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HONDURAS: African-descendant, indigenous "Garifuna" communities suffer repression struggling for ancestral community development rights versus the global tourist industry.

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SUMMARY: On January 15th, paramilitaries armed with illegal weapons opened fire on community leaders in the Garifuna community of San Juan de Tela, on the Caribbean coast of Honduras. Last November, Rights Action distributed an urgent action to support San Juan community leader Wilfredo Guerrero, whose home was the target of arson.

Below is a Rights Action article discussing the ongoing repression against Garifuna community leaders in the context of plans for destructive enclave tourism projects located within protected areas, threatening the afro-indigenous Garifuna communities' territory, resources and culture.

We also distribute an OFRANEH press release from last October, questioning the contradictions between supposed 'nature conservation' on the one hand and bad development projects on the other, both imposed on Garifuna communities.

OFRANEH is a community-based organization working for real local development and territory rights in Garifuna communities along the north coast, under intense pressure on all sides from the global tourism industry, the export-oriented agro-industry, oil exploration, drug trafficking and (para)militarization.

As is the case for many other communities and organizations engaged in this kind of work in Honduras and elsewhere, OFRANEH and Garifuna community leaders face ongoing repression.

NATURE CONSERVATION or TERRITORIAL CONTROL AND PROFITS?

OFRANEH denounces Tela Bay tourist mega-project and ongoing repression against Garifuna community leaders

-- By Sandra Cuffe, Rights Action

"But the greatest doubt - considering that over half of all Garifuna communities are located in protected areas or their respective buffer zones - is if the dedication to environmental protection work really exists or if it can be reduced to a formula for territorial control, so that later the protected areas can be raffled off among the same old sorcerers as always." (OFRANEH)

On October 11, 2005, the day before the infamous October 12th date commemorating 513 years of imperialism, colonialism and pillage in Latin America, the Fraternal Black Organization of Honduras (OFRANEH) published a communiqué denouncing the ridiculous findings of an Environmental Impact Assessment Study, which proclaimed that the Los Micos Beach & Golf Resort - an enclave global tourist industry complex, including an 18-hole golf course, all inside a national park - is, in fact, sustainable. Although ridiculous, the distortion is far from surprising.

For decades, plans have been in the works for a luxury resort complex in the Tela Bay, located in the department of Atlántida on Honduras' Caribbean coast. Over the years, the legal obstacles in its way began to disappear. Repression against Garifuna leaders and communities working to defend their communal territory, resources and culture from destructive imposed mega-projects, however, continues.

REPRESSION and PARAMILITARIZATION

Repression against Garifuna leaders from the Fraternal Black Organization of Honduras (OFRANEH) and from communities on the Tela Bay continues.

Last year Rights Action denounced the illegal and defamatory search of OFRANEH activist Miriam Miranda's home, and the shooting and wounding of the organization's General Coordinator Gregoria Flores. On November 9, 2005, San Juan Lands and Territory Defense Committee president Wilfredo Guerrero's house was burned to the ground, destroying his possessions and important community documentation.

2006 appears to have yet more repression in store for Garifuna communities organized and struggling to defend their communally managed lands and resources. On January 15th, armed paramilitaries fired their weapons at San Juan community members.

The day before, January 14, representatives of PROMOTUR – a tourism real estate company owned by powerful politician, landlord, banker and media owner Jaime Rosenthal – entered the community with a number of armed guards, some of them with their faces covered and carrying illegal weapons. They proceeded to erect a fence around a section of community land coveted by PROMOTUR, which has long been denounced by San Juan community leaders for its aggressive incursions into community lands.

Community members immediately contacted Special Prosecutor for Ethnic Groups Jany del Cid, who called on the Public Prosecutor's Office in nearby Tela to send representatives and criminal investigation (DGIC) agents. On Sunday, January 15th, the State authorities arrived in San Juan and proceeded to detain the three hooded paramilitaries carrying AK-47s, illegal weapons in Honduras.

As soon as the authorities left, however, the remaining hooded individuals, led by Domingo Ayala, opened fire on the community and sped away a few minutes later.

A commission of community authorities, including Wilfredo Guerrero, presented a ten-point denouncement of PROMOTUR's actions to the Attorney General, accompanied by Special Prosecutor Jany del Cid. The Attorney General's Office has summoned Jaime Rosenthal to 'clarify' his side of the story today, although his 'side' – that San Juan community members are the violent invaders – has been amply and improperly covered by the national newspaper El Tiempo, owned, of course, by Rosenthal.

