

Report - August 2001

COPINH
Civic Council of Indigenous and Popular Organizations of Honduras
(Consejo Civico de Organizaciones Populares e Indigenas de Honduras)

This report is based on:

- a visit that Grahame Russell (Rights Action director) made to Honduras & COPINH, July 11-29, 2001

**“PUEDE HABER CONSECUENCIAS” /
THERE MAY BE CONSEQUENCES**

In summary:

This report is a series of comments, anecdotes and analysis from Grahame's trip that will give supporters a better idea of the breadth of issues that COPINH is working on, and how they address the issues. Every time I have the chance and honor to visit with COPINH, I am ever more impressed with their vision of human rights and development work, that is deeply rooted in over 700 communities in the departments of Intibuca, La Paz and Lempira (and in a few communities of Santa Barbara), where they work. I am ever more impressed at their courage and energy to continue forward and build upon their work, despite the political obstacles and repression, and the lack of resources.

Rights Action is committed to helping COPINH consolidate and expand its work. For their work, I have little doubt that they will continue, unfortunately, to suffer on-going threats and repression.

July 11: Legal activism

I arrived in Tegucigalpa, and was met at the airport by 3 COPINH members, including Bertha Flores, our main contact and colleague in COPINH. Right away, we went to a meeting with ASJ – Asociacion para una Sociedad mas Justa (Association for a More Just Society) --, a small organization of lawyers and legal workers that works with grassroots organizations, like COPINH, on the legal aspects of the community development / human rights issues that community based groups are constantly facing.

In all cases, it is the community based groups – COPINH -- that play the principal role in: identifying the issues they are confronting; organizing and educating the communities about the nature of the political and legal processes; helping the ASJ gather pertinent evidence or information; working closely with ASJ as the legal cases advance (hopefully) through the legal and administrative processes; etc.

Example: A major issue of collaboration is the legalization of communal land title. ASJ has provided support, from time to time, as COPINH has worked for and successfully achieved community title to land in some 35 communities. These are communities that have lived on their lands for generations, but recently (over the past decades) have come under pressure from supposed “owners”, usually local powerful economic interests that want to illegally expropriate the land from the communities. There are also foreigners. Legal and political control over ones' land is vital to healthy community-based development.

Example: An area of collaboration is that ASJ lawyers go to jail, when authorities have illegally detained COPINH members. See information below about how ASJ lawyers

went to a downtown Tegucigalpa jail, July 18, to liberate 3 COPINH members who had been illegally detained during the July 18 confrontation with the police and riot troops. (One COPINH member was severely beaten not only during the protests, but also in jail while under police control.) Also, in the event of land disputes, large landowners will often manipulate the legal system, so as to have detention orders issued against COPINH members in the communities. The ASJ will go with COPINH to challenge these detentions.

ILO 169

Much of COPINH's work is based – legally and politically -- on Covenant 169 of the International Labor Organization. COPINH does popular education concerning ILO 169; the ASJ uses provisions from ILO 169, ratified by the Honduras government, in its legal arguments to demand respect for indigenous community control over their lands.

Article 107

In the case of foreigners trying to get control over lands, the COPINH and ASJ use article 107 of the Constitution that says no foreigner can own land within 40 kilometers of the borders and waterfront. The ASJ is especially invoking this article in its land-related work with Garifuna communities in the north of Honduras. The Garifuna people, represented by their organization OFRANEH (also supported by Rights Action), are working with the ASJ on a number of battles, as their lands are under aggressive "attack" from tourist-financial interests, from Honduras and from outside.

Both COPINH and OFRANEH worked closely with the ASJ in the recent campaign against the reforming of article 107 of the Honduran Constitution. While Hurricane Mitch was devastating the country, politicians tried to push through Congress a reform to article 107, allowing foreigners to own land within the 40 kilometre limit. Their argument was this would bring more and new investment into the country, thus improving "development".

Groups in opposition, representing the poorest and most discriminated sectors of Honduras, argued (correctly) that this would simply lead to more poor indigenous and Afro-Honduran groups losing their lands, in the name of a "development" model that benefits those people and organizations that have capital.

Working against the reigning "development" model, and presenting community-based and controlled "development" alternatives is at the center of COPINH's work.

