

ENCA



Environmental Network *for* Central America

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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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Association of Economic and Social Development (ADES), El Salvador

Is Mining Money Behind the Arrest of Salvadoran Water Defenders?

By John Cavanagh, January 26, 2023

*The following article taken from inequality.org is by John Cavanagh, a Senior Advisor at the Institute for Policy Studies. In 2021 Robin Broad and John Cavanagh wrote **'The Water Defenders: How Ordinary People Saved a Country From Corporate Greed'**, published by Beacon Press, Boston. Here he ties together the struggle for the metal mining ban in El Salvador with the struggle for a fair water distribution system and the government's persecution of the water defenders. We are grateful to John for granting us permission to include the article in the ENCA Newsletter.*

Human rights and environmental activists across the globe are mobilizing in support of five men detained in El Salvador on charges that appear aimed at silencing opposition to mining. The arrestees — Miguel Ángel Gámez, Alejandro Laínez García, Pedro Antonio Rivas Laínez, Antonio Pacheco, and Saúl Agustín Rivas Ortega — were among the leaders of a campaign to block mining activities in El Salvador that would have enriched a few while endangering the nation's water supply.

In 2017, their campaign shook the rapacious global extractives industry to its core by winning the world's first [ban on metals mining](#). Robin Broad and I chronicled this thrilling victory in our book, ***The Water Defenders: How Ordinary People Saved a Country From Corporate Greed*** [published by Beacon Press, Boston, in 2021].

But now it's clear this David versus Goliath struggle is not over. El Salvador's Attorney General claims the January 11 arrests are related to an alleged murder over 30 years ago during El Salvador's brutal civil war. These charges are beyond dubious.

As more than 250 organisations from 29 countries point out in a [joint statement](#), the government has never bothered to prosecute members of the military responsible for dozens of civil war-era human rights violations. These include a 1981 massacre that left 30 dead and 189

disappeared in the arrestees' community in northern El Salvador.

"This further raises questions about whether the Attorney General's true motivation is to attempt to silence these Water Defenders, especially in light of the current administration's crusade to criminalize, persecute, and demobilize its political opponents," reads the international statement.

Through my 14 years of collaboration with the water defenders of El Salvador, I've gotten to know one of the five men arrested — Antonio Pacheco — particularly well. His story reflects the courage, creativity, and perseverance of a movement that has inspired fellow activists around the world.

For over two decades, Pacheco has led the Association of Economic and Social Development (ADES), the organisation that anchored the fight against mining in the northern province of Cabañas.

The mining corporation that had come to Cabañas was the Vancouver-based Pacific Rim. What they wanted was to extract the rich veins of gold buried near the Lempa River, the water source for more than half of El Salvador's 6.2 million people.

Pacheco initially thought mining might be good for this economically poor province. But then he learned about the

dangers for public health and agriculture from popular educator Marcelo Rivera. They and others, including tireless community leader Vidalina Morales, began informing their impoverished, rural community about the issue. They also raised funds to bring in outside experts, including a leading international hydrologist who issued a devastating critique of the mining company's environmental impact statement.

In time, the activists built up a National Roundtable on Metals Mining that won over a strong majority of the public and rallied the Catholic Church, farmers, small businesses, and labour and environmental groups to oppose mining.

Then the company struck back. In 2009, Pacific Rim (a Canadian firm later bought by Australia-based OceanaGold) filed a lawsuit against the government of El Salvador, eventually demanding \$250 million in compensation for the loss of profits they'd expected to make from their mining project there. For the cash-strapped country, that was the equivalent of 40 percent of the national public health budget.

This legal blackmail occurred amidst an explosion of violence against anti-mining activists, including the murder of Pacheco's fellow campaign leader Marcelo Rivera. Several people have been convicted of Rivera's killing, but to this day the "intellectual authors" have never been held accountable.

Pacheco also faced personal death threats. In the wake of Rivera's assassination, one note read: "The hour has come...[Pacheco] for the bomb in your own house and of your pals, now is the hour you pay for what you did...[You are] the next like Marcelo Rivera."

Pro-mining forces also tried to buy Pacheco off through offers of

prostitutes and other bribes. He didn't blink. Instead, Pacheco focused on broadening the campaign's base, building relationships with the right-wing ARENA party's environment minister, conservative bishops, and other unlikely allies.

He and Morales also encouraged my organisation, the Institute for Policy Studies and MiningWatch Canada, to create International Allies Against Mining in El Salvador, a coalition that has brought outside attention to the campaign and pressure on the mining company.

In 2016, the water defenders who had paid such a high price for their resistance won their first measure of justice: a three-person tribunal ruled unanimously against the mining company. This victory emboldened efforts behind a ban on metals mining, efforts that paid off in 2017 with a stunning, unanimous vote in the Salvadoran legislature.

