



The Moskitia: The Honduran Jungle Drowning in Cocaine

#TheMoskitia

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November 2023

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When Cocaine Comes to Paradise



March 2023. Late afternoon. Puerto Lempira, Honduras.

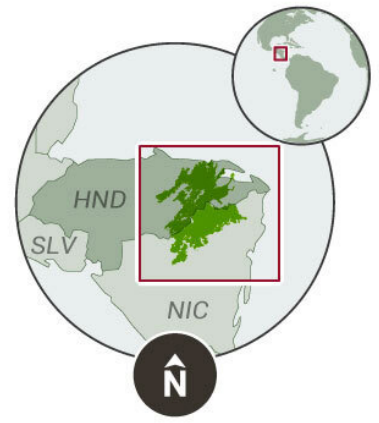
In front of the Tansin Lagoon, Moreno and Brutus, two Indigenous Miskito locals, each open a can of beer as the water sways gently beside us.

Brutus, a skinny, dark-haired young man, stands and begins to tell us how he came out of his last adventure alive.

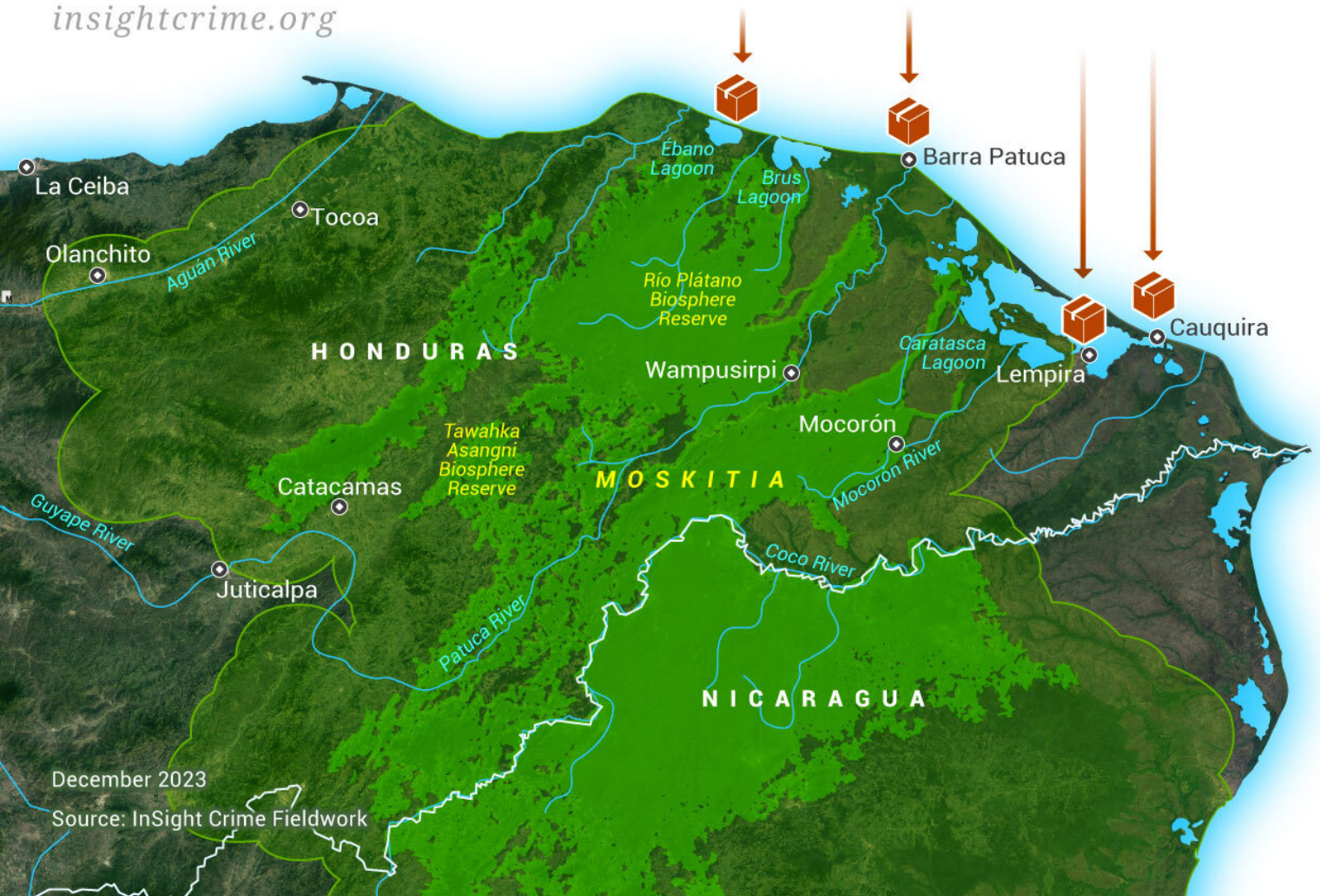
Just a week ago, he says, he found treasure on the open sea and managed to escape from a group of pirates who wanted to take it from him. He looks toward the horizon as he recalls his story. After the escape, he had the most memorable night of his life, he says.

We met Brutus through Moreno, a former employee of a local cartel who spent much of his adolescence taking packages of cocaine out of airplanes and putting them onto boats, and vice versa.

Drug Arrival Points on Honduras' Moskitia Coast



insightcrime.org



December 2023
Source: InSight Crime Fieldwork

Several sources had told us about a package of drugs that appeared a week ago, floating in the ocean. It was discovered by Miskito fishermen. Moreno said that Brutus, a friend of his, was on that boat. Brutus doesn't leave the house, he said. He's depressed. But if we bought a few beers and something to eat, maybe Brutus would tell us his story.

This morning, Moreno said that the mafia has ears everywhere. If we wanted to speak, we had to go somewhere isolated.

So we did. We picked up Brutus and went to a small private beach in front of an abandoned mansion. It was being built by the Honduran drug trafficker, Arnulfo Fagot Maximo, when Honduran authorities arrested him in 2017 and extradited him to the United States. In 2019, Fagot Maximo was convicted of conspiracy to distribute cocaine and sentenced to 33 years in prison.

Once we arrived, Brutus began his tale. In a mixture of Spanish and Miskito, his native language, he told us what he had found at sea.

“We saw it floating in the distance and one of the fishermen on the boat jumped in to pick it up,” he said. “Another fisherman even started to shout, ‘Yes! Today, we hit the big one!’ We didn’t fish anymore that night, and we woke up drinking. We were happy. It was 29 kilos.”

The sea had gifted the fisherman a valuable treasure: a load of pure cocaine worth around \$110,000 in the Moskitia at the time.

Brutus and the sailors didn’t know it yet, but the sea has conditions when giving up its spoils.

The captain told them that 25 kilograms of the cocaine was his because he owned the boat. He called the captain of another boat, who arrived and took the 25 kilograms. Brutus and the other sailors were bereft: they’d held the treasure in their hands, and now it was gone. But the other captain and his boat never reached their destination. They were intercepted by a boat carrying armed men in uniform, who took the cocaine.

Brutus’ captain was left with nothing, while Brutus and the 12 sailors had 4 kilograms to share, the equivalent of about \$16,000. If they managed to sell it all, they would each receive just over \$1,300 each. But once again, the sea had its own plans.

The Moskitia: The Last Kingdom

We are in the Moskitia jungle, in the department of Gracias a Dios, on Honduras’ northeast coast. This jungle is by far the largest in the country and one of the largest and most important in Mesoamerica. It is home to 20 of the 21 families of aquatic birds in Honduras, according to the Wildlife Conservation Society, an organization dedicated to the conservation of wild areas. It is also a refuge for jaguars, pumas, tapirs, and red-and-green macaws.

The Moskitia was an autonomous kingdom until the end of the 19th century. It was a poor and densely jungled place, and ruled by “the Moskitia King,” who was recognized by the British Empire. But the kingship was an empty title — a way for the English to keep a foot inside the territory of the Spanish empire. That’s why its annexation to the rest of Central America took 300 years longer than the rest of the region’s territories.

For hundreds of years, the region’s river system and the lagoons isolated and protected the Miskito people from invasions from the mainland, from the influence of the mestizos — people of European and Indigenous heritage — and from the voracity of capitalism. Yet the relationship between the people and

the rivers is difficult. The rivers provide locals with fish to catch, waterways to move through, and water to drink. But occasionally, when tropical storms arrive, those rivers and lagoons become congested and overflow, drowning the life they nurture.



The Moskitia extends 22,568 square kilometers along the border between Honduras and Nicaragua, and is inhabited by more than 100,000 people. It is the least inhabited region in Honduras and one of the least densely populated areas in Central America.

Its inhabitants are mostly Indigenous Miskitos, like Moreno and Brutus. There are also other minority groups, including Garífunas, people of Indigenous and African heritage, and other Indigenous groups, such as Tawankas, Pech, and Nahuas.

For the last three decades or so, there have also been mestizos. The Miskitos call these mestizos who now surround them, and all outsiders who were not born within the boundaries of their jungle, “*terceros*,” or third parties.

The Miskitos believe these mestizos are invaders. They are accused of a range of crimes by Indigenous authorities, from the murder of Indigenous leaders and the indiscriminate deforestation of the forest, to the disappearance of environmental defenders and the annihilation of the Miskito way of life.

Dozens of Indigenous leaders from communities scattered throughout the jungle told InSight Crime something more. They said that the mestizos are also allies, workers, collaborators, and the driving force of one of the biggest political and economic forces in Honduras: drug trafficking. Two high-level

police sources said the same, and at least two judicial documents to which InSight Crime had access repeated the accusation that the mestizos run the cocaine business.

The Cursed Treasure

The mansion of Fagot Maximo, where we sit with Moreno as Brutus tells his story, is imposing. Though it has been stripped to the bones, its grandeur remains. Had it been completed, it would have been a palace.



On the second floor, the remains of the mosaics and tiles that covered the pillars and the bar counter can be seen. On the northern side, facing the Tansin Lagoon, is what was planned to be a swimming pool. All that remains is a hole, overgrown with giant green weeds.

The upper part of that mansion remains a gray structure. It was still being built when the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) arrived. The rooms and their jacuzzis have been taken over by the same green weeds that fill the pool, and local couples seeking privacy come to these rooms, ensuring that they serve the purpose for which they were built, but for different people: Miskitos.

Brutus shows us the photos of the cocaine packages he and the sailors found. Square lumps wrapped in blue plastic. In the photo, the hands of sailors are seen grasping the packages, as if they're worried about losing them.

He tells us that he and the other sailors on that boat spent almost two months at sea, fishing for shrimp and lobster, while they anxiously guarded their spoils. Those 4 kilograms were to be shared by the 12 sailors, but the ship's cook, an avid crack consumer, had opened a 1-kilogram packet, broken it in half, and scraped some off to turn into crack.

The cook's actions almost caused a knife fight. There was little fishing from then on, and each sailor slept with one eye open. Dreams of wealth were pinned on those bricks of white powder, not on the lobsters at the bottom of the sea.

Time passed. At the beginning of March, 11 days before our meeting, Brutus and the other fishermen had returned to land at a port named Kaukira. There, Brutus had taken his share of cocaine. He sold it to a local buyer, and then he disappeared, leaving the others tangled up in the type of problem that is not easily resolved with words.

Brutus' father, also a fisherman, picked him up from Kaukira in his boat. Brutus was carrying about \$1,300. They were intercepted by pirates as they made their way home.

"When they flashed their lights at us we thought they were fishermen warning us not to break their trammel net. But suddenly — *bang bang bang bang* — the bullets," says Brutus, opening his eyes wide, accompanying his story with wild gestures and thunderous sounds.

According to Brutus, the pirates were Miskitos. He recognized the faces of some old fishing buddies who had left the industry to concentrate on the sea's more valuable commodities. Moreno confirmed their identities. The pirates had learned of the discovery and wanted, with the help of machetes and revolvers, to take their cut.

That day, however, the sea was not in their favor. They stole Brutus' backpack, thinking it contained the money. But Brutus had hidden the cash in his crotch. After the attack ended and the pirates left, Brutus and his father headed back home to Puerto Lempira, the capital of Gracias a Dios, their loot intact.

After handing a few dollars to his father, Brutus went out to enjoy himself. He headed to the town's bar area, put credit on his phone, and called his friends, Moreno included. He had bagged half an ounce of cocaine and decided to have a night to remember.

Later, he learned that after failing to steal Brutus' cut, the pirates had gone looking for the other sailors in Port Kaukira. There, they found the crack-addicted cook and the others. They attacked them with machetes, snatched the cash, and left in their boats.

The sea gives, and the sea takes away.

Journey Through a Dying Jungle

Professor Aristides, one of the most important Indigenous leaders in this region, welcomes us to Puerto Lempira. It is perhaps the only place in the Moskitia jungle that can be called a city. It has three paved streets, electricity, telephone and internet signal, as well as a dock and a police station.

The professor is a small man. He speaks Spanish with difficulty. While his simple conjugations are reminiscent of children learning to speak, his legal knowledge, and easy reference to institutions like the International Labor Organization (ILO) indicate he is an astute activist.

