

BELOW: A wonderful article about the history, life, culture and resistance of the Garifuna people in Honduras. Since 1998, Rights Action has funded and worked closely with OFRANEH (Honduran Black Fraternal Organization), the leading Garifuna people organization (discussed in the article below). [On request, Rights Action can email a series of short articles and urgent actions about the struggles of OFRANEH]

PLEASE JOIN RIGHTS ACTION'S JULY 7-12, 2008 EDUCATIONAL DELEGATION TO HONDURAS. We will spend part of the time with OFRANEH, on the North coast, learning about the history, life, culture and resistance of the Garifuna people; and part of the time in the Siria Valley, learning about the environmental harms, destruction of the local economy and human rights violations caused by Goldcorp Inc.'s cyanide-leaching, open pit goldmine. For more information: Grahame Russell, info@rightsaction.org.

If you want on-off this elist: info@rightsaction.org. **WHAT TO DO, including how to make tax-charitable donations to OFRANEH:** see below.

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THE LAST REBELS OF THE CARIBBEAN: GARIFUNA FIGHTING FOR THEIR LIVES IN HONDURAS



Written by Ramor Ryan,

Thursday, 27 March 2008, <http://upside-down-world.org/main/content/view/1195/1/>

They hang the man, and flog the woman,
That steals the goose from off the common;
But let the greater villain loose,
That steals the common from the goose.
- Anonymous protest poem from the 17th century

Enclosing the commons – the historical process of fencing off land which had previously been in the public domain, for private use – is perhaps one of the most blatant expressions of the fundamental criminal nature of the capitalist state. Today it's the voracious neo-liberal model which stalks the last pockets of community-held global territory for privatization - from Chiapas, Mexico, to the deep Amazon, to the Garifuna coast of Honduras, leaving no stone unturned.

"We have hundreds of kilometers of beaches that aren't developed, and it's a waste," said the then Honduran Tourism Secretary, Ana Abarca in 2001. "We want strong tourism. We are going after the sun and the beach."

While the neo-liberal government sees unproductive beaches and waste, other people see living communities existing in harmony with their surroundings. These hundreds of kilometers of "waste" are home to 76 Garifuna villages, where people live as they have for a couple of hundred years, reliant on the sea for fishing, on the beach for coconut and fruit, on the wetlands for rice cultivation and the surrounding hillsides for growing manioc, yucca, firewood, and hunting. Their simple wooden homes are built along the beaches, or on stilts above the waves. Men fish from dugout canoes or dive with spears along the reefs.

Ironically, it is the Garifuna communities' two most salient attributes – the simple beauty of their territory, and the uniqueness of their vibrant culture – that pose a threat to their existence. The former coveted by the tourist industry because of the pristine nature, the latter commodified, spearheaded by the commercialization of the mesmerizing Punta music and dance, as exotic eye-candy for the tourists.

"We don't want the mega tourist industry here," says Miriam Miranda, executive committee member of OFRANEH (Black Fraternal Organization of Honduras), the most prominent organization representing the Garifuna people. "Why do these people come to take our resources? They are not welcome."