Now, Pacheco and others who have inspired defenders of water and democracy around the world sit in jail cells.

Why would a government imprison heroes who have saved their country by saving its rivers? El Salvador's president, Nayib Bukele, is an authoritarian populist who has demonized environmentalists and suspended a wide range of civil liberties, leading to widespread arbitrary detentions [See ENCA 87].

His targeting of the water defenders could be linked to Bukele's mismanagement of national finances, in part through his disastrous marriage of El Salvador's currency to Bitcoin, which has created tremendous pressure to generate revenue from any source — even if it destroys the environment.

Before his arrest, Pacheco was one of several people who had reported suspicious appearances by unknown individuals offering to lease farmers' land for exorbitant amounts of money and provide funding for municipal social programmes in the mining region of Cabañas. These appearances are just one sign that the Bukele government could be moving toward increased collaboration with transnational mining institutions and overturning the mining ban.

El Salvador-based environmentalist Pedro Cabezas and Canadian journalist Owen Schalk have also reported that two mayors from the Cabañas mining region say they met with officials of the Exports and Investment Promotion Agency of El Salvador who told them that mining will soon be reintroduced.

In their joint statement, the international organisations call on Bukele's government to "drop the charges against the five water defenders and otherwise release them from prison to await their trial."

Through incredible courage, backed up by strong international solidarity, these water defenders have won seemingly unwinnable battles against formidable economic and political forces. The fight must continue to gain their freedom and keep mining out of El Salvador.

Notes:

- *Robin Broad and John Cavanagh's book — details above — is the definitive story behind the run-up to and the background of El Salvador's metals mining ban, but the subject is also widely covered in a range of articles in Chapter 5 ('Mining') of The Violence of Development website as well as in a number of previous ENCA Newsletters (51, 52, 53, 56 and 59).*

Update on the detention of the ADES Five water defenders

John Cavanagh's article above was written in January this year. In August this year the five detained water defenders of Santa Marta and the Association of Economic and Social Development (ADES) celebrated a minor victory as they were released from jail into house arrest. This meant that they were free of the horrific conditions in the Salvadoran penitentiary system and that they were reunited with their families. The court order also required the detainees to be released into hospital for medical evaluation, but the General Directorate of Correctional Centres of El Salvador failed to comply with the order and released them directly into their homes instead.

In June this year, before their release, we received an email letter from one of ENCA's most prominent associates in El Salvador tying together the links between the arrest of the ADES 5, the current repressive state of exception in El Salvador (reported in ENCA 87) and the threat of an end to the prohibition of metal mining in El Salvador. We are not using our associate's name because of the high possibility of reprisals against him resulting from his information and opinions. His letter, translated for the ENCA Newsletter by ENCA member Jill Powis, is given below. (Thanks Jill.)

"Anyone who criticizes the state of emergency which has been imposed on an apparently permanent basis suffers police harassment and persecution.

A number of organisations (Institutions such as UCA, FESPAD and CRISTOSAL) have documented a range of human rights violations in El Salvador during this state of emergency. For example, they estimate that as many as 66,000 people suffered arbitrary detention without an investigation or arrest warrant, during which 170 have died. According to personal testimony from the victims themselves, human rights abuses committed in the prisons include physical and psychological torture, beatings, electric shocks, suffocation, and malnutrition.

The Movement of Victims of the Regime in El Salvador (MOVIR) presented a letter to the offices of the Presidential Commissioner for Human Rights, Andrés Guzmán, asking him to review the cases of innocent people arrested under the state of emergency.

In public statements, the Presidential Commissioner has repeatedly claimed to be unaware of human rights violations in El Salvador and is therefore complicit in the current policy of terror. In El Salvador, people continue to be disappeared and, despite the fact that this has been reported to the authorities and a search association

has even been set up in response, the State has shown itself to be indifferent to the issue.

In the case of the environmentalists [*here he is referring to the water defenders, the Santa Marta 5*], they have now been in arbitrary detention for seven months. On 16 May, the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders requested their release, but the Salvadoran State has refused.

The Sensuntepeque Investigating Court (*Juzgado de Instrucción*) has twice refused to review their detention and has still not held the special hearing to review the measures handed down by the Criminal Chamber of Cojutepeque on 30 June.

