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## [Honduras: Women fighting for land against a backdrop of violence and murders](#)

Men and women peasant farmers in the Bajo Aguán valley in Honduras are suffering violent repression after organizing and taking action to regain control of their land, which had been granted to them as part of a thwarted agrarian reform process dating back to the early 1970s.

The Agrarian Reform Law passed in 1972 gave rise to the settlement of a region that until that time had not been devoted to agricultural production: Bajo Aguán. It paved the way for the expansion of monoculture plantations of oil palm in the region, initially geared to the cosmetics and food industries, and currently promoted for the production of agrofuels as well.

As part of this process, the creation of working cooperatives was fostered and loans were provided for the planting of oil palms. With the support of international financial institutions and the Honduran government, highways and other infrastructure were constructed to facilitate access to these lands.

Later, in the 1990s, the Law on the Modernization and Development of the Agricultural Sector paved the way for the concentration of land ownership in the hands of local large landholders, such as Miguel Facussé, who further promoted the expansion of large-scale monoculture oil palm plantations in a large area of northern Honduras, especially in Bajo Aguán. Families that had been granted land ownership through agrarian reform were sometimes induced and other times forced to turn their lands over to these large landholders.

Many of these families, faced with the loss of their livelihoods, began to organize in peasant movements to demand from the government what they considered to be their right to the land. Beginning in 2000, after drawn-out and unproductive negotiations, the peasant farmers decided to take back their lands, initiating a process of the recovery of lands planted with oil palms that they claimed as rightfully theirs.

The 2009 coup in Honduras deepened the land conflict in the Bajo Aguán, and human rights violations became so severe that various human rights organizations began to monitor and denounce the situation internationally. An international mission visited the region and issued a report on the human rights situation, which stated that “the repression is manifested through different actions and omissions by the state, which range from the violence exercised by the police, military and private security forces employed by the landholders, to the use of the legal system to intimidate and discourage the fight for land.” (1)

In 2011, a number of national and international social and human rights organizations and peasant movements in the Aguán region created the Permanent Human Rights Observatory in the Bajo Aguán to provide support, observation and monitoring to prevent human rights violations.

### **NEWS UPDATE**

In the early morning hours of March 12, Marvin José Andrade, a peasant farmer from the

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community of Cayo Campo, located next to the campesino settlement of La Lempira, was found murdered. His corpse, discovered on a turn-off from the highway, was severely burned and showed signs of torture. Residents of the community report that he had received death threats from security guards employed by nearby large landholder businessmen.

Campesino community leaders and members of the Permanent Human Rights Observatory in the Bajo Aguán have reported receiving new death threats, in spite of which they say they will stand firm in the defence of life and the preservation of the basic human rights of our communities and peoples.

### **Women fighting for land: Stories of resistance**

This history of the struggle for land is interlaced with a great many unheard stories of women who have fought in their multifaceted roles as mothers, wives, leaders and workers.

“Women live in a climate in which all of their rights are liable to violation: they have no access to farmland or any other means of production that would provide them with a livelihood. Faced with this situation, women are obliged to seek out alternatives for their survival: breaking down gender barriers, fighting alongside their fellow male peasant farmers, joining in all of the tasks required by their current situation.

“Women are constantly harassed by private security guards and members of the police, army and navy forces. They are afraid to go out to work, which negatively impacts on their financial income, exacerbating their situation. During evictions and hostilities they are victims of violence against their bodies and their loved ones.” (1)

During a recent visit to the country to participate in the International Gathering for Human Rights in Solidarity with Honduras, held in February of this year, we were able to visit a number of local communities, settlements of peasant farmers, where we spoke with Consuelo and Guadalupe. We believe they symbolize the struggle waged by so many women for land, dignity and a better future for their children and for other peasant families.

*Consuelo, woman, mother, activist, La Lempira settlement, Bajo Aguán, Honduras. Member of the United Campesino (Peasant Farmer) Movement of the Aguán (MUCA).*

“Five years ago I decided to join the movement for the recovery of our lands. The campesino movements emerged around 20 years ago to defend and recover lands in the Bajo Aguán. Since then the repression has been unrelenting, and since the coup in 2009 it has become even worse. Of all of the agreements that have been signed, not one has been fulfilled. They promised us the sale of occupied areas of land and uncultivated land in the recovered areas, but this has not happened. They are asking very high prices for land that was once agrarian reform land, they have not allowed us the grace period that we requested, and the interest rates they charge for the land are extremely high.

