Honduran Campesinos in the Crosshairs

Lauren Carasik
Western New England University School of Law, Carasik@law.wne.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.law.wne.edu/media

Part of the Human Rights Law Commons

Recommended Citation
Honduran Campesinos in the Crosshairs, ALJAZEERA ENGLISH (April 6, 2012).

This Editorial is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Publications at Digital Commons @ Western New England University School of Law. It has been accepted for inclusion in Media Presence by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Western New England University School of Law. For more information, please contact pnewcombe@law.wne.edu.
Honduran campesinos in the crosshairs

The US government and multilateral institutions must demand an end to the human rights abuses surrounding land disputes.

Former President Manuel Zelaya's plan to review land title claims were invalidated after a coup [AFP]

Springfield, MA - Honduras now claims the dubious distinction of being the murder capital of the world as drug trafficking and gangs play an undeniable role in the violence plaguing the small central American country.

However, there is near complete impunity for the forces that have killed more than 300 people since the 2009 coup, including labour, political and land reform activists, journalists and lawyers. Members of the campesino land rights organisations in the Bajo Aguan have been the targets of systemic repression. Last Thursday, four more campesinos were murdered in Trujillo, bringing the total number of people killed in that region since January 2010 to 64.
The international community cannot sit idly by as these atrocities unfold.

The land disputes date back to efforts in the 1960s to entice landless farmers to the fertile region of the Bajo Aguan. The initial agrarian reform laws contained protections intended to ensure that the land remained in the hands of small landowners by limiting the amount of hectares individuals could accumulate. In 1992, the Law for Modernisation of Land gutted many of the protections written into the original agrarian reform efforts, creating pressure on peasant land cooperatives to sell their land to large landowners.

In the two years following passage of the 1992 law, three large landowners used a combination of fraud, coercion and violence to consolidate ownership of 73.4 per cent of the land transferred under the prior Agrarian Reform. Palm oil magnate Miguel Facusse, well known to the US government for alleged ties to drug trafficking, owns a significant swath of land in the lower Aguan valley and is implicated in much of the ongoing repression.

Organising in resistance to the coercion, local campesino groups formed, known as Unified Campesino Movement of the Aguan (MUCA) and the Authentic Revindicative Campesino Movement of the Aguan (MARCA), to demand the nullification of the title transfers. In the absence of a functioning judicial system, campesinos were forced to navigate a byzantine dispute resolution process that promised no ready solution or relief.

Failed agreements

After years of delay, then President Manuel Zelaya oversaw an agreement in 2009 to review the land title claims of the MUCA campesinos that many presumed would set aside the fraudulent transfers. Zelaya's ouster in the coup shortly thereafter invalidated a land reform bill that promised some relief for peasants, as the illegitimate administration of Roberto Micheletti sent the unmistakable message that it had no intention of honouring the agreement. In the face of escalating violence, the campesino movements have continued to demand the right to occupy the land they rely on to survive.

Under unrelenting pressure, representatives from MUCA and MARCA negotiated an agreement to the land dispute with the Honduran government in February 2012. The onerous and untenable terms of the agreement all but guarantee its dissolution, as families will be unable to subsist under the payment scheme required. Foreclosure on the land is inevitable, giving the patina of legitimacy to the future eviction of the campesinos.

The tenuous campesino coalitions threaten to unravel as families grapple with the impossibility of their obligations. Without a solution that ensures the long term ability of the campesinos to farm and feed their families, the cycle of repression and violent displacements will continue. Similar conditions exist elsewhere in Honduras.

The egregious human rights abuses related to the land disputes have attracted the attention of US legislators. On March 5, 2012, seven senators wrote to express their concern about the killings and impunity in Honduras. Four days later, 94 members of Congress sent a letter to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton urging the US government to suspend aid to the Honduran military and policy and to demand the end to impunity in Honduras, with specific mention of the repression in the Bajo Aguan.

Instead of responding to the grave concerns outlined by members of the House and Senate, the Obama administration has requested increased military aid for fiscal year 2013, ostensibly to assist the fight against drug trafficking. Many analysts decry the increased militarisation of the war on drugs as counter-productive and destructive.

Aside from that polemical critique of US policy, the US can and should refuse to provide further military assistance unless Honduras works to the end to the violent repression and impunity that plagues the country generally, and especially the Bajo Aguan region.

Negative externalities

Although the land disputes are decades old, conflict in the Bajo Aguan has been exacerbated by the incentive offered to developing nations under the carbon credit trading scheme created under the Kyoto Protocol of 1997. Concerns about global climate change prompted the UN set up the Clean Development Mechanism to encourage the production of alternative fuel.

In effect, countries in the global south that develop clean energy sources can sell carbon credits to the larger polluters in the global north. The fertile land of the Bajo Aguan provides optimal conditions to grow African palm oil, an

enterprise that qualifies as green energy.

Adding an additional international component to a local land dispute, both the Inter-American Development Bank and the World Bank's International Finance Corporation provided loans to Facusse’s Grupo Dinant to support the production of African palm biofuels.

The human rights abuses are not just a Honduran problem: International Financial Institutions are providing loans to the very corporate African Palm producers accused of violently repressing the campesino land rights movements.

The US government is providing military training and assistance to the Honduran government that is complicit in the repression; developed countries are purchasing carbon credits from companies that produce green energy through the violent displacement and repression of local campesinos; and the UN Clean Development Mechanism is inadvertently fostering optimal conditions for human rights violations in the global south by making land grabs from subsistence campesinos more profitable.

The US government and multilateral institutions must unequivocally demand an end to the human rights abuses in Honduras as a condition of ongoing assistance. Developed countries must demand that carbon credits they purchase are ethically generated. The beleaguered campesinos of Honduras cannot wage this fight on their own.

Lauren Carasik is Director of the International Human Rights Clinic at Western New England University School of Law.

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

Source: Al Jazeera