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Despite Opposition from Honduran Communities, All Is Set for ZEDEs Following Second Corte Suprema Ruling

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At first, they were called Redes Especiales de Desarrollo (RED)—colloquially known as model cities (ciudades modelo)—and the law creating them was passed in 2011 by 126 of the 128 deputies in the Congreso Nacional.

The stage was thus set for foreign investors to come to Honduras, build their own cities, in what the administration of ex-President Porfirio "Pepe" Lobo (2010-2014) said, and the government of successor President Juan Orlando Hernández assures, are the country’s hope for attracting foreign investment, reaching development, and lifting people out of poverty.

But civil-society sectors opposed to the project say it was actually set for what they warn will become the selling of Honduran territory and sovereignty in chunks, benefitting only major foreign investors.

Opponents of the RED—the acronym is the Spanish word for network—went to the country’s legal system, filing appeals, eventually reaching the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ), where they scored high in 2012, when 13 of the court’s 15 magistrates declared the law unconstitutional (NotiCen, Nov. 1, 2012).

A new law was taken to Congress, this time creating the Zonas de Empleo y Desarrollo (ZEDE), and passed, a move criticized by opponents who said that only the RED’s label had been changed, while the concept remained (NotiCen, Feb. 28, 2013).

The following year opponents again went with appeals to the CSJ, but this time the court ruled against the action, stating the ZEDE law is not unconstitutional.

Local sources said the magistrates who first voted against the RED were removed and replacements brought in, selected by Hernández, who then was the head of Congress, to back the new law. Thus, the last hurdle on the road to building the first ZEDE was removed. That is when South Korea entered the picture.

South Korea involved in feasibility study

In October 2012, President Lobo told NotiCen that, regardless of the debate on the initiative, "There’s one reality: if there’s no investment, there’s no employment—and this is what the people need most."

"We must understand that we must change," said Lobo. "I say to my people: if you don’t do this now, remember, you’ll have to do it tomorrow," because there is a need to "change the strategies of how we create economic growth and development," a goal that must be accomplished "with social responsibility."

On Feb. 10, 2014, after a meeting with Hernández, Korean Embassy officials, Korean investors, and authorities of the Korean International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) at Casa Presidencial, Ebal
Díaz, executive secretary of the Consejo de Ministros, told journalists that the construction process for the first ZEDE would begin in the following days, with a feasibility study by South Korean entrepreneurs. Díaz explained that the project "is not about creating a free zone but a competitive, world-class space."

The meeting was also attended by other government officials and representatives of the people of the coastal department of Valle, in southern Honduras, on the Golfo de Fonseca, the area selected to launch the ZEDE initiative. The gulf is shared by El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua, all with short coastlines on it and whose borders meet in its waters.

The towns of Amapala, on a small island in the gulf, Alianza, close to the southern end of the border with El Salvador, and Nacaome, the capital of Valle, have been initially selected for one of them to host the first ZEDE.

On civil-society sectors’ warnings that the ZEDE initiative is tantamount to selling the country in bits, Díaz assured the reporters that "the Honduran authorities will see to it that national sovereignty is not lessened."

Seven months later, during a meeting in New York City, KOICA experts presented Hernández with a preliminary feasibility study. The contents of the document "open a possibility for the country to have an economic development zone," Infrastructure and Public Works Minister Roberto Ordoñez told reporters, adding that the project is long term, and underlining the need for an international search for investors.

Presidency Minister Reinaldo Sánchez said the preliminary study leads the Honduran government to expect the creation of at least 100,000 jobs in the gulf area.

The full KOICA feasibility study, now in progress, is expected to be presented to the Honduran government sometime in the first quarter of this year.

**Human rights organization skeptical**

On the opposition side, the human rights Organización Fraternal Negra Hondureña (OFRANEH), based in Sambo Creek in northern Honduras, took an early lead in countering the initiative when it still was the RED.

More recently, in an article posted last year on its Web site, OFRANEH stated, "The new version of the ciudades modelo continues to be a mystery in a country kept under information restriction."

"The Honduran people are susceptible to the illusion of job creation and economic growth, heralded by the political-corporate élite in charge of distributing the booty, especially after the 2009 coup," OFRANEH added. It referred to the bloody military uprising that in June 2009 toppled Honduran President Manuel "Mel" Zelaya. Zelaya is now a deputy for the opposition, center-left Partido Libertad y Refundación (LIBRE), which he co-founded four years after the coup, following his return from exile.

"The media under the domination of the power élite have been fine-tuning the idea of the need to hand over territorial strips to foreign capital as the only way out of the economic crisis, without going into specific detail regarding the magic formula to solve the serious crisis they have plunged Honduras into," added the Honduran Garífuna (Afro-indigenous) peoples’ rights organization. "In
the past several years, handing territory over has been sold as attractive to bring in the necessary economic investment leading up to 'development.'"

In Honduran human rights activist Bertha Oliva’s view, the ZEDE initiative is linked to the country’s rapidly increasing militarization. "What we’re soon going to have is the military providing citizen safety," she told NotiCen.

"The purpose ... is to annihilate any outburst and social movement that disagrees with the practices that are going to take place to plunder the territory, in many communities, with the ZEDEs," a move to prevent social tension and unrest, added Oliva, head of the Comité de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos en Honduras (COFADEH). "But what they’re selling is the need to combat drug trafficking, with the purpose of dismantling social forces, and right now to dismantle any effort communities are making to defend their territory, their natural resources."

"So, we’re in a complex, risky situation, and the very complexity makes it dangerous to think you’re going to be in democratic times, because we see not only how militarization advances but also the control of the system of justice operators," Oliva warned. "For example ... with the blow they dealt" the CSJ, when "they removed magistrates and brought in people obedient to the president of Congress—who now is the president of Honduras."

"So, now they have what’s ideal," with judges who "follow orders from the one who’s set on implementing the ciudades modelo," which is now a key issue, "because it’s business, and it’s not just anywhere they’re going to be built but in key places with access to the sea and in places where it’s known there’s oil, which tells you something," Oliva said.

Thus, the ZEDE initiative "must go forward, because it’s the business of the year, not for the country’s development because, on the contrary, a country handing out its territory in pieces and building city enclaves with separate justice systems and everything is a country handing out its sovereignty," Oliva underlined. "That goes against the people, but, yes, it’s going to benefit the commercial sector, those who have sold the country, because they’ve seen it as a private business," and among them is "the president."

"Those are the locals, the local negotiators, but all the others are international investors who are going to come and set up their ciudades modelo because of the oil," said the human rights activist. And regardless "of whether you’ve owned the land for thirty, fifty years, whether you have ownership documents, the ZEDE law says that, if there are owners, they’re going to be evicted if there’s an investor interested in that place."

-- End --