

ENCA



Environmental Network *for* Central America

www.enca.org.uk

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Public Meeting

A round up of the public meeting held in February

Unicorn Grocery

A report from our visit to one of ENCA biggest supporters

Costa Rica Elections

What does this change of government mean for the country?



Birds of Nicaragua



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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Cover Photo: Blue Oriole photo by

Laureano Mairena

Report from a 2025 birding brigade to Nicaragua

By Geraldine Cawthorne, member of the Nicaragua Solidarity Campaign (NSC)

Last February, after noticing an NSCAG bulletin post, I had applied, paid the fees, renewed my passport, packed and was ready to set off to Nicaragua for a bird brigade in the Solentiname islands in the south of Lake Cocibolca.

Thirty-four years ago, on an environmental brigade there, I'd helped plant 4,000 saplings of local species – cedro, caoba, leucaena and pochote – from a tree nursery funded by ENCA's forerunner, the Environmental Network for Nicaragua (ENN), on the main island of Mancarron. Billed with local families, we walked nine miles daily fording 3 streams each way, bathed and washed clothes in the lake, had head torches and fireflies to guide at night, kept malaria at bay with pills, incense coils and nets, and spent time ensuring safe drinking water. I returned from there humbled by the care and kindness we had been shown and impacted by an awareness of what had been achieved, with minimal resources, through political will and tight knit organisation at local level.

With no long-haul travel over the last thirty odd years, misgivings about managing it were dispelled by a seamless Aeromexico flight out, and easy connection at Mexico City.

Bright young Nicaraguan citizens sorted me warmly and efficiently at passport and customs, designated driver Juan Carlos waited by the Arrivals door, and I was into 2025 Managua.

Outside: cars, big US lorries with heavy duty fenders, neat white buses (courtesy of China), still an occasional horse and cart, and masses of helmeted men and women (also enrolled on relevant maintenance classes) riding small motor bikes. The second Nicaragua flyover is under construction (opened summer 2025.)

Casa Benjamin Linder is a hostel/guesthouse located in a peaceful northwestern neighbourhood of the capital; the site that once housed offices of the first foreign minister and provided a long-revered meeting place for internationalistas and community groups. It has been repurposed as welcoming accommodation for individuals and groups while continuing to serve as a venue for all manner of community projects and activities.

Accommodation expectations based on my memory dissolve when I am shown to a double room with en suite shower and toilet, air con and wifi, set in a calm garden with stunning murals along the walls.

In the few days before starting the brigade, I am whisked off to a range of visits and activities: the local hospital, a macro-nutrition project at a local rural school, a workshop for adults and school students involved in an aquaponics project on 'value-added' possibilities, and a comprehensive historical walking tour of Managua from Harold, our interpreter, guide and p/t university teacher.

Fellow travellers Larry and Gayle arrive from Minnesota, we head up to the hills by Ciudad Sandino for an early morning bird stroll and breakfast with Paul and Becca, who restored Casa Ben Linder and organise the trips. Then on the Friday, an early start for the 177-mile journey down to San Carlos.

In 1991, travel in an open lorry took all day, and half the road was dirt track. Now, gliding fluidly along stunning road surfaces at 55mph, and with a drink stop half-way, we are greeting our bird and boat men, Laureano and Luis, just four and a half hours later. Boat loaded, and life jackets donned, we head off along the broad meandering Rio San Juan, natural border between Nicaragua and Costa Rica and long-time strategic route. >>

Laureano and Luis immediately show lightning speed of bird and other wildlife recognition; on to the next one before we have the binoculars focused. Over the days ahead we will see: grey, green, white and blue herons; hummingbirds, swallows, buzzards, black vultures and ospreys, honey creepers, orapendulosa, Ring and Amazon kingfishers, Muscovy duck, brown pelican, white and blue egrets, yellowhammers, blue and yellow orioles, and the roseate spoonbills who come back each year in the breeding season to Venada island.

First an overnight in the fortress town of El Castillo. 34 years on, EU and other funding have restored the fortress and a well-designed museum with multilingual information about the real 'pirates of the Caribbean' sits alongside.

A visit to a cacao coop shows a guest book full of recent UK signatures - day-trippers up from Costa Rica, who fly direct from the UK to San José. A new expanded airport site is marked out for Managua, but completion will be some years yet.

Down river a quick look into the Indo Maiz Biological Reserve, then out to the islands. We are based at the beautiful hotel and cabins created by Laureano and his mother on Isla San Fernando, which



Yellow oriole by Laureano Mairena

also houses a gallery of artwork from the

women on Solentiname – the men carve birds, fish and other fauna from balsa.

Although international tourism dipped after the attempted coup in 2018 and then the Covid years, national tourism continues to increase. The Nicaragua model is based on benefitting local communities rather than companies from outside.

For Laureano and Luis, the big game fishing season brings people, and Laureano also works with MARENA, the Ministry of the Environment, cataloguing and reporting species seen, to enable wildlife to be carefully monitored and protected. Both also cultivate beans, bananas, cacao and avocados.

Our island days contain paradisiac views, stunning sunsets, lots of wildlife, also petroglyphs hinting at the pre-Colombian culture of the islands. The largest island, Mancarron, shows an up build about 200m in from the shore, and it is believed was a sacred place for burials.

