

May 8, 2004

HONDURAS: on-going struggle for a healthy and sane development model and the rule of law.

In Honduras, community development organizations are not only battling national private-sector and government sectors, but also the exploitative development policies of northern governments (insisting on the free trade model), global companies and investors, and the international development regime headed by the IMF, World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank.

The article below was written by Sandra Cuffe, who works with Rights Action in Honduras. Rights Action funds and works with a number of grassroots community development organizations in Honduras. (To support this work and to get educated and involved, see below)

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INTIBUCI STRIKES BACK! LOCAL STRUGGLES CONTINUE FOR RIGHTS & DEVELOPMENT, RESOURCES, JUSTICE

The police had caught wind of the special activities that were being planned in the twin towns of La Esperanza and Intibuc., department of Intibuc., in southwestern Honduras. A few officers slept inside the building of the Departmental Direction of Education in order to halt any protest or occupation that might take place there on April 26, 2004.

They underestimated the organizational capacity of the convergence of the grassroots groups, popular federations, unions and church-affiliated groups participating in the Regional Coordination of Popular Resistance, based out

of Intibuc.

With the experience and leadership of the Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations (COPINH), the participation of numerous other indigenous Lenca federations and local groups, the addition of the federation of potato producers, and the inclusion of the increasingly politically involved Catholic Church of the region, the united Regional Coordination launched itself into action with determination and commitment.

The police were still sleeping when the group entered the Departmental Education grounds at 3am and set up camp around the building. Bleary-eyed and throwing on their uniform accessories, they communicated the event to the police headquarters, where movement began to consider evicting the protestors.

As deliberations continued, small groups of people, unnoticed, began converging on the Municipal Mayor's Office of Intibuc, which was occupied within a few short minutes. The shared installations of the FHIA (Honduran Foundation for Agricultural Research), SAG (Secretariat of Agriculture and Livestock) and COHDEFOR (Honduran Corporation for Forestry Development) was next on the agenda. An action was also carried out in the municipality of Jes's de Otoro, along the paved highway connecting La Esperanza and Intibuc to Siguatepeque and the main highway in the country.

Over a week later, these actions continue, between acts of intimidation against demonstrators and the silent treatment from departmental and national government authorities.

These actions continue because the participants are from surrounding communities and are directly affected by the issues and policies about which they are demonstrating.

They continue because this is not a march, but a series of ongoing occupations that will last indefinitely until their voices are heard, taken seriously, and given an acceptable response.

They continue because there is wide public support, demonstrated by

the
donations of corn, beans, rice, bread and coffee. They continue
because
their demands are just.

LETÍIS PROTECT THE FORESTS!

This is the slogan written along the bottom of the Honduran license
plate.

It is the slogan on the license plates of vehicles belonging to the
illegal
loggers operating in the region; on the license plates of the trucks
transporting the felled trees to the northern city of San Pedro Sula,
to the
southern border with El Salvador and elsewhere; it is the slogan on
the
license plates of the COHDEFOR and national police vehicles regularly
seen
accompanying logging trucks in the region, often carrying illegally
logged
trees and lumber.

Deforestation is an increasingly serious problem around the country,
accompanied by the high levels of corruption in COHDEFOR, which,
according
to the Regional Coordination of Popular Resistance (CRRP), is far from
promoting the protection of the trees, has been converted into a
strategic
ally of the destroyers of the forests. They also denounce the
Sustainable
Environmental Management Units (UMAS) as being a bureaucratic post at
the
service of political clientelism.

The CRRP is demanding a 20-year logging ban, citing destructive and in
many
cases illegal logging practices in numerous communities in the
department of
Intibuc: Malguarita, municipality of Intibuc; San Pedro Lomas,
Intibuc;
Quiala, La Esperanza; various communities in the municipalities of San
Marcos de la Sierra and Colomoncagua; and Llanos de Santa Cruz and
Piedras
Negras, both pertaining to Jes' s de Otoro. A forest audit is called
for,
along with the application of sanctions against all those involved in
the
violation of the norms of forest exploitation.

EDUCATION OR POLITICS?

Another focus of the actions in Intibuc, as is evidenced by the

occupation

of the Departmental Direction of Education, is the politicization of education. COPINH has previously carried out a number of actions against the current Departmental Director of Education, Mario Cantarero. A supporter of the National Party currently in power, he has been hiring, firing and transferring teachers according to their party allegiances.

Numerous communities are without even primary schools, others without teachers and yet others have been assigned teachers who are frequently absent, reliable only on the day they come into town to pick up their paycheques.

Following a week-long protest and lively occupation organized by COPINH and teacher unions last year, Cantarero was suspended for a couple months, pending investigation into the accusations. He was quietly reinstated and continues to politicize education in the department.

He has a bone or two to pick with COPINH, although he is certainly by no means the only one, as remarks by national authorities in the Secretariat of Education demonstrate.

The Instituto Bilingüe Royal, a college that moved from Siguatepeque to La Esperanza a few years back, initiated an indigenous student-teacher program last year in collaboration with COPINH and the reluctant agreement of the Secretariat of Education. The program aims to give people - mainly youth - from impoverished communities in the region the secondary and college education they lack, working towards a teacher certificate, which they will then use to work as recognized teachers in their own communities.