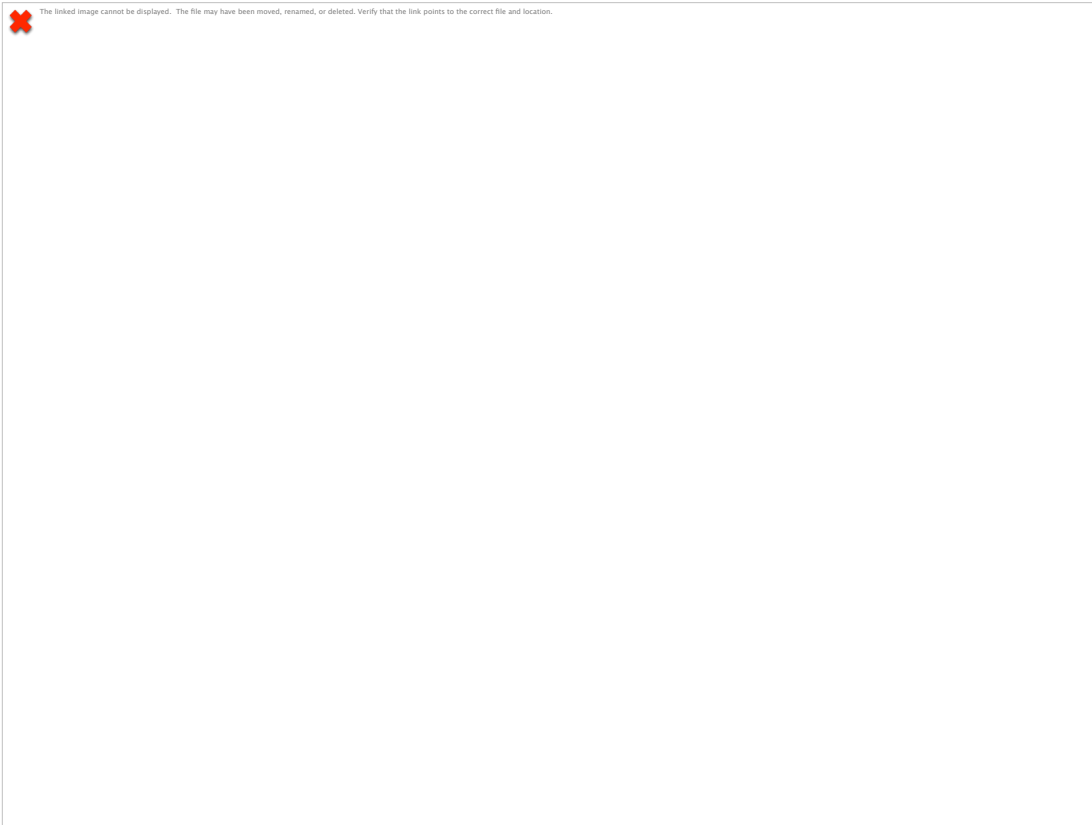


Photo by Timo Russo

So despite UNESCO declaring Garifuna culture one of nineteen Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity in 2001, the problem for the neo-liberals is that the land is unproductive, and the people superannuated. The assault on the Garifuna culture and way of life on the northern coast of Honduras by a powerful cabal of government ministers and foreign investors, overseen in the name of economic development, seems too shockingly philistine to contemplate, and somewhat akin to the Taliban destruction of the Bamiyam Buddah statues, formerly declared as another of UNESCO's cultural heritages of humanity. But such is fundamentalist nature of neo-liberal capitalist ideology: profit before people driven by naked greed.

And balanced with that rapacity is the dignity of the Garifuna resistance to the privatization of their ancestral lands. This is a struggle with fable-like, epic qualities, of heroes and villains, theft and floggings and, well if not quite geese, at least sharks. But

talk to Garifuna community leader Alfredo Lopez for 5 minutes and it becomes clear that any attempts to romanticize the cut-throat struggle is incongruous. He will talk of the brutal repression, the murders, the prisoners, of an venerable culture against the wall, of a proud people facing extinction. "All this privatization is illegal, and if it continues - we are going to die as a people." says Alfredo, standing before the breathtaking Bay of Tela – the disputed territory coveted by the lascivious conglomerate of tourist industry transnationals. "To lose our land, is to lose everything. We are in a struggle for our life and we will do what it takes to defend ourselves."

DISPOSSESSED, MAROONED, MARGINALIZED : RESISTANCE BLOSSOMS

The quintessential banana republic, Honduras remains after Haiti the second poorest country in the hemisphere. The Central American staples of chronic insecurity, massive migration and economic precariousness bedevil the country. And in a nation saturated by Pepsi Cola culture, McDonalds, shopping malls, and all things tacky USA bent on homogenizing everything into consumer conformity, the Garifuna stand out as fantastically different.

About 100,000 Garifuna live in small fishing communities hugging the Caribbean coast, speaking their own Igñeri dialect which is a combination of Arahaco, Swahili, and Bantu.

