

HONDURAS: TOURISM, “DEVELOPMENT” & ENVIRONMENTAL HARMS AND VIOLATIONS OF GARIFUNA PEOPLES’ RIGHTS & TERRITORIES

“LAGUNA DE MICOS & BEACH RESORT”:

New tourist “development” plans, on Honduras’ north shore, are destructive of the environment, including coral reefs, and violate the human and territorial rights of the Indigenous Garifuna population. This was written by OFRANEH (organización fraternal negra hondureña), that Rights Action supports and works with, and translated by Rosalind Gill, rgill@glendon.yorku.ca.

Over the past years, Rights Action has sent out information about repression and corruption associated with this “development” project – this emailing focuses in more directly on potential environmental harms ... as well as the on-going lack of consultation and due process.

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La Ceiba, Honduras, September 19, 2007

OFRANEH:

We are facing the possible destruction of the coral reefs located off the 3.2 kilometer Bahia de Tela beach, where there are plans to construct a tourism complex known as The Laguna de Micos & Beach Resort. This is only one example of the inadequacy of the environmental impact report that was carried out for this mega project. The report made no reference to the existence of the coral reefs, which are well known to local inhabitants. The Honduras Foundation for Investment in Tourism (FITH) has stated that they have just now learned of the existence of the reefs.

On September 13, 2007, Juan Canahuati reported to the newspaper, El Tiempo, that both investors and the government had been unaware of the existence of the coral reef. The government had previously authorized dredging of the area to prepare for infill of the 316 hectares of wetland which would be occupied by the project. However, a 1997 bathymetry report funded by AID and the VIDA Foundation clearly refers to the existence of and locates the coral reefs.

The coral reefs in question form part of the Mesoamerican Barrier Reef System. One wonders, thus, how these reefs could be simply omitted from the environmental impact report. Authorities from the Foundation for the Protection of Lancetilla, Punta Sal and Texiquat (PROLANSATE) declared that the report is inadequate and ambiguous.

However the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) chose to ignore criticism from environmentalists with regard to the inadequacies of the report. In fact, they went ahead and provided a loan, thereby getting involved in a project that is highly destructive to the environment. Of course, all of this is being fostered by the Puebla-Panama Plan.

Juan Canahuati also stated that the original design for the mega project had been modified and that now, the plan was to create 11 artificial lagoons, from which 14.5 million cubic meters of fill would be extracted, while 1.1 million cubic meters would come from non-coral reefs. The environmental impact report had mentioned the use of 3 million cubic meters. Thus, according to this statement by Mr. Canahuati, there is no intention whatsoever to respect the original report, which itself, was already in dispute.

On several occasions, PROLANSATE has demonstrated how the mega project will cause serious harm to the wetlands of the Laguna de Micos, with specific reference to #722 of the International Convention for the Protection of Wetlands (RAMSAR). On September 14, PROLANSATE sent a letter to Fernando Caballos,

Director of Bahia de Tela Tourist Development (DTBT), to express its objections to the changes that are being made to the original design of the project. As well, it calls for the development of a “participatory process” and questions the investors’ use of the term “sustainable”.

OFRANEH (Fraternal Organization of the Black Peoples of Honduras) has seen how the power elite associated with the neo-liberal parties pays only lip service to the word “participatory” (the word “sustainable” receives the same treatment). Intervention by the government and its associates is basically designed to divide communities by giving perks to certain “leaders”, with certain individuals being selected to receive work grants through The Sustainable Coastal Tourism Project. This project, in turn, is financed by the World Bank and is designed to strengthen local “leaders”, whose real function is to implement the investors’ agenda.

A report financed by the IADB entitled “Analysis of Socio-cultural Impacts of the Sustainable Coastal Tourism Project on the Garifuna Communities of the Bahia de Tela”, which was carried out by Geraldina Tercero in June, 2006, clearly describes the social repercussions of development for Garifuna communities in the area. The report also recommends the creation of an independent committee whose mandate would be to explain possible environmental impacts to local communities.

Real estate speculation, which began several decades ago and fluctuates with the ups and downs of the different projects that are proposed, has had terrible consequences for local Garifuna communities, who are now being offered 7% of shares in the projects. What is happening is that this theoretical figure is becoming a mirage, causing division within the communities and antagonizing Garifuna leaders, who can only dream of controlling 7% of the environmental disaster that is being created.

Our organization has observed the complete lack of ecological vision of individuals associated with the FITH. Many of these people are known to be corrupt and willing to sacrifice the environment for profit. They claim they are unaware of climate change and of the fragility of the Caribbean coastal and marine ecosystems. Alterations to the bottom of the bay and to the coastal water system will have grave consequences for local inhabitants, because the area is already a high risk zone.

However, it is the IADB that we question the most severely. Why does the bank not apply its own environmental policies? Why did the bank grant a loan (Ho-195) to the Sustainable Coastal Tourism Project, including financing for the infrastructure at Laguna de Micos and the Piedras Amarillas Airport? The IADB’s incoherent development vision contravenes ILO Convention 169, as well as the new United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

OFRANEH hereby states its strong objection to the destruction of the coastal and marine ecosystems and declares that the present situation may well lead to an environmental disaster in the Bahia de Tela. We call on the IADB to respect its own environmental policies and, once and for all, cease financing destructive projects that are in the hands of professional crooks. We also suggest to Manuel Zelaya’s present administration, that if the President intends to speak about mitigating disasters in his speech to the United Nations next week, he remember that if it allows the Bahia de Tela wetlands to be filled in, his government is provoking a future catastrophe.

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OFRANEH needs international critical attention on the IADB and WB, that are constantly funding these types of “development” projects, harming the environment and violation the rights of local populations. OFRANEH needs 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. To help out and for more information:
info@rightsaction.org, www.rightsaction.org.