

Harassment, Threats, and Illegal, Forcible Relocation in the Lacandon Jungle: First-Hand Observations of a U.S. Delegation



On August 7, 2006, a delegation of seven observers from the United States -- along with representatives from the U.S. non-governmental organization Global Exchange and the Mexican NGO's Human Rights Center Fray Bartolome de las Casas, Maderas del Pueblo del Sureste and Xi' Nich -- traveled to the region of El Desempeño, located in the Lacandon Jungle in the State of Chiapas. In a clearing in the

jungle near the Usumacinta River, we met for three hours with members of the indigenous communities of Flor de Cacao, San Jacinto Lacanja, Ojo de Agua el Progreso and Viejo Velasco Suarez, who offered compelling testimony of impending illegal, forcible evictions from their lands.

Background of the Agrarian Conflict

The delegation was organized when the Human Rights Center learned from civic organizations representing these four communities that federal, state and municipal governmental officials were pressuring members of the communities to relocate, and threatening them with forcible evictions if they did not. The purported basis for the officials' actions was that these four communities are allegedly illegal encroachments on territory held by the Lacandon community. Equally disturbingly, the Human Rights Center had received reports that individuals from the neighboring communities of Frontera Corozal and Nueva Palestina (the so-called "comuneros") -- allied with the Lacandon community and the government -- were engaging in a pattern of intimidation and threatened violence against these same communities.

The claims of the government notwithstanding, these four communities have lived on their lands for the last twenty-two years. They moved to El Desempeño only after being forced from other lands they had held until 1972. In that year, the Mexican government granted 614,321 hectares in the Lacandon Jungle to a group of 66 families from the Yucatan peninsula, which had relocated to Chiapas in the 18 hundreds. These 66 families -- who later became known as the

Lacandon community -- accepted this enormous land grant with the proviso that they concede to the government near-unlimited rights to extract precious woods and control of the natural resources, according to Miguel Angel Garcia of Maderas del Pueblo and other local experts. This grant to the Lacandones unleashed 12 years of conflict between them (and their allies in Nueva Palestina and Frontera Corozal) and the indigenous communities who had lived on the same lands but were left out of the grant to the Lacandon community. The conflict ended only when a settlement was reached with the government in 1984, and the communities agreed to relocate to the lands where they are now again threatened with eviction. Said one woman from Flor de Cacao:

In 1982, the people from Nueva Palestina and Frontera Corozal came and burned down our houses and threw us in jail. They were trying to get us off the land. Now they are doing it all over again!

The Flor de Cacao resident's dismay is understandable, in that just one year ago, these four communities – along with 24 others – had received a formal commitment from government officials after various negotiation sessions in El Limonar with their representatives that they would be eligible for firm, binding, legal title to their lands. Thus, the understanding of these communities was that representatives of the 28 communities were negotiating in good faith and making all efforts to obtain legal security for them. They expected their land conflict with the Lacandon community and their civilian and government allies to be resolved, once and for all. Now they find themselves once again fighting for their homes, their communities, and their livelihoods.

Background of the Visit



The original plan of the delegation had been to travel on August 6 to the community of Ojo de Agua, by means of one of the boats that are launched from docks in Frontera Corozal. Accordingly, we arrived at the docks on that day at approximately 11 a.m. prepared to charter a boat for a one-hour trip to the community. Initially, some

of the members of our group had been told by one of the Frontera Corozal boatmen, or *lancheros*, that the price for chartering the boats would be 2500 pesos. Subsequently, after talking with others in Frontera Corozal, the initial

lanchero left, claiming that it was “not his turn” to drive a boat. Another *lanchero* said that he would take us for the price of 4000 pesos. While we were discussing whether we could afford this exorbitant fare for a one-hour ride, the second *lanchero* told us that, in fact, no boats would be available at all to take us to Ojo de Agua. The *lancheros* offered no explanations -- either for why they changed the price or for why they suddenly had no boats available.

Without a boat, we would have been forced to hike well into the Lacandon Jungle, as none of the communities has a functioning road on which vehicles can travel. As it was the rainy season, conditions were extremely muddy. Because of the mud, the heat and other difficult conditions, we did not believe that we would be able physically to reach by foot even Ojo de Agua, the closest community to the road that runs along the border with Guatemala. This was an unfortunate circumstance, as Ojo de Agua members wanted us to see their physical realities, including the presence of police forces and comuneros in their homes. We nevertheless arranged with representatives from the communities that their members would meet us the next day at a midway point in the jungle between the highway and their communities.

“We Want to Live in Peace”

On August 7, more than one hundred people -- men, women, elderly people and children -- from Ojo de Agua, Flor de Cacao, San Jacinto and Viejo Velasco Suarez walked for nearly two hours to meet us in the jungle clearing, which we reached after an arduous 1 _ hour hike. Only one representative from Viejo Velasco was present because, as he later told us, all but one of the 42 families from his community -- a civilian support base of the Ejercito Zapatista de



Liberacion Nacional (EZLN) -- had fled the community and relocated to a neighboring community in Ocosingo. They left without financial compensation; they left because they feared violence if they stayed, according to some of the individuals we spoke with.

