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## **Wikileaks Honduras: U.S. Linked To Largest Landowner, Repression & Killings, Bio-Fuels Production, Narco-Trafficking**

By Dana Frank

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## **WIKILEAKS HONDURAS: U.S. LINKED TO LARGEST LANDOWNER, REPRESSION & KILLINGS, BIO-FUELS PRODUCTION, NARCO-TRAFFICKING**

By Dana Frank, October 21, 2011

<http://www.thenation.com/article/164120/wikileaks-honduras-us-linked-brutal-businessman>

Since 2009, beneath the radar of the international media, the coup government ruling Honduras has been collaborating with wealthy landowners in a violent crackdown on small farmers struggling for land rights in the Aguán Valley in the northeastern region of the country.

More than forty-six campesinos have been killed or disappeared. Human rights groups charge that many of the killings have been perpetrated by the private army of security guards employed by Miguel Facussé, a biofuels magnate. Facussé's guards work closely with the Honduran military and police, which receive generous funding from the United States to fight the war on drugs in the region.

New Wikileaks cables now reveal that the US embassy in Honduras — and therefore the State Department — has known since 2004 that Miguel Facussé is a cocaine importer. US “drug war” funds and training, in other words, are being used to support a known drug trafficker's war against campesinos.

## MIGUEL FACUSSE

Miguel Facussé Barjum, in the embassy's words, is "the wealthiest, most powerful businessman in the country," one of the country's "political heavyweights." The New York Times recently described him as "the octogenarian patriarch of one of the handful of families controlling much of Honduras' economy." Facussé's nephew, Carlos Flores Facussé, served as president of Honduras from 1998 to 2002. Miguel Facussé's Dinant corporation is a major producer of palm oil, snack foods, and other agricultural products. He was one of the key supporters of the military coup that deposed democratically elected President Manuel Zelaya on June 28, 2009.

## FACUSSE & LAND STRUGGLES IN THE AGUAN VALLEY

Miguel Facussé's power base lies in the lower Aguán Valley, where campesinos originally settled in the 1970s as part of an agrarian reform strategy by the Honduran government, which encouraged hundreds of successful campesino cooperatives and collectives in the region.

Beginning in 1992, though, new neoliberal governments began promoting the transfer of their lands to wealthy elites, who were quick to take advantage of state support to intimidate and coerce campesinos into selling, and in some cases to acquire land through outright fraud.

Facussé, the biggest beneficiary by far of these state policies, now claims at least 22,000 acres in the lower Aguán, at least one-fifth of the entire area, much of which he has planted in African palms for an expanding biofuel empire.

Campesino living standards in the region, meanwhile, have eroded dramatically. In December 2009 thousands of organized campesinos began staging collective recuperations of lands in the lower Aguán that they argue were stolen from them, or else legally promised to them by the government through previous agreements or edicts.

## POVERTY & REPRESSION

The campesinos' efforts have been met with swift and brutal retaliation. According to Committee of Families of the Detained and Disappeared of Honduras (COFADEH), the independent, highly respected human rights group, at least forty-four have been killed, at least sixteen this past

summer alone. The victims include leaders of groups such as the Movimiento Unificado de Campesinos de Aguán (MUCA), which is involved in land occupations, but also members of stable communities that have been in place for decades, such as Guadalupe Carney, Rigores or Prieta, whose residents believed they had secure title to their holdings.

According to a recent statement by Human Rights Watch calling for investigation, no one has been arrested or prosecuted for any of these murders.

Many of these killings and related attacks have been attributed to Miguel Facussé's private security guards, as well those of his associates. Known locally as sicarios or hired assassins, they wear either plainclothes or Grupo Dinant uniforms and are reported to number between 200 and 300. Facussé himself admits that on November 15, 2010, his guards shot and killed five campesinos from the MUCA at the El Tumbador community.

A July 2011 report from a joint fact-finding mission from the World Council of Churches, Foodfirst Information and Action Network (FIAN) International, and other international groups on the killings of campesinos in the Aguán, states: "In all cases, according to witnesses and members of the peasant movements, the security guards working for Miguel Facussé and René Morales are seen to be the primary actors," including in the deaths of three MUCA members on August 17, 2010.

Alleged assassinations and armed attacks by Facussé's guards continue. On October 5, Facussé's security guards allegedly shot at and gravely injured two MUCA members at the San Isidro campesino community, according to FIAN. On October 11 at La Aurora, FIAN and other human rights groups report, at least six security guards on lands claimed by Facussé's Dinant Corporation, together with police and military forces, shot and killed Santos Serfino Zelaya Ruiz, 33, and opened fire on fifteen women spreading salt, who hid for hours afterwards in the palm trees.

