



# Rights Action

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## Coyolar, Honduras: The Other Side of the Global Tracks

by Grahame Russell

*Your donations support community development projects (water, health, education, human rights, relief) in villages like Coyolar.*

**L**as Delicias de Coyolar, a Lenca descendant community in western Honduras, clings to a mountainside and life, despite impoverishment, drought and famine. The causes of their suffering are economic, racial and military; global and national.

Two hours along a twisting, mountainous road from La Esperanza (Dept. Intibuca), we park the truck and meet Pedro Lorenzo who rose at 4am, to hike 4 hours to meet us. I am accompanying leaders of the Civic Counsel of Indigenous and Popular Organizations, Honduras (COPINH). At 9am, we hike along a rocky path, the only way to Coyolar. We are to walk down a 3500 foot high mountain, and then up 2000 feet on the other side; extraordinary views of valleys, mountain ridges and dry land.

Along the way, we meet Izabel Manueles carrying a 100-pound bag of corn on his shoulders. Izabel was paid 15 lempiras (US\$1) by an elderly campesino from Coyolar for this 10 hour round-trip job. Izabel doesn't have enough money to buy his own \$10, 100-pound bag of corn.

### **"The bad years come almost all the time now"**

Pedro Lorenzo is a member of the Indigenous Council of Coyolar that has invited COPINH leaders to meet with people from 10 isolated villages. Along the path, Pedro keeps a running commentary: In a good year, the rains come from May to October and famine is kept at bay as "we are able to grow enough corn and beans to survive the dry months." In a bad year, like this year ["los anos malos ahora son casi siempre"],

the rains come in May, stop from June to August, and start again in September. Corn and bean crops die; famine is again inside the door. From time to time, Pedro points off in the distance to caves that housed their Lenca ancestors, generations before, "a time when there was enough water."

We arrive at the bottom and bathe in the Chocuara River. Water is the most urgent need of the impoverished

millions of the Americas. In a good year, the poor still lack water for irrigation, subsist for 6 months and survive for 6 more. And every year, good or bad, there is plenty of water for the wealthy sectors and the export-oriented plantations.

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*Water is the most urgent need of the impoverished millions of the Americas. In a good year, the poor still lack water for irrigation, subsist for 6 months and survive for 6 more. And every year, good or bad, there is plenty of water for the wealthy sectors and the export-oriented plantations. Access to water is a question of power, politics and economic development policy.*

## THANK YOU FOR YOUR DONATION!

Thank-you for making your tax-deductible check payable to 'Rights Action' and mailing it to the appropriate USA or Canadian office (see information on p.4). In 2002, Rights Action has sent \$726,315.00 of your funds to over 55 community based rights-based development projects, emergency relief projects, and educational and technical support projects.

# Peru: The Imperative & Pain of Truth-Telling

By Marie Manrique

*Your donations support grassroots organizations working to uncover the truth in Peru and providing humanitarian and human rights support for thousands of 'political' prisoners improperly jailed during the regime of former dictator Alberto Fujimori.*

As the public audiences of Peru's "Truth and Reconciliation Commission" opened in Abancay (department of Apurimac), the audience listened to Placido Damien, a campesino leader. It mattered little to the non-Quechua speakers that they not fully understand his native language; his pain and outrage filled the packed hotel salon.

Peru's Truth Commission, formed in early 2001, has held public audiences in different regions of the country as part of their 18-month mandate to investigate and report on the political violence of the 1980s and 1990s. With estimates ranging from 40,000 deaths, at least 5,000 disappeared, and an uncountable cases of torture, including the state policy of rape, Peru's violent past is similar to the patterns and methods of terror in other countries of Latin America.

Peru's Truth Commission comes at a difficult time. President Toledo, who announced during his campaign that he would abide by the Truth Commission recommendations, has a popularity level of 16%. Former dictator Alberto Fujimori (1990-2000), on the lam in Japan, boasts support from 45% of the population. Racism, impoverishment and impunity are endemic today, as in the past. As the first of the nine testimonies of the day initiated these public audiences, none of the six Commissioners present, presiding over the Commission's work, could ignore the difficult political context surrounding their labors.