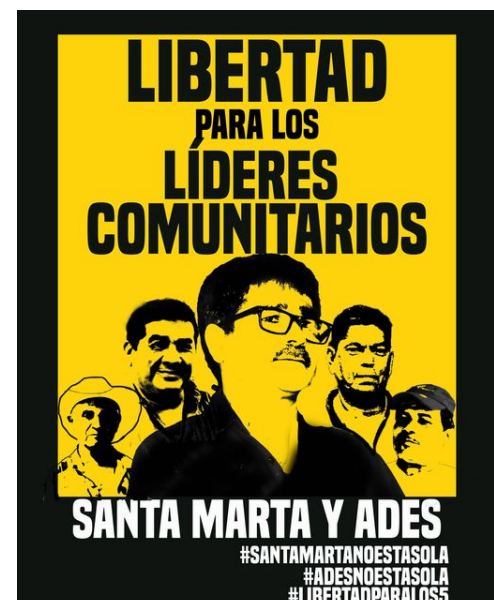
Grassroots organisations have asked the Prosecutor's Office to withdraw the charges against the environmental leaders of Santa Marta and ADES.

Their request is based on the lack of real evidence incriminating the leaders and environmentalists and on the provisions of the National Reconciliation Law of 1992. The organisations also point out that the criminalization of environmental defenders is an abuse of the judicial process motivated by plans to recommence metal mining.

If the Salvadoran government continues to ignore the calls of the Special Rapporteur, El Salvador could be considered to be in contempt of this body.

The President has now sent 7,000 soldiers and 1,000 police officers to Cabañas, further consolidating their presence in the municipality of San Isidro and the community of Santa Marta, both centres of resistance to mining companies.

This deployment of state forces, far from guaranteeing security, is instead intimidating and terrorizing the inhabitants, as innocent people are being detained, accused of being criminals."



Environmental Racism?: Pesticide banned in UK and EU shipped in vast quantities to Costa Rica.

By ENCA secretary Sheila Amoo-Gottfried

Sheila has summarised the results of an investigation made largely by Greenpeace and Public Eye into what she calls 'environmental racism' by European agri-business transnational companies like Syngenta which have been sending fungicides that are banned here in Europe to countries of the Global South such as Costa Rica in this case.

Cipreses, a town on the fertile slopes of the Irazú volcano, north of San José, traditionally held ceremonies at the Plantón spring, praying for rain for the crops. Nine years ago, Isabel Méndez noticed a strong pesticide smell at the spring. She raised her concerns to ASADA (the local water administrative association), but these were brushed off.

Chlorothalonil, the chemical used widely as a fungicide is banned as a potential carcinogen in the UK and EU and yet is shipped in large quantities to Costa Rica, and other countries in the Global South, by European companies like Syngenta.

Méndez, determined to fight for her community, partnered with Ricardo Rivera, a former ASADA administrator, and other concerned residents to form EcoCipreses. Noticing that many people were getting sick in such a small place, samples were sent for testing and scientists confirmed the water springs were contaminated in Cipreses and the neighbouring town of Santa Rosa. EcoCipreses advocacy led to national calls for a ban on Chlorothalonil, following these scientific reports. The government issued instructions not to drink tap water, and since then trucks have been rolling in to deliver drinking water to the affected communities.

"For nine years now", says Méndez, "I've been fighting with other women in Cipreses to get Chlorothalonil banned, and we are making progress on what used to feel impossible: Costa Rica's Constitutional Court has given the Executive Branch of Government a deadline of six months to issue a ban."

This ruling came into force in June 2023, but Isabel Méndez is well aware that Costa Rica's complex decision-making system which requires relevant government ministries to all agree to the ban, along with the strong lobbying pressure coming from the agrochemical industry, could seriously delay definitive action.



In the meantime, to keep the pressure up, she has launched an online petition, gathering more than 52,500 signatures to put pressure on government ministers. "These last years have been very tough on my community. Besides never having enough water, my daughter, Fiorella, had polyps at 16 and has now, at 23, lost her sense of smell and taste. One of my neighbours has tongue cancer and several young people have been diagnosed with stomach cancer. It's alarming.... To make matters worse, some locals with the support of the pesticide lobby regularly harass, intimidate and threaten us with death because of our activism."

EcoCipreses has concerns about the broader health and environmental impact on the whole region, which

produces 80 per cent of Costa Rica's vegetables, using similar quantities of fungicides, vastly exceeding safe consumption limits. The solutions are not easy. No-one knows how long people have been drinking contaminated water or what the effects on their health will be. No one knows how widespread the contamination is across the country or how the pesticide traces can be removed from the springs already found to be tainted.

So, Isabel Méndez and her colleagues are determined to maintain maximum pressure. "As hard as it is, as hard as it's been, we won't give up because it isn't just Cipreses' and Santa Rosa's springs ... there could be plenty more.

We feel we can't let Syngenta use countries like ours – from Latin America to Africa – as dumping grounds for chemicals they can't sell legally in Europe."