Theirs is a vibrant living culture born of an utterly unique history.

Between 1640 and 1670, two slave ships coming from West Africa ran aground of the tiny island of St. Vincent, in the lesser Antilles. So began the story of the people who came to be known as the Garifuna - born of a shipwreck, and never enslaved. Their fate should have been to labor to death on the colonizers' cotton and cane plantations, but instead they find themselves - a couple of hundred castaways - on a tropical island populated by a hostile indigenous population known as the Red Caribs. This is character building stuff for sure.

The Red Caribs rescued the shipwrecked but any goodwill ended there. The indigenous attempted to enslave the newcomers and the Africans, as was to become characteristic of them, resisted. The Africans retreated to the western mountains of the island, forming a Maroon community that in time, was sought out by other runaway slaves and fugitives. So a liberated territory was consecrated and a kind of pirate utopia blossomed, an anti-capitalist autonomous zone in the age of seventeenth century capitalist expansionism. Conflict with the Red Caribs was constant and occasionally brutal, but somewhere along the line love (or maybe just cupid) overcame differences and the flowering of the union became known as "karibena galibina" - child of the Caribe, indigenous galibi - a name which underwent some morphological fine tuning until eventually becoming Garifuna. (British colonialists who had trouble with the preponderance of foreign names confronting them as they plundered about the region just called them Black Caribs.)

Resistance was the leitmotif of this Maroon community. At the dawn of the 18th century, the Red Caribs sought support from the French to defeat them. But using intrepid guerrilla tactics, the Garifuna fought the French forces back. The sword failed, but the cross had more success, and missionaries were able to penetrate the communities. But as the Garifuna converted, their spiritual resistance was to retain their African gods within the catholic paradigm: this syncretistic religion remained, not imposed, but their own.

At the dearth of the 18th century, they fought the next colonizing force – the British - to stand-still. Facing annihilation from the sole superpower of its day, the British Empire, the Garifuna negotiated and underwent a forced deportation. Exodus brought them to the uninhabited island of Roatan off the coast of Honduras. Many died at sea, but against all odds, the rebellious Garifuna survived once more.

This ethnic group that should have been killed off a few times already in their brief 100 or so years of struggle, now found a little space to work in with the regional colonial masters - the Spanish. Thriving on Roatan, (we like to have lots of children, Alfredo Lopez will tell you 200 years later) the Garifuna spread out along the Honduras coast, eventually encompassing the Caribbean coast lines of Nicaragua, Guatemala and Belize. There they intermingled uneasily with the indigenous inhabitants and always keeping their ethical and cultural identity intact. But they remained as ever, marginalized, independent and rebellious in their little autonomous enclaves.

"GOING AFTER THE SUN AND BEACH" - THE ENCLOSURE OF THE COMMONS

Tela Bay and its environs is the center of the Honduran Garifuna world, with some 36 communities dotted along an impressive 80km sandy shore. The largest of them, Triunfo de la Cruz, population 800 families, is a quiet, unassuming village that now finds itself on the front line of the conflict. The first thing the visitor may notice about the Triunfo de la Cruz beachfront is what is lacking. Unusual for a paradise vista like this - a sweeping sun-drenched bay with lush sands and majestic palms. There is no line of beachfront hotels, no bars, no reclining tourists in bikinis sipping margaritas, no uniformed attendants sweeping up the ocean debris. Instead there is a group of hardy fishermen dragging their small old boats from the sea, there are gaggles of raggedy children playing games and there is an intriguing, languorous feel to the place. It's a though nothing has changed much here on the beach at Triunfo de la Cruz for a couple of centuries, and people like it that way.

Traditionally the Garifuna holds their land communally, as part of the patrimony of the people in general. The community assembly gathers to decide upon whatever happens in the territory. It is an autonomous zone as such, where the authority is the people's assembly, and sovereignty lies not in the Honduran state, but with the Garifuna as a whole. Marginalized and isolated, this arrangement worked fine without interruption for some two hundred years, partly due to the isolation of the coast and the marginalization of the community from Honduras. Nobody else wanted to live in such a wild and remote region, so they were left alone.

