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Violence against Central American environmentalists goes unpunished

Since our last newsletter ENCA has received disturbing reports from Central America which suggest that the death squad activity which rose to prominence in the region during the 1970s and 1980s has not abated. But now environmental and social activists are their targets as well as political leftists. In Guatemala in September, Yuri Melini, the Director of the Centre for Environmental, Social and Legal Actions (CALAS) was shot but fortunately survived. In the second of our articles below we ask who ordered this shooting. First, however, we tell a tale of Honduran impunity.

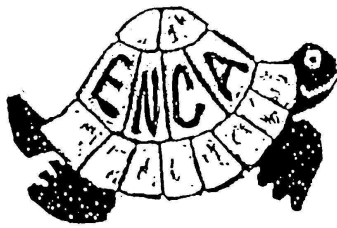
HONDURAN DEATH SQUAD ESCAPES JUSTICE



Inspection of the place of execution and the bullet-holed wall

In December 2006 two members of the MAO (Environmental Movement of Olancho), Roger Iván Murillo and Francisco Heraldo Zúñiga, were assassinated in a death squad execution style killing. They were killed for their part in defending the forests of the department of Olancho in Honduras against illegal timber felling. Both men had received death threats from logging companies. (For more background on this struggle by Olancho's environmentalists see ENCA Newsletters 42, 44 and 45.)

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Editorial

As if Central America doesn't have enough environmental and social problems! The major articles in this issue of the ENCA Newsletter give us cause for great concern for our partner organisations and other small-scale, grassroots, activist organisations which work to defend the social and environmental integrity of the region. There appears to have been a recent rise in threats to these organisations and their personnel, especially in Honduras and Guatemala, but possibly in the other Central American

nations too. It is often difficult to prove the sources and intellectual authors of these threats, but nearly always there seem to be links with vested interests in the rich world's transnational corporations – gangster capitalists – in search of increased profits from the extraction of Central America's natural resources and the exploitation of its labour.

We urge all our members and all others who pick up this newsletter not only to inform themselves about these cases (and what they say about the global economic system), but also to take appropriate action by following the web links given and writing letters to the appropriate authorities.

The four assassins who carried out the machine gun execution were members of the local police – Linton Omar Cáceres Rodríguez, Rolando Antonio Tejeda Padilla, Juan José Talavera Zavala and José Arcadio González. Despite a history of impunity for those who commit such crimes in Honduras, the four were detained and were convicted by a Honduran court on 1st July this year.

They were to be sentenced on 15 August and faced up to 30 years in prison. After the conviction they were detained by Brigade 115 of the Honduran army whilst awaiting individual sentencing. In early August two of the convicted, Cáceres and Talavera escaped and a few days later González also fled. As the MAO said on hearing the news: “It is inexplicable that after being found guilty these men were given so many privileges, when by our standards they should have been behind the bars of a maximum security prison because of the danger they represent to society, in particular to the relatives of the murdered environmentalists.”

The MAO has asked a series of other questions about their escape: Who is it that would want us to believe that they escaped on their own? Who is it who has helped them to escape justice? Who is behind their escape? Is it the same people who were responsible at the Brigade 115 installation when they escaped? Where were these people when they escaped?



2nd July in Olancho: Linton Omar Cáceres (in the middle) and Juan José Talavera (on the phone) in army custody

ENCA has written a letter to President Mel Zelaya urging him to initiate a thorough investigation into who was responsible for these escapes and to do all he can to ensure that justice is served in this case. The MAO has also demanded that the case of the assassinations be kept open in order to determine the intellectual authors of the original crime.

(We refer our readers to the earlier ENCA Newsletters – Nos. 42, 44 and 45 – for appropriate addresses for letters of concern.)

WHO ORDERED THE SHOOTING OF A GUATEMALAN ENVIRONMENTAL LEADER?



Yuri Melini, Director of CALAS

On September 4, Yuri Melini was shot three times in Guatemala City and, despite grave injuries, was fortunate to survive. Melini is a leading environmental activist and had just won an important Court victory striking down aspects of Guatemala's Mining Law. The attack appeared to be carefully planned. The assailants were reportedly waiting for Melini and called his name to guarantee his identity before shooting him. He was shot in the abdomen, right knee and left thigh.

