

September 14, 2000

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"HONDURAN INDIGENOUS RIGHTS ACTIVISTS  
ATTACKED BY POLICE, DENIED MEDICAL CARE"

Greetings from Rights Action:

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Rights Action sends this information concerning a recent spate of repression (violations of political and civil rights) against indigenous and community human rights activists --many are members of community-based organizations supported by Rights Action-- who had been rallying and protesting in favor of their rights to land and to numerous economic and social rights.

\*\*\* See information below about how to support the work of community-based organizations in Honduras and how otherwise to get involved working on these global human rights and development issues.

We produce here a compilation of articles written by Miguel Marsh, a colleague of ours who lives and works in Honduras.

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Subject: "Honduran Indigenous Strikers Attacked by Police and Denied Medical Care"

Date: Sat, 9 Sep 2000 17:55:31 -0600  
From: "Michael Marsh" <miguel@sdnhon.org.hn>

#### BACKGROUND

In Honduras, it's safe to say that the government could care less about the indigenous population. After being ignored, at best, and mistreated or killed, at worst, for generations, indigenous groups in Honduras have come together over the last ten years to demand their basic human rights -- access to land, security, and health and education.

[CONPAH, the Confederation of Autochthonous Peoples of Honduras, brings together 9 different community-based organizations representing different indigenous, Afro-Honduran and Garifuna peoples. Rights Action supports the work of CONPAH and its member organizations.]

At some of the popular mobilizations I attended in the early 1990s, the atmosphere was frequently festive. [This was after the so-called "cold war" was over, and the US government had finally stopped blatantly underwriting military regimes throughout Central America that

systematically violated the political and civil rights of their populations. Honduras was no exception to this policy, being controlled throughout the 1980s by a brutal military regime.]

While the indigenous peoples weren't naive enough to think that after generations of abuse the government was going to do a complete about-face and work openly with them, there was a belief among many participants that if they showed that they were serious in their own demands and development, then the government would assist them. After all, as one Lenca activist said to me "Deben saber que somos Hondurenos tambien y que tenemos necesidades." (They should know that we're Hondurans too, and that we have needs.)

The times feel like they have changed. Over the last few years the atmosphere at the mobilizations has become thicker, harder. Fewer people bring their children; participants seem tenser, more anxious. Most people are extremely skeptical that their issues will be addressed adequately by the government.

Indigenous leaders and participants alike are cynical of the government and well aware that the government is not afraid to use violence, or to even shoot protesters with live ammunition, as they did last October 12th, should they decide to do so.

As a result of the government's refusal to listen and to act responsibly, and as a result of its eagerness to use violence "to restore order", each demonstration is a little more violent than the one before.

Who's to blame? The Honduran government and the US government [that has long backed the Honduran government and unjust economic status quo] and large companies (national and international) that operate throughout the country and that arm the military and security forces.

If the Honduran government had kept the promises that it had made to indigenous people in 1992-93, when they first brought their demands to Tegucigalpa, ... if the Honduran government had honored the accords that it signed with indigenous peoples in 1997, ... if the Honduran government had openly met with indigenous people, instead of shooting indigenous protesters last year, ... if, as the indigenous have been requesting for several years now, the Honduran government had carried out the disarming of cattle ranchers who hire hit squads (quasi-paramilitary groups) to regularly kill indigenous leaders, ... if the Honduran government had committed itself to promoting and guaranteeing the basic economic, social and cultural rights of indigenous people [indeed, of the country's poor majority], instead of living their own corrupt lives behind the curtain of legal immunity, ... then Honduras would not be in

the situation that it finds itself.

SEPTEMBER 5th, 2000

Some of you may have seen my stories of the peaceful indigenous encampment in front of the Presidential Palace in 1997. The indigenous --primarily Lenca and Maya-Chortis-- pressured the government to honor treaties established in the first half of the 1900s, that aimed to protect their native lands.

After a three-week demonstration, that mobilized over 5000 indigenous people (and got me briefly detained by the Honduran soldiers), the government signed a new agreement promising to comply with the ancient "Treaty of San Andres."

Or seen more cynically, they signed an agreement saying that they would abide by their other agreements, which state simply that they will abide by other agreements, etc. Here in Honduras one quickly sees that the government is most ready to sign agreements; abiding by them is another thing!

After promising to respect and give legal title to the land in question, nothing much has happened. Earlier this year, small stretches of land were titled in favor of the indigenous people. This came mostly as a result of the demonstrations last October, in which several indigenous people were shot by soldiers, (which I witnessed with my own eyes). None of the soldiers or their superiors were ever prosecuted and the government has not paid any compensation to the families victimized by the government violence.

With that history in mind, last week the Lenca and Maya-Chortis people mobilized once again, with four principal demands: 1) that the government turn over the promised lands in Copan and Ocotepeque; 2) that the government suspend activities aimed at building the controversial "El Tigre" dam along the Honduras-El Salvador border, rumoured to be funded by the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank; 3) that the government formally recognize the indigenous organizations and give them the legal status that they've been after for eight years now; and 4) that the government reinstate the Special Prosecutor for

Indigenous People.

This last call to action was the most prominent. Over a year ago the government made a "mistake" -- the Attorney General appointed a person who actually cared for indigenous people for the position of Special Prosecutor. While his decisions and actions haven't been perfect, he's been a 100% improvement over the past lackeys who have done nothing for indigenous people. He was fired from his job two weeks ago primarily because he did his job trying to protect indigenous people from the frequent attacks of cattle ranchers, etc.

I visited our friends at the strike site for a couple of days last week. The hunger strikers, including the ex-Special Prosecutor himself, are completing nine days of not eating. It was funny to see the Special Prosecutor in his suit, lying next to 75-year-old Dona Pascualita who hasn't owned a pair of shoes in her life. The hunger strike and activities are getting a fair bit of attention nationally.

