

ENCA



Environmental Network *for* Central America

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New Partnerships?

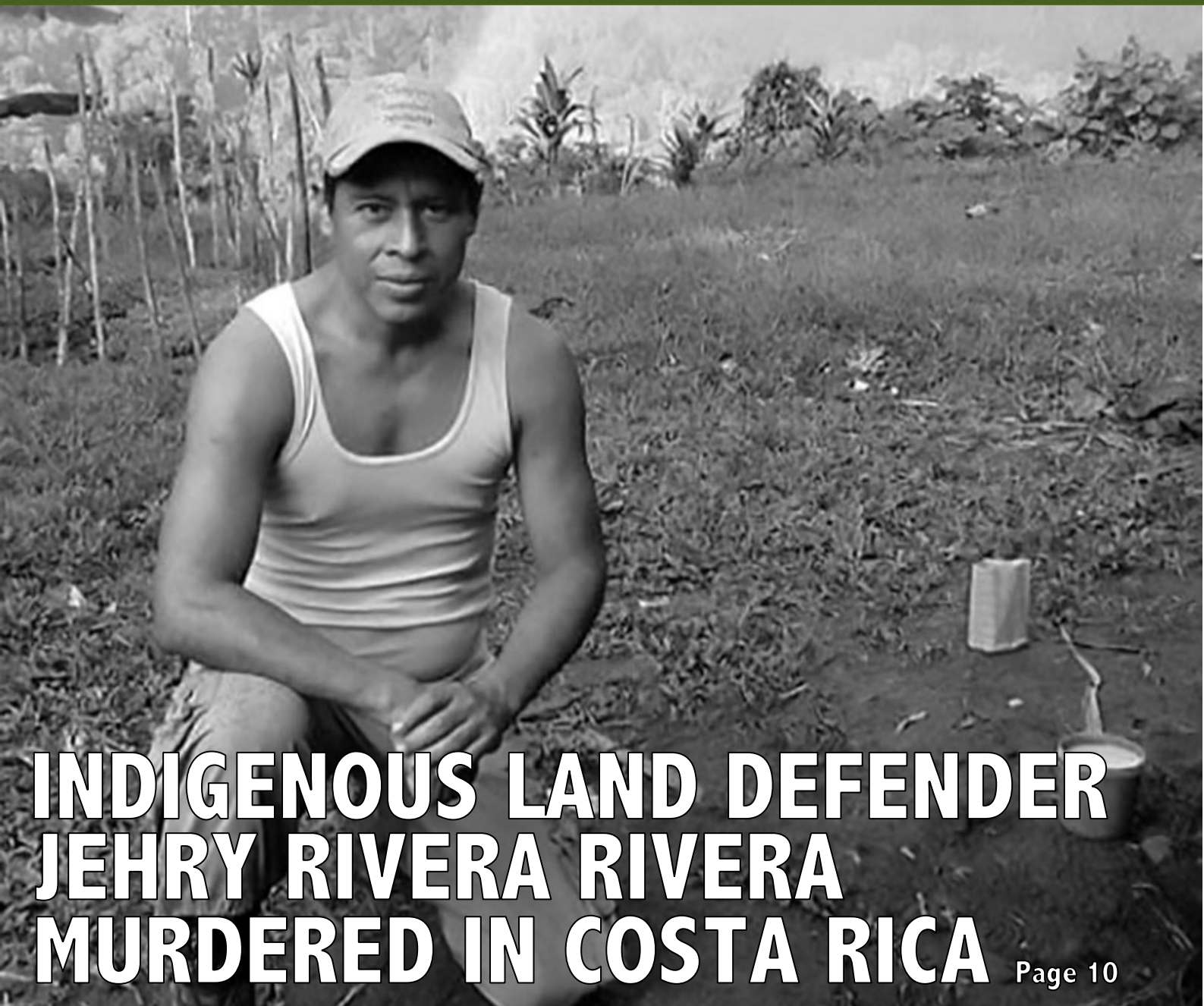
Guatemala offers El Salvador access to Atlantic Coast

Water

Supplies at risk for 60,000 in El Salvador

Guapinol Lands

Repression of environmental defenders continues in Honduras



**INDIGENOUS LAND DEFENDER
JEHRY RIVERA RIVERA
MURDERED IN COSTA RICA**

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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 the exploitation of natural resources benefits the many and not just the few and is carried out within sustainable and renewable bounds.

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Guatemala offers El Salvador a port on the Atlantic Coast

Shortly after the inauguration of Alejandro Giammattei as the new Guatemalan President, he met with President Nayib Bukele of El Salvador and offered a deal of potentially great benefit to El Salvador: namely a port on the Atlantic coast of Guatemala. Lucy Goodman translated articles about the deal from La Prensa Gráfica (by Melissa Pacheco, 28.01.20) and El Economista (29.01.20), and Martin Mowforth added various commentaries on these for the ENCA Newsletter.