July 11, Night-time: Popular health work

We drove four hours to La Esperanza, where COPINH is based, to participate in an event with Cuban doctors returning to Cuba after two years of work with campesinos and Lenca communities. After Hurricane Mitch devastated much of Honduras, rural communities clamored for emergency and longer-term medical attention. The Cuban government offered hundreds of doctors to Honduras. While the Honduran government balked at this offer, COPINH – amongst other groups – pressured the government to have the doctors arrive.

A contingent of 2 dozen Cuban doctors arrived in the Lenca region. While a number of the doctors worked in the hospital of La Esperanza, most worked in impoverished communities, coordinating their medical and educational work with COPINH. These are communities where Honduran doctors won't, for the most part, go. The work of the Cuban doctors has been beneficial to COPINH's on-going popular, community health work – including a growing area of work with natural medicines.

July 12: Grassroots, international movement building

At 6 am, we drove back to Tegucigalpa, to meet with a representative of COMPA-Honduras. COMPA is the 3-year old 'Convergencia de Movimientos Populares de las Americas' that is growing slowly across the Americas. Bertha Flores, co-founder and leader of COPINH, is one of two COMPA coordinators, the other being Gustavo Castro of the CIEPAC organization in Chiapas.

COMPA aims to bring together and mutually empower grassroots, popular organizations across the Americas. The initial meeting took place in Washington DC, fall 1999. The 2nd meeting took place in Chiapas, fall 2000. The 3rd meeting will take place in Cuba, 2002. As lead up to the 3rd meeting in Cuba, national and regional COMPA meetings are taking place across the Americas.

COPINH is the coordinator of the growth of COMPA in Central America, and particularly in Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua. COPINH has hosted the first of 2 Honduras-COMPA meetings. COMPA aims to fill a void that exists across the region – that most groups work only on local or national issues. (COPINH is an exception to this, with a broad, global vision of the nature of the problems they are facing). COMPA, by its definition, is educating about and taking on "corporate globalization," working to create "globalization from below". This latter is based on a broad understanding of human rights (including political, economic, social, cultural and social rights) and on a deep understanding of the relations between respect for and harmony with the environment and indigenous-communal forms of land ownership and use.

Addressing political assassinations

We had a second meeting with the ASJ to discuss a new project that COPINH and OFRANEH have initiated with the ASJ, dealing with an old subject – the assassination of more than 40 community leaders over the past 10 years. ASJ, in conjunction with COPINH and OFRANEH, will pick 'emblematic' cases of political assassinations that have remained in impunity. They will work these cases as far as possible in the weak and off-corrupted Honduran legal system, before filing these cases with the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights, of the Organization of American States.

There is little hope of having legal justice done inside Honduras, but there is much to be gained in terms of moral and political justice, so that these crimes and assassinations don't remain covered up by impunity.

July 12-13: Gualaco: Dams & Assassinations

With COPINH, we spent the afternoon and night camped out in front of the Honduran National Congress, in solidarity with campesinos from the municipality of Gualaco, in the central department of Olancho. Since January, they have been protesting the proposed construction of a Dam on the Babilonia river, that is dividing their community. And since January, they have been receiving death threats, breakins and beatings at the hands of private security guards hired by the Energisa company. On June 30, a community activist – Carlos Roberto Flores – was killed in front of his home (while his young and pregnant wife and two infant children were inside) by 6 security guards hired by the Energisa company.

Since July 4, about 100 people from the Gualaco community (men and women, elders and infants) have been camped in front of the National Congress, demanding: the suspension of the Energisa project, pending investigations into the legality of the

government licenses and into the environmental issues; and justice in the case of the assassination of Carlos Robert Flores.

We spent the afternoon and night, talking with the community members, before sleeping on the ground outside Congress. Bertha Flores spoke to them of COPINH's experiences in the past, under similar situations of repression and protest, and invited them to send representatives to COPINH's forth-coming Assembly, to explain the Gualaco situation. Rights Action was able to provide them with an emergency grant of 7000 Lempira [\$467] for the purchase of rice, beans, coffee, blankets, water-cleansing drops, etc.

