

Why Have the Garifuna Women Been Shackled?

Q & A with Mary Beaudoin

Interview with Lucy Pagoada, National US/Canada Coordinator of the National Resistance Popular Front of Honduras, based in New York, who, along with OFRANEH (Black Fraternal Honduran Organization) and the Spanish Evangelical Church in the Bronx, works on the immigrant crisis of the unaccompanied children and women.

Q: Could you explain who the women are who are wearing leg monitors who were participating in the Climate Crisis March in New York on September 21? Most of them appear to be mothers who have their small children with them.

A: Our Garifuna sisters whom you saw at the March for Climate Change are all from Honduras. The Garifuna are engaged in a heroic struggle to preserve their ancestral land in Honduras. The women come directly from those communities. [The Garifuna originated from a mix of African, indigenous Arawak and Carib Island people who have been living in coastal areas of Central America—primarily Honduras, Belize, and Guatemala. They have a strong community identity with their own distinct culture and customs—language, food, dance, music, and spiritual rituals.]



ICE put electronic leg monitors on Garifuna women when they arrived in the U.S. Advocates denounce the monitoring as an “ultimate act of racism and sexism.”

Photo: Mary Beaudoin

Q: If the women want to preserve their land in Honduras, why did they leave it and come to the U.S.?

A: The women are here, in the U.S., because they are escaping the general conditions of extreme poverty and violence in Honduras. Since 2012, Honduras was declared by the UN as the most violent country in the world, with a horrifying statistic of 82

out 100,000 people killed. 22 Hondurans are killed every 24 hours. These conditions were created by our very own U.S. government, when it supported a military coup in 2009, and financed the Honduran bloody army and police with our very own tax money.

The women were victims of a rumor campaign that started in Honduras. They heard that if they left Honduras, the U.S. government will help them and their children get legal status. We believe that this was a set up, planned by the U.S. government along with its puppet government in Honduras, to get the Garifuna women and their families to abandon their ancestral land so that a plan could proceed for taking over their land for tourism development and the implementation of Model Cities in Honduras—a project of converting Honduras into a Dubai or Hong Kong type place.

Q: How do you know this?

A: Our evidence for this is that all these women and their children were able to freely cross all the borders including the border of Mexico into the U.S. and when arrested by the U.S. border patrol, they were placed in a detention center and then they were sent to their relatives. [In need of employment many Garifuna joined the merchant marine in the nineteen fifties and came to live in U.S. coastal cities. Today, there are 100,000 Garifuna living in the U.S., with a substantial community in the New York borough, the Bronx.]

We need to understand that the Garifuna communities from which the women come, are direct targets of the U.S. corporations and the current Honduran government, which is a U.S. puppet, who intend to develop major tourist complexes in the north coast of Honduras, the area where the Garifuna communities are located. So, there is a direct plan to expel them and create a Model City on their land. One of the masterminds who introduced the Model City concept is Paul Romer, an economist at New York University.

Q: Oh, Paul Romer, the economist known for the concept of creating city-states from scratch in poorer countries, supposedly allowing for entrepreneurial innovation by wealthy countries, unfettered by the laws of the host country—he presented it as a social engineering idea that was suppose to solve problems of poverty, crime, etc. but the idea has been criticized as rife with neoliberalism and neocolonialism, and as more a symptom than a solution to issues. Recently I've read that, though Romer had been meeting for a couple of years with Honduran officials, they couldn't reach a deal about turning the land completely over to foreign interests, and Romer has distanced himself from the project but the elite of Honduras want to follow the model retaining control themselves.

A: Yes, the plan is proceeding with foreign investors and the elite in Honduras, with the puppet government facilitating. It's more or less the same thing.

Q: So in order for the plan to proceed and investors to get prime ocean-front real estate for development, they needed to remove the Garifuna from the coast?

A: Yes, that is it.

Q: What is the National Resistance Popular Front (NRPF) of Honduras that, in solidarity with the Garifuna, is resisting this project?

A: It is the most important social and political movement that was formed in Honduras, on June 28th 2009, as a natural response to the U.S-led military coup that expelled the democratically-elected president Jose Manuel Zelaya Rosales. Hondurans, in and outside of the country organized nonviolently against the coup and against all of the violations of human rights and the impunity that took and continues to take place in the country since the coup.

Q: What distance do the leg monitors allow the women to travel--how far from their current residence?

A: They cannot leave the city. The electronic monitors are a replacement for the traditional imprisonment, or jail.

Q: Have the women been found guilty and convicted of anything in a court? What kind of court? What are the charges against them that resulted in leg monitors? Who put the monitors on them?

A: The only crime that these women have committed was to risk their lives by leaving their communities to hop on the train known as "la bestia" (the beast), cross the desert and the Rio Grande, hoping for a better future for themselves and their children. Once on the U.S. side of the border, they were arrested by the border patrol, put in a detention center there, and then they were released to their family members who mostly live in the Bronx. Once released, they were given an appointment to go to an Immigration Office at 26 Federal Plaza and there they were sent directly to an ICE office where they got the electronic monitors placed on them. These women were made to sign documents that were in English, therefore not understanding what they were signing; as a result they were signing to be placed in the ICE electronic monitor "Program". It's incredible how our U.S. government has lied and violated the rights of these women. Some of the monitors were put on them in front of their children. Can you imagine the trauma for these children?

Q: What did you and they hope to accomplish by participating in the Climate Crisis Convergence, and for the women, in general?

A: Our organization, along with OFRANEH (Black Fraternal Honduran Organization) and the Spanish Evangelical Church in The Bronx, are some of the organizations that have been working on the "Immigrant Crisis of the Unaccompanied Children and the Women." I am also a member of the May First Coalition for Workers and Immigrant Rights, and so we started working on the "crisis issue" even before the women and the children arrived in New York. And so, when they started arriving, we were here to welcome them and advocate for them. We started organizing meetings with them every Monday at the church under the leadership of Pastor Danilo Lachapel, and with the support of other churches, we started doing different kinds of actions, such as a weekly vigil in front of Federal Plaza to denounce what the Immigration Department was doing to them. So when the Climate March was announced, we were already working on the campaign to denounce ICE's use of the electronic

monitors on the women, for we consider it an ultimate act of racism and sexism against them. And so we agreed to participate in the March as a contingent and to bring our campaign to expose this to people who would see and listen. Thank you for your interest.