Sensing encroaching danger and exhibiting not a little premonition, in 1992 the Garifuna achieved legal recognition in the courts for their communally-held land, after decades of struggle. They could rest easy, it seemed.

In 1994, the cabal of powerful business interests made their move. They imagined a Honduran-version of Cancun, bringing in the state and investors bags of money. Locals looked on aghast as suddenly a big fence went up on the beach at Triunfo in 1994 and the building of luxury villas commenced. The fact that it was a completely illegal move presented no difficulties for the developers: they got their buddies in government to change the laws. A privatization bill was introduced, rendering the communally-held land titles of the Garifuna useless. The criminal nature of the state is always the most apparent when it comes to the question of enclosing the commons. As the Tourist Minister emphasized, they were "going after the sun and the beach" and the legal

annexation of community-owned lands began with impunity.

They hadn't counted on the fierce refusal of the Garifuna to accommodate these plans. Organized in the Land Defense Committee of Triunfo de la Cruz (CODETT) the locals resisted, focusing on the unscrupulous malfeasance of the regional state authorities who in the process of fencing off the land had granted erroneous title deeds to the investors. CODETT accused the Tela Municipality authorities of abuse of authority and embezzlement of public funds.



Photo by Timo Russo

The assault on the Garifuna came swift. Upon signing the lawsuit in 1997, three Garifuna leaders in Triunfo met violent deaths. First, activist Oscar Bregal was murdered leaving the community on January 7. Next, CODETT leader Jesus Alvarez was shot dead on April 7 while he ate with his small son in the nearby town of Tela. This was the third murder attempt on Jesus. Then later, two gunmen entered the home of Santos Zacarias Santos and shot him 17 times in front of his children. Unsurprisingly, Honduran police have not resolved any of these cases – quite possibly because they themselves are among the lead suspects.

Another prominent activist Alfredo Lopez was taken out by legal means – framed and imprisoned for trumped up drug charges. He was jailed for 7 years.

Repression is nothing new for the Garifunas. The OFRANEH organization (Honduras Black Fraternal Organization) formed in the 1970s to defend the interests of the people and protect their communally-held ancestral land, has been the constant target of state repression. Its members' houses have been searched, and the members themselves have been illegally detained, surveilled and harrassed. This systematic assault on the

organization continues unabated. The last deadly assault was aimed at the OFRANEH president Gregoria Flores who suffered gunshot wounds while walking down the street in nearby La Ceiba town.

The best way to combat repression is to respond with lightning action. OFRANEHs base of support is predominantly amongst women of the communities, and it was the women who responded with direct action against the first tourist project, occupying the site, and building their own form of alternative community based eco-tourist cabins alongside the stalled resort construction site. "With the force of Barauda and Satuye, our resistance continues!" proclaimed the Garifuna, winning this round of the fight.

THE LONG STRUGGLE

But the reach of power and money is long. While the various legal petitions to stop the usurpation of the land went through national and international courts at a painfully slow pace, the state and investors were garnering support for their mega-tourist resort plans from high capital – the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank, while at the same time wearing away at community resistance. By the time Alfredo Lopez was released from jail, having won his case before the Inter-American Human Rights Commission in 2003, the struggle had almost spanned a decade. By means of another unscrupulous legal connivance called the Area Under Special Management (ABRE) edict, the Government decreed Tela Bay a kind of officially denominated developers playground. The new property law was yet another attempt to break up the Garifunas collective titles, increasing pressure on individual owners to sell their newly acquired property titles. In the small impoverished Garifuna community of Miami, a remote beachside paradise, most residents eventually succumbed to the pressure, and sold their individual land plots, opening the way up to the investors. The coercion was accompanied by veiled threats. As Garifuna leader Edgardo Benedeth pointed out: "The Miami residents think that if they don't sell the land, it will be stolen anyway".