On January 8, 2011, opposition activist and journalist Juan Chinchilla was kidnapped in the Aguán Valley, tortured and interrogated. He escaped after two days and reported in an interview that his captors "almost all wore uniforms of the military, police and private guards of Miguel Facussé."

Human rights groups worldwide have denounced Facussé's attacks on Honduran campesinos. On April 8, the German development bank DEG (Deutsche Investitions und Entwicklungsgesellschaft mbH), cancelled a \$20 million loan to Dinant after investigating the situation. A week later EDF, a major French energy corporation, announced it was canceling plans to buy carbon credits from Dinant.

Facussé has lashed back aggressively with full-page advertisements in his defense. He also recently sued both Honduras' Bishop Luis Alfonso Santos and Andres Pavon, President of the Comité para la Defensa del Los Derechos Humanos (CODEH), a well-known human rights group, for defamation.

In tandem with the killings and disappearances of individual activists, in the past year and a half, the Honduran police and military have launched successive waves of repression against entire campesino communities, both newly occupied sites and stable ones with long-term legal status.

On December 15, 2010, between 500 and 1,000 police and military surrounded the small campesino town of Guadalupe Carney with snipers and helicopters, and staged a house-by-house search for alleged arms—which they never found. Troops have remained encamped in the middle of the town ever since. In April 2010, 2,000 Honduran police and military occupied the entire lower Aguán valley, controlling access and intimidating its residents.

The situation has worsened since May, and continues to escalate. Five security guards, a policeman, and five others, in addition to over sixteen campesinos, have died. The region is once again occupied by 1,000 troops in a military operation known as Xatruch II—which is aimed at combating armed guerrillas, of whose existence there is no evidence. Nor has any evidence been produced linking campesinos to the other deaths.

Overall, the occupation and repression of the lower Aguán have assumed terrifying proportions. "With the militarization of Xatruch II they are trying to convert our zone into Iraq," COFADEH and the MUCA charge. "Our settlements are being submitted to a permanent state of siege."

On June 24, with one hour's notice, police burned down almost the entire ten-year-old community of Rigores of over 100 houses and bulldozed down its three churches and seven-room schoolhouse. The residents began to rebuild their homes with tarps and sticks, but on September 16–18, in response to the death of a policeman nearby, police rampaged through the town, randomly grabbing and detaining people, including children. One of them was a 16-year-old boy who has testified that police put a bag over his head, sprayed him with gasoline and threatened to kill him. On September 20 police and military successfully ejected all those who remained in the community.

Multiple eyewitnesses and human rights groups report Facussé's private guards, police, and military all working together in these violent evictions and associated deaths— at El Tumbador on November 15, 2010; in Guadalupe Carney on December 15, 2010; in Rigores on June 24, 2011; and at La Aurora on October 11, where the women hid in the trees—as well as during Chinchilla's kidnapping.

This past August 15, COFADEH reports, Facussé's guards along with police and members of the military brutally attacked campesinos on the African palm plantation known as Finca Panamá.

#### NEXUS – MILITARY, POLICE, PARA-MILITARIES

According to Rights Action, the Washington, DC, and Toronto-based human rights group, "Military, police and private security forces are reported to exchange uniforms depending on the context, to mobilize jointly both in police patrol cars and automobiles that belong to private security companies employed by the African palm planters." COFADEH concludes: "The relationship between the military and the private security guards demonstrates clearly that the security guards are acting as paramilitary forces."

#### U.S. FUNDING & TRAINING

In the past two years since the coup US funding for the Honduran military and police has escalated dramatically. The US has allocated \$45 million in new funds for military construction, including expansion and improvement of the jointly operated Soto Cano Air Force Base at Palmerola (supplied now with US drones) and has opened three new military bases. Police and military funding, almost \$10 million for 2011, rose dramatically in June with \$40 million more under the new \$200

million Central American Regional Security Initiative, supposedly to combat drug trafficking in Central America—which is, indeed, rampant, dangerous and growing in Honduras under Lobo's post-coup government, especially in the Aguán.

Honduran military operations in the lower Aguán valley, including joint operations with Facussé's guards, benefit from these funds, as well as special training.

This summer seventy members of Honduras' Fifteenth Batallion received a special thirty-three-day training course from the US Rangers. According to the Honduras Solidarity Network, members of the Xatruch Special Forces group in the Aguán Valley, in a September meeting, "confirmed that they had received training from the United States military in special operations, which include sniper and anti-terrorism training." Eyewitnesses informed Rights Action they saw US Rangers also training Facussé's security guards.

