

6-9-2005

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Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Chortis Rejoin Battle With Honduran Government To Recover Their Lands." (2005).
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Chortis Rejoin Battle With Honduran Government To Recover Their Lands

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Honduras

Published: 2005-06-09

The Chorti indigenous group of western Honduras took over the Parque Arqueologico de Copan Ruinas in a new round of contention with the government that dates back, depending on length of historical view, to the conquest, or to the 1950s, or to 1997. The current action stems from a 1997 agreement with the government that has gone unfulfilled.

Shouting, "We want land, not more nonsense (paja)," some 3,000 Chorti campesinos blocked visitors from entering the Copan ruins. The government had signed a pact with them promising to buy and turn over land to their communities in the departments of Copan and Ocotepeque. Since then, they have received little more than promises.

Explaining the recent protest, Maria Marcelina Perez Interiano of the Consejo Nacional Indigena Maya-Chorti (CONIMCHH) told reporters, "As Maya-Chorti people, Convention 169 of the International Labor Organization (ILO) includes us (see NotiCen, 1997-08-21), as does Article 346 of the Constitution, which says the state must protect the lands and bosques where our communities settled. An accord was signed eight years ago wherein the government obligated itself to buy us 1,700 ha of land, but since then all we've gotten is promises."

The promised land: the government never bought it

An arrangement was made with the owners of that land whereby the communities would have use of it for three years while the government bought it in two payments. But the owners never got any money and are demanding eviction of the Chortis. "The government is not concerned that our people are starving to death. We Chortis practice agriculture, the cultivation of corn and beans, but without land we cannot plant, and our children are dying of hunger," said Isidoro Vasquez, a Chorti official.

CONIMCHH demanded to negotiate a solution with a government commission, but not just any commission. They wanted President Ricardo Maduro, Congreso Nacional president Porfirio Lobo Sosa, Instituto Nacional Agraria (INA) Minister Henry Acosta, and Finance Minister William Chong Wong on the other side of the table. Before ending the 14-hour takeover, the Chortis settled for negotiations with a somewhat less impressive set of adversaries.

Tourism Minister Thierry Pierrafau was on the scene and agreed to a team consisting of himself, Acosta, director of the Registro de la Propiedad Isaias Barahona, and an as yet to be named presidential designate. Pierrafau agreed to a June 9 meeting. The Chortis last occupied the ruins in September 2000, when 900 demonstrated in support of eight members of the community who had gone on a hunger strike. That action was also in protest of an unkept land promise. The protest

was broken up by 200 Honduran police, who attacked the demonstrators with batons and tear gas, injuring scores and sending at least 17 to hospitals.

In 1998, the Chortis occupied the Copan ruins to demand land and to force an investigation into the deaths of 43 indigenous leaders killed during a six-year period. This action followed one in 1997 when the Chortis along with the Lenca people camped out in front of the presidential palace in Tegucigalpa for three weeks because of the government's failure to comply with the Treaty of San Andres to protect indigenous lands. As the number of protesters reached 5,000, the government agreed to this and to provide land titles.

It all started in the 1950s. These were not the only actions the Chortis have taken, just some of the most notable. The problem could be said to have originated, the conquest notwithstanding, in the 1950s, when already powerful landowners bought thousands of hectares in the Copan Valley on both sides of the border with Guatemala. The Chorti communities were part of the deal, and they were forced to work as farm laborers. Not until the 1970s did the INA provide them their own land, but only to three of the 17 communities, and even that was land largely unsuited to agriculture.

In the 1980s, the communities formed unions and began to demand land and credit. In 1991, more than a dozen Chortis were assassinated. Bolstered by their rights under ILO Convention 169, survivors fought on, and in 1994 they created CONICHH to recover their territory. In April 1997, Chorti leader Candido Amador was assassinated, consolidating Chorti nationalism and leading to a march on Tegucigalpa in May to demand an investigation of their leader's murder (see NotiCen, 1997-05-29).

A hunger strike captured international attention but also moved the Organizacion de Agricultores y Ganaderos de las Ruinas de Copan (AGRACOR), representing the landowners, to lean on the government to prevent any distribution of land. AGRACOR claimed, among other things, that the Chortis were of doubtful ethnicity, and therefore not entitled to protections as indigenous. The notoriety of the hunger strike, however, trumped AGRACOR's power, and the government awarded them some land and credit.

But most of the land and none of the money was ever transferred, nor did the government ever provide the financial or technical support necessary to make the 350 ha that was delivered productive. The Chortis, having worked as laborers for generations, had lost the skills that might have served as an alternative to government assistance. Pressing their advantage, the farmers, now mostly tobacco growers, discriminated against CONICHH members among their workers by firing them or denying them land access.

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