

## Land conflicts

### Keywords – title

- > land grabbing
- > garifuna people
- > palm oil plantations

## Introduction

Vallecito is a small village located on the northeastern coast of Honduras, within the Limón municipality, in the department of Colón (Figure 1). Honduras' Caribbean coasts are home to the Garifuna communities, one of numerous indigenous groups living in the country.

Even though Garifuna property rights over ancestral lands are guaranteed by national and international conventions (ILO convention n.169) their communities are often threatened by paramilitary forces affiliated with powerful businessmen engaged in land grabbing processes, often for palm oil plantations.

In the corridor between Colón department's capital Trujillo, and Moskitia, - the tropical rainforest in eastern Honduras that runs along the Mosquito Coast, and extends into the northeastern part of Nicaragua - there are numerous gangs linked to organized crime. They serve the economic interests of palm oil businessmen, politicians and drug smugglers, contributing to a high rate of murders, most of which are not prosecuted. The location of Vallecito on the edge of this corridor has recently turned it into a main target for palm oil and drug trade interests, directly affecting the Garifuna communities living there, who are now struggling for their land and the survival of their people.

## Background

### Garifuna people and the right to their ancestral territories

Garifuna people – or Garinagu and even Black Carib, as the British colonial administration used to call them in order to distinguish them from Yellow and Red Carib - are the descendants of Africans shipwrecked in the mid seventeenth century on the islands of St. Vincent, of the Red Carib of St.Vincent, the Kalinagu from Dominica, and the indigenous Arawak Caribes (Kalina



Figure 1: Vallecito, Honduras

people, or mainland Caribs, native to the northern coastal areas of South America, in the region between Orinoco and Antillas). The long history of intermarriages between those communities gave birth to one of the richest cultures in the Americas. The Garifuna identify themselves as indigenous people, and were officially recognized in 2001 by UNESCO under the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Garifuna people still preserve their original idiom (Arawak maipure norteño) and their animistic religion (Dugü), while maintaining and transmitting ancient cassava production techniques from generation to generation (Figure 2). These traditions can be traced back to the “yuca amarga” their ancestral predecessors. Over the centuries the Garifuna people spread from St. Vincent island toward the mainland. Today they live primarily in Central America, along the Caribbean coast in Belize, Guatemala, Nicaragua and Honduras.

Garifuna people have always been proud of not having been reduced to slaves, and of preserving their cultural traditions and ancestral territories. However, from the late 1990s there has been a growing movement to deny the indigenous status of Garifuna peoples, categorizing them along racial lines. This trend serves the purpose of a state-wide strategy of dispossession of Garifuna ancestral lands, to undermine Garifuna land rights previously recognised by the government, in order to implement controversial development projects. Most of these are in the tourism and

Illustration - picture

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Figure 2: Garifuna women at work



Figure 3: A gate does not allow Garifuna people to have access to part of their ancestral lands



Figure 4: African palm plantation



Figure 5: Increasing militarization

agrofuel sectors, and are supported by the international financial institutions.

### Agrarian reform, agribusiness and land grabbing process in Colon department:

In the 1970s and 1980s the rural region near Trujillo became the focal point of Honduran agrarian reform programs, and campesino farmers were brought in by the government to colonize the area. As part of the program, cooperatives planted large extensions of land with African palm, a new crop being exploited for vegetable oil production.

A certification process started in the early 1990s. At the same time agrarian counter-reforms began to be promoted by the neoliberal government of Rafael Callejas. These delivered definitive entitlements over the land which excluded the functional habitats of the Garifuna communities, denying them the territorial rights to beaches, forests, estuaries and maritime territories (Figure 3).

Land conflicts began in the region in the mid-1990s when titles to land obtained by campesinos through the agrarian reform program were transferred to agribusinessmen, giving a boost to the land grabbing process connected to the extended cultivation of African palms (Figure 4), the most profitable crop in Honduras. African palm is a lucrative export, sold to the west for biofuel production and grown in exchange for carbon market credits.

Since then, large landholders (notably Honduran agribusinessman Miguel Facussé – owner of the Dinant Corporation and currently the largest landowner in Honduras) have accumulated land through coercive and fraudulent land purchases. Cooperative leaders in the region were subject to intimidation, including assassination attempts, while others were reportedly killed. The expansion of property borders for which titles had been obtained facilitated land-grabs. Another practice was the employment of front-men, local

businessmen and landholders who protected the interests of Facussé and other large landowners, such as Erick Rivera and Reinaldo Villalobos. These two men were well-known drug traffickers engaged in agrarian conflicts with communities and protected by the security forces of Facussé.