“The problem we have here is that *terceros* are destroying the jungle. They destroy large hectares of jungle and buy and sell land. This is illegal. According to ILO Convention 169, these lands belong to the Miskito community, they cannot be sold. But they [the *terceros*] do. They have drug traffickers behind them, that’s why it’s difficult to get them out,” says the professor, with a look of disgust on his face.

He invites us to go to his village, Tansin, on the other side of the lagoon, several hours away. Another local drives the old pickup truck in which we travel. It is a bumpy ride.

After less than an hour’s drive, we arrive at stretches of land that have been invaded by *terceros*. There is not a single tree in sight. It is now a never-ending empty valley, with cattle grazing in the distance. The professor takes us along a path that leads to fields planted with jackfruit. The fat, fleshy fruit grows from a few sparse trees. We are standing on private land, he tells us quietly. This is territory appropriated by the *terceros*.

On the nearby grounds is a tall, wooden barn with a frame that would look at home in the fields of Kentucky or Arkansas. Two new tractors and a Ford pickup are parked out front. A man watering jackfruit saplings growing in a nursery he greets us. He is not Miskito, and neither the professor nor the driver return his greeting.

We leave. Not ten minutes have passed when a man driving an ATV overtakes us. He asks us to stop, tells us that he is the administrator of this farm, and that the land belongs to a man named “Bruce.” He wants to know who we are and what we are doing there. It is clear he wants us to leave. This land has a new owner.

In the car, the Miskitos sit silently. Anger fills their eyes. Expulsion from their land is becoming more and more frequent. Perhaps the professor wanted to make us feel what the locals endure each day.

We continue on, past more and more appropriated land. Huge fenced areas, hundreds of hectares in size, stretch as far as the eye can see. Barbed wire divides each plot, cutting to pieces the land that was once jungle, that once belonged to the Miskitos.



The Politician

The ILO Convention 169 of 1989 on “Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries,” has been ratified by Honduras and 22 other countries. It grants Indigenous organizations rights over their lands, stipulating that Indigenous lands must be administered by Indigenous organizations and cannot be sold or rented.

The Miskitos are aware of these agreements. The problem, according to Professor Arístides and other leaders, is that Miskito organizations have been co-opted by *terceros*. The Federation of Indigenous and Native People of the Mocerón Segovia Zone (Federación de Indígenas y Nativos de la Zona Mocerón Segovia - FINZMOS), one of the most powerful Miskito institutions, oversees the proper use of the land. But since 2014, it has been headed by Rogelio Elvir, a councilor in the mayor’s office of Puerto Lempira. Elvir is not Miskito, and several of his family members are allegedly linked to drug trafficking.

Elvir, now in his fifties, was born in one of the jungle towns on the border with Nicaragua. He is the brother of Marco Antonio Elvir, who the Honduran and US governments consider to be an important regional drug trafficker, according to Honduran media. His other brother, Modesto Elvir, now deceased, faced similar accusations. Rogelio Elvir is also the uncle of Rosbin Duarte Elvir, also accused by the Honduran media of being a drug trafficker.

In 2017, the Technical Agency for Criminal Investigation (Agencia Técnica de Investigación Criminal - ATIC), an agency dedicated to investigating and prosecuting crimes with serious social impact, seized at least 10 properties owned by Marco and Rosbin Elvir as part of operations Estigia I and Estigia II. The properties included luxurious mansions located deep in the jungle. The operations targeted a criminal group called “Los Helios,” allegedly led by Marco, dedicated to cocaine trafficking from the Moskitia to the United States. Some of the properties that were seized are located in Puerto Lempira. They have begun to crumble.

In Puerto Lempira, just a few blocks from one of these now dilapidated properties, Rogelio Elvir welcomes us. In staccato sentences, he tells us that the local people are exaggerating the land issue. He says that although it is true that some mestizo farmers are living in the Moskitia, they do not occupy more than a few hectares of land, used to plant their crops.

We tell him that we have visited the land, and that we have seen the devastation. He changes tact. It’s not really up to him to change the situation, he says. It’s the job of the central government. He tells us about groups of Miskitos who are organizing themselves to fight against *terceros*, and describes them as a group of bandits.

We ask him about his relationship with three members of his family who are accused of involvement in drug trafficking. He responds tersely. He isn’t responsible for his family, he says. He ends our conversation by saying that in reality all Hondurans have the right to the Moskitia, and that it is a space that should be shared. He and his family are poor working people, he adds.

“I buy and sell animals, and that’s what I live on,” he says.

As a token of this, he asks us to pay for his coffee in the cafeteria of the mayor’s office.

“I didn’t even bring cash.”

He gets up and leaves.

The Poor Narcos

After a long journey through Miskito lands and lands appropriated by *terceros*, we finally arrive in the village of Tansin, where Professor Aristides was born and where he has worked for the last two decades.

As we arrive, we see movement. A group of 15 people are scampering around a tree, shouting excitedly as they sharpen long bamboo poles. They are chasing a large iguana. It is now surrounded, and its end is near. It pokes its head through the branches and stares at the people who will soon eat it.

Food insecurity affects 43% of the people in the Moskitia, according to the World Bank, meaning that almost half the people here do not have the secure source of food they need to live. Most eat rice, beans, and yucca for almost every meal.

”Bush meat,” like the iguana, is vital. But since the arrival of *terceros*, there are fewer animals to hunt, and fishing in the lagoons and rivers has become increasingly difficult. The environmental destruction that has accompanied the *terceros* is having a terrible impact.

Tansin has one flimsily built school. Boys and girls receive classes in a tin-roofed, wooden-walled enclosure that at 11 o’clock in the morning turns into an oven, making the air unbreathable. The school is not big enough, and the groups that cannot get into the classrooms must take refuge under the shade of the trees. There is no bathroom or running water. A group of emaciated horses wander around the school, looking for scraps of food in the garbage. The three teachers who give classes leave their students repeating the vowels in Spanish and Miskito over and over again and approach us. They tell us that their students have no chance at a good life.

In the Moskitia, work is scarce. Those who can are employed as fishermen. Living in the ancestral way, planting small plots of land and hunting in the mountains, is increasingly difficult. The most fertile lands are already in the hands of *terceros*.



The local people say that the jungle is dying and with it the animals. This is not only their perception. Global Forest Watch, an online platform that tracks deforestation worldwide, estimates that the department of Gracias a Dios lost 110,000 hectares of forest — equivalent to more than 150,000 soccer fields — between 2015 and 2022. This ancient forest, which survived the devastation of the Spanish conquest 500 years ago, the destructive maelstrom of the colonial era from 1500 to 1821, and the arrival and establishment of capitalism in the 20th century, will be lost completely in less than 300 years if deforestation continues at this rate. In less than ten generations, the Moskitia could be a thing of the past.

The school's director, a plump 29-year-old man, paints a thorny future for these barefoot children, who are struggling to write a few words of Spanish in their notebooks. With the jungle dying and work scarce, earning money working for drug traffickers has become more palatable and more necessary for the Miskitos. The director himself unabashedly tells us that he worked for the narcos at a difficult economic time for his family.

“Loading and unloading boats and airplanes, brothers. That’s how I had to do it, there was no work,” he tells us in front of his students.

El Narco

The drug trade has been in the Moskitia since the 1980s. It has hundreds of beaches on the Caribbean Sea, and it is both unpopulated and remote, making it difficult for authorities to access. These features make this part of the jungle ideal for smuggling drugs and shipping them north. Local social conditions, including unemployment and hunger, provide drug traffickers an easy labor pool.

The first to see these socio-ecological advantages of the Moskitia was Juan Ramon Matta Ballesteros. He was the most important drug smuggler in Central America in the 1980s, and the link between traffickers in Mexico and Colombia. However, his reign was short-lived. In April 1988, he was arrested by the Honduran police and escorted by US Marshals to the United States where, 35 years later, he remains in prison.

More recently, the Miskito jungle was also the scene of operations for a conglomerate of Honduran kingpins who, according to US prosecutors, maintained ties to then-President [Juan Orlando Hernández](#). Hernández is in a US jail cell, along with his brother, a son of another former president, and other Hondurans belonging to the country’s political elite.



The Moskitia, and much of northern Honduras, has been a narco empire for the last three decades. But until recently, drug traffickers' presence was more discreet, more clandestine. They kept to their mansions and clandestine runways.

However, in the last 10 years or so, the traffickers have begun to take over large tracts of Miskito land. They have chosen the most pragmatic way: they take the land by force, then cut down the trees and put up barbed wire and install armed guards. Where there are no trees, there is no forest, and where there is no forest, there are no Miskitos.

The only benefit the Miskitos have found in the arrival of the *terceros* is that, from time to time, the sea gives them a few kilograms of cocaine. The drugs are the product of shipwrecks or accidents, and locals can sell it and, when it is enough, turn their lives around. But, according to the school's director, Professor Aristides, Brutus, Moreno, and almost any Miskito we have spoken to over the past five months, even that dangerous benefit is being lost.

Another professor tells us that while March is "high season" for finding packages of cocaine on or near the coasts, cocaine is not as desirable as in the past. The price has fallen. They have come together to fix the prices, and now a kilogram of cocaine recovered and in good condition that could cost \$9,000 five years ago, barely scrapes \$4,000.

“Now they don’t pay anything per kilo. It’s dirt cheap, brother,” the director complains.

If what Professor Aristides wants to show us is that drugs have not filled the Miskito villages with opulence, he has succeeded. Everything indicates that having added cocaine to the formula of state neglect, multidimensional poverty, and land invasion will bring the Miskito culture closer to its decline or extinction. Its geographic location, which for years protected it, now makes it appetizing to traffickers.

Contrary to what some authorities have told us, and to what dozens of Hondurans we have spoken to think, the Miskitos are not drug traffickers. They are left with the crumbs, the leftovers, the pieces that fall off the boats. This floating treasure, which appears only sporadically, has become the hope of entire families and villages.

Barra Patuca’s Piñata

Generally, these stories of Miskitos who find cocaine are of lustful sailors or lonely wanderers who comb the beaches in search of a life-changing find. Occasionally, the sea distributes its riches in a more communal way.

Last year, in April 2022, in a small and poor village called Barra Patuca, some packages, wrapped in plastic, appeared floating on the horizon. What happened next has already become a legend in the area. The story spread like fire through jungle villages.



“The piñata lasted more than a month. It was like a carnival. People came from all over to buy and sell things. Food, guaro (a local form of hooch), prostitutes ... There was everything there,” recalls a sailor from another community who visited Barra Patuca at that time.

“There were people lying in the streets, falling asleep drunk. People came from other parts, from far away and stayed there for weeks,” he says.

The find brought a lot of money in Barra Patuca.

It all started when, one afternoon in April 2022, a group of fishermen divers were searching for lobster several nautical miles off the Miskito coast. The fishermen had already been in and out of the water for several hours that day. After a week at sea, they had not caught enough lobsters to make the expedition profitable, the captain told the sailors.

It seemed like the week couldn't get any worse.

But the sea, as the Miskitos know, is capricious. Sometimes it can give you gifts.

“Then they saw what was floating by ... It was a giant bale,” says a fisherman. “They saw,” he says, in the third-person plural, as if to stand back from it.

“And all of a sudden, it wasn't just one, it was a bunch of bundles! And we went out to grab them! Well, out they came,” he stumbles.

They were the first to come across the treasure. Then others would see it too.

It was like a mirage. Most had seen a bale of cocaine floating in the sea before. But it is one thing to find one bale with 24 kilograms, and quite another to find 87 bales with 24 kilograms each. Our Miskito sources estimated that 2 tons of cocaine floated to them. Two tons of treasure. White gold.

No one knows exactly where so many bales came from. Some sources told us they saw two drug trafficking boats being overturned by Miskitos in the estuaries of Barra Patuca. Others claim to have come across the bales on the high seas, while still others claim to have seen the bales arrive floating, calmly, to the shores of the village.

Those who were there say that the Coors Light beers, a luxury that can rarely be afforded, were sold out and that the stores in town sent boys in boats to buy more, many more, but they had to drink them warm, there were not enough freezers or refrigerators in town.

The day after the discovery, “negotiators” who come from large cities like San Pedro Sula, Colon, or Tegucigalpa, to buy the drugs they find, arrived. Not two days had passed when the money began to flow.

Then came the “Turks,” the name used by Miskitos for anyone who sells clothes or fabrics. After them came those who had a motorcycle, a boat motor, a few pounds of rice or beans, or a pig. Even sex workers arrived. Almost everyone who had something to trade for money came to the village. Those who had managed to sell some cocaine bought whatever was put in front of them. The most visionary bought cement and wood to construct or repair houses. Others bought a lot of Coors Light. That party lasted almost a month.

The Cocaine Current

The Miskitos attribute the arrival of cocaine to supernatural causes that have to do with deities, with destiny, or a type of karma for their own actions. They have charged these events with a profound meaning, and have incorporated them into their worldview. Finding drugs is something they attribute to a sort of game between good and evil, where evil tempts people with drugs to divert them from the just path. It almost always succeeds.

However, an oceanographer from an English transnational oil and petroleum company, who asked not to be identified by name, explained in an interview with InSight Crime in May 2023 that the arrival of this drug in certain places, in certain seasons, has to do with a body of water known as the Western Caribbean Current.

