



Nicaragua-United States
Friendship Office
of the Americas

A FURNACE OF VIOLENCE

HONDURAS, U.S. POLICY AND THE ROOT CAUSES OF MIGRATION

This report is dedicated to the memory of Berta Cáceres, a leading Honduran indigenous activist, who was murdered on the morning the report was to be posted on our web site. The Sisters of Mercy have worked with Ms. Cáceres and her organization, the National Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (COPINH) for many years in their struggle to defend indigenous rights to land and natural resources. We hosted her when she came to Washington, DC in 2015 to receive the prestigious Goldman Environmental Prize for her outstanding activism and leadership, including the defense of her beloved Gualcarque River. Our hearts and continued solidarity are with the people of Honduras at this time of profound and collective loss. (March 3, 2016)

WASHINGTON, D.C.

MARCH, 2016

Religious Delegation to Honduras

December 5-11, 2015

Principal Author, Sister Karen Donahue, RSM

Purpose of delegation

This delegation to Honduras was organized by the Institute Justice Team of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas in cooperation with the Friendship Office of the Americas and the Honduras Accompaniment Project (PRPOAH) for the following purposes:

- to learn about the political, economic and social situation in Honduras, so that we can help raise consciousness and advocate for just U.S. policies in Honduras and the region
- to learn about the conditions that are driving Hondurans to migrate to the United States, so that we can better advocate for humane immigration policies.
- to offer a gesture of solidarity and accompany the people of Honduras, especially our own Mercy sisters and associates, at this time of crisis in their country.

Participants

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Staff

Jenny Atlee – Friendship Office of the Americas,

Lucy Edwards – PROAH (Honduras Accompaniment Project)

Marine Pezet – PROAH

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Cities visited

San Pedro Sula

El Progreso

Tegucigalpa

Individual/Group meetings

- Sisters of Mercy and Mercy Associates
- Casa Corazon de la Misericordia

- Forum of Women for Life
- FESTAGRO (Federation of Unionized Agro Industrial Workers)
- Network of unions and NGOs working on labor rights
- Rev. Ismael Moreno, SJ, Director, Radio Progreso and ERIC (Center for Reflection, Investigation and Communication)
- ERIC staff
- Radio Progreso staff
- CNTC (National Center for Rural Workers)
- COFAMIPRO (Committee of the Families of Migrants and Disappeared of Progreso)
- Dream Weavers, Ministry of the Sisters of Mercy
- Committee of Families of the Detained and Disappeared in Honduras (COFADEH)
- Casa Alianza, affiliate of Covenant House
- United States Embassy, Tegucigalpa, Honduras

Preface

The United Nations reports that there are more refugees in the world today than at any time since the Second World War – currently more than 60 million people are refugees.¹ Pope Francis recently urged nations around the world, and in particular the churches of Europe, to open their borders with mercy and compassion to Syrian refugees. And, upon visiting the U.S. Congress in September 2015 and the U.S.–Mexico border in February 2016, he urged the United States to do the same.

In the summer of 2014, tens of thousands of women and children fled increasing violence in their home countries in Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala, known as the Northern Triangle, and embarked on a dangerous journey through Mexico in search of refuge in the United States. For the first time, such violence has exceeded the levels of violence that occurred in the Central American region during the civil wars of the 1980s.²

In an attempt to stem the tide of refugees and asylum-seekers to the United States, the Obama Administration launched a media campaign in the countries of the Northern Triangle to discourage parents from sending their children north. President Obama also increased the number of federal agents on the U.S.-Mexico border, and provided support to Mexico to strengthen its southern border with Guatemala in order to turn back migrants and refugees entering Mexico. As a result, thousands of individuals were deported back to Central America from both Mexico and the United States.

¹ United Nations High Commission on Refugees, *World at War: Global Trends in Forced Displacement in 2014*, June, 18, 2015, http://unhcr.org/556725e69.html#_ga=1.125125772.762709137.1456625218.

² Inter-American Dialogue, *Central America Great Crisis*, September 9, 2015, <http://www.thedialogue.org/resources/central-america-crisis/>.

Research on the root causes of migration from Central America to the United States documents the increased levels of violence in Central America and provides data on the numbers of migrants, refugees, and asylum-seekers entering the United States in recent years.³

The following report is an effort to shed light on why many men, women and children continue to risk their lives and flee the region: quite simply, they undertake the dangerous journey north because they perceive the risks of staying in their countries as much greater. Our report focuses on Honduras, where the Sisters of Mercy have ministered for over fifty years to impoverished people and have witnessed firsthand the devastating human rights crisis in the country, particularly since the 2009 coup.

The Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, together with the Friendship Office of the Americas, organized a delegation of U.S. religious to Honduras in December 2015. The aims of the delegation were to provide a gesture of solidarity and to learn about the current situation in the country. We observed the increasing militarization of Honduran society since the coup, rampant impunity and corruption, and how U.S. policy is seen as contributing to the conditions of violence and deepening poverty that drive outward migration.

Some of the report's quotes are unattributed to protect those who provided them, mostly human rights defenders and social movement leaders whose lives have been threatened. We were moved by the courage and tireless work of these individuals to achieve justice and accountability, and to rebuild the social fabric of their country. Their efforts to uphold the human dignity of all persons and to promote the participation of the country's majority living in poverty, particularly indigenous and Afro-descendant communities, is Honduras' greatest source of hope.

