
Honduras: Criminalization of the Garifuna people defending their territory from the advance of the African palm

In the early 17th century, during the colonial era, shipwrecked Africans reached the Caribbean coast, inhabited by the Kalinagu or Caribe people. Over the years, cultural syncretism gave rise to the ethnic identity of the Garifuna people. The fusion produced the Garifuna language, religion and traditions. The Garifuna people settled river estuaries and marshes on the coasts of several Central American countries, where they engaged in fishing and subsistence agriculture.

In Honduras, the Garifuna people live on the northern coast of the country, where they have had a constant struggle for the defence of their territory. In the late 19th century, the state recognised their territorial rights and handed over the first community land titles. In spite of this, in the 20th century, under pressure from transnational banana companies interested in exploiting these lands, the communities began to lose part of their territories. With the endorsement of the state, large areas of Garifuna territory passed into the effective control of foreign companies.

Heedless of the protests of the Garifuna people, the state has allowed history to repeat itself nearly 100 years later: the banana enclave changed into an oil palm enclave. (1)

The case of the Garifuna community of Armenia

The banana boom and the arrival of the Standard Fruit Company, with enticing promises of work, led to the displacement of the Armenia community to another site on the coast, also part of Garifuna territory. It was re-established with the name of Nueva (New) Armenia. As years went by, the promised work did not materialize, and territorial pressure and cultural differences with the newcomers were felt. New customs were adopted for land management and ownership. The Garifuna community lost access to nearby forests and coastal areas which had provided part of their food and building materials for houses. Lands under community tenure entered in conflict with the land-grabbing by the transnational banana company, which had the authorization of the state itself.

In the 1990s, African palm plantations also began to expand within Garifuna territory in the vicinity of Nueva Armenia. The National Agrarian Institute and the municipal government acted against each other. While the one said it recognized Garifuna territory, the other handed over those same lands to small cooperatives of oil palm producers.

When the Standard Fruit Company's concession expired, and the company had in any case determined that banana production was no longer profitable, it withdrew from the Garifuna territory around Antigua (Old) Armenia. The company returned the lands to the municipal government, which did not respect the historical rights of the Garifuna people and instead began to distribute land for African palm cultivation.

The new land owners, both at Nueva (New) Armenia and at Antigua (Old) Armenia, have followed the strategy of forming palm producers' cooperatives, as this is a requirement for receiving property titles. Once they have the property titles, they sell the land and palm plantations to a single company. The community says this company belongs to a local economic group, but in fact, its owners are unknown, and they are acquiring a large proportion of Garifuna territory with complete impunity.

Recently, the expansion of African palm plantations has caused the destruction of the remaining forests, pollution of rivers with agrochemicals and the loss of food sovereignty of the Garifuna people. Nearly 80% of the Garifuna territory is occupied by African palm plantations.

The land titles issued by the state in the early 1900s have not been respected by the authorities, and the new company has been occupying and destroying what was left of their ancestral territory. As a result, the Garifuna people have decided to retake their lands and assert their community titles.

In January 2014, heavy machinery could be seen clearing what was left of Garifuna territory. The community lodged a complaint with the municipal government and set up the "Permanent Cultural Resistance Camp" (*Campamento Resistencia Cultural Permanente*) on recovered land near Nueva (New) Armenia. At the camp, some 80 members of the community are resisting the advance of oil palm plantations. In spite of the legal complaint, the company has continued its activities. Day by day, this new agribusiness offensive is taking over a few more meters of land, completely encircling the camp, which now only has an exit to the sea.

In August, police swarmed into the camp, tore down its flag and arrested several of its members. They were charged with illegal occupation of their own land, and were held for over 6 hours. As a result, the other members of the community also mobilized in support, but when they got back to the camp, they found their houses burnt down along with all their possessions. These reprisals however have not intimidated them; on the contrary, with enviable fortitude, the community is in the process of rebuilding their homes. (2)

The communities are on constant alert for possible attacks by the oil palm company or the police. They know that the municipal government will not protect them. "The state does not govern for the poor; it is trampling on the ancestral land rights of the Garifuna people," said members of the Honduran Black Fraternity Organization (OFRANEH). (3)

Attempted kidnapping, police arrests and evictions are some of the trials suffered by members of Garifuna communities for taking a firm line in defence of their territory. They are therefore taking their grievances to the international fora. At the latest hearings of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, in Paraguay in September 2014, the Garifuna people presented their case, and the state of Honduras now faces an international court case.

With the goal of increasing the visibility of this resistance movement, demonstrating that the Garifuna people are not alone in their struggle, and denouncing the impacts of the expansion of African palm monocultures, an international forum was held in September in La Ceiba, Honduras. Latin American organizations and networks met with indigenous, *campesino* and Garifuna communities to discuss the impacts of large-scale monocultures. During the forum, participants visited the community of Nueva (New) Armenia and Resistance Camp, where they were able to verify the denunciations and claims of the Garifuna people.

1. The state of Honduras denies indigenous status to the Garifuna people (in Spanish), <http://ofraneh.wordpress.com/2014/08/20/estado-de-honduras-deniega-condicion-de-indigena-al-pueblo-garifuna/>
2. Nueva Armenia's struggle for life and sovereignty (in Spanish), <http://www.rel-uita.org/index.php/es/agricultura/soberania-alimentaria/item/5450-nueva-armenia-y-su-lucha-por-la-vida-y-la-soberania>
3. *Organización Fraternal Negra Hondureña* (OFRANEH-Honduran Black Fraternity Organization), a Honduran federation of the Garifuna people for the defence of cultural and territorial rights, <http://www.ofraneh.org>