El Salvador and Guatemala plan to eliminate the border initially for the passage of persons and later for freight. They have also re-defined flights between the two countries as 'domestic flights'.

The Guatemalan president offered a concession to create a public-private partnership as the means to enable completion of a Salvadoran port on the Atlantic coast. Land from the Santo Tomás de Castilla National Port Company (Empornac) will be ceded to El Salvador for this purpose. The area to be ceded is known as El Arenal (or The Quicksand) and currently serves as a depot for containers. Last year (2019) Empornac carried out technical studies to determine the feasibility of constructing a pier to accommodate dredgers and cruise ships there.

"We have offered El Salvador something unprecedented in the history of Central American integration and today I want to announce it publicly because we're going to explore, as soon as possible, the possibility of El Salvador having a port in the Guatemalan Atlantic. We will deliver this project as a public-private partnership so that El Salvador can develop it. It is an offer that we have made to El Salvador, we consider it to be the right thing to do," Giammattei announced at a press conference that took place at the Presidential House.

He added that he had spoken with the authorities of SICA (Sistema de Integración Centroamericana / Central American Integration System) in order to receive the support of the institution in the implementation of the project. He also announced that he made a firm pledge to officially de-categorise flights between Guatemala and El Salvador to 'domestic'.

This comes as part of the initiatives to improve integration in the region.

The Guatemalan Minister of Economics, Antonio Malouf, confirmed that a legal-technical analysis for ceding the land of Empornac will be carried out.

"Basically, it would be our entry to the Atlantic. Our goods will have the power to go from the Atlantic and enter from the Atlantic. I believe what we're doing is making a real union that is going to spread to other countries in Central America that will want to unite and do similar," declared the Salvadoran President.

Apart from the possible construction of the Salvadoran port on the Guatemalan coast and the re-categorisation of flights, the leaders announced that in one month they hope to have removed the border for the passage of people and within three or four months the barriers for goods between the two countries.

"We have to sign papers where we can eliminate the customs on goods respecting that goods entering El Salvador and destined for Guatemala have already paid taxes in El Salvador and do not have to pay them in Guatemala and those that have entered Guatemala destined for El Salvador do not have to pay them in El Salvador. We believe it will take us about three months," the Guatemalan president declared to the media.

The elimination of the borders for the passage of people also requires the implementation of a bi-national arrangement on security. "If someone passes from Guatemala to El Salvador evading an arrest warrant, they will not be evading anything because we are going to

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have the same approaches in both countries," Bukele stated.

Giammattei referred to their intention to apply similar security sanctions, one of which was to standardise the criminal codes in both countries. In the language he used to explain this part of the agreement, Giammattei betrayed his profoundly hateful and hardline understanding of crime in society. "Standardising the penalties, the sanctions, the punishments, so that when they spray 'Baygon' here the cockroaches do not go there because they think that there they will find it easier, and when they spray 'Baygon' the cockroaches won't come here, as the law will be the same for the two countries," said the new president.

Moreover, he said that they had been monitoring Bukele's Territorial Control Plan (PCT), the main commitment of the Salvadoran Government to improve security conditions, and he (Giammattei) did not rule out implementing some of the same sanctions in Guatemala. ♦



The presidents share the announcements between themselves about the removal of the border for the transit of people and goods. (Melissa Pacheco).

Guatemalan Congress Weakens NGOs

In February this year the Guatemalan Congress moved to limit the work of non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Human rights defenders and social activists criticised the Guatemalan Congress for passing a law that could be used by governments to arbitrarily control non-governmental organisations.

The 'Law of Non-Governmental Organisations for Development' establishes that NGOs will not be able to use foreign donations or financing to carry out activities that "alter" public order.

"If an NGO uses foreign donations or financing to alter public order, it will be immediately cancelled ... its executives will be charged under criminal and civil legislation," the new law states.

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) also expressed its reservations regarding the new law.

"The reform of the NGO law could affect the freedom of association, assembly, and expression, as well as democratic spaces for organised civil society," the OHCHR said and added that "it is important to adopt laws and policies that guarantee spaces for democratic participation."

In 2019, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet expressed concern about the NGO bill as it introduces controls that could be used to arbitrarily limit social organisations.

The NGO law is based on proposals that lawmakers of the previous legislature made to avoid the fight against corruption promoted by the International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG).

With the new law, the government can "arbitrarily cancel uncomfortable organisations," said Justice Now (JusticiaYa), an NGO which was born amidst the anti-corruption fight in 2015.

The leftist party Winaq, whose most notable member is the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchu, said the NGO law is "a blow to freedom of social organisation and harmful to the majority."

