

ENCA



Environmental Network *for* Central America

Issue 59. October 2013

www.enca.org.uk

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**Bringing
Nicaragua to
the world
stage
but at what cost?**

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ENCA aims to work directly with people in communities who are seeking to arrest environmental degradation and who are often struggling against the repression and violence of armies and police forces acting under the command of wealthy individuals, transnational corporations and corrupt politicians. We campaign with them to place environmental rights within national constitutions and to ensure that all natural resources are made to benefit the many and not the few.

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Daniel Ortega meets Wang Jing of
HKND

COPINH Persecuted for Opposition to Dam Project

PROAH give an overview of the situation faced by opponents to the Agua Zarca Dam.

In recent months there has been an escalation in the persecution of Honduran human rights defenders acting to protect the environment against megaprojects. A particular target has been COPINH (Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organisations of Honduras) which for over two decades has worked to defend the territory, traditions and rights of the Lenca indigenous people in the west of the country (see *ENCA Newsletters 50 and 52*).

This persecution of COPINH has included criminalisation, death threats and murder, for its peaceful opposition to the Agua Zarca hydroelectric dam project, in the Rio Blanco region, Intibucá department.

DESA, a Honduran company, contracted SINOHYDRO, the giant Chinese hydroelectric corporation that currently controls half of all hydroelectric resources in the world outside of China, to construct the dam as part of SIEPAC (Central American Countries' Energy Interconnection System), an initiative which is ultimately intended to form a regional grid.

For the Lenca people, however, the dam represents the desecration of their sacred Gualcarque River, and the theft of their ancestral land, to which they have legal title and on which they depend for their livelihoods. This hydroelectric concession is just one of a huge number granted since the 2009 coup – 40 under just one law in September 2010 – without any consultation of the affected communities and in violation of Honduras' international obligations under ILO Convention 169 on the rights of indigenous and tribal peoples.

Since 1 April 2013, in protest at the violation of their land rights, the Lenca community in Rio Blanco has been

blocking the access road to the dam site with the support of COPINH. This has placed them in direct confrontation with the authorities, who have reacted by militarising the area and unleashing a campaign of persecution against COPINH's members.

On 15 July, Tomás García, a Lenca leader and member of COPINH, was murdered and his 17-year-old son, Allan García Domínguez, was seriously injured after being shot without warning by the military as they were walking towards the site of the road block. The shootings were strongly condemned by both Amnesty International and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. A soldier has been arrested in connection with the killing but accused of murder in self-defence, a charge which allows him to be released on bail instead of imprisoned pending trial, as is normal for homicide cases. According to COPINH, the bail has been paid by DESA.

As well as this direct attack on a key member of COPINH, the movement is also a victim of a more insidious campaign, of criminalisation. In the first incident, Berta Cáceres, COPINH's General Coordinator, was arrested on 24 May together with Tomás Gómez, another member of the COPINH leadership. Although he was released immediately, Berta was jailed until the following day, accused of "illegally carrying weapons" after a gun was found in their car by soldiers at a military checkpoint in Río Blanco. It is widely believed that the gun was planted to criminalise COPINH and delegitimise the struggle of the people in Río Blanco against the dam project. Thanks to huge support by national and international organisations – over 40 representatives



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were outside the courtroom during the hearing – on 13 June Berta Cáceres was granted a temporary stay in proceedings against her due to lack of evidence, with the version of events provided by the police (who had failed to investigate the alleged crime) and the army contradicting each other. However, the Public Prosecutor's Office (*Fiscalía*) succeeded in having the court's decision overturned on appeal.

The revival of this charge has been significant in the next set of proceedings against Berta Cáceres, who has now been accused, along with Tomás Gómez and Aureliano Molina, another member of the COPINH leadership, of land usurpation, damage to private property and coercion. Following the initial hearing, in La Esperanza, Intibucá, the judge issued a decision on 20 September sentencing Bertha Cáceres to prison pending trial, and Tomás Gómez and Aureliano Molina to alternative measures to prison – signing at a court every two weeks and a prohibition on visiting the dam construction site.

At this latest hearing, which a PROAH member attended as an observer, no evidence was provided linking the three leaders of COPINH to the damage at the dam site. The 'coercion' appears to consist of COPINH's support for the communities in the Rio Blanco region which, over the past six or seven years, have consistently opposed a range of concessions in *cabildos abiertos* (formal community debates). There was the suggestion during the hearing that COPINH had incited the people of Rio Blanco to damage the hydroelectric company's property – however, Berta argued that COPINH has always advocated peaceful protest, and has actually been praised by the authorities for seeking to promote dialogue between the state and the community. The 'usurpation' is assumed to refer to the road block preventing access to the dam site – organised by the community on its own ancestral land.

