

Honduras Re-Admitted To The OAS. 3 Killed; 2 Kidnapped In The Aguan

By Annie Bird, June 9, 2011

On Sunday, June 5, Jose Recinos Aguilar, Joel Santamaria and Genaro Cuesta, all members of the Authentic Revindicative Campesino Movement of the Aguan (MARCA), were massacred in a car a few meters from the San Esteban cooperative. At approximately the same time it is reported that armed forces entered the installations of the National Agrarian Institute and opened fire on families who for several months have taken refuge within the government owned agrarian training center. Doris Pérez Vásquez was shot in the abdomen and is reported to be in critical condition.

Even as the community buried the three men murdered this Sunday, they continued the search for Olvin Gallegos and Segundo Gomez, two members of MARCA. Eyewitnesses saw private security guards, from the same forces being trained as paramilitaries, kidnap the two men.

MAY 15 – DISAPPEARANCE

The killing and kidnapping of these 5 campesinos follows upon the May 15th forced disappearance of Francisco Pascual López as he tended cattle on his farm close to the property line with the Panama African palm plantation, a farm that maintains heavy presence of paramilitaries. Nearby farmers with whom he shares the farm heard shots fired, but when they arrived where he had been, he was gone. Police found bullets and a trail of blood leading into the Panama African palm plantation, but refused to enter the plantation to continue the search.

MAY 18 - KILLING

On May 18, Sixto Ramos was killed along the highway, shot from a passing car. Additionally, on May 10, Jose Paulino Lemo was shot as he walked on the road to sell fish by a passing motorcycle. Francisco

Pascual Lopez, Sixto Ramos and Jose Paulino Lemo were active members of the Campesino Movement of the Aguan (MCA).

PARAMILITARY TRAINING ON HONDURAN MILITARY BASE FOREIGN TRAINERS REPORTED

There are reports that approximately 400 private security guards, employed by African palm producers in the region, are being trained in the Rio Claro base in Tocoa, Colon, home of the 15th Army Battalion. The security guards reportedly are from the Orion security company, employed by the Exportadora del Atlantico, and others are employed directly by the Dinant palm oil and derivatives company.

The trainers wear Honduran military uniforms, and rarely leave the base though they have been reported to participate in forced, illegal evictions. During these evictions security guards have been reported to change into military uniforms; close collaboration between police, military and security guards has been reported.

Local informants claim the trainer's accents, stature and coloring lead people in the region to believe they are not Honduran. Many suspect they are Colombian. In October 2009, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the use of Mercenaries, Private Security and Paramilitaries reported the Honduran African palm producers were recruiting security forces in Colombia particularly among former AUC members – a right-wing paramilitary group.

There have also been reports of Chinook helicopters flying to and from the Rio Claro base, which leads many to believe US troops maintain a presence on the base.

On January 8, 2011, Juan Chinchilla, a Honduran land rights activist, was kidnapped and tortured. Able to escape the evening of January 9, while being moved from his illegal detention center, Chinchilla reported that participants in his torture spoke English and another language he was not able to identify.

CRIMINALIZATION OF LAND RIGHTS AND OTHER HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

The rash of killings and forced disappearances is obviously of grave concern; all the more shocking as Honduras was re-admitted to the OAS.

A communiqué by the National Agrarian Institute Workers Union asserts that since the June 2009 military coup, 39 campesinos have been killed by paramilitary forces working for the oil palm planters while 10 more have been disappeared.

As violence by paramilitary forces increases so does criminalization of land rights activists and other human rights defenders. The limited media reporting of the killings in the Aguan region is coupled with accusations that the land and human rights movements being targeted by the paramilitary actions are armed.

In March 2010, when the military backed Honduran regime was criticized for the extreme militarization of the Aguan, de facto president Lobo responded with unsupported accusations that the campesinos were armed and Venezuelan and Nicaraguans were present in the area.

Following the November 15, 2010 massacre of 5 campesinos by Dinant palm oil security forces (with military and police support), Lobo claimed that campesinos had a stash of over 1,000 high caliber weapons and had received foreign training, which Security Minister Oscar Alvarez claimed took place in Nicaragua.

On this pretext the military took over the National Agrarian Institute (INA) and the INA union reported that the army stole documentation that demonstrated that palm oil planters did not hold legitimate claim over lands being contested by campesinos.

African palm producer Miguel Facusse (one of the wealthiest and most powerful men in Honduras and major backer of the June 2009 military coup) is again using Honduras' corrupted "justice" system to

persecute human rights defenders, a practice long employed by Facusse and others.