Garifuna communities have repeatedly denounced the State practice of treating their ancestral lands - to which their communities have held communal title for many decades - as 'fiscal' or national lands eligible for agrarian reform. In this way the government has been able to sell off Garifuna land to colonizing campesinos, land that has frequently been acquired later by large landholders. The state also enacted a law, the *Ley de Municipalidades*, that allowed the expansion of urban areas directly into Garifuna ancestral territory.

The INA (Instituto Nacional Agrario - National Agrarian Institute) has played an important role in this looting process, and has been accused of encouraging the interference of outsiders in community entitlement processes. This is despite the fact that many such outsiders obtained access to those lands fraudulently. The result has been violent invasions of Garifuna ancestral territories, such as the one currently being perpetrated in Vallecito.

### Vallecito: an hub for agribusiness, oil diggers and narco interests

Vallecito has been home to the Garifuna people since 1804, until the rise of the dictatorship in 1980s, when the military took possession of the area. Afterwards, the Garifuna movement Iseri Lidamari fought to regain control over the ancestral lands belonging to the Limon community.

Until the commencement of land dispossession in the early 1990s under agrarian counter-reform, more than 17 Garifuna communities had lived traditionally on a stretch of ancestral territory running from Santa Rosa de Aguan to Plaplaya. However, in 1993 a



portion of Punta Farrallones, in the municipality of Limon was acquired by Miguel Facussé through a series of land sales. The Garifuna community of Limon then decided to employ the same method used to separate them from their territories - the acquisition of a title through the agrarian reform program - in order to protect one section of their traditional lands, an area now known as Vallecito. In 1997 the INA granted title deeds on 980 hectares of land in Vallecito to the Afro-descendant Garifuna community, entrusted to six Garifuna cooperatives (Ruguma, Saway, Saway Sufritiñu, Walumugu, Satuye y Sinduru Free).

Since then Garifuna communities living in Vallecito have suffered heavy territorial pressure. Corporations, politicians and the military have begun to try to take over the area due to its strategic location, its isolation, and due to its vast unexploited resources, which indicate the presence of hydrocarbons, as indicated by oil filtrations in the area between Punta Farallones and Miel river wetlands. These territories have also become an important target both for narcos and corporate interests.

In the same year that Miguel Facussé began expanding the cultivation of African palm in Vallecito from a neighbouring farm he controlled, he took illegally took over 100 hectares belonging to the Ruguma collective, one of the six associative collectives of Vallecito. Through legal challenges and international pressure, the community was able to regain control over the lands in 2004.

Today, Facussé's territory completely surrounds Vallecito. In total, about 80% of Garifuna land has been seized by non-Garifunas over the last 18 years, despite a Supreme Court ruling upholding the Garifunas' title to the land. Since 2005, people associated with organized crime have intensified their presence, imposing a reign of terror in the corridor of Limon - Punta Piedras, trying to force Garifuna communities located in Vallecito to minimize their presence and activities on the land

belonging to the collectives. Criminals have now taken over a section of Vallecito territory, building a clandestine airstrip for drug smuggling that had been used for years without any governmental intervention.

The military coup d'Etat against president Manuel Zelaya Rosales in 2009 worsened the situation, leading to a scaling up of the "land for sale" policy and an increase of organised crime in the Honduran Caribbean region, and the ungovernable nature of these territories.

In July 2010, the OFRANEH (Organización Fraternal Negra Hondureña) signed a written agreement with INA officials to achieve the remediation of the associative collectives, once again deprived of their lands. However the invaders refused entry to INA members and the Public Ministry.

On August 2012 the process of land-measurement and remediation was set to commence, however, paramilitary forces serving Reynaldo Villalobo and Miguel Facussé were sent to intensify their presence (Figure 5), in order to harass, intimidate and besiege Garifuna activists.

In 2013 the INA finally sent technicians to re-measure the entire territory. Despite the threats, harassment, sabotage and permanent siege, the Garifuna community was able to take possession of their land and to temporarily exercise their collective rights on it.

However, in July 2014, several members of the Garifuna community, including human rights defender and OFRANEH president Miriam Miranda (Figures 6 and 7), were captured by heavily-armed men in Vallecito. During a previous visit to the area, they had discovered that the illegal runway used by the narcos, which had been destroyed by the army in January 2014, was being rebuilt. The Garifuna members were allegedly going to be killed, but they were released when the attackers realized that more members of the Garifuna community were still in the





Figure 6: *Miriam Miranda is the general coordinator of the Organización Fraternal Negra de Honduras (OFRANEH), an organization that has worked since 1978 for the promotion and defence of the rights of the Afro-descendant Garifuna community. In 2011 she was granted precautionary measures by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights because of the threats and harassment she faces due to her human rights work. These measures have not been properly implemented.*



Figure 7: *Bertha Caceres (COPINH) and Miriam Miranda (OFRANEH), indigenous representatives and human rights defenders*

area, and might be aware of the abduction and call for help.