In 1991, the health post was a small wooden hut containing some generic medicines and vitamins on head high shelving, an instrument for weighing babies, and an AIDS poster. Now we pass a large, bright modern single-story building – the current health centre. It runs Monday to Friday, 8 – 5 and is staffed by a Cuban trained clinician along with a nurse. As the main problem is access for those not living on Mancarron, three times a month they travel out to do visits to the other islands. The arrival of WhatsApp has been invaluable for referral to the mainland for support or emergencies.

One school for the islands has become three. High point of this visit is my joyful meet up with my one-time hosts Emilia and Arsenio.

A visit to the wetlands reserve of Los Guatuzos also is part of our trip. Sliding along silent lilac flowered creeks



Kingfisher by Laureano Mairena

with the hum of multi-wildlife in the background – 320 species throbbing – feels like another universe of Avalon. Turtles and camouflaged caiman nestled by the bank, and ashore are sloths and anteaters, and mammoth butterflies. In the evening, slipping over in the mud, I almost squash a tiny tree frog, and in the ecolodge at night, hear my only mosquito buzzing outside the net, although this is dwarfed by roars of howler monkeys, noisily objecting, I feel, to our presence.

Leaving the islands, I know I will come back, but for now bulk buy birdies for friends and family, and head back up to the bright Arbol de la Vida lights of Managua.

Local trips to a family several generations pottery in San Juan del Oriente, a wander at the viewpoint and the craft shops in Caterina, and an afternoon indulging in the delight that is swimming in Laguna de Apoyo, round off an awesome nine days. Still the same kindness and care, plenty of remarkable progress, impressive organisation and people determined to move things forward. Mighty thanks to all at Casa Ben Linder and in the south for all I experienced.

For more information on opportunities for well-organised visits, go to: www.casabenjaminlinder.org

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US military bases in Costa Rica?



Costa Rica's undeserved reputation for neutrality and pacifism may also be coming to an end soon when Laura Fernández takes office as the country's new President on May 8th this year.

Fabián Silva Gamboa, a constitutional lawyer who advises the President-elect, has proposed a reform to the political constitution that would allow the United States to establish military bases there. Fernández has already signalled her intentions to replace the model of the country that arose from the 1948 civil war which abolished the country's army and built the foundations of a welfare state.

Thanks to the neoliberal turn in the 1990s and 2000s and thanks to US pressure to militarise the country's police force from the 1980s onwards, much of the welfare state is now in poor condition, poverty is not falling and violence and citizen security has been getting worse in recent years.

In recent years, Costa Rica has become a significant territory, especially its coastal areas, for storing and moving cocaine bound for the United States and Europe, and along with this violence has also increased. Silva Gamboa suggests that the presence of US bases will help to deter the incidence of drug trafficking. Others might suggest the opposite.

One might ask why a newsletter dedicated to environmental issues should be reporting on overtly and internationally political issues such as the US interference in other country's national affairs, but quite apart from policy influence, the environmental pollution record of former

US military bases is extremely abusive, as Costa Rica's southern neighbour can testify. (See earlier ENCA Newsletters on the toxic pollution left behind in Panama by the former US bases.)

Given that Costa Rica abolished its army in 1948, the proposal would require a constitutional amendment, a broad legislative majority that the 31 legislative seats won by the PPSO are not sufficient. To move forward with this initiative, at least seven opposition legislators would need to join them.

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- *Tico Times*, 26.02.26, 'US Bases Proposed in Limón, Puntarenas and Guanacaste to Target Drug Traffickers', *Tico Times*, San José, <https://ticotimes.net/2026/02/26/us-bases-proposed-in-limon-puntarenas-and-guanacaste-to-target-drug-traffickers>
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- Tom Perkins, 13.10.23, 'Toxic PFAs from US military bases polluting drinking water, report finds', *The Guardian*, London, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/oct/13/pfas-pollution-us-military-bases-forever-chemicals>

Panama cancels canal concession to China and seizes two key ports from Hong Kong corporation

Compiled by ENCA editor Martin Mowforth

At the end of January this year, Panama's Supreme Court annulled the concession under which the Hong Kong corporation CK Hutchison operated the Balboa and Cristobal port terminals, claiming that the original concession to operate the two ports was unconstitutional.

Three weeks later, the Panamanian authorities "made direct physical entry into the terminals at Balboa and Cristobal" and assumed "administrative and

operational control" over the two ports, according to the company. The corporation described the takeover as unlawful and claimed that Panamanian authorities had threatened its employees with criminal prosecution if they defied orders to leave the two ports.

Readers will recall that even before his inauguration in January 2025, the Supreme Leader Donald Trump had begun to allege that the Canal was being operated by China and he promised to "take it back", using military force if necessary. These moves by the Panama government clearly reflect the threats made by the US President.

In place of licenses granted to CK Hutchison, Panama has granted temporary licenses to the Danish shipping company Maersk and the Geneva-based Mediterranean Shipping Company (MSC). CK Hutchison said it was taking legal advice on pursuing national and international legal action against Panama and third parties. The corporation notified Panama of an investment protection treaty dispute that it would pursue after Maersk had expressed its interest in running the ports.

Hong Kong's government also expressed strong dissatisfaction and opposition to Panama's takeover and urged Panamanian authorities to respect the spirit of the contracts. The Chinese government warned that Panama would pay a heavy price, both politically and economically.