For three hours, individuals from each of the threatened communities detailed the difficult and painful circumstances they had been enduring. The individuals spoke in Spanish, Ch’ol, Tzeltal and Tzotzil; a Global Exchange representative translated into English. A representative from Ojo de Agua informed us that only five families out of a total of 25 remained in his community; the rest, he explained, had relocated recently

under pressure from Frontera Corozal and Nueva Palestina comuneros. Some of these families allegedly accepted financial compensation from the government -- after the comuneros and a representative of the municipal government from Benemerito de las Americas plied them with alcohol and brought them down the river to Frontera Corozal in order for the residents to sign documents. The Ojo de Agua member described that when the twenty families moved out:

Eighty comuneros came in with nine police officers and moved in. They said that they would throw our things in the river if we did not leave. They have brought in engineers to measure plots. They are planning to give fifty square meters to two people. They have been stealing our oranges, mangoes, and coffee.

The witness testified, and several individuals from the other communities confirmed, that the day before our visit, all of the comuneros had departed on horseback, along with the police officers. As of the date of this writing, neither the comuneros nor the police officers have returned to Ojo de Agua. Unfortunately, the families that had left under pressure have not returned to their homes yet, either.

The man from Ojo de Agua, and many other individuals, stated that they believed that the three representatives of the 28 communities to the Limonar negotiations had taken bribes from the government and/or the Lacandon community in exchange for abandoning the fight on behalf of Ojo de Agua, San Jacinto, Viejo Velasco, and Flor de Cacao. As one woman from San Flor de Cacao said:

The idea [behind the negotiations at Limonar] was that the land, the water, the mountains, would be secured for all of us. None of us would be left out. The three representatives promised to help us. Now we are being threatened with death. We don't know why.

The claim of betrayal by the community representatives was confirmed when our delegation visited the community of Lacanja Tseltal, one of the original 28 communities. Members of Lacanja Tseltal stated that they too believed that the three representatives -- one of whom is from their own community -- had accepted bribes. In any event, the overwhelming sentiment expressed by nearly all of the individuals who testified was that they were utterly unprepared for the recent and sudden threats of eviction and that they had instead believed that the Limonar negotiations offered the real promise of land security for the first time in a long time. Indeed, just one year ago, a similar delegation of U.S. observers were informed during their visit in Lacanja Tseltal that all 28 of the communities would be eventually granted title to their lands.

A woman from San Jacinto offered testimony that suggested that the events in Ojo de Agua were soon likely to be repeated in her community:

The comuneros from Frontera Corozal and Nueva Palestina have been coming near our lands and shooting in the air. They've been stealing our things. For many years, they haven't respected us. Everything is supposed to be staked out, but now they say they want more land. Many children and old people have died [because of this conflict]. They should stop.

A woman from Flor de Cacao, echoed the above sentiments:

We want to live in peace. We don't want the same thing that happened from 1982 through 1984 [when we had to relocate to this region].

An elderly woman also from Flor de Cacao, explained why the four communities are being threatened at present:

When we first came here, there was no corn, no beans, there was nothing. For twenty years, we have cultivated the lands; now we have animals and crops, and the land is good for growing beans and corn. We are used to where we are. We want to give our land to our children. But now they want this land.

Conclusion

While the exact reasons for the exclusion of these four communities from the land legalization process are unclear, geographical and political factors offer an important clue. Three of the communities -- Flor de Cacao, San Jacinto Lacanja, Ojo de Agua el Progreso -- are located in a terrain where there are still precious woods that the Lacandon community wants to exploit, according to Miguel Angel García from Maderas del Pueblo. They are also on the banks of the Usumacinta River, one of the most important sources of pristine drinking water in the region. "Plan Puebla-Panama," the government's proposal for economic "modernization" for the country, also contemplates the construction of hydroelectric dams on the Usumacinta. Additionally, many of the individuals who testified believe the reason that the Lacandon community and comuneros want the land for themselves is so they can develop it for tourism purposes, as the archaeological site of Yaxchilan is located nearby, and the Lacandon community engages heavily in the tourism business. The fourth community, Viejo Velasco, because of its affiliations with the EZLN, also is likely perceived by the Mexican government to be an impediment to the maximization of profit. Indeed, shortly after our visit to El Desempeño,



government officials violently evicted the EZLN civilian support base community Chol de Tumbala that was similarly in the process of securing their land claims.

Federal, state, and local government officials should take immediate steps to guarantee the integrity and safety of Ojo de Agua El Progreso, Flor de Cacao, San Jacinto Lacanja, and Viejo Velasco. These communities are entitled -- under both the covenant of 1984 and the agreements reached at the Limonar roundtable -- to land security. The local, state, and federal government should immediately take action to stop the threatened illegal evictions and restore the families who have fled to their lands, if those families wish. Fairness and justice demand nothing less.

All who agree are urged to contact the government officials listed below and urge that:

* measures be adopted to guarantee the integrity and security of the Ojo de Agua El Progreso, Flor de Cacao, San Jacinto Lacanja, and Viejo Velasco families that have lived and worked in this territory for over 20 years, prioritizing dialogue and agreements to reach a solution that respects and guarantees their individual and collective rights.

* the covenant of 1984 be respected and implemented, which was signed by representatives of the Lacandon Community, the Agrarian Reform Department and the communities that are currently threatened with eviction.

* the agreements reached and signed between the communities and the agrarian authorities at the Dialogue Round Table "El Limonar" be respected and implemented.

List of Government Officials to Contact:

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