



Two charismatic figures are igniting opposition in Honduras to destruction of the environment, writes **Finola Robinson**

The fight for life

DOÑA CATALINA'S ramshackle farmhouse sits on a plot of land backed by fields of sugar cane and maize – crops that her family rely on to eat and sell in the neighbouring market. Her eyes twinkle with a spirit that is proud and strong. But her face is weathered by storms that suggest life has been far from easy. Poverty in rural

Honduras is rife, and the fluctuating market price of sugar, combined with a drop in the water table caused by rampant deforestation and illegal logging, is making it increasingly difficult for families like hers to eke out a living.

'One of the main rivers that passes through Campamento used to reach up to my waist,' she remembers. 'But now

The impact of logging in Olancho is everywhere to be seen.

it's just a trickle: you can walk over it easily just by stepping on a few stones. It's getting harder and harder to find water.'

Courage

In 2003, Doña Catalina became an unexpected national figure after joining a week-long protest march that saw thousands walk 175 miles from the Olancho regional capital Juticalpa to the country's capital city, Tegucigalpa. As a sprightly 78-year-old, Doña Catalina walked all day, every day, fuelled by a meagre diet of plain tortillas and water. At night she slept under the stars by the side of the road or in houses offered up by supportive strangers. 'I started the march in Juticalpa and just carried on walking,' she explains. 'My bones are healthy and if the distance had been further, I would have walked for longer. I walked to fight against deforestation and to fight for life.'

The following year's March for Life (*Gran Marcha por la Vida*) saw numbers triple as environmental awareness grew and people became more courageous about speaking out. Farmers and country-folk took to the streets from five different points in Honduras and when protesters reached the capital they were 30,000 strong.

Protestors on both marches followed one man: a charismatic Salvadorean Catholic priest called Fr José Andrés Tamayo.

Fr Tamayo is parish priest of Olancho's small town of Salama and leader of CIIR/ICD partner organisation MAO (the Environmental Movement of Olancho) – a coalition of small-scale farmers and community leaders calling for a 10-year moratorium on logging.

Threat

Deforestation is now the country's single biggest environmental threat. Loggers, operating in cahoots with Honduran authorities and fuelled by money from wealthy US corporations, are mowing down a staggering 267,000 acres each year – roughly the equivalent in size to 109,000 football pitches. In Olancho, Honduras's largest region, unregulated logging has already destroyed half of the 12 million acres of forest. The resulting soil erosion has dried up much of the water supply and threatens the region's

rich but fragile ecosystem, home to a dazzling array of more than 500 species of birds, rare species of trees, endangered plants and animals.

Only a small percentage of the logging is legal. Estimates show that illegal, clandestine logging accounts for more than three-quarters of hardwood production and nearly half of pinewood production. Thanks to loopholes in Honduran forestry laws, much of the remaining production is 'legalised' – accompanied by documents and permits and therefore legal from a bureaucratic perspective – but it is common practice for loggers to abuse these regulations. One permit can be used time and again, for instance, or a licence granted for pine will be used to fell other hardwoods. It is now impossible to trace the flow of wood around the country.

Hit-list

Olancho's rich landscape gives the region a lush and seemingly tranquil beauty. Undulating hills carpeted with tall, majestic pine trees are dotted with clusters of rustic houses that imply a harmonious marriage of man and nature. But scratch beneath the surface and a bitter, bloody war is raging between environmentalists, loggers and corrupt government officials: a war that has seen Fr Tamayo publicly denounced, physically assaulted, and threatened with death; a war that has even led to the brutal murder of three MAO activists, including 23-year-old priest Carlos Arturo Reyes, shot dead in his own backyard. The murderers escaped justice but are believed to be part of the

terrifying logging mafias who roam the area with a list drafted by local sawmill owners of 17 environmentalists to target.

Fr Tamayo is top of the hit-list, yet he refuses to be scared into silence. 'If we let the powerful elite take away our means to earn a living, we are allowing them to turn us into victims and take away our right to live,' he says. 'The environment may not be a fashionable topic but it is a problem that we just cannot see in isolation from other parts of life.'

