

June 7, 2003

URGENT ACTION
COPINH DEMANDS EDUCATION REFORM IN HONDURAS

ìEducation makes people easy to lead, but difficult to drive; easy to govern, but impossible to enslave.î Henry Peter Broughan

COPINH (Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras) yesterday took control of a local Department of Education building, demanding education reform, particularly in the rural, predominantly indigenous regions where teachers are scarce if not altogether absent.

Please send emails [see below] to the government of Honduras.

If you want on/ off this elist: info@rightsaction.org

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[This article/ urgent action was prepared by Jessica Pupovac, who works with Rights Action in Honduras]

Over 500 years ago, Cristopher Columbus landed in the Bahia Islands of what is now known as Honduras. Within one generation the colonialists were running every pueblo and remote village throughout the lands. Within two generations, almost every Indigenous language had been eradicated.

Popular and indigenous movements in neighboring Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua have taken up arms to resist US-backed State repression and to demand their rights on various occasions during the second half of the twentieth century, but not in Honduras. Some Hondurans I have met call themselves a ìdocileî people, beaten down so many times they no longer attempt to get up and demand what is rightfully theirs.

But not in La Esperanza, Intibuca, where COPINH (Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras) yesterday ìtookî the Department of Education building, demanding education reform, particularly in the rural, predominantly indigenous regions where teachers are scarce if not altogether absent. COPINH is a grassroots community development organization working for indigenous and human rights throughout western Honduras in Lenca descendent and campesino communities.

In this case, COPINH is demanding the resignation of a corrupt local Director of the Ministry of Education and to address the lack of educators in rural and indigenous communities. With a folkloric music band, a group of about ten women making the tortillas throughout the day, and a crowd of approximately 50 people, the majority of whom

traveled from rural communities throughout the region, the people of COPINH arrived at the local Ministry of Education at 7am yesterday morning with no intention of leaving until their demands are met.

The recent UN Report on Human Development found that the most impoverished regions of Honduras are the departments of Lempira, Intibucá and Santa Barbara, not coincidentally the regions where the largest percentage of Honduran indigenous population resides. These departments, in addition to La Paz, are home to the majority of COPINH's constituency.

Not only are the majority of Hondurans extremely poor, but economic development stimulation and stabilization programs, designed and initiated by International Finance Institutions (IFIs), have maintained or worsened the poverty of the majority. The World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank have invested highly in Honduras, but with a largely negative as opposed to positive effect on poor and exploited communities. Recent studies show that Poverty Reduction Strategies, implemented in many African, Latin American and Asian countries by the IFIs, have increased the number of exploited people living in poverty. As the local paper El Tiempo pointed out last week, Honduras is not exception. According to the Social Forum on External Debt in Honduras, "the medicine has turned out to be worse than the illness." (El Tiempo, June 3, 2003)

Honduran external debt is \$5.6 billion, and even there were no debt it is hard to believe that investing in social services and the basic rights of the majority would be a priority of Honduran current administration or the IFIs. According to Roy Guevara Arzú, Secretary General of Afroamérica XXI, (an Inter-American organization that fights for Afro-American rights): "The methods that the current administration is utilizing are contrary to any initiative that could realistically reduce poverty -- they are implementing more taxes, devaluating the currency and investing little in the social sector ... the resources that have they only use to pay the state debts." (El Tiempo, June 3, 2003)

RIGHT TO EDUCATION

The immediate aim of COPINH's demonstration is to force the resignation of Hugo Eduardo Vasquez, who they claim is a corrupt Deputy Director of the Ministry of Education in the department of Intibucá. Vasquez is a prominent member of the Partido Nacional, the ruling party in Honduras that is notorious for corruption: last year, the President of the National Congress and others took out government loans totaling tens of millions of Lempira (Honduran currency) and used it to cancel their own debts. Under their rule, only areas of the country that align themselves with their party receive priority for social services.

An exploited and misdirected country, coupled with corrupt leaders stealing from the public purse leaves many impoverished areas without adequate schooling. Those communities that do have operational schools often lack funds for enough teachers for the number of students in the community. Approximately 16 schools in the municipality of La Esperanza have only one teacher for 100-150 students.

Recently, many teachers have been transferred from rural, indigenous areas into the larger towns. Others have simply stopped receiving their salaries. Teacher Carlos Suezo, representative of COPEMA (Colegio of High School Teachers), is a constant presence at the demonstration. He says that although he has not received a salary since February, he continues to teach his classes. Carlos loves what he does and does not have a family to support. Most do not have the freedom to make such a sacrifice and have had to look for employment elsewhere.

If a rural community has a school, it typically is only primary level. According to UN statistics, the average Honduran receives 5 years of education in his or her lifetime. If a student wishes to continue their studies and advance to middle or high school, they have to do so at an average cost of L2,000 a month (for materials, lodging and transportation). In a region where families earn on average L40-50 a day (less than \$3), continuing education beyond the fifth grade is nothing more than a pipe dream.