Sources:

- *La Prensa Gráfica (El Salvador) 12 February 2020.*
- *Impunity Watch*
- *Telesur 12 February 2020.*

Nicaraguan environmental defenders harassed and criminalised – Mina la India

ENCA has received news from the CIEL (Centre for International Environmental Law based in Washington DC) about reprisals taken against environmental defenders who protest against the Santa Cruz de la India mine. In ENCA 75 (April 2019) we carried a short article about Mina la India which contradicted the much-touted praise of the environmental and social practices of the mine by the British owned Condor Gold mining company and the Nicaraguan government. It seems that the mine continues to be associated with a pattern of repression.

Washington, DC — The Centre for International Environmental Law (CIEL) denounces an ongoing wave of intimidation, retaliation, and criminalization targeting Nicaraguan environmental defenders and community leaders who have publicly opposed plans for a controversial gold mining project in Santa Cruz de la India, Nicaragua.

On December 18, 2019, a group of approximately 15 police in full riot gear raided the home of Olmán Salazar, a leader of the Community Movement of Santa Cruz de la India, which has organised in opposition to the La India gold mine project of UK-based company Condor Gold. The police handcuffed, interrogated, and physically and verbally assaulted Sr Salazar and family members present at his home. Police also confiscated Sr Salazar's computer, telephone, and other personal possessions, which they have retained to carry out an investigation. Sr Salazar fears additional criminalization may result from this investigation.

Notably, this incident occurred just days after Sr Salazar presented a [public statement](#) regarding the 2019 divestment from Condor Gold by the World Bank's International Finance Corporation (IFC) at a press conference held by the *Movimiento Nacional Ambiental Frente a la Minería Industrial* (MONAFMI).

To CIEL's knowledge, this statement issued to the Nicaraguan press represented the first public announcement made in Nicaragua about the IFC's divestment.

For several years, defenders and community leaders had called for the IFC's divestment from the mining project due to the project's major impacts on water sources and the environment. They hail the IFC's decision to divest as a victory for the movement.

The MONAFMI statement in Spanish, as well as an English translation, are available below:

- Banco Mundial retira su inversión del proyecto minero de Códor Gold en Nicaragua: <https://bit.ly/2vB03Mw>
- World Bank divests from Condor Gold mining project in Nicaragua: <https://bit.ly/33FWLV2>

CIEL has worked with affected community members and partners in Nicaragua to raise awareness about previous acts of police intimidation and harassment against community members for their opposition to the project.

CIEL: www.ciel.org

Central America supplying China with fresh fruit

Costa Rica

The opening of a new container port at Moín close to the port of Limón on the Caribbean coast of Costa Rica in 2019 has enabled the opening of a new maritime route for its fresh fruit to reach China within a maximum period of 22 days, almost half the time period that it used to take.

The new port will be able to handle up to 8,500 containers although currently it operates with a maximum of 4,000 containers. It can also receive the 'super

post-Panamax' container ships. The port operators are hoping that extra production of fresh fruit will be stimulated by the opening of this extra route to Shanghai.

The concession to build and operate (for 33 years) the Moín Container Port was awarded to APM Terminals, a Dutch company.

Panamá

The first container of Panamanian pineapples sailed for China last October following the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries. This was the first one of a



planned 12 containers of pineapples every week.

The Panamanian government sees this as a historic step on the path to sending other fruits, fish and coffee to the huge Chinese market in the future.

China has been a crucial commercial partner of Panamá for decades, but the new diplomatic relations have given a significant impulse to the economic relations between the two countries.

Sources:

- El Economista, 24 September 2019, 'Costa Rica abre ruta marítima directa con China que reduce costos y tiempo'.
- El Economista, 1 October 2019, 'Panamá comienza la exportación de piña a China'.

Guatemala's New President Threatens the Land, the Environment and Human Rights

In January ENCA received a disturbing communication from the Guatemala Human Rights Committee (GHRC) relating to Guatemala's newly inaugurated President Giammattei. The concerns relate to many land and environmental issues as much as they do to purely human rights issues. We are grateful to the GHRC and to Annie Bird for permission to reproduce her letter introducing their full report on these issues. We are unable to reproduce the full report here because of its space requirements, but we would urge all our readers to visit the GHRC website (as below). The introductory letter is reproduced below.



Alejandro Giammattei became Guatemala's president on January 14th 2020

On January 14, Alejandro Giammattei assumed the presidency of Guatemala. Guatemala's human rights community is concerned. Here are key points to keep in mind.

- Four trials in Guatemala, Switzerland and Spain have demonstrated that police death squads killed inmates during Giammattei's term as National Prisons Director - his only previous experience in public office. Other convictions show the same death squads were involved in violent disputes between drug traffickers, indicating the prison killings could be attributed to similar motives. While his direct participation has not been proven, this is a concerning precedent to what could happen

under his watch as president. Related trials are ongoing, though prosecutors and judges are under attack.

