

Day 39: Kidnapping & disappearance of 5 Garifuna land defenders

Palm-lined and pristine, Garifuna territory has long been coveted by tourism developers and palm oil barons

<https://mailchi.mp/rightsaction/day-39-kidnapping-disappearance-of-5-garifuna-land-defenders>

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Garifuna rights protest, August 21, 2020, in front of police station, San Pedro Sula, demanding return ALIVE of 5 disappeared Garifuna land defenders.

Photo: screen shot

[Honduras Solidarity @hondurassol](#)

[#GarifunaLivesMatter](#) - Protest outside of headquarters of the Investigative Police Directorate (DPI) in San Pedro Sula right now. Demanding answers & the whereabouts of the disappeared Garifuna. Individuals wearing DPI [Honduran police] vests were involved in the disappearance of the men.

- View: <https://twitter.com/i/status/1296938583488528384>

5 Black Men Kidnapped by 'Police' in Honduras Are Still Missing

The abduction has highlighted racial tensions on the country's coast, and the increasingly repressive tactics used against local indigenous communities

By [Jared Olson](#), Vice news, August 21, 2020, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/v7gjp3/5-black-men-kidnapped-by-police-in-honduras-are-still-missing

Local pastor Omar Guzman convened his nightly vigil on a dirt intersection on a recent evening in Triunfo de la Cruz, a dusty hamlet on Honduras' windblown Caribbean coast. It was several weeks since the forced disappearance of five black Honduran, or "Garifuna," men from this community, and local residents have been praying ever since.



Twelve armed men in police uniforms and balaclavas entered the town in the predawn hours of July 19 in unmarked, brand-new pickups, despite a COVID-19 curfew. They abducted the five men at gunpoint. Eyewitnesses reported the assailants wore uniforms of the "DPI," or the investigative arm of the Honduran National Police, but seemed disorganized and amateur. They forced the men into their trucks and drove off into the night. Nothing has been seen or heard since of either the masked men or their captors.

"The community is scared," Guzman told VICE News during a recent interview in his house. "Very scared. That's why I go and pray every night, because I want the community to go back to normal."

But tensions remain high. Villagers haven't just been praying. At a roadblock outside Triunfo the next day, the smoke from smoldering tires swirls up into the boiling afternoon sky as Guzman directs protesters yelling "Las Vidas Garifunas Importan!" (Garifuna Lives Matter!) while navigating lines of approaching military police. Security forces have been reported to have a higher presence in the affected communities since the abduction. Protests have metastasized since the kidnappings, and hundreds of Garifunas from the region are manning roadblocks that cut off the main highway entering Triunfo.

Carlos Alberto Castillo, a local fisherman, was filling the gas tanks on his boats for a day on the water when he spotted the patrol of the trucks, which had no licence plates, rolling into the village at 5 a.m. that July morning. When the men with guns got out, he said, it was clear to him

that they weren't real cops. Their hats were worn crooked and they didn't speak the officer's parlance. But they didn't seem like chancers either.

"They couldn't have been just gangsters," said Alberto Castillo to VICE News, standing on the same beach where he saw the abduction unfold. Drawing out a map with a stick in the sand, he showed the paths the trucks followed as they entered the village. "The operation was too well organized," he says. "There had to have been someone with money behind all of this."

Locals think the kidnapping was orchestrated by the powers behind efforts to seize land occupied by Garifuna communities like these.

"[The abductors] didn't talk like police.... People are saying that a landlord, someone very rich, probably sent the gunmen," said Cesar Bendith, a member of a black rights non-profit, OFRANEH ("Black Fraternal Organization of Honduras") and a community leader in Triunfo.

"It's a combination of landlords and rich people who want to come here to build a resort." says Inés García, another activist from OFRANEH. "They don't negotiate with people in this community."

Before the disappearances, at least one of the five men was likely in the crosshairs of local powers. Alberth Sneider Centeno is an influential activist, known for his outspokenness in protecting Garifuna land from outside intrusions. He'd had death threats before, witnesses told VICE News.

Now, the faces of the five Garifuna men - Alberth Sneider Centeno Thomas, Milton Joel Martínez Álvarez, Suami Aparicio Mejía, Junior Rafael Juarez Mejia, and "Mamba" as yet unnamed, but known to many as "Pri" - have gone global, and inundated social media networks.

Many suspect government complicity in the crime: The administration of President Juan Orlando Hernández, which is [backed by U.S. President Donald Trump](#), is accused by activists of being behind "[a well-crafted plan to exterminate the Garifuna community](#)."