The Guatemalan government has expressed concern that the shooting may have been an act of intimidation to deter Melini and others from engaging in environmental advocacy. The Colom government's press release condemning the attempted murder and supporting the work of CALAS is to be welcomed as is the early start to an investigation by the police and the Public Prosecutor's office. Despite government concern, however, on the same day as Melini's shooting, 50 other environmental activists received threats relating to their work; and since August 2008 there have been rumours surrounding the existence of death threats against other high-profile environmental activists.

Yuri Melini is Director of the Centre for Environmental, Social and Legal Actions (CALAS). CALAS is an environmental organisation that engages in investigations, education and community support. It seeks to protect the environment, strengthen political participation in environmental decision making and improve respect for the collective environmental rights of indigenous peoples. More specifically, CALAS has worked within the Guatemalan legal framework to demonstrate the environmental impact of mining and petroleum projects as well as to campaign against contamination of drinking water and occupation of nature reserves.

Most recently CALAS successfully petitioned the Constitutional Court to strike down aspects of the Mining Law. As CALAS had argued, the Court found that the Mining Law was unconstitutional because it did not require sufficient consideration to be given to environmental consequences of mining before a mining license was issued. The Law allowed for mining to an unlimited depth and permitted contaminated water from mines to be discharged into rivers. In overturning these aspects of the Law, the Court strengthened environmental restrictions on mining in Guatemala.

Readers can find out more about this specific case from:
<http://action.humanrightsfirst.org/campaign/Yuri/explanation>

Sources:

<http://action.humanrightsfirst.org/campaign/Yuri/explanation> (Human Rights First)

<http://www.frontlinedefenders.org/node/1565> (Front Line: Protection of Human Rights Defenders)

http://www.nisgua.org/themes_campaigns (Network in Solidarity with the People of Guatemala)

Amnesty International – Public AI Index: AMR 34/021/2008

At this juncture, it is noteworthy that our next article also relates to Guatemala's environment and is provided by another organisation which experiences threats against its personnel. Indeed, Co-Director of Trópico Verde, Carlos Albacete now lives in exile with his wife, Piedad Espinosa, in the USA because of the threat against their lives in Guatemala. He continues to work as Co-Director of the organisation from the USA.

INTERNATIONAL DENUNCIATION OF GUATEMALA FOR THE DETERIORATING STATE OF LAGUNA DEL TIGRE NATIONAL PARK

*From Trópico Verde/ParksWatch Guatemala
Press release, Antigua, Guatemala, 12 September 2008*

The state of Guatemala was today denounced by the Latin American Water Tribunal¹ for the deterioration of the Laguna Del Tigre National Park in the department of Petén. The accusation has been made by the environmentalist organisation Trópico Verde² which sought the intervention of the tribunal to prevent the imminent disappearance of Central America's most important protected wetland.

According to the environmentalist organisation, the lack of action by the Guatemalan state during the last eleven years has put the area in critical danger of disappearance. "The protests made by different Guatemalan civil society organisations have not been heard, so it is clear that the case must be heard in international tribunals which can exert pressure on the Guatemalan authorities to fulfil their obligations", stated Carlos Albacete, Co-Director of Trópico Verde.

He added "In 2007, illegal deforestation largely by cattle ranchers amounted to over 4,700 hectares, which is equivalent to deforesting 13 football pitches every day. It was similar in previous years, and there is no evidence that things are going to improve during what is left of 2008."

According to Trópico Verde, the measures which have been taken to confront the problem have been no more than cosmetic, and "the authorities have decided to take the easy route, confronting subsistence campesinos but leaving in absolute impunity the large cattle ranchers who are the major cause of the crisis", commented Albacete. According to the organisation's estimates, between 40% and 50% of the park has already been badly deforested by the ranchers who have been illegally taking over land in the area since 2002.

The accusation was presented today to the Public Inquiry held between 8th and 12th September by the Latin American Water Tribunal in Antigua. The tribunal offers an international autonomous petition for environmental justice and was created with the aim of contributing to the resolution of conflicts related to water systems in Latin America. The tribunal has held sessions on four occasions before this, two in San José, Costa Rica (2002 and 2004), one in Mexico City (2006) and the other in Guadalajara (2007). Its public inquiries have examined 42 cases and have heard approximately 200 denunciations presented by civil society against water systems.

Trópico Verde is a Guatemalan ecologists' organisation created in 1998 which works for the protection of forests and wetlands in Guatemala.