July 13: Community outreach radio program

We drove 4 hours to La Esperanza. At 3 pm, I participated – with Bertha and other COPINH members -- in a one-hour radio program. COPINH has a one hour radio slot, Monday – Friday, every week. This is a main means of communication with their base throughout western Honduras (though not all families have radios!). After explaining what is Rights Action, and how we work, we had discussions about: "globalization"; the nature of international 'solidarity' work versus forming global 'alliances'; what and who are international NGOs; how to strengthen the work for human rights, the environment and community controlled development.

Then we had an initial meeting with COPINH leaders, in La Esperanza office. We discussed the underlying nature of how COPINH is successful, and in many ways exemplary, in doing their work:

- strengthening of organizational capacity, at the local level. The strength of COPINH is not from the main office down, but from the community level up
- widespread and appropriate education about human rights, citizen participation and the political issues that confront the people
- establishing and using good communication skills, firstly with COPINH members based in their home communities, and secondly at the regional and national levels, in getting COPINH's message known
- establishing and facilitating COPINH's ability to mobilize people, to participate in all aspects of COPINH's work, including demonstrations, and
- constantly seeking ways to create and maintain some economic stability for the organization

July 14: Washed clothes. Went for a run. Began this, and other reports.

July 15 (Sunday): Regional COPINH Assembly

COPINH held an all-day Assembly in La Esperanza, to elect a new coordinating body for the department of Intibuca, and to plan a mass mobilization (beginning July 18) related to supporting the efforts of the people from Gualaco to halt the Energisa Dam project and to have justice done for the assassination of Carlos Roberto Flores, as well as to pressure the government to comply with long standing and never-respected promises related to the rights of Lenca communities in western Honduras.

Over 100 men and women arrived from far-flung communities. It is hard to describe how hard it is for these people – mostly impoverished – to even get here to the Assembly. *A major theme of this report is that groups like Rights Action, and donors, must be aware that "doing good and sustainable community human rights and development work" is contingent on making funds available for the daily logistical necessities of travel for many*

people who have no financial resources, for the daily logistical needs of communication, and for food, lodging and water for base members.

The Assembly began with "one minute of applause" for all the people from Intibuca, and throughout Honduras, who have been killed over the years, by the State or by killers hired by large land-owners, simply because they were participating in efforts to defend and/or claim their rights. Paper was handed out to all participants, to take notes. I heard two older women laughing, saying "but we don't know how to write."

As part of the Assembly, I gave a one hour presentation (questions and answers) about global issues related to economic and military issues, and about the evolving nature of global human rights and "development" work.

Members of the Gualaco community arrived, and entered into an educational and empowering discussion with the COPINH Assembly about what is happening in Gualaco, about how the issues are common to other struggles in Honduras (indeed, elsewhere as well), and about how they can work closer together. The decision was confirmed to send as many COPINH base members as possible to join the people of Gualaco in front of the Congress.

que puede haber consecuencias

A phrase heard over and over, when discussing participation in actions related to COPINH's on-going demands with the government and related to the demands of the Gualaco community, was "Hay que tener claro de que puede haber consecuencias" (We must be clear that there might be consequences), "consequences" referring to repression from the police or armed forces.

The final part of the discussion, about supporting the Gualaco efforts for justice and furthering COPINH demands, related to how COPINH members must act in a perfect manner: responsible, coordinated, mutually supportive, no alcohol, ready to stay before the Congress "for as long as it takes", ready with sheets for sleeping, plastic sheets for rain, water bottles, natural herbs and medicines, etc.

The afternoon part of the Assembly was dedicated to electing a new coordinating body. This session was initiated by a broad discussion and debate about the nature of how COPINH works, about how the Coordinating body (to be elected as unpaid volunteers) had to listen to and implement the decisions taken by the broad Assembly, and about how COPINH can only be successful, if the base and the Coordinating body work closely together.

Then came the elections, and explicit steps were taken to ensure that women formed a substantial part of the Coordinating body, explaining clearly why. By wide acclaim, Bertha Flores was elected as the General Coordinator. Bertha has been coordinator before, and will be again. She is the main COPINH leader – respected by all, but COPINH ensures that other people are rotated through the coordination structure.

July 16 - 17: Travelling in Lenca land

With members of COPINH (Apolinario, Felix Dominguez, Andres), I went on a two day trip to the south-western corner of Intibuca, along the Salvadoran border. Driving along mountainsides, we looked down into Salvador. This is an extremely beautiful region, a jumble of steep and fertile mountains; no flatlands. Small communities – mostly poor, mostly inaccessible from the road – are scattered on the mountainsides.