“The persecution is constant and acute, and the situation is becoming increasingly worse with death threats. There is psychological torture above all, because the members of movements who belong to different land recovery enterprises [campesino organizations similar to a cooperative] are prisoners in the settlements. We don't have the freedom to circulate outside of the places where we have been located, since we run the risk of being murdered or kidnapped.

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“Here in the region everyone knows the threats are coming from the big landholders, because they are suddenly the owners of everything, they have the money, the weapons, they have it all. They are the ones primarily responsible for the persecution, the murders and the main acts of violence against campesino men and women. We call René Morales and Miguel Facussé the owners of death because they decide when someone is going to die, so they are practically in charge of death, they are the ones who make those decisions.

“The lives of women who are struggling in campesino movements or different organizations to bring about change in our country or in our homes are very difficult, because we have always been targets of violence. They say that we women are the weaker sex. But in fact we are the ones who are fighting on many different fronts, for the right to land, against the privatization of education and health care, among other struggles. We as Honduran women have built up our self-esteem and we continue to struggle to bring about change in our country and to give our children a better life. Even if we have a partner, when children are hungry they go to their mothers and say, 'Mama, I'm hungry.' And so we the women are the ones confronting the situation, we are the pillars, and we are the main targets of violence.

“I worked for Facussé for seven years, and I can tell you that the work there is not decent work. They would give us two-month contracts and then propose that we continue to work under the table, without contracts. I did different types of jobs: fertilizing the oil palms, gathering the palm fruits that fell to the ground during the harvest, in the nursery, and in the extraction plant in the production of oil, vegetable fat and margarine. When we were spraying chemicals in the fields, all they gave us were gloves. I got poisoned when I was working there, and when it happened the second time I had already become asthmatic, my lungs had been weakened from inhaling chemicals. I went to a doctor and she told me I was poisoned, because the toxins had entered my bloodstream, and she gave me a form for three days of medical leave. The company engineer ripped up the form and I continued working until one day he realized that my health was getting worse and he told me to go home until I was better. When you don't work you don't get paid, the people working there are totally exploited, it is very hard to be sick and not get paid. When I joined the movement for the recovery of land I decided to stop working there.

“Eight months ago they started up a persecution against me and against my children. They have been investigating who my relatives are here in the region. One day one of Facussé's guards asked a friend of mine for my whereabouts. She didn't tell him anything, but the guard told her that everyone who had worked for Facussé would have to be killed. They watch my house, they have followed my daughters while they are walking to school, they watch them every day. One time, when one of my daughters left school, a truck started to follow her. When she threw herself into the ditch at the side of the road to save herself from being run over, they stopped and rolled down the window, and pointed a gun at her to threaten her and asked for information about her mother. They laughed at her when they saw how scared she was. They asked her questions about her mother and the rest of the family, they asked her where I worked, and they threatened her that if she was lying they would kill her. Trying to intimidate her they told her, we are going to kill you and we're going to take your mother far away from you and we're going to kill her too. They have terrorized my daughters so badly that they both failed a year in school because they are always so nervous and frightened.”

*Guadalupe, woman, mother and widow, Guadalupe Carney settlement. Her late husband, a member of the Campesino Movement of Aguán (MCA), was killed in November 2010 in the community of El Tumbador in Bajo Aguán, Honduras. (3)*

“There were five campesinos and more than 200 of Miguel Facussé's security guards were waiting

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for them. They attacked them from two sides, leaving them no way out. The shooting continued for three hours, because they chased them until they had killed them all. They were unarmed, all they were carrying were machetes to work with. The guards themselves planted guns on them after they killed them so they could take pictures of them that way, so that everyone would say that the campesinos have guns.

“I was the last one to find out that my husband was dead. The community mobilized to remove them from the fields where they were killed, because Facussé's guards tried to burn them with gasoline so that we couldn't hold a wake for them in our community. Then we found out that Facussé wanted to pay off their deaths, he offered money to the families to get their bodies back, so that the families wouldn't make any demands. As if they were animals that he had killed and was paying for. He was trying to get off free. We refused, and said that what we wanted was justice against him, because the money wouldn't bring our men back. By offering us money he was accepting responsibility for their deaths.