The multi-million dollar Los Micos Beach and Golf Resort affected not only the beach but also the wetlands behind Tela Bay upon which the Garifuna depend for their livelihood. Community water supplies were heavily impacted by the hotel and golf course. "We don't play golf!" laughs Alfredo Lopez, pointing out the absurdity of putting an extravagant golf course on Garifuna land. Confronted by the heavily guarded new enclosures appearing along the beach, Alfredo comments, "We are not used to living with fences or to walk among armed security personnel. They block access to the beach and local tourism is affected. What kind of development is this that only benefits the businessmen and the owners of the projects and goes against the culture and ways of the communities?"

Not even the promised jobs for the locals materialized. "They talk of employment," points out the Garifuna organization OFRANEH, "but the reality is that the hotel chains won't give us work, they bring workers from outside."

Still the government harked on about bringing wealth and developing the communities through the investment projects. "According to what we have seen in the past, the reality is completely different," argued OFRANEH. "We believe that the development has to come from inside and not from outside, and that is why already we have experiences of common and traditional tourism that the local communities are developing. So that gives us the firmness and the moral authority to say that it is not true. There can't be development if these people force the communities to give up their property."

Employing the ever effective tactic of divide and rule, the government and investors are using money and influence to pressure, bully and buy allegiance. Some sectors of the Garifuna have given in and take the government view that the development of mega-tourism is an inevitability that can't be fought. "This is going to happen, the question is how to prepare," says Natividad Rochez, the Tourism Ministry's coordinator of ethnic projects and himself a Garifuna. Government friendly Garifuna NGO's are popping up, ostensibly representing locals, but in reality, payrolled by big business. The states battle for hearts and minds is fought village by village, house by house and generally negotiated through the wallet.

But resistance continues. The Garifuna will tell you a story of the origins of their famous Punta dance. The world renowned music and dance form grew from a war dance called the Yancunu. Back in the day of resistance to the colonialists, Garifuna men donned colorful masks, dressed up as women, danced salaciously before the conquistador foe and at the least expected moment, would whip out the weapons hidden among their many skirts to do battle.

The struggle today takes on less extravagant tactics: in the form of legal suits before national and international courts, or mass marches on the Capital, mobilizing popular support. Yet the cunning and passion remains the same. In Tela Bay, roads are blocked and construction of the hotels sabotaged. Resistance is both collective and individual, like the single old lady who refuses to budge in the center of the development at Miami village, forcing them to build their mega complex around her little hut.

THE FACE OF IMPLACABLE RESISTANCE

"Very often when I do something which the state regards as illegal, I regard as legal. That is, I regard the state as criminal." - Noam Chomsky