“I can drop a buoy in a place in the Caribbean and I know exactly where it will arrive and when because the currents always work the same way. They move in a loop,” says the expert.

This man has been studying the Caribbean Sea around the Honduran Moskitia for more than 20 years. He believes that while many bales of drugs are lost or abandoned by their carriers, others are deliberately dropped by planes in specific locations. He says he has witnessed such events and knows of colleagues who have even been hired to advise traffickers on the nature of these flows.

Perhaps this explains why the buyers arrive so quickly, with cash already prepared, to buy the drugs that the Miskitos find. If what the oceanographer claims is true, the Indigenous Miskitos are another unknowing link in the drug distribution chain.

For the Miskitos, poverty disappears when they get their hands on these bales. They can become wealthy overnight. Although the price at which outsiders buy a kilogram of cocaine from the Miskitos has plummeted lately, \$4,000 — the price of a kilogram of cocaine there today — would take a local fisherman or farmer more than a year to make from daily backbreaking labor.

But after the explosion of wealth and the binge it brings, the hangover always arrives.

The Hangover

For the Miskitos, drug money is a bad omen. Cursed money goes like water through the hands, evaporates, and brings only short-term revelry. That's why, the shrewdest outsiders only showed up in Barra Patuca once the party was over.



“I came to the piñata, to buy motors. They gave them to me cheap. When there is cocaine, my people, the Miskitos, buy engines, a freezer, a motorcycle, a boat, a television, a fishing net, or a car. But after two months, when the coca money is spent and they're poor again, they sell everything cheap. I went to buy two motors after the party was over. I got them for 40,000 lempiras (\$1,624), but they cost more than 90,000 lempiras (\$3,655) new,” said one of the teachers at the school in Tansin, to the astonishment of his students.

The Miskito culture is not a capitalist culture. The people do not operate under the logic of surplus value. Instead, they live by subsistence, or sowing to live. The Miskito language does not have words for numbers beyond twenty. Twenty is yawanaiska, which, literally translated, means all the fingers on my hands plus all the toes on my feet. To express higher numbers they have had to incorporate Spanish words. Under the logic of subsistence, it is more important to share with your community than to invest in a company.

In July 2022, after the festivities, the lobster hunters of Barra Patuca returned to the sea. The fishermen climbed into their mahogany canoes and the poor merchants returned to their sales. The peasants continued planting their yucca and rice. With the joy of having been part of an unforgettable carnival, and the memory of having been momentarily rich, they hoped that the sea would once again repeat its kindness. Now the sailors and lobster fishermen look towards the horizon hoping to again see a white lump appear floating toward them so that the party can start again.

The Treasure Goes Up in Smoke

As for Brutus, word of his story soon spread, and he went from being an ordinary sailor to being Brutus, the man the sea rewarded, the brave man who outwitted the pirates and the patron of Puerto Lempira's nightlife. He tells us that after two days of drinking, snorting, eating and sex, the money and cocaine ran out.

Rumor has it that the pirates who failed to steal his money have sworn to kill him if they see him again in Kaukira. Meanwhile, his friends keep asking him to buy them drinks and drugs, and they don't believe him when he tells them it's over. They call him selfish and withdraw. The same thing happens with his family. They scold him for keeping the money for himself and not sharing it with them. "You're loaded, Brutus," they tell him when he passes by, and everyone sells him more expensive food.



According to Brutus and Moreno, at least two of the pirates were killed by other pirates somewhere near Port Kaukira days after the robbery. The law of the sea.

The sun sets over the Tansin Lagoon, making the sky an impossible orange painting. Flocks of birds interrupt us with their twilight chatter. Nocturnal animals are beginning to wake. In front of us there is an abandoned boat. It had arrived loaded with 80 bales of cocaine some nine months back. Now it bobs lifelessly in the water, full of mold. No one has had the courage to move it, let alone use it. The first Miskitos couples of the evening are wandering about, looking for a dark and secluded place for romance.

The vestige of Arnulfo Fagot Máximo's mansion is filling with shadows. From the half-built third floor, we can see to the other end of the lagoon. In the middle of a mangrove swamp, there is another boat. That one also came loaded with cocaine a year and a half ago and was abandoned by its owners. Nobody touches that one either.

At night, Brutus and Moreno tell us that we should head home. After dusk, the lovers leave and the addicts, the thieves, the pirates, and vagabonds of Puerto Lempira come out. It is better that we go. To them, we are *terceros*.

2

When Death Flew Over the Ébano Lagoon



It was about 3:00 p.m. in the afternoon of September 16, 2021, when the Bell H1-1H, with the registration number 953, of the Honduran Air Force filled the sky over the community living on the shores of the Ébano Lagoon.

A few seconds later, it started to rain lead.

The shots sank into the dry earth with power, like huge raindrops, throwing boulders into the sky on impact that then fell back down onto the moldy tin roofs of the beachside huts.

The Miskitos, the indigenous people who live on the lagoon, still remember the sound of the shrapnel. A strong “P” and a long and bombastic “R.”

Prrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr, prrr, prrrr.

That afternoon, in the middle of the Caribbean jungle of the Moskitia region in Honduras, some Miskitos had approached an object that the soldiers aboard that helicopter were trying to guard. It was a gray boat with three engines.

The boat had been fleeing along the shore as the helicopter chased it, dropping bullets from the sky. It landed on the beach with a pirouette that sent it flying through the air, locals remember.

The helicopter, the Miskitos recall, passed by several times, spraying shots over their heads, before panic and chaos took hold of them.

Two kilometers from the beach where the boat had run aground, in a house made of wooden boards and a tin roof, Élica Bermúdez was digesting the last bite of fried chicken she was having for lunch when she heard the thunder and immediately thought of her husband, Erick Barú Rivera.

“They’ve killed him,” Élica said at the time, out loud, as if she had been talking to someone.

It was a premonition. On the shore of the beach, her husband lay on the sand, on the verge of death. Two bullets had entered his back and were lodged in his stomach.

Suddenly, the rattle of gunfire came closer and closer until it could be heard a few meters away from the courtyard of their house. Élica ran into the room and threw herself over her youngest son, trying to protect him from the bullets falling from the sky.

For the next 40 minutes, the Miskitos recall, the people of the community ran. They ran into their rooms, hid behind trees. They screamed. They cried. They hurled insults. They cursed.

Prrrr. Prrrrrr. Dust flooded the streets. My God! Lead rained. Bullets came through the roof. Jesus! The helicopter buzzed. Prrr. Blood. Another wounded. Father, help us! Dust. Another wounded. Prrr. Prrr. Another one. Buzzing. Oh, my God! Screaming. Buzzing. They killed him!

Ibans

Ibans. That is the word used by its inhabitants to name this small strip of land bathed by the fresh waters of the Ébano Lagoon on one side and by the waters of the Caribbean Sea on the other. Its name, according to the community elders, is a distortion of the English word ebony, one of the most precious trees that grows in the forests around the lagoon.

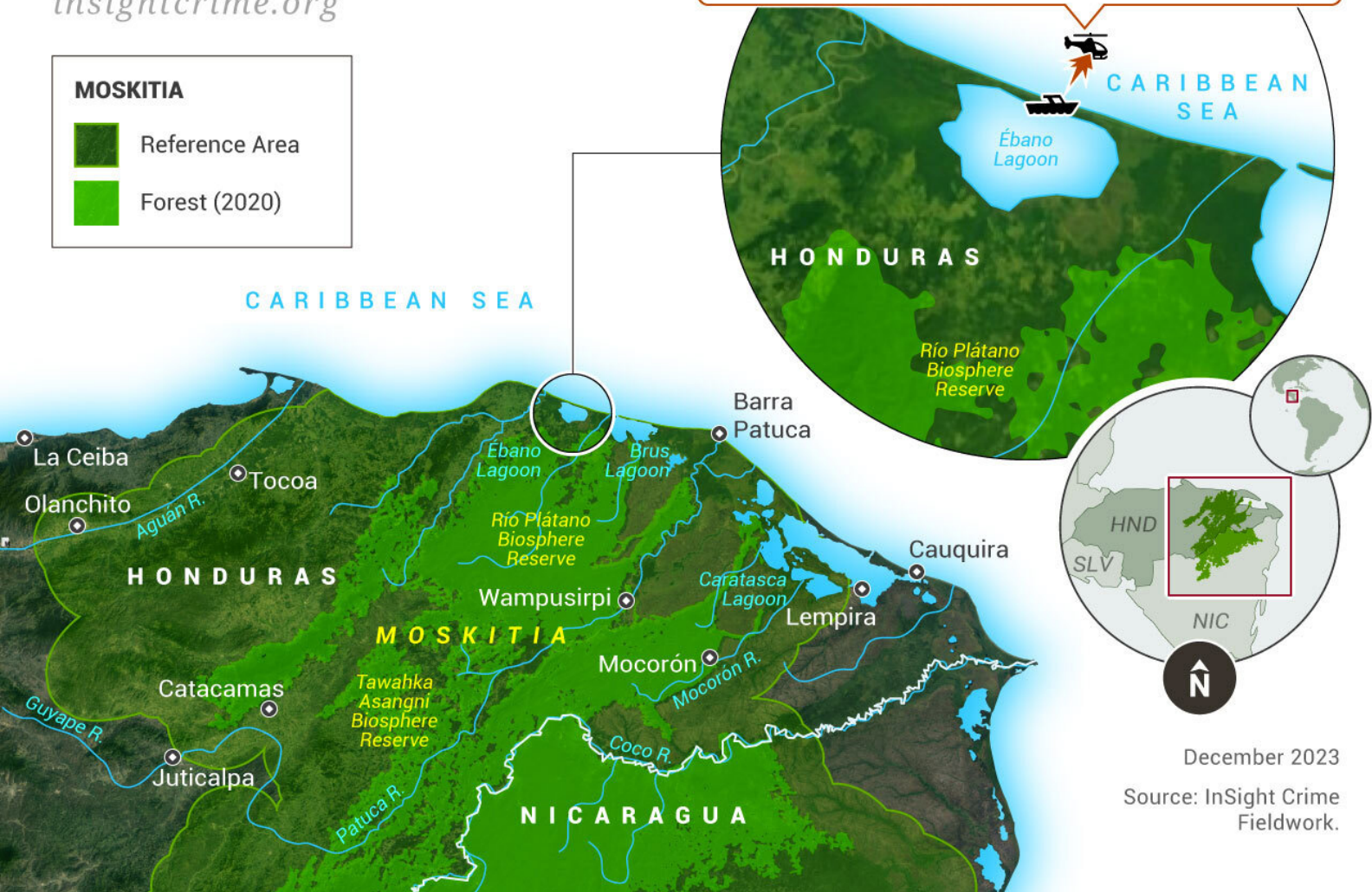
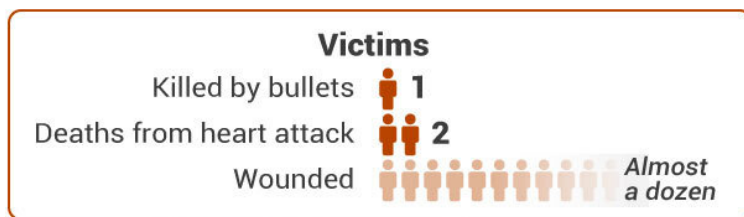
The Ébano Lagoon is located between the municipalities of Juan Francisco Bulnes and Brus Laguna, in the department of Gracias a Dios, in the jungle of the Honduran Moskitia. It is not unusual that its name, when pronounced by its inhabitants, switches between English and Spanish in such a way that

some call it Ébano Lagoon and others call it Ibans Lagoon. It is a legacy of the great influence of the British Empire, which kept a foothold in this region from colonial times until the beginning of the 20th century, even after Spain had withdrawn from Central America.

Helicopter Attack at Ébano Lagoon, Moskitia

On September 16, 2021, a helicopter of the Honduras Air Force attacked a community on the shores of Ébano Lagoon. The attack lasted for 40 minutes.

insightcrime.org



December 2023

Source: InSight Crime Fieldwork.

Ibans, within the Moskitia, is one of the areas that nature has rewarded the most. It is surrounded by the richness of the Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve, which makes it a fertile area bathed by fresh waters that irrigate the forests. Its immense lagoon is full of fish and snails. And on the other side, it is bathed by the sea, with an abundance of crabs, lobster, and jellyfish, which fishermen sell to a Chinese company that has been exploiting this coast for years.

Perhaps because of its geographical position, perhaps because of the orientation of the winds, or probably because of a whim of the sea, Ibans has also long been a place where the waves constantly throw up bales of cocaine, which drug traffickers drop on their way traveling from south to north. Not just a few bales. Sometimes, according to locals, when the boats run out of gas, water, or food, they run aground on the white sands of the shoreline and leave entire shipments at the mercy of the Miskitos, who fall on them like children on a piñata.

However, the costs of these piñatas are high.

‘We Are Poor’

When I first arrived in Ibans in March 2023, almost a year and a half after the helicopter had attacked the village, everything seemed calm. To get to Ibans from Tegucigalpa, the Honduran capital, you have to travel for three days. Moving from one village to another within the Moskitia depends on several things: the weather, whether transportation is available, and whether there are enough people wanting to go to the same place to make setting out in a pickup truck or launching a boat worthwhile.