- Giammattei has promised to expand and promote extractive industries that displace the livelihood and provoke forced displacement of rural and indigenous communities.
- At least two key cabinet appointments are active members of the Foundation Against Terrorism, which uses malicious prosecution to promote impunity for human rights abuses. On the day of the inauguration, Daniel Pascual, Coordinator of the Campesino Unity Committee, began trial on slander charges - a violation of freedom of speech, this process places the

defender in danger, and is marred by procedural anomalies.

- Giammattei has promised to dissolve the Presidential Security Secretariat (SAAS), a civilian security agency created to comply with the peace accords, and instead has focused on strengthening the National Security Council. He has promised to appoint retired military officers active during Guatemala's genocide to almost all key security positions.
- Students protesting the inauguration were illegally detained and apparently beaten. A judge ordered their release this morning and an investigation into police aggressions.

On the GHRC website (www.ghrc-usa.org) please find an in-depth analysis of human rights concerns surrounding Giammattei's inauguration. Also please see GHRC's analysis of the August 11, 2019 run-off elections, the June 16 general elections, and the Constitutional Court decisions to bar candidates Zury Rios and Thelma Aldana.

Many Thanks,
Annie Bird

Website: www.ghrc-usa.org

Water and Real Estate in El Salvador

The following blog post by CISPES (Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador) was posted in January this year relating to a real estate development of a 'mini-city' and its conflicts with the provision of water for over 60,000 people in Greater San Salvador. We are grateful to CISPES for permission to reproduce the post here.

<http://cispes.org/>



The social movement struggle to stop construction of the massive 'Valle del Angel' real estate development project has entered the new year with both increased threats and increased mobilization. Protests against the Dueñas family's planned 'mini-city', which would comprise more than 500 blocks of residential and commercial space in northern San Salvador, began more than a year ago in the neighbouring communities of Apopa, Nejapa, and Quezaltepeque. Since then, environmentalists and organisers from a variety of sectors have formed a coalition to fight the behemoth enterprise together.

The project is part of an alarming trend of mega-developments that have sprouted up across the country and region. Marketed as 'urban' and 'modern', they're designed to be almost completely self-sufficient and typically boast everything from thousands of units of luxury housing (more than 8,000 units in the case of Valle del Angel), shopping, offices, and restaurants to hospitals, churches, hotels, and schools.

Omitted from the marketing, however, are the profound negative impacts: siphoning of water from nearby rural populations (for whom water is already dangerously scarce); grave harm to both the environment and public health; further privatization of land and resources at the expense of public welfare; and an alarming intensification of the disparities between rich and poor.

Regarding the Valle del Angel project specifically, the social movement warns that because of its location in a basin that contains an important aquifer (i.e., underground layer of permeable rock or other sediment from which water can be extracted through a well or spring), it poses additional risks even beyond those mentioned above. The aquifer renders the area in question a significant 'recharge zone', supplying water to much of northern San Salvador.

Environmentalists and ecologists have cautioned that the development would erode the subsoil and stress the reserves that undergird the zone; this, alongside contamination and other

destabilizing effects, would decrease the aquifer output, threatening the water supply of more than 60,000 people in greater San Salvador. Further, the densely populated project would worsen traffic in an already heavily congested area, increase the risk of landslides, eliminate the habitats of a wide variety of wildlife, and destroy ecosystems and some of the last remaining forested regions of El Salvador.

The development has been in the works since at least 2009. At that time, however, the environmental commission under the FMLN denied the requested well-drilling permits on the grounds that they over-exploited the aquifer by exceeding the maximum allowable water extraction/flow rate, straining its capacity and putting the water supply at risk. But this June, just a few weeks into the new administration, El Salvador's national water board, ANDA, stepped in to grant the permits, even though it was beyond their authority to do so. The social movement challenged the validity of the permits on these grounds as well as on the same grounds the FMLN denied them – that in delivering a quantity of 400 litres of water *per second*, they exceed the allowable, safe, and sustainable rate. The case currently sits at the environmental commission, where it is being debated.

The social movement struggle to stop development has been fiercely and increasingly vocal (though rarely covered by the mainstream press in El Salvador). Since the risks were presented in public forums last year, it has grown to include direct action, press conferences, government petitions, editorials, letters to the >>

president, and appeals to El Salvador's Supreme Court as well as the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. Public demonstrations escalated in the last months of 2019 after the social movement got word the developers had increased pressure on the environmental commission to grant the permits before the end of the year. More than once, protestors occupied the streets surrounding the environmental commission with their own demands and powerful voices of resistance: "Corporations out of our communities!" signs read. So far, they've been able to hold off the permits, but the threat persists.