Another victim—Damien Casani—gave testimony, his Quechua interspersed with words in Spanish for which there is no translation in his native tongue: "electric torture," "state security," "incomunicado," "military court," "faceless judges," and "pardon commission." Some witnesses narrated the "assassinations" and "disappearances" of family members; others of their own cases of arbitrary detentions and tortures. Many spoke of the destruction of their communities. Some spoke in Spanish while others preferred the native language of the region. Some denounced Army and Police abuse and human rights violations; others decried the bloody tactics of the former armed rebel group Shining Path.

Few in the audience could control their tears as three monolingual Quechua women recounted their husbands' extrajudicial assassinations in the Andean village of Susay in 1987. Victoria Huamani's horrific experiences, after finding her husband's rock-smashed skull in a field near their home, echo the painful tales of political violence against Guatemala's indigenous Mayan population: fleeing by night, hiding in caves, and eating dirt because there was no food for her and her small children. Neither Mrs. Huamani nor any of the other people who valiantly shared their stories of terror and pain in the hearings have received justice, much less reparation.

The day's audiences were drawing to a close as Pablo Macani Laguni took the stage. This middle-aged bilingual Quechua man was vice-president of his rural community until the Shining Path, in a common tactic that often included violence, forced him to renounce in 1987. Mr. Macani's problems continued the following year when the Army detained him in his community. In a conversational tone, frequent among survivors who recount horrors without untapping all the painful emotions attached to their suffering, he narrated his weeks-long detention in an Army base. He survived the torture methods of the rack (hanging the victim by their arms behind their back from an above-ground rack), the pool (slow drowning of the victim in shallow water by their own weight, worsened by the panic caused), forced consumption of his excrement, and beatings which broke his arm, ribs and several teeth. Yet as Mr. Macani explained that he is now broken (malogrado), he urged Peru to follow his example, "Let's not faint."

As international supporters of the search for truth and justice in Peru, and globally, we would do well to remember his powerful advice. There are numerous efforts by groups of victims, survivors and family members of persons affected by the political violence in Peru who are working courageously, with little support, to uncover and publicize the violence and terrorism of the past, so as to build a future with justice and equality. We must support their efforts directly, with funds and international attention, and by addressing the international connections and responsibilities for this violence, and remembering that its potential solution involves all of us. ■

## Coyolar, Honduras

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### The Gathering

At 1pm, we arrive, exhausted. Content villagers receive COPINH; no one has ever visited their community. Men, women and children have hiked from nearby villages; musicians as well, carrying guitar, bass guitar and accordion. As we rest, children smile shyly, wearing worn shoes and thin clothes hanging on by threads.

All are gathered for a meeting about indigenous rights and community development. The sun is high when the agenda is read out (most people here are illiterate) that everyone approves. At great length, people talk of the problems of the community: lack of water, housing, health, education, jobs, jobs with decent salaries, means of communication and transportation, recreation, etc.

The sun sets and darkness outlines the San Marcos de la Sierra Valley. Candles are lit and more people speak; for most, this is the first time they have spoken of their sufferings, aspirations and struggles. It is the first time they have been listened to. A woman's words: "Everyday, my family hikes down two hours to fill containers with water from a river and hike back up. Tomorrow, we will do this again. Sometimes the river dries up for months on end, and then ..."; she does not finish her sentence.

### Taxing Life

Three years ago the government began charging property and home ownership tax, an astounding effort to take tiny amounts of money from people who have survived with no support from any government or international development fund or bank, for generations. Every villager in Coyolar and the valley, must pay, some up to \$90 dollars per family; it could take a man 3 months to earn \$90.

The discussion turns to how communities need to unite efforts and not pay the taxes. This will entail political struggle and possible threats and repression. "But how can they make our lives harder and more difficult that they are now?", concluded one.

## COPINH and the Struggle for "Development"

As the discussion continues about taxes, about joining COPINH in its struggle for indigenous rights and community controlled development, the underlying issue that keeps emerging is—"What kind of development do we want and who is to control our development?" It is obvious that Coyolar, and such communities across the Americas, suffer from an almost complete lack of development. The first question is why? The second question is what kind of development?

