

International Public Hearing and Seminar on Human Rights in the Bajo Aguán, Honduras

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by Marc Edelman

The first witness hobbled on crutches to the front of the cavernous church meeting hall. "We were at a protest when the police and military came after us," Neptalí Esquivel recalled, describing what happened on March 30, 2011. "I raised my hands to surrender, but they fired two shots at me with an M-16. One bullet split my femur. They threw me on the ground and began to kick me with their boots in the wounded leg until they dislocated my hip."

The International Public Hearing on Human Rights in the Peasant Communities of the Bajo Aguán convened on May 28, 2012, in Tocoa, Honduras, seat of a district that has witnessed the most acute agrarian conflict in Central America in the last 15 years. For an entire day witnesses from surrounding communities gave heart-rending testimonies before a panel of a dozen human rights specialists from the Americas and Europe, as well as observers from the Inter-American Human Rights Commission, the European Union, Honduran human rights groups and diverse civil society organizations. Various Honduran government representatives were invited, but the only one to confirm his attendance, César Ham, Director of the National Agrarian Institute, failed to appear at the last minute.

"They put a plastic bag over my head to suffocate me," 17-year-old Santos Bernabé Cruz testified, recounting his experience during an eviction the year before in the village of Rigores. "They kept hitting me and pointed a rifle at me and put it in my mouth. Then they threw gasoline all over me and threatened to burn me alive. Some of them said it would be better to bury me alive or tie a rock to me and throw me in the Río Aguán."

Nine international networks convened the Hearing, which was followed by a two-day seminar that focused more broadly on the human rights situation in Honduras as well as on the defense of peasants' rights at the national, regional and international levels. Working groups of peasant activists and international experts tackled the difficult question of how to develop practical measures to advance human rights in a zone immersed in an intense conflict.

Victims of human rights violations have nowhere to turn, since the country's judicial institutions are dysfunctional, the police and military frequently commit abuses and are allied with the large landowners, and perpetrators of crimes almost always enjoy impunity. The widows and orphans present reported that they have not obtained any state assistance after the assassinations of their loved ones. Few have received adequate medical or psychological treatment after the attacks that upended their lives and often wrecked their bodies.

The roots of conflict in the fertile Aguán valley go back at least to the agrarian reform of the 1970s. Reform beneficiaries in the Bajo Aguán region received relatively large parcels (averaging more than 10 hectares per family). The reform gave rise to dynamic peasant enterprises, notably the Isletas cooperative, which produced bananas that it sold to Standard Fruit. In 1977, when Isletas sought greater independence from Standard, the military occupied the region and imprisoned several peasant leaders. The state never provided adequate support for the peasant enterprises and already in the 1980s many coop members began to abandon the land. The regional integration

and market openings of the 1980s accelerated this process, as many campesinos were unable to pay debts to public-sector banks incurred when they obtained their parcels. Also in the 1980s, the Honduran government leased land to the United States for a regional military training center which led to a heightened military presence in the Aguán. The 1992 Agricultural Modernization Law, which permitted the sale of agrarian reform lands under certain conditions, accelerated the disbanding of peasant enterprises. Between 1992 and 1997, at least 73 cooperatives in the Aguán Valley sold some 250,000 hectares of land to wealthy entrepreneurs, transnational corporations, military officers and—at times—their own "leaders."¹ Most of these "sales" were nonetheless technically illegal and, especially after the devastation of Hurricane Mitch in 1998, campesinos in the Aguán intensified efforts to recuperate lands, including the site of the former US military base.

Following the 2009 military coup, more than a dozen brutal evictions occurred in the Bajo Aguán, most without the required legal notice. Since the coup, according to Honduran human rights organizations, 52 campesinos have been assassinated in the region, as well as a journalist and his fiancée. One peasant remains "disappeared" after more than a year. In 2010 the Porfirio Lobo government signed an accord with one of the peasant organizations to provide financing to cede 11,000 hectares claimed by Miguel Facussé, René Morales and Reynaldo Canales, about 5,000 of which were occupied by organized peasants on both banks of the Aguán River. This agreement was not implemented and violence continued. In May 2012 Facussé fixed a June 1 deadline for payment for "his" lands and threatened another violent eviction.

It was in this climate of tension that the International Public Hearing opened on May 28. The Hearing, and the Seminar that followed, highlighted the importance of international observers where human rights are routinely violated. On June 1 thousands of peasants demonstrated in Tocoa in defiance of Facussé's eviction ultimatum. Four days later the National Agrarian Institute reached an agreement with the Unified Peasant Movement of the Aguán (MUCA) about payment for occupied lands on the right bank of the river. Peasant leaders declared that they acquiesced "under pressure and under threat" and the terms include a premium price for Facussé and onerous loans for MUCA. Nevertheless, the accord headed off a potentially calamitous confrontation in at least one part of the region. Even Porfirio Lobo, who became president in post-coup elections condemned throughout the hemisphere as illegitimate, acknowledged that in Honduras an error had been committed and that there had been an agrarian counter-reform that now needed to be corrected. The close links between Lobo and the large landowners, however, suggest that the obstacles to such a "correction" will be formidable. Indeed, in the weeks following the agreement a new wave of violence swept the region, as police, military and private guards attacked peasants who continued to reclaim land and to protest the ongoing repression.

Marc Edelman, a professor of anthropology at Hunter College and the CUNY Graduate Center, was a member of the tribunal that presided over the hearing in Tocoa.

¹ Miguel Alonzo Macías, *La capital de la contrarreforma agraria: el Bajo-Aguán de Honduras* (Tegucigalpa: Guaymuras, 2001), 39.