For more information, please consult: www.tropicoverde.org

Notes

1. "The Latin American Water Tribunal bases its work on principles such as balanced coexistence with nature, respect for human dignity and solidarity among peoples for the preservation of the region's water systems. ... [It] is an ethical institution committed to preserving the water and to guaranteeing its access as a human right for current and future generations." (www.tragua.com)
 2. Trópico Verde is a Guatemalan organisation dedicated to the defence of the environment. It works on specific themes, the two most important being forests and wetlands. It considers citizen participation to be important and therefore works with grassroots organisations and when necessary uses peaceful means of protest against those in power. (www.tropicoverde.org)
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From Trópico Verde, ENCA has also received an article entitled:

‘MAYAN MEGATOURISM RESURRECTED, PITTING PRIVATE SECTOR AGAINST NARCO-CATTLE RANCHERS’

The article was published in September in NotiCen which offers news and analysis of international political matters as they manifest themselves in Central America and the Caribbean. We give a very brief summary of the article here and hope that our readers will refer to the links given below for a reading of the full article.

A tourism project of astounding proportions is rising up out of the ashes of the grandiose but now defunct Plan Puebla Panama (PPP), which has been proposed for the Petén, Guatemala’s largest and most remote department. President Alvaro Colóm has proposed an archeological park extending some 22,500 sq km across this, Central America’s largest, forested wilderness. The park would include both El Mirador, a giant ruins considered the cradle of the Mayan civilisation, and Tikal, the gem of the Mayan classic period.



Narco-cattle ranching in the Petén

Some of this vast area has been raped, turned into cattle ranches, denuded of the forests that could not be seen for the trees whose value as illegally felled timber has spelled their doom. It also necessitates the eviction of subsistence campesino families and would include a large area of the Petén which is lawless and in which forest is clear-felled with impunity for cattle grazing. Additionally, the area is used as a major trans-shipment route by drug smugglers. Trópico Verde refer to those responsible for the illegal felling as ‘narco-cattle ranchers’.

Carlos Albacete, Co-Director of Trópico Verde, said that the organisation first denounced the situation in 2006 and has documentation showing that, in at least five cases, lands within the Laguna del Tigre park were illegally deeded to persons linked to narcotrafficking. In the Mirador area of the central zone of the Mayan Biosphere Reserve, the group has documentary evidence of state lands taken over by drug traffickers that were subsequently robbed of their timber and turned to grazing. After Trópico Verde made its charges, authorities nullified the titles, but they did not act against the drug traffickers. “They don’t mention that, to get the deeds issued, they had to bribe lawyers and officials or that in Laguna del Tigre so far 40 small planes used to transport cocaine from Colombia to Guatemala have been found,” added Albacete.

ENCA has posted the full article on our website (on the ‘Latest News’ page): www.enca.org.uk

We also strongly recommend readers to listen to an interview with Carlos Albacete on Chicago Public Radio at: <http://www.chicagopublicradio.org/content.aspx?audioID=29250> as well as consulting the Trópico Verde website at: www.tropicoverde.org

The death squad assassins who target environmental activists such as those from the MAO, CALAS and Trópico Verde as outlined in the previous five pages are merely the dogs who bay at the heels of the gangster capitalists. The latter are the intellectual authors of the assassinations and death threats and they represent the timber industry, the mining industry, the cattle ranching industry, and many other sectors of production. In turn, the conditions are made right for their plundering, resource extraction, violence and impunity by those who impose policies which promote individual wealth over public good and community welfare and which remove all forms of restrictions to that wealth regardless of the costs to society and the environment – namely, the pushers of the so-called Washington Consensus, the World Bank, IMF, other regional development and investment banks and the leaders of the rich G8 nations. These are the same gangsters who do everything in their power to bribe and force Third World nations to accept unfavourable conditions in free trade agreements such as NAFTA and CAFTA-DR, in order to create markets suitable for the industries of rich countries to profit from the wealth of other countries' resources.

So it is pleasing to be able to report news of the breakdown of the talks between the European Union and Central American nations. Although our next article was written before the talks broke down on 10th October in Guatemala, we have included it because it explains some crucial reasons for the breakdown. (The first paragraph has been altered to take account of the failure of the talks.)

TRADE TALKS BETWEEN THE EU AND CENTRAL AMERICA

By Ivor McGillivray

Trade talks between the European Union and Central American nations took place in October but failed to bear fruit with particular disagreement on tariffs for coffee, sugar and bananas. The talks aim to reach what the EU refers to as an Association Agreement with the Central American nations. A new round of talks is due to take place in Brussels in December (2008). Previous rounds took place in San José, Costa Rica (October 2007), Brussels (February 2008), San Salvador (April 2008) and Brussels (July 2008).