The trip from Tegucigalpa to the Moskitia began with an hour’s flight to Ceiba, the largest neighboring city to the Moskitia jungle — although calling it a city is being generous. Then you have to wait until early the next morning to board a truck that travels for eight hours to Batalla, the first village in the Moskitia. In Batalla you have to wait another day to be able to travel by boat for an hour to Ibans.

The other way to get there is to go from Puerto Lempira on a six-hour boat trip out to sea. When I took this route on my second visit, it rained almost non-stop. But upon arrival, the water of the Ibans lake was still as a mirror, and a huge carpet of floating green water lilies adorned the sides of the main dock. I was greeted by one of the leaders, who introduced me to the members of the council of elders, which acts as a local government, and then to a dozen survivors and witnesses of the shooting.

At Ibans, I spoke with survivors who showed me their scars, x-rays, medical exams, videos, and photographs of what happened that afternoon. In addition, I listened to the accounts of more than a dozen witnesses, examined the 113-page file opened by the Special Prosecutor's Office for the Protection of Ethnic Groups and Cultural Heritage, and spoke with lawyers, police, military, indigenous leaders, and public officials.



Despite the claims made by military officials that what happened that day was a confrontation between soldiers and drug traffickers, all indications are that it was more of a direct attack.

The first person I interviewed in Ibans was Élica Bermúdez, the widow of Erick Barú, who died from his bullet wounds in a Tegucigalpa hospital two days after the assault. In addition to Barú, according to the inhabitants of Ibans and the criminal case opened in the case, two more Miskito men, Launder López and Héctor Derich, died of heart attacks on the beach after hearing the sounds of war. At least 11 other Miskitos were wounded by bullets that afternoon.

Élica is a 32-year-old Miskito woman. The day I met her, she looked dirty, with pale skin and matted hair. Standing beside her husband's grave, she sobbed as she talked about how she had been left alone and without hope.

The same is true of seven other survivors I interviewed over the course of five months between March and July 2023. All of them believe that the criminal investigation opened into the shooting will never bring justice. Some believe this is because the Honduran state has no intention of investigating at all.

“It's because we are poor,” says Élica.

The Helicopter

Cherlito Platino points with his index finger to the scar located right in the middle of the back of his neck.

“The doctors couldn't remove the bullet because they said it was in a delicate place, very dangerous to take it out,” he says, trying to articulate his words in Spanish, his second language after the native Miskito tongue.

I met Cherlito one afternoon in early July. He is one of the survivors of the shooting, and to prove it, in addition to his scars, he has an x-ray showing the bullet lodged between his vertebrae. He was introduced to me by one of the indigenous leaders of the Ibans community after I asked him if I could meet the survivors of the helicopter attack. It was not difficult to reach him. In this community, almost everyone knows and remembers that day in September 2021 as if it were yesterday.



Cherlito recalls he was casting his fishing net in the waters of the Caribbean Sea off the coast of Ibans and pulling it up full of jellyfish. In his boat, a medium-sized motorboat powered by a 200-horsepower engine, he was accompanied by three other fishermen and a driver. Together, they had been out at sea for about six hours, filling the buckets with jellyfish they would sell for 21 lempiras each, or about 80 cents in US dollars.

But then something unexpected happened.

“Prrr prrr, the shots rang out. Soldiers were shooting from both sides of the helicopter, through both doors,” Cherlito recounts.

Below the helicopter, in the waters of the Caribbean Sea, a huge gray speedboat was traveling at full speed towards the coast of Ibans, driven by the power of three Yamaha engines of 300 horsepower each.

On the shore, about 200 Miskito men, women, boys, and girls suddenly stopped their fishing to watch. They lowered the buckets from their shoulders, dropped their nets and looked up to the horizon, observing the scene not with fear but with the joy of someone who has found treasure.

Upon reaching the shore, the boat hit the beach at the speed provided by its three engines and jumped into the air in a spectacular pirouette, landing on the sand about 20 meters inland. Three frightened men got off the boat and disappeared like smoke, scurrying off into the hills.

Seeing the boat run aground, the Miskitos jumped on it in the hope of taking for themselves some of the cocaine treasure they imagined was inside the boat.

Before the first of them could reach the boat, the bullets from the helicopter hit the beach, sending the sand flying into the air and creating a huge golden cloud.

The bullets went through Cherlito's boat some 200 meters out to sea, and one of them hit him right in the back of the neck.

"The bullets were so fast they had already hit me by the time I felt it," says Cherlito, who, though wounded and bleeding, helped his companions take the boat to the beach. "We all got off the boat, and then I lost my strength, and everything went black."

He fainted.

The Boat

Sergio Herrera is an elementary school teacher. He is also a survivor of the attack, and he described to me what happened next. That afternoon, he was out buying some brushes to paint his house when he was surprised by the sight of so many people running towards the beach.



“People were shouting, ‘A boat has crashed! A boat has crashed!’ And when I went out to the beach, I saw a boat sitting on the sand. And I also saw that a helicopter was shooting to the side of the fishing crew. And people were running away, mostly women and children,” recalls Sergio.

Upon seeing the bullets hit, the Miskitos retreated. Some threw themselves into the brush that grows along the seashore. Others threw themselves on their bellies in the sand, pretending to be dead. Others hid under a bush or fled, slipping away down the paths that lead to the beach.

But just a few minutes later, Sergio walked towards the boat and saw that a group of about 50 Miskitos was surrounding it. By then, it was already being guarded by a group of about eight soldiers. The soldiers were those stationed in a small, improvised military post installed in Ibans four years ago as part of the “Shield” (Escudo) plan. Their presence came on orders from the government of Honduras’ then-President Juan Orlando Hernandez, and their stated objective was to shut down the drug trafficking routes taken by planes and boats coming from South America.

The military, who had appeared in support of the helicopter, according to the Miskitos, guarded the boat and pointed their rifles at anyone who tried to approach it.

“All of us who were there, the soldiers and also the population, assumed that the boat was full of drugs. That’s why the soldiers were guarding it. The message was clear: ‘If you try to get to the boat, we are not going to allow it,’” recalls Sergio, sitting under the shade of a tree in front of his house.

For many Miskitos, the drugs that come from the sea are just another of nature’s resources. Some even speak of “high season” and “low season” for cocaine packages. These people consider these packages something to which they are somehow entitled, like the fish from the sea, the fruits from the forest, and the wood from the trees.

So that day they approached the boat, sniffing out its contents from afar. Suddenly, lead rained from the sky once again.

According to witnesses and survivors, in the middle of the commotion, a drunken Miskito jumped on one of the soldiers guarding the boat and tried to take his rifle, to which the soldier responded by opening fire.

The soldier missed the drunk, but in the chaos, Sergio was hit.



“I felt a sting,” Sergio remembers, as he puts his hand to his chest. “I looked at myself and saw blood coming out of my heart. My friend Franklin, who was next to me, saw me bleeding and said, ‘I’m hit too.’ But I could no longer react. Then I felt myself fading away.”

He fainted.

Next to Sergio was Tecxi Jackson, another of the jellyfish fishermen who was working on the beach that afternoon.



“The helicopter started shooting, and with the commotion of the people, some of them jumped on the boat. Then, I just felt a bullet hit my hand. I felt the heat,” says Tecxi.

Near Sergio, Tecxi, and Franklin, another man had just fallen to the sand after being pierced by a bullet: Erick Barú Rivera. Erick had just gotten off a small fishing boat and was running towards the boat, trying to grab a share of the treasure.

“When I saw that the helicopter was shooting, I told him not to go near,” recalls Wilmer Rivera, his cousin, as he points to his grave in the Ibans cemetery. The cemetery is so small

and with so few dead the graves don't have names — everyone just knows whose grave is whose.

“He told us we were cowards and ran off in the direction of the boat. He had only gone a few steps when he was shot in the back,” Wilmer says.

The helicopter descended a little, hovering for a few seconds just a few meters above the boat, and then it ascended again.

“I saw that it was on its way up when it started shooting again. I saw the two pilots and the two soldiers at the doors shooting with M60 machine guns,” says Sergio, showing on his phone a video uploaded to Facebook by some residents who publicly filed a complaint about the incident.

The helicopter lifted off, and while it had first fired on the Miskitos trying to approach the boat, it then began to rain bullets on the entire community of Ibans, according to the Miskitos.

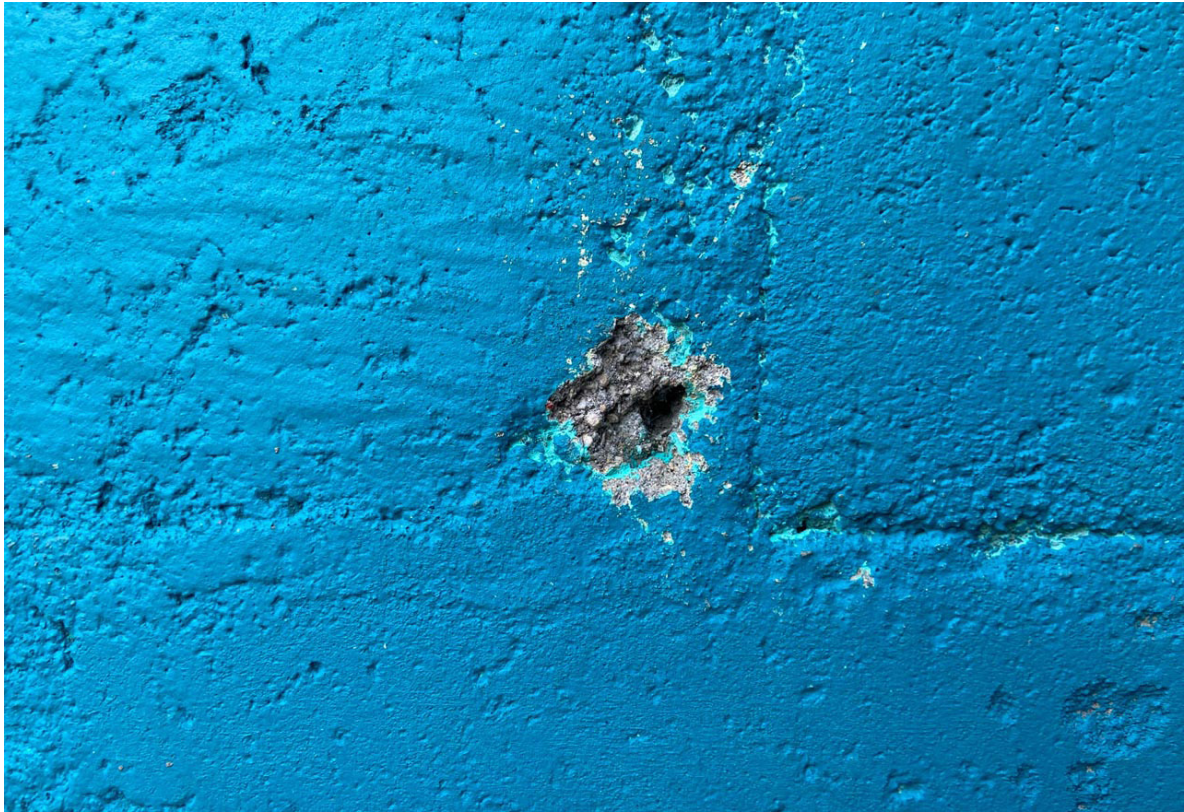
Vanesa Duarte, director of the Celso Castillo daycare center in the community of Coyoles, a hamlet next to Ibans, pulls out her cell phone and shows me the video of the helicopter hovering near her house. There are other videos like this one, filmed by locals, that show images of the helicopter and the bursts of gunfire over Ibans.

Minutes before filming the video, her husband, who works in timber, had run towards the boat intending to grab some of the supposed loot. But on the way, he ran into the helicopter, which was spitting fire, and had to dive for cover behind some old sheeting.

“When they heard the helicopter, my kids came out to see it. They always went out to wave goodbye to it when it passed by. But suddenly, I saw them run inside because they heard the gunfire, and they could see the bullets, they could see little rays of light falling to the ground, and they could hear the thunder,” recalls Vanesa.

Vanesa's house has a dock overlooking the Ébano Lagoon. Minutes before the shooting, her cousin had moored his boat to the dock to rest. He works delivering sacks of food, one of the Honduran government's Pyrrhic projects to alleviate the hunger that plagues the Moskitia. His boat was, at that moment, full of those sacks.

“Since there were a lot of sacks on my brother-in-law's boat, maybe those in the helicopter thought it was the drugs, and they stopped in front of my house, in front of my window, as if it were a movie! And they took aim. My children were shouting at me, ‘Mommy, mommy, they're going to shoot us!’ But thank God the men didn't shoot at us and the helicopter lifted off again,” she recalls.



The hail of bullets fell everywhere, even in the daycare center where Vanessa works, which every day houses 32 children between 2 and 5 years old. There are still traces of the shooting: a bullet hole on the walls of one of the classrooms.