To travel 50 miles, to the town of San Antonio (founded 1747), it took 3.5 hours. The road is gravel or dirt (mud, when the rains fall), winding around mountains, along ridges, up and down. Without the 4x4 Toyota pickup, rented from a friend of COPINH, we could not have made the trip.

Isolated, marginalized communities

To fully understand the challenges that COPINH must deal with, daily, in its work, it is necessary to understand how poor and isolated are the communities and how rough are the few roads that do exist. *Getting from A to B is half the struggle, and the educational and organizational work has not yet begun.*

Good community human rights and “development” work?

COPINH's strength lies in how well its base is established, community to community, even as they face huge obstacles:

1- Education

A major element of COPINH's work is long-term, empowering education, community to community. This, they have done throughout their region since 1994, despite their lack of financial resources. Using tried techniques of popular, participatory education, the main focuses of education relate to:

- critically analysing local needs and violations
- critically looking at what are the local, national and international causes of these needs and violations
- human rights and constitutional law
- indigenous rights and Covenant 169 of the ILO
- the long history of indigenous resistance to violations and repression
- examples of other struggles in other places
- the need to organize, from the community level up

2- Organization

Their education work is intertwined with work to strengthen local COPINH organization efforts. COPINH has been diligent and successful, community to community, despite the lack of financial resources. The main focus of the organizational work, built on the educational work, is to understand how organizations should be structured, community to community, and how to maintain democratic and transparent processes, from the local to regional to departmental levels. The July 18-27 (see below) mobilization would not have been possible without strong roots at the community level.

3- Communication

COPINH's education and organization work has been successful despite the enormous challenges of communication. Driving along the main (gravel and dirt) road in south-western Intibuca, top speed 25 mph, average speed 15, I got a real taste of just how much of a challenge communication is. COPINH owns one very-beaten-up truck that is often being repaired for the state of the roads. There are few phones. Most members of COPINH live off the “main” road, anywhere from a 30-minute to 3-hour hike up and down mountains.

In understanding what constitutes good, long-term human rights and community controlled “development” work, the enormity of the communication challenge cannot be understated. COPINH members, only a few elected coordinators earning a nominal

salary (\$100 - \$200/ month), walk and travel in the back of pickups for hours, even days, to communicate information concerning upcoming education, organizing and advocacy work. While the radio program is important, it is not trustworthy for communicating precise and detailed information.

4- Mobilization/ transportation

Much of COPINH's education and organization work leads to the need to transport (mobilize) its members to participate in educational activities and/or in political meetings and demonstrations. COPINH often combines its education and advocacy work. COPINH's pick-up truck does not come close to covering the transportation of COPINH members scattered in isolated communities across three departments.

COPINH members make huge personal/ family sacrifices to leave their communities for one day, or one week, to participate in educational and advocacy activities. While COPINH will do its best to pay for transportation by truck, this is not always available. COPINH participants quite simply have to pay their own way, and they are the poorest of Hondurans.

A measure of their strength, is that each community regularly chooses the person(s) who will attend education / advocacy activities, and then the community will provide a fund (L.50 – 200) for the person(s) leaving to participate. This last point is as good a proof as there exists, of the community based nature of COPINH's work. These community members then report back to community members as to what they have been doing on their behalf.

Sustainable community “development” and human rights work

The communication and mobilization challenges common throughout Honduras – indeed the Americas – cannot be over-stated. Healthy and sustainable human rights and community-controlled “development” work can not succeed without considering and providing the resources necessary to deal with these communication and transportation/ mobilization challenges.

Right to a sustainable and healthy environment

Along the road from La Esperanza, southwest towards San Antonio (along the Salvadoran border), COPINH members explain and show me a few results of their work. We pass by the place where COPINH successfully worked to close the illegal Aseradera de Carrizal (wood-cutting business) owned by a man from elsewhere in Honduras. (COPINH has successfully forced the closing of 5 large illegal wood-cutting businesses). The Carrizal business was cutting trees from land that it had illegally taken possession of. For years, authorities had ignored and/or corruptly participated in this illegal behaviour.