Sources:

- *Tico Times*, 30.01.26, 'Panama Cancels Canal Concession as China Vows to Protect Firms', *Tico Times*, San José.
- Erin Hale and *The Associated Press*, 24.02.26, 'Hong Kong conglomerate says Panama Canal ports seized by authorities', *Al Jazeera*, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/2/24/hong-kong-conglomerate-says-panama-canal-ports-seized-by-authorities>
- *Reuters*, 24.02.26, 'Panama seizes two key ports from Hong Kong group amid US-China canal dispute', *NBC News*, <https://www.nbcnews.com/world/asia/panama-seizes-two-key-ports-hong-kong-group-us-china-canal-dispute-rcna260376>
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Belize government to spend £450 million on upgrade of Port of Belize

On 10th March, *Breaking Belize News*, an online tabloid in Belize, reported on the Prime Minister John Briceño's announcement that the Belizean government is pressing ahead with a \$450 million upgrade of the Port of Belize cargo port which will include a new cruise port facility.

According to the government, the project is pending environmental approval and will now enter into the development phase. The project is expected to modernise cargo handling facilities and expand port capacity.

Dredging policies destroy marine ecosystems

In November 2025, the Turneffe Atoll Trust (TAT) reported that current dredging policies are destroying seagrass beds, mangroves, corals and other significant marine ecosystems.

On paper, numerous laws exist (2020 Fisheries Act; 2018 Mangrove Act) and government departments (Department of the Environment; Geology and Petroleum Department) oversee the acts of dredging. Although this appears quite strong in terms of the protection they offer to marine ecosystems, the TAT reports that in practice it is fragmented and ineffective.

The TAT reports that dredging often begins before permits are issued and in other cases the conditions stipulated in the permits are ignored. In other cases, permits are issued with no consideration made for the impacts of dredging. Such problems have occurred in numerous marine reserves throughout the country, including South Water Caye, Hol Chan and Turneffe Atoll Marine Reserve.

The TAT warns that even more worrying are the proposed changes to the Environmental Impact Assessment process which would remove the requirement for an EIA in the nation's most valuable marine reserves.

Belize / Guatemala border dispute

In January this year, Aaron Humes of *Breaking Belize News* reported that Francis Fonseca, Belizean Minister of Foreign Affairs, and his Guatemalan counterpart Carlos Ramiro Martínez attended an official meeting at the Adjacency Zone Office of the Organisation of American States (OAS) with Antonia Urrejola, the newly appointed Special Representative of Sebastian Kraljevich, the Secretary-General of the OAS for Belize and Guatemalan Affairs.

Both Foreign Ministers and their delegations received presentations from the Special Representative on the OAS Adjacency Zone Office's 2025 activities to foster excellent bilateral relations, as they continue to seek a peaceful resolution to the territorial dispute at the International Court of Justice.

Minister Fonseca said discussions centred on the future role of the OAS after the ICJ resolves the Guatemalan claim, as well as reducing tensions between each country's military and civilians at both the Western and Southern borders of Belize. He reiterated that each country is interested in maintaining peace and stability in the area until it is decided who it belongs to.

Reports of interest

The ENCA Newsletter is beginning a new feature with this edition of the newsletter: recommended reports that may be of interest to some of our regular readers and to anyone interested in gaining some real detail on the issues that we cover here. As our regular readers will know, our articles are normally no longer than two sides of A4 and often include illustrations of some kind. This may lead at times to an under-reporting of some issues, and this new feature is intended for those who would like to delve more deeply into selected themes and reports.

Initially, the feature will simply include the author, date, title and url. We start with the following.

- Rights Action, 04.02.26, 'Report: Financing & planning of March 2016 assassination of Berta Caceres in Honduras', tinyurl.com/25d748xb
- Rights Action, 15.01.26, 'Mining resistance struggles in Guatemala, as U.S. and Western resource-related aggression continues unabated in many corners of Planet Earth', tinyurl.com/55n44mkm
- Keri Blakinger, 18.02.26, 'Amid Mass ICE Arrests, Trump Pardon Recipient Juan Orlando Hernández Given Special Treatment', tinyurl.com/vsbbnu4
- Rights Action, 16.10.25, 'Canadian tourists blaming Garifuna people (Honduras) working and struggling to not lose lands and communities to relentless onslaught of tourism industry', tinyurl.com/3b86z9rr
- Edith Romero, 25.02.26, 'A Neocolonial Billionaire Fantasy in Honduras', tinyurl.com/2zvzfs3c
- Rights Action, 27.02.26, 'Peter Thiel is Unleashing a Neocolonial Billionaire Fantasy in Honduras. Follow the money: US, Western-backed regime change interventions are good for business', tinyurl.com/5yrbh2w7
- Roger Harris and John Perry, 26.02.26, 'Laura Dogu and Washington's Regime-Change Playbook: Nicaragua, Honduras, Venezuela', in *Counter Currents.org*: tinyurl.com/s9hcx2s7
- Beatrice Twentyman, 16.12.24, 'Panama: 300 Indigenous Guna families relocated amid rising sea level', *Latin America Bureau*, London.
- La Isla Network, March 2026, 'LIN & Rockefeller Ally to Protect Sugarcane Cutters in El Salvador and Women Workers in Brazil', tinyurl.com/493vjv6u

ENCA Public Meeting report

Report compiled by ENCA member Martin Mowforth

On 19th February this year, ENCA held one of its thrice yearly meetings in a rather different manner from the norm. First, the meeting was held on a Thursday rather than during a weekend. Second, it was followed almost immediately by a meeting that was open to the public and which aimed to present the findings of our recent links with our partner organisations in Central America.

