

Sixth Human Rights/Solidarity Delegation

August 18-25, 2009

Report

Introduction

A religious delegation organized by the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas Institute Justice Team with the support of Quixote Center/Quest for Peace visited Honduras from August 18-25, 2009. Since the Honduran military's removal of President Jose Manuel Zelaya on June 28, the situation in the country had become increasingly tense. Honduran human rights and civil society groups were reporting serious human rights violations against activists, journalists and other social leaders expressing opposition to the coup, reports not covered in the mainstream media, which prompted the interest in organizing the delegation. Efforts at mediation by the United Nations, the Organization of American States, and Costa Rican President Oscar Arias have not succeeded in enabling the return of President Zelaya.

Honduras is one of the poorest countries in the hemisphere, with the far majority of its 7.5 million people living in poverty. The population is also characterized by an extremely unequal distribution of wealth, and the socio-economic disparity gives rise to deep polarization in the society. Honduras has had a history of military coups. The 1970s and 1980s were particularly marked by violence and brutal human rights violations perpetrated by military and security forces. The government was turned over to civilians in 1981, though the military continued to exert influence in the political and economic life of the country. Zelaya was elected president in 2005.

Delegation objectives

- To lend protection against human rights violations and help safeguard human rights by providing an international presence and witness to events on the ground;
- To learn about the social, economic, religious and political realities in Honduras through meetings with various sectors of civil society, including Church leaders, and through listening to first-hand accounts of victims of the post-coup violence;
- To issue reports that reflect the information that is gathered, in order to break through the blockade of information available in the United States;
- To lend moral support to our respective congregational members/partners, as well as to the broader faith community and civil society organizations engaged in accompanying the poor;
- To advocate, both in Honduras and upon return to the U.S., for the restoration of constitutional order and the protection of human and civil rights.

Participants

- Sister Diane Guerin, Sisters of Mercy of the Americas Justice Minister, Mid-Atlantic Community
- Sister Edia Lopez, Sisters of Mercy of the Americas Justice Minister, Central, Caribbean and South America Community
- Jean Stokan, Director, Sisters of Mercy of the Americas Institute Justice Team
- Marie Dennis, Director, Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns and Co-President, Pax Christi International
- Rick La Torra, translator

Itinerary

The delegation visited Tegucigalpa, Progreso, San Pedro Sula, Santa Rosa de Copan and Siguatepeque. We met with Honduran lawyers and other analysts of the situation; pastoral workers, including the Sisters of Mercy, Mercy Associates, and a U.S. Maryknoll priest; the Catholic bishop of Santa Rosa de Copan; leadership of the resistance movement; the Honduran human rights organization, COFADEH; a representative of Radio Progreso and ERIC, the Jesuit center for analysis and theological reflection; the head of Caritas in Tegucigalpa; and U.S. embassy staff. A detailed list of these meetings is included at the end of this report, as Appendix A. We also listened to a host of testimonies from those who had been victims of human rights abuses and intimidation by police and military forces since June 28. (Note: A full transcript with these testimonies is available on request. Please contact: jstokan@sistersofmercy.org).

Legal issues surrounding the coup

Repeatedly we heard details about events leading up to and on June 28, centering on President Zelaya's proposed intention for that day: to hold a consultation (a non-binding referendum/ poll) to determine whether or not there was popular support for a ballot question to be included in the November 2009 elections. The question was to have been "Are you in favor of there being a constitutional assembly or a process to change the Constitution?" If the question were actually put to a vote in November (depending on results of the consultation in June and a Congressional decision to support the results of the consultation) and if the majority of Hondurans voted for such a process to change their constitution, steps to do so would be decided after President Zelaya was out of office by the newly elected government. This explanation clearly contradicts what is often portrayed in the media as justification for Zelaya's ouster—that he was using the consultation on constitutional reform in order to extend term limits and run for the presidency again.

The consultation was to have been based on the Honduran law of popular participation which was approved on Zelaya's first day as president. This law made national opinion polls legal, but the Supreme Court later ruled that any attempt to hold a consultation would be illegal. The current Honduran constitution was developed in 1982, during a period of political violence, and contains a number of sections designated as "articles in stone" which could not be changed. This includes any proposal for a new constitutional assembly; however, grassroots momentum for just such a call had been building for the last several years.