Víctor Fernández, COPINH's lawyer, has pointed out that the formal charge against the three issued by the Public Prosecutor's Office bears a remarkable

resemblance to the complaint lodged by DESA – the prosecution had reproduced it without, it appears, conducting its own investigation. It is obvious that the charges are spurious and designed to stifle legitimate protest – Amnesty International has stated that it will consider the three prisoners of conscience if they are imprisoned.

The treatment of Berta, sentenced to prison pending trial, contrasts starkly with that of the soldier accused of murdering Tomás García – released on bail. COPINH has lodged an appeal against these latest charges.



Víctor Fernández, COPINH's lawyer, has revealed that he could potentially face similar charges to those faced by the COPINH leadership – of 'incitement' for his support of the community of La Nueva Esperanza in its fight against mining, in his capacity as Coordinator of MADJ (Broad Movement for Dignity and Justice). The mining company, Minerales Victoria, has filed a complaint with the Public Prosecution Service apparently accusing the community of violating its rights, an extraordinary charge given the persecution suffered by the people of La Nueva Esperanza at the company's hands.

As well as the criminalisation of the leadership, Desiderio Méndez, a COPINH member and a key witness to Tomás García's murder, is now also facing criminal charges. He was taking part in the same march as Tomás and his son, and was near them when they were shot – his neck was grazed by one of the military's bullets. At 3 am on 5 September, policemen burst into the house in La Tejera, Rio Blanco, where he

was sleeping, firing shots and threatening the 14 members of the family, including 6 children. They stole belongings such as cell phones, and flashlights, and vandalised property, which include spilling the family's sacks of food, ruining it. Then, without an arrest warrant, they took Desiderio Méndez away, threatening to torture him so that "he would talk," and refusing to say where they were taking him. They held him for 24 hours, and charged him with allegedly having a gun in the house. It is significant that, of the 14 occupants of the house, only he was accused of possession of a gun, suggesting that he is being persecuted for his role as a witness.

The Honduran government is relying on megaprojects to balance its books, the clearest sign being the adoption on 22 July 2013 of the Law for the Promotion of Development and the Restructuring of the National Debt which encourages the selling off of national assets, including natural resources. Given that the government considers the stakes so high – and is prepared to use both the state security forces and a corrupt justice system to impose its will – this can only point to further persecution of the defenders of the environment unless there is a radical change in the direction and implementation of national policy. Many in Honduras and the international community consider that this and other crucial issues are at stake in the forthcoming November elections.

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Hitching Across Central America for ENCA

James Watson says a short goodbye: and gives us a last round-up of his low carbon trip visiting ENCA's projects in Central America

In September 2012, ENCA member James Watson embarked upon an epic journey from the UK to and around Central America where he worked on numerous projects run by ENCA's partner organisations in the region. It was 'epic' not only in its length of time, but also for the fact that he undertook the journey without flying. His blog entries have made fascinating reading and are all available on www.enca.org.uk/flightlesstravel.htm. Most ENCA members will probably already be familiar with the blog, but ENCA would like to thank James for raising sponsorship money for ENCA through his travels by producing a few extracts from his final blog entry. We urge everyone to visit and re-visit the total of 20 blog entries that he made.

I hope that my blog, or at least some parts of it, has been interesting to those who've read it! Travelling as a sponsored journey for ENCA – with an overall purpose of avoiding planes and with this blog to record the most interesting parts – has for me made the whole year a lot more interesting, and given it a sense of purpose. The most vivid memories have been from hitch-hiking and couchsurfing, travelling by cargo ship, working with the clinic in Nicaragua, and visiting all the ENCA partners to see their struggles around the environment and justice in Central America.

Across Europe and Turkey and much of Mexico, I hitch-hiked to get from A to B, and used Couchsurfing to find places to stay wherever I ended up. Couchsurfing is a free website or online community of people who advertise free bed space in their homes, for people to potentially stay over on their travels. Both involve throwing yourself on chance and the kindness of complete strangers, and for this reason both were incredible experiences for me. To be able to get hundreds of miles, across whole countries and continents, with no formal travel companies was amazing. Just the rush of gratefulness every single time someone picks you up – chooses to take the risk and help someone they've no knowledge of at all – opens you to the most stunning realisation that the world *is* full of good people.

Then, you arrive in a new place – you might have heard of it, or maybe it's lost in the back end of nowhere you'd ever imagined you'd visit – and, through Couchsurfing, meet another stranger who lets you sleep in their home for free! But more than that, with Couchsurfing you meet someone looking to welcome you as a new friend – and prepared to be an amazing local guide to teach a bit about the place you've found yourself in.