Most recently, on October 6 members of Operation Xatruch II captured, detained without charges, and tortured Walter Nelin Sabillón Yanos, a MUCA member, FIAN reports. Sabillón testified to FIAN that while he was in detention at the Tocoa police station, authorities beat him, repeatedly placed a hood on his head, and three times applied electric shock to his hands, abdomen and mouth while interrogating him about the campesino movement.

On September 17, I called the Tocoa police station to inquire about the condition of more than thirty campesinos that had been rounded up and were being detained. "Tell her they've killed all the campesinos," the official laughed, and then hung up. A colleague who called immediately afterward was told the detainees were being treated "like dogs." "Are they being tortured?" she asked. "I hope so," the official replied.

#### WIKILEAKS – MIGUEL FACUSSE & DRUG-TRAFFICKING

Now cables released by Wikileaks on September 30 suddenly shed light on the US military and State Department's role in the Aguán Valley conflict and in Honduras more broadly.

A March 19, 2004, cable from the US embassy in Tegucigalpa, entitled "Drug Plane Burned on Prominent Honduran's Property," reports that "a

known drug trafficking flight with a 1,000 kilo cocaine shipment from Colombia...successfully landed March 14 on the private property of Miguel Facusse.” According to the cable’s author, Ambassador Larry Palmer, sources informed police that “its cargo was off-loaded onto a convoy of vehicles that was guarded by about 30 heavily armed men.” The plane was seen burned and its wreckage then buried by a “bulldozer/front-end loader.”

Palmer writes that “Facusse’s property is heavily guarded and the prospect that individuals were able to access the property and, without authorization, use the airstrip is questionable.” One source “claimed that Facusse was present on the property at the time of the incident.”

Ambassador Palmer also reported that “this incident marks the third time in the last fifteen months that drug traffickers have been linked to this property owned by Mr. Facusse.” In a subsequent cable on March 31, 2004, Palmer noted the confiscation by Honduran authorities of “approximately 700 kilos of cocaine” and conveyed the belief that the drugs may have come from the burned plane on Facussé’s property.

On February 22, 2009 — four months before the coup — El Heraldo, a right-wing Tegucigalpa newspaper, reported that, according to an official of the Honduran government’s anti-narcotics office, a Cessna aircraft with 1,400 kilos of cocaine had been found in Farallones, east of the Aguán Valley in the department of Colon, “on a landing strip that according to our information belongs to Miguel Facussé.” It seems safe to presume that the US embassy reads El Heraldo daily and carefully.

Other cables released by Wikileaks establish that embassy officials met with Miguel Facussé in June 2006 and on September 7, 2009, ten weeks into the coup, when the embassy had lunch with Facussé and Rafael Callejas, another of the coup government’s powerful backers.

#### U.S. GOVERNMENT, FACUSSE & BIO-FUELS

A new US ambassador, Lisa Kusbiske, arrived in Honduras this August. She is an expert on biofuels — the center of Miguel Facussé’s African palm empire.

How does this all add up, then?

First, the US embassy met at least twice with a known, prominent drug trafficker.

Second, it was aware that he was a backer of the coup and met with him as it was playing out, as if he were merely a “prominent businessman.”

Third, most importantly, the United States is funding and training Honduran military and police that are conducting joint operations with the security guards of a known drug trafficker, to violently repress a campesino movement on behalf of Facusse’s dubious claims to vast swathes of the Aguán Valley, in order to support his African palm biofuels empire.

Current Honduran President Porfirio Lobo was in Washington, DC, the first week in October, trumpeting his commitment to defending human rights and fighting drug wars — with President Obama’s full blessing. In reality, both are providing cover and support for a war against impoverished campesinos, to promote the economic interests of Honduras’ richest and most powerful man.

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Sponsored by Alliance for Global Justice, Join AfGJ Coordinator Chuck Kaufman, Karen Spring (long-time Honduras human rights accompanier with Rights Action) and Tanya Kerksen (food policy analyst from Food First). For an application, send an email to AFGJ@AFGJ.org

2- HONDURAS & GUATEMALA, JANUARY 1-14, 2012

"MINING, BIOFUELS & MILITARIZATION: US MILITARY AID & CANADIAN-AMERICAN ECONOMIC INTERESTS"

Sponsored by Rights Action, join Annie Bird (Rights Action co-director). For complete information: annie@rightsaction.org, 202-680-3002.

3- GUATEMALA, MARCH 10-17, 2012

"DAMS, MINING & AFRICAN PALM PRODUCTION \* versus \* COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT, ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE & HUMAN RIGHTS"

Sponsored by Rights Action, join Grahame Russell (Rights Action co-director). For complete information: info@rightsaction.org, 860-352-2448

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