The lawyers with whom we met were very clear that the actions on June 28 were illegal and that they constituted a coup. Religious leaders, pastoral workers, human rights organizations, social analysts and the U.S. embassy all concurred. The lawyers were insistent that they were not supporters of Zelaya but that, as attorneys, their obligation was to uphold Honduran law.

They said that in Honduras there is a clear process for bringing to justice high level officials of the government, including establishment of a commission and a trial, in which charges are presented. Article 205 of the Honduran Constitution gives the Honduran Congress authority to deem the actions of the president acceptable or not, but not to remove the president from office. With Zelaya's ouster, the Congress named Roberto Micheletti to succeed, but we were told that members of the Congress loyal to President Zelaya were not permitted to enter the chambers for the vote.

Deeper analysis

Many people told us that moneyed interests and big business were behind the coup. Both foreign and Honduran businesses were afraid, they said, that they would lose privileges, including tax breaks, lax environmental regulations and no-bid contracts. Major transnational, major pharmaceutical and major petroleum companies have an affinity with the coup leaders.

Others identified three major powers behind the coup:

1. the business elite that controls the political reality;
2. the old guard of the army connected to U.S. military power that were responsible for "dis-sovereignty," described as the loss of sovereignty in Central America in the 1980s due to U.S. domination; and
3. organized crime – narco traffickers that were heavily invested in the coup.

What they suggested could unfold is a civilian government sustained and influenced by the three major powers. The first phase is the coup itself; next will be institutionalization of the coup.

There is a tremendous loss of confidence in the political system. We were told that Zelaya was extremely weak when he entered the presidency, with only 13 members of Congress on his side. Some said he assumed office without a plan. He was never known for his left ideology, but he needed to build a base.

Zelaya moved to garner the support of social movements through initiatives such as giving teachers a huge raise, giving campesinos bags of seed and fertilizer and, collectively, distributing 100 tractors from Venezuela. He also increased the minimum wage from 3,700 to 5,400 lempiras, a huge increase which angered the business sector, though it still represents an inadequate level of income. Zelaya presented himself as a benefactor to the poor.

It signaled a big change when he moved toward joining the Latin America trade bloc known as the Alternativa Bolivariana (ALBA), led by Venezuela's president Hugo Chavez. Several people told us that coup leaders were fanning a fear of Chavez's influence over Zelaya as a scare tactic,

yet it was pointed out that the Honduran Congress gave their approval to both the ALBA agreement, as well as the PetroCaribe project, in which Venezuela provides oil to Honduras at preferential rates.

At least one analyst with whom we met called the ousting of President Zelaya an “international coup against all of Latin America.” He spoke about the strong interests of the U.S. in Honduras, which has a very strategic location. He posed the question of why John Negroponte was in the country in early June apparently meeting with almost all of the coup leaders. Another spoke about the “implementation in Honduras of the harshest most right wing forces in the world.”

Others expressed the open belief that the CIA and Pentagon were behind the Honduran army, or at least complicit in the coup, though we did not hear specifics about the supposed U.S. role. Concern was frequently expressed that military officers involved in the coup were trained at the U.S. Army School of the Americas (now WHINSEC).

According to the U.S. embassy, half of the investment in Honduras is from the U.S. Some are Fortune 500 companies, though overall, they are fairly mixed in outlook. Many businesses do have reasons to support the coup government.

Many were clear that people are fighting not to restore a caudillo but to defend civil rights and the rule of law.

One said that the coup opened a whole new period in Honduras – one of authoritarianism sustained by multinational capital and military force. The struggle will be very long term – beyond getting Zelaya back. It will be very brutal. Many felt that a dangerous precedent would be set if the coup government in Honduras finds a way to sustain itself. It would offer a model for how other countries could orchestrate and characterize a coup as a constitutional transition of power, and then seek to legitimize itself through elections, in conditions that would not be free and fair.

Human rights violations

We heard multiple reports of horrific human rights violations inflicted by Honduran military and police forces upon ordinary people peacefully exercising basic rights guaranteed by the Honduran Constitution and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. These abuses, including beatings, rape, harassment and intimidation, arbitrary arrest, disappearances and even death, were well documented by the Honduran Committee of the Families of the Detained and Disappeared (COFADEH) and in recent reports from Amnesty International and by the InterAmerican Human Rights Commission, also present in Honduras while we were there.

