

Death Valley: The Land War Gripping Honduras

By Sorchá Pollack, May 9, 2015, Irish Times

<http://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/death-valley-the-land-war-gripping-honduras-1.2205506>

With a murder rate 65 times higher than Ireland's, Honduras is one of the world's most violent countries. And few parts are more dangerous than the Lower Aguán Valley, where local farmers claim that big business has illegally taken over their land.

Guadalupe Gallerda can still remember the sound of gunfire echoing through her village, in the Lower Aguán Valley, in Honduras, the day her husband was murdered. More than four years later she still struggles for words when speaking of his death.

"We want justice for the people who killed our family and friends. This is our land," Gallerda says as she shelters from the midday sun in her sparse stone kitchen. "We need this land to look after our families. How many children must be left without fathers before we can reclaim the land that legally belongs to us?"

The village of Guadalupe Carney, not far from Honduras's Caribbean coast, was shaken to its core when in November 2010 five farmers were shot dead while attempting to occupy a local African-palm plantation belonging to Miguel Facussé, a millionaire industrialist who is chief executive of Dinant Corporation.

Gallerda's 48-year-old husband, Raúl Castillo, left his home in the early hours of the morning to join nearly 160 local farmers, members of the Peasant Movement of the Aguán, and reoccupy the El Tumbador plantation. The group had been battling in court for the land, part of a former military training area, since the 1990s.

As the group approached El Tumbador, they say, they were fired on by security guards hired by Dinant and members of the Honduran military. Survivors say the

farmers carried only machetes; Dinant claims the local men were heavily armed and initiated the gunfire.

Jumi Judith Ordoño Acosta, who also lost her husband that day, said she waited all night, praying he would return home. “You could hear the noise, but I never imagined it would be him,” she says as tears stream down her face. “We’ve had no support or help. Now I have to work in the mountains like a man, grab my machete and go to work. We need Miguel Facussé to give us access to our land, so our children can grow up on it, and go to school, and so we can move forward with our lives.”

Francisco Ramírez, who still shows the scars of a bullet that passed through his face during the occupation, says that local farmers continue to feel harassed and that, even though Dinant security guards have stopped shooting people, their continued presence is highly intimidating to families and children.

Five security guards were charged with homicide for the Tumbador killings; none was convicted. A lack of evidence meant that they were given “provisional dismissals”; prosecutors were given five years to come up with more evidence.

Violent Land Disputes

The case of El Tumbador is just one of numerous violent land disputes in the Lower Aguán Valley. The roots of the conflict stretch back to the 1970s and 1980s, when the Honduran government introduced a process of agrarian reform through collective land ownership. Under the scheme the government distributed an estimated 120,000 hectares in the Aguán Valley to peasant co-operatives.

The land reform began to be reversed in 1992, after the introduction of a law that reduced restrictions on the sale of collectively owned land and promoted privatisation. This allowed wealthy landowners, such as Facussé, to buy the vast majority of arable land in the Lower Aguán Valley for the production of African palm oil, one the world’s cheapest edible oils and a key ingredient in many foodstuffs and cosmetics.

Local farmers claim that many of the sales were the result of bribery, threats and coercion, and they say that they are still the rightful owners of the land. They also

say that the large-scale cultivation of palm oil has led to impoverishment and hunger.

In 2008 Manuel Zelaya, the country's reformist president, announced steps to address the land conflict, but these ground to a halt the following year, when Zelaya, who had been democratically elected, was ousted in a military coup.

Since then farmers say they have been victimised by the police, army and private security guards working for palm-oil companies, as the Aguán region has become increasingly militarised. The government, meanwhile, has failed to ensure that local police and security guards respect citizens' basic human rights.

With 79 murders per 100,000 people, Honduras is considered one of the most dangerous countries in the world. (The Republic of Ireland has 1.2 murders per 100,000 people.) This small Latin American nation of 8.4 million inhabitants made headlines in 2013 when its second city, San Pedro Sula, was named the most violent city in the world outside the Middle East and other war zones, with more than 1,200 killings a year.

This culture of violence and impunity has also spread to rural areas like the Aguán. According to the Permanent Observatory for Human Rights in the Aguán, which was set up in 2011 in response to escalating violence in the region, 123 people have been killed and four people forcibly disappeared, presumed dead, in the area between 2008 and 2013. These victims include 90 peasants, 10 security guards, one police officer and one soldier.

Since the coup Honduras has witnessed a rise in inequality between rich and poor, and today it has the most unequal distribution of wealth in Latin America, with 40 per cent of the land belonging to only 2 per cent of landowners.

Winning Back Ownership

In 2012 Marca – the Authentic Peasant Reclamation Movement of the Aguán – which represents Trinidad, another Aguán village, succeeded in winning back ownership of three farms from the Oleopalma African palm company thanks to the work of a lawyer, Antonio Trejo Cabrera.

Walter Caracamo, whose father moved to the Aguán as part of the agrarian reforms of the 1970s and 1980s, wistfully recalls the time the community spent farming and living on their own land in Trinidad. “They were two very special years. We had work, food, an office; our children were in school. It was a completely different way of life.”

But this period of peace and relative prosperity was short lived. Soon after Trejo won the land-dispute case he was shot dead in the Honduran capital, Tegucigalpa.