Modesto Morales, an indigenous leader in the Moskitia, remembers it as chaos. “The helicopter began to shoot at people and houses. It shot at me. I jumped off my motorcycle when I saw it had shot out the tire and put another bullet in the bike. Then I shouted to someone who was with me, ‘They killed me!’ And I jumped onto the sand, pretending to be dead. It was like we were at war.”

A ‘Too Poor’ Investigation

On the evening of that September 16, while the wounded from Ibans were still being transported to receive medical attention in facilities in different parts of the country, the Honduran armed forces gave their version of events in a brief statement. It was just over 100 words and was published [on their Facebook page](#) under the heading, “Securing a boat allegedly carrying drugs.”

The military’s publication basically put forward three ideas. The first was that that afternoon, one of its helicopters was chasing a boat with “supposed drugs.” To that end, they published photos of the boat with plastic barrels at the back and armed soldiers around it.

The second was that after being abandoned by its crew members, “cells linked to drug trafficking tried to unload the drugs” from the vessel, and, as they did so, they shot at the helicopter. As “evidence” they published two close-up photos of an aircraft with two holes that could have been caused by bullets.

The third claim was that after the confrontation, the vessel was secured by elements of the armed forces “while waiting for an inspection of the barrels and fuselage.”

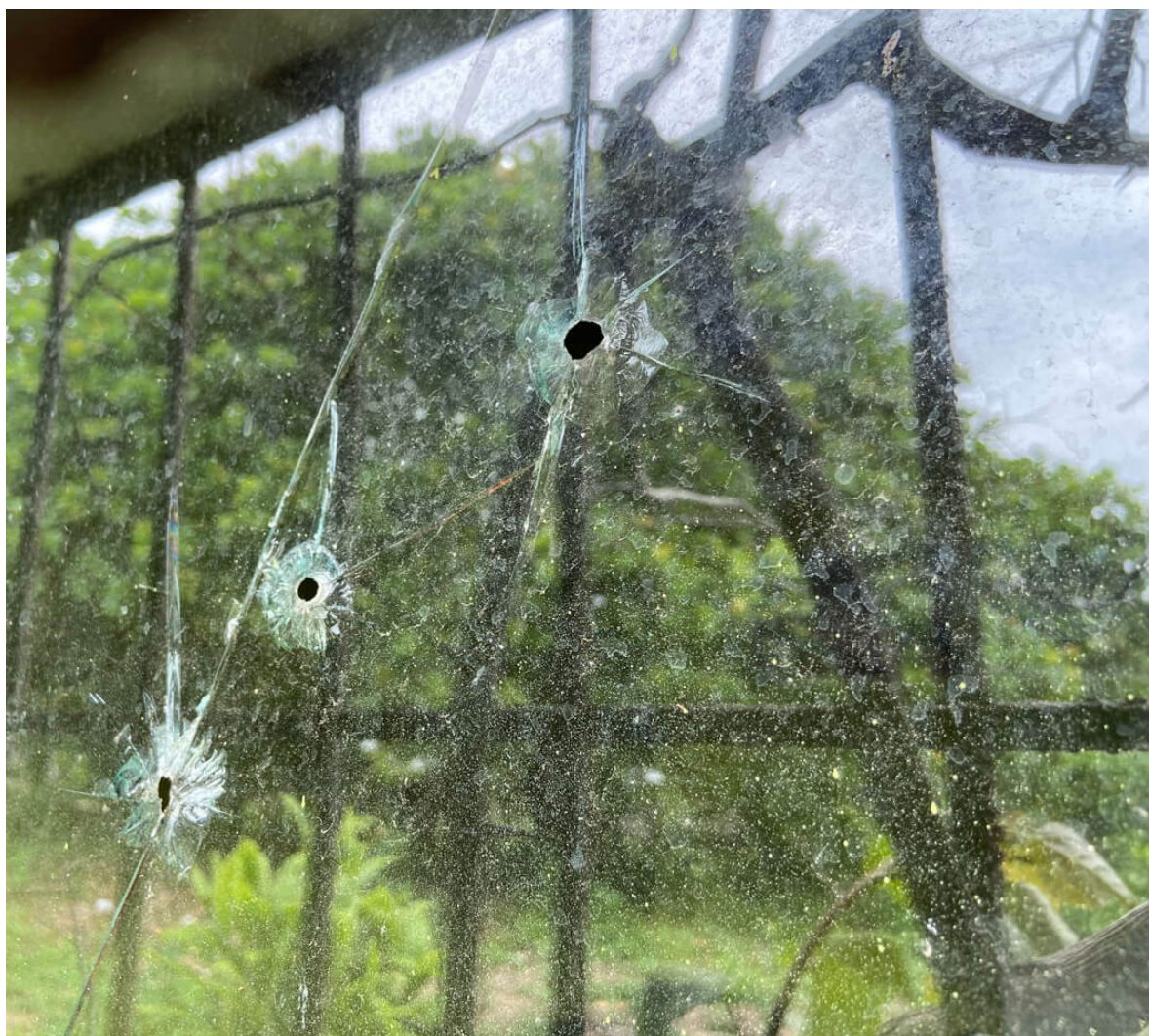
The communiqué, which to date has been the only official statement from the authorities on the matter, omitted mention of the wounded and dead during the encounter. Nor does it say anything about shooting at terrified children, daycare centers, and churches.

The day after the shooting, indigenous leaders from different Miskito organizations went to Tegucigalpa and filed a two-page complaint with the Special Prosecutor’s Office for the Protection of Ethnic Groups and Cultural Heritage. In the complaint, addressed to the then prosecutor Jany del Cid, the leaders demanded an investigation to clarify the facts of the case and the dismissal of the armed forces spokesperson who had handled the case. They also asked for compensation for the physical and psychological damages to the affected Miskitos, as well as for the authorities to repair the damages on roofs and walls of houses, schools, and churches.

The complaint is signed by 11 indigenous leaders of the Moskitia, and is backed by 11 accounts from direct witnesses and relatives of the victims. In their accounts, they all state that no Miskito was armed that afternoon and that no one ever fired at the helicopter.

Just five days later, the Special Prosecutor’s Office for Ethnic Groups said it had no jurisdiction in the case and transferred the investigation to the Special Prosecutor’s Office for Human Rights. In a memorandum in the file, obtained by InSight Crime, the institution argued that it does not have sufficient resources to continue with the investigation and that “it is public knowledge” that the Human Rights Prosecutor’s Office had already initiated inquiries, as it had announced via its social media accounts. The investigation, in other words, had become a hot potato.

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On September 23, two days after the file was transferred to the human rights prosecutors, the prosecutors sent a memo to the Technical Agency for Criminal Investigation, the special investigations unit of the Attorney General's Office. In the memo, they asked the agency to designate five agents to begin the investigation. Three investigative agents, an expert in visual inspections, and a technician in evidence seizure and extraction were scheduled to visit Ibans on October 16. However, the visit never took place. The potato was still too hot.

On September 30, an assistant from the Human Rights Prosecutor's Office attached another memorandum to the investigation file in which he stated that on that day he tried to contact one of the victims by telephone, but "the call did not go through." He noted this down, then took no further action.

On October 13, the regional coordinator of the Public Prosecutor's Office in Ceiba asked the head of the Special Prosecutor's Office for Human Rights for a report on what happened in Ibans. In the report, dated October 15, the unit responded that, according to the investigations carried out and the

consultations made with the police in Puerto Lempira, the largest Honduran city in the Moskitia and site of the only preventive police post in the area, there was no information about the case. This was because they were never able to go to the site, since the police did not have the resources for the journey.

This may be true. The police chief of Puerto Lempira, Commissioner Mario Posadas, told me

“To get around, we have to exchange gasoline vouchers in exchange for a ride from the fishermen.”

Pedro Mejía, a lawyer with the organization Litigio Estratégico, which fights for the defense of human rights in Honduras, is the legal representative of 11 of the surviving victims and the relatives of those killed in the shooting. When I spoke to him at the end of July, he was discouraged and described the investigation as “too poor.”

The 113 pages that make up the file to which InSight Crime had access reveal that two years after the event, judicial authorities have not gone to Ibans to investigate the shootings.

In November 2023, InSight Crime requested an interview with a representative of the Honduran Air Force high command. We also asked for comments from the Honduran Public Ministry and the police to explain why, two years after the incident, they have not even visited the Ibans community to investigate. At the time of publication, we had received no response from any of these institutions.

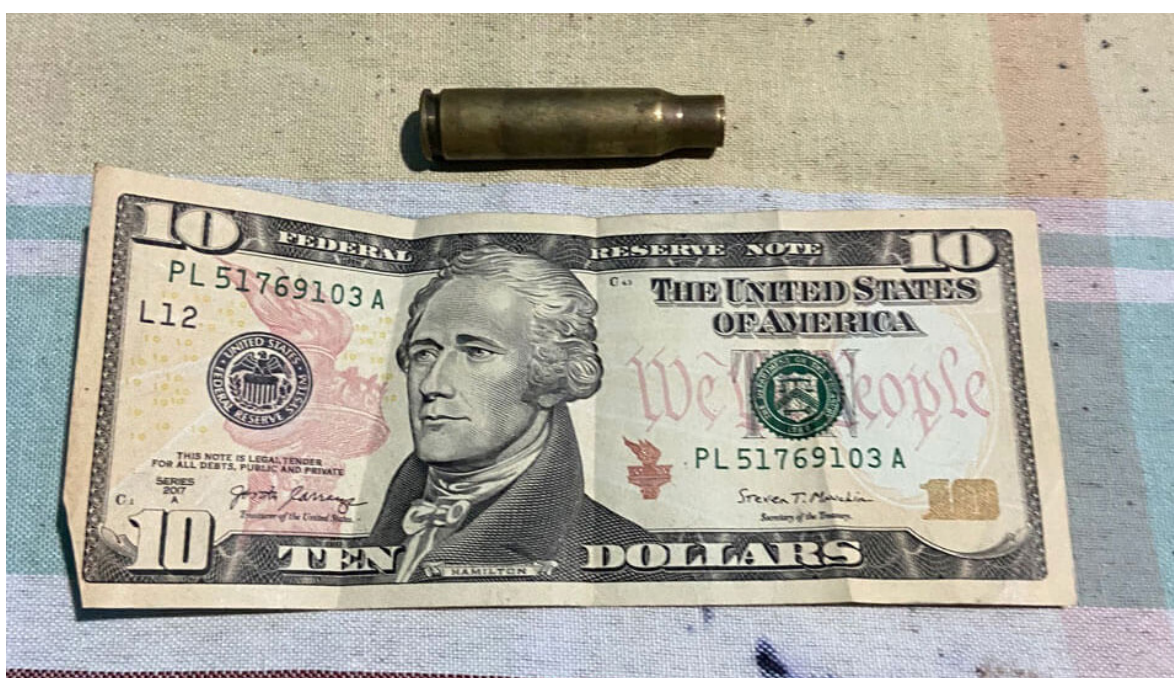
Hiding the Evidence?

According to the attorney, Mejía, the poor state of the case file is not only due to the lack of investigation by prosecutors and police, but also because the Armed Forces is hiding and may have destroyed evidence. On March 17, 2022, six months after the shootings in Ibans, the military announced in a brief statement put out on social media that the Bell H1-1H helicopter carrying the registration number 953, the same one that, according to Mejía, participated in the operation in Ibans, had crashed and burned. It was, according to the statement, totally destroyed, but its occupants suffered only slight burns.

In addition, according to the Miskitos' testimonies, 40 days after the shooting, a group of soldiers came to Ibans. They went door to door, demanding that the inhabitants hand over the shell casings they had collected after the shooting.

“Soldiers and police came house to house and asked if we had the bullets that were left over, and told us we had to hand them in. They told us it was for justice. But justice never came,” says one of the Ibans community leaders, who preferred not to be identified by name for fear of reprisals.

Their fear is not unfounded. At least two Miskito leaders from the community have had to flee because of death threats. The latest was Modesto Morales. In a phone call at the end of July 2023, Modesto claimed that a group of armed men dressed in black came to his house at night after he filed a complaint against the military for human rights abuses against the community.



Nevertheless, on one of my visits to the region, I managed to find some shell casings, some may still remain in Ibans. After pointing out the holes in the roof of his house where he says the shots entered, an inhabitant showed me casings he said were from the incident. One shell casing had the number 7.62 mm on its base. This is the caliber used in M60 machine guns mounted in the helicopters described by the witnesses. The M60 is a powerful device used in military conflicts, usually as a means of supporting troops on the ground. And it is an even more powerful weapon when fired at tin-roofed schools and unarmed people.

The lawyer Mejía believes the investigation will never move forward. In part, he says, because the authorities themselves are afraid to investigate an institution as powerful and feared in Honduras as the Armed Forces.

“It’s not necessary for someone to receive a threat. It’s known that the Armed Force [sic] is an institution to be feared,” he tells me.

The lack of cooperation from the military, according to the survivors, may also be related to a blunt fact: The boat abandoned in Ibans on September 16, 2021 did not even have drugs on it.

According to eyewitness accounts, on the day of the shooting, the Miskitos hovered, angrily, near the boat. Finally, one of the leaders intervened, approaching the commander in charge of the troops guarding the boat, who was well known in the area. According to Modesto, the commander had earlier introduced himself as part of the of Task Force Bravo, a joint US-Honduran unit operating under the direction of the US military’s Southern Command (SOUTHCOM).