On May 30, 2011, Facusse's lawyers announced he was suing Catholic Bishop Luis Alfonso Santos for statements that implicated Facusse in the killing of 14 farmers in the Aguan region. A few days later, June 6, 2011, Facusse presented defamation charges against Andres Pavon, the Director of the Honduran Committee for the Defense of Human Rights (CODEH). Several months prior Pavon had presented legal charges against Facusse related to the killing of the 14 farmers, and just days before being subject to the defamation charges had denounced that the evidence on the killings was disappearing from the Attorney General Offices files.

PALM PLANTERS USE VIOLENCE AND FRAUD TO TAKE LAND FROM FARMERS

This State-backed, paramilitary repression occurs in the context of a series of complex, long-term land rights disputes in the region.

The lower Aguan, a fertile agricultural plain that surrounds the Aguan river near Honduras' Caribbean coast, was subject to an agricultural colonization program in the 1960s and 1970s facilitated by an agrarian reform program. At that time dozens of cooperatives were formed and many began cultivation of a crop pioneered by United Fruit Company, African palm for vegetable oil production.

In the beginning of the 1990s, a "land modernization" law was passed. Among other measures, the "Land Modernization Law" in Honduras removed restrictions on resale of land obtained through the agrarian reform program. Dozens of cooperatives established through the agrarian reform program were resold to today's Honduran palm oil magnates, Miguel Facusse and Rene Morales. However many of the sales were marred by illegalities, fraud and violence.

By 2000, there were tremendous problems of landlessness, underemployment and terrible working conditions among small

farmers in the region. With the support of the Parish of Tocoa, landless farmers organized the Campesino Movement of the Aguan (MCA).

In 2000, hundreds of small farmers established themselves in an area known as the Center for Regional Military Training (CREM), an extension of land used by the US army in the 1980s to train Central American militaries and to provide support to the Contra armed insurgency that fought the Sandinista government in Nicaragua.

Between 1989 and 1990, the CREM land had been purchased by the National Agrarian Institute, reportedly from US citizen Temistocles Ramirez, for \$17 million to be used exclusively for agrarian reform purposes. Previously, the land had been used for large scale cattle ranching, and according to some reports drug trafficking, largely by former Honduran military, who naturally quickly came into conflict with the campesinos who established farms in the property in 2000.

However, with support from the catholic church and national land rights organizations, the "cattle ranchers" were compensated through the INA for the "improvements" they had made on the CREM land, so as to take pressure of the campesinos who were now setting up coops and businesses, with the support of INA.

Only a few portions of the land then remained in conflict, particularly an area known as El Tumbador which Miguel Facusse claimed to own, via a questionable land purchase. The MCA divided the CREM lands between 45 distinct Campesino Businesses.

In 2004, campesinos began organizing to reclaim cooperative lands that had been illegally acquired by the palm oil magnates in the 1990s, forming the Unified Campesino Movement of the Aguan, MUCA.

In February 2006, 7000 campesinos organized in the MUCA blocked the main highway in Tocoa, demanding that the District Attorney in Tocoa, the Attorney General of Honduras and the Supreme Court investigate the irregular purchases of the cooperatives in the 1990s.

By March 2009, after years of investigation, the MUCA proposed a negotiation platform focused on demanding that 29 cooperatives be returned to campesinos.

On May 28, 2009 MUCA occupied the palm oil processing plant owned by Miguel Facusse.

President Zelaya personally went to the Aguan to negotiate with the campesinos. On June 12, 2009 an agreement was defined between the MUCA and the government, and the processing plant occupation was lifted. On June 19 President Zelaya signed the agreement, which essentially mandated a technical-legal team with the investigation of the legal history of the cooperatives.

On June 21 the investigation began, but ended with the June 28, 2009 military coup.

In reaction to the suspension of the investigation, on December 9, 2009 the MUCA began occupying the former cooperatives in conflict, and claim to hold documentation to demonstrate that the palm oil magnates do not legally own 29 cooperative farms.

In April 2010, de facto president Porfirio Lobo sent thousands of troops to occupy the Aguan, and forced the MUCA to enter into negotiations, not only threatened private security forces controlled by the palm oil magnates, but also by the Honduran military.

An agreement was signed in which Miguel Facusse agreed to sell an extension of land to the MUCA. At this time a section of the MUCA split off to form the Authentic and Revindicative Campesino Movement of the Aguan, MARCA.

MARCA campesinos decided to pursue recognition of their land rights through law suits using the documentation they had gathered that showed flawed titling processes by the palm oil magnates rather than signing a negotiated agreement as those in MUCA chose to do.