The Valle del Angel development is not the first or only one of its kind. The encroachment of urban mega-developments as a mechanism of capitalist expansion is a disturbing trend in El Salvador and in the region. In addition to other industries like mining/natural resource extraction, agribusiness, and hydroelectric projects, urban real estate development is on the uptick as a means of 'accumulation through dispossession' and the ongoing

transfer of wealth from the working class to elites. (All of which are among the root causes of destabilization and displacement we're seeing across Central America.)

Further, with the election of Nayib Bukele, the social movement has become increasingly alarmed by his administration's quick authorization of permits for similar projects that bypass checks on environmental impacts. In a letter sent to the President last summer, the movement voiced deep concern that he has "instructed his cabinet to accelerate the environmental permits held back by the previous government" and urged that "economic investment should not take precedence over the interests of the Salvadoran population." Likewise, both the Office of the Human Rights Ombudsman in El Salvador and the archbishop of San Salvador have criticised Bukele's silence on the issue. Lastly, without a General Water Law, which the social movement has been demanding since 2006, there is limited legal recourse and no guarantee of water as a human right.

If the term 'neoliberalism' sometimes seems hard to pin down, the Valle del Angel project is a telling image of the world that neoliberal policy seeks to advance: oases of luxury amid widespread, water-, food- and land-scarce poverty: a world in which exorbitant price tags keep the poor – and poverty itself – out, while limited resources are hoarded within.

Resistance to the Valle del Angel has a place alongside other struggles in El Salvador (like the case of the Tacuba water defenders) in being emblematic of the fight against that neoliberal vision. And El Salvador's struggles, in turn, take their place among other popular resistance movements around the world – from Ecuador to Chile to France to India and beyond – filling the streets daily, demanding a different, socialist, egalitarian world instead.

CISPES will continue to report on this issue, but also follow the Foro del Agua, the Alianza Contra la Privatización del Agua, ECOS El Salvador, and ARPAS for regular updates.



More repression of the Guapinol land and environmental defenders

Further to our article in ENCA 75 in April 2019, we have recently received reports from the Honduras Solidarity Network (HSN), from International Allies and from the Central American Alliance Against Mining (ACAFREMIN) regarding more recent repression of the Guapinol defenders. We present a summary of these three reports below.

The findings of a report commissioned by ACAFREMIN were presented in Tegucigalpa on 26th February 2020. The report found that the state of Honduras was responsible for systematic violations of the human rights of the communities of Tocoa in the department of Colón which were impacted by mining concessions granted to the Inversiones Los Pinares company.

The research team was composed of a human rights lawyer and four academics including Dr Ainhoa Montoya who attended an ENCA meeting in London in 2018. They spent a week in Honduras in June 2019 to verify reports of human rights violations against environmental defenders who were opposed to mining in the municipality of Tocoa. They investigated the historical background of the conflict but focussed especially on the last decade since and in the context of the 2009 coup.

According to the study, the neoliberal policies pursued by successive governments since the 1990s have intensified investment in the extractive industries largely for the benefit of national elites and transnational corporations. These industries have been set up without appropriate consultation with local populations, have generated conflicts with local groups and have caused serious human rights violations. These industries and the policies which promote and support them have been actively promoted by the Canadian and US governments.

In Tocoa the Honduran state has systematically criminalised and harassed those communities which have opposed Inversiones Los Pinares and which have been defending their water sources. The victims and witnesses interviewed identified the army, police and local

armed groups (made up of the company's security guards) as responsible for these actions.

These violations of human rights are a clear example of the generalised violence suffered by indigenous and social leaders and small farmers who challenge the legality of corporate megaprojects and extractive industries in Honduras.

Specifically, the report found the following irregularities in the operations of Inversiones Los Pinares.

- Serious irregularities in the granting of mining licenses within the Carlos Escaleras National Park.
- A lack of prior consultation with the affected communities before the granting of licenses.
- The Public Ministry, police and army have been used to protect the interests of Inversiones Los Pinares.



ACAFREMIN meeting showing solidarity with the Guapinol defenders' (Photo: ACAREMIN)

- Internationally recognised rights such as the right to peaceful protest among others have been denied to the defenders of the Río Guapinol and instead they have been criminalised by the state acting in support of corporate rights.
- Eight of the 31 defenders remain illegally detained and the others, along with their families and friends, continue to be stigmatised and to live in fear and anxiety.