The public meeting provided ENCA with an opportunity to showcase ENCA member Liz Richmond's 2024 visits to partner organisations in the region. Liz delivered a Powerpoint presentation of her visits to:

- Gales Point, south of Belize City, where protests arose because of Vulcan Materials Company's plans to extract aggregates for shipping to the USA.
- The Mesoamerican Institute of Permaculture (IMAP), in Guatemala where the organisation had used funds provided by ENCA to promote family gardens to provide organic vegetables for numerous families.
- MUFRAS-32 in San Isidro, Cabañas, El Salvador, where over the last 15 years ENCA has supported a variety of projects, often with the financial help of the Unicorn Grocery in Manchester.
- The Council of Women of the West (CMO in Spanish) in Nicaragua where ENCA has supported numerous projects such as fuel-efficient and healthier stoves, garden water tanks and office costs.
- A women's cooperative in San Carlos, Nicaragua, where ENCA had funded a programme of inserting cacao production into a diversified agroforestry system.
- Longo Maï in southern Costa Rica where Liz has spent a great deal of time over the past 30 years and which ENCA has also supported in small ways in the past. It also serves as an informal information point for FECON (the Costa Rican Federation for the Conservation of Nature) whose *Aula Verde* educational programme has also been financed by ENCA.

- CENDAH (the Centre for Environmental and Human Development) in the Indigenous Guna territory of Panama which again ENCA has funded on a number of small-scale development projects over the previous decade.

All of these visits have been reported in considerable detail by Liz in recent ENCA Newsletters and many of the projects these organisations have run have been featured in many ENCA Newsletters over the years.



The public meeting in February also featured a video prepared for the meeting by the Permaculture Institute in Guatemala (IMAP). In it, Concepción Ajtujal, a young permaculture grower, shared how climate change is affecting her and other local farmers with higher temperatures, rainfall shortages, poorer soil quality and more pests than normal. She invited viewers together to become part of the change that our planet needs. IMAP's work and our funding of it have also been covered in recent ENCA Newsletters, especially ENCA 92.

The meeting was then addressed by video link from Spain by Hector Berrios of the Salvadoran organisation MUFRAS-32. Hector and his partner Zenayda along with their two children Maya and Kiara are currently exiled in Spain due to the persecution and threats they suffered in El Salvador because of their human rights work. ENCA assisted the family in their journey from San Isidro to their new home in the Basque country of Spain. More details of their work in El Salvador and their need to flee the country are given in ENCA Newsletters 92, 93 and 94.

For the sake of the ENCA public meeting, Hector had been primed with a few questions, and ENCA treasurer Stephanie Williamson translated Hector's responses for the audience. Due to the restrictions of

space, here we have summarised Hector's responses to the pre-arranged questions – below – although where we have used Hector's words, they are given as quotations.

Hector's responses for the ENCA public meeting

How are you, Zenayda and the girls getting on in the Basque country?

"Well, they are in the process of integrating and learning Basque. We arrived in the Basque Country in April 2025 as a result of political persecution by Nayib Bukele's regime in El Salvador. We are political refugees because we are environmentalists and oppose the mining project promoted by the country's president. We are grateful to ENCA and all our friends who helped us leave and protect our lives, physical integrity, and freedom of movement."

What's the current situation in El Salvador?

Since President Bukele's declared state of emergency in March 2022, Hector informed us that over 90,000 people had been detained and 482 killed in various prisons. "The measure, designed to crack down on gangs, is being used to criminalize organised civil society and to try to silence voices critical of the government."

The regime's tactics include: disappearances, arbitrary and mass detentions, the manipulation of criminal proceedings, violation of the secrecy of communications, house searches of human rights defenders without judicial warrant and the abuse of pre-trial detention. "The regime has caused 130 defenders to flee the country (human rights defenders, environmentalists, more than 40 journalists and more than 20 lawyers.)"

What about the next elections and the political context for those?

Hector believes that Nayib Bukele is trying to perpetuate his presidency by bringing forward the next general election from 2029 to 2027 and by extending the presidential mandate from five to six years. By such means he aims to maintain power in perpetuity, to take advantage of his absolute majority, and to consolidate his authoritarianism.

What's happened with mining permissions since Bukele lifted the mining ban?

MUFRAS-32, social and environmental organisations and the Catholic Church strongly oppose the lifting of the ban, arguing that El Salvador is a highly water-stressed country. "Despite promises of 'sustainable mining', critics claim that metal mining is inherently and ecologically vulnerable in such a small and densely-populated country."

How is the repression and intimidation from the Bukele regime affecting MUFRAS-32's advocacy work?

Most of the MUFRAS-32 personnel (press officer, management and educators) have left the country because of the constant harassment and human rights violations. Today we denounce these violations from wherever we happen to be.

What about MUFRAS-32's practical work on organic crop production and land restoration? And women's participation?

In the face of government repression, pro-mining legislation, privatisation and general neoliberalism, with ENCA's help, MUFRAS-32 has developed projects such as the planting of trees and bamboo, campaigns against metal mining and agro-ecological production. As a result of this work and of their human rights defence work, the Garcia-Serrano family have suffered harassment, persecution, monitoring and surveillance of their home and place of work and of their daughters.

