



Nicaragua-United States

Friendship Office
of the Americas



Religious Delegation to Honduras **December 6-12, 2012**

Summary Report

The Sisters of Mercy of the Americas' Institute Justice Team and the Friendship Office of the Americas organized a religious delegation to Honduras to examine firsthand the current situation in Honduras with a particular focus on human rights issues, and to extend a gesture of solidarity to the Mercy community and others working with those who are impoverished and marginalized.

Background

The key reference point in all of the conversations with religious and civic leaders was the June 2009 coup, in which the democratically elected Honduran President Jose Manual Zelaya was overthrown. The coup's significance was discussed in terms of the reasons why Zelaya was removed, as well as the devastating impact from the resulting weakness and corruption of the state. Contrary to misinformation in the mass media on the developments that led to the coup, it seems clear that Zelaya's policies were challenging the economic elite, both within Honduras and internationally. He had raised the minimum wage, given land titles to *campesinos*, supported efforts to hold a constituent assembly that would lead to the writing of a new constitution, and drew close to Venezuela and the progressive governments of Latin America to form a block to promote regional cooperation as an alternative to the neoliberal (free market) trade policies.

As one of the poorest countries in Latin America, Honduras had started to see some small progress being made to address the extreme levels of economic inequality and marginalization. Since the coup, however, there has been a rolling back of these advances. Policies have been put in place to benefit big business and privatize more sectors of the economy, to weaken labor laws and dismantle unions, to repress dissent, and to facilitate land-grabbing, including lands held by indigenous communities with communal titles. Of particular concern is the National Congress' recent passage of a new mining and hydrocarbon law to permit surface mining despite objections by environmental groups and local communities, as well as passage of a law to permit "charter cities," creating zones that would be operated outside the government's jurisdiction.

Current Situation

Violence in Honduras is pervasive and has skyrocketed since the coup, making Honduras one of the most dangerous countries on the globe. Femicide (targeted attacks on women) is on the rise as well as targeted political violence. The city of San Pedro Sula has surpassed Ciudad Juarez, Mexico as being the most dangerous city in the hemisphere. The country has become a major transshipment route for drug cartels, and many sectors of the government and society are involved in drug trafficking.

Police corruption also is one of the most serious problems facing Honduras today. Little effort is made to investigate crimes, including the high percentage of crimes committed by police, and the citizenry has no confidence in the security forces. Impunity is rampant and unchecked. The problem is further exacerbated

in that several people implicated in human rights violations and/or with involvement in the coup have been given key positions in the post-coup government, including the current Chief of the National Police Juan Carlos “el Tigre” Bonilla, for whom there is strong evidence of past ties to death squads.

At the same time, there are signs of hope in the many people and groups who are courageously working for social and economic change. These include human rights defenders, labor unions, journalists and community radio stations, indigenous and *campesino*/farm organizations, grassroots faith communities, judges “for democracy,” LGBT activists and many more. Because of their work for change, these groups have been targeted for repression. Leaders (or their family members) are assassinated and death threats are numerous. The independent, civil society-led Commission of Truth issued an in-depth report in late 2012: “*La Voz Mas Autorizada es la de las Victimas*” (The Voice of Greatest Authority is that of the Victims) and found that crimes against humanity were committed with the complicity of the Honduran judicial system, and that terror is used by the state as a policy of social control, including groups operating as death squads.

United States’ Involvement

United States intervention in Honduras today is carried out with the justification of combating drug trafficking. The U.S. is training Honduran military and police, despite their involvement in human rights violations and corruption. Given the deeply embedded structures of impunity, efforts focused on training have not been effective and instead serve to strengthen corrupt structures within the security forces and further militarize the so-called drug war. Many Hondurans see the role of the U.S. military as bolstering the power of the oligarchy and transnational capital, and feel that the U.S. gives too much priority to making Honduras an attractive and safe venue for foreign investment. They feel that the militarization of their country is generating ever greater levels of violence.

The U.S. Embassy maintains relations with the national police chief (Bonilla) and believes that there is no evidence that he currently has ties to death squads. His presence as head of the police, however, still engenders fear and sends a powerful message to those in social movements and those concerned about human rights. The U.S. Embassy also dismissed that there is a pattern of repression directed against social movements, human rights defenders and others in the political opposition.

Such posturing to dismiss patterns of politically targeted violence and its eager defense of the Honduran government, helps explain why so many of the groups with whom we met carry deep distrust of the Embassy. While it has been important that Senior State Department officials from Washington travel to Honduras to deliver the message that the United States is concerned about human rights, many believe that it would be more productive for the U.S. to distance itself until the Honduran government demonstrates political will and takes definitive action to address corruption and impunity.

Actions Needed

In conclusion, what Honduras most needs are policies and practices that eliminate impunity, address the social and economic inequalities, and promote justice and long term sustainable development so that the dignity and basic needs for the majority of Hondurans are met. While the drug trafficking is a clearly a serious problem, alternatives to the over-militarized U.S. approach are needed. U.S. policy in Honduras should take action on the recommendations of the Commission of Truth, which includes calling for the investigation and sanction of the intellectual and material authors of the coup and resultant human rights violations, and for annulment of the January 2012 Amnesty Law. The report also calls for an end to military and security agreements between the U.S. and Honduras and closure of U.S. military bases in Honduras—a call which we heard repeatedly from the many groups with whom we met.

The U.S. faith community needs to maintain a high level of vigilance to the human rights situation in Honduras. It should continue to engage the attention of policy makers to make the needed changes

identified above and educate others in the U.S. about the situation. People-to-people bonds need to be strengthened and more delegations organized. Prayer also is a critical form of our accompaniment. Its essence was well captured in response to our delegation's question to the Honduran Mercy sisters: "In the midst of so much violence and desperation, what gives you hope?" They responded, "Knowing that people in the international community are praying for us...are watching out for our people."

The final word is gratitude – gratitude for the courage and unwavering determination of these sisters and all in Honduras working for social change. Their inspiration engenders even greater levels of solidarity and ongoing action on our part. We are ever grateful.

To access the delegation's full report, go to www.sistersofmercy.org