In May 2014 a group of security officials from the Oleopalma company and the local military arrived in Trinidad to evacuate the 90 families living on the land. Caracamo says that the palm-oil company had threatened to evict them but that they had no idea when it might happen.

“There were about 150 soldiers and security guards,” he says. “They gave us 15 minutes to collect all our belongings and leave our homes. Then they burned down our houses, our belongings, our food, clothes and beds. They even burned our corn harvest. They held my arms behind me, and started to kick me while using tear gas in my face,” Caracamo says, adding that he was locked up for 26 hours after the evacuation. “The people didn’t want to abandon their land. This is where we live. We had the documentation to show we own this land.”

Reoccupation

Last month the Marca group decided to reoccupy the land on which it had previously lived and worked. The entire Trinidad community, including young children, arrived at the plantation in the early hours of the morning armed with machetes and poles. They are adamant that they were carrying no other weapons.

A short time later security guards representing Oleopalma and the army arrived at the scene, armed with AK-47s and other rifles. The head of security for Oleopalma, César David, claimed that security guards stationed on the land had fled after farmers arrived shooting into the air and that they later returned with reinforcements.

This reporter saw an unarmed group of farmers facing intimidating balaclava-wearing soldiers across a ditch while Martha Arnold, a local member of the human-rights observatory, tried to mediate.

Only the previous week the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights had called on the Honduran government to protect Arnold – and her five children – from “violence and harassment” while carrying out her human-rights duties.

“The role of the observatory is to observe and document,” she says. “We are here to make sure peace is maintained between the farmers and the military. We’re also here to mediate with the farmers, to make sure they don’t insult or provoke the military.”

Culture Of Impunity

In April 2014 the Honduran attorney general’s office created a unit to investigate killings and disappearances in the Aguán Valley, in an attempt to end the culture of impunity that has come to define the region’s agrarian conflict. A year later the unit has yet to file its first report.

Javier Guzmán, who is leading the investigation, says farmers lack confidence in the authorities and refuse to co-operate. He argues that the unit doesn’t have enough evidence to bring those responsible for the 2010 deaths to justice, adding that the investigation has been unable even to access the weapons used during the El Tumbador killings.

Roger Pineda, Dinant’s director of corporate relations, says the palm-oil company is happy to co-operate with the investigation but has yet to be approached by the unit. “Our position has always been to collaborate and never cover up for anyone,” he says. “If someone from our company misbehaves we will be sure to hand them over to the authorities.”

Last month Dinant said the company had removed firearms from security guards at “all plantations, manufacturing plants and extraction mills”. Asked about the El Tumbador deaths, Pineda says the security guards allegedly responsible had been hired through a third-party contractor.

Food Security

If the Honduran government wants to gain the trust of the Aguán people it needs to avoid promoting monocultures such as that of African palm oil, which threatens the ability of poor families in the region to feed themselves, according to Jennifer Cornally, Trócaire's director in Honduras.

"The state must combine making sure farmers have legal entitlement to their land with support for agricultural production and diversification, ensuring the protection of the environment using agricultural techniques, so that people can live a life of dignity."

Rigores is one of the Aguán communities suffering from this lack of food security, in large part because of an eviction four years ago. In June 2011 police and soldiers arrived to throw its people off the land they had called home for more than a decade. Residents were given two hours to collect their belongings before their homes were set alight. Bulldozers destroyed many buildings in the village, including a school and two churches.

Santiago Maldonado describes the pain of watching helplessly as his home and crops were destroyed. After they burned their homes, he says, the authorities scattered poison over the fields. "As a small farming community we couldn't do anything, just stand by and endure the destruction."

Juana Esquivel, who runs Fundación San Alonso Rodríguez, a charity that supports the basic human rights of people in the Aguán Valley, says that land is the lifeline of these communities. "If you ask a local farmer what land means to them they will tell you it means life. On this land they have their home, their food, all their basic needs."

Esquivel came to Dublin in March to ask the Irish Government to ask Honduras about human-rights abuses in the Aguán Valley. These questions, submitted through the United Nations' Universal Periodic Review, which examines the human-rights performance of all of its member states, were put to Honduran representatives this week at a meeting in Geneva.

"The state has failed to respond to the continued violence and militarisation of the Aguán Valley," says Esquivel. "This is about a peaceful struggle for social

justice, so that peasant families have access to agrarian reform to ensure their economic, political, cultural and human rights.”

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Honduras: A Country Of Repression, Impunity And Global Business Opportunities

The extremely high levels of repression and violence in Honduras are not a “Honduran problem” – they are a U.S. and Canadian problem. Since the June 2009 military coup, that ousted the last democratically elected government, Honduras has become the ‘Murder Capital of the world’, the ‘Repression, Corruption and Impunity Capital of the Americas’.

Since 2009, the U.S. and Canadian governments have supported and legitimized a succession of illegitimate, repressive regimes. North American companies and investors, and “development” banks (World Bank, Inter-American Development Bank) have increased business activities in: African palm production, maquiladora sweatshops, privatized “model cities”, tourism and mining. The Honduran regime remains in power due, in large part, to its political, economic and military relations with the U.S. and Canada and the “development” banks.

Across Honduras, community based organizations – struggling for fundamental reform to the Honduran State and society - need considerably more human rights accompaniment, funding, media attention on the harms and violations and education and activism in Canada and the U.S. Since 1998, Rights Action has been funding and struggling with numerous courageous grassroots organizations.

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