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LADB Staff

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## Garifuna Threatened by Coconut Disease

by LADB Staff

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Lethal Yellowing Disease (LYD) has ripped through the Caribbean Coast of Central America, destroying the major species of coconut palm in its path. It is also destroying the livelihood of the much-abused Garifuna people.

The Garifuna are Caribbean people culturally and historically distinct from others of African origin who populate the region. Garifuna are a people who came to the Central American Coast in 1797, having been expelled from the island of St. Vincent, landing first on Roatan, one of the Bay Islands of Honduras. They now populate the Caribbean coastal regions of Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua. Lethal Yellowing Disease, a more recent arrival, now thrives in those same places.

"The disease is uncontrollable," said Guillermo Cruz, director of the Organismo Internacional Regional de Sanidad Agropecuaria (OIRSA) in Honduras. Where it has arrived, the disease has killed 100% of the Altos del Atlantico palm, the most abundant in Honduras and the one that yields the highest quality coconut. LYD affects 34 species of coconut, but Altos del Atlantico is "the most susceptible, and [the disease] has already destroyed it; we no longer have that species," said Julio Nunez of the Direccion de Ciencia y Tecnologia Agropecuaria (DICTA). "It is impossible to avoid the dispersion of the vector because the wind carries it, and to combat it with chemical products is also impossible." The Garifuna make bread, sweets, and oil from the Altos coconuts, including their traditional dish, tapado, a mix of meat, fish, platano, and yuca. They export the coconut and make other products, including the roofs of their houses, of the leaves. It is basic to their way of life.

Now the sole avenue open to the survival of that way of life lies with replanting resistant strains, Nunez said. DICTA manages a program in La Ceiba, Honduras, to replant nonsusceptible palms throughout the zone, in cooperation with businesses, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), government agencies, and the affected populations. The program is most advanced on Roatan, not because the island is home to the Garifuna but because Roatan has become an important tourist center for North Americans, Europeans, and Israelis. The disappearance of the palms, having marred the beauty of the beaches, has led to tremendous support for a solution on the part of tourism operators there. LYD causes the fall of fronds and fruit, leaving bare, dead, poles rising out of the sand. Eventually, within six months, the poles fall too.

There is good evidence that the replanting has more to do with esthetics than with ethnics; Garifunas throughout Roatan and elsewhere have been thrown off their lands to accommodate the tourist facilities. They have been summarily displaced, as realtors claimed choice locations to subdivide and sell to the North Americans, Europeans, and Israelis (see NotiCen, 1999-11-04). This has been relatively easy to do, as the blacks lack the resources to defend their property claims in the courts and institutionalized racism stacks the legal deck against them.

On the Guatemalan Caribbean Coast, where Garifuna culture is also of interest to tourists, *myndus crudus*, the insect that carries the disease, has visited with a vengeance. *Myndus crudus* is essential to the process. The infectious agent is a mycoplasma-like organism (MLO) that is transformed by the insect to cause LYD. The same MLO, injected into a palm, does not cause the disease if it has not passed through *myndus*. The plague has raged there for years, leaving hunger as well as blight.

Aurelia Satuye is president of the Asociacion de Mujeres Garifunas de Guatemala (Asomugagua). She said that, before LYD came to her region, a woman who baked and sold coconut bread could make the equivalent of about US\$75 a week. Now, because of the lack of coconut to work with, she makes, with luck, about US\$25. That woman would also have been able to make oil, coconut-milk concoctions, coconut water, preserves, and palm-leaf hats to sell. Statistics from the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock, and Nutrition (MAGA) indicate that losses from LYD amount to one-third of the total annual production of the country 15,800 metric tons of coconut grown on 4,188 hectares. Almost all this loss is concentrated where Garifunas live.

The disease vector is wind-borne, and was propagated widely by Hurricane Mitch in 1998 from Belize, where it had first become a problem in 1992, although LYD has existed in the Caribbean for 100 years. The combined action of prevailing winds and government-imposed quarantine of the area have thus far retarded its spread to Guatemala's Pacific Coast. The government has set up inspection roadblocks on the highways and has prohibited the importation and international transit of species known to be susceptible. But, reported Satuye, for the Garifuna, the situation grows worse with each passing day, as MAGA works to find resistant Guatemalan palms.

The agency's coordinator of the department of rules and regulations, Mario Aldana, said they are constantly analyzing genetic material for the purpose of propagating a resistant native variety. "We believe that it is easier to create a resistant variety locally than to try other hybrids," said Aldana. "Part of the strategy is to take resistant genetic material and keep it under observation to find a new variety." Known resistant varieties at the moment are inferior in production and quality to the Altos. The government plans to spend the equivalent of about US\$500,000 during the next five years to find a substitute and to replant.

For the Garifuna women, this means, said Satuye, that in five years they have the hope that a family might see two or three palms growing in their yards. For prospective commercial grower David Quinto, it means the loss of an anticipated 300,000 coconuts a year.

In 1999, Quinto bought four bare hectares of land and planted 3,000 palms with the expectation that in 2005 his production would reach that level. His young palms are not yet contaminated, but he lives with the fear that, should he lose them, as he almost certainly will under present conditions, it will be 12 years until he harvests a coconut. Distributed as they are along the Caribbean coast, the Garifuna are a transnational community. They have in common a language, Garuhagu, and the fact that in whichever country they live, they are traditionally ignored. When they are noticed, they are exploited. The ill wind that brought them LYD might, however, have blown them some good. It is difficult to fight the disease without benefiting the people who depend on Altos.

Building on the recognition brought about by media interest in LYD, several Afro-Honduran organizations representing most of the Garifuna towns and settlements in the country met in La Ceiba to make a unified demand on the president that he respond promptly to the community's other grave problems poverty, hunger, unemployment, and the high incidence of HIV-AIDS. Citing Convention 169 of the International Labor Organization (ILO), to which Honduras is signatory and which extends certain rights to indigenous peoples (see NotiCen, 1997-11-20), the groups will also seek to have municipalities deal with their land-title issues, as the Convention requires.

Garifunas suffer a higher incidence of HIV infection than does the rest of Honduras' population, already the highest in the region, because of their proximity to tourist zones. They are themselves a tourist attraction in many locations. For this they are demanding the Health Ministry and the UN Development Program (UNDP) attend to the financial and technical needs associated with the AIDS epidemic. They are asking that resources from those institutions be channeled through their own organizations for training, prevention, access to medicine, and orphan-care programs. "In other words, we ask that Afro-Honduran communities represent not only numbers for obtaining financial aid but that in practice there be real support for the stabilization of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases," said a demand document.

Regarding tourism in their midst, they said that they support the concept but want an end to the forced sale of their lands that has accompanied its development, and they seek an alternative tourism that respects the environment, their cultural values, and generally benefits their own people economically. Among the participating civil groups at the meeting were the Organizacion Fraternal Negra Hondurena (OFRANEH), Centro Independiente para el Desarrollo de Honduras, Mujeres Garifunas en Marcha, Ecosalud, Organizacion de Desarrollo Etnico Comunitario (ODECO), and Movimiento Negro Iseri Lidawamari.

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