It took months of education and organizational work, and a week-long physical occupation of the Carrizal company's installations, by COPINH men, women and children, to finally bring this business to a halt. The company had hired thugs, and initially the police had supported the business. Once the successful occupation was finished, the land was returned to the community of El Carrizal.

(As in the case of the July 18-27 mobilization, detailed below, one sees here that direct action — after appropriate educational and organizational work – is usually the only way to ensure that the correct political and legal decisions are taken. This always comes with high costs in terms of how much time and energy it takes to mobilize and sustain a physical presence, for so long, with so few resources.)

Transportation

Along the road – the condition of which described above --, COPINH explained how they had pressured the government, including a week-long occupation in front of the National Congress, to have this road improved – to its present state! Along the road one sees signs with the name of President Carlos Roberto Flores, claiming the road reparations to be the “good works” of the President. Felix, a COPINH coordinator, commented: “Those signs should say that this road-reparation work is the result of the good work of COPINH.”

Community sustainable development

COPINH described to me 8 years of work, community to community, educating about the need to not use the “slash and burn” [“cultivo emigrante”] technique of production. This slash and burn technique comes from the lack of legal and political control that campesinos have over their land. Combining work to organize communities and then strengthen the communities’ legal control over their land – this is often dangerous work, as large owners often make corrupt claims to the land in question, backed by the force of hired mercenaries --, COPINH then educates widely about the need to use and protect their lands.

This region of Honduras is decently forested, and COPINH is at the forefront to eliminate illegal wood-cutting, and to teach campesinos how to protect their community forests.

Creative fund-raising

On various occasions in the past, COPINH has set up controls on the roads to ask for financial contributions from the passing vehicles. These solicited and voluntary contributions, and have helped COPINH survive economic crisis in the past.

Right to Education

Entering the ‘founded-in-1747’ town of San Antonio, COPINH showed me the local middle school that they successfully pressured for.

San Antonio de Intibuca – “Development” for whom?

San Antonio is a beautiful, poor pueblo, founded in 1747, with cobblestone roads and red-tiled roofs. At 120 meters above sea level, San Antonio is very hot – in the shade. Nestled in the mountains, San Antonio – along with many more towns and municipalities – will be under water if the “El Tigre” dam – to be funded in part by the World Bank – goes ahead.

We had a discussion with COPINH and the Mayor of San Antonio, about the expanse of land that would be flooded for the dam, and about the existence of “Emergency Committees” that exist in each and every town of every municipality that will potentially be affected by the El Tigre dam. In the past, on a number of occasions, Rights Action has distributed information concerning the cross-border (El Salvador-Honduras) ‘El Tigre’ dam project, and will continue our efforts to support the work of COPINH in this area.

This is an example of COPINH’s on-going work to educate and protest about ‘top-down’ “development” projects, that usually do not respond to the needs of the impoverished local community, and to educate and organize about what community-controlled “development” should look like. (More on this in the attachments concerning the issue of the Energisa Dam project, on the Babilonia River, in Gualaco, Olancho).

Colomoncagua

In a driving rain storm, we drove out of San Antonio – using the 4x4 traction --, to arrive late in Colomoncagua, just inside Honduras, further along the Salvadoran border. In the 1980s and 1990s, tens of thousands of Salvadoran refugees lived in UN-run refugee camps outside Colomoncagua. “Colo” is similar to San Antonio – cobblestone and rock roads, tiled roofs – yet, nestled much higher in the mountains. The heat is not overwhelming. As is common, the electricity crashed in Colo, luckily enough when we were already in our ‘hospedaje’ and the rain fell comfortably on the tin roof – deeply sleeping us.

Popular education in ‘El Llano Grande’

The morning of July 17, we had an initial community meeting in Colo and then drove 20 minutes to the village of El Llano Grande, where we had a 2-hour meeting with 100 men and boys, women and girls, all Lenca-descendent campesinos. Both of these meetings, like the one in La Esperanza mentioned, were open town meetings. We discussed:

- What is globalization? What is neo-liberalism? What is the “free” market system? Are these things good for human rights and community-controlled “development”?
- Internationally funded dams and what is the “development” thinking behind these dams, versus what is a healthy idea of community-controlled “development”?
- Local needs, including: access to credit, land titling, health and education, etc.
- How to strengthen the human rights and community-controlled “development” work of COPINH, and of each community?
- What and who is Rights Action (Derechos en Accion)?

