Honduran Peasants Resist Evictions, Assassinations and Attacks

Overview and Eyewitness Report

International Human Rights Observer Delegation

Alliance for Global Justice

Summer 2011

BACKGROUND & OVERVIEW

The Alliance for Global Justice, a United States based non-profit dedicated to supporting human rights throughout Latin America, sponsored a 15 member delegation to Honduras from June 27 through July 5, 2011. The purpose of the delegation was to investigate and monitor reported violations of human rights throughout Honduras in the two years following the June 2009 coup d'etat which overthrew the democratically-elected president, Manuel Zelaya.

On June 30th, following several days of meetings in and around Tegucigalpa, the delegation traveled to the Aguan Valley agricultural region in northeast Honduras. This is the site of many reported human rights violations including assassinations, kidnappings and illegal evictions. During a meeting with campesino leaders in Tocoa, we were informed that since the coup 42 campesinos have been murdered. Others have been kidnapped and tortured. Witnesses reported seeing the abductors in either military or police uniforms, or those of the private security forces employed by large landowners in the region. We spoke directly with one campesino who was kidnapped and tortured but who managed to escape. To date, Honduran officials have not convicted a single perpetrator of these murders and kidnappings. According to local human rights monitors, Honduran authorities have not even commenced an official investigation.

The delegation heard reports from numerous people in a wide range of settings about the conflict. The delegation was eyewitness to the remains of the destruction of a large farming/peasant community at Rigores, near Tocoa, where over one hundred homes and a community church and school were burned to the ground. According to the locals, that attack took place one week before our visit, on June 24. Many families are now staying in the community center and a large emergency tent. We visited and talked with women and children at that location.

On July 1 we directly observed a large police sweep in the Rigores area. About 40 Police and Special Forces ("Cobras") armed with automatic rifles moved toward the villagers, burning at least one dwelling in their wake. It was rumored that the police goal was to force local people who had their homes destroyed on June 24 to leave the area.

Members of the delegation challenged the legality of the sweep and made the police aware that international observers are aware of the situation and monitoring it. The eviction was postponed that day but it is unclear what will happen in the future.

In addition to observing these human rights violations, the delegation met with community and peasant movement members who are nonviolently struggling for change in the Aguan. There are different campesion organizations according to the specific area and local history but they are all united within the overall Honduras Resistance (FNRP – Frente Nacional de Resistencia Popular). The delegation met with representatives and visited a tent encampment where there has been an ongoing peasant occupation of lands which they claim are rightfully theirs. We learned from local leaders that the communities were previously promised land title by the government. In some cases , with this understanding and government promise, they have lived on and worked the land for up to twelve years. Since the coup in June 2009, official police and private security forces have been carrying out a policy of assassination and intimidation trying to force the peasants to give up their claims. To date they have not succeeded and the delegation was impressed by the resolution and commitment of the Honduran campesinos and their leaders to resist the attacks and continue their non-violent struggle for land and human rights.

JULY 1ST INCIDENT

At about 8 AM on July 1st, the delegation visited the small campesino community of Rigores, where about 400-500 families lived in very modest homes (wood, thatch, adobe, cement block, aluminum-roofed) and farmed small, adjacent plots of land. We then talked to campesinos who recounted in horror and through tears a June 24th attack by national police and private security guards on a portion of their community. According to the campesinos, the attackers alleged that many Rigores campesinos occupied land owned by two brothers, who despite not having been in Rigores for over 12 years, claimed that it was theirs. On June 24th, without warning and without presenting an order of eviction or title to the land, the attackers evicted a large number of unarmed and peaceful families from their homes and land. Sleeping children were thrown from their beds, homes were bulldozed and burned (in violation of Honduran law, which prohibits such evictions without a judge being present, and international law which prohibits burning), and no opportunity given to the evicted families to establish their title to the land. The community school and church were also destroyed. We witnessed the charred homes and spoke directly to the evicted tenants, who were now living in a shelter in another part of the Rigores community. Amnesty International reported that 114 families, and 493 people, were made homeless.

As we conducted our investigation on July 1, we observed in the distance a large police force (which included several camouflaged "special operations" personnel). We also observed, in the same area as this force, smoke rising from a burning structure. As the force neared us, we observed at least 40 uniformed Honduran police officers, fully armed with automatic rifles and handguns. Despite the fact that we were clearly unarmed and all wore blue t-shirts which distinctly said in Spanish "International Human Rights Observers", several police took up sniper positions behind trees (with aimed rifles) and others either held revolvers at their side or fingered their automatic rifles. Also present were about 20 unarmed campesinos, including children.