The capture of environmentalists in the department of Cabañas alerted them to the seriousness of the dangers they face. (In 2017, Zenayda and Hector were part of the environmentalists who achieved a total ban on metal mining in El Salvador.) After their exile to Spain, several members of their comrades and families continue to practice farming on their plot in Cabañas; but please note the awful news at the end of this report that occurred after Hector's address to ENCA's public meeting.

Anything positive to report from comrades back in El Salvador?

"The women of MUFRAS-32 continue to resist through agro-ecological production alternatives but with lower political profile due to fear – we resist in silence by working the land."

How can people in the UK best show solidarity with MUFRAS-32 and other civil society organisations fighting for human and environmental rights in El Salvador?

"Do not leave us alone. You can talk or write about what is happening in the country. We can activate solidarity mechanisms with English law associations to help investigate the violations of human rights. You can also stand with our organisation in specific activities, supporting agro-ecological production of fruit, basic grains and vegetables."

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From their exile in Spain, Hector and Zenayda continue to promote the work of MUFRAS-32 in the Salvadoran department of Cabañas, and recently ENCA donated £500 towards their programme of cultivating organic red beans on their small parcel of land there. Despite the absence of Hector and Zenayda, Hector's

sister Patricia and others in the organisation are continuing their work promoting alternatives to the prevailing model of extractivism.

Unfortunately, on 7th March (this year, two weeks after our meeting and video link with Hector), he wrote to ENCA with information about an attack that had taken place on MUFRAS-32's land in Cabañas on 26th February. He wrote:

"MUFRAS-32 wants to inform you about a criminal attack that we have suffered on our installations in El Salvador. At dawn that day, the neighbours who live around our *finca* heard explosions and looked out to see a fire which destroyed part of our productive infrastructure. This production is an economic alternative to the extractivism and for more than two decades we have been promoting these alternatives. So, again, we ask for ENCA to accompany us with your solidarity, denouncing, as we have done before, that in our country there is a systematic dismantling of democratic institutions under Nayib Bukele's government. The government has intensified its hostility towards environmentalists, ecologists, human rights defenders and land defenders, journalists and civil society organisations."



Firefighting efforts on MUFRAS-32's land

Continued Violence in the Aguán

Followers of the ENCA Newsletter will be aware of the problems suffered by campesino and campesina farmers, land rights activists, environmentalists, human rights activists and lawyers representing these groups in the Aguán Valley of Honduras. Literally hundreds of such people have been assassinated over the course of the last three decades, and threats of violence from the security guards who protect the African palm oil plantations and their owners are never very far away from the villages and towns which house the campesinos'.

For the last couple of years, ENCA has been receiving the Aguán Monthly News Alert which details many of the incidents that occur so frequently in the Aguán. Below we include a few excerpts from the News Alert of December 2025 – January 2026. We are grateful to the Calan Institute which produces the monthly report and to the Honduras Solidarity Network which passes it on to us.

Tocoa, Colon, Honduras - During the month of December, Honduran grassroots organisations rejected the interference of US President Donald Trump in the Honduran electoral process. Trump favoured the National Party candidate, Nasry Asfura, in an act that violated the right to self-determination of the Honduran people. In January, Asfura assumed the presidency of Honduras amid strong accusations of electoral fraud.

The rights of organised *campesino* families continue to be violated by the criminal groups 'Los Cachos' and 'Los Pechugas'. In December, the National Police and the Executing Judge were unable to carry out the eviction of 'Los Cachos', who are illegally occupying the Camarones Cooperative's farm. This criminal group is also accused of being responsible for the murder of Roger Castillo, a member of the Camarones Cooperative. Meanwhile, in January, the criminal group 'Los Pechugas' evicted the families of the 9 de Agosto Cooperative from their farm, but they were able to return after the Military Police expelled 'Los Pechugas'. During the attack, Marvin Ramírez Ramos, a member of the cooperative, was murdered by the criminal group.

At the hearing for the presentation of evidence in the Juan López murder case, the court set a date for the public trial against the three people accused of committing the crime against the environmental defender. The trial will be held in June 2026.

Failed Police Operation to Carry Out Eviction of 'Los Cachos' Criminal Group: On December 8, a police operation attempted to enforce an [eviction order](#) issued by a national jurisdiction judge against the 'Los Cachos' criminal group, who were illegally occupying land belonging to families organised in the Camarones Cooperative. However, the police force and the executing judge were unable to carry out the eviction after protesters from Quebrada de Arena, in support of the 'Los Cachos' group, began throwing stones and [injuring the campesinos](#) who were attempting to reoccupy the land. Among the dozens of injured was Wendy Castro, sub-coordinator of the Agrarian Platform, who was accompanying the families of the Camarones Cooperative. Instead of protecting the *campesino* families during the wave of attacks, [the police withdrew](#), leaving them defenceless. The families organised under the Camarones Cooperative have been unable to access their land since December 24, 2024.

Incitement of violence against Yoni Rivas and the Plataforma Agraria continues: On January 2, the Plataforma Agraria [released a statement](#) denouncing death threats against Yoni Rivas, the organisation's spokesperson. An effigy of Rivas was burned and smashed, accompanied by a sign that read "for invading lands", in the community of Quebrada de Arena, Tocoa. Media outlets echoed these messages of hate, accusing Rivas of invasion and destruction and calling him a "supposed human rights defender." According to the Plataforma's statement, "Dinant Corporation intends to hide their responsibility and attribute these actions to the Quebrada de Arena community, while media outlets share messages of hate to create a favourable scenario for the criminal group Los Cachos to carry out the assassination of our colleague or the Plataforma Agraria ... It is the Dinant Corporation that calls us [invaders], because of our demand for our right to the land."