Content & Procedure – Sustainable community human rights & “development” work

It is evident to me that COPINH is successfully growing because it is carefully and slowly balancing the demands of Content and Procedure.

Content:

COPINH was initially successful because it was formed by persons of Lenca and campesino descendance, from the region they work in, to openly and aggressively address the human rights and “development” issues that most affect the lives of the majority poor in the 3 departments [let alone the work that COPINH does on the national level]:

- Community land titling
- Forest protection
- Road [transportation] improvement
- Education and health
- Access to credit
- Housing
- Judicial reform
- Ending impunity of the powerful sectors (governmental or private)
- Etc.

COPINH is explicit in its position that it is not and will not be affiliated with any political party or ideology, but that their work is eminently political and certain important levels.

Procedure:

None of COPINH's work would or can be successful over the long run [COPINH is 8 years old, and growing], if it did not have the organizational and structural procedures in place

to ensure that their work and growth is based on a decision-making process from the community-level up.

While there is no doubt that COPINH is led, and was founded by courageous and gifted leaders, COPINH is successful because it has earned and kept the complete trust and support of the "base". The structures and procedures in place are the extensive network of community coordinating bodies of COPINH that elect, on an on-going basis, their representatives that participate in COPINH's work [education, organizing, mobilizations, advocacy] and in COPINH's regional decision-making and election meetings.

(See also the section above concerning Communication and Mobilization, to understand better how COPINH has been able to overcome – with evident limitations – these "procedural" challenges to healthy and sustainable human rights and community-controlled "development" work.)

Concepcion

As we drove by the town of Concepcion, Apolinario told me of the town meeting they recently had – with officials from the government, the World Bank, USAID, etc. -- concerning the possible construction of the Zuzuma Dam on the Rio Negro river. COPINH has done extensive work with the community related to notions of top-down, market based "development", versus 'bottom-up' community controlled and designed "development." The community voted almost unanimously, in front of the gathered officials, to reject the Dam project.

(As of the writing of this report, COPINH base members are still mobilized in Tegucigalpa, in front of the National Congress, while their negotiating commission – including Bertha Flores – is arguing out the last points with a government commission, including the passing of a Congressional resolution saying that the 'El Tigre' and Rio Zuzuma dam projects will not be constructed.)

Personeria Juridica

A constant thorn in the side of COPINH's work is that the national government will not grant them 'personeria juridica', corporate legal status that will permit them to:

- open a bank account in the name of COPINH
- own and sell property
- receive funds from donor agencies that cannot, otherwise, fund groups that do not have corporate status
- file legal proceedings in the name of the organization

Meanwhile, *personeria juridica* has been granted to newly formed "indigenous" organizations that work closely with the government and are now receiving funds from the World Bank. (See below, where this was one of the points that COPINH successfully pressured for during the July 18-27 mobilization).

July 18-27 – "Enabling democracy" -- Days of protest, repression, negotiation & perseverance

COPINH's work is that of "enabling democracy" because, but for the efforts of groups like COPINH (there is no other group as well organized, even as COPINH receives only a small part of the funding that more established NGOs receive), the legal and political systems don't really work, despite government claims to the contrary – 'democratic country, governed by the rule of law', etc.

(Annual mobilizations: Since 1994, COPINH has been mobilizing thousands of campesinos to come, from time to time, to Tegucigalpa, to demand what is rightfully theirs. A study ought to be done about the nature of these mobilizations, and how they contribute directly to “enabling democracy”, always at great cost to the people.)

During these 9 days, I joined COPINH in their protests before the National Congress. See the attached urgent actions and analysis that Rights Action prepared, in support of this community-based human rights / “development” activism. The main roles I had during these 3 days – including July 18th, which was brutal and distressing – were: accompaniment, international communication, accessing funds, visiting the jail and hospital.

