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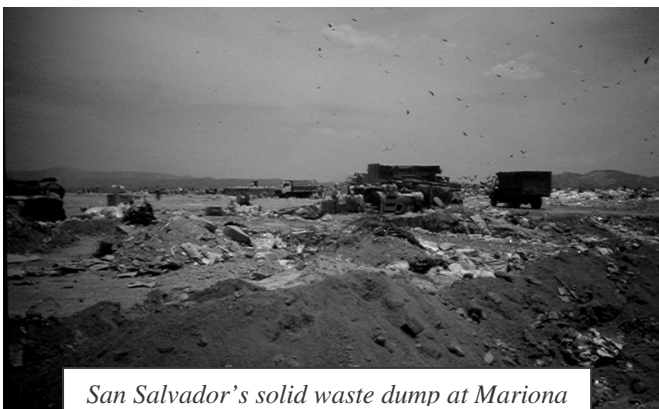
EL SALVADOR'S STATE OF THE ENVIRONMENT ADDRESS

In January this year, El Salvador's President Tony Saca delivered his state of the country address at the half way stage of his term of office. Our colleagues in UNES (Salvadoran Ecological Unit) sent him the following response.

Dear President Saca,

On behalf of all who form part of the Salvadoran Ecological Unit (UNES), please receive our cordial and environmental greetings.

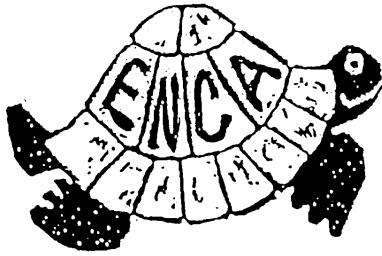
Recently we have received your message regarding the state of our country at the half way stage of your presidential term of office. We wish to draw your attention to a problem which does not hold any importance in your report – the serious socio-environmental crisis in which we currently live.



San Salvador's solid waste dump at Mariona

On reaching the half-way stage of your presidential mandate, we view with concern the lack of any political will to confront the accelerating socio-environmental crisis, persistent environmental impunity, the squandering of the country's natural resources, and the absence of appropriate policies to protect the environment. Although these problems have been inherited from previous governments, we see no signs of correction or change. Today top officials in your cabinet

Continued on page 2



We begin this newsletter by airing the views of some of our partner organisations in Central America. Our circulation is not large within the UK, but this is a role we are more than happy to fulfill for the many Central American grassroots socio-environmental organisations with which we link. To any similar groups in the region who receive our newsletter, we would also be very pleased to receive your own newsletters, and if you have issues and campaigns which you wish to publicise, please let us know and we shall do whatever we can to help despite our small

circulation and despite the infrequency of our newsletters.

The remainder of the issue focuses firstly on biofuel production in Central America and its implications and secondly on the use of pesticides in plantation agriculture in the region. Both of these issues represent, we believe, inappropriate forms of development for the region.

... continued from page 1

are self-confessed violators of the Law of the Environment.

Today El Salvador is much more vulnerable than it was 17 years ago, and it has overstepped the limits of sustainability and environmental viability: the causes of our water problems have become more critical and there appear to be no standards by which we can promote its sustainable and integrated management; in Central America we are champions for our high rates of deforestation; our cities and infrastructure megaprojects grow in disorderly fashion, and there are no plans and no system for land tenancy; the energy crisis continues to deepen and thought is given only to its supply and to the construction of more dams on our moribund rivers and more thermo-electric plants without any significant effort given to non-polluting energy. Eight years after the Law of the Environment declared a legal end to open air landfill dumps, they continue to be used and are one of the major sanitary problems of the cities.

Similarly, we find the same situation relating to governmental management of atmospheric pollution, biodiversity protection, and the approach to global environmental problems. Climate change, which is the concern of almost all governments in the world, does not appear on the government's agenda in El Salvador.

Given this lack of interest in facing up to these problems, last December Carlos Guerrero was named as the new Minister of the Environment in place of Hugo Barrera. The new minister comes from the ministerial team of the Ministry of Public Works, which is one of the institutions most responsible for the destruction of natural resources and which has intentionally violated the Law of the Environment. Moreover, the new minister has no professional training in any way linked with the environment – and for this he has been denounced by professional associations.

Dear President Saca: given all the above, and making use of our constitutional right to petition – according to Article 18 of the Constitution – UNES demands that you give immediate attention to the serious environmental crisis through which we are living. We consider that it is necessary to change the approach of your government on environmental matters by adopting sustainable policies of environmental protection, beginning with the management of water resources, environmental control of land, protection of the biological diversity that remains, and solutions to urban ecological problems, amongst others.