COFADEH was particularly concerned about the impact on youth as police and military entered high schools and universities to harass and arrest students and faculty. Teachers and youth have both been targeted by the de facto government. One teacher, arrested while we were there, had just given testimony before the InterAmerican Human Rights Commission.

Youth have been attacked with particular vengeance as security forces have broken up demonstrations. Used to conducting random street sweeps to control gang violence, police have used the excuse of gangs to focus repression against youth. The threats against youth have been traumatic. Photos of young people were being circulated as “suspects,” inviting bounty hunters to turn them in to the police.

Women have been attacked in a particularly cruel way. We heard one account of a woman raped four times, then violated with a bayonet. A delegation focused on the situation of women was in Honduras at the same time we were there. [Click here](#) for their preliminary report.

Impunity of the intellectual authors of human rights violations is a major problem. The administration of justice has been particularly weak in Honduras. We were alarmed to see people and patterns of abuse re-emerging from the shadows of repression in earlier decades. One example frequently mentioned is that of Billy Joya, who was famous in 1980s as a perpetrator of human rights violations. Now he has appeared again on the scene as a security advisor for the “de facto president.” Impunity in the past for criminals and violators of human rights has left Hondurans vulnerable to a painful repeat of history. Militarization, disinformation, extreme attempts to control the civilian population and a terrible polarization of the citizenry have far-reaching ramifications for a people yearning for a just end to poverty and exclusion.

In San Pedro Sula, we were part of a several hour session in which victims of human rights abuses were gathered to share with us their testimonies. We heard painful accounts of repression and intimidation by Honduran police and armed forces particularly directed at those participating in non-violent demonstrations calling for constitutional order to be restored. Stories were shared by a woman lawyer, a labor union member, a teacher, several youth, women religious, the daughter of a man who was killed, a survivor of the violence in the 1980s and others. (Transcriptions of interviews are available from Jean Stokan, jstokan@sistersofmercy.org.)

The right to freedom of the press has been repeatedly violated in Honduras since the June 28 coup. The media that has continued to broadcast has contributed in a significant way to the disinformation of the public. Many spoke about the dominant media outlets being in the hands of the business elite who are in support of the coup. While we were there, Channel 36 and Radio Globo, two outlets regarded as more neutral in reporting, were both attacked. People interpret events based on the information to which they are exposed; thus, the absence of reporting on, and the distorted portrayal of, the protests or commentary critical of the de facto regime, contributes to the confusion and deep polarization in society.

Resistance

We met with many sectors of Honduran society that demonstrate amazing courage and capacity to organize and sustain a diverse and strong popular resistance to the coup and subsequent repression.

We were told that since 2005, social movements in Honduras had been trying to promote a Constitutional Assembly. Many supported the proposal of the president and joined together to promote the consultation that was to have taken place on June 28. Never before in Honduras had

the people been consulted. One person described how, “On June 28, people came and voted even without ballot boxes, even as the military threatened. We never imagined such a movement – in spite of human rights violations.”

The resistance to the coup, we were told, has been very strong and united. In Honduran history, there has never been a coup with such resistance. Despite repression – deaths, beatings, detentions, arrests – the nonviolent resistance has remained very strong.

The resistance is comprised of different organizations: social, special interests, fair trade, NGOs, human rights, etc. - brought together by the same objective: To return to constitutionality and to struggle for a Constitutional Assembly. The resistance says that this effort will not end with Zelaya’s return to Honduras, but the struggle will continue to work for a new constitution for Honduras that represents all sectors in the country – not one that is exclusionary.

The coup served to open “Pandora’s box,” catalyzing a movement from the grassroots with a widened agenda for social change. The biggest task of the resistance was identified as the need to develop an understanding/strategy for the next decade. The cultural content of the struggle is huge, including in reference to political parties.

One person said that “What is happening now is like watching the parting of the Red Sea – Honduras has never seen this kind of a resistance – women hitting soldiers, men stopping tanks in their tracks. Salvadorans and Nicaraguans are amazed.” One person likened it to “Gandhi’s salt march.”

Response of the international community

The international community responded swiftly and strongly to events on June 28. The United Nations, the Organization of American States (OAS), the European Union, and many individual countries around the world denounced the coup and took strong measures to isolate the illegitimate government.