Sources

- Unearthed, (June 2023), "'Water is sacred too': How a pesticide banned in Europe robbed a Costa Rican town of its drinking water", *Greenpeace, Public Eye*, <https://www.publiceye.ch/en/topics/pesticides/chlorothalonil-a-banned-pesticide-exported-from-europe>
- Euronews, 26 June 2023, 'The EU and UK exported 1,000 tonnes of a banned pesticide to poorer countries, investigation reveals', *Euronews*.
- Vinicio Chacón, 20 septiembre 2023, 'Más de 52 mil personas piden prohibición de Clorotalonil', *Semanario Universidad*.
- Eko, 16 August 2023, Online petition: 'EU: stop spreading banned chemicals'.

Migration hits Panama and Costa Rica

By ENCA member Martin Mowforth

Both Panama and Costa Rica are under pressure from the wave of migrants passing through the inhospitable Darién Gap at the south of the region heading, mostly, for the border between Mexico and the United States, to the north of the region. In the years from 2014 to 2020, we heard of the primary sources of immigration to the US being the Central American countries of the so-called Northern Triangle of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. But in more recent years, the wave of migrants from the Northern Triangle has been swollen by a new wave originating from south of the Central American region.

According to official sources in Panama, up to early September 2023, more than 348,000 people had crossed the Darién Gap into Panama, a figure 100,000 greater than the figure for the whole of 2022. Of these, 60,000 were children. Almost a half of this total were Venezuelan, and other significant South American and Caribbean nationalities included Haitians, Ecuadoreans and Colombians. There was also a growing number of people from China and the African continent, especially from Cameroon.

In September, the government of Panama announced that it aimed to intensify its deportation of migrants who enter the country via the Darién Gap from Colombia in an effort to put a stop to irregular immigration into the country. These numbers continue to increase despite the fact that the US has warned that it will not allow entry into the US to anyone who entered Panama through irregular channels.

The Panamanian director of Migration, Samira Gozaine, stated that “within our capability and our budget, we shall increase actions to gradually and progressively increase the deportations

and expulsions of migrants who irregularly enter the country.” But she warned of a lack of resources to carry out the newly strengthened policy to the full: “obviously we have limited resources. If 3,000 people enter, we would like to deport those 3,000, but that’s not an operational possibility.”

The Panamanian government has also said that it will strengthen security measures in the frontier settlements and will change the locations of some police control posts. When they cross the frontier, the migrants still have to contend with wild animals, wide rivers, dense jungle and criminal gangs, although with the help of international organisations the government has established a number of posts throughout the country to help migrants.

In September this year, the Costa Rican government declared a state of emergency in response to the excessive number of migrants (more than 386,000 since January) who have entered the country through its southern border with Panama.

Similar to the efforts of the Panamanian government, the Costa Rican President Rodrigo Chaves announced that deportations and security measures would be increased. Rights groups such as the Human Rights Watch, on the other hand, described these measures as: “misguided and will contribute to more precarious situations for migrants in transit.”

Human Rights Watch Americas director Juanita Goebertus explained that the most serious issue underlying this hardened policy is that “people whose lives are at risk, whose personal integrity is at risk, cannot access the protections

they have a right to.” Even former Costa Rican President Laura Chinchilla described the state of emergency as “misguided” and “highly counterproductive”.



In July, the University of Costa Rica’s fact-checking project, Doble Check, found that President Chaves’ public statements about foreigners in the country “presented a distorted image of the number of migrants in Costa Rica and the state resources directed toward that population,” while failing to recognise the economic contributions made by immigrants.

The United Nations Office for International Migration has called for collective action between Central American governments to provide humanitarian assistance.

Sources:

- Manuel Bermúdez, 08.09.23, ‘Panamá seeks to put a stop to the passage of irregular immigrants through the Darién jungle’, *Semanario Universidad*, San José.
- NACLA staff, 28.09.23, Untitled email note, North American Congress on Latin America, New York.
- United Nations News, 05.09.23, ‘Record crossings of perilous Darién Gap underscores need for safe migration pathways’, United Nations

FECON Report from Costa Rica: Tourism and Private Development encroach on Public Land and Local Livelihoods on the Guanacaste Coast

In 2022 FECON – Federación Costarricense para la Conservación del Ambiente – contacted ENCA with a funding proposal for a project on the Guanacaste coast of Costa Rica. FECON are a national network for Costa Rican environmental groups and report on issues from Agribusiness to Eco-feminism. ENCA was able to support them with a \$2,000 grant towards the project. FECON have now reported back on how that money was spent – an impressive small budget project with far reaching implications. For the newsletter, their report was translated and summarised by ENCA member James Watson. August 2023



“Through approaching the communities, we hope the people will identify the most important territorial elements or spaces for their existence as a community, for which it is worth participating and mobilising socially in the organising processes developed by the Municipality” (FECON 2023 Report)

Guanacaste is a province of north-west Costa Rica with an extensive coastline popular with tourists. FECON’s proposal highlighted the pressures that tourism development has put on the local community and environment. Regional leaders had come to them with concerns that tourism and private interests were obtaining development permits on supposedly public-access land, in processes that apparently use wealth to exclude and marginalise locals. They were particularly concerned about loss of access to and eviction from homes on coastal land. They state that tourism has displaced all other forms of economic activity – with traditional fishermen being pushed out while sport fishing and the marina booms. Forest, water resources, and local fauna including breeding sea turtles are also threatened by the unregulated spread.