'Today, national and transnational companies are taking possession of what belongs to the people. Millions of living creatures, including man, are being stripped of their rights just because of the ambitions of a few. Surely, to act against nature is to act against humanity. Show me a human being who does not live from nature.'

Survival

Yet there seems little political will to turn the situation around. The wood industry is mired in accusations of corruption and most Hondurans suspect loggers work hand in hand with government officials and wealthy cattle ranchers, for whom logging is a profitable side-business.

Olancho was already in the grip of these loggers when, in 1985, Fr Tamayo moved there with the church after his ordination into the priesthood. He discovered his parishioners' biggest concern was how to survive amid the environmental destruction. His pivotal moment came when a parishioner had to be buried in a plastic sack because



Fr Tamayo talks to environmentalists (background) by logging contractors.

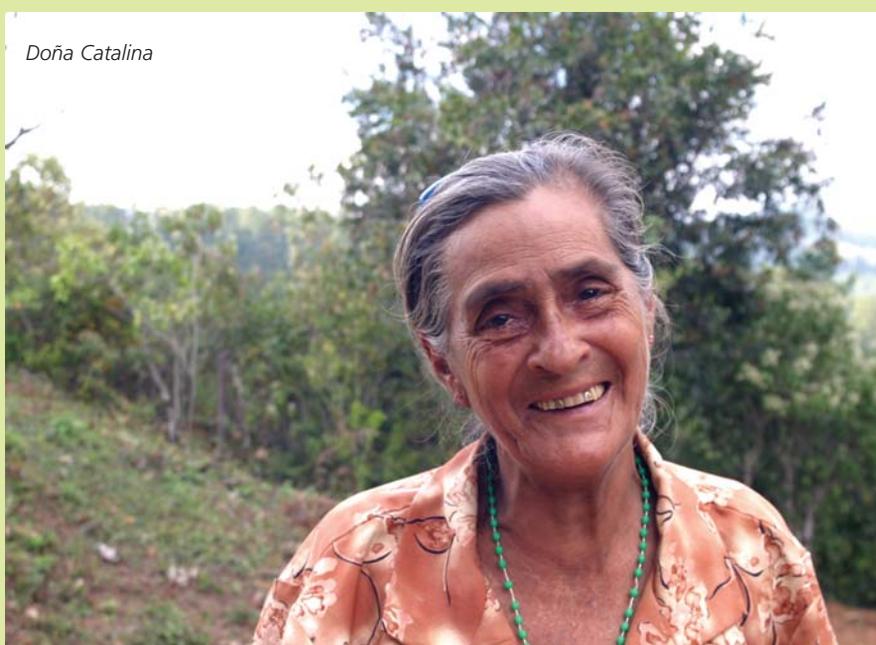
they could not afford a coffin. The contrast between the wealth of the natural resources and the poverty of the people was so stark that Fr Tamayo felt he had no choice but to act. He has campaigned to protect the environment ever since.

In 2001 Fr Tamayo formed MAO, and in 2003 he was awarded the Honduras National Human Rights Award. Then, in April this year, he won the Goldman Environmental Prize. His campaign goes from strength to strength. A trip to the UK in July – hosted by CIIR/ICD – saw him voice his concerns to delegates at Global Warming 8, a climate change event hosted in the run-up to the G8 summit in Gleneagles. Later that same week, he addressed the National Justice and Peace AGM where he received a standing ovation. 'How can we talk about defending life,' he said, 'if we do not defend our environment?'

Next on the agenda is a Meso-American March for Life from Panama to Mexico, to protest against CAFTA (the Central America Free Trade Agreement), as well as deforestation and the extraction of natural resources.

As Doña Catalina points out: 'It is up to all of us to do something to protect the environment and the life we have – for the happiness of Honduras, the air, the water, for all the children who are growing up in this country. For the future. What else do we have?'

Finola Robinson is CIIR/ICD's press and information officer. She visited Honduras in February.



Doña Catalina