All these issues are new and unknown for the new minister of the MARN [Ministry of the Environment and Natural Resources], and the first step on this colossal national task should be the immediate dismissal of Carlos Guerrero.

Our organisation reiterates to you our commitment to continue working towards the country's socio-environmental sustainability. Already with other social organisations on other public occasions we have presented to the Legislative Assembly project proposals relating to water management, biosecurity, solid waste management, and others. Likewise, we have been working with various municipal authorities on environmental issues.

We hope that our petition will be considered. Any communication relating to this letter should be addressed to our offices.

Sincerely,

Angel María Ibarra Turcios
Mauricio Sermeño Palacios
(On behalf of UNES)

San Salvador, 24.01.07



THE STATE OF THE HONDURAN ENVIRONMENT

A similar open letter – actually a press release – from a group of Honduran organisations was also issued earlier this year, and we present this below.

The ever increasing rate of illegal timber felling in Honduras, linked with acts of corruption in the administration of the forestry resource, has prompted environmental organisations, human rights organisations and other social sectors to demand, over the last seven years, the approval of a new legal framework to promote a genuine environmental justice through institutional reform and a transparent, sustainable and balanced management of our natural resources and biodiversity.

The current National Congress of the Republic has made a public commitment this year to approve the new Forestry Law, and in an act of genuine political will in January 2007 approved seven articles of the Law. Nevertheless, the process has been suspended for the last two months awaiting the opinion of the Executive Authority on the demise of COHDEFOR [The Honduran Forestry Development Corporation] and the creation of the new (replacement) institution.

Despite the fact that COHDEFOR is the governmental body responsible for the administration and management of our forests, the institution has failed to manage 87 per cent of the national territory which is classed as natural forest, and even worse than this, it has facilitated the destruction of over a half of this amount.

To continue with the current administration would only lead us into a situation in which COHDEFOR would continue with its irrational sale of our woodland in order to allow it to continue operating institutionally and to favour the interests of particular groups which have traditionally accrued fortunes to the detriment of the fundamental rights of rural communities in the country.

The creation of a new institution presents a key opportunity for woodland areas to recuperate and offers the potential to generate wealth. It would allow for rational and sustainable exploitation of woodland allowing poverty

alleviation and for promoting the serious application of citizen power with genuine participation from communities through afforestation and reforestation programmes and the exercise of law.

It is for this reason that the participating organisations in this press conference demand that the President of the Republic urgently approves the petition to the National Congress (19.01.07) for the dissolution of COHDEFOR and the creation of a new institution.

Whilst the Executive continues to abstain from approving the process of discussion and approval of the Law, the situation will remain stalled to the benefit of the looters of the woodland and the traffickers of power. Consequently, it is essential that the Executive honours its promise to protect the woodland and urgently approves the Law so that the National

Congress immediately takes up discussion again of the new Law of Forestry, Protected Areas and Wildlife, as already agreed with different sectors of society.

Tegucigalpa, 21.03.07.

Signed:

Coalition for Environmental Justice
Environmental Movement of Olancho (MAO)
COCOCH
Popular Block
Democracy Without Borders Foundation
MOPAWI (Pawisa Aspika, Mosquitia)
Juticalpa Caritas, Olancho
Green Alliance
Federation of Pech Tribes (FETRIPH)
Association for a More Just Society (ASJ)
Honduran Association of Environmental and
Agroforestry Journalists (AHPAAF)
Special Attorney for the Environment (FEMA)
FINZMOS
Confederation of Indigenous Peoples of Honduras
(CONPAH)

ENCA normally concentrates its focus and its articles on the seven countries of Central America, excluding Mexico. Just occasionally, however, we include an article which whilst dealing with Mexico also covers matters that are particularly relevant to the seven countries of Central America. The significance of the effects of NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) on Mexico will not be lost on all those who have followed the negotiations and recent signing of the Central American version (DR-CAFTA) of this slanted treaty.

MEXICO: WILL BIOFUELS MEAN THE END OF TORTILLAS?

By Eric Holt-Gimenez, Food First

Now that self sufficiency in maize production has been totally destroyed in Mexico, with the main part of the rural labour force working 'on the other side' in slaughterhouses or farms which employ migrants and in poorly-paid industries, the price of maize is going up. Why? The problems generated by the expansion of our food system, dominated by transnational corporations, affect first and foremost poor people - as much in the US as in other countries. The North American media has finally started to talk about the price hikes of tortillas in Mexico ('Nothing flat about tortilla prices', San Francisco Chronicle, 13/01/07). This problem affects not only Mexico, whose citizens each eat an average of 10 tortillas per day, but also the US. How? Let's take a look back into the past.

