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HONDURAS: THE STRUGGLE FOR FORESTS, WATER AND JUSTICE IN OLANCHO

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This is part of a series of articles about the exploitative and destructive

development model in Honduras, that serves the greedy interests of the

powerful economic sectors both inside Honduras and globally. When communities organize to protest the corrupted free trade development model, repression is soon to follow.

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°NI UN PALO MIS! -- THE STRUGGLE FOR FORESTS, WATER AND JUSTICE IN OLANCHO

In the department of Olancho, there are zones where a few years have passed

without rainfall. The quantity and pace of logging has been so extreme as

to have affected the groundwater and rainwater supplies in a relatively

short time period. This has obviously had a profound effect on the survival

and well-being of communities throughout the department, as well as in other

areas of the country where the phenomenon is occurring.

Many Olanchanos relate the problems in their department to problems they

perceive at the national level, namely the high level of corruption among

the government and economic elite and the lack of rule of law. Father Osmin

Flores, a priest in Catacamas, president of the Pastoral Social for the

Environment and active member of the Environmentalist Movement of Olancho

(MAO, for its Spanish acronym), explains that "the problem is more complex:

it is a question of land ownership; a matter of the non-application of the

forestry laws; a matter of the politician who is involved in the logging

industry or the logger who is also a politician."

## THE REVOLVING DOOR

As is the case with other Honduran government institutions, the Honduran Corporation of Forestry Development, COHDEFOR, has a number of contradictory responsibilities: granting logging concessions; developing forest management plans; enforcing environmental regulations; conservation and protected areas. While there are honest people working for COHDEFOR, there also exists a revolving door between those involved in the logging industry and the various levels of the institution. When asked his opinion about the fact that several directors of COHDEFOR have themselves been powerful businesspeople in the logging industry, Attorney for the Environment and Natural Resources Elmer Lizzardo Carranza remarked that it was tantamount to entrusting the carrot patch to a rabbit.

The relationship between politics and the logging industry is also noticeable at every level in Olancho. Many municipal mayors are involved with loggers, who offer money and security in exchange for the rights to logging concessions. Even candidates at the presidential level are complicit; an estimated 40% of campaign funds for the National and Liberal parties – the two main parties in the country – come from logging profits.

Although there exists a system of bribes in return for approved logging authorizations, much of the profit made in the business relies on bypassing the whole authorization procedure, an especially lucrative venture in various protected areas filled with precious wood. Authorities often turn a blind eye to this kind of activity, since those involved are often part of the politician–logging industry circle.

These same authorities often lay the blame for the destruction of forests on internal migrants who come to Olancho from other parts of the country looking for a patch of land to cultivate to survive and support their families. Father Andr es Tamayo, an environmentalist movement leader based in Salam., relates this movement to the pattern of logging in the

country,  
which began in the west before sweeping across to Olancho, and to the consolidation of land ownership into fewer and fewer hands: "People who have been displaced from other parts have come here. Now that they have destroyed this too, they have nowhere to go, so they're going to be migrants all their lives. And the campesino is blamed for going about destroying, but this is just propaganda, political discourse."

#### °NI UN PALO MIS! - COMMUNITY RESISTANCE

In the case of San Pedro de Catacamas, it is because of the experience of drought. All the dry wells. As a result of deforestation, the water table has dropped. This causes communities to take certain measures, disregarding COHDEFOR, disregarding any institution that has vested interests in the wood.

- Community member from San Pedro de Catacamas, Catacamas, Olancho

Many communities, witnessing the inaction and complicity of government authorities, have taken matters into their own hands. The movement to defend the environment is in large part a self-defense movement; the majority of the population is rural, relying on the land to survive. The experience of some zones, where crops are failing and the quality of life has plummeted due to the scarcity of water caused by irrational logging, has now been accompanied by local resistance.

In the case of San Pedro de Catacamas and several other communities in the area, inhabitants organized actions during three entire months, blocking the passage of logging trucks entering or leaving the community. They obtained their immediate goal - putting a complete halt to logging in the sector - as had many communities in western Honduras over the past two decades. Not a single tree more!, they say.

MARCH FOR LIFE

People from all over Olancho, both from rural communities and the urban centers, have been organizing to put a stop to the wave of destruction threatening their livelihoods and surroundings. A number of community-based organizations in Olancho, accompanied by social movements and organizations from around the country, organized a week long March for Life in June 2003, from the departmental capital of Juticalpa to the nation's capital, Tegucigalpa. The group, some 20,000 people by the time it arrived in Tegucigalpa, was met with silence from the highest levels of government, who refused to meet with a commission of representatives.

The March for Life was the most visible and possibly the largest demonstration by the social/environmental movement of Olancho; however, there have been a series of highway and road blocks, hunger strikes, and other local actions to highlight the problems and demand that the government make a serious commitment to working together for a solution. These actions have been accompanied by concrete and feasible proposals on forestry policies, elaborated by the different organizations and other supporters, including sectors of the Catholic Church, the National Agricultural University and the Committee of Relatives of the Detained-Disappeared of Honduras, COFADEH. They continue, despite the indifference of the government.

#### CHRONICLE OF A DEATH FORETOLD

In Olancho there is a custom: They tell you by phone, as they have told me, "we're going to kill you." Just like in that book . . . Chronicle of a Death Foretold. Here they let you know so you can prepare the coffin, prepare the candles and prepare the food. Because then they're going to kill you.â

– Oscar V. ldez, Municipal Human Rights Commissioner in Catacamas, Environmentalist Movement of Olancho member

On July 17, 2003, a press conference was held in the office of COFADEH to denounce a list of names that was being circulated, reportedly with

the names of 12 environmental activists from Olancho who were to be assassinated by people involved in the logging industry. The next day – July 18, 2003 – Carlos Arturo Reyes, an outspoken community and environmental activist whose name was included in the death list, was shot down outside of his home in the municipality of El Rosario.

This political assassination was not the first in Olancho; two other activists, Carlos Luna and Carlos Flores, have also been killed.

Numerous

others have been the victims of death threats and attempts on their lives.

Many connect this persecution with the militarization of the region, which

authorities state is to combat illegal logging and drug trafficking.

Father

Tamayo's opinion differs: "When the government talks of

militarization, it

means protecting logging, that's all. It simply officializes the logging

activities."

Other methods of repression are also being used to stifle and discredit the

movement and its leaders. For imaginary crimes supposedly committed during

the peaceful March for Life, Father Tamayo and some 20 other community leaders and activists have been charged with a whole salad of accusations:

extortion, blackmail, destruction of primary material, forestry demeanors,

threats and sedition. Other cases involve similar invented charges against

community leaders and Catholic Church workers from the municipalities of

Guayape and Guata, all related to their work raising awareness and mobilizing their communities in self-defense against the logging industry.

ïWe know that there are grave risks involved, and that even the application

of justice in this country is an apparatus of political and economic power,

that attempts to undermine this type of struggle, the movement for the environment.ï

– Ramón Peralta, environmental activist

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This report was written by Sandra Cuffe, who works with Rights Action in Honduras. Quotes are taken from interviews conducted during an international delegation to Olancho in July, 2003.

For more information about logging in Honduras and how to support community-based organizations working for a truly sustainable development for their communities, to come to Honduras on a fact-finding educational delegation, or to be a human rights accompanier in Honduras, contact Rights Action: [info@rightsaction.org/](mailto:info@rightsaction.org/) <<mailto:info@rightsaction.org/>> 416-654-2074/  
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