Coming back to Europe, I have just completed my second journey as a passenger on a cargo ship. Earlier articles cover the experience on the ship on the way out, and the all-important relative carbon-emissions caused by cargo ship travel as opposed to flying (the fundamental reasons why I chose to do the whole year's travel without planes). My return trip was 14 days, a little shorter than the outward journey, but even more enjoyable.

Within a day or two on the BF Ipanema, and for the whole of my return on the Schubert, the fear of isolation had given way to sheer awe at the huge, changing beauty of the ocean. On one occasion on the return trip I finally caught a shoal of dolphin playing around the ship, and the amazing uniqueness of experiences like that make the journey worth it. But even when only waves break the surface of the empty ocean, you can't help but get lost in its simple beauty and inconceivable vastness – this endless surface covers our planet and reminds you just how big Earth is, and how small and reliant we are on it.

Most important on a 2 week voyage though is to have something to do, and so I had armed myself with a computer full of downloaded books and films for both journeys. Between reading, staring at the sea, taking the sun (on

the Caribbean end of the journeys) and organising my thoughts from my travels, I found it extremely beneficial to have this empty time, remote from daily living, to fill with whatever thoughts I wanted.

The sheer diversity of people and social movements working together is amazing

The Clinica Xochil, Nicaragua

Having a chance to return to the clinic for 2 weeks at the end of my time in Central America was, it turned out, an essential part of my volunteering, that made the whole experience much more rewarding. When I arrived, the clinic was just in the process of moving site, to a much better building on the other side of El Viejo. This had been a priority I identified with the clinic's doctors back in January, so it was great to see this finally happen. Moreover, I found out on my return that some of the donor-relations I had been trying to build for the clinic had finally been paying off – a US organisation called Wisconsin Nicaragua Partnership had sent a huge donation of medical supplies and equipment, and they were to send a second one before I left. Then, we received a visitor from Norwich-El Viejo link, a UK based charity I had contacted in February.

Seeing all these changes, after the ground-work I had helped to lay earlier, was extremely gratifying. In these last 2 weeks I was able to use the connections and Spanish skills I had established to arrange a solid period of shadowing with the doctors in the government hospitals of the area. This rounded off the experiences. The entire period spent at the clinic has given me the best foundation in what medicine means in Central America.

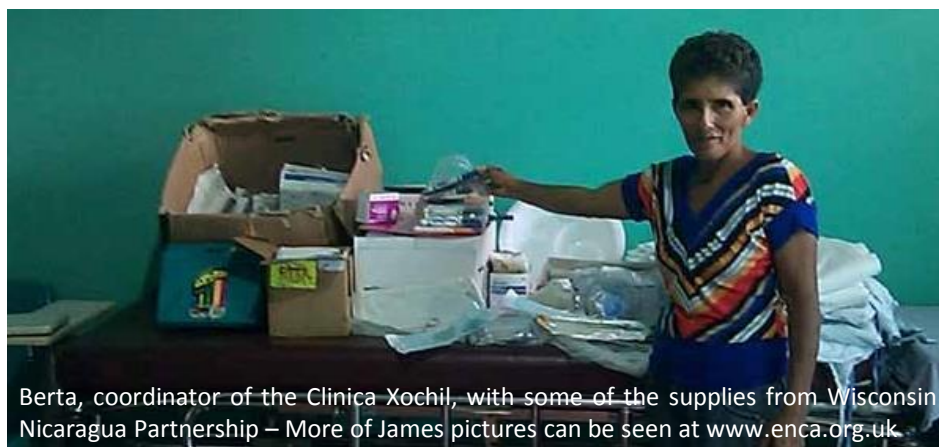
Getting Below the Surface of Central America with ENCA

The opportunities that ENCA's connections have given me while travelling through Central America – and even up into Mexico – made a huge difference to the depth of experience I was able to have travelling. I've been involved in ENCA since 2007 and already had some knowledge of the environmental and social problems of the region, but I learnt a huge amount this year about just how interconnected the issues in Central America are. Environmental issues tied to health problems abound across the region – chronic respiratory problems from firewood smoke, water contamination from ineffective latrines, deforestation leading to lack of clean water and cancers and birth-defects from agrochemicals, to name just a few. Behind all these problems lies the socio-economic disadvantage of the countries and marginalised people within them. And behind this run the channels of corruption and exploitation that maintain it – that concentrate what wealth there is in the country with tiny minorities with support from international trade and local politicians, and leave little extra for meaningful development for the impoverished majority. Countries where the environment is exploited by big businesses without any regard for the locals who rely on it for their survival, just as the scarcity of jobs

allows big business to exploit cheap labour with bare safety regulations.