The Agreement has several objectives in the areas of trade, cooperation and political dialogue. One declared objective is sustainable development: furthering economic development, with a high level of environmental protection and social cohesion. The Agreement also sets out to develop a political partnership “based on respect for and the promotion of human rights, democracy and good governance” (EU, 2007). Its economic centrepiece is to create a bi-regional Free Trade Area that complies with, but also goes beyond, WTO rules.

The Central American region has been a priority area for EU foreign policy and development assistance since the 1980s. Trade between the EU and Central America has been regulated by the Generalised System of Preferences (GSP): in short, exemptions from WTO rules. This was superseded by the GSP Plus scheme in 2005, which was intended to reward efforts to combat drug production and trafficking. The GSP Plus scheme grants enhanced market access for around 7,200 products. Around half enjoy duty-free access, while the rest are classified as ‘sensitive’ and incur (reduced) tariffs. Industrial products have duty-free access and the same applies to a range of agricultural products, but competitive exports such as beef, dairy products and sugar are classified as ‘sensitive’. Bananas and pineapple are not included in the scheme at all. Central American trade negotiators demand that these products, as well as sugar, ethanol, shrimp and coffee, be given privileged access to EU markets similar to the GSP Plus scheme as part of the Association Agreement.

The EU has existing Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) with the Euro-Mediterranean countries, South Africa, Mexico and Chile. Negotiations are underway on new FTAs with India, South Korea, the ASEAN countries (Association of South East Asian Nations), as well as Central America. Negotiations with Mercosur (Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay) and the Andean Community (Bolivia, Columbia, Ecuador, Peru) are currently suspended. These initiatives take place against the background of stalled WTO talks. The most recent negotiations in the Doha Development Round, the culmination of a process begun in 2001, collapsed in July. Several factors led to this outcome. China and India, and the United States, could not agree on the Special Safeguard Mechanism (SSM) which allows countries to impose a special tariff on certain agricultural products in the event of an import surge or fall in price. The United States argued that the threshold had been set too low. Another reason was the unwillingness of the US and EU to reduce agricultural subsidies. The 2007 US Farm Bill, passed by Congress in May 2008, entrenches the historic

system of high subsidies for agriculture. It has been suggested that the collapse of the WTO process signals the end of multilateralism, and is bound to invigorate the pursuit of bilateral agreements. It is also not surprising that an EU – CA Association Agreement follows in the wake of a US FTA in the region (DR-CAFTA).

The Association Agreement has been criticised by a number of civil society organisations. The Central America Women's Network (CAWN) argues that "an Association Agreement with a strong trade liberalisation agenda will deepen existing gender inequities, undermine women's economic independence and weaken their ability to promote and defend their rights" (CAWN, 2008). This contention is supported by research undertaken by Nicaraguan feminists Martha Yllescas Altamirano and Guadalupe Salinas Valle on the impacts of DR-CAFTA. The authors point out that women are over-represented in both the small business and public sectors. The privatisation of services and loss of government revenue from tariffs would put pressure on public sector budgets and lead to contraction of the sector, while small businesses and smallholders would find it difficult to compete in an open market. The researchers have found that DR-CAFTA is already having a negative impact on small businesses. Increasing unemployment would lead to fewer economic opportunities for women. This trend is already apparent, with an increasing proportion of men employed in the export processing zones. They also find that agricultural communities have been hard hit by DR-CAFTA.

Oxfam acknowledges that FTAs can create "larger, more effective and more attractive markets" (Oxfam, 2008), but cautions that these serve "to undermine rather than support the development process" when struck between partners at significantly different levels of economic development. Well before the launch of the current negotiations, Oxfam judged that "a bi-regional FTA would certainly do more harm than good to Central America since it would mean opening up to EU manufactured products, with damaging consequences for domestic industry" (Oxfam, 1999). The EU is obliged by the Maastricht Treaty to advance sustainable socio-economic development and poverty alleviation. But Oxfam questions whether such proposed Association Agreements are likely to achieve these aims. It sees the recipe "liberalisation equals growth ... equals poverty reduction" as more an article of faith than proven formula, and calls for research into the social and environmental impacts of liberalisation to be incorporated into the design of Association Agreements.