In the 1980s Mexico was still self-sufficient in maize production, a staple food. At the beginning of 1990 then president Carlos Salinas de Gortieri decided to cosy up with the US by implementing the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) before the scheduled date. He loosened import controls on US maize and immediately imports jumped from 396,000 to 4,850,000 metric tons, swamping the Mexican market with US maize, subsidized and tax free.

Mexican farmers, who had been losing government support and services since 1982 due to the structural adjustment policies of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, did not have the ability to compete with this cheaper maize sold at a price below their cost of production. Gringo maize quickly

ENCA Newsletter, June 2007, p.4

replaced Mexican maize in the tortilla market. In fact, the tortilla market also consolidated under the control of GRUMA, a gigantic Mexican consortium which processes the maize kernels.

In the first year after NAFTA more than 700,000 Mexicans migrated to their northern neighbour looking for work; many of them were farmers or their children old enough to work. From 1994 to 2004, 1.3 million *campesinos* went bankrupt. After 13 years of NAFTA, one million immigrants from Mexico and Central America arrive each year in the US.

Another issue behind the maize price hikes is that of the corporations Archer Daniels Midlands (ADM), Cargill and Monsanto expanding into the market for ethanol from maize. More agricultural land is dedicated to yellow maize (for ethanol) and less to white maize (for flour), pushing up yet further the price for maize dough and tortillas. Some defenders of rural areas consider this a “positive development”. It's been welcomed by some maize growers in the US Midwest along with large farms in Sinaloa. Is it possible the Mexican *campesinos* could go back to producing maize, and that Mexico again could wield sovereignty over its food security? There is an unequivocal answer: it depends.

It depends on how effective agribusiness is in draining off the unexpected earnings of US farmers. The three big corporations are forging their new empire: genetic engineering-processing and transport, an alliance which will chain together production, processing and the sale of ethanol. ADM is already gobbling up co-operatives which are producing biofuels. Not

one of these companies has shared its profits with farmers. On the contrary, Monsanto is taking US farmers to court for more than US\$15 million to safeguard its seed. And the three companies have been implicated in illegal activities. It is difficult to believe that farmers will be the beneficiaries when this powerful trio controls GM seeds, the processing technology and the transport of maize and biofuels.

It will depend whether Mexico follows current trends elsewhere in Latin America in which agribusiness rapidly substitutes food with production of biofuels, displacing small-scale farmers and separating them from their land and from food. It depends whether the Mexican monopolies which own the maize dough industry are decentralised. It depends whether the *campesinos* are given support to go back to the countryside and provided with credit, agricultural assistance and security in the market so that they can return to producing maize.

Lester Brown, who works with Worldwatch, recently pointed out that biofuels will make food prices so expensive that the poor will not be able to eat and hunger will expand (‘Ethanol could provoke global hunger’, Fortune, 21/08/06). The leap in the price of tortillas could be the first indicator of this prediction.

It is true that an increase in the price of maize could help to revitalise rural communities in the US and Mexico, but only if structural changes are implemented which guarantee that the burgeoning biofuels industry does not squeeze out either farmers or the production of food. Otherwise, this will only lead to more hunger.

This article was translated from UNES' magazine Ecotopia 176, Feb. 2007.

Note: In April this year, the UN reported that hundreds of thousands of people in drought-prone areas of Guatemala could face a hunger crisis if the price of corn continues to rise. Mesoamerica reported in May that “as world corn prices continue to soar due to the recent push for ethanol production, the main staple of the Guatemalan diet is reaching costs that are prohibitive to most of its citizens. According to the UN, children under five in Guatemala are chronically malnourished. This is the highest rate in the western hemisphere and the sixth highest in the world. The growing demand for ethanol is partly to blame for the danger. The ‘environmentally-friendly’ fuel promoted by the US government as a way to reduce oil imports has pushed international corn prices to near-ten year highs.”

Our next two articles continue with the issue of the encroachment of biofuel crops into the agriculture of Central America for the sake of carbon offsetting and carbon emissions trading, and of course for the sake of allowing the G8 polluting nations to continue in their polluting ways without making any major changes to their reliance on fossil fuels. The implications for food security and levels of poverty and hunger in the region do not look promising. For those more concerned with turning a profit, however, the prospects look brighter.

Carbon Is the Biz

By Alberto Mendoza

SAN SALVADOR, Oct 2006 (IPS) - El Salvador is studying the Kyoto Protocol carefully, not because it has to cut its emissions of the greenhouse gases that cause global warming, but because this international agreement opens a way to earn profits and encourages investment for development.

The treaty on climate change provides a Clean Development Mechanism (CDM), which allows rich countries - the only ones obliged by the treaty to reduce their emissions - to implement projects in developing countries, such as afforestation or reforestation, or to finance activities that reduce global emissions of greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide (CO₂), which are mostly released by burning oil, coal and gas. There is also provision for emissions trading, which allows the states party to the Protocol to sell coupons (certified emissions reductions) for their extra savings in greenhouse gas emissions below their assigned quota, to other countries whose gas emissions exceed their assigned targets and have not been able to reduce them to the required levels.