Eight Political Prisoners from Guapinol:

1. Kelvin Alejandro Romero
2. José Daniel Márquez
3. Porfirio Sorto Cedillo
4. José Abelino Cedillo
5. Ewer Alexander Cedillo
6. Orbin Nahum Hernández
7. Arnol Javier Alemán Soriano
8. Jeremías Martínez Díaz

All the Guapinol political prisoners live in the communities of Guapinol and San Pedro, close to the city of Tocoa, and are

all organised in the Municipal Committee in Defense of Public and Common Goods (Comité Municipal en Defensa de Bienes Comunes y Naturales del Municipio de Tocoa).

That same organisation was honoured by the Washington-based Institute for Policy Studies (IPS) with the 2019 Lettelier-Moffitt Human Rights Award granted to organisations that fight for the defence of human rights. The IPS statement about the award follows.

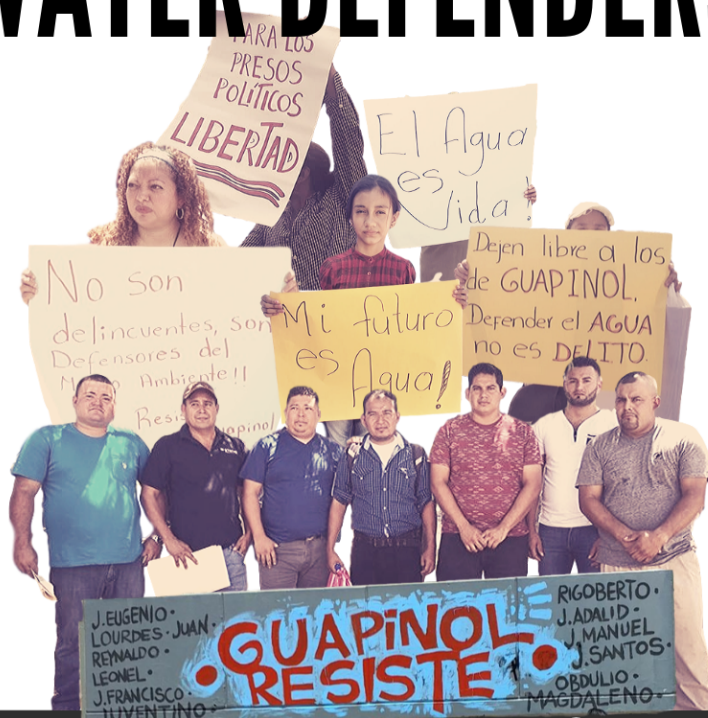
The Committee for the Defence of the Commons of Tocoa is a grassroots coalition that since 2011 has been fighting to stop Inversiones los Pinares, a mining company owned by the most powerful family in Honduras, from contaminating key water resources in the Aguán Region. The committee has denounced that the mine permits were allocated under irregular circumstances and its eventual exploitation will destroy a conservation area established in 2012.

For years, the committee has called on the Honduras legislature to overturn a decree that allowed the Facussé family to obtain licences for the project inside the Carlos Escaleras Natural Reserve.

After years of pressure from local organisations and residents of Tocoa, mayor Adam Fúnez held a town hall meeting where the local population voted overwhelmingly to support a local mining prohibition. But the victory was bitter sweet for local environmental defenders as the new bylaw is not retroactive and the mining permits for Inversiones los Pinares remain active, along with 8 previously granted concessions for exploration. The Committee for the Defence of the Commons has vowed to continue to challenge the Inversiones los Pinares project at the constitutional level while it maintains a campaign to free 8 land defenders who have been jailed due to their opposition to the mine.

EWER CEDILLO / ORBIN HERNÁNDEZ / ARNOL ALEMÁN / JEREMÍAS MARTÍNEZ
KELVIN ROMERO / JOSÉ MÁRQUEZ / PORFIRIO CEDILLO / JOSÉ CEDILLO

FREE THE GUAPINOL WATER DEFENDERS!



Why is the Guapinol case so important?

The Guapinol case is important because it sets a precedent and creates a normality that water and environmental defenders should be put in jail in Honduras for an extended period of time. The Honduran dictatorship continues to send people that speak out and defend their rights to jail.

More information:

Honduran Land Defenders Receive the prestigious Lettelier-Moffitt award in Washington: <http://bit.ly/2Wq7QrI>

Tocoa is declared free of mining, but controversial mining project remains active <http://bit.ly/2vwpi2x>

<http://www.acafremin.org>

hondurassolidarity.org

Indigenous Costa Rican activist murdered



Jehry Rivera Rivera, an indigenous leader from Térraba in southern Costa Rica, was shot dead in February this year. His murder shocked Costa Rica and is associated with land disputes between the Teribe indigenous people and land owners. The Teribe were occupying and reclaiming land used by ranchers.

The assassination took place in an area in which the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) had issued protective measures for the indigenous population as a result of the constant threats they had been receiving from land owners who were seeking to appropriate their territory.

