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HONDURAS: HOW TO FIGHT FOR AND DEFEND THE RIGHT TO EDUCATION

This information was prepared by Jessica Pupovac (www.rightsaction.org). Please re-publish and distribute this information, citing Rights Action. If you want on/ off this e-list: info@rightsaction.org

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COPINH STRUGGLES TO IMPROVE EDUCATION IN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES, June 15, 2003

Today I write with good news. I have spent the last few weeks living and working in La Esperanza, Honduras, with COPINH, the Civic Council of Indigenous People of Honduras. The Lenca people of COPINH have every reason to have thrown in the towel decades ago and accepted their fate as an impoverished, historically marginalized people without social services or educational or employment opportunities.

However, seeing the crucial importance of an education in changing that reality, and knowing that it is their right to have access to such, they organized last week and took control of the regional Ministry of Education building, demanding placement of teachers in rural areas and a host of political and educational reforms (see previous article, Rights Action, included below). A week later, their movement larger and growing stronger, they got the attention of the international press with a energetic demonstration outside of the president's home and reached a negotiation with the government that conceded on all of their major points.

I found their struggle, and their achievements not only inspiring, but something worth sharing with the rest of the world, filled as it is with so many people who believe that things are the way they are and that the best option is usually the path of least resistance. I offer here, then, a lesson from COPINH on how to initiate meaningful change.

THEY MOBILIZED a group of people around some basic points, in this case everyone has a right to an education and our representatives are corrupt and do not represent us. They did their homework and learned of the pattern of teachers being pulled out of, or never showing up in, indigenous communities, and they solicited the support of these communities in their struggle.

THEY DEMANDED TO BE HEARD. After taking over the Ministry of Education building and attracting nationwide press attention, they moved to a busy street in front of the President's House and erected 18 crosses along the side of the road, upon which they took turns being crucified for short periods of time under the hot sun. All day

long, as people drove to work, ran errands, had lunch and came home, there they were. Being such a Christian country, and being 18 crucified campesinos on the side of the road, the national and international press covered the story, replete with photos, and the president, expecting an unidentified foreign mission the next day, was in a hurry to get them satisfied and on their way.

THEY HAD RESOLVE. The first night of the toma, there was an unmistakable sense of anticipation and celebration in the building. A traditional band came from a member community to sing songs of resistance and hope and people danced and laughed and celebrated the fact that change was underway. They never lost this spirit throughout the week.

THEY STOOD TOGETHER. A friend of mine who had worked with COPINH previously told me before I headed down here that, they had taught him the meaning of solidarity. I thought this was a hokey thing to say at the time, but now I understand what he meant. Everyone was always eager to do their part to help each other out, to share their small blankets during the cold nights, to wait until others had their food before taking their own. And, more importantly, they didn't leave ñ there was always a huge crowd of people at the toma, and before people would leave, they would make sure that others had arrived to replace them.

THEY PERSEVERED ñ EVERY TIME. Although this particular action only lasted one week, it had a lot of weight because the people of COPINH said that they weren't going to leave until a negotiation was reached. Based on previous experience, including an entire month during which they occupied part of the national congress, in 2001, government officials knew they were serious.

THEY HAD SPECIFIC GOALS TO BE MET. They had a list of demands, they prioritized them, and they brought them to the government officials in charge of implementing them. On the night of June 10, they signed an agreement with the Secretary of Education and the Secretary of Justice, promising that vacant teachers' posts would be immediately filled, that the corrupt Deputy Director in Intibuc would be suspended for a period of two months while the allegations of corruption are investigated, and that a Commission for Education Quality will be created. The Commission will be comprised of government representatives, COPINH representatives, a teacher's union.

And that, my friends, is how it is done. Rights Action takes this opportunity to congratulate COPINH in this and their many other achievements in improving the quality of life and the level of political power enjoyed by indigenous communities throughout Honduras. For me, it has been an honor to work alongside of you. (Jessica Pupovac, June 15, 2003)

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PREVIOUS URGENT ACTION, prepared by Jessica Pupovac, Rights Action.

From: Rights Action [info@rightsaction.org]

Sent: Saturday, June 07, 2003 12:03 PM

URGENT ACTION - COPINH DEMANDS EDUCATION REFORM IN HONDURAS

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

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

Over 500 years ago, Christopher 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 docile 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 took 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, Intibuc 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)

Honduras' 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 Honduras' current administration or the IFIs. According to Roy Guevara Arz, Secretary General of Afro-América 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 Intibuc. 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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Please consider making a tax-deductible donation in Canada or the USA for community education work in Honduras. Make payable to "Rights Action", and mail to USA: 1830 Connecticut Av, NW, Washington DC, 20009, or CANADA: 509 St. Clair Av, W, box73527, Toronto, ON, M6C-1C0.

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