The terms of the “agreement” signed between the palm oil companies and the MUCA have not been complied with and the “justice” system has not facilitated the advance of the legal remedies sought by MARCA.

Instead, throughout 2010 palm oil planters strengthened their paramilitary presence and the area remained militarized. Dozens of campesino killings have been documented, and it is understood that others have occurred which have not been documented; please see the list below:

PARTIAL LIST OF KILLINGS, KIDNAPPINGS & DISAPPEARANCES

1. January 4, 2010: Miguel Angel Alonso Oliva, from the Cooperativa Guanchias, Shot in the back
2. January 31, 2010: Juan Ramon Mejia, from the Cooperativa Occidental, Intentionally run over by a car
3. February 4, 2010: Isidro Santos, from the Cooperativa Occidental, Died in car crash while fleeing from armed men shooting at them from another car
4. February 4, 2010: Francisco Montes, from the Cooperativa Buenos Amigos, Died in car crash while fleeing from armed men shooting at them from another car
5. February 14, 2010 – Feliciano Santos from the Cooperativa 21 de Julio – fatally shot while walking to lands in dispute
6. March 17, 2010 – Jose Antonio Cardoza from the Associative Business Brisas de COHDEFOR – fatally shot while walking home from the fields
7. March 17, 2010 – Jose Concepcion Carias from the Associative Business Brisas de COHDEFOR – fatally shot while walking home from the fields
8. April 7, 2010 – Jose Leonel Guerra Alvarez from La Confianza Cooperativa – shot in front of his home by two people who stopped on a motorcycle
9. April 25, 2010 – Esteban Garcia from the Associative Business 9 de Agosto - shot while riding his bicycle from a passing car

10. June 20, 2010 – Oscar Giovanni Ramirez of the La Aurora Coopertiva – killed in the midst of an assault carried out by Cobra police force and Orion security guards
11. August 18, 2010 – Victor Manuel Mata Olica from the La Auroroa Cooperative – shot while traveling home in a car that according to witnesses was fired upon by security guards riding in blue double cabin pick up truck
12. August 18, 2010 – Rodving Omar Villegas from the La Auroroa Cooperative – shot while traveling home in a car that according to witnesses was fired upon by security guards riding in blue double cabin pick up truck
13. August 18, 2010 – Sergio Madiel Amaya from the La Auroroa Cooperative – shot while traveling home in a car that according to witnesses was fired upon by security guards riding in blue double cabin pick up truck
14. September 10, 2010 – Francisco Miranda Ortega of the La Aurora Cooperativa – shot by six people while he rode his bike to Tocoa
15. November 15, 2010 – Raul Castillo of the Cooperative 14 de mayo – shot by Dinant security guards on the Finca El Tumbador
16. November 15, 2010 – Jose Luis Saucedo of the Cooperative 14 de mayo – shot by Dinant security guards on the Finca El Tumbador
17. November 15, 2010 – Ciriaco Munoz of the Cooperativa Nueva Esperanza – shot by Dinant security guards on the Finca El Tumbador
18. November 15, 2010 – Teodoro Acosta de la Cooperativa Nueva Esperanza – shot by Dinant security guards on the Finca El Tumbador
19. November 15, 2010 – Ignacio Reyes Garcia of the Three United Families Cooperative – shot by Dinant security guards on the Finca El Tumbador
20. Esteban Garcia from the Associative Business 25 de abril was shot while riding his bike by gunmen in a white sedan

WHAT TO DO

TO MAKE TAX-DEDUCTIBLE DONATIONS for the pro-democracy movement in Honduras, make check payable to "Rights Action" and mail to:

UNITED STATES: Box 50887, Washington DC, 20091-0887

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CREDIT-CARD DONATIONS: <http://rightsaction.org/contributions.htm>

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- EDUCATIONAL DELEGATIONS TO HONDURAS: Form your own group and/ or join one of our educational delegation-seminars to come to Honduras and learn first hand about the pro-democracy movement: info@rightsaction.org
- CREATE YOUR OWN email and mail lists and re-distribute our information
- RECOMMENDED DAILY NEWS: www.democracynow.org / www.upsidedownworld.org / www.dominionpaper.ca
- RECOMMENDED BOOKS: Eduardo Galeano's "Open Veins of Latin America"; Howard Zinn's "A People's History of the United States"; James Loewen's "Lies My Teacher Told Me"; Naomi Klein's "The Shock Doctrine"; Paulo Freire's "Pedagogy of the Oppressed"; Dr Seuss's "Horton Hears A Who"

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