The EU – CA Agreement shares much in common with that being negotiated between the EU and the Andean Community (CAN, *Comunidad Andina*). The latter has now reached an impasse – in July 2008 negotiations were cancelled. The political contexts are somewhat different. Columbia and Peru had signed a FTA with the United States, while Bolivia and Ecuador had not, and these seemed less interested in the FTA component of the Association Agreement. This difference added to the political tensions within the Andean Community and may have contributed to the breakdown in negotiations. In the Central American case, on the other hand, each nation has now ratified DR-CAFTA. But some observers of the EU – CAN process claim that the EU is not inclined to engage in genuine political dialogue between equals in negotiations, evidenced by a high-handed and arrogant approach towards the parties (UNES, 2008). Moreover, despite the demands of civil society, information about the negotiating process has been kept confidential. There is insufficient involvement of civil society. It unfortunately appears that the EU – CA negotiations are following a similar pattern.

Sources

CAWN (2008) *The association agreement between the European Union and Central America: its potential impact on women's lives in Central America*, [www] <http://www.cawn.org/> [accessed 11/10/2008]

EU (2007) *Draft EU-Central America negotiating directive*, [www] <http://www.bilaterals.org/> [accessed 11/10/2008]

Oxfam (1999) *EU Association Agreements with Latin America: Good news for those in poverty?* <http://publications.oxfam.org.uk/> [accessed 11/10/2008]

Oxfam (2008) *Tackling EU Free Trade Agreements*, [www] <http://www.oxfam.org.uk/> [accessed 11/10/2008]

UNES (2008) *Ante la cancelación de la cuarta ronda de negociaciones del TLC CAN – EU*, Revista Ecotopia 210 <http://www.unes.org.sv/> [accessed 11/10/2008]

The development of alternative and renewable forms of energy and the scale at which they are developed are crucial issues to address if we are to avoid the unjust and unequal society and environment created by the gangster capitalists, our western leaders. With this in mind, the following items of news may be of interest.

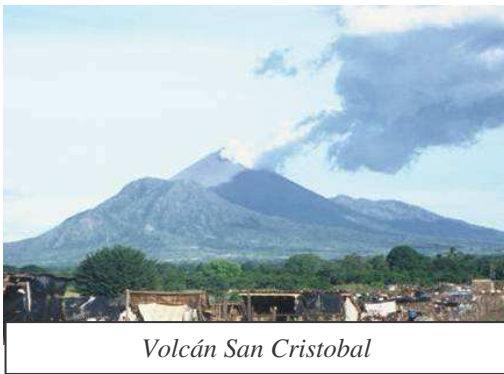
NICARAGUA SEEKS BIDS ON ENERGY FROM LARGEST VOLCANO

By Eric Sabo, June 2008

Nicaragua plans to open its largest volcano to geothermal exploration as record oil prices force the government to seek new sources of energy.

Concessions to extract energy from the San Cristobal Volcano, which has the largest energy potential of the country's 12 geothermal sites, will be put up for bid, Nicaragua's Energy Ministry said. The government is considering offers made before July 31, according to a statement posted on the Energy Ministry website.

Energy Minister Emilio Rappacioli told national lawmakers this month that the government is working on plans to switch to entirely alternative energy within five years. The plan aims to tap hydroelectric and geothermal reserves that may produce an estimated 3,000 megawatts of power a day. "There's a lot of potential," said Heather Berkman, a Latin American analyst with the Eurasia Group. "The problem is that investors are hesitant to put money on the ground because there's so much political uncertainty."



Volcán San Cristobal

President Daniel Ortega, who had promised to end Nicaragua's energy crisis with discount Venezuela oil, said in June that the country aims to phase out fuel-based power plants in favour of alternative energy. About 80 percent of Nicaragua's electricity is supplied by fuel-burning power plants. The country has

suffered 4-hour-a day blackouts since oil soared to record prices in May.

Tax Incentives

The National Assembly passed a law this month that grants increased tax incentives and a higher tariff that companies can charge to produce geothermal energy.

The San Cristobal volcano, with 225 megawatts of potential, could power half of Nicaragua's energy needs, according to the Energy Ministry. Nevada-based Ormat Technologies Inc. runs the country's power plant at Momotombo. Canada's Polaris Geothermal controls the San Jacinto-Tizate geothermal power concession.