The Salvadoran Sugar Company (CASSA) began to produce electricity in 2002 from sugar cane waste, and this is fed into the national energy grid. Electricity is generated in this way during the annual 5 month cane harvest. Claudia Figueroa, the company's environmental manager, said that old sugar mills were

replaced in 2006 by less wasteful electric mills. Thanks to this, they have registered with the CDM to offer for sale 89,000 carbon units. Each unit represents the equivalent of one metric ton of CO₂ that has not been emitted, and sells for between \$6 and \$10. Japan has already expressed an interest in buying them. In addition, the company imports hydrated ethanol from Brazil and processes it for export to the US as a clean transport fuel. According to Figueroa, ethanol "is a business opportunity with great prospects."

The Kyoto Protocol stipulates that industrialised countries that have ratified it must cut their greenhouse gas emissions, for the period 2008-2012, to 5.2 percent below 1990 levels. The Protocol was adopted in 1997, but did not enter into force until 2005, when it was ratified by 55 industrialised countries, responsible for 55 percent of total emissions. The United States refused to ratify the Protocol on the grounds that it would harm its economy.

Mauricio Ayala, coordinator of the clean development division of the Ministry of the Environment and Natural

Resources, said that El Salvador has two other projects registered within the CDM framework.

The first involves covering over the Nejapa rubbish dump [photographed on page 1 of this newsletter], located in the metropolitan area of San Salvador, and using the methane gas it produces to generate electricity. Between 1999 and 2005, 2.7 million tons of solid waste were deposited there. The proposal submitted estimates that using the methane in this way would eliminate 1.19 million tons of carbon dioxide in seven years, and 60,000 barrels of oil would be saved p.a.. Jobs would also be created, and the project would be an example for similar efforts elsewhere in Central America. The initiative is backed by the Canadian International Development Agency.

The second ongoing project aims at expanding the geothermal power plant at Berlín, in the eastern province of Usulután. The plant, which began to operate in 1992, uses heat from the depths of the earth to generate electricity. With the proposed expansion, a

reduction of close to 1.3 million tons of carbon dioxide emissions is expected over the next seven years. The private LaGeo company runs the plant, and the expansion project is backed by the Netherlands and the Andean Development Corporation. According to the Ministry of Economy, 14.6% of electricity in El Salvador is generated by geothermal plants, 38.9% by hydroelectric power stations, and 46.5% by thermal generating stations, the most polluting variety because they burn fossil fuels.

Other pilot projects to develop renewable energy are being carried out in El Salvador, in partnership with the Energy and Environment Partnership with Central America (EEP), which was created at the initiative of the World Summit on Sustainable Development in South Africa in 2002. "Energy is an important factor in development, as no community can develop without it," said María Eugenia Salaverría, El Salvador's representative on the EEP. "In the rural environment, energy can relieve poverty, because renewable sources can be productive as well," she

added.

In August, the EEP installed a water pump which uses solar energy to supply 300 low-income families with drinking water in the community of Areneras, in the southern province of Sonsonate. The idea is not a new one. Tecnosolar, the only company devoted entirely to solar energy, has been installing solar-powered electricity generators in rural communities for years, filling orders from different non-governmental organisations.

The administration of incumbent President Antonio Saca, of the rightwing Nationalist Republican Alliance, also intends to extend the electricity supply in rural areas using solar energy. Official statistics indicate that about 30% of the population lacks electricity. The government plan began in November 2005, in the communities of Las Flores and Cerro Alto in Sonsonate, where 70 families are supplied with electricity by solar cells installed on their houses.

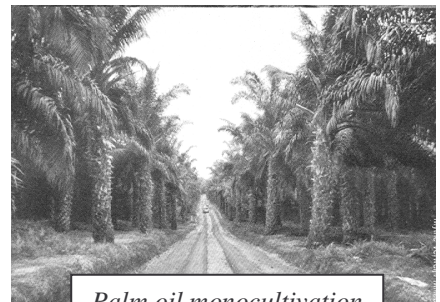
Each family pays \$3.50 a month for equipment maintenance and a repairs fund, and they are able to connect two or three light bulbs, a black and white TV set, a radio and, on a sunny day, some other low-power appliance. However, so far the installations are inadequate for a family to be able to use the energy for productive ends, such as a refrigerator to preserve and sell foods, or a sewing machine.