Rivera's assassination occurred almost a year after the attack on another Costa Rican indigenous leader, Sergio Rojas, who was also killed by hitmen despite protective measures that had been issued for him.

The Costa Rican Federation for Environmental Conservation (FECON) suggested that "this crime against the indigenous rights defender Jehry Rivera splashes with blood the hypocrisy of the Costa Rican state, which claims to protect human rights, but its policies leave all indigenous peoples abandoned and forgotten. Although Costa Rican legislation recognises these lands as part of the indigenous territories,

governments do not apply the law. They protect the interests of racist groups."

Human rights defenders also criticised the Costa Rican corporate media for its negative reports on land recoveries carried out by indigenous peoples. The media ignore the fact that companies have been invading and appropriating indigenous territories for years. Many journalists even encourage violence against those attempting to recover their land.

Representatives of the affected communities claimed that the inaction of the government enabled the violence and gives impunity to those committing the violence.

ENCA's friends in the village of Longo Mai in the south of Costa Rica have provided us with some background information on indigenous issues in Costa Rica related to this case and this was translated for us from the original German by ENCA member Kerstin Hansen.

Indigenous peoples make up about 2 per cent of the Costa Rican population (approximately 100,000 people) and there are 24 indigenous territories and 8 indigenous ethnic groups in the country.

The biggest problems in these territories are caused by megaprojects such as hydroelectric dams. In the south,

invasions of indigenous territories have been particularly common: for instance, 88 per cent of the Teribe's territory is not occupied by the Teribe. In the China Kicha territory (which is very close to Longo Mai) this loss of land is even higher (97 per cent). Yet in 1977 a law was passed making it illegal to sell land in these territories, and this was reinforced by the United Nations ILO 169 declaration that was signed by Costa Rica.

For the last 40 years, however, practically all Costa Rican governments have failed to enforce the legal measures to ensure indigenous autonomy. In the last ten years indigenous peoples have therefore taken matters increasingly into their own hands to reclaim lands. In March 2019, one of their activists, Sergio Rojas, was killed by twelve bullets. A few days ago, Jehry Rivera was murdered in Térraba.

And their following statement supports the views expressed above by Costa Rican rights defenders.

This is proof of institutional racism, a relic of colonialism, and an unbelievably cynical discourse which presents this country as an ecologist's paradise to the outside world while failing to seriously protect ethnic groups who follow a model of ecologically sound agricultural practices and 'buen vivir'. ♦

Sources

- Telesur, 25 February 2020, 'Costa Rica: Jehry Rivera Dies While Defending Indigenous Lands'.
- Telesur, 27 February 2020, 'Costa Rican Indigenous Denounce Government Inaction Regarding Murders'.
- Franfurter Rundschau, February 2020, 'Indigenous activist murdered in Costa Rica'.
- Roland Spendlingwimmer, 27 February 2020, personal communication.
- Agencia Delfino.cr, February 2020, Untitled news release.

Transport initiatives in Costa Rica

Despite our efforts to point out that Costa Rica is not as environmentally friendly or as labour friendly as its legislation and its reputation would suggest – see ENCA 77 and article about Jehry Rivera’s assassination in this edition – the Costa Rican government is clearly making some real attempts to move towards its pledge to decarbonise the country. As we pointed out in ENCA 73 (p.7), the country’s transport system is heavily dependent on fossil fuels, so meeting this goal will not be an easy task, but the following summary indicates some important first steps made towards the goal.

By ENCA member Martin Mowforth

Rail reactivation

In November 2019, the Ministry of Planning and Economic Policy together with the Costa Rican Railroad Institute (ICF by its Spanish initials) initiated a feasibility study into the reconstruction of 131 km of railroad between the central province of Alajuela and the Pacific Central province of Puntarenas. Such a rail line could be used to transport passengers and freight.

\$550,000 (USD) have been invested in the initiative. Elizabeth Briceño, President of ICF, said: “We are sure that this will contribute to the economic reactivation of the zone and will generate employment.” The funds will be used for the pre-feasibility and feasibility studies, market analyses, risk analysis, environmental studies, and design, administrative and budget evaluations.

The studies are expected to take seven months. The Planning Minister, Pilar Garrido, linked the project entitled ‘Railroad Reactivation to the Pacific’ with other possible rail initiatives such as the ‘Limón Electrified Freight Train (Caribbean Zone)’ with the aim of connecting by rail six of the country’s seven provinces.



Electric cars

The IONIQ model of electric cars has a range of 375 km from one single battery charge which takes up to 54 minutes. In Costa Rica, the model has been marketed for two years and 400 sales have already been achieved. This is a level of acceptance which Jerry Campos, regional manager of Hyundai, says is greater than expectations.

By the end of 2019 Costa Rica had 34 fast charging points for electric cars in operation. They are part of a network of charging stations (called ‘electrolineras’) that the government plans to expand in future years.