Source: www.bloomberg.com

With reference to the development of alternative and renewable energy sources, ENCA would also like to congratulate *Agrovivienda* for installing its 100th solar energy kit, bringing electricity for the first time to well over 500 people in the rural areas around Masaya, Nicaragua. *Agrovivienda* is a project carried out by ADIC Masaya and supported by the Leicester Masaya Link Group (LMLG), the Chartered Institute of Housing and others. More details can be found at www.cih.org/nicaragua and www.leicestermasayalink.org.uk Or you can contact John Perry, the project coordinator, at johnperry@satelinet.com

Energy alternatives are very definitely related to our next short article which is a report of a meeting held on World Environment Day in June. The meeting of the Central American Forum of People Affected by Climate Change was held in El Salvador. A brief report published on Radio Mundo Real (www.radiomundoreal.fm/rmr) is given on the next page.

PEOPLE AFFECTED BY CLIMATE CHANGE DEMAND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE IN EL SALVADOR

Within the celebrations of the World Environment Day, environmental, social and peasant groups of El Salvador, together with organisations and communities affected from Central America, gathered during June in El Salvador for the 'Forum of People Affected by Climate Change'. Some of the organisations that participated were CESTA, the Salvadoran Centre for Alternative Technology and Friends of the Earth El Salvador, the Foundation of Cooperative Promotion, and the National Centre of Rural Workers (member of La Via Campesina), Friends of the Earth's groups COECOCEIBA from Costa Rica and Ceiba from Guatemala.

According to CESTA's website, the initiative was promoted "to address the issue of climate change in its political, social and environmental dimension, from the view of the people affected by this phenomenon in the country and the region." They also aimed to "contribute to the discussion and awareness raising of the condition of people affected by climate change and to increase the abilities and motivations to strengthen the struggle for environmental justice in the region" beginning a process of "collective construction of a regional movement that gathers as many communities affected as possible".

Real World Radio talked with two leaders of communities affected by climate change, Marisa Arévalo Amador, from Tegucigalpa, Honduras, and Oliverio Roblero, from San Marcos, Guatemala. Marisa Arévalo explained that her community was mainly affected by recurring droughts, which had forced many of its residents to migrate to Europe and the US since they could no longer harvest. Oliverio Roblero referred to the damages caused by water pollution, indiscriminate logging and the heavy rains and landslides in his community.

Nearly 160 people from different organisations participated in the meeting held on June 6th and 7th, as well as environmental activists, peasants, community members and indigenous groups.

ENCA members may be interested to know that World Environment Day is celebrated with much more gusto in Central America than it is in the UK. At our last meeting in October those present viewed a DVD of the World Environment Day celebrations in El Viejo, Nicaragua, made by our partner organisation SELVA to whom we donated \$400 (USD) towards the costs of their World Environment Day Festival.

ENCA members may also wish to know that in late May the Central American Commission on Environment and Development (CCAD), the UN's Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) and the UK Department for International Development (DFID) announced plans for a study on 'The Economics of Climate Change in Central America'. It is intended to analyse the challenges, costs and benefits of mitigating and adapting to a warmer world. It will take 15 months and cost around \$1.8 million.

We move onto two articles about fish resources in and around Central America, the first concerning tuna, largely for our consumption in the western world, and the second concerning sport fishing around the coasts of Costa Rica, another form of blatant exploitation of Third World resources for First World fun.

CALVO IN EL SALVADOR: TUNA AT THE COST OF MARINE BIODIVERSITY?

In today's ever increasing demand for marine produce, tuna is the third most important fish consumed worldwide, only exceeded by shrimps and deep-sea fish. The European Union fleet (roughly 60% Spanish and 40% French ships) catches 500,000 tonnes of tuna each year. The Spanish fleet of freezer ships fishes around 60% of their tuna in international waters and the rest through fishing agreements with third countries. Spain accounts for 16% of global tuna products, the third most important country after Thailand and the United States. Between 2002-2006 the tuna industry rapidly globalised, with Spanish companies owning 35 industrial plants outside Spain and more than 50 subsidiary companies. The two largest Spanish companies are Jealsa and Calvo. Calvo, the 4th largest processor in the world, has 25% global tuna market share and

has recently opened two processing factories each in El Salvador and Brazil, in addition to its three European ones. The company fleet consists of 11 fishing, two support and three merchant ships.

Dolphins and tuna

One of the notorious impacts of tuna fishing is the high number of dolphins killed. According to Earth Island Institute (EII), 7 million dolphins have been killed. Turtles and sharks, which often swim alongside the shoals, particularly yellow fin tuna, are also often killed. Despite the monitoring carried out by organisations such as EII and the international 'dolphin safe' standards, the death of marine animals continues.