Several of us peacefully approached the leader of the police force and identified ourselves as human rights observers and US citizens. As the officers continued to hold their weapons in the above-described manner, we asked what their purpose was. They showed us an "official document", which was a sworn complaint by the two brothers who claimed the disputed land and alleged violence by the campesinos on the day before, June 30th. After inspecting the document, we pointed out to the leader of the police that the "document" was not an eviction order, was not signed by any judge, and contained obviously false and possibly perjurious allegations given that the report was dated in early June but supposedly described events that occurred weeks later . Throughout this encounter, the police refused our repeated requests that they holster their weapons. Obviously, we all felt extremely threatened by the police actions. After several hours, the police climbed aboard 4 jeeps and trucks and departed, apparently due to our presence. However, one of the jeeps, containing 5-6 officers, would periodically drive around the village, apparently monitoring our continued presence. We finally did leave at about 2 PM.

The Next Day

The next day, on July 2nd, our delegation visited the regional Honduran police headquarters in Tocoa to lodge an official complaint about the July 1st incident in Rigores. To date, we have not heard anything in response from police officials. We have learned that Honduran agricultural officials have promised campesinos in Rigores that no further evictions will take place pending negotiations with the affected parties. Given the history, the Rigores community is understandably wary of such a promise.

THE UNITED STATES EMBASSY

During the entire encounter with the Honduran police, several delegation members repeatedly telephoned the U. S. Embassy in an attempt to obtain some assistance in this obviously dangerous and potentially violent situation involving U.S. citizens. Despite our efforts, we were unable to reach anyone at the US Embassy. Given the huge amount of money and tax dollars going to support this embassy , it is striking that US citizens could not even reach our own officials when in need of support.

POSTSCRIPT (SINCE RETURNING TO THE US):

Latest news indicates that the return of ousted President Mel Zelaya has not been accompanied by any reduction in violence or attacks. In fact violence against journalists and community leaders seems to be increasing.

In the first weeks of July 2011 two Honduran journalists and three community leaders were murdered.

More recently:

July 23, 2011 – campesino leader Julian Alvarenga murdered.

August 2, 2011 - In the Aguan region four police vehicles drive by peacefully protesting campesinos and shoot into the crowd. One person gravely injured and struggling for life in hospital emergency ward.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

1) Challenge our own government's actions. Publicize the US Government's apparent white-washing of Honduran government crimes. Ask why our taxes are maintaining military bases and personnel in Honduras while Honduran peasants are being murdered with impunity and education and social services are being cut in the US.

2) Support positive efforts such as those by Alliance for Global Justice. AFGJ is working within the Honduras Solidarity Network to establish an on-the-ground permanent observer presence in the Aguan area which has been subject to attacks and assassinations. The initial requirement is funds to pay for a Honduran coordinator and vehicle. To contribute go to the Alliance for Global Justice website www.afgj.org. Click on DONATE and specify Honduras accompaniment. Alternatively you can mail a check to: AfGJ, 1247 E St., SE, Washington, DC 200003.

3) Inform and energize yourself by seeing it first hand. Join a future AFGJ delegation tour. See the website www.afgj.org or send an email to AFGJ@AFGJ.org.

TO LEARN MORE …….

www.therealnews.com – Excellent video reports on the coup and Honduran resistance. See the Latin America section of the website. For example see "Honduran Police Burn Community to the Ground":

http://therealnews.com/t2/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=31&Itemid=74&jumival=7111

www.counterpunch.org – Many good articles on the coup and resistance. Search on Honduras. Especially see articles by Tanya Kerssen on "Honduras Open for Business" and Nikolas Kozloff on the connections between Covington Associates, US Attorney General Holder and Chiquita (United Fruit).

http://www.hondurasresists.blogspot.com - News from grassroots activists in Honduras.

http://hondurashumanrights.wordpress.com – Monitors and publicizes human rights abuses since the 2009 coup in Honduras.

www.quotha.net – Blog by American University anthropologist and noted Honduras scholar, Adrienne Pine.

www.upsidedownworld.org – Lots of good information and analyses on Central America and beyond. See "Despite Aguan 'Land Agreement', Continued Repression in Honduran African Palm Oil Plantations" by Tamar Sharabi.

http://friendshipamericas.org/honduras - Honduras Accompaniment Project of the Friendship Office of the Americas.

http://afgj.org/ - Alliance for Global Justice – Tours, Online Activist School and more.

www.rightsaction.org – Outstanding first hand information and on-the-ground development projects focused on Honduras and Guatemala.