But in wealthy neighbourhoods in San Salvador, solar energy is far from a viable proposition. Arturo Solano, the founder of Tecnosolar, said that solar panels to supply the electricity consumed by an upper middle class family, with all its regular comforts, would cost between \$50,000 and \$100,000. Solano said that El Salvador urgently needs new legislation to oblige electricity distribution companies to buy the energy generated by private solar panels installed, say, on the roof of a house, at a fair price. "That," he said, "would be good business."

BIO-DIESEL AND BIO-ETHANOL DEVELOPMENTS

By Ben Gregory

"If palm oil, Mr. President, is your pilot megaproject, it will not be in our ethnic territories. Worse yet, if it were, it would bring with it grave environmental, social, and cultural damages. This we can affirm based on having lived with the palm tree monoculture from the late '70s to the present, in other words, for more than 25 years, suffering all the while the impacts of 20,000 hectares of a crop forced upon us 'deep inside this plantation, comrade', which continues to violently expand further into our collective territory." (1)



Palm oil monocultivation

These words could easily have been written by the indigenous communities on Nicaragua's Caribbean Coast. In fact, they come from a letter written on behalf of Colombia's Afro-Colombian communities, where both

bio-diesel and bio-ethanol are being heavily promoted by the Colombian government. The country is already the fourth biggest producer of palm oil in the world, and the largest in Latin America, with 300,000 ha. under African Palm.

I first heard about African Palm in the mid-eighties. A voluntary worker in Ecuador spoke to our local Latin America solidarity group. During his talk there was a throwaway remark about how big oil companies were looking to buy large tracts of land to grow African Palm when the oil ran out. The memories of the talk came back to me in February as I sat down and read *The Ecologist*. It said the US had just imported a quarter of a million tons of Ecuadorean bio-diesel, and in the process undercut its own subsidy-fed soya bean farmers. (2)

In the same month I travelled with a delegation from the Wales Nicaragua Solidarity Campaign to Nicaragua, with a meeting on the itinerary with African palm workers in Kukra Hill. We had already had some contact with the workers, who were growing solely for the margarine/vegetable oil market. Our interest, at least initially, was to find out about their working conditions, and their attempts to form a union.

The African Palm plantation, of over 20,000 hectares, is owned by the Kukra Development Company, a subsidiary of a Costa Rican conglomerate, Grupo Agroindustrial CB (also known as the Numar group). It employs only 250 people directly. The rest, up to 2,000 day labourers, are employed by local gang masters. The company sub-contracts individuals to carry out work on the plantations, who then hire workers on daily rates. The workers are thus exploited twice, by the company and by their local employer. As one woman worker told us, "I wake up at 2 o'clock, go to the field at 3am, and work until 5 in the evening, where I pick up seed and clean the palm. I manage 20 manzanas a day, and get paid by the sack. To get C\$800-900 (\$45 - \$50 a fortnight) I would have to get all my family here to help, and pull the children out of school. You can't buy milk, rice, sugar on that wage." These punishing conditions are common throughout the biofuel world. In a recent article on bio-ethanol in Brazil, the *cortadores de caña* - the sugar cane cutters - were described as 'ethanol slaves', working in similar conditions to those we witnessed in Kukra Hill. (3)

Unionising has been hard, if not impossible for locals to carry out. In an attempt to reach the workers, local activists invited Sandinista National Assembly Deputies to speak to the workers last year. The workers are now keen to try to establish a union under the new Sandinista government. The FSLN, which took power in the Municipal Council in 2005, have been trying to ensure that the company pays its taxes, and have been working with the management to improve the conditions for the workers, many of whom live in barracks in extremely hard conditions.

Improving their lives will prove an uphill struggle. Costa Rican Grupo Agroindustrial CB is already quarter owned by Belize based BB Holdings Ltd. 70% of the shares of BB Holdings are owned by Michael Ashcroft, better known as Lord Ashcroft, multi-millionaire, former treasurer and current deputy chair of the UK Conservative Party. He must be one of a long line of investors joining international and national capital which see biofuels as the next gold-rush.

The manager of the Kukra Hill plantation was very open in his meeting with us about what the future held for the company. He spoke about increasing production from 20,000 ha. to 200,000 ha., to meet the needs of the new bio-diesel market. He also said the company offered good conditions to the workers without a union present, but as the oil is a commodity product, margins are low, and the company needs to be very efficient.

These 'efficiencies' are already apparent in the costs to the workers, food sovereignty and the environment. They are also obvious to a growing number of organisations and individuals, a hundred of which signed a document in December calling for the "immediate suspension of all subsidies and other forms of inequitable support for the import and export of biofuels" (4).

Notes

(1) Letter to the president of the Republic from ethnic territory authorities and legal representatives of the Community Councils of Black Communities from the ethnic territory Kurrulao (South Pacific Colombia). Quoted in *IRC Americas Program Report* 'Colombia's Palm Oil Biodiesel Push', Tatiana Roa Avendaño, Feb 2, 2007.