Yesterday, a group of 600 Maya-Chortis took over the entrance to the

archaeological site at Copan Ruins. This is something they did also in 1997, when the latest agreement was signed. The government claims the economy loses a million lempiras a day (about \$60,000); an inflated figure though it is, this is a quick way to get the government's attention.

But the most shocking thing that happened yesterday occurred on the outskirts of Tegucigalpa [capital of Honduras]. Three hundred indigenous people in buses attempted to enter the city. Soldiers refused to let them drive into town! Absolutely no law was being broken. They were on their way to a legal demonstration. The soldiers' unconstitutional actions showed, once again, that Honduras has not left its repressive past behind. Oppression and impunity live on in the mentality of the soldiers and their commanders. The civil government, once a target of military repression, has adopted some of the same tactics used notoriously by the military.

SEPTEMBER 14, 2000

Picking up from my September 5th message, ... approximately 200 largely

Lenca protesters gathered in Tegucigalpa in front of the Attorney General's office and a group of close to 1000 Maya-Chortis mobilized in front of the gates to the famous Mayan ruins at Copan. Along the northern coast, groups of Garifuna people added their voices and the sounds of their drums to the indigenous struggle.

Their principal demands are: 1) that the Honduran government treat indigenous people in accordance with the international Covenant 169 of the International Labor Organization; 2) that the special indigenous prosecutor Gilberto Sanchez Chandias be restored to his post; 3) that indigenous people injured by police in October 1999 be indemnified; 4) that the controversial El Tigre dam, rumoured to be financed by the World Bank and Interamerican Development Bank, not be built; 5) that the government investigate and prosecute those responsible for killing indigenous leaders; and 6) the government comply with the many accords it has signed with indigenous people.

Unfortunately, in Tegucigalpa and in Copan the government responded in its now customary way. First, the new Security Minister



unconstitutionally detained over 300 indigenous protesters in route to Tegucigalpa. He would not let them enter the city, neither by bus, nor by foot, even though they had done no wrong. The day following this illegal action, the Honduran Supreme Court appointed an investigative judge to gather evidence and to interview those detained, as a first step in ruling that the Minister's actions were unconstitutional. There has been no formal ruling yet.

Fortunately, due almost entirely to the strength and flexibility of the indigenous people, an agreement was reached in Tegucigalpa on some of the issues: 1) attorney Chandias was reinstated and then voluntarily resigned in order to become the special prosecutor for the region of Intibuca, Lempira and La Paz; 2) the government for the first time recognized Covenant 169 as the highest law in Honduras concerning indigenous people; 3) the government promised that the ex-prosecutor, Eduardo Villanueva, who has venomously attacked indigenous people for years and ignored their claims, will no longer be involved in indigenous issues; 4) the government will comply with the agreements previously signed with indigenous people; among others.

But meanwhile, as word of the Tegucigalpa agreement circulated in the press and throughout the country, 400 elite Cobra soldiers, and armed individuals financed by cattlemen and business people, attacked the 1000 Maya Chorti gathered in front of the ruins at Copan. The ruins have been the site of earlier protests, first for their historical significance and second because the ruins bring in thousands of tourists and their dollars to the Honduran government.

Indigenous people know what every Honduran knows, without a demonstration, without a strike or a sit-in, the Honduran government will pay no attention to the needs of its people.

In this case, the Honduran government paid attention. It sent the soldiers to attack and dislodge the protesters. Dozens of people were struck by batons, trampled in the attack or hurt by tear gas. Injured Maya Chortis were sent scrambling for protection, throughout the Mayan ruins. Over 20 indigenous leaders were arrested, and most are still being held. The police following the attack conducted a door-to-door

search for indigenous activists.

A friend, who was working that night in the hospital, saw that some five Honduran soldiers received treatment in the emergency room. Despicably but predictably, very few indigenous people were treated at the hospital.

Indigenous people, even those injured, were corralled behind police lines or fences and could not make their way to the hospital for treatment. As a result, very few indigenous people were treated at the hospital, though initial reports indicate that over 100 were injured.

I've also heard reports that some local doctors refused to offer treatment to protesters, out of fear of the police, though I can't confirm this myself.

Oddly, the soldier's attack, much like the attack against indigenous people in 1997, and the October 12th attack of 1999, happened several hours after an agreement between the government and indigenous people had been reached. One of the reasons that the Maya Chorti demonstration

lasted a day longer than the Lenca demonstration, is that the Maya Chorti were re-re-re-negotiating their land rights with the government.

You may remember that when I accompanied the indigenous people in front of the Presidential Palace in 1997, the government had signed an agreement pledging to honor the ancient Treaty of San Andres and promising to return 4900 acres of land to the Maya Chorti. I and several other people were appointed to a committee to formally "guarantee" the agreement. To date only about 1,800 acres have been returned to the Maya Chorti.

Just five hours before they were attacked by the soldiers, Chorti leaders held a meeting with the President of the Honduran Congress, who signed a decree authorizing the purchase of additional lands for the Maya Chorti. The following day the final details were to be negotiated and the agreement was to be signed.

At 5 p.m., one hour before they were attacked, the Maya Chorti opened the gates to the park.

That is all that I relate at this time. It is once again up to the government to abide by its promises, though I have to say I'm not feeling optimistic.

Peace for all,

Michael

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#### RIGHTS ACTION

With offices in Canada, Guatemala and the US, Rights Action is a tax-exempt organization that raises funds for and otherwise supports the work of community development and human rights organizations in Chiapas, Guatemala, Honduras and Haiti.

To make financial contributions for the work of the Lenca and Chorti human rights committees in Honduras or to find out how you and your

community can get involved in global human rights and development

issues, contact our offices.

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