But what really amazed me on this trip was how these common threads unite such a sheer diversity of different people and social movements there. Each of the organisations I visited showed me a completely different way of life, and each had their own struggles and ways of fighting – from the CMO in Nicaragua helping women organise small businesses to help themselves (see my article, p4-5 of ENCA newsletter 58 – May 2013), to the demonstration plots of MOPAWI and IPES bringing innovative agriculture to support marginalised farmers in Honduras and El Salvador. From, in Honduras, the dangerous social protest of COPINH and the international legal challenges of OFRANEH, all the way up to the outright rebellion and creation of completely autonomous spaces of the Zapatistas of Mexico (who are still – for their sheer determination of will not to be victims any more – the group that inspired me the most).

I hope my travels and blog have raised your interest in both Central America and the work of ENCA. If this article and trip have inspired you, it is possible to make a donation to support ENCA's work via our website www.enca.org.uk



Berta, coordinator of the Clinica Xochil, with some of the supplies from Wisconsin Nicaragua Partnership – More of James pictures can be seen at www.enca.org.uk



Marlin Mine, Guatemala

Mining News

Doug Specht examines the ups and downs of mining actions in Central America in the last quarter.

The last 4 months have seen many ups and downs in the struggles against large scale mineral extraction in Central America. As has been reported many times before in ENCA newsletters, the mining sector in Central America is responsible for major environmental and human rights abuses, and movements against the industry often face brutal and sometimes fatal oppression.

In Guatemala these struggles have led to some success in the last quarter. *Hudbay Minerals*, which has been at the centre of many articles in ENCA newsletters about their human rights and environmental abuses, will now face multiple lawsuits in Canada. The lawsuits relate to allegations of shootings, beatings murder and rapes carried out by the company’s security personnel at the Fenix mine. *Hudbay Minerals* has previously fought hard to have the case tried in Guatemala where it may have more easily been able to influence the outcome. The moving of the trial to Canada may set a new precedent that will help developing nations to bring Canadian mining companies to account.

Further good news from Guatemala. *Tahoe Resources’* Escobal mine licence has been challenged by the Guatemalan courts. The mine which is situated in San Rafael, Las Flores was granted a licence without the

\$1bn

The amount of compensation sought by *Infinito Gold* from the Costa Rican government

250

The number of objections to *Tahoe Resources’* Escobal Mine

2001

The year Costa Rica banned open-pit mining

75%

Percentage of world’s mining companies based in Canada

consideration of 250 oppositions filed against the project. *Tahoe Resources* has appealed the case, and the mining permits have not yet been revoked. The recognition by the Guatemalan courts, however, is an important step forward in addressing the objections to the mine and towards holding the Ministry of Energy and Mines to account over its concession granting policies.

Sadly news from Costa Rica is less cheerful. In 2011 Costa Rica took the bold move to ban open-pit mining throughout the country. While this step has been a great boon for the environment, it has caused a backlash from mining companies already invested in the country. As reported previously by ENCA, the Canadian mining company *Infinito Gold* has been perusing legal action against the Costa Rican government, after reportedly investing US\$92 million into the Las Crucitas concession located near the border with Nicaragua. After months of negotiations, the lawsuit against the government was made official on 4th October via the company’s local subsidiary *Industrias Infinito*. *Infinito Gold* now formally seeks US\$1bn in compensation. Hope may come in the form of irregularities at the inception of the mining permit. As *Infinito Gold* pursue their claim, seven Costa Rican government officials, including the former minister of environment, await trial over alleged ‘donations’ made by *Infinito Gold* just months before the original permit was granted. Former President Oscar Arias also faces investigation.

Interview with Hector Berríos

In September, ENCA member *Martin Mowforth* visited El Salvador and caught up with *Hector Berríos* of the National Roundtable Against Metal Mining in El Salvador, known simply as La Mesa. (See ENCA Newsletters 52, 53 and 56.) To keep our members updated on the campaigns of La Mesa, we include here some extracts from the interview with Hector.



MM: Can you describe the Mesa's current programmes?

HB: Well, first, a greeting to ENCA and its magazine – for us, it's very important. We believe that we've managed to get to this point thanks to international solidarity.

As regards your question, we have several axes of work. In El Salvador, one of these is to bring about a law which definitively prohibits mineral exploitation which today is threatening us via new public-private partnerships ... which are neoliberal economic programmes which have the tendency to privatise natural resources belonging to the people. That is one of the issues we are pursuing.

Another issue which we are promoting is raising the resistance to the level of the whole region. We have to articulate the resistance at national level, but also at the level of Central America. And there are some efforts which have been made internationally, such as the case of the Cerro Blanco mines in Jutiapa, Guatemala, which share a border with the western zone of El Salvador. We've managed to get this mining activity suspended through activism in both Guatemala and El Salvador. We've managed to get both the Presidents of Guatemala and El Salvador to issue a declaration about it, and we've demonstrated that scientifically mining activity will have a negative impact on the drainage and water flow through El Salvador

The source of the Lempa River basin is in our neighbouring country, not in ours. If mining activity is developed in our neighbouring countries, we will be seriously affected. So we are using community radio stations in Guatemala, Nicaragua and Honduras to cover many mining issues. [Mining] concessions have increased, so we need to increase awareness in our communities throughout Central America by means of the radio. That's one of our campaigns.