InSight Crime also contacted the US State Department requesting a comment on the events at Ibans, but had received no response by the time of publication.

On the day of the incident, Modesto said, the commander asked Hernández if the Miskitos could take the gasoline that was on the boat.

“[He] told me, ‘Calm your people down.’” Modesto recalls. “I explained to him that the people demanded to keep what was on the boat, whether it was drugs or gasoline, because they had done so much damage. He told me, ‘Okay, I authorize you to see what is in the boat, and if it is gasoline, you can take it. If it is drugs, no. Nor can you take the engines because I have to hand over the boat for inspection,’”

Modesto assures me that he got on the boat and removed the plastic covering the barrels. There, he saw that there were 18 barrels on the boat. Fourteen were empty; four had some gasoline.

“Then the people jumped on the barrels and took them away. They even threw me out, and I couldn’t stand up because I weigh almost 300 pounds,” Modesto recalls.

His words are reinforced by [a video uploaded to YouTube](#) titled, “Lancha sube en Ibans la Moskitia en tiroteo,” published on October 6, 2021, by user @franklinlopez4042. In the video, a crowd of Miskitos can be seen ransacking the silvery-gray boat. Some of them take the barrels and the straps they find inside the ship.

Honduran authorities did not report any drug seizures that day in Ibans.

Caught Between Two Fires

The Miskitos have been caught between forces that, in one way or another, destroy their way of life, their health, and their forest. The events of that day in September 2021 were not unique.

In 2012, a boat piloted by a US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) agent and two Honduran counternarcotics agents opened fire after colliding with a civilian passenger boat. On hearing the gunfire, a DEA agent in a support helicopter then ordered the Honduran gunners to fire on the passenger boat. The gunfire killed two pregnant women, a 14-year-old child, and an adult. All Miskitos, all civilians.



On that occasion, [the facts came out](#) thanks to videos declassified by the US Department of Justice. However, Miskito leaders speak of several other cases that have not been reported. They tell of other helicopters firing on civilians, of beatings at the hands of the military, of torture, and robberies. They insist that the Miskito people are being harassed by both drug traffickers and Honduran and foreign authorities.

And now, more than two years after the latest attack, and after dozens of attempts by the Miskitos and their lawyers to obtain justice for the scars and the deaths they have suffered in the village of Ibans, there is only despair, trauma, and pain.

Before leaving that piece of paradise and its Ebony Lagoon, I have one last conversation with Elica, Erick Barú's widow. She confides in me, tells me a kind of secret that she has kept to herself and that she now thinks it is a good time to share. Lowering her voice a little, she says:

"The Miskito has beliefs ... and sometimes, when my boy gets sick, his belly swells. The Miskito say it's because his dead father comes to feed him."

But the dead do not eat the same as the living. That is why, according to the Miskitos, children get sick.

"Our belief says that if I burn the clothes he left behind and draw smoke, he goes away," she adds. "But my child is not cured. He gets sick again, and he gets sick again. Now he has come down with another illness. He is very sad. I say it must be his father's spirit who is bothering me."

All the ghosts left by that helicopter will take a long time to leave the town on the Ébano lagoon.

3

The Resistance at Mocerón River



Over 60 indigenous Miskito leaders and representatives are gathered in a Catholic church in the town of Mocerón, a village inhabited by approximately 500 Miskitos, located deep in the Moskitia, the great Honduran jungle in the department of Gracias a Dios, which borders Nicaragua.

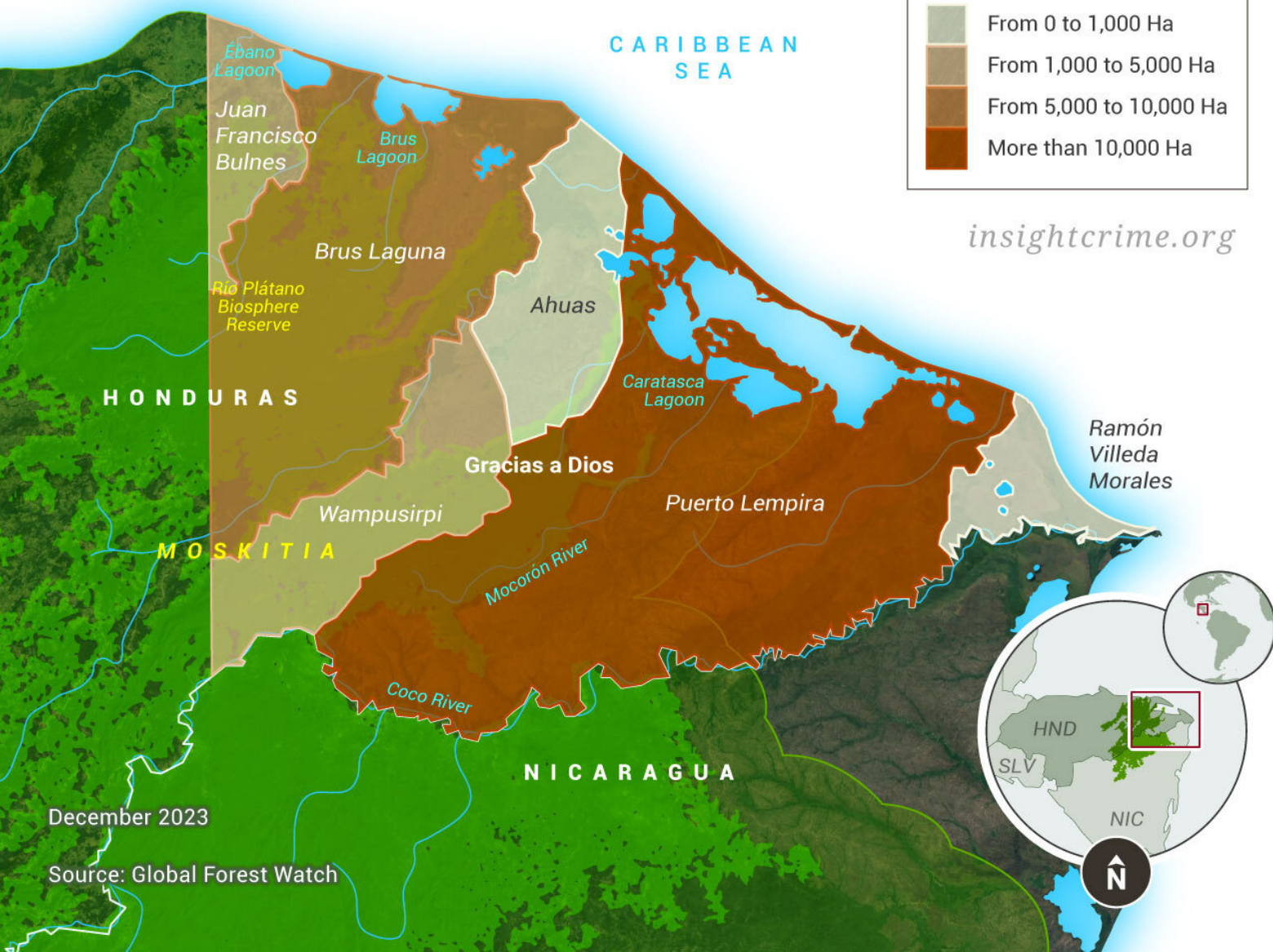
The meeting is led by the priest Enrique Alargada, a small, slow-speaking Valencian Spaniard in his fifties, who has lived here for more than 20 years. The event has an anodyne name, one that would not arouse suspicions. It is the “Annual pastoral meeting for the environment.”

To attend the meeting, more than 50 representatives of different Miskito social groups traveled through the jungle for days. Among them are leaders of the town of Limitara, near the border with Nicaragua, and representatives from the Miskito women’s association, who traveled from Puerto Lempira, the capital of Gracias a Dios. There are also the women of the village of Mavita, where residents protect scarlet macaws from the poachers, driving them to extinction. They are joined by leaders from the territorial councils responsible for the defense of Miskito lands and at least two dozen other representatives of Miskito villages. In short, the Miskito people are well represented here, from the coastal and lagoon communities to the mountain villages.

Here, under the symbolic shelter of the church, these leaders discuss strategies to save their forest from the voracity of the “*terceros*” — the third parties — the name by which the Miskitos call the outsiders, the foreigners. The *terceros* they are referring to today have two particular characteristics. The first is that they are invading and destroying the Miskito jungle. The second is that they are linked to drug traffickers.

Tree Cover Loss in Gracias a Dios, Honduras, 2022

From 2001 to 2022, the department of Gracias a Dios in Honduras lost 153,000 hectares of tree cover.



A Village Prepares to Fight

Alargada opens the meeting with a mass. He speaks perfect Miskito, but at the end of the homily he speaks in Spanish. He tells them that the Miskitos are like a biblical people; they have been promised a land by God and entrusted to take care of it.

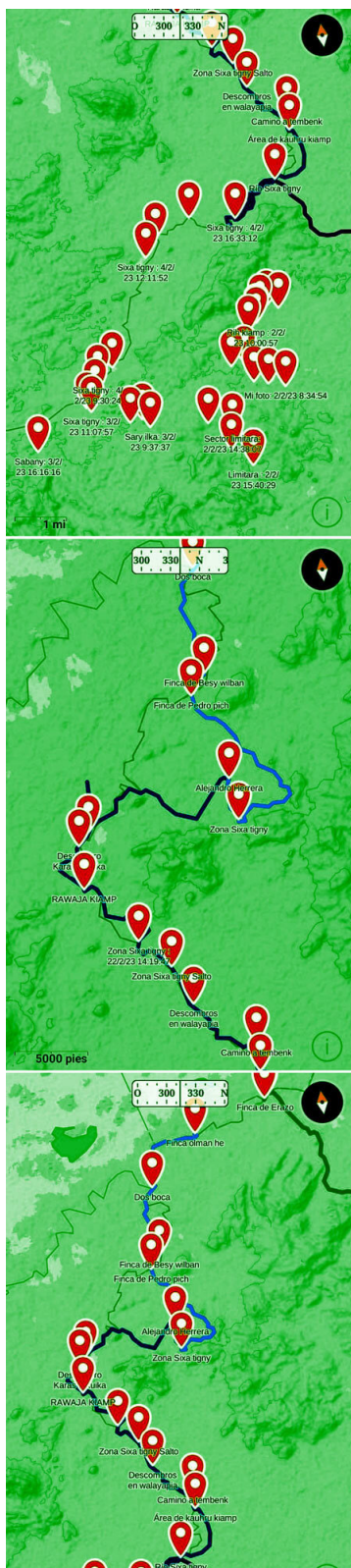
“If we lose this land, if we allow them to take it away from us, in the future they will say, ‘What a foolish people the Miskito are. They let them take away the land and the riches that God gave them,’” he preaches.

One by one, men and women come forward to tell the others what is happening in their territories. Almost all of them speak of hundreds of hectares destroyed, of lands that have been illegally sold and invaded and through which they can no longer pass. Others tell how they were driven out of the same jungle where their grandparents and their grandparents’ grandparents had hunted and planted crops.

Then a young man asks to speak. He is large, with thick arms glistening with sweat. He wears the expression of a warrior on his face and walks towards the altar of the church as if doing a ring walk at a boxing match. He is not wearing the farmers’ work clothes that the others wear. Instead, he is dressed in a black shirt, tennis shoes, and jeans.

He is Miskito, but he is not a member of any of the organizations that are meeting today. He has been in the military, he says, and now he is here to organize the struggle against the *terceros*.





Photographs of the georeferenced maps made by Miskut during his patrol. Each point represents dozens of hectares of razed forest.

Almost everyone knows and respects him. His name has become well known throughout the jungle, among Miskitos and among the *terceros*, but in an effort not to be the one to put the target on his back, I will call him by another name, Miskut, like the mythological hero of the Miskitos. The man is a military-style strongman leader, a *caudillo*.

“I have come to show you, not to tell you,” he begins, as he presents a slide show. He tells them that together with the elders of the village of Mocerón, he has already made two forays deep into the jungle, “from Wisplini to Mavita,” he says, referring to a village more than 150 kilometers away from the meeting site.

“They don’t even take all the wood. They leave the mahogany to rot on the ground,” Miskut says. The murmur has become something difficult to decipher, a collective sound somewhere between lamentation and protest.

As Miskut speaks, a projector throws its bluish light on the wall of the church, where a crucified Jesus lies bleeding and motionless. It flashes apocalyptic videos and photos: hundreds of dead trees, endless charred plains where life once soared. A murmur of indignation runs through the church as he shows what was once a forest of mahogany, the sacred tree of the Miskito culture, from which they build their canoes and huts. The trees all lie dead on the ground. He says the *terceros* clearcut large tracts of land, driven by a desire to take over the Moskitia hectare by hectare.

“They don’t even take all the wood. They leave the mahogany to rot on the ground,” Miskut says. The murmur has become something difficult to decipher, a collective sound somewhere between lamentation and protest.

