

October 29, 2002

Human rights award for COPINH, in Honduras.

The Body Shop announced today that COPINH (Civic Council of Indigenous and Popular Organisations) is one of 4 recipients of their 2002 Human Rights Award.

Rights Action is proud to have nominated COPINH for this Award. For over 4 years, Rights Action has supported the work of COPINH with grants, emergency funds, human rights accompaniment, technical assistance and campaigning on global development and human rights issues.

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Please re-distribute this information, citing source. If you want on/off this e-list: info@rightsaction.org

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www.the-body-shop.com // Embargoed until 29 October 2002

THE BODY SHOP HUMAN RIGHTS AWARD 2002 --- Four grassroots groups win \$300,000 global award.

Four groups fighting for housing and land rights in Israel, Kenya, Honduras and Bulgaria have today won a \$300,000 share of one of the top international human rights awards. At a special ceremony tonight in London (Tuesday 29th October 2002), The Body Shop Human Rights Award will mark the achievements of these grassroots organisations who have each demonstrated exceptional bravery and creativity in protecting and promoting housing rights for those who are marginalised.

Land-grabbing, illegal eviction, persecution and discrimination are just some of the issues our winning groups have to regularly face.

Representatives of the winning groups will be available for interview in advance of the ceremony.

Launched in 2000 The Body Shop Human Rights Award is unique in that it is the only award to highlight and celebrate the outstanding achievements of grass roots organisations working in the emerging areas of social, cultural and economic rights.

Mary Robinson, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and his holiness the Dalai Lama have endorsed the Award.

The Body Shop is grateful to Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions, who acted as invaluable advisors to the Jury in selecting regional experts. (www.cohre.org, T: (Geneva, Switzerland) 41(22)734-1028)

High resolution images of The Body Shop Human Rights Award winning groups and their communities are available for the media to download, free of charge from www.vismedia-online.com.

For further details or interview requests contact: The Body Shop International, Global Campaigns and Community Affairs, Elsley Court, 20-22 Great Titchfield Street, London, W1W 8BE, Tel: 0207 208 7600 x7187, www.the-body-shop.com.

Winning groups:

Bulgaria ñ Romani Baht Foundation

Honduras ñ COPINH (Civic Council of Indigenous and Popular Organisations)

Israel ñ National Committee for the Defence of the Rights of the Internally Displaced Kenya ñ Ilishe Trust

Human rights are often seen as just political and civil liberties. The Body Shop Human Rights Award aims to demonstrate that human rights are as much to do with economic, social and cultural rights, and that all human rights are universal, indivisible and inter-dependent.

We believe that fundamental needs such as education, housing and health are the right of every person on our planet. A human rights-based approach to these issues can redress injustice and result in lasting change in the lives of millions.

COPINH -- BUILDING HOPE

COPINH (Civic Council of Indigenous and Popular Organisations), La Esperanza, Intibuca, Honduras.

One of the poorest countries in the Americas, Honduras has a legacy of extreme poverty and human rights abuses. The terrible poverty endured by Honduras was worsened by natural disaster in 1998 when Hurricane Mitch struck with brutal force, leaving nearly 10,000 Hondurans dead.

Violations of the rights of indigenous communities and political activists continue with impunity. But many grassroots groups are campaigning vigorously to defend their rights, groups like COPINH that works to strengthen community unity and fight land rights violations in the western Honduras. It campaigns against illegal foresters and

loggers. It opposes the forced evictions of campesinos (peasant farmers) and political activists, whose homes and animals are often destroyed. It also seeks to hold the military and police to account for the abuse of the political and civil rights of campesinos and indigenous people.

In order to defend their rights, these communities backed by COPINH organise marches, sometimes taking several days, to the seat of their government in Tegucigalpa where they make their demands to be recognised as having equal rights to housing, land, health and education.

So why has COPINH been chosen as one of the winners of the 2002 Award?

The Jury agreed that the work of COPINH is exemplary, believing it to be vocal and well-organised across great distances. They have demonstrated tenacity and bravery in the face of extreme circumstances and have inspired their communities to take action to claim the land which is rightfully theirs.

The people:

10 years ago Domingo Gomez marched to the Honduran capital with COPINH to demand legal title of the Lenca people's ancestral homeland. The land was under threat from loggers and developers and the community had joined forces to prevent it being taken away from them. But Domingo paid a heavy price for his right to protest that day as he was shot by troops trying to stop the demonstration. He lost his eye. Domingo has not been disheartened by his experience and maintains his belief in COPINH as crucial in giving the indigenous people a voice.

Pascualita Vasquez is a respected member of the Council of Elders of the Lenca community. The land is remote with many areas not accessible by road. The terrain is mountainous and the conditions harsh, but it is home to the Lenca, one of the traditional indigenous Honduran groups. For time immemorial Pascualita's community believed the land had always been theirs, as this is where they had lived for many generations. When outsiders tried to confiscate the land, the community mobilised with the help of COPINH. Thanks to COPINH they were eventually successful in their battle to secure legal title.

Vincenta Gonzalez took part in one of COPINH's marches to the capital city to demand legal title to her land. With the help of COPINH, she and her husband were successful and are now looking forward to a more secure future for her and her family. Her son is now studying to be a carpenter. COPINH has been instrumental in securing a voice for women within the community whose rights were traditionally ignored. Now thanks to COPINH workshops she has a voice and is a respected member of her community and the COPINH council.

Salvador Zuniga explained to us that home to the Lenca people far extends beyond the reach of a house, including the land and everything upon it. To the Lenca, even stones have a soul, so to see outsiders invade their land, chop down trees and destroy the surrounding environment is to see the destruction of the harmony and spirit of the community. Salvador told us that COPINH helped the community to close down an illegal saw mill which was threatening the environment and the indigenous people's very existence. They succeeded. He describes the triumph as a product of our unity and determination to demand our rights.