The National Roundtable Against Metal Mining has other efforts, other spaces of joint consideration with the people of Guatemala and Honduras. Specifically, we are looking at the ways in which we can ... provide proposals and alternatives which explain why these [mining] projects should not be allowed. To this end, we are working on a presentation to promote ... our proposal for a special law. ... This special law implies a prohibition or moratorium on mining exploitation.

Our country's environmental problems and vulnerability lead to stress – 90-100 per cent of our waters are contaminated. ... We believe that we must have a law here that definitively prohibits mining exploitation in the country, which guarantees the right to a future for our people, which guarantees the right to health, to food sovereignty, the human right to water. And that will start to be achieved in part through a legal framework which

prohibits mining for a period and gives our people the chance to seek to preserve the environment.

Another issue which we are discussing is that of international intervention, and this implies that whatever the level of the claim made by the company internationally and imposed on El Salvador – and this is millions – it must not be surrendered. ... The money could be invested in health, in agricultural projects for our people. So we are currently suggesting that El Salvador is a sovereign state which must not submit itself to this type of arbitration conducted through the free trade treaties which are instruments of the World Bank where the only consideration is the economy. We are seeing the transnational companies profiting without seeing their impact on human rights. ... We believe that there are already a number of countries in the South which have begun to acknowledge this – that it [The World Bank's International Court for the Settlement of Investment Disputes] is a legal instrument which responds only to the transnational corporations.

So, at the moment our struggle has managed to prohibit mining exploitation, but we believe that President Funes has an idea to approve a law which prohibits mining. Well, not all the candidates for the 2014 presidential election are talking about this, so we must start raising awareness in the population.



El Gran Canal: Bringing Nicaragua to the world

As Nicaragua signs a deal with HKND, *Amy Haworth Johns* examines the true costs of developing El Gran Canal.

In June 2013, Nicaragua granted the Chinese construction company HKND Group exclusive rights to build the greatest feat of engineering Nicaragua will ever have seen: a waterway to rival the Panama Canal. Passed through government in a 2-day “hurried and breathless” session, the construction is proposed to drastically reduce shipping routes between US and Asia and put Nicaragua onto the global shipping stage.

A second canal in Central America has been a dream of engineers; and as global shipping trade continues to increase, the desire for a shorter route from North America to Asia has reignited this dream. According to Dr Paul Oquist (responsible for National Policies and Plans under the Sandinistas), the canal will cut the journey time between China and Europe from 18 to 11 days shaving off 800 km from trips which previously went through Panama. Its construction is also seen as a Sandinista / Ortega legacy – to eradicate poverty in Nicaragua through its delivery of 10 - 15% growth over the next five years. Without its construction, growth is predicted to be half of this figure and Nicaragua will continue to be dependent on foreign aid – another restriction Ortega is keen to be free of. The location of a canal to rival Panama has always been Nicaragua due to the size and location of Lake Nicaragua which will form a large section of the canal. Until now projects have been abandoned due to the impossible landscape; but in June 2013, the \$40bn agreement granted HKND Group a 50 year commission to design, build and manage the canal megaproject.

HKND Group

The Hong Kong Nicaragua Development Group (HKND Group) is headed by the “secretive” Chinese businessman Wang Jing (41) who also heads Beijing-based Xeiwin Telecoms which, in 2012, signed a \$300 million telecommunications deal in Nicaragua. Upon hearing of historical dreams of breaking Panama’s monopoly on global shipping, Jing was enthused by the possibility of building a canal joining Nicaragua’s Atlantic and Pacific coasts. The total project approved by the newly passed ‘Law 840’ includes the construction of the canal, two deep-water ports, an international airport (in Marrito), an additional ‘dry canal’ freight railroad, a series of Free-Trade Zones (FTZ), and an oil pipeline. It is indeed a grandiose proposal, which Daniel Ortega promises will double the GDP and triple employment by 2018. The rapidity of the decision and grounds on which the agreement was made, however, have led to outrage as it is feared that the price to be paid by Nicaragua is astronomical.

Impacts

Law 840 or ‘the Canal Agreement’ was passed through government by President Ortega with a vote of 61 to 35. Tension levels were revealed when Xochilt Ocampo, the only Sandinista lawmaker who failed to support the law, was removed from office ten days later without explanation. Since the clauses of the agreement have been publicly revealed, national and international communities are growing more concerned with the socio-economic,

political, environmental and developmental implications of this megaproject. Opposing Liberal Party congressman Luis Callejas said his party fears the law because it “violates constitutional guarantees to private property, natural resources and indigenous lands ... the canal will carve up Nicaragua and leave our national sovereignty in pieces.”