Impoverishment and marginalization (normal and predictable in Coyolar and such communities) are products of an unjust economic and political order. This is, at once, a local and global issue as the rich countries and individuals get richer and the poor get poorer.

To join COPINH, the whole community must be in agreement. There is no COPINH if there is no unity, one village to the

next, one municipality to the next, across the country. COPINH, a volunteer-driven grassroots organization, does not have funds to support community projects (health, education, production, etc). A community joins COPINH if it is united and ready to struggle for the rights of all poor indigenous and campesino people. "Other

than our unity and the justness of our struggles for our rights, we have no power," says a COPINH leader.

### "Compostura"

The meeting is over and the day ends on a musical note. Twice a year, the community does a "compostura" celebration, at planting and harvest time, to bless the community and pray for a good harvest. This year, Coyolar will do a 3<sup>rd</sup> compostura in view of this special visit. The compostura is as old as the Lenca people, a mixture of Indigenous and Christian rites, with corn taking the central position in the ceremony. When drought kills the corn, the basis of life and survival, this has deep material and spiritual meaning.

Sometime near 1:00 am, lying on a cement walkway around the school-house, I am woken by children playing in the ongoing community celebration. I saw a canopy of a million stars ... above a small pueblo of the best kind of people the earth has ever known, clinging to life and community. For generations it has been this way. Perhaps now, this time, things will change.

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## How to make TAX-CHARITABLE contributions in the USA and Canada:

Make checks payable to "Rights Action" and mail to our Washington DC or Toronto offices.

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### MAILING LISTS

If you would like to be on our newsletter or email list, and receive regular information about the work and issues that our partner groups are addressing, let us know.



**DONATE ON-LINE:**  
www.rightsaction.org

## Coyolar, Honduras

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At 5:00 am, the sun enters the great valley. Our hosts—having continued the compostura all night, watching over the fire and guests—bless and offer us sweet coffee. After words of thanks, we walk down the rocky path, towards the river that will soon dry up.

### Change, Now!

Coyolar and most of Honduras and the Americas, need political, legal and economic change. A few weeks ago, COPINH held an educational gathering and protest in Tegucigalpa (capital of Honduras) with over 1000 landless campesinos, demanding their rights to land, water, jobs, education, etc. This time their protest was not broken up by State police forces. Rather, Honduran President Maduro stated he would meet with COPINH anywhere to debate the merits of the global development-economic model, well entrenched in Honduras.

This meeting should be held in Coyolar and the President should hike in, carrying his food and water. There are many people who should hike into Coyolar. Across the globe, political and economic leaders, intellectuals and journalists lament poverty, and ... work to keep in place a global economic-development model that impoverishes over half the globe's population. These leaders, thinkers and opinion-makers should hike into Coyolar, and all the Coyolars across the planet. They should open their ears and hearts. They should enter into real dialogue with the people of the Coyolars of the world, and then they should bring about the economic, legal and political changes necessary so that all people can live in healthy communities, with access to water, houses, jobs, land, education, health, ... a park for the kids to play in. ■



### Lori Berenson—6 Years/ 10 months in Jail in Peru

November 30, 2002, will mark the 7<sup>th</sup> anniversary of illegal captivity of Lori Berenson, a US citizen being held political prisoner in Peru. In 1995, then-25-year-old Lori Berenson was in Peru working as a journalist, focusing on endemic poverty, racism and women's rights. She was illegally detained—accused by the then-Dictator Fujimori of being a leader of a Peruvian rebel group—and has been kept in abusive jail conditions since. To find out how you can help the Berenson parents to free their daughter, contact the: **Committee to Free Lori Berenson**, T: 202-548-8480, www.freelori.org.

### EDUCATION & OUTREACH ACTIVITIES

**September – October, 2002:** Educational Speaking Tour in the USA on situation of the "landless" majority in Guatemala.

**November 2002:** Educational delegation to Peru, to learn of the work of the "Truth Commission" in Peru.