Miskut doesn’t seem to want to hold anything back. He points the finger at the representatives of the forestry institute, the only state entity represented at this meeting, and calls them useless. He accuses them of being accomplices of

the apocalypse for not denouncing what is happening, for being lukewarm on the subject. He points to two women representatives of a group of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and says:

“The NGOs come to give us workshops, to tell us how to farm without damaging the forest and the ecosystem, to tell us to make home gardens to have food, and leave the mountain be. We already know how to do that, we have taken care of this jungle for more than 500 years! Why don’t they help us to stop the *terceros*, who destroy hundreds of hectares in one day?”

Miskut has a microphone, but he does not need it. The people he is referring to are in the front row, their faces lowered, and the reproachful looks of the Miskitos boring into their backs.

The images keep coming, one after another, dozens of videos showing desert where before there was life. Miskut continues to speak, the videos moving forward, the murmurs of the Miskito people already mingling with his words. An old woman cries out, as if in tears, and the officials and NGO representatives stare at the church’s exit, looking like they long to walk through it.

“There are also traitors among us,” he says, and points a resounding finger at Maximiliano, another name I will change for his own protection. Maxmiliano is a man in his 40s, sinewy, like most people around here. “He has been working for the *terceros*. He has been cutting down jungle on the side of Wisplini, and Mavita. I have the proof. He works for them.”

The crowd stirs and the first cries begin to sound out, it is already difficult to control them. Then Miskut says that everyone is at risk, that Maximiliano is some kind of spy, and that this puts the lives of everyone present in danger. To say this, in a place where leaders have received threats and been shot at by the *terceros*, undoubtedly puts the life of Maximiliano at risk.

Miskut drops the microphone and takes his strong body and his military stride outside. He passes by Maximiliano and looks him right in the face with the fury of a jaguar, then he leaves.

Maximiliano trembles, his nerves make him stutter. He takes the floor, grabs the microphone, and asks for forgiveness. He says that nobody is perfect, that if there is anyone here free of sin, let them cast the first stone. As he speaks, a communal booing drowns out his words. He pushes on, talking about everything he doesn’t have — money, food, work, and support. Then he talks of everything he does have — children and hunger.

But his excuses find little sympathy here. Those present are also hungry, and they have children. The church begins to empty, and outside, there is a commotion of screaming, angry Miskitos gathering around Miskut. From the look of things, it seems that Maximiliano will not come out of this well.





Photographs presented by Miskut at the meeting in Mocerón showing the remains of mahogany trees

Alargada takes the microphone and cools things down. The Miskitos, those who remain in the church, calm down. Then he blurts out a phrase, one of those that makes people cheer.

“We have to look at who we are really serving. If we want to place ourselves at the service of caring for our land, our children, and their future, we cannot also serve those who destroy it. If we want to serve our people and the people of the Moskitia ... we cannot serve two masters.”

Outside, the commotion is loud. Maximiliano goes out another door and takes refuge in an evangelical church two blocks away, then he flees town.

In this story, Miskut and Maximiliano will meet again. But there are still three days to go before they do.

The Hunt

It is nine o'clock in the morning. A layer of dew fell at dawn, and the town of Mocerón has woken up to the smell of wet grass and wet earth. Two days have passed since the meeting in the church, and a group of Miskitos are preparing to go out into the jungle to hunt. This time, their prey will be people. They are going to hunt *terceros*.



Before leaving, the hunters eat plates of rice and boiled cassava that a group of women from the village have prepared for them.

It is a group of 16 people. Half of them are soldiers from the Honduran Army's 5th Battalion. They are here because of an agreement between the Honduran military and the indigenous communities of the Moskitia. It is one of the few expressions of support the Miskitos have received after sending so many letters and petitions. The government sends a squadron of soldiers to patrol the jungle from time to time, claiming that they are actively fighting deforestation and drug trafficking.

However, the government did not take into account that these soldiers are all Miskitos, and they believe, like everyone here, that if they do not stop the killing of the forest, their families and their children will face a very difficult future. That is why, today, they are rushing their rice and cassava so they can leave early and hunt in daylight.

It is Miskut who organizes everything. He has organized the civilian Miskitos, and he has persuaded the soldiers to accompany him, taking advantage of the agreement with the government. Miskitos in uniform and Miskitos out of uniform all follow the orders of the *caudillo* Miskut.

He rallies them loudly in Miskito, their native language, waving his hands and arms around as he tells these men how brave they are for what they are about to do. He tells them that the future of the Miskito people depends on the success of their mission.

Also traveling with the group is one of the council of elders of Mocerón village. His name is Abraham, he is 74 years old, and he walks through the jungle like rocks would walk if they could. He is tough, leathery, and compact. He walks without wheezing and hardly sweats. He energetically refuses when they offer him a hand to climb a hill or jump down a slope.



We set out on foot, in single file. It is almost ten o'clock when we cross the Mocerón River. Its waters are clear, and you can see a bed of leaves and branches at the bottom. Today, the waters are gentle because it is summer, the driest season of the year. This month, May, the first rains are expected to arrive to alleviate the thirst of the crops and the pastures and to swell the river, although every winter that happens less and less.

The Miskito soldiers cross in a canoe so as not to get their M16 rifles wet. I go with them while the others swim across. On their backs, each one carries about 40 kilograms of rice and cassava, and they take turns lugging a large aluminum cooking pot. They cross the river like it were nothing more than a puddle. This is the starting line. From here, far from their homes, the mission begins.

Abraham takes out a Bible and makes them form a circle. He reads, with some difficulty, Psalm 91 in Spanish: “My God, in whom I trust. For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence. He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge ... A thousand may may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you.”

Then begins a hard trek through the virgin jungle that will last five days. The Miskitos, soldiers and civilians, push the pace. They want to arrive in the afternoon at the first point where they believe there are *terceros* clearing the jungle. They know this land; their fathers and grandfathers hunted here. But in those days, they were seeking less dangerous prey.

The group of Miskitos advances through the jungle quickly, it is almost impossible to keep up with them. The idea is to find the ruins of the jungle, to intimidate the *terceros*, and to take photo and video recordings, not only of the Martian landscape that remains after logging but also of the faces of the people who do it.

On the two previous occasions that they had gone out with the same mission, at the beginning of 2023, they surrounded several groups of invaders. One had taken over more than 600 hectares, an area the size of over 800 soccer fields. Another had taken over 500 hectares. But the videos show poor men, living in houses very similar to those of the Miskitos.

The indigenous people elaborate theories about these newcomers. They associate them with traffickers because they have seen them working together, but they know nothing more. A high-ranking Honduran police commander who spoke to us on condition of anonymity said the strategy for invading the land is simple. They send groups of settlers to take over large tracts of land, give them the necessary tools to drive out the indigenous people, and then, when they have occupied the land, they sell it to drug traffickers or to the frontmen the traffickers have on their payroll. The traffickers’ modus operandi is also described in official documents obtained by InSight Crime detailing two major anti-drug operations carried out in the Moskitia by the Technical Agency for Criminal Investigation (ATIC) and the Honduran Attorney General’s Office, Estegia I and Estegia II.

In the previous raid, in March 2023, Miskut and Abraham’s troop confronted a group of *terceros*, and were able to capture two of them. They took away their rifles and tied them up.

INFORME, IDENTIFICACION. Fecha: 25 de marzo
Declaracion personal. Asignatura: Id 2015

Yo Rainaldo Eceda urvina mayor de edad soltero, tengo mi esposa, pero en union libre. # de identidad 1618-9984-00399, labrador jurisdiccion de santa barbara municipio de Quimistan Departamento de santa barbara. Comparece ante el Sr. Presidente del Consejo de Anciano departamento, Sr Victor Pravia morcel en Puerto Lempira, D. C. Manifiesto, Idea y Destina. me traslado de Rio Platano, hacia en Puerto Lempira; el Sr. Betohumano y otros me dio la oportunidad de conocer la montana de mooron y logre de ubicarme. Hacer mi champa al centro de limitara, ya lo tengo echo milpas y la casa. mi lugar donde yo vivo en Rio Platano se advierten los narco, en forma violenta. por lo tanto tube que ubicarme en la mosquitia cerca de mooron. Sin autorizacion de nadie. El vice presidente del Consejo de Anciano del departamento de Gracias a Dios Don Victor Pravia morcel, recomienda, de esta forma si usted quiere ir a la montana de limitara, debe de registrar Autoridad Civil y militares y comunales y la Fiscalia de la etnia y patrimonio. Advertencia: una sola vez Registrado, Firmado y Sello, Dare mi visto Buen y la firma; de lo contrario, negotibo su ubicacion en esta montana porque es ilegal, debe de registrar en via legal. Llegare a ver donde vives tu. dado en Puerto Lempira a los 25 dias del mes de marzo del 2015

[Signature] Rainaldo Eceda urvina
 Vice P. C. de Anciano

Revisado por: *[Signature]*

Witnesses who were there and were part of the troop told me that Abraham kicked the *terceros* and hit them with a stick while he made them point out on a map the places where the jungle had been destroyed. But the next day, after threatening them, they were released, leaving the Miskito people with two more enemies.

We keep moving forward. The jungle is good to those who know it and hostile to the outsider, to the *tercero*. We enter an area populated by evil bushes that stick whoever touches them with small thorns, which remain under the skin until the body finally rejects them and they work their way out on their own, causing much pain as they do. Contrary to popular imagination, the jungle does not offer accessible food sources. It is very rare to find fruit trees, and hunting an animal is a complex task that depends on being smarter and stronger than your prey. It is like a green desert. As we march, sudden gusts of wind stir the tops of the immense trees, where birds and monkeys watch us pass from their armchairs of branches.

It is mid-afternoon, the branches of the trees block the light, and the jungle becomes dark. We enter an area full of shifting mud, where the inexperienced foot sinks slowly as the mud drowns you and you are lost forever in the bowels of the jungle. More than once, Miskut's hand lifts me up like a child from the clutches of the mud. My presence only delays the troop. Every mistake of mine means valuable minutes lost. The sound of my boots on the rocks and the clink of my pack will eventually give away our position, if it hasn't already. I believe, moreover, that they do not want to hunt in front of the eyes of a stranger, in front of the eyes of a *tercero*. Miskut tells me that he and I will return to Mocerón. I obey him without complaint. Old Abraham will lead the troop in their search for enemies.

In Search of Allies

Miskut has an important mission. But it is a risky and secret mission. He must talk to the elders of Mavita, another distant village whose leader, after resisting the illegal logging of pine trees, was ambushed by a group of hired killers. He survived, but afterward he decided with the village elders and young leaders that they would barricade themselves in their village. There is no phone signal, and the only way to find them and enlist them in the war for the jungle is to go there and convince them in person.

Miskut will let me accompany him in exchange for buying something that, at this point in the jungle, has become almost a treasure: gasoline. The only way to get there is on his motorcycle. It is a road formed by the feet of the Miskitos who have traveled it for decades, perhaps hundreds of years.



Miskut asks me not to tell anyone we are going because we must avoid an ambush. But no one buys gasoline to stay in the village. “These people have ears everywhere,” one of the elders had already warned us, referring to the traffickers’ local informants. And it’s true, they do. The next day, we would find out.

Our presence here has not gone unnoticed. Four days ago, while talking at night with a group of elders from Limitara who had come for the meeting, we discovered that we were being spied on by a boy. No one there knew him, and when we asked him who he was and why he was eavesdropping on us, he ran. We followed him, but he dissolved into the jungle like a ghost.

Miskut and I leave through the back of the village as stealthily as possible, taking a disused road that is longer, but safer.

The bike is large, with special dirt tires. Miskut drives it like an extension of his body and reaches speeds of 80 kilometers per hour. He carries a .38 caliber revolver, but it is no guarantee of our safety. Although it is a large caliber, it only holds six shots, and he must use both hands to drive.

Along the drive, the landscape changes from rainforest to coniferous forest, with towering pines and grasslands climbing to the top of the mountains and hills. The pines stretch as far as the eye can see. If it weren’t for the thin path we are moving along, it would seem as if no one had ever been here. Everything is in a state of natural disorder. It is like walking through a brand-new world.

Two hours into the trip, the narrow trail intersects a larger one. Miskut stops the bike in front of a rough cement cross.



“This is the place where Oswaldo Jacobo was killed,” he says, staring at the cross. Oswaldo was one of the Moskitia’s first environmental defenders. He was a biologist, and when confronted with the imminent destruction of the forest in the late 1990s, he created the first Miskito organization to defend the Moskitia and all it contains, Miskitos included.

“Oswaldo had to be taken out of there with a shovel,” his sister told me a few days ago. According to his family and neighbors, on December 27, 2000, Oswaldo stopped his motorcycle because a tire blew out. While he was trying to fix it, a pickup truck ran over him several times, leaving only an indistinguishable mass that the vultures ate for days, a mass that his relatives had to shovel into plastic bags so they could bury him in the town of Mocerón.

Oswaldo had previously received threats for obstructing logging and standing in the way of the power of drug traffickers. He began to organize the Miskitos and sought a series of alliances with organizations in Honduras’ capital, Tegucigalpa. That day he was on his way to Mavita, the same village we are heading to now, to do something very similar to what we are planning: talk to the most respected and feared Miskitos in the jungle, the Lakut.