Therefore, students from rural communities can never go on to become teachers and return to their communities to teach, and the people are never given the means by which to educate themselves or each other and thereby improve their condition -- and the cycle of poverty and exclusion continues.

All agree that the single most important key to development and to poverty alleviation is education, touts James D Wolfenson, President of the World Bank, on the World Bank website. Yet, while the IFIs and governments of the wealthy and powerful first world nations stress the need for third world education (in order to improve its education systems to have a more skillful and therefore more productive workforce), their policies prevent that from happening. Throughout Africa, Latin American and Asia, privatization of education is being pushed by the global development banks, which experts say will raise service charges, putting education even farther out of reach for marginalized populations, and meanwhile efforts to take the indigenous populations into account are cosmetic and superficial.

Evidence of this is found in the fact that there is little or no disaggregated data for indigenous populations in Latin America, although they are disproportionately represented among the continent's poor. They are largely absent from the planning, design and

implementation of development policies and programs that directly affect their lives and communities.

However, COPINH has organized programs to train indigenous teachers to teach their communities in an inclusive manner. They have begun to collect and organize information about the repression they face and how they plan to combat it. And today, they are organizing to tell their government, and the rest of the world, that they will not be forgotten. They are pointing out the deficiencies of the education system in an attempt to create a better future.

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SUPPORT EDUCATION FOR INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES IN HONDURAS

Please cut and paste the following and send it to info@se.gob.hn (with 'Para Carlos Avela Molina' in the subject line). Please 'cc' copies to: Dr. Hugo Noe Pino, Honduran Ambassador to the USA, embassy@hondurasemb.org; Embassy of Honduras to Canada, embhonca@magma.ca and Roberto Martinez, Third Secretary, roma@magma.ca; Denis Thibault, Canadian Ambassador for Honduras, sjose-gr@dfait-maeci.gc.ca.

ESPA-OL ABAJO

June 7, 2003

Dear Mr. Minister of Education Ingeniero Carlos Avela Molina:

I write to express my support of the Lenca communities, affiliated with COPINH, parent associations and educators who have organized mobilizations in order to improve the quality of education for the indigenous and campesino children of Honduras. The demands of these mobilizations are the following:

- The depolitization of the education system, in which many Lenca communities are without teachers because they have been removed or transferred to schools in urban regions as part of political favors.
- That the government provide teachers to the communities in proportion to the number of students in said community.
- That the government open middle schools in rural areas without economic resources.
- That the Ministry of Education support the program of indigenous educator training.
- That an inclusive, multi-cultural focus be incorporated into the educational system in indigenous communities.

- That teacher's rights be respected.

We want to express to you the fact that the world has been alerted and we await an appropriate solution that will resolve the just demands of this right to education movement. We hope you will take advantage of this opportunity to show the world, and the people of Honduras, that you reject corruption and that the development of indigenous communities is important to you and that so is education.

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6 Junio 2003

Estimado Señor Ministerio de Educación Ingeniero Carlos Avela Molina:

Le envío un saludo respetuoso y fraterno.

El motivo de la presente a parte del anterior es para expresarle mi apoyo a las comunidades Lencas, afiliadas al COPINH, asociaciones de padres y madres de familia y educadores y educadoras quienes han desarrollado movilizaciones para mejorar la calidad de educación de los niños indígenas y campesinos en Honduras. Las demandas de estas movilizaciones son:

Despolitización del sistema educativo ya que muchas comunidades Lencas no tienen maestros ya que estos fueron quitados o pasados a escuelas del Centro.

Que provean maestros a las comunidades según la necesidad (de acuerdo al número de estudiantes) de cada comunidad.

Que abran centros de educación pre-básica en comunidades con pocos recursos económicos.

Que den apoyo al programa de formación de educadores indígenas.

Que desarrollen el enfoque de inter-culturalidad en la educación en las comunidades indígenas.

Que respeten los derechos de educadores.

Que cese la manipulación de la educación por parte del diputado oficialista Hugo Eduardo Vasquez.

Le manifestamos que en el mundo estamos alertas y esperando una solución justa a estas demandas.

Esperamos que le va a aprovechar esta oportunidad a mostrar al mundo y a los indígenas de su país que sí, les importan y que valoran la

educacion en Honduras.

Atte,

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RIGHTS ACTION/ DERECHOS EN ACCION

With its main office in Guatemala City, Rights Action is a tax-charitable organization (in Canada and the United States) that raises funds for over 50 community development, emergency relief & human rights projects in Southern Mexico, Central America (mainly Guatemala & Honduras) and Peru, and educates and advocates about global development and human rights issues.

ARE YOU INTERESTED IN:

- Participating in educational delegations to these countries?
- Receiving our quarterly newsletter?
- Making tax-deductible donations for community development work in these countries?
- Being a human rights accompanier in these countries?

CONTACT: info@rightsaction.org, 416-654-2074, www.rightsaction.org