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Speech of JosÈ Martir Pineda, General Coordinator of COPINH, Body Shop HR Award Ceremony, London, England, October 29, 2002

To members of this prestigious company, To distinguished guests,

It is for me an enormous honor to receive, on this occasion, this award in recognition of our struggle in defense of human life which is profoundly intertwined with the life of all plants, animals, and with water, Mother Earth and all elements of nature.

It is, for indigenous people, imperative that humanity understand that if we continue to attack and undermine nature and communitarian and harmonious ways of existing, then the destruction of our large and only home will be inevitable.

Thus, in the name of thousands of Lenca sisters and brothers in Honduras, I thank the Body Shop for this award. I re-affirm our commitment to fight for the defense of the forests, for justice, for the rights of indigenous peoples, for life and human dignity.

In the name of my Lenca sisters and brothers, I call to humanity to work together to build peace in the world, to put an end to efforts for more war, and to work together for an equitable development model that respects nature.

Our peoples have given the world indescribable sacrifices. We cry out for an end to centuries of death, of modern slavery, of impoverishment and exclusion.

Our peoples cry out for life and a just world. We demand solidarity, respect for all human rights and self-determination for our peoples because we are in the process of developing and nurturing the human spirit in its broadest dimension!

°!Viva los DERECHOS HUMANOS!!
°!Vivan los Pueblos Indígenas!!
°!Muchas gracias!!

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«A People's Movement», by Marguerite Pigeon [a Rights Action colleague who worked with COPINH January ñ June, 2002]

It has sometimes been asked what one can do for one's country. For just over 10 years, a single organization in Honduras has made a difference in the lives of the poor majority by tirelessly and passionately demanding the reverse: that the country do more for its citizens.

It is no overstatement to say that COPINH (The Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras) has transformed the political landscape of Honduras from one of repression and submission to one of participation and negotiation.

By educating and mobilizing thousands of poor Hondurans, giving a face and voice to the country's indigenous people, and joining forces with other grassroots organizations in the country, throughout Central America, and in North America, COPINH has won concrete victories against tremendous odds (including on-going repression). These include recognition for hundreds of indigenous land titles, new schools, roads and medical facilities, and the shut-down of illegal logging operations -- all while instilling a sense of pride and political agency in its membership.

Strategic and Progressive

The history of COPINH is both simple and complicated. Simple, in that it emerged like most grassroots human rights organizations: to fight and win a local fight --in this case, a campaign in the Western Honduran state of Intibuc to save a forest from illegal and environmentally damaging logging.

What enriches this history is its vision. In short, the founding members of COPINH ñ mostly descendants of the Lenca people -- used the logging protest to channel new momentum that was building in Honduras in the early 1990s, after the brutal repression of the 1970s and 1980s at the hands of the US-backed military and death squads.

They knew the people were restless but resilient. They calculated that organization-building, education and protest were again possible. Finally, they understood that the power of the international indigenous movement could be used to entrench human rights at home.

Largely agrarian, illiterate, poor, and politically powerless, the campesino and indigenous people of Honduran have lived for centuries in repression and near feudalism. In Western Honduras, the Lenca

indigenous people have lost their language and had much of their culture all but destroyed.

By calling themselves a movement of human rights and restitution, COPINH seeks to reverse this damage. Based in Western Honduras, but open to members from around the country, COPINH uses as its guiding principle an indigenous vision, one that is democratic, respectful of the land, and spiritual.

COPINH and Rights Action

For four years, Rights Action has worked in partnership with COPINH. Rights Action has provided financial, technical and political support for the group. RA staffers and volunteers have provided human rights accompaniment. RA has worked closely with COPINH in education and activism work related to global economic and military issues.

Helping COPINH develop an international profile, publicly denouncing state-sponsored violence against COPINH members, promoting COPINH's campaigns against invasive projects like the globally-funded El Tigre dam, attending local meetings, and participating in traditional Lenca ceremonies, RA does our best to accompany COPINH every step of the way.

At the same time, COPINH serves as a model of how to sustain a grassroots organization in Central America. Rights Action, which works with dozens of similar groups in several countries, draws on this success by sponsoring delegations to Honduras, as well as bringing COPINH speakers to the North to share their vision with others.

The Body Shop Human Rights Award

This year, the on-going struggle for justice in Honduras will move to the next level as COPINH accepts the Body Shop's prestigious international award for human rights. With pride, Rights Action nominated COPINH, and with pride Rights Action congratulates COPINH's members, and more importantly, its communities, for their self-sacrifice and commitment to a more just society and global community.

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CONTACT INFORMATION:

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COPINH via RIGHTS ACTION:

For more information about COPINH, contact Rights Action. Rights Action is a multi-faceted development and human rights organization that raises funds for community rights-based development work in Southern Mexico, Central America (mainly Guatemala & Honduras) and Peru, and educates and activates about global development and human rights issues.

TAX-DEDUCTIBLE DONATIONS:

To financially support the community development work of COPINH, make check payable to "Rights Action" and mail to:

USA: 1830 Connecticut Av, NW, Washington DC, 20009.

Canada: 509 St. Clair Av. W. [Box 73527], Toronto ON, M6C-1C0.

DONATE ON-LINE (in the US): www.rightsaction.org.

INTERESTED IN: Being on our e-list? Being on our newsletter list?
Going on educational delegations to Mexico, Central America or Peru?
Being a human rights accompanier in the south?, then:
info@rightsaction.org, www.rightsaction.org. 416-654-2074.

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