Bajo Aguán, Honduras: History of Rural Poverty Turns Dramatically Violent in Region Where Wealthy Landowners Impose Their Will

George Rodríguez

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiCen by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.
Bajo Aguán, Honduras: History of Rural Poverty Turns Dramatically Violent in Region Where Wealthy Landowners Impose Their Will

by George Rodríguez

Category/Department: Honduras
Published: 2011-11-17

The northern Honduras region of Bajo Aguán is a case history of extreme poverty for campesinos barely making a living on rich, highly valued land and faced with the power of wealthy landowners who forcibly impose their will.

The situation is dramatically exposed by the 1993 Agriculture and Livestock Census, with figures indicating that 1.6% of people there own 40% of the cultivated land, while 72% own barely 12% of the land. Besides, 44% of the Honduran rural population—more than 200,000 campesino families—have inadequate or no access to land of their own, according to the same source.

The Report on Rural Poverty, by Brazil’s Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada (IPEA), found that more than 50% of this Central American nation’s campesino population’s daily income is less than US$0.50 and that of 25% is less than US$0.25.

The report’s figures place 2.8 million Hondurans in rural areas living below the poverty line and show that they represent more than 75% of the country’s campesino population and more than 70% of the poor nationwide.

And the picture painted by the UN Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) shows 78.8% of the country’s rural population below the poverty line and warns that it has the highest poverty level in Central America.

Within this grim framework, life for Bajo Aguán’s peasants is made even harsher by the decades-long land dispute, which has taken a violent turn particularly during and after the 2009 coup (NotiCen, July 2, 2009).

As the International Fact Finding Mission found during its visit to Honduras in February-March this year, "the current rural development model, based on agribusiness and land grabbing, is not only worsening poverty levels, but also affecting the food security of the entire rural population."

"At the same time it is generating intense conflicts that frequently turn into open and systematic violations of people’s most basic rights," it stated in its report titled "Honduras: Human Rights Violations in Bajo Aguán."

Land redistribution efforts thwarted

The mission, made up of leaders from six international human rights and religious networks and organizations from Europe and Latin America and accompanied by Honduran human rights, women’s, and campesino organizations, pointed out a "substantial decrease of sovereignty and food

©2011 The University of New Mexico,
Latin American & Iberian Institute
All rights reserved.
security accompanied by a process of reconcentration of the country’s best lands into the hands of a few." This "reversed the advancements achieved by the land redistribution process that started in the 70s," it added.

The mission referred to the 1973-1977 period when an agrarian-reform process produced legislation and made possible the distribution of approximately 120,000 hectares of land, with the Instituto Nacional Agrario (INA), created in 1961, as the key instrument.

INA then implemented a peasant-relocation program, with campesinos migrating from southern Honduras to the less-populated northern Atlantic coast, mainly Bajo Aguán, where they organized into associations such as cooperatives to guard the land they now began owning, with INA management, from being sold to local terratenientes (wealthy landowners).

Nevertheless, the latter managed to buy land from the campesinos via unilateral legal interpretations, illegal moves, corruption, and the Ley para la Modernización y el Desarrollo del Sector Agrícola, passed in 1992, allowing such purchases, thus continuing to concentrate land ownership.

By 1993, the major terratenientes in the region—Miguel Facussé, René Morales, Reinaldo Canales—had massively bought lands owned by most of the campesino organizations, thus expanding their own properties devoted largely to growing African palm trees for producing oil as well as biofuel.

Five years later campesinos who had sold their land launched an investigation into the purchases and found the land had been fraudulently taken from them.

In 2001, the Movimiento Unificado Campesino del Aguán (MUCA)—one of the country’s major and most active campesino organizations—was born and three years later began claiming lands purchased by the wealthy owners and demanding the sales be declared null.

MUCA’s first public activity came in February 2006, when thousands of campesinos peacefully blocked a highway near the town of Tocoa, in what was called the Toma de los Cinco Mil Machetes (Takeover by the 5,000 Machetes), which led to negotiations between MUCA and government representatives.

On June 12, 2009, in Tocoa, both parties signed an agreement resulting in, among other points, the creation of a technical legal commission made up of MUCA and INA delegates and headed by a representative from each side.

**Conditions worsen after coup**

Putting his signature to the agreement seven days later was probably one of President Manuel "Mel" Zelaya’s last activities before being violently overthrown and expelled from Honduras as a result of the bloody June 28 coup, which also brought down the agreed roadmap for solving the agrarian conflict.

With the agreement vanished, by December, six months into the de facto régime’s relentless repression of all forms of opposition, more than 2,000 MUCA members set off a recovery process by entering the land they were claiming was unlawfully purchased by the large owners.

©2011 The University of New Mexico, Latin American & Iberian Institute All rights reserved.
What followed was a spiral of violence unleashed by the terratenientes, through the local military and police, as well as paramilitary groups and the landowners’ own security guards, in order to evict the campesinos.

The eviction actions have included armed attacks on the campesinos—claiming at least 46 lives, so far—illegal arrests, abduction and killing of campesino leaders, sexual abuse against campesinas, burning homes, all within a massive militarization of the region, which has become a war zone.

An elite Army group, the Fuerza de Tarea Xatruch II, is a key military actor in the conflict zone. A contingent of 370 members of the task force was sent, in August 2003, by then Honduran President Ricardo Maduro (2002-2006) to Iraq, as part of the US military occupation of that Arab nation, after going through a training period in Spain.

The force, which takes its name from Gen. Florencio Xatruch (1811-1893), the leader of an Honduran military force that took part, in 1856 in Nicaragua, in the struggle against US filibusters headed by William Walker, who led three invasions into Central America after 1853 and was executed by a firing squad in 1860 in the northern Honduran port of Trujillo. Xatruch’s last name gave origin to the term "catracho," the popular term with which Hondurans refer to their nationality.

On Aug. 22, Honduran President Porfirio "Pepe" Lobo expressed deep concern about the situation in Bajo Aguán and announced an investigation into the events there. "We are very concerned about what is happening in the Aguán," said Lobo, after a new murder took place in the area—that of MUCA vice president Pedro Salgado and his wife Irene Lagos inside their home.

Two days earlier, Secundino Ruiz, president of the Movimiento Auténtico Reivindicador del Aguán (MARCA)—another major active campesino organization in the area, was gunned down by two men riding a motorcycle.

Policía Nacional (PN) director José Luis Muñoz said that, "apparently, there are other interests besides getting land, as we’ve already seen. Intentions are manifest in another sense, and for that reason there’s an agrarian problem to be solved there, and a political problem to be ended."

Referring to the need for police presence in the area, Muñoz warned that, "under those circumstances, campesinos and guards are going to keep killing each other. Some, defending the farms, and others, trying to get in."

"In fact, several crimes are being committed, because there’s robbery, pillage, and usurpation." Muñoz said, referring to the campesinos.

Rudy Hernández, a human rights activist and a former leader of MUCA, said, "The state must understand that this conflict won’t be solved through violence, through militarization and lies, but through respecting signed agreements, access to land, and new rural development policies."

"All of us who are involved in this struggle are exposed to persecution. We must leave our homes, take security measures, live in uncertainty. All that must end," Hernández said in October, after taking part in an Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) hearing in Washington on the Bajo Aguán situation.