

Honduras, January 12, 2007

THE "DEVELOPMENT" OF INSECURITY AND VIOLENCE IN HONDURAS AND BEYOND

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THE "DEVELOPMENT" OF INSECURITY AND VIOLENCE

As is the case in many countries down the length of the hemisphere, repression is on the rise in Honduras. Sharing many elements with the human rights situation in several other countries, the phenomenon in Honduras is also intrinsically connected to the past. Far from being a new occurrence, this new wave of repression is simply an element of the most recent manifestation of centuries of domination and control, from the invasion of 1492 to US military occupations, from colonization to neoliberalism and ongoing occupation.

The persecution of Honduran grassroots organizations, social movements and the poor in general goes hand in hand with the "development" and "integration" models against which these organizations are struggling, whether explicitly or not.

Over the past few years, many Honduran activists (and non-activists) have commented on the gradual return to the (in)security climate of the 1980s, when CIA-trained State-sponsored death squads kidnapped, tortured, murdered and disappeared hundreds of activists, lawyers, students and other citizens.

The advances of the 1990s - the creation of a civilian police force, the creation of an independent justice system, the demilitarization of the public sphere, etc - are gradually being eroded.

Today, soldiers are out on the streets "policing" alongside the police.

Thousands of youth (generally poor) have been extrajudicially executed over the past few years, their bodies usually dumped alongside the highways leaving the country's major cities. Despite evidence of the involvement of current and former military and police agents in death squads involved in what is generally termed "social cleaning" (limpieza social), accompanying the State's "zero tolerance" policy on

ëgangsí.

In 2004, the article of the Penal Code defining the charge of illicit association was reformed to toughen sentencing for this charge and to broaden the definition, which is now largely left up to the subjective decisions of police, public prosecutors and judges. Known as ëthe anti-gang lawí, in practice, the reformed definition means that the physical appearance of poor young men with tattoos or baggy pants is more than enough to detain them. Searches and even mass detentions on the basis of appearance are frequently carried out by the army and police in Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula.

The charge of illicit association has also be used against social activists, part of the broader use of the (in)justice system as a tool of repression.

Since 2004, activists belonging to the Environmental Movement of Olancho (MAO), the land rights activist organization Martyrs of Guaymas and campesino organizations from Sico in the department of ColÛn have all been charged with illicit association.

Another disturbing trend in public ësecurityí in Honduras is the incorporation of private security companies into the realm of police activities, along with the army. The following article ñ by the Fraternal Black Organization of Honduras (OFRANEH) ñ offers a brief analysis of the rising violence in the country, putting the December 2006 murder of ASJ lawyer Dionisio García and MAO activists Heraldo Z'Òiga and Iv·n Roger Cartagena in context.

All of these organizations need on-going funds to carry out their environmental, community and human rights work, as well as emergency funds to deal with repression against their members. For more information, to get on/off this E-list, or to support grassroots organizations facing on-going repression in Honduras, contact: info@rightsaction.org, www.rightsaction.org.

INSECURITY AND SECURITY AGENCIES IN HONDURAS By OFRANEH, January 11, 2007 La Ceiba, Atl·ntida, Honduras
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The increase in violence in Honduras last December against environmentalists and social activists in general demonstrates the Stateís incapacity to protect environmentalists and human rights defenders, despite the protective measures ordered for their supposed protection.

The murders of environmentalists Heraldo Z'Òiga and Roger Cartagena, members of the Environmental Movement of Olancho (MAO), and of lawyer

Dionisio García, who worked with the Association for a More Just Society (ASJ), combined with the ongoing threats against the members of both of these organizations, have shaken Honduran activists and the population in general.

Honduras, according to a study carried out by the National Autonomous University of Honduras (UNAH)'s Observatory on Violence, is six times more violent than the rest of Central America, with a rate of 23.1 homicides for every hundred thousand inhabitants. Considering also the widespread extrajudicial executions of minors, the country is awarded the shameful first prize worldwide for the execution of children.