Miskut made this cement cross with his own hands as a tribute to Oswaldo. He believes he will end up the same way. Fate will decide if someone also makes a cement cross in his honor when he dies. We return to the motorcycle, still several hours away from our destination.

It is late afternoon when we cross the small river that separates the village of Mavita from the rest of the Moskitia. The forest ends, and a gigantic garden begins. We are entering Lakut territory.

The noise of our motorcycle breaks the peace of the village and causes a whirlwind of colorful wings to rise up. It is as if a rainbow had been shoed away. There are dozens of scarlet macaws that live here, protected by the Lakut family, the founders and guardians of this piece of paradise.

It is not a large village. The locals say that grandfather Lakut arrived to this land, then sparsely populated by pines and macaws, at the end of the 1950s. He had been here while he was a soldier, fighting in the ephemeral and malnourished war between Honduras and Nicaragua for the control of the Moskitia. After the war, he returned, built a house, and had children. His sons found wives, and his daughters got husbands, and today the village has more than 200 inhabitants. They live much as the humans of this region did three thousand years ago. They grow cassava, corn and beans and supplement their diet with fish and wild game.

But what makes this village unique in the whole of the Moskitia is that living alongside the Lakut are the scarlet macaws. The idea of saving this species was born in Rus Rus, a neighboring village. There, a man called Tomás Manzanares started to breed macaws and take care of their nests. But to take care of the nests, it is necessary to take care of the trees that house them, and, it turned out, those trees were worth money. Unlike in other parts of the jungle, in this area the traffickers have a system in place to cut down the pines and sell them in the department of Olancho or across the border in Nicaragua. As a side business, the loggers also sell the macaws and their chicks to other traffickers, who then take them to Colombia and Jamaica.



The macaws and the pine trees where they make their nests are still worth gold, and in this jungle, in a rare formula of alchemy, gold attracts lead.

The rule seems to be that if something is worth money in the Moskitia, then sooner or later the *terceros* will arrive. For Manzanares, defending the macaws cost him dearly. In 2011, a *tercero* shot him four times and left him bedridden for four months.

With Manzanares out of the way, the macaws were captured and sold, and the trees where they make their nests were cut down and sold. The die seemed to be cast for those animals. So Manzanares decided to do the same thing that Miskut is doing now: seek the support of the Lakut. He spoke in 2011 with the Lakut family's council of elders and asked for shelter for the few specimens that survived the slaughter and sale.

The Lakut elders decided to give shelter to the macaws, and since that day, they have lived among them. They eat the same beans, rice, and cassava as the Lakut, and have their nests in the trees protected by the family. This is how the grandmothers and mothers of the macaws that flutter around us today first arrived here. But the macaws and the pine trees where they make their nests are still worth gold, and in this jungle, in a rare formula of alchemy, gold attracts lead.

Lakut Warriors

Santiago Lakut is head of the council of elders of the Mavita village. He is a strong man, well into his fifties, with skin as dark as an ebony tree. Santiago, like his grandfather, the founder of the village of Mavita, knows about wars. He fought in the 1980s in Nicaragua on the side of the *Contras*, a guerrilla group financed by the US government that sought to overthrow the socialist Sandinista regime. This knowledge of warfare and the weapons at his family's disposal is what makes him so indispensable in the fight against the *terceros*.

He shows off a bullet pulled from the underside of the windshield of his truck.

"I was driving with my son when suddenly we started hearing gunshots. There were two of them. My son said to me, 'Dad, what is that?' 'They're bullets. Get down,' I told him, and I came here without stopping," said Santiago.

At night, the Lakut have given us the same dinner as their macaws: rice and beans. Santiago and the other elders receive Miskut in a remote part of the village. We sit on some pine planks while Jurassic-sized mosquitoes drain our blood, and they ask Miskut to let it all out, to tell them what brought him here.



Miskut respectfully greets the three elders, and before speaking, he alludes to the fact that although it is a remote connection, he also carries the surname Lakut in his name. He then apologizes to me, he will speak in Miskito to the elders. Whatever he is going to tell them needs privacy. They talk for more than an hour, sometimes in the soft, harmonious tone of their language, sometimes with expressions and expletives borrowed from Spanish or English. Santiago and the elders refuse whatever Miskut asks of them. Miskut insists. They shake their heads and frown, look at each other, clearly worried. They say no.

After a while, the discussion seems to have reached an impasse. Miskut, skilled in persuasion, takes out a powerful weapon: his phone. And one by one, he shows them the photos he took during the two previous raids. Hundreds of

felled mahogany trees rotting on the ground, charred animals, victims of the fires set by the *terceros*, videos where workers captured by Miskut's troop of Miskitos admit that over the last few weeks they have cut down between 400 and 600 hectares of forest to bring in cattle. There is sadness in the eyes of the Lakut.

He shows them the low flow of the Mocerón River and talks about how, where before they had to struggle to avoid being capsized in their canoes, now they have to try not to run aground. He reminds them that if the forest dies, the rivers will dry up, and if this happens, each village will be cut off since they will no longer be reachable by canoes. Then, yes, each village in its solitude, will have to come to terms with the *terceros*. Even the brave Lakut will be defeated at some point.



Lakut community leaders look at photographs of land invasions and the destruction of the forest in the Moskitia.

The Lakut look on in silence, dumbfounded. They approach Miskut's phone like they are gathering around a bonfire and point their fingers. They ask to see the map that Miskut has made with georeferenced locations of the places where the *terceros* are concentrated. They are no longer learning, now they are planning. The sadness has become something else.

It is late at night, and they finally return to Spanish. They tell me that they are willing to exhaust all peaceful means to expel the *terceros* from the jungle. They are going to pressure the government to fulfill its longstanding promises to "clean up" their lands, which basically consists of sending the military to expel the *terceros*. But if this fails, there will be no other way out but to fight.

An Ambush in the Jungle

The next morning, the village wakes up to the cries of the macaws. One peeks over the railing of my window and squawks at me, as if asking me for something. Outside, a woman from the Lakut family trudges along carrying a huge pot full of food. The macaws hover over her, shrieking thunderously. From a distance, she looks like some kind of goddess of color and flying animals. With a ladle, she serves them rice and beans on a table, the same thing she will eat for breakfast, and the animals make a swirl of feathers over the food. They sound like they are laughing.

In the afternoon, the Lakut will serve them another pot of the same menu, thus ensuring that the macaws stay close to them, under their protection, and that they do not have to risk foraging for food where the poachers can catch them. If any *tercero* ventured to hunt macaws or log pine in the vicinity of Mavita, they would have to engage in a shooting match with the Lakut, and this is something the traffickers do not want, at least not right now.

The Lakut family receives some support from international animal conservation organizations that help them with money to keep the birds, but it is not enough. And, above all, they do not provide any help in protecting them from poaching and deforestation. If it were not for this family, and before that, for the brave Manzanares, there would be no more scarlet macaws in this forest.

We get on the motorcycle again. A journey of several hours through the jungle awaits us. The elders point us to a forgotten road, they think we will be safer there. They entrust one of the teenagers of the family as our guide and give him a shotgun and a motorcycle. The boy takes us on the old road, made by his grandparents, walking so much in the same place. Reaching the limit of Mavita's territory, he tells Miskut where to go. In the distance, we can still hear the laughter of the macaws.

The road is difficult, we have to get off every so often to adjust the chain of the bike, which slips off with every stumble or rock. The jungle is quiet; just a trembling wind moving some leaves and the song of a bird that can be heard in the distance. We stop at Casa Sola, a small hamlet of three houses where a *tercero* family with whom the Miskitos have a good relationship lives. Miskut gets off and says hello, he wants to show me something.

“We have no problem with them coming to live here. There is land here. As long as they live like us, that they take one or two hectares and grow crops for a living, we welcome them. But if they want to come and cut down 500 hectares for one man and then sell it and expel the Miskitos, then they are not welcome,” he tells me.

We drink the water offered by a silent woman and return to the bike.

Less than an hour after leaving Casa Sola, suddenly, in the middle of a wide road, there is Maximiliano, the man Miskut accused in public of being a traitor. There are five other men with him, and they all carry machetes.

Fear is a powerful thing, it plays strange games in the head. In mine, it stops time, dilates my pupils, making me see everything much brighter and much slower. It dries my mouth and paralyzes my hands. Miskut tenses, I feel it in his shoulders, and he accelerates the bike. He emits a kind of faint, animal-like growl and says, more to the air than to me, "He doesn't have the balls. He doesn't have the balls."

He doesn't. They are left standing when Miskut shoots past like a bullet. Maybe they were expecting one rider and not two. Maybe the message from the famous "eyes and ears" wasn't accurate. But whatever stopped them from attacking was short-lived. Two of them get on a motorcycle and start it up behind us. I think about how if the chain slips, as it has been doing the whole trip, they will catch up with us. I think about the six bullets in Miskut's revolver.

"No. He doesn't have the balls. No," Miskut repeats like a mantra as he speeds his motorcycle over gullies and streams.

The motorcycle of the two men is smaller, we lose it every so often, but in the curves or coves, where we must go slower, we see them appear about 60 meters behind us. Suddenly, among the trees, we can see the smoke rising from the wood stoves of Mocerón. The men give up. Mocerón is resistance territory.

The Uncertain Fate of the Miskito Nation

Violence is rarely a migratory bird passing through. It nests in places and in people's hearts for a long time. It has been in the Moskitia for almost 30 years, and everything indicates that it will not be gone for a long time. But violence needs to stop being an idea and become a reality. It needs tools, and it is not a one player game. It also needs organization and resources. The Miskitos have accepted the invitation to violence, but they do not yet have all of the above to carry it out efficiently.

What would a war against the *terceros* look like? I asked Eusebio, a member of the Mocerón council of elders, a week before the trip to Mavita.

Don Eusebio answered very convincingly. They have bows, arrows, and spears, he said. He believes that just as an arrowhead enters the flesh of a deer, it will also enter the flesh of a man.



In the village of Mavita, near the end of our conversation, which was long, as Miskito conversations usually are, I asked the same question to the Lakut elders. They do have firearms, but they are few in number and mostly 12-gauge shotguns — a powerful weapon for hunting or self-defense, but not very efficient for a confrontation against AR-15s, AK-47s and the M67 grenades of *terceros* and cocaine traffickers.

“They have weapons, it’s true, because they have more money from drug trafficking. But we have strengths too. There are many of us and we are organized, we know the jungle. Besides, we have silent weapons, we have slingshots and arrows. I’ll kill you without noise!” says Hector, one of the three Lakut elders.

Then another, driven by euphoria, says, “We have sica.” The others turn to look at him, as if reproaching him for revealing their secrets. But after a while, they agree to tell me about their secret weapon, with which they plan to confront the *teceros*.

“Sica is a prayer. I do sica on you, I put you to sleep. Or I make myself invisible and kill you with a dagger, easy,” says Santiago, the chief of the Lakut elders.

They tell me sica is a kind of spell that is expressed in various forms. One must say the right words in the right order and mark a cross in a certain place. The enemy who passes by that place will be filled with hatred, and he will carry that hatred to his house, thus sowing discord among his own, and they will end up killing each other. According to the Miskitos, it also serves to make the enemy miss with their shots and jams their weapons.

The bow and arrow, concludes Dr. Antonio Rodríguez Hidalgo, an authority on the recent past of the human species, began to be used in the Mesolithic era, after the last ice age, in almost all the world except Australia. Its use became popular among hunter-gatherer societies about 12,000 years ago. So, if we get strict in terms of warfare technology, the *terceros* have a 12,000-year head start on the Miskitos. It is as if a Paleolithic people were facing a modern army.

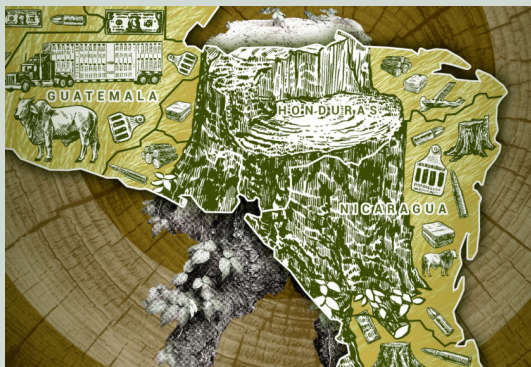
The shots are already ringing out here. They are lodged in Santiago Lakut’s car, in the bodies of the biologist Manzanares and a handful of Miskito leaders. They fall from the sky from the helicopters of the Honduran army and hit children and adults without distinction. They sleep, waiting in the shotguns of the Miskitos and the AR-15s of the traffickers. The first dead have already been buried, for the moment, on one side only, the Miskito side.

The troop that went out to patrol the jungle commanded by the elder Abraham returned with devastating information. More destruction, more fires, more *terceros*. Hundreds of hectares that a few days ago were a jungle teeming with life are now barren fields where cattle roam and cocaine planes land. What they found on their expedition further fuels the Miskito people’s conviction to fight.

While the future is uncertain, that of the Miskitos is predictable. They face forces they themselves do not understand, powerful men with an immeasurable capacity for violence and with resources to spare to finance it. Darkness is coming. Time will tell what the fate of the Miskito nation will be. For the moment, all we can say is that a handful of indigenous peoples are preparing for war on the banks of the Mocerón River.

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