FECON asked for US\$2,000 to support an information gathering ‘Diagnóstico’ project to engage with local communities, gather their concerns, and systematise them in documents that might kick-start their struggle. ENCA was happy to be able to send this money over in late 2022 and FECON have recently sent back a full report on how the money was spent.

FECON’s work with this little parcel of money has been impressive. Their report is an excellent example of high-quality

local work to build a firm foundation for a long-term campaign that empowers people otherwise excluded from development processes – at all levels from local to national.

Through four trips to the area, FECON have strengthened community connections with multiple face to face meetings and a Facebook presence. They started a media campaign ‘Playas de Guanacaste - Recuperemos la Zona Pública’ and were featured on La Voz de Guanacaste radio as part of a series on gentrification. They have built a local network of contacts affected by the issues, who via FECON now have a bigger platform on which to stand and advocate for their land.

FECON’s report shows an impressive commitment to systematic research and data gathering. They formalised an interview guide to systematically gather data from key people in the area. Visits were made to the coast and ground observations and satellite images used to estimate the encroachment of development on publicly accessible land.

FECON’s members include lecturers and sociologists with connections to Costa Rica’s National University (UNA) and the Technological Institute of Costa Rica where Tourism Management students have been given lectures on the Guanacaste story.

FECON have worked to link the local struggle to national level advocacy. They state that the local government of Santa Cruz has failed to carry out its responsibilities delimiting and protecting public land. In response to this FECON’s representatives have made a complaint against Santa Cruz to the Costa Rican Attorney General.

As FECON generates more local data and connections, they are putting themselves in an excellent position to continue this advocacy work in to the future, hopefully rebalancing the relationship between local less well-off community members and more wealthy, often external private interests and giving a voice to the easily marginalised for whom Guanacaste is both their home and source of livelihood.



OFRANEH'S Woes

In September 2023, ENCA was invited to a roundtable meeting in London with Melissa Martinez, a prominent member of OFRANEH (Black Fraternal Organisation of Honduras). The meeting was organised by Peace Brigades International (PBI, www.peacebrigades.org) with whom ENCA has worked before on issues specifically related to the difficulties encountered by the Garífuna population on the northern coast of Honduras.

ENCA member Jill Powis attended the meeting on behalf of ENCA and wrote the following summary for the newsletter. Jill had previously worked with PBI as an accompanier of human rights defenders in Colombia and with the Honduras Accompaniment Project (PROAH by its Spanish initials) in Honduras, especially with OFRANEH from 2011 to 2013.

26th September 2023

Melissa comes from Punta Gorda, located on Roatán, one of the Bay Islands off Honduras' Atlantic coast. It was the very first community of Garífunas, who were exiled there at the end of the 18th century from Saint Vincent by the British before most moved to the mainland. Its other (more unfortunate) distinction is that it is the only Garífuna community not to have formal titles to any of its ancestral land, which makes it very vulnerable, particularly as the Roatán coast is coveted by the tourism industry. Only last year, the Punta Gorda community moved to reclaim ancestral land which appeared to have been illegally sold, and two months later, in November, was

violently evicted by the state security forces.¹

OFRANEH has been defending the cultural and territorial rights of the Garífuna people since 1978.

Their territory has come under heavy pressure particularly since the 2009 coup from the government promotion of tourism and extractive industries on the Atlantic coast without due consultation. For trying to resist the illegal appropriation of their land, OFRANEH members have suffered criminalisation, harassment and assassinations – to date 48 have been murdered.

OFRANEH has taken a number of cases to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), which in 2015 ruled that the state of Honduras had violated the right to collective property of the Garífuna communities of Punta Piedra and Triunfo de la Cruz. However, the government has so far failed to comply with the IACHR's rulings on land titles for these communities.

Such has been the level of frustration that the community of Triunfo de la Cruz in the end decided to take matters into their own hands and occupy the land in question. The following month, on 18 July 2020, five men who had been involved in this action, including four community leaders, were disappeared, reportedly by armed men dressed in the uniforms of the Police Investigation Directorate (DPI). Melissa criticised the fact that, despite the election of President Xiomara Castro in January 2022, which had had the potential to dramatically improve the human rights situation in the country, there had been no progress in implementing the IACHR's ruling, nor in clarifying what had happened to the five activists of Triunfo de la Cruz.