He can do anything he wants because he has money, and that isn't right. I would like to see him brought to justice, to show that we are worth something too, that he's not the only one who matters, that is what I want more than anything.”

It was inevitable that Guadalupe would relive her pain while talking about the events of that November, nine months after the recovery of the El Tumbador estate. She turned her comments back to the present day to talk about her school-aged son who “was very close to his father. Sometimes he can't sleep. I tell him that he died for the land. We talk about him all the time, and now he understands everything a bit better.

“After we organized to recover the land in 2000, we put together a number of enterprises with people we knew and settled in here. We started by setting up champitas [makeshift houses built with wood and plastic sheeting]. The land was measured into plots and each family was given a quarter of a plot. We cleared the land, recovered the oil palms that were already there and planted other crops on our plots. You should not always plant the same thing. We also share the land at the top of the hill among all the members of the settlement to grow what each family considers necessary.”

Left alone at the head of the household and her family, Guadalupe was forced to take on a huge burden of responsibility. In addition to taking care of her son, she began to work outside her home in a farming cooperative. She raises hens and turkeys, takes care of her plot of land where banana trees, oil palms, avocados, cassava, corn and other crops provide her with the means of survival, and attends meetings of the movement.

“The soldiers are here day and night, always keeping watch over the community. They are always observing who comes and goes, like they are controlling the whole community, who comes in, who goes out. They've always got an ear out, listening to what we say or do to report back to those who are against the community, in other words, René Morales' and Miguel Facussé's people. And Facussé's guards are always around, too. They wear different uniforms every day, sometimes blue, sometimes white, so that people won't recognize them when they see them on the highway. The fear is always present, until my son gets home from school, when I leave at four in the morning on my bicycle to go to work, constantly. People are afraid to walk on the highway, afraid of them, because when they see you alone they can kill you; it happened to a neighbour of mine, they followed him and before he got home they shot him.”

When we ask Guadalupe how she sees herself in the future, she answers, “I can't see myself

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anywhere else, my son and I will continue to fight for what we have started here, like he did [her husband]. I would like our lands to be free, to be able to work in peace.”

### **Women's struggles and hopes**

In spite of all the difficulties, the women of Bajo Aguán are organizing and growing stronger. In the framework of the International Gathering, a women's workshop was held “because we understand the importance of seeing each other and talking to organize, to feel and have more power, to know about and learn from our struggles, to understand and to fight against patriarchy, to join all of our forces in the struggle, to feel appreciated, to lose our fear and defend ourselves.”

“We who are from Aguán and from campesino organizations fight alongside our male comrades for the land, and together with them we confront the repression and violence of the police, army and security guards. We are faced with burying our partners, brothers, fathers and even our own sons, grieving for them, and moving forward. The fear caused by the repression gives us nightmares, troubled sleep, headaches and other illnesses, it makes us nervous to speak, to walk, to live our daily lives. But we surround ourselves with other women to deal with this situation, we make arrangements to take turns taking care of one another, to sleep, to eat and to talk to see how we can move forward. And we are moving forward. All of us, men and women, are in this struggle together.” (4)

This article was prepared by WRM based on its participation in the International Gathering for Human Rights in Solidarity with Honduras, February 2012.

(1) Report prepared after the visit by a mission of human rights organizations to the region of Bajo Aguán, Honduras, December 8-11, 2010. The full report is available in Spanish at <http://wrm.org.uy/paises/Honduras/HondurasMisionDDHH-2010.pdf>

(2) International Gathering for Human Rights in Solidarity with Honduras, held in Tocoa, Colón, Honduras, February 17-20, 2012. For more information and the Final Declaration of the gathering go to <http://www.mioaguan.blogspot.com/>

(3) For more information on the massacre in El Tumbador see “Masacre y barbarie en el Bajo Aguán”, at [http://www.rel-uita.org/agricultura/palma\\_africana/masacre\\_y\\_barbarie\\_en\\_bajo\\_aguan.htm](http://www.rel-uita.org/agricultura/palma_africana/masacre_y_barbarie_en_bajo_aguan.htm)

(4) Declaration from the workshop “Bodies, Struggles and Hopes of Women” held in La Confianza, Colón, Honduras, February 16, 2012, prior to the International Gathering for Human Rights in Solidarity with Honduras. The full text of the declaration is available in Spanish at <http://www.mioaguan.blogspot.com/>