Meanwhile, violence with economic roots continues to increase dramatically and the repression against grassroots organizations has gotten worse, manifesting itself through selective assassinations with the goal of using terror as weapon of social control. It seems as though the lessons of the Cold War were interiorized by the members of the national oligarchy and their attack hounds. The impunity that continues to surround the forcibly disappeared of the 1980s is reflected in the current attitude demonstrated by the neoliberal governments that have been applying the Rumsfeld Doctrine, with the return of soldiers to the sphere of public security and order.

PRIVATE "SECURITY" COMPANIES AND PUBLIC "ORDER"

The inclusion of private security companies as guardians of public order ñ as was proposed by the national "Security Council" in September of 2006 ñ violates the most basic guarantees and human rights of the Honduran people and incorporates these agencies into the systematic repression against the people of this country.

The number and power of private security agencies have grown in an alarming manner ñ a product of the economic insecurity and pillage that Latin America has been subjected to under the rise of neoliberalism, which has increased poverty and violence on the continent. The 60,000 members belonging to private security companies in Honduras behave like private armies at the service of the interests of the elite, who have given the security agencies a carte blanche for repression.

The investigation carried out by ASJ lawyers and journalists into the Delta Security company, owned by U.S. citizen Richard Swasey, has brought to light the abuses and unusual power with which these companies act ñ beyond the reaches of the law.

PRIVITIZED REPRESSION

In May 2005, Gregoria Flores, the Coordinator of our organization (the Fraternal Black Organization of Honduras) was the victim of a shooting in the city of La Ceiba, by a reported employee of a private security company.

Coincidentally, at the very moment she was headed to the Garifuna

community of Triunfo de la Cruz in order to record testimonies related to a human rights case presented by our organization to the Inter-American Human Rights Court.

The attack that almost cost her life was declared to be an accident and no one was ever prosecuted. Furthermore, the investigation was manipulated, creating a climate of total impunity. That same year, members of our organization were subject to constant persecution because of our activism in defense of ancestral Garifuna territory and our struggle against the Honduran Lands Administration Program (PATH, for its Spanish acronym) imposed by the World Bank as a means to fragment and individualize our ancestral territory.

Facing this systematic harassment by State security agencies, our compañera Gregoria was forced to leave the country for own safety, seeking asylum in the United States, where she was recently granted the status of political asylum. It is sad how the situation in our country is returning to the level of the ominous period of the 1980s, where the empire submitted the popular will by instigating fratricidal wars to maintain its political and economic influence.

The Plan Puebla Panama (PPP), the Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor, the uncontrolled mining exploitation and the systematic destruction of the forests provide sufficient motives for the group of families that believe themselves to be the owners of the country ñ along with their foreign associates and financiers ñ to proceed to apply their own particular version of injustice.

The murders of the compañeros of MAO and ASJ by members of the Honduran State security forces or by paid assassins at their service will not be forgotten by our people. The scars of the exploding bullet that the insecurity guard shot at our compañera Gregoria form part of the permanent memories full of pain and outrage that accompany a great part of the Honduran people, although we have been submissively been supporting exploitation and blood shedding for centuries.

Repression as an answer to economic and social deterioration only serve to create more violence, without offering concrete solutions to the problems of Honduras. The rise in poverty and State violence are the ingredients of an explosive cocktail that will result ñ sooner or later ñ in a unanimous alliance of the people against our tyrants.

THE PATUCA DAM, DESTRUCTION OF FORESTS AND THE KILLING OF MAO ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISTS By Miriam Miranda, OFRANEH, January 3, 2007 (Translated for Rights Action by Rosalind Gill) La Ceiba, Atlántida, Honduras.

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The debate over the viability of the Patuca Hydroelectric Dam and the present administration's plans to go ahead with construction has finally brought the mega-project to the attention of the Honduran public.

The government's plans override public interest and fail to consider the serious environmental consequences for the Miskitos and Tawacas who live on the costal wetlands and in the lower and central parts of the Patuca region.

For more than ten years, there has been talk of plans to build a series of dams on the Patuca River. As well, the Plan Puebla Panama is advocating the construction of an unknown number of dams, which will supply energy to our "neighbours" to the North through the SIEPAC (Mesoamerican Energy Interconnection Initiative).