Although the process hosted by Nobel laureate Oscar Arias remains stalled as of this writing, there are hopes that it could still facilitate the return to Honduras of President Zelaya. Long term peace, however, will depend on ensuring that the poor and marginalized be included in the economic and political life of the country.

Role of Catholic and evangelical churches

Religion has had an enormous impact on politics in Honduras. Prior to the coup, the Bishops Conference of Honduras published a communiqué (June 19, 2009) on the political juncture of the country, addressing the growing tensions and need for participative democracy. The Conference named social justice, dialogue and consultation of the citizenry as the conditions under which participative democracy is made possible.

The coup served to polarize Honduran society. One of our delegation's deepest preoccupations was about the deep divisions in the vibrant Honduran Catholic community, which traditionally has been the majority religion in the country.

We frequently heard people charge that the evangelical churches and the Catholic Church, particularly Opus Dei, provided support for the coup. We heard from many people about the deep hurt, anger, and a sense of abandonment occasioned by the July 3 statement of the Honduran Bishops' Conference. The statement, read by Cardinal Oscar Rodríguez Maradiaga, SDB, upheld that the actions of June 28 were "rooted in law" and was aired repeatedly on the mainstream media. It accepted the premise that Zelaya had violated the constitution and thus was not president at the time of his removal. Some commented that the Cardinal received poor legal advice in the preparation of the statement. One testimony from the grassroots captured the sense of pain, calling the statement a "blow to a body already wounded." Despite our attempts, we were unable to secure a meeting with Cardinal Rodriguez to hear his perspective on this and try to understand his words and actions that have created such an intense reaction from the Honduran people.

There was a sense of desperation in the testimonies from people who were victims of brutal attacks by the security forces, and a hunger for the Church to denounce the human rights violations occurring in the country. We were told that the dioceses of Trujillo and Santa Rosa de Copan had spoken about either the human rights violations or the coup itself. Other religious bodies that have spoken out included: a number of local pastoral teams, the Jesuit-affiliated Radio Progreso and ERIC, the Honduran Conference of Men and Women Religious, and the Central American Provinces of the Dominicans and Jesuits. These took the form of formal statements challenging the coup and calling for the restoration of the constitutional order. (See list of statements compiled by lay missionary in Honduras John Donaghy: <http://www.honduraschurchdocuments.blogspot.com>.)

We met courageous priests, women religious and lay women and men who have accompanied people from all walks of life whose human rights were being violated. Many of these pastoral workers were threatened and attacked as well. In our long conversation with them, we repeatedly heard their analysis on the influence of economic interests in facilitating the coup.

The Church has an important, and needed, role to both speak out in defense of human rights and to help heal the divisions both within itself and within the larger society. The Honduran Bishops' Conference statement of June 19 addressing social justice, dialogue and consultation remains a valuable framework for moving beyond the current crisis.

Conclusion: Concerns, hopes and recommendations

We remain concerned about implications for the region and beyond of what we have seen in Honduras. We are convinced that the conflict there is not only, nor primarily, about Mel Zelaya, although the return of the legitimate president to office is imperative, but about the abuse of political and military, and especially of economic, power. That does not bode well for the future of the hemisphere or for any country in the world where the basic rights of citizens to a decent life, to a healthy environment, and to participate in important decisions that affect their lives

challenge the privileges and power of a few – be they individuals, institutions or business interests.

We believe that Hondurans – including civil society, the Catholic Church and all communities of faith, the military and police, the private sector, organized labor, politicians, scholars, lawyers – can come together to create a just society and end the crisis they are now living. To move in that direction will require a return to legitimate government of and for ordinary people, an end to the abuse of power that characterizes the Honduras we have visited in these days and a deep commitment to honest and broadly participative dialogue across the differences that now divide Honduran society.

The pain of the victims of violence in these weeks needs to be listened to with great care, as well as those who feel abandoned. The Church can help move toward healing and assume a greater role of speaking out forcefully for an end to the pattern of intimidation and official abuse against those nonviolently expressing their opposition to the coup.

We also urge the Catholic community worldwide and all people of good will to strengthen international solidarity with the Honduran people, accompanying those whose basic human rights are being violated, advocating for a just and enduring resolution to this crisis, and addressing the many ways in which international greed for minerals and markets, wealth, power and control provide fertile ground for the suffering in Honduras.