In El Salvador there is no public information on the fishing regulations for Calvo's fleet nor the dolphin mortality levels, nor what, if any, efforts the company makes to protect dolphins or marine turtles which get trapped in the nets. The scientific community has alerted people to the excessive level of netting used, threatening certain species with extinction, including birds and small whales.

In 2002 Calvo built a tuna steak processing plant employing 750 workers in La Unión department in the east of the country, and the company started its fishing operations off Salvadoran coasts. In its first year of operation, Calvo caught 400 tons of tuna daily, raising the question of what will happen to tuna stocks in Salvadoran coastal waters over the next 10 years? And what about the people who live from small-scale fishing? In 2006, its second plant opened, continuing Calvo's relentless harvesting of the seas.

Hazardous working conditions

When the ships arrive at the factory, the fish haul is transferred onto a high-speed conveyor belt. Workers have to grade the fish as they go past which is where the first major safety risk occurs, due to the speed of the belt and the large size and weight of some of the fish. After grading, the fish is taken to the freezer for temporary storage. To unfreeze the fish, they are put into containers of boiling water, which are then sent to the filleting section, where there have been serious accidents, including amputation of fingers in the machines. Factory workers have denounced how in some cases injured workers were subsequently sacked. Once the product has been unfrozen and filleted it is taken to the washing area, often still at very high temperature. Workers complained that they have to keep plunging their hands in cold water after having been exposed to extremely high temperatures and this alternation between hot and cold can lead to pains in the bones and muscles. Blistering or large lumps appearing on the hands are common occupational symptoms. The Salvadoran Institute for Social Security operates a clinic inside the factory but workers report that they often have to return to work before their injuries have properly healed. Other complaints are that the company does not provide gloves, leading to frequent hand injuries. The washed fish goes to the packing section, where it is wrapped in bags, sealed and then plunged into boiling water, from which it is pulled out by female workers without using gloves or any kind of eye protection from the hot steam. Burning from caustic soda used in the fish washing area is another health and safety concern.

The clinic only has one doctor for around 1,400 workers and offers medical attention for just 2½ hours in the morning. Foremen often refuse workers permission to go to the clinic and there is no follow-up of their health complaints nor comprehensive health checks. Another major complaint is that workers are restricted in how much water they are allowed to drink, so that they do not go to the toilet. Each minute's toilet absence from the work station is recorded, even for people with registered kidney problems. There have been several serious accidents at the factory, the latest in December 2007 when there was a poisoning incident and many women workers had to be taken to local health centres, against the orders of the factory director who told them to just go home. The women were fainting, vomiting, suffering severe headaches and dizziness, along with a sensation of asphyxiation.

Contaminating the environment and violating labour rights

In March 2008, while Calvo launched in Europe its first tuna product with 0% fat [sic], in El Salvador residents of 16 zones in La Unión were protesting in the streets demanding the closure of the ASIGOLFO waste-disposal site. This landfill site receives 290-300 tons of waste daily, causing foul stench and contaminating the water table. Part of this daily load consists of fish waste and other materials from the Calvo factory. According to Aurelio Ventura, community leader, "This company is dumping its fish rubbish on us and polluting with the chemicals that they use to suppress fish smells".

While Calvo claims concern for consumers and the environment in its European business, in El Salvador the company treats people as disposable and violates their labour rights. In 2007, workers, mainly women, in its Salvadoran plants, started actions to set up a trade union. Calvo responded by sacking union members and while the case goes through the courts, the company refuses to recognise the legal existence of the trade union despite its proper documentation, according to national Ministry of Labour regulations. Calvo has failed to comply with International Labour Organisation conventions and refused to receive representatives from the International Union of Food and Agricultural Workers or Spanish trade union, Comisiones Obreras. The company has also used underhand tactics to influence the Salvadoran government, to avoid paying tariffs on its tuna imports into the EU.

Source: Translated and summarised by Stephanie Williamson from Revista Ecotopia 210, summer 2008, produced by UNES, El Salvador.

FISH HEADS DEBATE BILLFISH FISHING FUTURE

By Nicolas Ruggia
Tico Times Staff | editorial@ticotimes.net



The Costa Rican Fisheries Institute (INCOPECSA) held a meeting in June with commercial and sportfishing camps, as well as the conservation group, The Billfish Foundation, to address the rapidly declining billfish numbers in Costa Rican waters. *[Billfish is the term applied to a number of large predatory fish with sword-like bills such as sailfish, marlin and swordfish.]*

The debate has grown intense between commercial and sportfishing sectors which both claim the other is encroaching on their waters. In June, there were several accounts of commercial fishing rigs harassing sportfishing vessels and tourists with machine guns, helicopters and even explosives.

