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HONDURAS: For the Water, Life, and Land of the Peoples!

By Sandra Cuffe, an activist and human rights accompanier working with Rights Action and COPINH in Honduras.

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For the Water, Life, and Land of the Peoples! Reflections on a Gathering
by Sandra Cuffe

>Welcome. Write your name, organization, and country on this list here. We'll type it into one of these computers in one of a number of disorganized files to be misplaced later. The housing committee is extremely busy and is currently not to be found, but don't worry ñ you'll have somewhere to sleep. No, the name cards, conference folders, and posters have not arrived yet. Anyway, follow the signs around the block to the outdoor kitchenthe women of COPINH are well organized and have been preparing delicious food for days.í

Anyone expecting powerpoint presentations, slick event schedules, hotel rooms, or punctuality had come to the wrong place. This was La Esperanza, in western Honduras, where the II Forum Against Dams: for the Water and Life of the Peoples, and the III Week for Biological and Cultural Diversity were hosted simultaneously July 17-20, 2003 by COPINH (the Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras).

True to the grassroots nature of COPINH (winner of the 2002 Body Shop Human Rights Award, as nominated by Rights Action), these events were community-based and participatory. COPINH coordination and community members, a handful of volunteers, and a few others from the organizations of the Mesoamerican Convocation Committee organized the forums, guided by their own experiences as participants in other events.

Above all, however, the forums were the product of the amazing spirit and dedication of the organizers, the energy and heart of the participants, and an absolute need to share and learn about the exploitation of natural resources in the region and the community struggles in resistance.

Although many of the hundreds of participants, representing 172 organizations from 14 Latin American countries and other regions of

the world, were present in previous conferences and forums, there was also a surge of participation of community members from all over Honduras, many of whom had never before attended an international forum or anything like the gathering in which they found themselves.

As part of the III Week for Biological and Cultural Diversity, community members and organization representatives shared their histories and experiences of struggle and repression in an open and inclusive atmosphere. Participants selected one of the 19 simultaneous thematic discussion groups to analyze their situation, to make connections between local struggles, and to develop strategic action plans. Topics included GMOs, land, natural medicine, indigenous and Afro-descendent rights and culture, food security, women's rights, privatizations, and a slew of other subjects.

Participants in the II Forum Against Dams: for the Water and Life of the Peoples heard presentations on the global movement against dams, the role of international financial institutions, and representative case studies from Mesoamerican countries and around the world before they divided by region into groups to develop action plans to confront these mega-projects. The experiences of the compañeros from Colombia, Brazil, and Thailand helped those involved in local struggles in Honduras locate their community within the wider resistance movement.

The ENERGISA dam being constructed on the Babylon river in the municipality of Gualaco, department of Olancho, is an illustrative case of a local struggle in Honduras against the destruction and repression brought on by these projects. The Gualaco dam was portrayed in a giant mural hung above the stage for the duration of the events. The mural depicts the environmental destruction caused by the construction of the dam and the spirit of ongoing resistance in the affected communities. Central to the work is the depiction of Carlos Flores ñ to whom the forums were dedicated ñ assassinated in June 2001 for his active opposition to the dam.

The hosting of these events in this country is extremely significant. Honduras has too many martyrs, although news of the widespread repression and impunity rarely makes it outside of the country's borders. Over the last decade, dozens of indigenous leaders and other activists have been assassinated for their involvement in struggles for the water, land, forest, resources and life of their communities. During the evening of July 18th, while forum participants were celebrating a festive cultural night of poetry, theater, music and dance, yet another environmental activist was killed. Carlos Arturo Reyes, involved with the Environmental Movement of Olancho (MAO)'s struggle against illegal logging and related paramilitary violence in the department, was shot outside of his home in the municipality of El Rosario. Only the day before, a press conference had been held to denounce the repression and hostilities in Olancho and to demand protection for a long list of environmental activists, including 23-

year old Carlos Arturo Reyes, who had received death threats.

The urgent meetings convoked to take action against this latest assassination were but one example of the myriad of spontaneous initiatives being organized and held outside of the conference schedule. People from different communities and organizations were talking, sharing, planning, strategizing, and making connections. Further presentations were being set up, workshops going on, and mobilizations being discussed. Indigenous ceremonies were held. The video forum kept rolling while outside on the grass participants in a popular theater workshop were experimenting with funky walking styles while other musicians and actors were hanging out and jamming. One evening I strolled over to the kitchen with the intention of bringing the dedicated cooks over to the gym to experience the music, energy, and madness. I found the ensemble of Miskito musicians tuning their guitars. They played and sang for the food committee, women from COPINH communities, and a few lucky others who had wandered into the cozy little gathering.

As the last evening of artistic and cultural expression drew to a close, COPINH coordinators and others were still rushing around, restoring the school to something perhaps resembling its pre-event appearance. While some opted for a few hours sleep, many chose to relax at a cozy post-event fireside party where the conversation and singing carried on until it was time to move on. At 4am groups started heading back to the school to grab a seat in one of the buses heading to Tegucigalpa, the capital of Honduras, where we initiated our participation in the IV Mesoamerican Forum for the Self-Determination of the People with a 6-hour protest march, COPINH-style.

After unfurling the banners outside the Supreme Court to demand the freedom of Marcelino and Leonardo Miranda, unjustly imprisoned for their struggle for land and justice in Monta0a Verde, we headed across the city in the direction of the Inter-American Development Bank headquarters. Most had not eaten and had slept only a few hours over the previous days. However, the incredible energy and momentum of the forums in La Esperanza kept growing, as young COPINH coordination member Kelly led the march in a roaring chant that would be repeated by many over the next few days:

Are we afraid [of the police]?

NO!

Are we hungry?

NO!

Are we tired?

NO!

¿Entonces?

°Adelante!, °adelante!, °que la lucha sea constante!

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HOW TO HELP/GET INVOLVED!

Educate yourself and others around you! Contact Rights Action, to learn about the direct negative impacts of foreign governments, multinational corporations, and international institutions at home and in the Global South, and about the myriad of grassroots resistance struggles for justice, peace, land, and the environment.

Financially support grassroots organizations in Honduras! To learn more about and support the work of COPINH, other popular organizations in Honduras, or Rights Action itself, to volunteer, be a human rights accompanier or to participate in a human rights delegation to Honduras, Guatemala, Chiapas, Ò contact Rights Action: info@rightsaction.org, t: 416-654-2074, www.rightsaction.org.

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