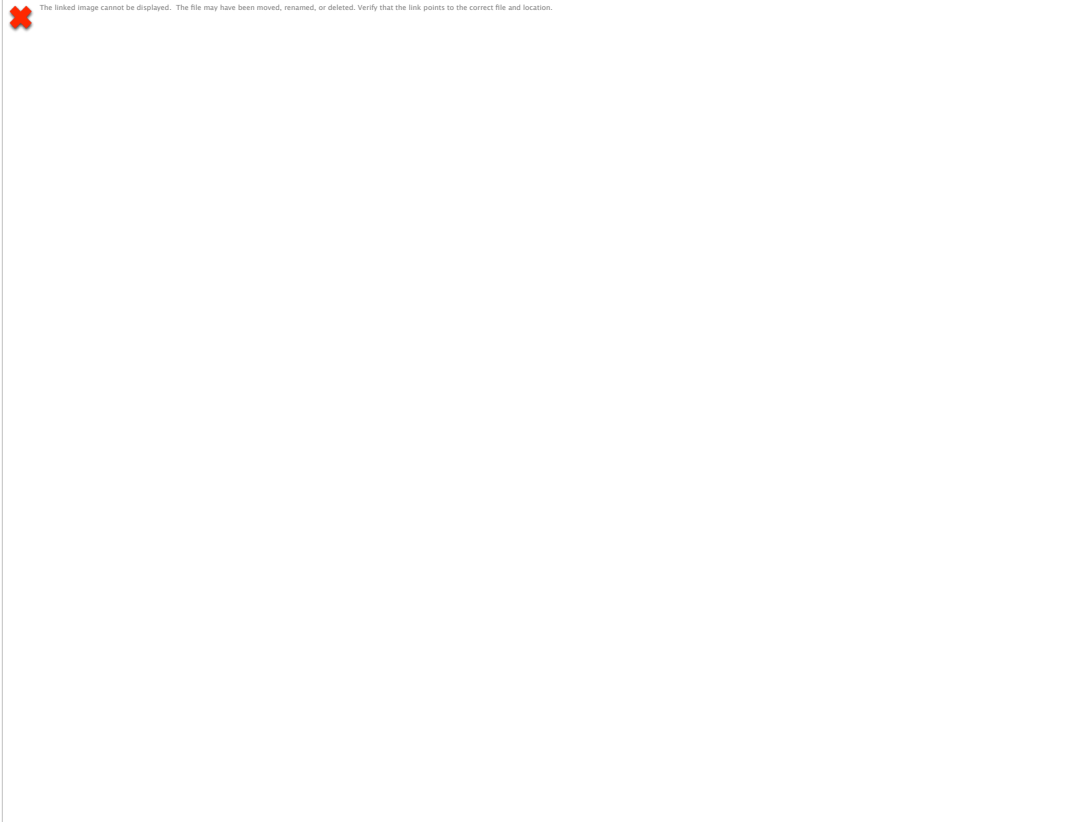
So I'm off to the front line of the struggle, Triunfo de la Cruz, to meet the man who served 7 long years of illegal imprisonment. Alfredo Lopez currently plays a central role with the OFRANEH organization, and refusing to be silenced, has emerged as an eloquent and veracious voice denouncing injustice on his campaigning radio shows on the local Garifuna Radio Faluma Bimetu, (the Sweet Coco) and the regional-wide Radio Progreso. Implacable, he seems a living example of the dictum that what doesn't kill you makes you stronger.

Never trust a cell phone. Sure enough the day we are meant to meet in the nearby town of Tela I can't get through to his cell. Frustrated, I decide to board the chicken bus to Triunfo, on a blind attempt to locate him.

The bus is full of Garifuna speaking away in their own distinct Igñeri tongue, then suddenly changing to Spanish, and then, most strangely, occasionally speaking in English - and a very accented Bronx, New York English at that. I notice that the bus is full of kids and middle aged people: there is almost a complete lack of people in the 18-35 range. Then I remember that the Garifuna are a migrant community and almost half the population, predominantly young adults, live in the US.

We trundle into Triunfo de la Cruz and it's a hot, sleepy Caribbean village with the 500 or so family houses spread out far and wide amongst the lush tropical trees. Because the town is not designed to the Spanish colonial pattern like the rest of Honduras, the

imagined central plaza for me to debark at never materializes. I am already lost. So when most people have exited the bus that seems to be just riding around the labyrinthine roads somewhat randomly, I turn and ask the lady behind me where I can find Alfredo. As luck would have it, the lady tells me she is his sister.



Alfredo Lopez on his radio show. Photo by Timo Russo

"He's very hard to find, you are lucky you met me," she tells me, as she takes me to her house. There she dispatches a child to alert her brother, and eventually, after getting clearance, we set off down back lanes and across yards and finally come to a little house under a bunch of big old trees. Kids are everywhere and Alfredo is busy finishing up installing a new water pump for his well as the community water system is not working. "I'm hard to find, he says , "you were lucky." I am.

The recent spate of repression against OFRENEH members explains Alfredo's allusive behavior. We sit under a tree and he holds a bundle of papers. He looks weary, it's a difficult moment; OFRANEH is under a lot of pressure, people are being bought off, one by one. Other activists are migrating, Alfredo explains, and others still are simply tired of the struggle, resistance fatigue setting in. "We are really at a crucial moment in the struggle and it could go either way..."