LAND, WEALTH, GUNS & POLITICS

Further complicating matters is the appointment of Jaime Rosenthal's son Yani as Minister of the Presidency in the government scheduled to assume power this Friday, January 27. Yani Rosenthal is a shareholder in the Los Micos Beach & Golf Resort project and is a lawyer for several of his father's businesses.

He will hold this key position in the government of president elect Manuel 'Mel' Zelaya, whose own father was a powerful landlord on whose land occurred the infamous massacre of 'Los Horcones' in 1975, when several farmworkers and catholic community members participating in a march against repression from Juticalpa, Olancho to Tegucigalpa were stopped, taken away to one of Zelaya's estates, tortured, killed and thrown in a well on the property.

If these two examples are any indication, the new government's agenda will clearly represent the interests of the powerful elite and their companies interested in the 'prime real estate' of the Garifuna communities along the Caribbean coast and particularly in the Tela Bay. In order to impose these interests on the Garifuna people, paramilitarization and repression are utilized.

As San Juan community authorities explain in a press release concerning the latest incident of repression: "The community of San Juan Tela has been in the sights of politicians, businessmen and military men, who use the judicial system to take over and intimidate the Garifuna people of the Tela Bay with the intention of stripping us of the lands we have inhabited for over two centuries."

Persecution, detentions and murder attempts, reports OFRANEH, have been quite commonplace in San Juan since 1997. In that same year, the government conveniently 'lost' the community's land documents, including the guarantee of occupation to the 1775 hectares of ancestral territory awarded to the community by the National Agrarian Institute in 1984.

The National Agrarian Institute has since awarded San Juan a communal title to 63 hectares, which covers only the residential area but not the functional habitat and necessary land and natural resources to support the

approximately 1400 people. These kinds of maneuvers to strip Garifuna and indigenous communities of their communal territory and resources are far from exceptions; where there are powerful economic interests, they are the rule.

THE 'MASTER PLAN': Los Micos Beach & Golf Resort

The Garifuna communal lands on which construction of the Los Micos Beach & Golf Resort is planned, now part of the Jeanette Kawas National Park (originally and often referred to as the 'Punta Sal' NP), were taken over from the community of Tornabé and transferred from the central government to the Honduran Tourism Institute (IHT) before the area was declared a protected area. A decree was issued to permit joint ventures between the IHT and the private sector, creating a public-private company for Los Micos.

Another major obstacle was the Constitution of the Republic, in particular Article 107, which prohibits foreigners from owning land within 40km of international borders and the coastlines. In early 2005, a resolution was finally passed by the Supreme Court establishing that Decree 90-90, which "regulates" the foreign ownership of urban property in areas affected by Article 107, is, in fact, constitutional.

The 'municipalization' process of the late 1980s and the 1990s, bringing rural areas and entire afro-indigenous Garifuna communities into the "urban" lands of coastal cities and municipalities, without informing or consulting the affected residents, has thus facilitated not only municipal control over communities but also foreign investment within Garifuna territories.

Over the past few years, the government has pushed the 'municipalización' project forward as part of its focus on tourism as one of the country's "development" saviours. International financing and loans, either directly for the project or indirectly for infrastructure supporting the project, have come from many international institutions and agencies, most notably the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), the Central American Bank of Economic Integration (CABEI) and the Italian "Co-operation".

The joint venture behind the project is half-owned by the IHT, with the remaining interests divided between the national elite (Miguel Facussé, Fredy Nasser, Jose Lamas, Rafael Flores, and more) and foreign investors. While negotiations for control of the latter had been negotiated for months in the Dominican Republic with continental tourism magnate Frank Reinieri, in late 2005 Honduran newspapers indicated that the 25% foreign share had been awarded to Freddy Dennis of Resorts of the World of the United States.

The Los Micos Beach & Golf Resort, according to the official 'Master Plan,' will occupy more than 300 hectares along over 3.2km of the coastline, between the Garifuna communities of Tornabé and Miami. The complex includes up to seven 4 or 5 star hotels, 168 residential villas, a mall, casino, tennis and equestrian centres and an 18-hole golf course, among other amenities.

The environmental impact assessment study claims that the project will have an overall positive effect on the Garifuna communities "most directly influenced" (avoiding the negative connotations of "impacted" or "affected"): Miami, Tornabé, San Juan and Triunfo de la Cruz.

However, OFRANEH and other organizations have long been denouncing the project for the devastating impacts it will have on both the resources and culture of the nearby Garifuna communities, bringing only slave-wage jobs and the further commoditization of the Garifuna culture while national and foreign millionaires reap in the profits.

