
Honduras: Forest defender murdered in Olancho

Around the year 2002, the forests in the department of Olancho were being devastated by the action of logging companies. Forest destruction was done to feed many saw-mills (both legal and illegal), and in some of them, several parliamentarians were directly involved. While the companies got richer, the local populations received the impact of timber exploitation, in particular the disappearance of water resulting from felling the forest and the ceasing of its function regulating the water cycle.

Faced with this situation, the local population started to organize itself and in 2002, the Environmental Movement of Olancho was created, with the aim of ensuring forest protection. For this purpose, they requested the government to regulate timber exploitation, to apply appropriate management methods, to carry out the necessary monitoring of felling and to protect protected areas. In some areas of particular cultural and biological value, they demanded that logging be banned for a 10-year period.

In order to achieve these objectives, the local population organized a series of actions, leading up to the March for Life, held on 27 June. This march, from the provincial capital (Juticalpa) to the national capital (Tegucigalpa), involved thousands of people marching for 7 days and covering some 200 kilometres to submit their demands to the president of the Republic. This march was supported by 27 organizations of students, workers, peasants, indigenous communities, pro-human rights activists and the Catholic and Evangelical Churches.

However, on reaching the Presidential House, they found that it had been surrounded by tens of anti-riot police, armed with metal shields, rubber truncheons and protective helmets. President Ricardo Maduro refused to receive them, although they waited for three hours outside his office.

One of the movement's main leaders, the priest Jose Andres Tamayo, summarised the situation, saying "For seven days we have peacefully marched to demand the government to eradicate the unmerciful logging of Honduras' forests, and specifically those of Olancho...and Maduro did not respond to our demands."

Faced by the government's lack of response, the local inhabitants were forced to take measures, among which the prevention of entry of loggers into forest areas. In four communities, a total logging ban was achieved this way.

The response was not long in coming. Threats and attacks were started and the preparation of black lists, and attacks on logging company facilities, carried out by people hired by the companies themselves as part of a strategy to blame the environmental movement for these attacks.

This went on until 17 July, when the Committee of Families of People Detained-Disappeared in Honduras (Comité de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos en Honduras - COFADEH) issued a communiqué denouncing "that terrorism in Olancho is placing at risk the lives of those defending the environment." The communiqué ended by stating "no one wants to mourn the death of a forest martyr, what we want is to defend everyone's life, even those who live planning and executing death

every day." The following day, Carlos Arturo Reyes, one of the people mentioned by COFADEH on the list of people threatened by sawmill owners was murdered in his own home.

Olancho and its forests are now mourning a martyr they never wanted. Will President Maduro now be willing to listen to the population of Olancho? Or will he continue to turn a deaf ear to their claims while the life of those defending the forest continues to be cut down by murderers paid by economic interests? No one wants any more martyrs, what is wanted is justice and forest protection. Is it too much to ask?

Article based on information from: interview to a member of the Olancho Environmental Movement, La Esperanza, Honduras, 20 July 2003. "Llegó a la capital 'marcha por la vida' que encabeza cura salvadoreño", Rebelión, 27/6/03 (<http://www.rebelion.org/ecologia/030627honduras.htm>)
"Terrorismo en Olancho pone en riesgo la vida de defensores del Medio Ambiente", COFADEH, 17/7/03