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Honduras sits between the region's main cocaine-producing countries and the United States, the biggest cocaine-consuming nation in the world. Ever since a [U.S.-backed military coup](#) in 2009, evidence and allegations of government complicity in the drug trade have abounded. Last year, the brother of President Hernandez, known as "Tony", was convicted for [cocaine trafficking in a court in New York](#).

The troubled nation boasts a sky-high [murder rate](#), [killings of human rights and environmental leaders](#), and is also a major source country of undocumented migrants seeking a better life in the U.S.

American support for the post-coup regime began under the administration of Barack Obama, and continued at an accelerated rate under Trump, who approved [\\$60 million in security aid](#) for the country this past April.

In an effort to appease demands from both the Garifuna and [international human rights groups](#) for information over the abduction, the government of Juan Orlando Hernández has released a series of statements about its investigation into the case. It claims that since the kidnapping, the IDs of the men were found in the major city of San Pedro Sula, an hour's drive from Triunfo. The government also claimed a U.S citizen was involved in the kidnapping, though they've yet to present proof of this.

On July 29, [it was reported in Honduran media](#) that military and police found burned human remains in the mountainous zone above Triunfo. But according to community members, the body was far too decayed to have been one of the five men who disappeared ten days prior.

In 2015, thanks in part to lobbying by Sneider, [a ruling by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights \(IACHR\)](#) demanded the Honduran government make reparations and recognize the land rights of the Garifuna, and said that the government was responsible for “systematic acts of repression” against them.

A wave of killings against Garifunas followed the ruling - [17 murders in 2019 alone](#) - the latest of which, before the most recent July kidnappings, was the murder of [71-year-old Antonio Bernárdez](#), on June 21. Bernárdez had been a respected elder and community leader in Punta Piedra, one of the main communities identified as having experienced violent land theft in the IACHR report.

The Garifuna have a [deep history of resistance](#) to foreign powers, even before their arrival on the coast of Honduras. A mix of Carib and Arawak natives and African slaves, believed to have shipwrecked onto the island of St. Vincent in the Caribbean, the Garifunas defended their land against French and British invaders. In 1797, after battling the British off and on for 30 years, the Garifuna were forcibly displaced to the coast of Honduras.

Today the Garifuna occupy most of the Atlantic coast of Central America, namely in Belize, Honduras, and Nicaragua. There are also large diasporas of Garifuna in New York City and Houston, where they support the land struggle that is ongoing in Central America.

“All that we want is that they're found,” García says of the five missing men, her voice saddening to a hush. “And that they're found alive.”

“There are three possibilities,” reflects pastor Guzman. “One is they return, two is we find the bodies, three is we never hear anything. The third possibility is the hardest for the families. Because the families never get closure.”

Hope may soon start to fade for the fate of these five men. In a country where criminal impunity is almost blanket, and the investigation of corrupt elites [is actively discouraged](#), their families may never get the closure they so need.

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Recent news: The Garifuna 5

- Letter from Prime Minister of St. Vincent & the Grenadines, <https://mailchi.mp/rightsaction/disappearance-of-the-garifuna-five-in-honduras>
- “Minority Group Fears ‘Genocide’ in Trump-Backed Honduras”, by Jeremy Kryt, Aug. 10, 2020, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/garifuna-minority-group-fears-genocide-in-trump-backed-honduras>
- “Indigenous men in Honduras are being abducted. Are the police to blame?”, by Jackie McVicar, August 5, 2020, <https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2020/08/05/indigenous-men-honduras-are-being-abducted-are-police-blame>
- 21 days since Garifuna land defenders disappeared by Honduran regime – Statement by Ofrañeh (Black Fraternal Organization of Honduras), <https://mailchi.mp/rightsaction/21-days-since-garifuna-land-defenders-disappeared-by-honduran-regime>

Archives on OFRANEH

Articles, reports, films & urgent actions related to OFRANEH's work & struggle in defense of Garifuna territory & rights: <https://rightsaction.org/ofraneh>

More information

- OFRANEH (Organizacion Fraternal Negra Hondureña): @ofraneh, garifuna@ofraneh.org, www.ofraneh.org, <http://www.ofraneh.wordpress.com>
- Rights Action: Grahame Russell, info@rightsaction.org, www.rightsaction.org
- Honduras Solidarity Network: Karen Spring, spring.kj@gmail.com, @hondurassol, www.hondurassolidarity.org

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Emergency funds – Community defense and Covid19 response

Even as Rights Action continues to send funds for Covid19 response work of long-term partner groups in Honduras and Guatemala, we request funds now for OFRANEH as they respond to the disappearance of 5 Garifuna land defenders from Triunfo de la Cruz.

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