Alfredo is an athletic 50-something year old (I used to play soccer professionally, he says), with a well lived in face and a mouth full of sparkling metal when he smiles, which he does as he tells his stories.

His is a world of total defiance. His foe – the government, the foreign investors, the compliant NGO's and most of all, the local authorities in the town of Tela, those who

framed him and killed his comrades – he refers to either as the all-encompassing "el turismo" or else simply, el enemigo – the enemy.

As in "the enemy is dividing the communities. They are setting up small meetings with certain individuals and creating divisions, so our unity is affected. They are systematically, house by house, removing us. Their tactics are complex, but familiar from other campaigns. El turismo is using local people, setting up NGOs as fronts, paying them well, buying some, pressurizing others. Our community assemblies are infiltrated by individuals working for el turismo, they try to ferment division..."

"Look what has happened in Miami" he says, referring to the only community so far to sell out to el turismo. "The community hardly exists now. It's a tragedy, they tricked the people into signing over their deeds, and now the community is destroyed. It serves as a warning for what will happen to the rest. People look at Miami and see the future. That's why the struggle here in Triunfo is so important. We are at the top of the list for el turismo, they want this land. If we hold out, so will the other communities."

His teenage daughter arrives out with a couple of plates of food. Delicious chicken, I'm thinking, savouring the home cooking.

"You like it?" asks the daughter.

"Fantastic."

"It's shark," she says with a laugh.

Fuck me! I'm eating a shark for the first time in my life and it's great!

The conservation NGO's are pressuring the fishermen, explains Alfredo. Garifuna have always eaten shark and sea turtle and other now endangered ocean species. "It's not us who emptied the ocean, we have always fished just for subsistence. Industrial fishing depletes the stocks." he says.

People constantly come and go, having a quick word with Alfredo, or looking for information. A big tall dreadlocked fisherman with hands the size of oars and an impressive laugh greets me like a brother, warm and friendly. He lingers long enough to assure me, as if there was any doubt at all in my mind – which I can assure you there was not – that he's totally down with the struggle. "To the very end," he says, with a great booming laugh.

Another man, clad in city attire, hands Alfredo an envelope, and leaves quickly, glancing about him. Cloak and dagger stuff. "We have our sources in the municipality," says Alfredo, his gold teeth flashing. "I broadcast all the inside information we receive on my radio show." Alfredo has a program on the community Radio Faluma Bimetu and uses it to inform the community of the case and the campaign. "The enemy are my best listeners because they know I've got the inside information!" He chuckles.

Alfredo loves to tell stories. Like when one of the OFRANEH members was arrested while blockading some construction equipment coming in. The cops brought him to the police station in nearby Tela. Within an hour a large group of Garifuna assembled, making a serious raucous with drums, music and dance, demanding his release. So he walked, the police not up to dealing with all these obstreperous Garifuna. Alfredo chuckles away while relating the story, his teeth sparkling, and it's like every little victory for the community against the enemy fills his heart with joy.

Seven years in jail. I say. That's tough. "They'll never stop me. This is a struggle to the end,"

he says. "We will do whatever it takes to win. We have the moral authority."

But he doesn't want to dwell on the miscarriage of justice he has suffered, he is keen to talk about the work the campaign is doing now, or the community spirit, or the context of it all.

"Garifuna were never enslaved," he emphasizes, proudly. "And our dignity keeps us resisting. The slaves' families were broken up, but not the Garifuna and that is why they have been able to retain such a strong family bond, generations living in each others shadow. We have a real strength of community here. The spiritual element is important - our ancestors walk with us."

I can't do justice here to his words, or how he expresses them. He speaks with utter conviction and carries himself like a proud chieftain of old, eloquent, and steadfast.

It's one thing to read all the articles and reports about the epic Garifuna struggle but it's another to sit here under the great old tree listening to this lion-hearted man talk, with all the children playing in the background, the sun setting over Tela Bay, a Caribbean sunset, the most majestic of them all.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

The United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization declared Garifuna culture as one of the Heritages of Humanity, due to their "outstanding value, roots in cultural tradition, affirmation of cultural identity, source of inspiration and intercultural exchange, contemporary cultural and social role, excellence in the application of skills, unique testimony of living cultural tradition, and risk of disappearing."