## Impact

According to Garifuna representatives, the presence of agribusiness corporations and drug traffickers affects them in several ways:

- **Discrimination:** The Honduran government is trying to deny the indigenous status of the Garifuna people in order to elude the application of ILO Convention n.169 and of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, thus avoiding the obligation to implement the right to previous, full and free consent before land is used.
- **Right to the land:** the Garifuna right to their ancestral lands has been substantially denied.
- **Right to self-determination:** Large scale projects are carried out on Garifuna lands without a consultation process to obtain their free, prior and informed consent. Imposing a development model based on extensive African palm monocultures for exports, rather than on sustainable local development, deeply affecting both the environment and the local communities. Imposing “development models” alien to the indigenous cosmovision, culminates in massacres and population displacements.
- **Militarization:** the attempt to displace the population and expropriate land
- causes armed conflict and paramilitary control of the area.
- **Right to life, to health and to safety:** militarization has led to a sound and enduring violation of human rights (harassments, kidnapping, murders). Indigenous and afro-descendent leaders have faced fabricated criminal charges and have been the target of attacks and intimidation in reprisal for their work in defence of human rights.
- **Food sovereignty:** the displacement forces Garifuna to leave their traditional food production techniques, directly affecting their food sovereignty and food security.
- **Right to work:** monocrop plantations affect Garifunas’ right to work and live following their traditional culture. An agrofuel plantation development model is often based on worker exploitation.
- **Indigenous rights and protection of cultural values:** the threat over their ancestral lands has a direct impact on their cultural heritage
- **Biodiversity conservation:** African palm monocultures affect the environment and biodiversity, as they imply the extended use of agrotoxics, the draining of coastal wetlands and the contamination of groundwaters.
- **Environmental protection:** territorial and resource plundering, justified by a false and misunderstood idea of development.

## Conflict and consequences

Convention n.169 of the International Labor Organization and article 32 of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, guarantee to Garifuna communities the **right over their ancestral lands, the right to determine and develop priorities and strategies** for the development or use of their lands or territories and other resources and the **right to previous, full and free consent** before land is used or abused in any way.

Nevertheless for decades Garifuna people have been facing harassment, intimidation, threats and murders in their struggle to take possession of their land against the powerful interests of agribusiness corporations, land owners and drug traffickers.



Illustration - picture

Moreover, notwithstanding the **self-identification** as indigenous people – considered by ILO Convention n.169 as a fundamental criterion for the identification of indigenous and tribal peoples – the Honduran government has for decades an approach aimed at reducing Garifuna status from the one of recognized indigenous people to one of mere ‘afrodescendants’, in efforts to elude the application of ILO Convention n.169.

Such racist, classist and discriminatory practices are responsible for the continuing loss of cultural identity among indigenous peoples. For instance, the Honduran government, during a trial brought in front of Inter-American Court of Human Rights (Corte Interamericana de Derechos Humanos - Corte IDH) by the Garifuna community of Triunfo de la Cruz, defended itself against demands for redress for the territorial plundering, by arguing in favour of its shift from a “cultural” to a “racial” approach.

Moreover, the implementation of false solutions to climate change such as the REDD+, and its approach of commodifying life in biodiverse areas, and subjecting it to capitalist markets and credit schemes, is ultimately empowering biofuel magnates to earn more profits from their harmful land practices.

This makes them directly responsible for the increase in land grabs and repressive activities occurring across Honduras. As the struggles of these indigenous communities and human rights movements more broadly show, the themes of land, culture, climate, sustainability and justice are entirely interrelated.

Since the latest threats suffered by Garifuna representatives in Vallecito in July 2014, several indigenous and

human rights organizations - such as Black Fraternal Organization of Honduras (Organización Fraternal Negra Hondureña, OFRANEH), Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (Consejo Cívico de Organizaciones Populares y Indígenas de Honduras, COPINH),

#### More on this case

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and Agricultural Missions Inc (AMI) – have begun to reorganize their protests and resistance against the powerful interests that hide behind landgrabbing processes, driven by the booming biofuel industry. Meanwhile, high level of impunity and corruption persist in the security and judicial systems of Honduras, as does an oligarchically-controlled media, making it difficult for criminals to be arrested or prosecuted for any of the fraudulent actions committed.



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