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## Campesino Communities in Honduras Being Devastated One Family at a Time

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# Campesino communities in Honduras being devastated, one family at a time

**The struggle to maintain fertile lands continues to decimate Campesino communities in Honduras.**

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"Although conflict over the land has been percolating for decades, the post-coup era has been marked by a rapid

and harrowing escalation in the violence and repression," writes Carasik [Getty Images]

Under the hot sun of a mid-March afternoon, I sat on a plastic chair outside the gracious home of Gregorio Chavez's family in the community of La Panama community, located in the Lower Aguan region of Northern Honduras. Trees bearing ripe oranges hung over the driveway swaying gently in the breeze, and children and animals gambolled about.

Gregorio's brother Jose offered us a brief, somber welcome before inviting us to accompany him and Gregorio's children on the path that Gregorio walked to tend to his land on July 2, 2012, the last day he was seen alive by his family.

We passed the lush gardens and paused a few hundred yards down the path, to where Jose, his face grim and eyes downcast, gestured to where Gregorio's machete was found in the grass by those who were alarmed when he did not return for dinner on July 2.

Jose could not bear to recount that along with the machete, the search party found blood and other evidence suggesting that Gregorio had been gravely injured, bound and dragged onto the neighbouring property by security forces in the hire of palm oil magnate Miguel Facusse.

Facusse, reportedly the largest landowner in Honduras, claims to own the Paso Aguan plantation that abuts the community of La Panama, though his right to that land is contested by the campesinos, who had legally received the land through agrarian reform initiatives in the previous decades.

### Aguan's land conflicts

Members of the community formed a search party and began scouring the area for Gregorio, accompanied by police from the neighbouring town of Trujillo. After four days of increasingly desperate searching, they came across a freshly dug grave on the property occupied by Facusse's Dinant Corporation. As Gregorio's body was being exhumed, Facusse's Orion security forces and soldiers from Honduras' 15th Battalion were observed fleeing the area in Dinant's trucks.

Although Gregorio was found with a plastic bag over his head, authorities declined to conduct any serious, competent investigation into the circumstances surrounding his death. International observers denounced the autopsy as shoddy, and the family was never provided with the official results they believed would confirm the haunting truth, that Gregorio had been tortured before his death.

Tragically, Gregorio's death is not an isolated incident. Instead, it occurred within the context of bloody land conflicts in the Lower Aguan, which must be situated within the global landscape that supports the ability of the Honduran agro-oligarchy and military to act with impunity.

Human rights groups estimate that at least **98 other campesinos have been killed** in the Aguan's land conflicts since the 2009 military coup that **ousted** democratically elected President Mel Zelaya. Because of this and other violence targeting human rights defenders, members of the LGBTI community, lawyers, journalists and others, Honduras is now the murder capital of the world.

Although conflict over the land has been percolating for decades, the post-coup era has been marked by a rapid and harrowing escalation in the violence and repression. Gregorio, a community leader, was presumably targeted for his resistance to the fraud and coercion exerted by Facusse and several other large landowners in amassing large swaths of fertile land that had been legally distributed to the campesinos through agrarian reform initiatives.

Facusse's security forces do not operate in a vacuum, and have been seen working with Honduran troops from the Xatruch III military operation, who in turn have received training from the US Military. US links to the violence do not end with the military - a recent Associated Press **expose** reported that State Department officials have been dissembling to members of Congress in order to fund the Honduran police despite another Associated Press **investigation** that outlined current death squad activity conducted by the Honduran police.

In contravention of a US law sponsored by Senator Leahy, money flows to forces controlled by Director General

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A culture of impunity**

Juan Carlos "El Tigre" Bonilla, believed to be involved in past death squad activity, including **three extrajudicial killings** a decade ago and suspected involvement in 11 assassinations and disappearances.

Despite widely reported human rights abuses, Facusse's Dinant Corporation has received loans from the World Bank, Inter-American Development Bank and other multilateral financial institutions. Dinant has also received carbon credits through the United Nations for his production of "green energy".

### **Too little justice**

The German Development Bank **withdrew its loan** after receiving credible reports of the abuses, and the World Bank is currently investigating its loans to Dinant, but the wheels of justice grind slowly, if at all.

Protesting the impunity surrounding Gregorio's killing, community members of La Panama blocked Facusse's access to the Paso Aguan plantation. His effort to access the property through an alternative route was thwarted by Mother Nature, by way of a stream flowing from the Aguan river that eroded Facusse's new road.

Despite the temporary quiet, the community reported that Facusse's security forces are lurking menacingly among the palm trees just over the border of La Panama. Community members fear that this stand-off will end violently - rumours of an impending incursion by paramilitary forces circulated just last week as we stood at the edge of the Paso Aguan.

Residents of La Panama inhabit a world of constant fear, yet they feel they have no other recourse. They cannot turn to the Honduran judicial system, which has consistently failed to protect their rights and which the US State Department decried as **corrupt and ineffective**. Neither can the campesinos trust the electoral process to reflect their interests, as suspicions of fraud are widespread and the collective memory of the coup is still raw for many Hondurans.

Since his death, Gregorio's bereaved widow has become increasingly withdrawn and does not stray beyond the space between her kitchen and bedroom. We were humbled when she quietly joined us outside as we gathered in a circle, hand in hand, campesinos and gringos, and bowed our heads for a moment of silence, honouring and remembering Gregorio and others who have sacrificed their lives in the struggle to defend their land, communities and livelihood.

The international community must refuse to be complicit in this repression: US military aid and training and funding for the police must be withheld until the human rights abuses stop; international financial institutions must demand respect for human rights as a precondition for any financial assistance and should pay reparations for their support of abusive businesses; and the United Nations and purchasers of carbon credits should meticulously ensure that green energy is not produced with the blood of campesinos. The campesinos of the Lower Aguan have suffered too much bloodshed and witnessed too little justice.

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***The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera's editorial policy.***