Cooperativa El Chile celebrates its 3rd anniversary: On January 5, the El Chile Cooperative [celebrated three years of continued presence on their land](#). Families of the cooperative gathered to celebrate their continued struggle, more than thirty years after the seizure of the land by the Facussé family.

GIEI releases its final report on the murder of Berta Cáceres: On January 10, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights' Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts (GIEI in Spanish) [released their 530-page final report](#) on the 2016 assassination of Lenca environmental activist Berta Cáceres. The report found that corporate actors used funds provided by [European and US development banks](#) for the Agua Zarca dam project to finance Cáceres' murder. The report is groundbreaking in detailing the mechanisms by which private actors were the primary drivers of violence inflicted on Berta Cáceres and Lenca communities. This is important because for decades, organised groups in the Aguán Valley have denounced agroindustrial companies, once financed by World Bank loans, of driving violence against *campesinos* in the region. The Agrarian Platform and the Coordinator for Popular Organisations of the Aguán (COPA) [supports COPINH's call for justice](#) in light of the findings presented by GIEI and which demonstrate the responsibility of the Atala family in the murder of Berta

13 cooperatives in the Aguán Valley obtain legal status: In a significant victory for the decades-long struggle of *campesinos* in the Bajo Aguán Valley, on January 15, thirteen cooperatives were [granted legal status](#) from the National Council for the Supervision of Cooperatives (CONSUCOOP in Spanish), recognizing their legal existence and legitimizing their claim as owners of their agrarian reform lands. This new recognition comes amid a renewed wave of violence against farmer cooperatives. The attacks on January 18 against the Nueve de Agosto Cooperative occurred just three days after they were granted legal status.

ENCA visits Unicorn Grocery in Manchester

By ENCA members Stephanie Williamson and Liz Richmond

In November 2025, ENCA members Liz Richmond and Stephanie Williamson visited the amazing food store and community hub that is Unicorn Grocery Workers' Co-operative in Manchester, at the invitation of Dan Monks, who coordinates their support for worthwhile causes in the UK and beyond.

As a co-op, Unicorn workers donate 5% of their annual salary bill to a variety of projects, including several proposed by ENCA. Since 2010, Unicorn Grocery has donated an incredibly generous £25,000+ to support activities by ENCA partners in Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Guatemala, as detailed in Table 1.

The purpose of our visit was to strengthen personal contacts, report on project progress by current grantee the Mesoamerican Institute for Permaculture (IMAP) and to tell Unicorn Grocery workers about the challenges faced by partners in Central America and the value of their funding and moral support. We made an informal presentation as part of the co-op's regular staff training, with Liz recounting her visits to partners in 2024 and Stephanie describing the situation for environmental and human rights defenders, the concept of food sovereignty and the practical alternatives to which ENCA contributes. We were able to share video messages from Zenayda Serrano from MUFRAS-32, now in exile in Spain, and Patricia Berrios in Cabañas, El Salvador, and convey thanks from IMAP in Guatemala.

After a good discussion with Unicorn workers, we were given a 'behind the scenes' tour of the bakery and food storage areas, including organic and fair trade fruit from Latin America. During our visit, Dan confirmed that the members' committee which assesses grant applications had just approved the follow-up funding proposal from IMAP.

It was a real pleasure to meet Dan and comrades, convey messages from our partners and discuss Central American



politics and solidarity. A thousand thank you's, as they say in Spanish, to Unicorn Grocery for their generous and steadfast solidarity over the last 15 years.

Above: Grocery staff with ENCA treasurer Stephanie Williamson. Photo by ENCA member Liz Richmond

Below: Table 1 showing funding provided by Unicorn Grocery

Group/Country	Amount	Date	Activities or equipment
International Centre for Information on Cover Crops (CIDICCO), Honduras	£2,816	2010	Education in agricultural diversity
Civic Council of Honduran Peoples & Indigenous Organisations (COPINH), Honduras	£2,748	2010	Medicinal herb garden establishment
(COPINH), Honduras	£1,000	Jun 2016	
United Movement <i>Francisco Sánchez</i> –1932 (MUFRAS-32), El Salvador	£2,050	Apr 2017	For Sustainable management of the Rios Viejo & Titihuapa river basins in San Isidro, Cabanas project
MUFRAS-32, El Salvador	£4,050	Nov 2018	For extension of previous project, focussed on training workshops and meetings with groups affected
Women's Council of the West (CMO), Nicaragua	£5,000	2019	Extension of earlier programme on alternative technology to improve food security. Spent on more of their improved stoves, building of water tanks and improvements of patio vegetable gardens.
Women's Council of the West (CMO), Nicaragua	£6,000	Jul 2020	Clean, safe water and vegetable gardens
MUFRAS-32, El Salvador	£3,500	Nov 2023	Promoting horticulture to replace extractivism practised in the area of San Isidro
Mesoamerican Permaculture Institute (IMAP), Guatemala	£2,000	Nov 2024	For botanical gardens & women's empowerment project
Mesoamerican Permaculture Institute (IMAP), Guatemala	£3,500	Nov 2025	Funds for women's refugee Casa Aq'a'bal and CENSAC college project
TOTAL	£32,664		

www.unicorn-grocery.coop/about-us/

Costa Rica's Democratic Gamble

ENCA's chairperson and co-editor of the ENCA Newsletter also writes a regular column in Geographical, the official magazine of the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG). Here we reproduce Doug Specht's article on Costa Rica's latest election and how it could unravel Latin America's oldest democracy.