After a trip to Taiwan last October, the President of Honduras, Manuel Zelaya, announced that he had obtained 250 million dollars in financing for the construction of the Patuca Dam, which will create a 72 square mile reservoir of water. The project will be carried out by the Tai Power Company, which has been granted a 15 year concession for energy production.

What is interesting about this process is that a long time before obtaining the environmental permit to construct the dam, serious infrastructure planning for the project was already underway. Already last December, the Honduran newspaper, el Heraldo, reported that according to statements from the Commercial Office of the Taiwanese Embassy, a team of Taiwanese engineers was in the Patuca region to carry out studies to determine the size of the area the reservoir would cover and to determine if there are any archeological ruins in the area.

We should point out that the SERNA (Department of Natural Resources) notified our organization that as of December 4th, no environmental permit had been issued for construction of the Patuca Dam. As we mentioned before, this is somewhat like what happened in Alice in Wonderland – the sentence is given before the charges have been made.

It would appear that the preferred tactic when it comes to mega-projects is to obtain financing first and deal with the environmental permit later. So the whole process becomes a merely bureaucratic one, involving political and not environmental decisions.

Near the end of December, the local press reported that there was opposition to the project from the inhabitants of the areas that were to be flooded by the Guayape and Guayambre Rivers. However, President Zelaya firmly announced that the government was determined to proceed

with the construction of the dam, despite opposition to it, and in response to accusations of politicization of the project, he said that "the State must exercise its power and fulfill its mandate."

Then, several days later, on December 20, in the police station in Guarizama (Olancho), which is located very close to the dam construction site, apparently two activists from the Olancho Environmental Movement (MAO) were killed by National Police agents. The MAO is a courageous organization that has decided to defend the forests of Olancho against the massive destruction that has been carried out in that part of the country.

The death of the MAO activists is linked to a campaign of intimidation against those who defend the forests in Honduras. The destruction of the forests is endangering the country's water supply. In the last 20 years, water levels have dropped and rivers have suffered irreparable sedimentation.

The activists who were killed had been arrested, and then riddled with bullets by the National Police. In the meantime, the elite in power continue to allow illegal cutting in the forests. The destruction is happening so rapidly that it is doubtful that it will be feasible to maintain the water levels necessary to provide sufficient water for the Patuca Dam, on a permanent basis.

There are people who lecture us about the need for a national energy plan and insist on the need to construct mega-dams. But they fail to consider the fate of the Honduran forests and the role they play in the sustainability of our rivers.

In the meantime, there are plans to ask the US Army Corps of Engineers, as part of the Nature Conservancy's Sustainable Water Management Programme, to advise the National Electricity Company on the sustainable management of the Patuca dam project.

Involving the Nature Conservancy (a monster that is one of the sacred cows of the environmental movement) as advisor on the project creates further doubt as to the viability of the project and raises concerns about long-term consequences. The Nature Conservancy, which has a rather dubious reputation, was the subject of an extended investigation by the Washington Post. The investigation revealed that the organization had used questionable environmental practices and was involved in real estate speculation in preservation areas.

As well, it was revealed that the organization has been known to use intimidation tactics in its bids to manage protected areas. (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/nation/specials/natureconservancy>)

We should also point out that it was the so-called "glorious" US Corps

of Engineers who were responsible for the dikes in New Orleans. They were the "heroes" of Hurricane Katrina. And the minority ethnic population of the city was abandoned while US troops were busy bringing "democracy" to Iraq.

To date, Mesoamerican Biological Corridor officials have remained silent as to the future destruction of Patuca River, which in fact, forms part of Corridor's Corazon Project. The indigenous and black peoples of Mesoamerica have come to see unprecedented duality in the actions of officials of the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor: on the one hand, they permit the construction of mega-dams and on the other they stand in the way of land claims by inhabitants who have lived on the land and looked after it for centuries.

There is no doubt that there is a severe energy crisis in the country. But there are other types of energy projects that would allow us to avoid the destruction of our rivers. SERNA has shelved the Cerro de la Hula project, which could generate more than 400 megawatts without destroying one of the biggest rivers in Central America. However, when it comes to options for energy production, the present administration of the country cannot see beyond old-fashioned "Hoover Dam" style projects.

We can only hope that the death of the MAO environmental activists is not a sign of increased repression and future imposition of projects through force.

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