Since the new President's election, there had in fact been an alarming escalation in attacks on human rights defenders, including OFRANEH members. According to Global Witness, in 2022 Honduras once again had the highest rate of killings of land and environmental defenders in the world,



ENCA member Jill Powis with Melissa Martinez in London

and this shows no signs of abating in 2023.ⁱⁱ The murder this year of no fewer than three Guapinol land and water defenders, including the two wrongly-imprisoned Dominguez brothers, illustrates this starkly (see ENCA Newsletter 88) – Melissa said that they had been released only to be murdered.

One of the most sinister attacks on OFRANEH this year happened as recently as 19 September, when Melissa had just arrived here for her advocacy tour of Europe. Four men armed with assault rifles surrounded the house of the organisation's coordinator Miriam Miranda in the Garífuna territory of Vallecito, Colón. Fortunately, they were intercepted by Miriam's security team and fled the scene, but not before they had threatened to come back to "finish the job."

This is only the latest act perpetrated against Miriam, who has suffered criminalisation, threats and attacks for years.ⁱⁱⁱ Melissa stressed the fact that the Honduran state was responsible for ensuring Miriam's safety but was still failing to do so. She pointed out that, although there had been a change of government with the new President Xiomara Castro, the personnel of the state remained broadly the same.

Melissa's home island, Roatán, is the site of one of the Zones for Employment and Economic Development (ZEDEs), autonomous areas with a private government and their own fiscal, regulatory and legal system. Melissa said that the Roatán ZEDE, named Prospera^{iv},

again imposed without any discussion with affected communities, already had a hotel; and building works had caused damage to trees and reefs. They had also affected the water quality for the nearby community of Crawfish Rock, and Melissa feared that its inhabitants would be forced to abandon their land if Prospera expanded further.^v

Although the legislation enabling the ZEDEs was repealed by Xiomara Castro shortly after she came to power as she considered them a threat to Honduran sovereignty, the existing ZEDEs have sunset clauses of as long as 50 years. In the case of Prospera, the investors were threatening to sue the Honduran government for up to \$11 billion, a third of Honduras' GDP, if they were forced to abandon the project.^{vi}

Although OFRANEH was fully engaged in the relentless struggle to protect and recover Garífuna territory, Melissa stressed that it was also committed to "building life", promoting its culture, including indigenous medicine. In response to COVID it had established health houses, where it used traditional practices to address a number of ailments including diabetes and high blood pressure, particular problems for the Garífunas. At these houses they also addressed issues such as health education and domestic violence.

A focal point for their culture was Vallecito in Colón, 1,500 hectares of land which OFRANEH managed to regain from drugs traffickers. It should be a safe haven but that was where Miriam

Miranda was recently attacked. Nonetheless, Melissa regards it as a paradise – a community where the Garífunas practise traditional agriculture "to save the land" – growing food, raising animals to eat and distributing them to other communities. They began coconut production two or three years ago and the first coconut factory in Honduras will be in operation in Vallecito very soon, in addition to a casabe [cassava bread] factory. Melissa said that they hoped to one day create a type of Vallecito in all the Garífuna communities, and declared "I will continue to fight for sustainable communities, a healthier way of life, for our people to be safer, and to keep our culture and traditions intact."

Melissa stressed repeatedly the need for international support to protect the Garífuna and their ancestral ways of being.

Peace Brigades International has suggested concrete actions that people can take in support of environmental and land defenders, including the Garífunas. Please refer to: <https://bit.ly/3QP2Hny>

ENCA member Sheila Royce of Amnesty International has sent us a copy of the letter sent by Amnesty to the Honduran government. It can be read at: <https://bit.ly/3GgFsOb>

i. For more information see [Garífuna fight land confiscations in Punta Gorda, Roatán - New York Amsterdam News](#)

ii. [Standing firm: The Land and Environmental Defenders on the frontlines of the climate crisis | Global Witness](#). See also ENCA Newsletter 87 (April 2023) 'In Honduras, the killings continue'. Also see: "Próspera is a private city and [special economic zone](#) on the island of [Roatán](#) in the [Central American](#) state of [Honduras](#). The city is an autonomous zone with private

government and its own fiscal, regulatory, and legal architecture.^[1]"

iii. [\[WHRD Alert\] HONDURAS / Siege and threats against the life of Miriam Miranda, OFRANEH coordinator and Garífuna defender. – IM-Defenders \(im-defensoras.org\)](#)

4. [Zone for Employment and Economic Development - Wikipedia](#)

In April 2022, the Honduran Congress repealed the Constitutional Amendments and Laws that created the ZEDE

regime.^{[18][19]} However, the three existing ZEDE are grandfathered in for a period of 50 years, as per their Legal Stability Agreements, Article 45 of the ZEDE Organic Law, and the Bilateral Investment Treaty with the Government of Kuwait.^[20]

v. For more information see ['Go home': Honduran islanders fight against crypto colonialists | Honduras | The Guardian](#)

vi. [Próspera Global \(prospera.co\)](#)

A round-up of Central American news of environmental significance

Compiled by ENCA member Martin Mowforth. Canals, wet and dry, are becoming popular in Central America; rail is making a comeback; turtles score a victory; and foreign intervention continues, but at least it isn't military and underhand from North America.