Guatemalan and Mexican sportfishing industries have prospered in the wake of the decline of the Costa Rican billfish population. “The commercial fishing and sportfishing industries are in crisis,” said Nelson Ehrhardt, Professor of Marine Biology and Fisheries at the University of Miami in Florida. “Costa Rica is losing status as an avenue for sportfishing. Your neighbours are gaining the best clients.” Between 2000 and 2006, the average sailfish haul in national tournaments dipped from eight fish to one, and sportfishing boats failed to catch any fish on 60% of outings in 2007, as opposed to 37% that came up empty-handed in 2006. There are also claims the commercial fishers under-report their harvests, further abating the number of billfish.

In wake of this, some have called for a ban on billfish, but others have called that excessive. “I don’t believe the voices that cry, ‘We have to [ban the harvest]’” said INCOPECSA president Carlos Villalobos. “That is the voice of dictatorship. I believe in the voice of sustainable development as shown by science.”

But Ehrhardt said some of the biggest problems are beyond Costa Rica, literally, and are due to Asian fleets that patrol the international waters just beyond Costa Rican shores. Besides depleting billfish populations with their fishing, Ehrhardt says, “[Taiwanese, Japanese and Chinese boats] release 50, 60 or 100 miles of line. Chlorophyll deposits are deoxygenating the water, creating these dead zones.”

Regardless of the solution the group reaches, Costa Rica stands to lose billions of tourist dollars if they mismanage the resource. “This is a real tangible problem off the coasts of South, Central and North America,” Ehrhardt said. “Costa Rica is losing market power in a very important industry. If there is no sportfishing, there is no more development. Property values will fall.”

In June this year, Wal-Mart, which owns Costa Rican supermarket chains Más X Menos and Hipermás, decided to stop selling billfish, reflecting a marked decline in the catch of sport fish.

Editorial decisions

It is a healthy sign that our links with Central American organisations, environmentalists and social activists are now so many and varied that we receive far too much material to include in a twelve page newsletter. For our readers' information, apart from those articles included in this issue, we currently have relatively topical articles on:

- The protection of Lake Nicaragua with ALBA funds
- Pollution from Baterias Record in El Salvador
- The 'Law of Seeds' in Costa Rica
- Further problems from pineapple expansion in Costa Rica
- The trafficking of animals through Central America

As well as updates on deforestation, oil exploration, the food crisis, a dry canal and a host of pollution incidents.

ENCLOSURE and APPEAL

With this newsletter you will find a Subscription Renewal slip as a gentle hint that we would be very grateful if you would renew your support for ENCA and its work and partnerships in Central America for 2009. (Please ignore the slip if you already have a standing order in ENCA's favour – for which we are extremely grateful.) (It also goes without saying that we do not expect our Central American partner organisations to subscribe financially to ENCA, unless of course they are rich, but that seems rather unlikely given the philosophy of ENCA.)

We are drawing your attention to the Subscription Renewal slip in this newsletter particularly because our funds are currently at their lowest for many years. This means that we are unable to give small-scale assistance to the projects and programmes of those many grassroots and community-based organisations that we have supported over the last twenty years. (For a list of the donations which we have made since we came into existence, please consult the ENCA website.)

That this inability actually means something can be seen from the fact that we have recently received a request for support from SELVA (Somos Ecologistas en Lucha por la Vida y el Ambiente) based in El Viejo, Nicaragua. Over the last ten years ENCA has made several small donations to SELVA for specific purposes and programmes and it was suggested at our last meeting that we should assist them at this time of real difficulty to help them get over a bad patch until March 2009 when they are expecting another input from other sources. Unfortunately, we are no longer in a position to grant even a few hundred dollars because of our own low level of funds. So, if any of our supporters can add a little to their subscription or can enlist new supporters, it would be greatly appreciated, not just by us but by our partners in Central America. We would also be keen to hear of any great fund-raising ideas you might have.

ENCA MEETINGS 2009

ENCA meetings are now held at the NSC's new office at the Durham Road Centre – see address below. The nearest tube station is Finsbury Park on the Victoria and Piccadilly lines. Meetings are held on Sundays from 12:30 pm to 4:30 pm and we start with lunch which is made up of whatever people attending choose to bring with them to share. For 2009, the three meetings dates will be:

22nd February

14th June

18th October

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