On 15 January, just 17 days before Costa Rica's presidential election, El Salvador's Nayib Bukele arrived in the country to lay the first stone for a mega-prison modelled on his notorious CECOT facility, a facility documented by Human Rights Watch as a site of systematic torture. Three weeks later, voters elected Laura Fernández, Bukele's explicit admirer, promising to replicate his security model. Costa Rica held a free, fair, and transparent election monitored by 100+ international observers. The electoral process was democratic. Yet the outcome may not be.

Fernández and her governing party won with 48.3 per cent of the vote and 31 legislative seats, enough to govern, but not enough to alter the constitution. Costa Rica has been Latin America's democratic exemplar for 75 years. However, as this democracy elects an authoritarian, it is pertinent to ask if it is possible to prevent

what happened in El Salvador, the complete dismantling of checks on executive power? And if Costa Rica falls to authoritarianism, the regional implications could be profound.

The security crisis that changed everything

Across Costa Rica, homicide rates jumped from 11.5 per 100,000 in 2021 to a record 17.2 in 2023, 865 killings in a single year, the most violent in the country's history. Gang violence has increasingly transformed what was called the 'Switzerland of Central America' into a country dominated by cartel logistics and territorial warfare. Responding to this, seventy per cent of voters prioritised security in exit polls. Three-quarters of citizens no longer align with any political party, and only 25 per cent remain satisfied with democracy. When institutions fail to deliver basic security, democratic norms can become expendable, at least in the minds of voters.

Fernández promised a hard line: a \$35 million mega-prison modelled on Bukele's CECOT, states of emergency suspending

constitutional guarantees in gang-affected areas, fast-track justice procedures, and 'lifting of guarantees' for security operations. Voters, terrified, embraced it. She didn't just promise to copy Bukele, she positioned herself as his apprentice. Bukele's January visit, her immediate post-victory call with him, and her explicit commitment to mirror his tactics made the model transfer explicit.

How it begins: the Chaves precedent

Before Fernández, President Rodrigo Chaves (2022-2026), her mentor and political godfather, spent four years testing how far Costa Rica's institutions would bend. He dismissed legislative censure votes as irrelevant, called the Electoral Court a 'coup d'état,' labelled the press 'scumbag press,' and accused the Comptroller General of sabotage. Chaves openly campaigned for Fernández despite constitutional prohibitions on presidential electoral activity. The Legislature attempted to strip his immunity twice, once for corruption allegations, once for electoral law violations, but failed to achieve the required 38-vote supermajority.

His four-year assault on institutions, the delegitimising rhetoric, the institutional pressure, and the electoral violations laid the groundwork for what could follow. He showed Costa Rica's institutions could be attacked without collapsing. Now Fernández, even stronger in the legislature, has clearer opportunity to push further.

Bukele's blueprint: what happened in El Salvador

In El Salvador, Bukele's consolidation of power followed a clear timeline. In February 2020, Bukele entered the legislature with armed soldiers to pressure lawmakers. In May 2021, he removed Constitutional Court justices and the Attorney General after gaining a >>



Does Costa Rica's green reputation hang in the balance? Photo by Sterling Lanier via Unsplash

supermajority, installing loyalists. In March 2022, he declared a state of exception for 'war on gangs.' By July 2025, constitutional reforms eliminated presidential term limits, extended terms to six years, and allowed indefinite rule.

The human cost has been staggering. Multiple agencies have documented systematic torture in Bukele's mega prison, CECOT. Every former detainee interviewed reported 'serious physical and psychological abuse on a near-daily basis.' Overcrowding is extreme, with less than 2 square foot per prisoner, food withheld, medical care denied. Mass arbitrary arrests created 110,000 prisoners, three times pre-2022 levels, with thousands of innocents arrested on tenuous grounds.

El Salvador's Supreme Electoral Court, once independent, now validates Bukele's decisions. Judges who disagreed were removed. Press freedom deteriorated. Civil society operates under threat. Bukele now controls the presidency, legislature, judiciary, and elections machinery, exactly as intended. His supporters note that homicides dropped and that security improved, but this came at the cost of democracy itself, systematic torture, mass incarceration, constitutional dismantling, and there is no indication this security can last should the harsh measures be rescinded.

Why the 31 seats matter more than the presidency

Fernández's 31 seats give her genuine governing power: control over regular legislation, budgets, and appointments. But constitutional amendments require 38 votes, a two-thirds supermajority she lacks. She cannot unilaterally rewrite the constitution or eliminate presidential term limits as Bukele has done.

The National Liberation Party holds 17 seats, the Broad Front holds seven, and others hold two. PLN leader Álvaro Ramos pledged to collaborate on shared priorities but oppose on contentious issues, particularly constitutional reforms. If the security crisis worsens, if gangs escalate violence, and if the opposition appears

obstructionist, Fernández could leverage these dynamics to build coalitional support for constitutional changes. Alternatively, states of emergency could be invoked to govern by decree. The question is whether the opposition can hold the line.

Free, or not?