Scenes from Honduras
AFGJ Delegation June-July 2011

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114 Family Homes Destroyed

Holding back tears, a couple described the horror of the preceding week. National police and private security guards bulldozed and burned down 114 homes, the church and community school. Teachers and students fled in terror as the attackers set fire to their classrooms.

Women Recounting July 24 Attack on their community

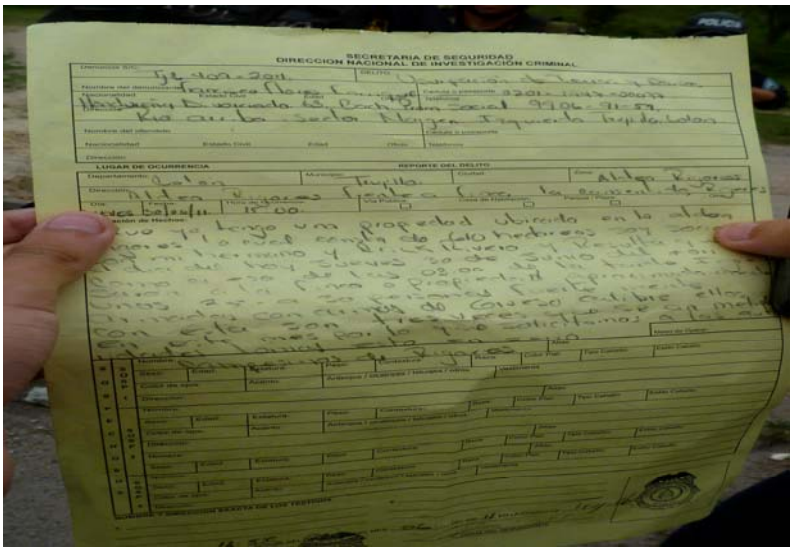
Even the Community School and Church were destroyed.

Heavily Armed Police and "Cobras" Sweep Toward Rigores Community, July 1, 2011

AFGJ Delegates Questioning Police Action, July 1, 2011

Displaced Families in Rigores

These children and their families, evicted from their homes, have found temporary refuge in a local community center. The day we came to speak with them, July 1, about 40 police armed with automatic rifles were headed toward the community center. Community leaders believe the police intended to expel the families from the community center.



Document "authorizing" the eviction of Rigores

When questioned about the legal basis for the eviction, police produced this document. It is a complaint alleging that on June 30, 25 – 30 campesinos, heavily armed with large caliber guns, entered the land illegally. The allegations appear dubious because the villagers seemed to have no weapons other than their machetes, which they use to work the land. Furthermore, the document had been signed and processed weeks <u>before</u> the alleged incident took place.

Protest Tent Villages in the Aguan Valley

The communities of Despertar, San Ysidro, San Esteban and Trinidad were given commitments that they will obtain land title in compliance with land reform measures. The coup in Honduras overturned the government just weeks before the finalization of this commitment. Led by peasant organizations which are part of the overall National Resistance Front, campesinos maintain permanent tent villages on lands which they have been promised. Despite the peaceful nature of this protest several community leaders have been killed by the police and private security forces.

Wife and Son of one of the Murder Victims

Sonia Molina's husband, Henri Roney Dias, was a leader in Despertar and one of the representatives involved in negotiations with the government. He was killed in the early morning one day in May. According to eye witnesses, the attackers were from the private security force of a local land oligarch. Two months later, when this picture was taken, Sonia has still not been able to tell her son that his father will never return.

“A piece of the US in Honduras”

Palmerola is a US military base that serves as center for US armed forces operations for Central America. It includes a large and safe landing strip on 1800 acres of land. Democratically elected Honduran President Manuel Zelaya was forcibly removed from his home, still wearing his pajamas, by the military on the night of June 28, 2009. One of Zelaya’s proposals prior to the coup involved relocating the Honduran civilian airport, one of the most dangerous airports in the world due to its small size and surrounding hills, to Palmerola, which has the best runway in the country.

Honduras is Open for Business.

The current Honduran government is moving toward privatization of all services, including education. This sign, the only sign identifying the police station in Tocoa, shows the close tie between the public and private sectors. In June, the government organized an elaborate campaign to attract international investors. The conference was entitled “Honduras is Open for Business.” The title was in English only, with no Spanish translation.

Faces of Resistance, Aguan Region, Honduras

The delegation witnessed first hand the commitment and dedication of the peasants to peacefully retain or recover land which they consider to be lawfully theirs. In Rigores, despite massive destruction including the loss of homes and possessions, the community is committed to stay. In another community peasants continue a peaceful occupation of land which they claim has been promised to them. Despite assassinations and horrendous losses, they appear committed to continuing their struggle for justice.