The work of COPINH is extraordinary and exhausting, given the very limited amount of funds they had and the limited use of two beat-up pickups, one of which was immediately impounded by the police, upon arrival in Tegucigalpa! A partial list of what COPINH has to coordinate and organize for this mobilization:

- organize the transportation of some 1000 campesinos from the furthest corners of the departments of Lempira, Initbuca, La Paz, to leave La Esperanza at 2am to arrive in Tegucigalpa in a 14 vehicle caravan at 6 am! This was not to be. There were two illegal detentions of the caravan, that delayed the trip by 6 hours
- organize all aspects of this “indefinite” mobilization, including:
 - food and cooking
 - metal bins were purchased, and firewood is purchased. Mini-kitchens are established wherever
 - cleanliness and cleanup
 - water
 - medicine
 - lodging (sleeping on the ground, outside and sometimes inside)
 - marching in orderly fashion from the site of sleeping to protest sites
 - /preparation of banners and daily communiques
 - negotiations with government
 - jail visits, to visit with illegally detained
 - hospital visits, to visit with wounded
 - meetings with other NGOs to decide on how to respond to government's repression and lack of good will
 - keeping the 1000 men and women (and some children) informed on a daily basis of what is going on, what are the plans, and getting their feedback
- plan, coordinate and finance trip home, for each of the 1000 to their communities

I use “ “ for negotiations, because the government will only negotiate under hard pressure from the street protests.

“Legalization” of the Repression

Within two days of the July 18th crackdown on COPINH (see attached information), the government brought a series of ridiculous charges against some 23 persons. (See attached information). This is simply one more obstacle for COPINH, and like-minded organizations.

Jail & hospital visits

With few resources or information, and having one of their pick-ups impounded by the police, COPINH mobilized different groups of members to visit the illegally detained, in jail, and the wounded in hospital. COPINH also had to coordinate doctor and nurse visits for the many more wounded who did not go to the hospital.

"Making" democracy & human rights

A Honduran friend, who has long worked with established NGOs on development issues, and who has long been concerned for the situation of the "poor", came one night to where we were sleeping on the floor of the STIBYS union; many slept outside in the parking lot. She said she had not come earlier because it was too hard for her to be close to so much deprivation. Moreover, she expressed anger with the leaders of COPINH, for putting their members through so much suffering and hardship. "They should have planned this better!", she expressed. "There is too much suffering."

When witnessing the lack of food, water and medicine that COPINH has for its members, carrying forth these protests, her sentiments are understandable. However, they are wrong, not only in that it makes a false separation between the COPINH leadership (sleeping on the floor as well / working with small stipends) and the COPINH membership, but also, and moreover, in that her sentiments don't appreciate the lack of options the impoverished people of Honduras really have. In western Honduras, COPINH is the only group that is directly working directly with the poor, organizing them community to community, carrying forth with their just demands.

The main point is that the Honduran political, administrative and legal systems are not working — for lack of political will and/or capacity – correctly.

My conclusion is that COPINH is "making democracy" and "making human rights" from below, and that this 10-day "peregrination", as they call it, is one of the only means available to them. While there may be things they can do better for the next peregrination, the impoverished have really few or no other ways to "make democracy", to make the political, administrative and legal systems work as they should.

Achievements

After ten days of very hard living, protesting, walking and waiting, it is important to list the achievements. COPINH was not simply protesting, for the sake of protesting. On day 1, COPINH had mobilized close to 1000. By day 10, COPINH still had close to 350. Their tactic, after the first few days, was to target the particular office or institution (see below), and march there early in the morning. With this presence outside the door – usually surrounded by police and riot troops --, they would then demand an audience with the appropriate officer of the institution.

Every evening the Coordinating Committee would then meet, to decide if enough had been achieved with a particular institution, before selecting which would be there next target.

Acta de Afectacion para el Saneamiento de la territorialidad de Montana Verde
Montana Verde is a combination of two old Lenca-descendant communities in the department of Lempira. For years, COPINH has been fighting, along with the community, to have the government (via the INA – National Agrarian Institute) carry out the determinations and measurements necessary to clarify who owns the land and what are its boundaries. This is a crucial issue for Montana Verde (and many communities)

because of the cases of “owners” who come in, by force or illegal usurpation of land, and take over community property.

Only with direct pressure was COPINH able to finally force the INA to sign a document – “Acta” – committing itself to doing what INA should have done long ago. With this written document signed by INA concerning the saneamiento (legal cleansing) of the lands in question, COPINH can better carry out their local work. The struggle is not over for Montana Verde, but getting the written INA agreement was a major hurdle.

With respect to campesino and indigenous rights and culture, this is an important achievement – having control over one’s community land is the basis of any and all indigenous well-being.