(2) Robin Maynard, 'Against the Grain', *The Ecologist*, March 2007, p.30.

(3) Tom Phillips, 'Ethanol Slaves prop up renewable energy boom', *Guardian Weekly*, March 23/29, 2007

(4) Interact, *Progressio*, Winter 2006/7

Note: For more information on biofuels see the March 2007 issue of the *The Ecologist*, and www.biofuelwatch.org.

Paraquat perils in Central America

By Stephanie Williamson

The 'Stop Paraquat' campaign conducted by non-governmental organisations, trade unions, and scientists around the world, calls to end the production and ban the use of this highly toxic and harmful herbicide. The critics' main target is the agrochemical multinational and leading distributor of paraquat, Syngenta. This Swiss company markets the herbicide in over 100 countries, usually under the brand name 'Gramoxone'. Paraquat is regularly used to control weeds on banana, coffee, palm oil, rubber, fruit, or pineapple plantations. Growers large and small use it copiously on their maize and rice fields. It is a broad-spectrum, contact weedkiller, affecting most vegetation types.

Unfortunately, paraquat is also highly toxic to animals, including humans. Many workers and farmers exposed to paraquat on a regular basis suffer serious health problems, and deaths caused by the high toxicity of the herbicide, which has no antidote, are not infrequent. The most important exposure route is via the skin but spray droplets can also be inhaled via the nose or mouth. While paraquat is known for its acute toxicity, it can also cause longer-term health effects including respiratory problems, and increase the risk of birth defects, cancer and Parkinson's disease.

Paraquat is widely used in Central America. One study in Costa Rican banana plantations found a high risk of worker exposure due to poor working conditions. Symptoms recorded included blistering and burns on hands, thighs, back, legs and testicles, nosebleeds and irritation of the eyes. Even when workers are provided with gloves and overalls, this does not protect them against all exposure, as spray equipment frequently leaks and clothing becomes soaked with the toxic liquid. Contact dermatitis is a common effect of paraquat exposure and not only is this extremely uncomfortable for the sufferer, the damage to the skin can actually increase the risk of skin absorption, putting the person at further danger from exposure to this and other harmful chemicals.

Pesticide-related ill health is a serious problem for rural communities in the region. In 2000, almost 7,000 acute pesticide poisonings were recorded in 6 Central American countries. Of these, a regional average of 35% were work-related, followed by intentional (suicide attempts) and accidental poisoning. However, the proportion of occupational poisonings varied considerably between countries, from 60% of cases in Guatemala to 27% in El Salvador. Paraquat was foremost among 12 pesticides most frequently reported by health ministry surveillance systems for acute poisonings in the 6 countries. Yet these figures don't even tell half the story of hidden ill health and suffering as many incidents are not reported to the health service - in Belize, only 1% of probable poisonings end up on official statistics. Costa Rican medics estimate that around 82-97% of poisonings are missing from government figures. There are several reasons for this massive under-reporting. Poor farmers often cannot afford to go to distant hospitals and the countries don't have poison



Paraquat injured skin

centres or good medical services for occupational health. Medical personnel often lack the knowledge to diagnose pesticide poisonings and may confuse symptoms with other diseases. Data from Costa Rica shows that acute poisonings are as much a public health burden as malaria and tuberculosis. Paraquat is often used to commit suicide, as it is widely available in rural communities and most people know that it is highly toxic. Swallowing a lethal dose leads to a prolonged and agonising death from respiratory failure.

Around 175,000 Costa Rican workers are probably exposed to paraquat and its close relative diquat each year. In 2001, 127 of 544 notified poisonings in the country identified paraquat as the pesticide product to blame and overall between 1996 and 2001, paraquat was the culprit for around 35% of all pesticide poisonings. On banana plantations it may be sprayed monthly. During handling of the concentrate, it is hard to avoid contaminating some part of the body. 58% of spraying systems surveyed inadequately protected worker health and safety. Often workers are not properly trained in how to handle hazardous chemicals or provided with well-maintained spray equipment and effective protective clothing.

In 2001, Central American health ministries identified a new "Dirty Dozen" of pesticides responsible for most poisonings in the region, including paraquat, and proposed a harmonised banning. The aim was to trigger

automatic bans across the region when any single country provided adequate evidence to support a national ban. This progressive policy was hamstrung by the influence of the agrochemical industry, under the guise of the Central America free trade agreements, which argued instead for approving a pesticide registration throughout the region, if it is registered in one country.