The EU sent its first-ever observer mission to Costa Rica; the OAS deployed 27 representatives from 15 countries. Voter turnout hit 69 per cent, strong for the region. No protests, no fraud claims. Ramos conceded on election night.

Yet the election itself may have been undermined by Chávez's campaigning for Fernández despite legal prohibitions, Bukele's strategically timed 15 January prison visit, 17 days before voting, and reports of an alleged assassination plot against Chávez, purportedly intended to justify strengthening the security apparatus. A free election may produce an unfree government.

Costa Rica's electorate, through legitimate democratic means, is potentially voting to dismantle democratic institutions. This isn't fraud, it's the internal contradiction of democracy: voters using democratic rights to eliminate democracy itself.

Costa Rica faces a decisive moment. Unlike El Salvador in 2019, Costa Rican institutions are stronger, democratic traditions deeper, and the opposition has legislative veto power. But Bukele's example shows that authoritarianism can consolidate within a single presidential term.

The question isn't whether Costa Rica held its 1 February election fairly, it did. The question is whether it will prevent February 2030 from looking like El Salvador today: a country where electoral legitimacy has been hollowed out, constitutional constraints eliminated, and the security apparatus turned into a tool of executive control.

Climate Stories Library- an invitation to contribute your story!

The Climate Stories Library provides a platform for individuals and grassroots groups to share their experiences of the climate and nature crisis, and other intersecting injustices. We believe every voice matters in the climate conversation. This project, set up by UK climate activists and primary school teacher, Juliet Nolan, and ecologist Jennie Lord, aims to

- ✓ enable those at the frontlines of the climate and nature crisis to tell their story directly and easily to a global audience
- ✓ amplify the voices of those who are often less heard or not heard at all
- ✓ build solidarity and connections between individuals and grassroots movements and to encourage seeing the world through the lenses of others

The Library has over 80 videos to date but few from Latin America. Juliet therefore invites ENCA partners in Central America to send 1-3 short videos (2 mins. max) taken on a mobile phone in which an environmental or land rights defender, community organiser, trainer, agroecological producer, youth activist or secondary school student speaks to camera in their own words about some aspect of how the climate or ecological emergencies are affecting them, their family or their community. They can talk about negative or positive experiences, and/or actions they're taking to restore Nature or improve community resilience. Full instructions are on the website and videos in Spanish are fine. ENCA partners IMAP in Guatemala contributed 2 farmer videos in Jan. 2026- you can see Concepción Ajtujal, a young woman permaculture grower speaking via: tinyurl.com/3srd67ke

ENCA members in the UK are also welcome to contribute too!

www.climatestorieslibrary.com/

Sargassum seaweed hits the Caribbean coast of Central America



In late February / early March, sargassum seaweed invaded numerous shorelines along the Caribbean coast of Central America. Sargassum has air vesicles that allow them to float. They can form widespread surface areas and occur most years as part of the Great Atlantic Sargassum Belt.

These floating platforms have been a feature of Caribbean coastlines since they began to form in 2011. They have been attributed to a number of factors: shifts in ocean currents linked to higher sea surface temperatures due to climate change, increased nutrient inputs from river outflows, Sahara dust and to changes in ocean upwellings.

The platforms consume oxygen in the water leading to fish kills and destruction of other seagrass habitats. They can also disrupt other coastal ecosystems such as mangroves and can even threaten sea turtle nesting sites.

Despite the problems caused for some species and habitats by sargassum, the platforms may also play an ecological role by providing habitat and food for various marine species. Where no specific efforts to remove the sargassum are made, it will tend to decompose and dry out naturally unless it refloats itself in the sea due to wave and current action.

The most direct impact on human behaviour comes from the coverage of sandy beaches (important to the tourism industry) by the sargassum platforms. One such example is illustrated in the photo sent to ENCA by Zoe López, a dive instructor and ENCA contact in the Honduran island of Roatán. Zoe adds, “we recently had a huge hit of the sargassum seaweed as well as being

affected by so much runoff from the construction industry and its clearing of mangroves”.

There is also a health hazard for humans. As the seaweed decomposes on shore, it releases toxic hydrogen sulphide and ammonia, causing respiratory issues and other health risks for tourists and residents.

In Costa Rica, the Ministry of Environment and Energy (MINAIE) informed the public about an increasing accumulation of sargassum along the country’s Caribbean coastline. The Ecological Integrity Monitoring Programme warned of accumulations in the Manzanillo and Puerto Viejo area as well as along the coastline of the Tortuguero National Park.

Possible treatments for the platforms include the use of booms to prevent them reaching the shoreline and the harvesting of the sargassum by boats. On the beaches, it can be removed by manual labour or machines, but there are also some initiatives exploring the use of the seaweed as fertiliser.

Sources:

- Rodríguez-Martínez, R.E. et al, April 2025, ‘The Great Atlantic Sargassum Belt: Impacts on the Central and Western Caribbean – A Review’, *Science Direct*, vol. 144. [tinyurl.com/mwecd5r4](https://www.tinyurl.com/mwecd5r4)
- *Tico Times*, 25.02.26, ‘Sargassum Buildup Grows on Costa Rica Northern Caribbean Coast’, *Tico Times*, San José. [tinyurl.com/mr23buxm](https://www.tinyurl.com/mr23buxm)
- Zoe López, 02.03.26, *Personal communication*.

Photo credit: Alexandra Harper Graham

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Meeting Dates 2026

February 19th (4pm) | June 27th | October 18th

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.