Second port of Honduras will be upgraded by a Chinese company

After President Xiomara Castro and Foreign Minister Enrique Reina visited China in June this year and after the cutting of Honduran ties with Taiwan, it was recently announced that a Chinese company, Harbour Engineering Company (CHEC), has been hired to upgrade the country's second port of Henecán on the coast of the Gulf of Fonseca. The project will be financed by the Bank of Exports and Imports of China and will cost \$240 million.

The company will dredge the port, widen the dock area and install two postpanamax bays. Honduran authorities hope that the upgraded port will be able to exploit some of the trade being lost by Panama as a result of the restrictions placed on the number of boats which can pass through that country's interoceanic canal.

Is the Panama Canal drying up?

That's a question that ENCA asked in ENCA Newsletter No. 80 in November 2020 in an article by ENCA member Lucy Goodman. She explained that the canal needs an extraordinary amount of fresh water (20 million gallons of fresh water is used on every passing ship) and at that time water levels were historically low. Climate change and a series of very dry years were considered to be the culprit.

Since then, the Panama Canal drought has continued along with restrictions on the number of boats passing through it, causing shortages of many goods and raising prices. James Meadway (for *Open Democracy*, 21.09.23) reported that canal authorities had said that restrictions on ships using the canal would probably remain in place into 2024, as an extended dry season in Central America is expected to last well into 2024.

Water levels in Lake Gatún in September this year were around 10 feet down on typical September levels. Quite apart from the ramifications of this situation for international trade, the demand for fresh water from local and national users also suffers restrictions.

Return of the railway in Nicaragua?

[From the NSC Newsletter, October 2023] Nicaragua's railway system from León to Granada came to an abrupt end in 1992 when the neoliberal government of Violetta Chamorro ripped up the lines that had been first laid down in the 1860s. A recently signed trade agreement between Nicaragua and the People's Republic of China, however, includes a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the Chinese company CCECC for the design and construction of a railway line to run from Managua to Granada. The MOU also includes the drafting of plans for a Corinto – Managua – Bluefields line (450 km) linking the country's Pacific and Atlantic coasts, effectively a 'dry canal'.

Saudi Arabian interest in a Costa Rican canal?

[From Tico Times, 12 August 2023] The government of Saudi Arabia has recently shown an interest in the idea of the construction of a 'dry canal' from the Pacific coast to the Atlantic coast in Costa Rica. The Saudi interest has revived interest within the country – the idea first emerged in 2016. The project would require the construction of a 315 km long, 10 lane highway with an estimated cost of between \$10 and \$15 billion US dollars. Needless to say, there would be many environmental effects of such a mega-project, and suitably rigorous environmental impact assessment studies would be needed before work began. Although this is the revival of a former

idea, the scheme remains a very long way off from reality.

Saudi funds for solar energy in Belize

It has been reported that a \$77 million loan from the Saudi Fund will provide the finance for the construction of a 60 Megawatt solar power plant in Belize which the government hopes will reduce dependence on external sources of energy. Prime Minister John Briceño explained that the government will own and operate the plant and will sell the electricity to Belize Electricity Limited (BEL). That money will go to the operating company and will be used to pay off the Saudi loan rather than BEL paying the Federal Electricity Commission of Mexico for the purchase of its electricity, as happens currently.

The Pacific Train in El Salvador

The idea of constructing a Pacific Train (Tren del Pacífico) in El Salvador to connect the north-west of the country (the port of Acajutla) with the south (the port of La Unión) has been a project of interest to the last three governments of the country. At a recent summit in Brussels between the European Union and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), the project received a major boost with the possibility of funding from the EU. A final decision about the funding will be made in 2024 and is currently dependent on the production of feasibility studies which are being carried out by a consortium of Korean companies.

The funding would also cover the construction of a monorail system in the metropolitan area of San Salvador.

And finally, a story of dysfunctional capitalism as it runs up against endangered turtles. >>

Costa Rican court upholds sea turtle habitat protection

In 2020 the Municipality of Nicoya in Costa Rica regulated to restrict construction within five km of the beaches of Ostional, Nosara, Pelada and Guiones in the Ostional National Wildlife Refuge in Guanacaste province. As crucial nesting grounds for various sea turtle species, these beaches are protected so that the turtles are not affected by building height and/or light pollution which could lead to reptile dysfunction.