It has become increasingly clear that the elections scheduled for November 29, 2009 cannot be carried out in a fair and valid manner in the current context, as recognized by the U.S. government, Latin American countries and the OAS. According to the U.S. Embassy, given the lack of progress in the San Jose accords, there could well be violence making elections impossible. The other concern is that the de facto government is consolidating power and could use the electoral process to validate and institutionalize the changes brought about through the coup.

Many countries, including the U.S., have cut aid to Honduras. From the U.S., Millennium Challenge Account (MCA) money that is already contracted is going, but this needs closer examination as there is great concern that MCA project funds are likely supporting some of the perpetrators of the coup. The U.S. has not formally declared a military coup under Section 7008 of foreign operations law, but doing so would enable Congress to play its rightful role in carrying out a full review of aid to the Honduran regime under all categories, including "democracy promotion" and to send a strong message regarding the illegality of military coups in the region.

We urge the U.S. to be unequivocal in the signals it gives to the de facto Honduran government on the need to return to constitutional order. In particular, we urge the U.S government to:

- Speak out strongly and publicly in denouncing the brutal human rights violations committed by the Honduran military and police forces;
- Freeze the U.S. based assets of the coup regime;
- Stop U.S. funds going to Honduras designated for democracy promotion/election preparation;

- Remove all U.S. troops from Honduras, cease all military joint operations and exercises, and terminate training programs; and
- Follow the example of other nations by recalling the U.S. ambassador until the legitimate president of Honduras is restored to office.

Such measures, if acted upon immediately, could have important impact in restoring constitutional order in this crucial period in Honduras.

The hope is that once constitutional order is restored, the challenges around addressing the deep polarization in society can be advanced. Many in Honduras are promoting spaces for such dialogue. Between the two extremes there is a large sector of society favoring neither side. A genuine dialogue among the people may be difficult, but would represent an important step.

Too much is at stake not to proceed in this direction. Each day that passes under the coup regime deepens the fissures in Honduran society and heightens the potential for violence, despite the commitment of those opposing the coup via non-violent resistance.

Long-term peace and stability in Honduras – will depend on ensuring that the poor and marginalized sectors of society be included in the economic and political life of the country. It is our hope and belief that this is possible. We will continue to hold the Honduran people in our prayers. And we commit ourselves to remaining vigilant and to accompany the process so that peace and justice can be firmly planted.

Resources

- “Honduras: Human rights crisis threatens as repression increases,” Amnesty International Report, August 2009. Photos and testimonies on the extent of police violence. (<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/AMR37/004/2009/en>)
- Inter-American Commission on Human Rights: Preliminary observation on the IACHR visit to Honduras, August 2009. (<http://www.cidh.org/Comunicados/English/2009/60-09eng.Preliminary.Observations.htm>)
- Catholic church statements on the Honduran crisis, and articles translated from religious sources (<http://www.honduraschurchdocuments.blogspot.com/>)

APPENDIX A -- Meetings

Tegucigalpa
Tuesday, August 18

- International representative of resistance movement
- Harry Dixon Herrera and Alejandro Castillo, attorneys, formerly with Honduran justice system

Wednesday, August 19

- Juan Barajona, Padre Andes Tamayo et al, leadership of popular resistance

- Berta Oliva, Executive Director, COFADEH human rights organization

Monday, August 24

- Popular resistance leadership
- Attorney General's office
- Simon Henshaw, Deputy Chief of Mission; Nathan Macklin, U.S. Embassy
- Dr. Juan Amendares, medical doctor; internationally recognized for his work with victims of torture

Tuesday, August 25

- Pedro Landa, Director of Caritas, Tegucigalpa

Progreso

Thursday, August 20

- Rev. Ismael Moreno, SJ, Radio Progreso and ERIC

San Pedro Sula

Thursday, August 20

- 35 survivors of human rights abuses and pastoral workers, convened by Sisters of Mercy
- Maryknoll Father Bob Coyne, pastor

Santa Rosa de Copan

Friday, August 21

- Father Fausto Milla
- Bishop Luis Santos
- John Donaghy, U.S. lay missionary with Diocese of Santa Rosa de Copan

Siguatepeque

Saturday, August 22

- Mary McCann