While completing their studies over a period of a few years, participants work as volunteers in their local schools, helping the teacher where one exists and becoming the teacher where one does not.

The director of the Institute happens to be black and Jewish, which may not seem like relevant details to mention. That is, until one learns of the

racist insults and threats spoken against him, the swastikas left on the Institute walls, and the racist and anti-semitic drawings slipped under the door. A couple months ago, the Institute was broken into at night. The official books, containing all legal authorizations, certificates and meeting minutes, were stolen and presumably destroyed.

The next day, Mario Cantarero appeared on local television, denouncing the Institute. According to him, the college had never received the official authorization to operate, nor had its textbooks been approved by the Secretariat of Education. A surprising coincidence, seeing as the authorizations were in the official books stolen only the night before.

Of course, after months of persecution and intimidation, Institute director Cleveland had not been foolish enough to leave all of his school's documentation in the Institute. Instead, he had replicas made to simulate the official books - blue, containing formal inscriptions, full of signatures and stamps. The actual documentation - containing all required authorizations, granted by the very same Departmental Direction of Education directed by Cantarero - remains in the possession of the Institute.

There is, however, one definitive agreement that the Institute needs to continue operating; although the college fulfills all of the requirements, the authorization has not been granted. When the Institute director met with a legal representative of the Secretariat of Education in the capital of Tegucigalpa to deal with all of these concerns, the true cause of all the persecution was revealed. "Let's speak frankly," he was told. The gist of the conversation?: We don't have any problems with your Institute. But why do you need to teach those Indians? Look, they don't need a college education. This is a country that relies on agriculture. We need them to plant their corn and beans, not to study. Stick with the regular college and you won't have any problems.

He stuck with the indigenous student-teacher program; he still has problems.

The CRRP is demanding an end to the politicization of education, the destitution of Mario Cantarero, respect for the agreements between the Secretariat of Education and indigenous peoples, an end to the persecution against the Instituto Bilingüe Royal and the granting of the definitive agreement required for its continuing operation.

HOT POTATO

Another aspect of the actions in Intibuc· surrounds the demands of the National Federation of Potato Producers (FENAPA), a federation with its strongest support base in Intibuc·, where the potato is considered the patrimony of the department. [Thereís even potato wine and a potato festival here!]

The CRRP is seeking protection and assistance for local potato producers. A number of points of the accord between producers and the State have been violated. One of these violations is the importation of potato seed - genetically modified and of low quality - by the Consul of Holland, Norber Bart.

Actions in the past year have taken place to demand the recognition of the agreements reached by the Agriculture Roundtable on the Potato and to press for legislation recognizing the protections included in the accord.

With the signing of the "Free" Trade Agreement between several Central American countries - including Honduras - and the United States, however, combined with the eternal pressure and control exerted by the IMF, chances for the recognition of these agreements are slim.

On April 30th, 2004, at 11pm, in the community of Maracía, Intibuc·, the Regional Coordination of Popular Resistance stopped the transportation of 1000 quintales (100kg sacks) of potato seed, contaminated and already showing signs of rot, imported by Consul Bart. Half of the seed, 500 100kg sacks, was decommissioned by the highest authority - that of the people.

On May 4, still awaiting a response from the government, a group affiliated with the CRRP traveled to Tegucigalpa, aging potato seed in tow. They visited the National Congress building, where the grounds were showered with rotting, genetically modified potato seed, a symbolic action to bring the demands of Intibuc to the very doorstep of the government, where perhaps they would be forced to listen.

THINK GLOBALLY, ACT LOCALLY / THINK LOCALLY, ACT GLOBALLY
The actions currently being carried out by the CRRP in Intibuc deal with a variety of other local issues, including municipal services, demands for transparency and audits of the municipal governments, specific demands for the recognition of land rights of certain communities, and the inadequate road system in the area. They also, however, touch upon a number of national and global issues that directly affect the communities of Intibuc.

The CRRP is calling for a halt to the neoliberal policies further crippling a region already subject to conditions of extreme poverty. The [US] Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) and Plan Puebla Panama (PPP) are rejected. Laws and policies in Honduras that fall into the aggressive trend to privatize life are also contested: the water law approved in October 2003 that leads to the privatization of water; the numerous mining concessions around the country that pose enormous dangers to the environment and to human health; the building of hydroelectric dams that destroy local communities at the benefit of multinational companies; and the privatization of public services.

The demands may be many, but so too are the people supporting them. What is more, the demands they make are just. Over a week after the actions in Intibuc were initiated, the number of people maintaining ongoing protests at the different occupied sites – many with the ground for a bed, with

the
rain and the cold – has grown and continues to grow. They are
determined to
maintain the actions until their demands are met. The government is
not
likely to win a waiting game; the people of Intibuc· have an endless
repertoire of stories, jokes and songs – political songs, Church
songs, and,
most of all, rancheras.

GET INVOLVED. Contact info@rightsaction.org, 416-654-2074,
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To give tax-charitable donations and otherwise support COPINH and
other
grassroots organizations working for community development social
justice in
Honduras,

To participate in an educational delegation (July 16-26 or August
14-22) to
learn about the issues confronting the local populations.