JBR Capital Ventures filed a lawsuit in 2020 which challenged the regulations on the grounds that the building rules were illegal as there existed no regulatory plan for Nosara and no general management plan for the Wildlife Refuge. The Administrative Court of the Second Judicial Circuit of San José, however, dismissed the lawsuit citing municipal responsibility to address local environmental issues.

Troubles in Panama

During late October this year, we began to receive reports of major troubles in Panama. The troubles have largely taken the form of road blockages where massive protests have brought much of the country to a standstill. The protests are against the government's approval of a contract with a Canadian mining firm (First Quantum Minerals) for the operation of Central America's largest open-pit copper mine.

The contract gives the company a huge land concession (almost the size of the city of Miami), is a threat to the environment, takes away sovereignty from the country and grants the company the right to prevent flights over the mine up to a height of 3,000 meters.

Because of the limit on space in this edition of the ENCA Newsletter, our readers are referred to The Violence of Development website (www.theviolenceofdevelopment.com) where a longer article on this topic was recently uploaded.

Center for Exchange and Solidarity (CIS) invites you to participate in the 15TH CIS International Election Observer Mission

The CIS has 30 years of Election Observer experience, and without a doubt this year's elections will bring new challenges. For example, a new law has been passed that will allow Salvadorans abroad to vote with expired identity documents or passports, leaving the doors open for fraud. And in another step backward, electoral laws can now be changed up until the last minute. A previous law that CIS observers recommended prohibiting changes in electoral laws and rules the year prior to the elections has been overturned, allowing for rules to be changed including up to the day of the elections. We invite you to be part of this mission to observe and make recommendations to strengthen the democratic process that was opened with the Peace Accords in 1992.

The CIS program will include meetings and trainings for observers as well as opportunities to visit communities and learn more about Salvadoran reality. Observers will meet with the Supreme Electoral Tribunal, the official electoral body in charge of elections, Political Parties competing in the elections, the Human Rights Procurators Office, and other institutions. CIS observers will be well trained and play an important role sharing objective observations and recommendations for reforms.

To request an application form, more info and to send application: electionmission@cis-elsalvador.org

Criteria for participation:

- Commitment to free and fair elections.
- Independent and objective (no political party affiliation in El Salvador permitted)
- Spanish is only a requirement for long term volunteers, it is not a requirement for week-long observers.
- Spanish and/or previous election observer experience a plus.



The Bird Brigade

Join our in-country delegation to explore the Solentiname archipelago of Nicaragua and its astonishing concentration of birdlife!

10-19 Feb 2024

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 Promoted by the Nicaragua
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This will be the 18th annual Latin American Conference. Recent conferences have attracted such speakers as Dr Aleida Guevara, Jeremy Corbyn MP, Ken Loach, Alberto Juantorena, Olympic gold medallist, Tariq Ali, Noam Chomsky, Walter Sandino, Robin Blackburn, Tariq Ali, Prof. Ernesto Laclau, Frances O'Grady, Mariela Castro, and many others.

Bringing together experts, academics, trade unionists, politicians, and activists from the UK, Europe and Latin America. With info and stalls from 30+ UK-based organisations.

Latin America continues to show a better world is possible – putting the needs of people and planet ahead of corporate greed. The continent is shifting to the left – with progressive governments elected in recent years in Brazil, Bolivia, Honduras, Mexico and even Colombia. Yet the US Empire is continuing with its sanctions, blockades and illegal 'regime change' efforts against countries including Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua. We can learn from and take inspiration from these mass movements across the region and show real

solidarity in the struggle for sovereignty and against neo-liberalism and US domination.

Features over 20 seminars including:

- Cuba: Standing firm against the empire
- Colombia, Brazil, Honduras: Left winning again in Latin America
- Chavez 25: Spark for 21st century socialism
- Latin America & the Caribbean: Zone of Peace or US base in the new cold war?
- Bolivia: How people-power overturned a coup & built a new society
- People & Planet on the brink: Lessons in tackling climate change
- Behind the corporate media war on progressive Latin America
- Plus
- LatinFilmFest24 featuring films, documentaries and special guests for Q&As
- Latin America Conference 2024 is supported by a range of organisations including CSC, VSC, NSCAG, NEU, Unite the Union, TUC.

enca.org.uk

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Meeting Dates 2024

March 3rd | June 30th | October 20th

ENCA meetings are usually held in London, with the location shared with members in the weeks before the meeting. 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.

A Hybrid option will be provided at some meeting should this be requested.