Firstly, HKND’s offer to fund the canal megaproject was agreed with repeal of laws which defend the country’s “natural resources and all bodies of water” including Lake Nicaragua, its tributaries, all drinking water and sanitation. In doing so, the HKND Group has been granted “access to and navigation rights on rivers, lakes, oceans and other bodies of water in Nicaragua.”

The second issue is that the 50 year rights for HKND to build the canal are not currently tied to a legally defined route. Numerous routes (see Figure 1) have been suggested and all will have serious impacts upon the environment and the people who live there. The canal aims to accommodate vessels of more than 60m in width and 22m in depth which will need vast areas of clearance in forested areas populated by rural indigenous communities. There is also scepticism at the suggested increase of employment. When questioned on the job distribution, Jing revealed that overseas construction companies will be brought in as the “Nicaragua [construction sector] has no technical capacity”. While employment will grow in secondary jobs and labour, the safety

and security of such jobs is a cause for concern.

The lack of a confirmed route or the location of accompanying airports, seaports, pipelines and FTZs will jeopardise future investment as it will be uncertain that sites will not be expropriated once HKND finalises the route (at a price determined by HKND). Figure 1 shows six of the proposed routes, all running through Lake Nicaragua and cutting across the 'ecological corridor' of eastern Nicaragua.



Figure 1.

The third equally, if not more, damaging clause is the legal documentation created by HKND which protects this agreement for 50 years (with possibility for extension to 100) from governmental changes and also removes the Nicaraguan government's right to sue HKND in national or international law courts for any environmental damage.

Alongside its political implications and sovereignty-damaging clauses, the environmental impacts will be huge. The favoured proposed route (Figure 2) has a suggested port in the Pacific coast port of Brito; the first stage of the canal will be cut linking this to Lake Nicaragua where vessels will cross the lake to Morrito whence the canal will be cut through over 150km to the port of Bluefields across heavily forested land which is home to numerous rural, indigenous communities.

At 8,254 sq km, Lake Nicaragua is the biggest freshwater lake in Central America and the Isla de Ometepe is a popular tourist hotspot with thousands of people visiting its two volcanoes. Recognised as a symbol of national identity and pride, the fear is that the lake will be rendered unrecognisable under the new laws, as they grant HKND the right to "extend, expand, dredge, divert or reduce" any body of water. As a source of drinking water, the construction process and presence of freight vessels will leave the water undrinkable.

Any proposed route will also cut through the 'Nicaraguan ecological corridor' which runs between the lakes and the Caribbean coast. This corridor provides habitats for fragile species such as jaguars, pumas, tapir, and many species unique to this area. The forested area is also inhabited by numerous indigenous communities including the Rama people, who live in rural subsistence communities. Until recently, the communities along proposed routes have received no consultation or warning of the construction which will cut through land they have used for generations. When questioned, HKND assured that

compensation will be granted to all landowners who will have to be relocated; however this project talks about expropriation of communal territories of the indigenous population which affects the existence and rights of the indigenous people. Indigenous Congressman Brooklyn Rivera stated "We can't approve of this concession without information about it, and this law can't substitute the legally established rights of the indigenous under Law 445."

As environmental assessments are underway, the construction of the Grand Inter-Oceanic Canal is becoming more realistic every day. With a government desperate to be independent from foreign aid and to eradicate poverty, the growth needed to sustain such a boost could only be achieved through a project such as this. Nevertheless, when an entire country's water resources and human and environmental rights are the cost, we have to ask if Nicaragua will follow the Chinese path of stable population but environmental disaster?

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Figure 2.



Deaths from kidney disease linked to use of toxic pesticides

As new legislation on the use of pesticides reaches the Salvadoran Legislative Assembly, *Martin Mowforth* explores their link to kidney disease in Central America.

For the last two years, communities in and around sugar cane plantations in Nicaragua and El Salvador have suffered an abnormally high rate of kidney disease. What was at first labeled as a mystery disease is now being firmly linked to the use of toxic heavy metals contained in pesticides used in the cane fields. Worldwide the disease has killed thousands in Sri Lanka, India and Central America. Hit particularly hard has been the Pacific coastal zone of El Salvador.

For much of August, *La Prensa Gráfica* reported on El Salvador's catastrophically high levels of kidney disease. The news stories in *La Prensa* have primarily centered on the municipality of San Luis Talpa, located an hour east of El Salvador's Bajo Lempa region, which since the beginning of this year reports nearly 60 deaths as a result of kidney failure. Soil and water-quality tests undertaken by the regional Institute of Legal Medicine (the National Forensics Institute) confirmed the presence of contaminants in San Luis Talpa.

