

New wave of repression targets opponents of Honduran coup

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Both the Canadian and US governments have praised the January 27 elections in Honduras as a major step forward toward a return to democracy and national reconciliation. Yet the reality on the ground under the newly elected government of Porfirio Lobo is one of continuing repression and selective assassinations of those who dared to oppose the June 28, 2009 military coup.

Murder of activists

According to the Committee for the Detained and Disappeared in Honduras (COFADEH) [1], at least 40 anti-coup activists have been murdered since the coup. Some of the atrocities that have been committed since the election include the following:

- On February 3, 29-year-old Vanessa Zepeda Alonzo, an active member of the Resistance and member of the Social Security Employees Union, was found dead in Tegucigalpa. According to eyewitnesses, her body was thrown out of a car.
- On February 15, Julio Funez Benitez, another member of the Resistance and active member of SITRASANAA, the water and sewage workers union, was shot outside his home in Olancho by unknown gunmen traveling on a motorcycle.
- On March 17, Francisco Castillo was assassinated. He was a colleague of Father Andres Tamayo, a well known Catholic priest, environmental activist and outspoken member of the Resistance. Castillo had previously worked for prominent Honduran businessman and coup supporter Miguel Facusse before resigning from his position after the coup.
- On March 23, social science teacher Jose Manuel Flores was shot by armed men wearing ski masks at the high school where he taught and in front of his students. Flores was also a prominent member of the Resistance.

Murder of the children of activists

Many of those killed had previously reported being harassed and threatened because of their work in the Resistance. Furthermore, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) has noted a disturbing trend in which "it appears that sons and daughters of leaders of the Resistance Front are being killed, kidnapped, attacked, and threatened as a strategy to silence the activists." Two examples cited are:

- On February 17, seventeen year old Dara Gudiel was found hanged in the city of Danlí, Paraíso. Dara Gudiel was the daughter of journalist Enrique Gudiel, who runs a radio program called Siempre al Frente con el Frente (Always Outfront with the Front), which broadcasts information about the Resistance. Days before her death, Dara Gudiel had been released from a kidnapping.
- On February 24, Claudia Maritza Brizuela, thirty six years old, was killed in her home in San Pedro Sula. She was the daughter of union and community leader Pedro Brizuela, who participates actively

in the Resistance. Two unknown individuals shot her on her doorstep in front of her children, ages two and eight.

Murder of journalists

Human rights groups have also condemned the murder and threats to journalists, with seven reporters and broadcasters killed so far this year, making Honduras “one of the riskiest countries in the entire region in which to practice journalism” according to the IACHR [2].

According to Jose Miguel Vivanco, Americas Director at Human Rights Watch [3], these attacks are “generating a climate of fear that is likely to have a chilling effect on the Honduran media.”

Examples include:

- On March 14, Nahún Palacios was shot repeatedly while driving his car. Palacios was news director for Aguan Television, Channel 5, and had covered the resistance protests extensively, as well as other politically sensitive issues such as the ongoing agrarian conflict in the Aguan. His house had been raided and his equipment seized by the military. He had also had precautionary measures granted for him by the IAHRC which ordered the State of Honduras to protect him, though he continued to report receiving threats up until his death.
- Radio Progreso, a community radio in El Progreso and one of the few uncensored, independent sources of information in Honduras since the coup, has complained of numerous threats made against its staff for their role in disseminating the work of the Resistance. Its director, Father Ismael “Melo” Moreno, a Jesuit Priest who is also the director of the Reflection, Research and Communication Team (ERIC, by its Spanish acronym), has received death threats related to his humanitarian decision to protect a woman who was sexually assaulted by police during an anti-coup demonstration in August.

Conflict in the Aguan

The Lobo administration is also receiving widespread international criticism for the increasing militarization in the Aguan, the Northern Coastal region of Honduras where a long-ranging agrarian conflict has recently resurfaced.

Over ten years ago, thousands of campesinos (small farmers) were forced off their cooperatively held lands by state authorities who claimed that the lands had been purchased by three wealthy businessmen.

The Aguan United Campesino Movement, (MUCA), which was formed to represent the campesinos’ interests, filed lawsuits and organized land occupations in order to pressure the government to negotiate. Just before his ouster, an agreement had been reached under president Zelaya to begin investigating the situation in the Aguan. However, the de facto government installed by the coup halted this process. In December 2009, MUCA responded by resuming the land occupations.

Tensions grew as eviction orders and arrest warrants were issued to the campesinos, often without following the proper legal procedures. On April 10, 3,000 military and police were reportedly deployed to the zone just days before negotiations were scheduled to resume, raising fears that if the campesinos rejected the government proposal, they could be forcibly evicted and violence could ensue.

Although a preliminary agreement between MUCA and the Honduran government was reached on April 14, and a commitment made to withdraw the police and military, the situation remains tense.

At least four members of MUCA have been murdered since the dispute broke out again in December 2009. And, according to a UN communiqué released in October from the working group on the use of mercenaries, landowners have hired as many as 40 Colombian ex-paramilitaries to allegedly “protect their property.” According to MUCA, the mercenaries have been used to carry out a campaign of fear and intimidation against its members.

Business as usual?

Despite the climate of violence and impunity in Honduras, the Lobo administration is moving ahead with plans to establish a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, one of the terms of the San Jose - Tegucigalpa Accord.

According to the “Human Rights Platform,” [\[4\]](#) a coalition of the Honduran human rights organizations, the conditions do not exist for a Truth Commission to carry out its mandate, given the on-going violence against members of the Resistance, the government’s failure to address the problem, as well as the fact that state officials linked to human rights violations have not been removed from office. The Platform also points out that the Truth Commission does not meet international standards, including prior consultation with victims and their civil society representatives.

Nevertheless, the US and Canadian governments have endorsed both the Lobo administration and the Truth Commission process, despite the serious concerns raised by Honduran civil society organizations.

In March, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced that the “crisis has been managed to a successful conclusion” and “without violence.” Clinton praised Lobo for having “moved quickly to implement many of the recommendations from the San Jose-Tegucigalpa Accord,” including the “establishment of the Truth Commission.”

Canada also supports the Truth Commission. Canadian diplomat Michael Kergin has been appointed to the five-member Commission, which will be headed by former Guatemalan vice president Eduardo Stein. Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Peter Kent congratulated Kergin on his appointment, stating, “Canada strongly supports the creation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The Commission is essential to advancing the process of national reconciliation and dialogue across all sectors in Honduras.”

On March 17, a letter was sent to the US Congress from 40 US human rights, peace, and faith-based organizations questioning the official US position and urging them to take a second look at what is happening in Honduras.

Resistance continues

Despite the repression, the resistance movement shows no sign of retreating. The National Popular Resistance Front, the umbrella organization which has brought together students, women’s groups, campesinos, indigenous peoples, LGBT activists, and Afro-Hondurans, has committees in villages, towns and urban neighbourhoods throughout the country

The Resistance is beginning to gather signatures on a petition in support of their plan to hold a Popular National Constituent Assembly on June 28, the one year anniversary of the coup. It has also announced plans to transform itself into a political party before the next presidential elections in 2013, with its demand for a Constituent Assembly to draft a new Constitution front and center in its platform.

P.S.

* From Maquila Solidarity Network:
<http://en.maquilasolidarity.org/node/935>

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.cofadeh.org/>

[2] <http://www.cidh.org/relatoria/showarticle.asp?artID=791&IID=1>

[3] <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2010/03/19/honduras-investigate-attacks-journalists>

[4] http://quixote.org/sites/quixote.org/files/PLATAFORMA%20press%20release%202.18.10%20English_0.pdf