THE LOS MICOS TOURISM PROJECT AND SO-CALLED ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

-- PUBLIC COMMUNIQUÉ by OFRANEH

The Fraternal Black Organization of Honduras, OFRANEH, in light of the environmental impact evaluation of the Los Micos Beach & Golf Resort made known by the Municipal Environmental Unit of Tela, points out the distortion that exists regarding the sustainability of the tourism complex that is planned for construction in the Tela Bay.

It seems as though the dominant elite of Honduras, who are the national associates planning to invest in the tourist project, are not familiar with the most basic elements of the concept of sustainable tourism or the repercussions that an enclave tourist project will have on the environment, even more so when it is located within a protected area and includes an 18-hole golf course.

We understand the investors' enthusiasm to provide Honduras with a mega-project with the "attractions" needed to attract mass tourism to a country that up until now, has been unable to establish a constant flow of visitors. During the current administration, Iberia flights to and from Honduras were cancelled, affecting the flow of European tourists.

The concept of sun and beach along with a golf course may indeed attract clients in an already saturated market. At the same time, though, the oil crisis has raised transportation costs beyond all recognition. While France adds an additional tax on international flights, the United States economy is reeling from the consequences of its wars in Asia and the destruction left by Katrina.

The height of the farcical environmental impact evaluation is reached when the make-up provided for the golf course is discussed. The environmental waste caused by golf courses is public knowledge. Ontop of the waste are the crises caused by excessive water consumption, which will affect communities neighbouring the project.

The experience of studies undertaken in Thailand show that a 100 hectare golf course uses an average of 1500 kgs of fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides a year, while at the same time absorbing the water required for some 60,000 people in rural areas.

Faced with the El Niño phenomenon we will see that the communities near the project will be lacking the vital liquid, while the golf course will remain green at the expense of the Garifuna people and the population of the city of Tela. This has been the parameter that has resulted around the world where golf courses have been established in association with enclave tourism.

The eutrophication of the Mico and Quemada lagoons will increase in the degree that the golf course requires fertilizers, complicating the already contaminated Quemada lagoon, which receives the releases of San Alejo and the waste of the African Palm oil processing plant located in the region.

Eventually, to keep at bay the plague of mosquitos, sandflies and horseflies around the lagoons, the managers of the tourist centres will be obligated to use enormous quantities of insecticides, which will affect the birds, snakes and their habitats.

The construction of the marina is another mystery. Experiences everywhere show that the construction of marinas cause environmental destruction by extracting materials and destroying mangroves and habitats, violating all the norms of sustainable coastal management.

For our Garifuna people, the silence of SINAP (National Protected Areas System), the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor and the authorities of the Jeanette Kawas park in the face of the ominous destruction planned is a mystery. But the greatest doubt - considering that over half of all Garifuna communities are located in protected areas or their respective buffer zones - is if the dedication to environmental protection work really exists or if it can be reduced to a formula for territorial control, so that later the protected areas can be raffled off among the same old sorcerers as always.

Where does the UICN (World Conservation Union) stand with its environmental policies? Or is one of the guidelines adopted after the last UICN meeting in South Africa on national parks to hand protected areas over to private initiatives? With the altruistic objective of of nature conservation, protected areas are thus converted into a real business, just as the neoliberal gospel dictates.

The Biological Diversity Convention (COP5/20, article 8j) points out the threats to biological diversity posed by tourist activities. A guide to sustainable tourism has been developed based on the conferences of the parties to the Convention. It appears that this guide is unknown to the Los Micos designers, who have an obsolete or warped vision of the definition of sustainable tourism.

It is important to point out the current state of insecurity in Honduras. Or perhaps publicity experts can convert these issues into selling points: the ominous first place of the country in the murder of minors; the macabre femicide on the rise, to the point that we will soon overtake Ciudad Juarez.

But clearly in a country of deaf staticians, the interests of 'minorities' should not be the object of respect. Foreign investment and national capitalists rule; thus, the future development of Honduras depends on foreign capital and the supposed gifts of international organisms, which permanently fatten up the country's external debt.

The "geniuses" managing Honduras are finally carrying out the plundering of Tornabé that has been in the works since the 90s with the complicity of a few "afro-descendant" leaders. They have finally now managed to redefine enclave tourism within a protected area as ecotourism. Honduras as a "mature" destination is the slogan of the millionaires who have enriched themselves from the pillage of national resources and by instilling ignorance in a country every day more submerged in misery and violent robbery.

From this experience, it is clear to us that the nature conservation that is so highly praised is no more than a mask in place to favour enclave tourism. Meanwhile, environmental destruction continues at an alarming pace, arousing doubts as to the intentions of the so-called environmentalists who designed the "famous" Mesoamerican Biological Corridor.

La Ceiba, October 11, 2005.

OFRANEH - the Fraternal Black Organization of Honduras

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