It is an immoral tragedy that thousands of Central Americans continue to suffer the harmful effects of paraquat when it is perfectly possible to grow crops profitably without using this herbicide. The Fair Trade Labelling Organisation, the Rainforest Alliance and the Forest Stewardship Council have successfully prohibited its use in the products they certify. Individual companies like Chiquita and Volcafe have also phased out its use in their bananas and coffee, respectively. Integrated weed management methods can be used instead. These include mechanical weed control (using machetes), using mulches and growing specific ground cover crops to suppress weeds. Sometimes these incur higher costs but mulching and cover cropping also help conserve moisture and improve soil structure and fertility so there are other benefits.

The Stop Paraquat campaign is asking organisations and individuals to sign up to hold Syngenta accountable for the suffering caused by paraquat. It also urges plantations, food manufacturers and supermarkets to make an ethical decision to stop its use and to support integrated weed management in their supply chains.

For more information and to take action, visit the Stop Paraquat section of the website of Swiss NGO The Berne Declaration at <http://www.evb.ch/en/f25000087.html>

This article was compiled from information on 'Paraquat: Unacceptable health risks for users' by Richard Isenring, The Berne Declaration and Pesticide Action Network, Asia-Pacific and UK, 2006.

Our last few issues of the ENCA Newsletter have covered the issue of the banana workers in Nicaragua who have been affected by the use of nemagon. In April this year the Los Angeles Times carried the following article.

PESTICIDE COMPANY SETTLES STERILITY SUIT FOR \$300,000

CHINANDEGA, NICARAGUA 16 April 2007 — A Southern California pesticide company has agreed to settle a lawsuit alleging that one of the firm's products caused agricultural workers in Nicaragua to become sterile, plaintiffs' attorneys announced. Amvac Chemical Corp. has agreed to pay a total of \$300,000 to 13 Nicaraguan workers who contended that they were sterilized while exposed to a pesticide called DBCP (also known as nemagon) on banana plantations nearly three decades ago.

The agreement, which Amvac filed late last month, still requires final approval by a Los Angeles judge. In court papers, the Newport Beach-based company called the agreement a "compromise of disputed claims" and denied any wrongdoing. An Amvac spokesman could not be reached.

Dow Chemical Co. and Dole Fruit Co. remain as defendants in the case, which is scheduled for trial next month in Los Angeles. In addition, the three companies face other lawsuits involving similar allegations in the United States and Nicaragua. Each of the companies has denied that any workers were harmed by DBCP, which was manufactured by Dow and Amvac and used by Dole on plantations in Latin America. The chemical is no longer made or used.

Lawyers announced the settlement at a rally attended by nearly 800 people. They said that the payments, which range from \$2,000 to \$60,000 per person depending on the injury and the years when they worked, were the first step toward a settlement for thousands of other workers in Nicaragua, many of them elderly and impoverished. "This is the point of the spear," said Juan Dominguez, the Los Angeles lawyer who filed the lawsuit. Additional funds, he said, could come as the case proceeds against Dow and Dole, which are larger companies.

The former banana workers, who were packed shoulder to shoulder on a basketball court in blistering heat, waved their hands and caps in the air after the news was announced.

More than 12,000 workers contend that they were sterilized or otherwise sickened by DBCP, which has been shown to cause sterility and brain and kidney damage in tests of lab animals. Tens of thousands of banana workers worldwide have sued over the use of DBCP. No lawsuit has ever gone to trial in the United States. In 1997, Dow, Shell Group and Occidental Chemical Corp. settled one such suit with 26,000 workers in Latin America and elsewhere for \$41 million. Both men and women say they were injured by the chemical, but sterility has been proven only in males.

"We have been fighting this fight for so long," said Carlos Miguel Blanco, 48, a plaintiff who alleges that he was rendered infertile while working on a banana plantation in the 1970s. "We want to finish this, not just for me," he said, "but for everyone who was affected."

DBCP was suspended for most uses in the United States in 1977 after workers at an Occidental plant in Lathrop, California, were found to have low or zero sperm counts after working with the compound, although it was not permanently banned for all uses in the United States until 1985. In previous interviews, Amvac officials have contended that their company played only a small role in the case. The company made and sold the product to Nicaragua for only two years, after it was suspended for use in the United States and other companies ceased making it, according to court records.

