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COLUMN ONE

## Creating a Logjam in Honduras

**As deforestation erodes rural life, a priest has taken on the timber industry and forced an unofficial freeze. Critics call him inflexible.**

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SALAMA, Honduras — Father Andres Tamayo, for eight years the priest for this farming town in the piney woods of central Honduras, doesn't look like a man who can marshal a thousand followers at a few hours' notice.

The 48-year-old Roman Catholic priest is, in his own words, a "short Indian," balding and lumpily built, who usually dresses in faded jeans and ragged golf shirts. Away from the pulpit, he easily is lost in crowds.

Yet when he preaches, his arms waving and his tenor voice booming, his usually timid flock of poor farmers and careworn homemakers is galvanized, eager to be transformed into a corps of shock troops to stop what he calls indiscriminate environmental destruction by the country's loggers.

After decades of mismanaged logging that has erased half of Honduras' forests, rural communities such as Salama are left with what residents say are the consequences of deforestation: ruined water supplies, eroding topsoil, thinned-out wildlife and a dried-out climate. Many say they have nothing to lose by following Tamayo.

"The padre is our guide," said Alonso Santos Paz, an impoverished farmer who said he had grown desperate with the failure of his bean and corn crops the last two years for lack of water. "If it weren't for what our family members send us from the [United] States, we'd be dying of hunger here."

A dozen times last year, the people of Salama and thousands of other followers blocked highways and bridges to stop timber lorries, took over city halls and shut down logging operations here in Olancho province, which has the nation's largest timber reserves.

From this backwoods parish, Tamayo has built a nationwide following — last year, he led 40,000 protesters from across Honduras on a march on the capital against wholesale deforestation. He has

become Honduras' leading environmentalist.

The firebrand priest seems on a collision course with loggers and is aware of the possibly lethal consequences. Many of the nation's timber cutters are ruthless outlaws who have formed logging mafias and killed activists who got in their way. Since 1996, three members of Tamayo's Environmental Movement of Olancho, known by its Spanish acronym, MAO, have been gunned down.

The killing last month of an American nun, Dorothy Stang, who had battled illegal logging in the Amazon rain forests in Brazil, brought home the risks to Tamayo.

"Death can come at any time," said the priest, adding that he had been threatened numerous times. A priest driving a car like Tamayo's was shot at in December, and Tamayo was run off the road in January in what he suspects may have been an attempted hit.

"They haven't changed me. I haven't stopped talking. Maybe they've waited too long to kill me," he said, smiling.

Tamayo has demanded an immediate moratorium on logging until forests can be inventoried and guarantees put in place that all timber be milled and worked in the communities where it was cut. The government opposes a freeze — as do Tamayo's superiors in the church. The country's leading prelate, Cardinal Oscar Rodriguez Maradiaga, withdrew official church support for Tamayo's march on the capital last year after the government convinced him that the demonstration could destabilize the country.

With or without government or church approval, Tamayo's movement enforces an unofficial moratorium in Olancho. Phalanxes of demonstrators shut down logging whenever and wherever they hear of it, even if the loggers have permits.

Last month in a forest 15 miles west of here, about 100 of Tamayo's followers descended on a logging crew, swarmed over equipment and formed human chains around trees. The loggers had what appeared to be a permit and had brought 20 armed state police to enforce it, said Efrain Paguada, one of Tamayo's aides. Still, after a tense standoff, the loggers called off the cutting.

"We know we could die defending the forests," said Paguada, a hard-bitten army veteran whose return to farming in his hometown of Silca has been a failure. The 46-year-old says he hasn't been able to grow a decent crop for three years because of the drought, and now devotes much of his time to helping Tamayo, often as his bodyguard.

"I'd rather die all at once," he said, "than live to see my children die slowly of thirst."

Paguada said Tamayo's followers would avenge any attempt on the priest's life: "If they touch the padre, you would see some real violence that would never end."

Tamayo's followers see him as courageous and principled; his opponents see him as radical and unbending. Even many who agree that deforestation is a problem say a moratorium isn't feasible in a poor country where tens of thousands of people depend on timber for their livelihoods.

President Ricardo Maduro has tried to impose tighter controls on logging during his three years in office but acknowledges that his government is no match for the rapacious mafias. He said he sympathized with the environmentalists.

"We're aware that the forests aren't managed as they should be, in a sustainable manner, and that the communities don't receive the benefit they should," the Stanford-educated economist said. "But I also think they are simplistic in saying, 'Well, the solution is to stop everything.' "

Maduro and members of his administration say they have tried for months to get Tamayo to join negotiations on a new forestry law but the priest has stayed away.

