Tegucigalpa the next day, Flores, a large woman with flowing dreadlocks and bright eyes, vowed to continue the fight for land, echoing the sentiment of the older women who stood in the sun in the lot, legs solidly apart and faces set in placid determination.

“I’m 82 and I’ve never sold my land,” said a small, wiry woman in a meeting in the San Juan community center, decorated with crepe paper and posters for the Miss Verano 2002 festivities. “And no one’s going to take it from me.”

Kari Lydersen is a reporter for The Washington Post Midwest Bureau. She is also an instructor in the Urban Youth International Journalism Program and has a book about globalization and immigration from Latin America forthcoming on Common Courage Press. Contact her at Karilyde@aol.com.