A risk of disappearing because the Garifuna are up against murderous local authorities, the avarice of the central government, the neo-liberal plans of the foreign investors and a bunch of dodgy local and international NGOs. Now they are even pitted against members of their own community who have turned. In a word, the Garifuna are at a risk of disappearing because of capitalism. Savage, unremitting pursuit of profit.

"It's all part of the broader Plan Puebla Panama and Cafta (Central America Free Trade Area)," says Alfredo, referring to the macro-economic plan for the region pushed by neo-liberal governments and institutions. But unity is strength and that is why they have strong ties with the indigenous network COPINH, and organizations further afield, like the Mexico-based COMPPA organization or US-based Rights Action. "We are in this together," says Alfredo, "same struggle, same enemies."

What can we do to help the Garifuna struggle? For a start we can help them develop their own local tourism by visiting them and make common cause with their plight. We can boycott the tourist industry and speak out about the inherent injustice of the mega-tourist development in the region. Italian solidarity groups have campaigned against the Italian consortium backing the project, and other groups are putting pressure on the Honduran government of Manuel Zelaya. The reputable Geneva based Human Rights group COHRE (Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions) found in July 2007 after a lengthy investigation, that "The government of Honduras is responsible for the violations of property rights, living conditions, development and life of the Garifuna communities of Triunfo de la Cruz and San Juan. Consequently it has the obligation to put integral reparation into effect, including just and adequate compensation."

That is not going to happen unless the corrupt, mercenary and criminal government at

state and regional level are forced to do it.

"With such odds stacked against you," I ask Alfredo Lopez, "what are the hopes?"

"We have a string of petitions before the Inter-American Human Rights Court and we have high hopes that we can win there. The state has never won a case in that court."

"That's the hope?"

"We are in a struggle to save our people. We will do what we have to do here in Triunfo. We are the strongest community, so the struggle will be won or lost here. And we think we will win our demands! That is our hope."

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Contact OFRANEH (Black Fraternal Organization of Honduras) at OFRANEH, Barrió El Centro, Avenida La República, 2ª Planta de Librería El Trébol, Contiguo a CELTEL, La Ceiba, Atlántida, Honduras, C. A. Apartado Postal 341. Telefax: 00(504) 443-24-92, e-mail: ofraneh@ofraneh.org.hn

COPINH (Consejo Cívico de Organizaciones Populares e Indígenas de Honduras) Barrio Lempira, La Esperanza, Intibucá, Honduras. copinhonduras@yahoo.es

COMPPA (Coalition of Popular Communicators for Autonomy) <http://www.comppa.org/comppa@mediosindependientes.org>

Note: Background information for this article is taken from Jose Idiaquez' The Walagallo: Heart of the Garifuna World, Envio magazine, and Rights Action Report - The Tourist Industry and Repression in Honduras (8.31.05).

Ramor Ryan is the author of [Clandestines - The Pirate journals of an Irish Exile](#) (AK Press 2006). He lives in Chiapas, Mexico.

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WHAT TO DO: info@rightsaction.org, www.rightsaction.org

EDUCATIONAL DELEGATION

From July 7-12, Rights Action is leading an educational delegation to Honduras to investigate the territorial and human rights struggles of Indigenous/Garifuna peoples and community-based resistance to the environmental and economic harms and human rights violations being caused by Goldcorp Inc's open pit, cyanide leaching mine. If interested: info@rightsaction.org.

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RIGHTS ACTION

Based in Guatemala, Rights Action (with tax-deductible legal status in Canada and USA) funds and works with community-based development, environment and human rights organizations in Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and southern Mexico (Oaxaca, Chiapas); and educates about and is involved in activism related to global development, environmental and human rights struggles.

TO MAKE TAX-DEDUCTIBLE DONATIONS for indigenous and community-based organizations that are working for justice and to end impunity, and to implement their

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