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## **Land Ownership Conflict La Buena Fe, Honduras SQUATTERS AND LA BUENA FE**

The La Buena Fe situation is by no means unique – thousands of similar land ownership and resource control disputes are happening all over Honduras and other Central American countries.

### **BACKGROUND:**

La Buena Fe, Honduras, was a project begun in 1958 by Marion and Dr. John Blumenshein with their five young children as a medical and educational mission. Though members of the Community of Christ (C of C), an international Christian denomination with headquarters in Independence MO, they began this mission independently of the church. They purchased a large area in the valley southwest of Lake Yojoa and named it La Buena Fe (LBF).

Dr. Blumenshein tragically died shortly after moving to Honduras but Marion and their children stayed on for years with the support of others who also caught the vision of this mission to provide more than medical help and a school in that impoverished rural area. Marion eventually returned to the US and turned the land and buildings over to a committee of Hondurans and North American volunteers to keep it operating. In the US, that group was called La Buena Fe Association. In Honduras, it is called Estancia La Buena Fe (ELBF).

In the mid 1980's, a new Honduran non-government development agency, the Rural Reconstruction Program (PRR), was established to expand on the human development concepts among the poor local farmers. The PRR Program was given the use of the buildings and land at LBF for a headquarters. It is this association of PRR, and its Director, Enrique Castillo, and the close identification of World Accord with PRR after more than 20 years of community building in partnership with PRR, which has drawn World Accord into this situation. World Accord has no ownership or financial interest in the disputed lands.

World Accord began to provide some small project funding to PRR in late, 1984. Ironically, one of the first projects was to construct a water reservoir tank for irrigation of a PRR demonstration plot on the land of LBF. It is that water source that some the later

squatters tapped into for their household needs and thus made it possible for them to live there.

In the late 1980's, the Government of Honduras began construction of a new paved highway that ran right across the La Buena Fe land linking to the main highway between the capital, Tegucigalpa, and the second largest city, San Pedro Sula. This new highway runs from Pito Solo near Lago Yojoa to Sta. Barbara, the capital of the Department. That highway suddenly raised the value and interest in the LBF land along both sides of the new road.

### **THE CONFLICT:**

The history of squatters on LBF land goes back to the early 1970s. Land ownership issues languished in the court system until 2001 when a court ruling upheld the land title of the Estancia La Buena Fe organization. Subsequently, after due notice, the squatter families were evicted by the army. This forced eviction was both unfortunate and ineffective, as the squatters soon returned.

The squatters have loosely organized in two groups – Nuevo Despertar and Pinares del Lago – that inhabit temporary humble homes along the highway and across the valley.

Various court battles raged from 2001 until late 2006.

### **EFFORTS at RESOLUTION:**

To resolve the conflict more peacefully and justly, the La Buena Fe associations in both the USA and Honduras began working with World Accord and C of C. The goal was to work as ethically and transparently as possible. Together, they decided to work with two mediators from the Mennonite Church – Ovidio Flores, a Honduran citizen, and Harold Shenk, a US citizen with 15 years of experience working in El Salvador.

The task of the Mennonite group was to work as independent third party facilitators and mediators. Their strategy involved thorough research with all of the parties to understand what each faction believed to be the underlying causes of the conflict. The mediators were also to recommend how the conflict over land might be settled peacefully and justly. They were directly funded by the Peace and Justice Ministries office of Community of Christ.

It became apparent that the conflict was complex and included personal grudges as well as land issues. This work lasted over two years. Travel, meetings and twice-monthly conference calls engaged international and local leaders of the Community of Christ, representatives from World Accord and ELBF. One of the conclusions of the Mennonite facilitators was that *a legal settlement on its own would not necessarily end the conflict.*

After rulings and appeals in the courts, the Supreme Court of Honduras ruled in the summer of 2005 that the land being occupied and claimed by the two farmers groups was legally the property of ELBF in Honduras. While the ruling by the Supreme Court appeared to clearly uphold the title of Estancia La Buena Fe, some language was subject to interpretation.

Some farm families moved off the land. A Humanitarian Assistance Fund of US\$40,000 was voluntarily established by the C of C (25%), La Buena Fe Association (US) (25%) and World Accord (50%) to help the original 29 farmer families resettle to another community. Humanitarian grants from this fund were given through a committee chaired by Ovidio Flores, the Honduran Mennonite mediator, and were provided on the basis of need to those families to help them resettle without undue hardship before any legal eviction might again be enacted. It must be noted that some of these families were in this situation through no fault of their own – having believed that they had bought land in good faith from previous squatters. In addition, it is important to note here that the \$20,000 provided by World Accord for this Humanitarian Fund was not funding from the Canadian Government or CIDA. It was from a reserve of project funding World Accord had amassed from other funding sources and donations. CIDA funding and the required Canadian matching for the World Accord Central American Program was neither interrupted nor diverted from the original planned Program.

While the court rulings contained no hint of legal obligation to provide humanitarian assistance to the squatters, ELBF, the C of C and World Accord continued in their shared goal of finding a peaceful and just resolution to the conflict.

#### **THE FEBRUARY AGREEMENT:**

A mediation meeting was planned and convened in Honduras. In February 2006, several members of the C of C international leadership team and World Accord joined local church leaders, community members, ELBF and the remaining members of the two farmer groups for five days of dialog. Leadership was provided by a professional mediator, who spoke fluent Spanish. At that time, she was on the staff of the Organization of American States.

The result of the five day mediation process was a formal agreement of peaceful process to provide individual building lots to the twenty farm families from the two groups. In addition, there would be more community land for a park, a soccer field, a church and a junior kinder school, plus a block of the richest agricultural land for the community to farm will be leased at a symbolic cost. Legal title in the names of both husband and wife will be provided for each family home lot. The PRR rural development program funded by World Accord would provide farm families with technical assistance to increase crop production and decrease the environmental damage of their current “slash and burn” farming techniques. World Accord would provide the community assistance to construct the kinder school. The two farm groups agreed to merge into a single community group.

All signatories agreed to live by the agreement, regardless of any further court rulings. Everyone present signed the agreement.

The final step was for these farmers to also receive humanitarian assistance, which was distributed approximately one month after the historic February 2006 meeting. To ensure all families received assistance, the C of C contributed an additional US\$15,000 to the fund.

Most of the farm families from one group, Pinares del Lago, appear to be complying with the agreement but some members of the other group, Nuevo Despertar, may not. In

August of 2006, the Supreme Court again ruled and upheld the earlier court decisions that clear title to the land rests with ELBF and issued an order to have the remaining squatting farmer groups forcefully removed from the land.

Again, the C of C, ELBF and WA met and jointly request to the Government to delay the eviction of the farmer groups to give them time to move their homes to their new home sites in the surveyed town site plan.

**TODAY:**

As of September 30, 2006, the farmers remain illegally on the land. One group is willing to abide by the agreement and move, while the other appears less willing. Steady progress is being made to survey the land for housing lots, lay out the streets and water ditches to facilitate the new community and provide legal title to the farmer families.

The Community of Christ church, Estancia La Buena Fe and World Accord have made every effort to assist these farmers. Despite working hard to avoid the trauma of another forced eviction, we expect that within the next few weeks, the Supreme Court order will be enacted by the army bulldozers.

Regardless of what happens on the “legal justice” front, World Accord and its partners will continue striving to mitigate and cushion the harsh reality of the human injustice wherever it exists in this situation.