Tamayo said he decided against participating when it became clear that the government opposed any moratorium, "even for a minute," and insisted on the right to name all three members of a crucial intervention committee that would have the right to stop logging and launch investigations at any time.

"There was no consulting, no pluralism on these themes," Tamayo said.

Tamayo's alleged inflexibility is also an issue with Salama Mayor Jose Ramon Lobo, a bitter foe of the priest who says he wants "rational" logging to resume. He said Tamayo's moratorium had forced the town's sawmill and four woodworking factories to close down. More than 100 jobs have been lost, the mayor said.

"The economic cost of Tamayo's stoppages is serious," he said. "We have families in trouble and a crime rate that is rising. We have invited Father Andres to talk, but he hasn't come. It's because he is a radical. He doesn't want to concede anything. He must always prevail."

The licensed lumber industry, which cuts 50% to 80% of all timber in the country, blamed Tamayo's campaign for violence on roads and at legally permitted logging sites. Total cutting last year was only one-quarter of the trees auctioned off by the government, partly because logging crews and truck drivers were intimidated, said lumberman Pio Voto Rinaldi, president of the Honduras Timber Assn.

"People now view the entire industry as delinquents, like we are Al Capone and Lucky Luciano," Rinaldi said. "We always suffered some image problems, but now it's the fashion."

Tamayo responds that legitimate loggers are too lax about buying wood from the shadowy mafias and that government officials charged with regulating logging and processing are hopelessly corrupt.

Call him an idealist or a radical, Tamayo has made the environment a political issue as rarely before in Honduras, said Aldo Santos, the nation's top environmental prosecutor.

The special prosecutor, a post instituted in 1995, brings cases against those who "abuse the nation's natural resources," mostly illegal loggers, Santos said. He insisted that his office had teeth: Several cases have resulted in prison terms, he said.

But he acknowledged that Honduras may lag behind other countries in taking on the issue. "In relation to other Central American countries, it's probably been a little late in coming," Santos said.

Better late than never, Tamayo said during a trip this month to Jimasque, a drought-stricken town of about 500 people. He said that if out-of-control logging continued, the country would turn into an arid wasteland — as some patches of Honduras already have. Hilly stretches of Highway 15 connecting the capital, Tegucigalpa, to Olancho already look devoid of life.

Tamayo said that when he arrived in Salama eight years ago, the nearby Agua Caliente River was filled with bass and the town surrounded with thick pine forests. Now the fish are gone, the river has all but dried up, and, except for one hill west of town, the surrounding area has been mostly stripped of trees. That hill remains lush "because we defended it," the priest claims.

Even more barren than Salama is Jimasque, a bastion of support for Tamayo, where water is now piped in from a mountain spring 15 miles away because deforestation has destroyed the water table and caused streams to dry up.

The loggers association and Salama Mayor Lobo argue that the aridity is a result of cyclical weather patterns such as El Niño as well as global warming, and that many other parts of the world are drying out because of circumstances beyond any local control.

Tamayo and the people of Jimasque aren't buying that. "The drought is due to the cutting. Since they cut the trees, the creeks have been dry now for 12 years," resident Alejandro Jaguada said.

Residents said the loss of water and climate change that followed the clear-cutting of nearby forests a decade ago had prompted an almost wholesale flight to Honduran cities or the United States. "We're living on crumbs," said Milvia Ayala, a homemaker. "The new generation is realizing that every day we are poorer here because it doesn't rain."

The padre said the issue of the environment found him, not vice versa. In ministering to the rural poor, he said, their most pressing problems involved increasing scarcities of wildlife and rainfall, not to mention the hardships and fights over diminishing water resources. The situation pretty much forced him to take up environmental activism, he said.

"I'm a man of action, not only words," Tamayo said.

The next morning, Tamayo delivered his weekly homily in Silca, five miles east of Salama, where he rallied his followers to stay firm in the face of intimidation from the logging mafias. His aide Paguada said threats to the priest's followers had been increasing and that one of the padre's young leaders had been gunned down under suspicious circumstances in December.

In his talk to the parishioners, Tamayo framed their struggle in biblical terms, identifying their cause with Jesus, and regarding the opposition as corrupt Pharisees.

"Truth has to be stronger than fear, stronger than power, and stronger than a uniform," he said. "That is the word of God."

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