



DIGNA'S FAMILY AND THEIR STORY.

Digna (Dignity) Portilla Amador (5)

Umberto Portilla Amador (8)

Carlos Umberto Portilla (59)

Carmen Dolores Amador (46)

This interview was conducted by Trócaire staff in the field, translated and recorded to express the story of the Portilla family, the focus family in this year's Lenten campaign.

Carlos Umberto Portilla has spent the last 37 years moving around different plantations and participated in a number of land movements in Honduras in an effort to secure land and

provide a better future for his family. He lived in an area of Honduras called Salama for 7 years but when a land movement began to gather momentum in another part of the country, his landlord moved everyone off the land in fear that they too would begin to seek the right to the land. After the eviction he secured a job as an agricultural labourer, it was a steady job but very low paid (approx. 15c per week). Carmen, his wife worked as a domestic helper and earned a similar amount. For years they struggled to feed their family of four on 30 cents per week. Carlos continually looked for additional work and was willing to work any hour of day or night to feed his family, but there was very little available. He doesn't know how they managed to survive on so little but they somehow got by. For years they ate nothing except rice and beans. Meat was a luxury they simply couldn't afford.

Recently Carlos and his family moved to the community of La Confianza near the north East coast of Honduras, in the region of Colon. Over 500 landless families are living in this community and they have formed a cooperative. Led by a number of locally elected leaders within the community, they have come together to form a cooperative and lobby the Government to secure access to land from wealthy landowners who forced families off their land in the 1980's (check date). After a long and violent struggle they have achieved some success. The Government recently signed over 3,500 hectares of cultivated land to the families and have committed to signing over an additional 11,000 hectares next April. While the community are delighted to have secured land for their family, they are now living here in extreme poverty and the most appalling conditions.

The fight is not over however, and Carlos and his community continue to face attacks from private security employed by the wealthy landowners who are determined to evict the community. The last eviction attempt happened in May 2010 at 2am in the morning. When the men saw the private security guards arriving with machine guns they shouted warnings to each other. The women and

children fled to the river bank and across the river for safety. The men retreated into the plantation on their land where they could watch the security guards without being seen.

The guards moved through the community looting the homes and then appeared to leave. They quickly returned however with backup and proceeded to burn down many of the homes. The families stayed in hiding for 9 days in total. During this time the men could eat roots and leaves in the plantation but they were extremely worried about the women and children. After nine days four younger men returned to the community to make sure the army had left and it was safe for everyone to return. They were shot by security guards hiding behind trees. They had no opportunity to defend themselves. Eventually the guards left and the families moved back to their community.

Carlos speaks about the absolute terror he felt, particularly for his wife and daughter during this eviction attack. He says:

“You see my beautiful little girl, I feel terror that anything will happen to her. I see how the security guards look at the women and children and I feel terrified. I also feel guilty that my poverty is putting my children into this position, forcing them to live like this. I felt a huge sense of fear and intimidation and considered leaving the community for the safety of my children. The community leaders convinced me that the poverty is not my fault, I am not to blame and I must stay and fight for a better life for my children. I believe in God and know that he will deliver some help and assistance.”



Carmen and Digna

He went on to say:

“Land is important to me because it’s everything I have ever known. My father and grandfather worked the land as I do. The only way I have ever eaten or clothed myself or my family is because of the land.

The atmosphere in the community is very tense at the moment. Yields of fruit are low and they are earning little money. Workers have a target to collect 8 bags of pine kernel each per day to ensure they earn enough money to feed everyone in the community, but today they could only collect 2.5 bags each. People are very concerned.”

The families have very little access to water. They managed to pipe some water in for drinking but supplies are low and rationed among over 500 families. They get water for hygiene – washing clothes, bathing etc from the nearby river which is completely polluted.

There are 5 latrines in the community, one for every 100 families. The wait for a latrine is completely unmanageable and people are forced to go elsewhere. The heat, insects and lack of sewerage or sanitation has led to serious illness within the community. People here live in tents made of plastic in searing heat. The land they currently occupy will flood easily during the rainy season. Carlos' family's home will be under a meter of water by August.

Carmen, Carlos' wife, added:

“Before we came to live here in La Confianza, we were living in another region nearby where my husband was a worker on an oil refinery for palm oil. He was collecting large kernels of African palm that are thrown into the factory to extract the oil from them and was also pruning the trees and cleaning up around the plantation.”

Carlos continued:

“For years and years we moved from place to place in search of first of all a job, in search of better conditions because in the early days we worked on the farm like slaves, with no salary, with treatment that was completely inhuman. Every time we would move to another place our aspiration was to get a patch of land, or even find a landowner willing to pay more and treat us better as workers. It was that struggle over a number of years that led us to La Confianza. Those were bitterly poor years. At first when I began in the plantations my salary was 3 Limpera (under 10 cents). Years later it went up to 5 – 7 Limpera (about 30 cents). They were difficult and hungry years.”

Talking about his faith and hope for the future Carlos said:

“First of all we believe in God. We believe that God will help us, that He is going to help us prosper and improve our situation. We know that there are a lot of threats ahead. The landowner who claims this land and who is refusing to give it up has threatened us, has evicted us. But we are optimistic that we will be able to maintain this land and we're willing to go on struggling and we're very proud that our community is standing by us and we're standing by it.”

Carmen expressed her feelings:

“As you can imagine, the evictions weren't the first time we have lived through something like that. We spent years moving from place to place and being tossed off our land before. It was terrifying here because of the threats, because of the fact that they were using the army and guards belonging to the landowner and because also there were lots of rumours. People were saying that the landowner might drop a bomb on the plantation and we might be killed; that our lives were at risk. But what can we do? We are poor. We don't have any options. We are willing to stand, to stay here. We're willing to continue fighting here so that we can keep control of our land. We've never done anything to harm anyone in our entire lives. Why should we have to live like this?

We love our land. But also we love our land for a very important reason. This is the only thing that will take our children out of poverty, that will give our children the right to a better future and now

I'm not even thinking of myself or Carlos, my husband. I'm thinking of our two young children that they will have an opportunity not to live in poverty. We're willing to put up with insults and threats and the kind of treatment we've had to endure if we can give this land over to them. If they can have this, they will have a nice, secure and happy future.

We want people to know that we're not beggars. We're working for ourselves and we want to have a dignified life. My last word is that our community is firm. It's standing strong and we're going to build it up into the future."



Digna and Umberto