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Honduras – The Anti-War Protest You Didn't Hear About

‘The Anti-War Protest You Didn’t Hear About’, by Matt Ginsberg-Jaeckle

La Esperanza, Honduras, 2/15/2003 -- Three o'clock in the morning is a cold hour in La Esperanza, Honduras. Below the streaming light of a full moon and the starkly illuminated clouds, a bus packed full of members of the indigenous Lenca population of Western Honduras begins to carve a path through the crisp evening air. Over a hundred Lencas organized in the Civil Counsel of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (COPINH) begin the four-hour journey down from the mountains and towards the U.S. embassy in Tegucigalpa. There they would join hundreds of unionists, students, and other indigenous populations to do their part in the worldwide day of action against the war in Iraq.

To an observer, it may seem strange to see busloads of people whose daily lives involve working in the fields, making tortillas by hand, and struggling to survive concerned enough about a war thousands of miles away to make a trek of up to eight hours for a protest that seemingly does not directly affect their daily lives.

To the hundreds of people from around Honduras who made the journey, however, the word *warí* is one that they are all too familiar with ñ in all of its connotations. Honduras has always had a strong U.S. military presence, being used in the 1980ís as the base for the U.S. counter-insurgency wars in Nicaragua and El Salvador. Hundreds of Hondurans were ‘disappeared’ by U.S.-trained counter-insurgency squads in the 1980ís, and thousands killed, while U.S. troops did untold damage in the mountain communities where they patrolled for guerilla traffic. But this is not the only sense in which *warí* has become meaningful for Hondurans.

During the protest, while group after group expressed solidarity with the Iraqi and Palestinian people, drawing connections between U.S. imperialist aggression in Latin America and the Middle East, there was also another type of warfare adamantly denounced. ‘While Bush drops bombs on Iraq, we must remember that he drops ‘economic bombs’ on the countries of the Third World every day,’ pointed out Salvador Z’niga, a COPINH leader. ‘The Free Trade agreements which the U.S., along with and through the W.T.O., World Bank and I.M.F., impose on us, such as the Free Trade Area of the Americas and Plan Puebla Panam’, can be seen as nothing less than economic warfare.’

Economic warfare was a recurring theme of the day. Several speakers pointed out that just as close to a million Iraqis have already died from United Nations economic sanctions on Iraq, people around Latin America have suffered and died as a result of economic measures, not just sanctions, as in Cuba, but also because of the strict economic

austerity measures imposed through IMF and World Bank Structural Adjustment Programs and other Free Trade agreements, such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

One speaker asked whether we might rightly consider a child denied access to a privatized hospital because of the inability to pay World Bank-imposed user fees a victim of warfare as well. After all, as Mother Theresa said, 'poverty is the worst form of violence.' The Honduran currency has been devalued year after year under the pretext of attracting investment, yet with the effect of decreasing the purchasing power of the already pitiful wages of Honduran workers, limiting or cutting off access to even the most basic necessities.

As the international economic actors have demanded that labor and environmental restriction be cut back, again to 'attract investment,' wages have fallen dramatically and unions have been busted, leading to a situation where many workers are asked to survive on less than \$3 per day, nowhere close to enough money for a person to provide for a family's daily food, much less other necessities.

Meanwhile, again in the name of investment and 'development,' proposed megaprojects such as the El Tigre dam in Western Honduras (promoted and supported by the Inter-American Development Bank) threaten to wipe out tens of thousands of indigenous and campesino households, while the energy from such projects, under the guidelines of Plan Puebla Panam., will be bought and sold on the newly created regional energy market, rarely if ever benefiting the rural populations that are to be displaced. The El Tigre dam, for example, would be strategically located next to industrial maquila (sweatshop) zones across the border in El Salvador. This too, argued the protesters, is warfare.

Another connection made by the protesters was between the mentality of imperialist aggression in Iraq and neo-colonial economic structures throughout the Third World. In both cases, the United States claims to have moral authority to make economic and political decisions for other peoples. Whether the imposition is that of a neoliberal/capitalist economic program or the proposed post-war provisional U.S. military government in Iraq, the attitude is colonialist and imperialist, argued the Honduran protesters.

Just as people around the world understand the incentive of large oil companies to assure greater control of petroleum-rich Iraq, so to do they see the incentive of U.S. corporations to seek greater control of labor and natural resource-rich Latin America through the imposition of neoliberal economic structures and 'investors' rights.' For this reason, alongside of chants such as 'No queremos, no nos da la gana, ser una colonia, Norteamericana' (We do not want to be a North American colony), protesters burned U.S. flags and continued with chants of 'Qu mala, qu mala, por invasor' (Burn it, burn it, [as punishment] for invasion).

The message was clear. An anti-war movement must address all forms of warfare. Stopping the war in Iraq is obviously the immediate goal. A strong applause echoed through the streets in support of the human shields who are traveling to Iraq from North America, Europe and the Middle East. Fists shot high in the air as a union leader read the list of sites around the world demonstrating against the impending war in Iraq.

At the same time, the point was made time and again that the mission of an effective resistance movement must be to build a new society. In such a society there is no room for paternalistic, colonialist, economic or military manipulation, be it through petroleum wars in Iraq or economic agreements in Latin America and the rest of the Third World. Instead, asserted these protesters, using a phrase adopted by anti-corporate globalization protests around the world, the peoples of the world must globalize solidarity because another world is possible.

This is the dream that drew campesinos, indigenous, trade unionists, and students from around Honduras to this protest in front of the U.S. embassy. As they denounced the war, they announced the possibility of a world without the economic exploitation and military aggression. Tired from the travel, hungry from not eating all day, nervous because of massive police presence and a tinted-windowed car that followed them all the way from the embassy to their bus, the spirits of the hundreds of members of COPINH were high nonetheless. By the time they arrived back in La Esperanza, the full moon had returned, as if to welcome them home, and the clouds surrounding it were lit with the sunset's colors. Joking and laughing amongst themselves, keeping an eye on the beauty of their mountainous region, these protesters had no need to repeat the slogan of the day; they embodied it ñ OTRO MUNDO ES POSIBLE!

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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.

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