Of course we need to remember that not everything about electric vehicles is environmentally friendly or even socially friendly. Nevertheless, it can be said that if Costa Rica manages to change its fleet of vehicles from petrol to electric over the course of the next decade, then there is little doubt that it will be further along the path of phasing out fossil fuels than most other countries in the world. But that’s a big ‘if’.

In February this year, El Salvador also introduced its first completely electric car to the public, again with plans for later expansion. It is being marketed there by

Grupo Q which is hoping to sell five units within two months of its introduction. Currently there is only one charging point in El Salvador. At the price of \$39,800 (USD) the car is unfortunately out of the range of the vast majority of the country’s population.

Electric buses

More recently (March 2020) the government of Costa Rica has announced a pilot plan to introduce electric buses as one aspect of their plan to decarbonise the country’s economy. Three autobuses have been donated to Costa Rica by the German Cooperation Agency GTZ, and the Costa Rican government has extended the scheme to include a total of 15 electric buses by the end of this year.

Currently the idea is that they will be tested out in different parts of the country, and data will be collected on their serviceability, their usage and their profitability. The eventual aim is turn the whole public transport fleet in the country over to electric buses. Claudia Dobles, the First Lady of the country, said: “This is a clear signal that the sector wants to modernise and provide an improved service to its users.”

The pilot plan requires the Costa Rican Institute of Electricity to provide the necessary accompanying technical electrical infrastructure. Additionally, the National Learning Institute is to provide training for drivers and mechanics; and a special tariff will be charged for electric bus users.

A group of transport businesses are involved in the plan and each participating business is expected to purchase at least one of the 12 new buses. The transport businesses have been pressuring the government to promote policies for the implementation of bus-only lanes and favourable financial credit lines for green initiatives such as bus renewals and operating costs.

The National Decarbonisation Plan presented by President Carlos Alvarado’s government in February 2019 envisages the elimination of the use of fossil fuels in Costa Rica by the year 2050.



***A report on the conference,
and especially on ENCA's
role in it, by ENCA member
Lucy Goodman.***

ENCA had a stall at the 15th annual Adelante! Latin America Conference on Saturday 23 November 2019 at Friends House, London. The conference presented its usual diversity of international speakers who demonstrated their devotion to improving the political and social reality in Latin America and the Caribbean.

The opening plenary focused on how Trump's administration is using military aggression, 'lawfare' and economic sanctions to force a reactionary agenda from Brazil, Argentina and Bolivia, to Honduras, Ecuador and Mexico.

A specially recorded Q&A with social critic and political activist Noam Chomsky, one of the most cited academics alive, was a popular afternoon session. The video of the

interview can be seen at:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S L2lpMNTz1A>

Another well attended meeting discussed Bolivia following the forced resignation of Evo Morales' last year. Evo was the country's first president to come from its indigenous population and championed indigenous rights, anti-imperialism, and environmentalism.

This year's conference marked the 60th anniversary of the Cuban Revolution and celebrated the country's achievements in health, education and internationalism throughout the ongoing, illegal US blockade. Directed by Ana Hurtado and passionately introduced by the Cuban Minister of Culture, the film 'Herencia' premiered during the lunch break. Watching this film really increased my appetite to soak up that colourful culture and hear those Cuban grooves for myself, never mind the fascinating history.

Other highlights included 'Nicaragua: For the many, not the few' a session about Nicaragua's poverty reduction

programmes, and 'Environment and sustainability in Latin America: Achievements and challenges in Bolivia, Brazil and Cuba,' with Wendy Emmett from CSC, also an ENCA member.

We didn't exactly push people into becoming members of ENCA (despite it being such a bargain!) but our lovely stall got plenty of interest thanks mainly to Rita who brought some fabulous home-made creations for us to sell. We had some fully decomposable dried flower garlands, jars of Salsa de Tomatilla, and some pouches of very fragrant herbs – all from Rita's allotment. I think I was the best customer of the day buying at least one of everything. Lots of conversations were also sparked by the 'Free Seeds' Rita brought for people to take away and plant. These included fruits, beans and flowers that are typical to Central America but which will grow in British climes too. Sheila brought a mound of ENCA newsletters for people to buy and had a lot less to carry home, so that was a result too.

The Latin America Conference enables great networking between organisations, awareness of each other's campaigns and promotion of upcoming events. There is a warm atmosphere of solidarity and we hope to return next year both with the stall and with some ENCA members leading workshops.



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Meeting Dates 2020

March 29th | June 21st | October 18th

ENCA meetings are held at the NSC's office at the Durham Road Centre, London, N7 7DT. Meetings are held on Sundays from 12:30 pm to 5 pm and we start with lunch which is made up of whatever people attending choose to bring to share.