San Luis Talpa Mayor Salvador Menéndez states that an average of eight out of every ten families has a member suffering from kidney disease. "I'm not asking for anything drastic," said Menéndez, "I'm just asking for help for my constituents." A 2009 study indicates that 18% of workers in the nearby Bajo Lempa region suffer from chronic kidney disease. Kidney failure is also currently the cause of admissions at Rosales National Hospital, and is the

main cause of death among men nationwide.

The nearby Bajo Lempa region has historically been an area of high agricultural production, particularly of cotton, and more recently, of sugar cane. Cotton cultivation requires use of heavy pesticides, and many that have been used in El Salvador are highly toxic and heavily regulated or banned internationally. In addition to pesticide contamination in the soil due to agricultural production in neighboring regions, Menéndez also cites the presence of 19 tons of an improperly-stored pesticide, Toxafeno, at a former chemical plant as a major contributing factor to his population's ill health.

Environmental tests of soil and water samples in Ciudad Romero, a village heavily affected by chronic kidney disease (CKD), found the presence of high levels of cadmium and arsenic, heavy metals toxic to the kidneys. Among a sample of 42 residents of Ciudad Romero who suffer from CKD, all reported applying pesticides without protective equipment. Dra María Isabel Rodríguez, El Salvador's health minister, described it as "a disease of poor people ... a disease of people who work in the fields and have very bad living conditions."

Though eager to sensationalize the deaths, major news outlets paid much less attention to a renewed effort to introduce a pesticide regulation bill at the National Assembly by the Ministry of Health. On September 6, however,

deputies in the Legislative Assembly from all parties except ARENA banned 53 active pesticide ingredients. The ingredients must be taken off the market in a set period of time, and importers must ensure that their clients understand how to use permitted pesticides safely.

Alfredo Cristiani, president of the right-wing National Republican Alliance (ARENA), is one of El Salvador's main pesticide importers. Both ARENA and CAMAGRO, the Farming and Agribusiness Chamber of El Salvador, insist that there is no conclusive evidence linking pesticide usage with kidney disease. While CAMAGRO maintains that the ruling will negatively affect crop production, those most directly affected by kidney disease celebrate this positive step taken towards addressing El Salvador's massive health crisis.

Chronic kidney disease and associated risk factors in the Bajo Lempa region of El Salvador: Nefrolempa study, 2009, Orantes C, Herrera R, Almaguer M, Brizuela E, Hernández C, Bayarre H, Amaya J, Calero D, Orellana P, Colindres R, Velázquez M, Núñez S, Contreras V, Castro B. Salvadoran National Health Institute, San Salvador, El Salvador.

Rodríguez quoted by Sasha Chavkin (29 April 2013) 'New urgency targets mysterious kidney disease in Central America', www.publicintegrity.org

Other sources:

CISPES Update, September 5, 2013.

Laura Bernal (9 September 2013) 'Arzobispo aplaude prohibición de 53 agroquímicos por casos de IRC', *Diario CoLatino*, El Salvador. Voices From El Salvador, 19 September 2013.

Hydropower projects threaten communities.

Anthropologist and resident of Longo Maï, *Jiri Spendlingwimmer*, outlines the projects threatening yet another community. In this case the community is Longo Maï in the south of Costa Rica.



The hydropower projects Monteverde 1 (2800 KW) and Monteverde 2 (4966 KW) which are located in the cantons of Buenos Aires and Pérez Zeledón are planned to exploit the rushing waters of Rio Sonador and Rio Convento.

The companies which are planning to develop these projects claim to produce "clean energy" based on renewable resources. Yet in fact these projects will cause lots of negative consequences for the communities of Cristo Rey, Longo Maï and Convento and their rich tropical environment.

Recently I participated in the public hearing of the hydropower project Monteverde 2. If the project is realised, our beautiful mountain Rio Convento will be reduced to at best 10% of its current flow for some 5 km, as the rest of the water would be diverted into a reservoir and then through a pipe to the powerhouse.

One effect of this form of producing electricity using small tropical mountain streams like Rio Convento and Rio Sonador would be that in the dry season the river would be transformed into a gully whose water would probably be absorbed by the soil affecting various communities downstream as a result.

The principle impacts for the communities of Cristo Rey, Longo Maï and Convento would include:

Impact on the Refugio Nacional de Vida Silvestre Longo Maï (Nature Reserve of Longo Maï) of 452 ha: In the forests on both banks of Rio Convento and Rio Sonador there will be effects on the flora and fauna, particularly water dwelling animals, and also on the water resources. Furthermore the ecosystem and the biodiversity of the protected natural area will be damaged.

