

ON INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS DAY, THE FIGHT FOR INDIGENOUS LAND AND AUTONOMY IN HONDURAS

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What's at stake for Honduras' Garifuna people:

Human rights, culture, and land. As throughout much ancestral territory, those who live on this beachfront in Triunfo de la Cruz are targeted for expropriation by a tourism corporation.

Honduras is the country with the highest level of homicide of any nation not at war, where government violence and human rights abuses have almost total impunity. It is also the country contributing most of the flood of children who have been recently forced to migrate to the US, because of that violence and by poverty - both, in part, a legacy of US policy in the region.

Yet something else is afoot. A fierce social movement, composed of many sectors, is pushing back to protect democracy, lives, and political rights. Indigenous peoples, including Garifuna, Lenca, Pech, Miskito, Maya Chortí, and Tolupan, are asserting their human right to autonomy, territory and cultural survival.

The Afro-Indigenous Garifuna people are organized through the National Fraternal Black Organization of Honduras, or OFRANEH by its Spanish acronym. OFRANEH is at the forefront of an effort to protect Garifuna territory against theft by multinational corporations, the national government, and the oligarchy - theft that occurs often with active or tacit support from the US government. OFRANEH aims to defend the ecologically rich lands, rivers, forests, oceanfront, and all that is nurtured upon them, including community solidarity, autonomy, and indigenous knowledge.

The group's work is also to preserve and bolster traditional Garifuna culture, through retention of the language, Garinagu, including through their community radio stations; music; ancestral spirituality; and ceremonial life. Moreover, members are actively strengthening their skills adapted to their ecosystem: ecological farming and sustainable small-scale fishing practices. *(continued on pg.9)*



Garifuna agronomist Henry Morales explains to youth about reforesting the landscape with mahogany seedlings.

strategic characteristics of the land for clandestine drug running - space for a runway, a hidden creek to the sea, and remote location - had invaded the legally titled Garifuna lands. In 2012, the community reoccupied its land with drumming and ceremony, despite narco and paramilitary threats and automatic rifle fire. Since then, however, a portion of the land has been re-invaded by campesinos, presumably with the support of narcos.



Vallecito: Lands recovered from narco-traffickers in 2012 lie in the heart of Garifuna territories.

OFRANEH coordinator Miriam Miranda said: "Our lands and identities are critical to our lives. For us, the struggle for our territories and our commons and our natural resources is of primary importance to preserve ourselves as a people."

Garifuna lands are being grabbed, with government approval, for tourism, a naval base, deep-water port, and gas and oil extraction. This is despite Convention 169 of the International Labor Organization, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and Honduras' own constitution, which guarantee free, prior, and informed consent to any projects in indigenous territories. Narco-traffickers have seized additional lands. Honduras' own constitution, which guarantee free, prior, and informed consent to any projects in indigenous territories. Narco-traffickers have seized additional lands.

A major element of OFRANEH's organizing and advocacy is to recover and consolidate the 2,500 acres of Vallecito on the North coast, and transform it into a center for Garifuna renewal. Narcos, interested in the

OFRANEH's strategy to win back Vallecito is to apply strong enough pressure, together with allies around Honduras and the world, that the governmental Agrarian Institute of Honduras (INA) will be forced to evict the illegal usurpers. The community of Triunfo de la Cruz has also brought a case about dispossession of its land to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights; a decision is expected soon.

The future of Vallecito is complicated by Honduran government plans for so-called "charter cities" (ciudades modelos in Spanish), foreign enclaves shielded from Honduran sovereignty with their own security and laws, financed by international investors. Vallecito is at the center of a large swath of Garifuna territory the government has in mind for this project. If it is consolidated, dozens of Garifuna communities could be displaced. *(Continued pg.10)*