



# New Target of the Death Squads: The Environmentalists

Dr. Ricardo Navarro - FoE El Salvador/ CESTA

## Background

CESTA and the Ecological Committee of "Nuevo Cuscatlán", have been promoting a campaign to stop the destruction of San Antonio La Joya estate for many months. This is a part of the "Cordillera El Balsamo", a rainwater catchment area and a habitat of numerous species of balsam, endemic to the zone, and one of the last forested areas of El Salvador.

In this area, a housing enterprise by the name of "Trafalgar", the property of the Vice Minister of Housing, Hans Bodewig (who just resigned from his post) and his family, has started an urbanisation of 25.2 hectares with plans to greatly increase the size of the urbanisation in the future.

The urbanisation violates article 25 of the environmental law that states that these types of works have to have an environmental impact study that is to be discussed with public consultation- this never happened. In addition, the project did not comply with all the environmental permits required to start the job. The only permits that Trafalgar Enterprises had, were those that Hans Bodewig (in his role of Vice Minister) had granted to Hans Bodewig (in his role as owner of Trafalgar), without concerning himself with the "conflict of interest". As if this weren't enough, the activity of the tractors making the roads for the new urbanization left hundreds of pre-Columbian relics in fragments. These pieces were from the late Preclassic period, around 300AC from the area where the Pre Columbian city of Cuscatlan existed.

The campaign promoted by CESTA and the Ecological Committee of "Nuevo Cuscatlan" (ECNC) has included public discussions, presentation of correspondence to the Legislative Assembly, demands in the Office of the Attorney General, and public protests with the residents. This environmental trampling caused by the ex Vice Minister of Housing was also condemned in a resolution of the General Assembly of Friends of the Earth International which took place in Melbourne, Australia in November 1998. As a reaction to this campaign, Bodewig stated that CESTA, in particular me, is responsible for initiating violence amongst the campesinos.

## The Death Squads Appear

One of the people who has had the most public presence in the struggle against the destruction of "Cordillera El Balsamo" has been the Vice President of the ECNC, Angel Antonio Mendez Torres. On October 22, 1998, CESTA and the ECNC presented a correspondence to the Legislative Assembly requesting that the urbanization be investigated; that afternoon, two men went to the house of Mr. Mendez while he was not there and left a message with his sister advising him not to continue his opposition to the works of Trafalgar Enterprises because the DEATH SQUADS ARE STILL ACTIVE.

Saturday December 5, 1998 at 12:30pm, hidden in the darkness of the night, two men tried to enter the house of Mr. Mendez. It would appear that theft was not their intention as they passed by valuable objects without taking them. Arriving in the backyard, they tripped over a hammock causing a noise that awoke the dogs. This forced them to flee.

On Tuesday December 15, 1998 around 1:00am, two men once again arrived at the residence of Mr. Mendez, but this time they were armed. They shot four times and while Mr. Mendez was fleeing through the backyard, they shot four more times. None of the shots hit him but one passed scarcely 5cm from his left shoulder. Immediately after this, the two men fled. After investigating the scene, four 9mm calibre shells were found.

That same day at 3:00pm, the ECNC and CESTA had a meeting in the Legislative Assembly, where in addition the owners of Trafalgar Enterprises and representatives of the Ministry of the Environment were called to discuss the problem. There we were informed that in order to be able to hold the meeting we required the presence of 7 delegates. However, there were only five between the FMLN, the PCN,

and the Convergence parties. Later the delegate Norman Quijano of the ARENA party arrived with the Vice Minister of Housing and said that he was withdrawing because "quorum" had not been met. Later another ARENA delegate arrived and stated the same, therefore the meeting did not take place.

The issue did not end there. On December 28, 1998, a woman from the community went to the house of Mr. Mendez in order to inform him that a group of three delinquents named Alejandro, Noe, and Leonel (we have their full names, the last two nicknamed "Los Pollos", are related to a well known public official and work in a government organization), had said that the members of the ECNC would not live past December 31. This statement was verified by another woman that had heard "Los Pollos" expressing this same threat. Fortunately the new year has arrived and nothing has come of this threat.

### Lessons Learned

Here many lessons have been learned. The first and maybe the most unfortunate is that the Death Squads are still active in El Salvador, which was a message sent to Mr. Mendez, and later proven to be the truth. Another lesson learned is that the economically powerful groups still continue to believe that El Salvador belongs only to them, with physical or legal violence, they intend to carry out their projects without concerning themselves with the fact that in doing so, they are violating the law or human rights. The ex Vice Minister of Housing's clear violation of environmental law does not concern him, nor is he interested in the impact on the residents of the area.

Another lesson is the inefficiency of state institutions and their subordination to economic interests. The Office of the Attorney General has always been aware of the destruction of this area. They have known that Trafalgar Enterprises has been violating the law, and have contributed to the destruction of a large part of the area, in particular through the excessive cutting of trees. The Attorney General is also aware that the area holds a great quantity of archaeological material and still they have not halted the urbanization. Although they did send a revocation of permission to the ex Vice Minister of Housing that Hans Bodewig had granted to himself. Equally, the Salvadorean culture office "Concultura" has knowledge of the archaeological damage caused by Trafalgar Enterprises and has not acted to stop the destruction. The Minister of the Environment has been a noticeable absence from this issue and is only present when it has to sign agreements, appear in photos, and travel to other countries; but when one tries to detain a destructive enterprise like Trafalgar, the ministry does not even show signs of life.

It is unfortunate that our government is not very interested in the environment nor in the well-being of the population. When its economic interests are at stake, as in the case of Trafalgar Enterprises and the ex Vice Minister of Housing, the law does not matter, nor does the environment or human life.

On the other side, the mayor of New Cuscatlan, Mrs. Bertila Rodriguez Moran, has dedicated herself to intimidate the members of the ECNC, saying that if they continue supporting the struggle to stop the destruction of this area she will prosecute them. Referring to Mr. Mendez she said he was already done with. In which case it would appear that Mrs. Mayor has the gift of premonition because she made this suggestion just prior to him suffering these criminal assaults.

### Our Demands

CESTA and the Ecological Committee of New Cuscatlan demand that the public institutions behave as servants to the people they govern and not as servants to capital interests. In the case of the San Antonio La Joya estate, the interests of the majority of the residents should prevail over the economic interests of one enterprise. Finally, we demand that the actions of the Death Squads be terminated once and for all.

CESTA - Ricardo Navarro, Apartado 3065, 33 Calle Poniente 316, SAN SALVADOR, El Salvador  
Tel: 503 2 200 046 / 2 206 480, Fax: 503 2 203 313, E-mail: [cesta@es.com.sv](mailto:cesta@es.com.sv)

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Box 222, Fitzroy, 3065. Ph 03 - 9419 8700, fax 03 - 9416 2081, email: [foefitzroy@peg.apc.org](mailto:foefitzroy@peg.apc.org)

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