The companies claim these are "clean energy" projects

Impact on the water consumed by humans: Various rural water supply systems would in all likelihood be very seriously affected and with them hundreds of users. Not only the quantity but also the quality of water would deteriorate dramatically.

Impact on agriculture and livestock: About eighty smallholders would be deprived of their right to use the water

of Rio Convento and Rio Sonador for agricultural and livestock purposes.

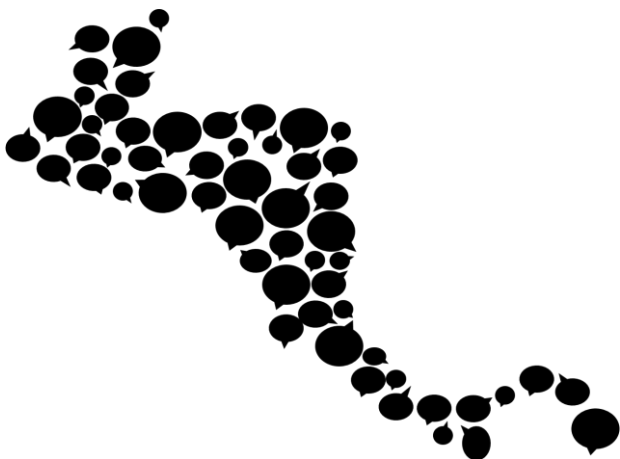
Impact on tourism: For the above reasons there would be a very negative impact on the foreign tourism of the farmer community of Longo Maï (www.sonador.info), which is a consolidated model of rural community tourism and has won the international TODO-award for Socially Responsible Tourism in Berlin, Germany. Rio Convento and Rio Sonador are two of its main natural attractions.

Other impacts constitute projects of fish farming which use the waters of Rio Convento and Rio Sonador for their activity.

The hydroelectric projects of Monteverde 1 and Monteverde 2 are both run by the same private company where few are those who would benefit from the generation of electricity, while the losers would be many.

This article was published in "La Nacion" of Costa Rica in April 2013 and has been translated to English, shortened and adapted to the perspective of European readers by students visiting Longo Maï.

www.enca.org.uk



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El Salvador Election Observation with ENCA and the CIS

At each election in El Salvador, the CIS (Centro de Intercambio y Solidaridad / Exchange and Solidarity Centre) serves as one of the Election Observer Delegations. Despite its opposition to the Salvadoran oligarchy whose power is enforced by the country's armed forces, it is an accredited and respected election observer organisation, and its reports have always been adjudged objective and fair.

The next elections in El Salvador are to be held on February 2nd 2014. These are Presidential elections and the CIS is again running an observer delegation. In the past, CIS observer delegations have numbered up to almost 300 people, the majority being US citizens, but always including a few Brits and other nationalities. You do not necessarily need Spanish – although it is always an asset. The minimum time commitment required is just over two weeks which includes the training programme, the election monitoring and election report time. There are other categories of volunteers, for which Spanish is a requirement and

the time commitment much greater. For those who can afford the time and the cost, it is a fantastic learning experience.

Several members of ENCA are already keen to participate in the election observing. Leslie Schuld, the Director of the CIS, has agreed that ENCA will serve as the UK coordinating body for observer volunteers, although all applications to join the delegation will be made individually to the CIS. More details of this process are given on the CIS website, www.cis-elsalvador.org. If, however, you are interested in becoming a member of the election observer delegation, ENCA would be grateful if, as well as following the procedure outlined in the CIS website, you could also inform Martin Mowforth of ENCA. Martin will also provide more details of what you can expect in the way of travel, accommodation and the election process, and if you would like to discuss the possibility with him, you can email him (mmowforth@plymouth.ac.uk) or ring him on 01822 617504.

International Communications and Volunteer Programme Co-ordinator with The Permaculture Institute of El Salvador (IPES)

IPES is a grassroots non-government organisation of subsistence farmers who practice permaculture for the development of a healthier, wiser and more ecologically sustainable society using the Farmer-to-Farmer methodology. They focus on natural farming and living, food security, capacity and leadership building, and developing stronger communities and local economies.

This is an unpaid internship for which IPES will provide free accommodation. As International Communications and Volunteer Programme Coordinator, you will live on IPES' permaculture demonstration site, 20 minutes outside the old colonial town of Suchitoto, El Salvador. The responsibilities include managing and improving IPES' international and online presence, responding to all International enquiries, providing on-site support to volunteers and working on the development of our permaculture demonstration site. IPES is looking for someone with excellent oral Spanish who can commit to one year.

For more information, please email
Maia Sparrow –
volunteer@permacultura.com.sv

Looking for the contact information?
**As part of our new look we have
moved it to page one.**