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... and toxic pesticides continue to cause problems

By the time you receive this request for urgent action through this newsletter, the urgency may be over, but the need for action and solidarity will still be there. So if you can write a letter as requested, we urge you to do so. The request came to us from Alistair Smith of Banana Link who explains that:

It would really be appreciated by our colleagues in Costa Rica - sacked by Chiquita for reporting a pesticide poisoning incident - if you could take a couple of minutes to send off this electronic letter. All you need to do is go to: http://www.labourstart.org/cgi-bin/solidarityforever/show_campaign.cgi?c=251

Costa Rica: Chiquita sacks workers for reporting poisoning

Multinational fruit company Chiquita likes to boast of its high social and environmental standards, but its Costa Rican subsidiary COBAL has sacked two union members for complaining about being exposed to a toxic chemical. Alexander Reyes Zuñiga, Jaime Blanco Juarez and Marco González Borge reported to their supervisors that spraying of a toxic nematicide (used for killing worms in banana tree roots) was going on in the same area as they were harvesting bananas. They became nauseous and dizzy and Jaime Blanco



had to go straight to the doctor, where he was retained for tests for several hours. Alexander Reyes suffered symptoms of poisoning the following day, but was told to resume work regardless. The team complained to supervisors only to be accused of entering the area to be sprayed despite orders not to do so. Alexander Reyes and Marcos Borge were sacked for misconduct. Chiquita management did not conduct any medical examination, did not give the statutory three warnings for misconduct and continue to deny the workers' version. The union SITAGAH has tried to negotiate the two workers' reinstatement, but the company has so far refused. Other recent violations of rights in COBAL plantations have been denounced by Costa Rican banana workers' union coordinating body COSIBA-CR.

NEWS BRIEFS

Nicaragua to change vote on whale hunting

In ENCA Newsletter 41 (October 2006), our first report was on Japan's 'purchase' of Central American votes in support of its resumption of whaling at the annual meeting of the International Whaling Commission (IWC). In April this year, the Costa Rican Whale Coalition organised a protest outside the Nicaraguan embassy in Costa Rica against the killing of whales. The protest was to persuade Nicaragua to change its vote at the IWC regarding the killing of whales. Nicaraguan ambassador to Costa Rica, Harold Rivas Reyes, greeted the protesters and delivered a communiqué from the Nicaraguan Ministry of Foreign Affairs explaining his government's decision to "not support" whale hunting and to revisit the treaties signed under previous administrations. Government officials under President Enrique Bolaños had expected "economic favours" from Japan in exchange for voting to allow whale hunting.

Third Indigenous Summit held in Guatemala

On 26-30 March this year, the Third Summit of Indigenous Peoples and Nationalities of Abya Yala was held in the Mayan city of Iximché with 1,800 participants from indigenous communities throughout the western hemisphere. A brief extract from the Declaration of Iximché gives a flavour of the meeting:

"We firmly oppose the development of plans such as the South American Regional Plan for Infrastructure Integration (IIRSA), Plan Puebla Panama, Plan Patriota, Plan Colombia, Plan Dignidad, Plan Andino, and the establishment of military bases. We also oppose the adoption of the FTAA and FTAs, which are fostered by the WTO for the benefit of the looter countries of the world. They only intend to create infrastructures to facilitate the circulation of their goods, to exploit natural resources on our lands and territories, and to protect transnational corporations. We consider them invasion plans for plundering, destruction and death."

Suspension of construction of golf course in El Espino, El Salvador

In March, UNES (the Salvadoran Ecological Unit) reported their "Pioneering Victory in Environmental Justice" with the Supreme Court's suspension of the construction of the Cuscatlán Country Club golf course in the Finca El Espino, a woodland area of great significance to the water supply of the capital city. The landmark victory established the precedent that an environmental organisation which is not directly affected by a development can nevertheless submit a legitimate objection to a development, an objection that will not be ruled out of court simply because they are not affected directly by the development. It also established the admissibility of the precautionary principle in the consideration of any development.

(More information on www.unes.org.sv)

ENCA's Environmental Study Tour of Honduras

As expected (see last newsletter), our planned Environmental Study Tour of Honduras did not manage to attract enough participants for the tour to go ahead as planned. Perhaps Honduras isn't sexy enough? Perhaps our publicity wasn't hitting the right spots? Perhaps too many potential participants were not persuaded by our last newsletter's defence of the tour in the face of criticisms about the carbon emissions that would be caused by our flights? Perhaps? Nevertheless, a small band of intrepid emitters will make their way to the region, partly to replace the battery connected to the solar panel we installed three years ago in the remote village of Los Pozitos, Nicaragua, and partly to express our international solidarity with a number of grassroots Honduran organisations and movements that are under intense pressure and threats from what might be called without exaggeration 'the forces of darkness' – see ENCA 42 on recent assassinations of environmentalists.

ENCA Contacts:

<i>Chair:</i>	Nick Rau	0208 809 4451	hnrnu@yahoo.co.uk
<i>Secretary:</i>	Sheila Amoo-Gottfried	0208 769 0492	sheila.amoo-gottfried@virgin.net
<i>Treasurer:</i>	Janet Bye	01473 254695	janet.bye@btopenworld.com
<i>Postal address:</i>	ENCA, c/o NSC, 129 Seven Sisters Road, London N7 7QG (Tel. 0207 272 9619)		

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