Agilizacion de un nuevo proceso de ‘Personeria Juridica’

Having ‘personeria juridica’ (equivalent to corporate status) facilitates many things for COPINH as a corporate entity (see commentary above), and is a simple administrative measure. For political reasons, over the years, the ex-Fiscal de las Etnias and ONIL (an “indigenous” organizations with support from the World Bank) initiated legal proceedings to prevent COPINH from receiving its corporate status!

During the July 18-27 mobilization, with direct pressure on the Ministry of Gobernacion, COPINH was able to force the Minister of Gobernacion (Vera Sofia Rubi) to sign an ‘Acta’ – witnessed by congress-persons – committing the Ministry of Gobernacion to accept a new process for personeria juridica, by-passing the pending legal objections. The grassroots legal organization ASJ will carry forward the process.

FHIS – Fondo Hondureno de Inversion Social

While COPINH has problems with the “development” vision of FHIS, run from the executive branch of government with support from the World Bank, they also know they have entitlements to FHIS “Nuestros Raices” funds to implement projects. With members in over 700 pueblos of the departments of Intibuca, La Paz, Lempira and Santa Barbara, COPINH was able to force an agreement, signed by the Minister of FHIS Moises Starkman, establishing that local COPINH committees will now be the recipients of FHIS projects, that range from micro-funds to road building projects.

Ministerio de Finanzas

COPINH signed an ‘Acta’ committing the Minister of Finances to release L.6.6 million, to carry out the long-overdue saneamiento (land ownership legal cleansing) of various communities: El Blanquito (Intibuca), Santa Cruz del Rosario (Intibuca), San Felipe (Lempira), Macheloas (Santa Barbara), etc.

The saneamiento will enable the local communities to finally have complete legal control over their lands. These are struggles that go back as many as 30 years, when avaricious land-owners violently (with corrupted State support) removed long-standing communities from their lands.

INA – Instituto Nacional Agraria

Besides the funds that the INA will receive from the Ministerio de Finanzas, to sanear a number of communities, the INA will provide the funds necessary to sanear the community of “Las Aguilas” (Intibuca). Illegally owning property there now is the former Vice-President of Honduras – Juan de la Cruz Abelard –, who, 30 years ago, forcibly removed from their lands the local population of “Las Aguilas”, and destroyed their huts.

Conclusions

- The legal and political systems of Honduras do not work democratically, according to the rule of law. This is due to corruption, lack of political interest and lack of capacity.
- The reigning development-economic model is inherently and profoundly unjust, and this is due to historical reasons as well as on-going global interests. There is very little chance in Honduras that endemic impoverishment will soon be properly addressed by the government and / or the global "development" economic community.
- Grassroots groups working for the basic human rights of the poor have few resources and few political options by which to try and fight for their rights, including indigenous rights and the crucial right to land.
- When they do organize, to carry forth such struggles, State and private land-owner repression often awaits them.
- COPINH is (arguably) the leading grassroots organization today in Honduras, advocating for both indigenous rights and, more generally, community-controlled "development" and human rights for all the Honduran poor.
- With few resources, COPINH has been exceptionally successful, since 1994, in putting and keeping in place the organizational practices necessary to develop and expand their organization, community to community.
- COPINH needs and deserves considerably more financial support, over a multiple year process. This would allow them not only to cover their basic operating costs, but also enter into an organizational self-critical and strengthening process.
- Rights Action is committed to strengthening the work of COPINH, at a minimum over the next three years.

Challenges for COPINH

- Accessing dependable funds is crucial to every challenge that COPINH faces.
- Accessing means of transportation and communication are crucial to every challenge that COPINH faces.
- The #1 organizational challenge, always, is for COPINH to strengthen its work – conceptually and in fact – in each and every community. While its work, since 1994, has been exemplary in many ways, in Rights Action's opinion, COPINH members could benefit from more interchanges and training with grassroots organizations from across the Americas, to assess their practices, and see if and how they can improve upon them.
- COPINH must continue to link economic viability at the community level with all aspects of its work. Otherwise, COPINH's impoverished members will be 'too poor' to be able to properly participate in COPINH activities.
- COPINH needs support not only to strengthen its community work, but also to spread throughout the country. There are small pockets of community-based movements throughout the country – some are actually not so small – that could benefit from interchanges and working relations with COPINH.