

11-17-2005

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Nicaragua and Region Ratify UNESCO Convention

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Nicaragua

Published: 2005-11-17

Several of the region's state officials gathered on Nicaragua's Corn Island on Nov. 13 to ratify the 2003 UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. Corn Island lies in the Caribbean, 350 km east of Managua. The occasion was the First International Summit of Garifunas in Central America. Nicaragua's President Enrique Bolanos hosted the event as part of an initiative to join Corn Island with other Garifuna enclaves in the Caribbean. Bolanos wants to see a trade agreement among these communities, which stretch from Nicaragua to Cancun, Mexico.

Nicaragua is home to some 8,000 Garifunas. They live on the island and around Laguna de Perlas, northeast of Bluefields, capital of the Region Autonoma del Atlantico Sur (RAAS). They have been there since 1912, when their leader, Joseph Sambola, founded the community of Orinoco. Their communities are dispersed from the Yucatan Peninsula in the north to Nicaragua in the south. The UNESCO convention was drawn up to prevent the disappearance of what the agency called the intangible heritage of the cultural legacy of peoples, their oral traditions, customs, music, dance, rituals, festivities, and traditional medicine.

The purpose of the convention was to bring international legal protection to forms of culture that are fragile by nature and which "are particularly today exposed to the effects of globalization, environmental degradation, and also inevitable evolution in people's lifestyles." Garifuna language, dance, and music were among the first 19 Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity identified by UNESCO for protection.

Nicaraguan vice foreign minister Javier Williams explained that one of the objectives of the Nicaraguan exercise in recognition is to attract foreign investment to promote tourism and other alternatives to the fishing industry that is the principal economic activity for these and other peoples of the Caribbean coast of Central America. Another aspect of the initiative is to create a direct partnership between Cancun and Corn Island.

Nicaragua is seeking to develop its relationship with the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and to involve other Nicaraguan-Caribbean ethnic communities including Miskitos, Sumus, Ramas, and Creoles, all of whom, like the Garifunas, preserve their own culture. Like the Garifunas here, some have either partially or entirely lost their original languages. In other Garifuna communities, the language is still spoken.

Bolanos promised at the summit to begin work on infrastructure on Corn Island, as well as to provide aid for Garifuna cultural preservation. The infrastructure work would include enlarging and improving the island's airport and constructing a pier and docking facilities for cruise ships and

other vessels to facilitate commerce and tourism. All this ceremony and activity is in response to Garifuna agitation for recognition of their rights and culture. Wherever they live along the Central American coast, Garifunas tend to be among the most forgotten and ill served of their countries.

Corn Island is 16 km long and has 8,000 inhabitants. It has a bare-bones hotel industry and a lot of natural tropical splendor. Most inhabitants are blacks and mestizos who speak Creole English as well as some who speak the Garifuna tongue. Reports say the island has been well cared for, boasting clean waters, white-sand beaches, and abundant flora. But it has little infrastructure. Electricity, where it exists, is currently available only six hours a day.

Earlier in the week, before the summit, Corn Island mayor Alex Dixon came to Managua. While there he lamented the lack of facilities. Since the recent rises in energy costs, the island cannot afford to provide electricity. Dixon said rationing power had hurt tourism on Corn Island, and he called upon the government to "assume its responsibility" and provide the basic services the population can no longer afford. The document ratifying the UNESCO convention was signed by Bolanos, San Vicente and Grenadines Governor-General Frederick Ballantyne, Development Minister of Belize Silvia Flores, Guatemala's presidential commissioner for Garifunas Mario Ellington, Jorge Milla for Honduras, and Maria del Socorro Saenz for Costa Rica.

Kemsey Sambola, representative of Nicaragua's Garifuna communities, said the ratification represents a decision among the nations of Central America and the Caribbean to help Garifunas overcome their problems, which are considerable (see NotiCen, 2003-03-20). They suffer racial discrimination, AIDS, and other sickness disproportionate to their numbers, confiscation of their lands, high unemployment, and other problems (see NotiCen, 2005-04-07). Worldwide, there are some 450,000 Garifunas, most of whom live in the US and Canada. Over 100,000 live along the Caribbean coast of Central America, where they first landed after being evicted from St. Vincent by the British in 1797.

Their first communities were established on Roatan Island, off the coast of Honduras. Garifunas need more than declarations Kemsey Sambola said the ceremony must translate into concrete action to resolve these ills and more. She added migration issues, prostitution, teenage pregnancy, and drug addiction to the list of plagues upon the communities. "We don't have the minimum conditions to get out of the poverty in which we live," she said. She called for bilingual education for her people, a right established in the Nicaraguan Constitution but which has still not come to pass.

Kemsey Sambola has been fighting with the Nicaraguan government for years. As president of the Organizacion Afro-Garifuna Nicaraguense (OAGANIC), she has wrangled with the Ministry of Culture to little avail in efforts to get schools in the Garifuna communities. She has complained that only Orinoco has had a complete primary and secondary school in a population of about 1,600. "The other communities are smaller. La Fe has about 150 people with no school. San Vicente is another small community with no school because the government doesn't pay the teachers to teach. This is why most of the people leave the communities to come to Bluefields so that their kids can get a better education," she said. Of all the communities, only Orinoco has had a generator, and when there is no money for diesel, "we go without light."

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