Significance of June 28, 2009 coup

"The coup signifies a huge regression for us as a country....Some benefited from it: the business sector, particularly those benefiting from privatization; the owners of banks; transnational mining companies; weapons dealers; organized crime; and the U.S. government."

On June 28, 2009, democratically-elected Honduran President Jose Manual Zelaya was overthrown in a military coup. He was removed from the presidential palace at dawn and flown to San José, Costa Rica. Later that day, the Honduran Congress voted him out of office, replacing him with the president of Congress, Roberto Micheletti.

³ AFL-CIO, *Trade, Violence and Migration: The Broken Promises to Honduran Workers*, January 2015. <http://www.aflcio.org/content/download/147761/3770791/file/Honduras.PDF>. Bacon, David, "Debunking 8 Myths Why Central American Children are Leaving," *In These Times*, July 8, 2014, http://inthesetimes.com/article/16919/8_reasons_u.s._trade_and_immigration_policies_have_caused_migration_from_ce

Supporters of the coup claim that this action was necessary to preserve constitutional order. They say that President Zelaya was taking steps to alter the constitution so that he could run for a second term. In fact, Zelaya was merely proposing a national non-binding referendum to determine whether or not Honduras should hold a constituent assembly that would write a new constitution aimed at giving the majority of the population more rights. The assembly would have been open to all sectors of society, something that the elite opposed. There is no basis for the claim that Zelaya wanted a new constitution in order to achieve a second term; the constituent assembly wouldn't have taken place in 2010 or 2011, long after he was out of office.

Zelaya's opponents used scare tactics to generate opposition to the referendum. They accused Zelaya of communist sympathies and ties to then-Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez and Cuba's Fidel Castro. They charged that under the new laws, children would be separated from their parents and people's cars would be confiscated.

Apparently the real reason for the coup was President Zelaya's failure to deliver to various sectors of the business elite and their international allies. While he came from the upper classes, he broke with their interests. He raised the minimum wage to keep pace with the cost of living, lowered gas prices, promised land titles to *campesinos* who had been on the land for fifteen years, and resisted efforts to privatize various sectors of the economy including telecommunications, ports, electricity and water.

In November 2009, fraudulent elections brought Porfirio "Pepe" Lobo Sosa to the presidency. Other candidates withdrew in protest from the process, and many Hondurans boycotted the elections. Despite the fact that voting took place in a climate of fear and intimidation, the United States recognized the new president.

The current president, Juan Orlando Hernández, took office in January 2014. He supported the 2009 coup as a member of the Honduran Congress, has worked to strengthen the role of the military in the country, and has admitted complicity in a social security scam involving some of the country's top political and business leaders. Large sums of money--at least \$90 million -- were transferred from the national health service to the coffers of his ruling National Party. Despite that, the United States continues to support him.

Our delegation repeatedly heard that the coup has devastated government institutions. It opened the door to impunity and corruption at the highest levels, and created the conditions for skyrocketing crime and violence, drug trafficking, and an increase in poverty--all "push factors" for the massive migration north.

In the six and a half years since the coup, the situation in Honduras has continued to deteriorate. We were told that San Pedro Sula remains the most violent city in the world (about 171 murders/100,000 population in 2014), surpassing even places like Ciudad Juarez, Bagdad and Mogadishu.

We were told that the country is ruled by transnational corporations (especially in the extractive sector), local elites, and politicians of the extreme right. International actors, including the United States, the Organization of American States (OAS), the United Nations and the European Union are viewed as supporting this arrangement, as it serves the interests of international capital. The needs and the aspirations of the Honduran people have no place in this equation. When asked what space would open up for Honduras if these international actors were not in the picture, one person said, *we could develop according to our own priorities*.

Several groups spoke of their frustration about the direction the country is taking, with increases in deregulation and privatization, and the gutting of the public sector, all in the service of maximizing profits, and all of it enforced by the military. For example, instead of granting land titles to peasant farmers so they can implement sustainable agricultural methods and feed their families, land is sold to agribusiness firms for palm oil plantations. Sensitive ecological areas have been turned over to mining companies; as a result, land and water resources have been destroyed. Indigenous communities are being displaced so that tourist resorts can be constructed along the coast.

To resist these developments is to risk one's life. Journalists, *campesino* and labor leaders, lawyers and community organizers have been harassed, intimidated, and even assassinated since the coup. A state of near total impunity exists in Honduras today. We were told that only about 4-5% of the crimes committed are ever investigated.

Situation in 2015

The year 2015 was marked by marches of the *Indignados* ("the Outraged"), in which large numbers of the middle class joined an uprising against the government, many protesting for the first time. Hundreds of thousands took to the streets when they learned of the president's involvement in the national health service scandal. While the marches had some impact, they produced no permanent changes.

Political power is increasingly concentrated in the executive branch and backed up by the police and military. Hernández wanted to enhance the status of the military police by including it in the constitution, but suffered a defeat when the legislature rejected his proposal. Two months later, the Supreme Court amended the constitution to allow him to run for a second term. Authoritarianism, and a lack of checks and balances are serious problems.

Refusing to respect the rule of law, Hernández has tried to gain control over the congress, judiciary, military, and electoral authorities. He chaired the congressional committee that endorsed the coup. In December 2012, while the President of Congress, he led the "technical coup" in which five members of the Supreme Court were illegally deposed in the middle of the night and replaced by Hernandez loyalists. In the summer of 2013 he was instrumental in the illegal naming of the current Attorney General.

Land Issues

“The struggle for land is not easy. There is a lot of land not being worked, but we are up against translational corporations and big landowners who are like monsters gobbling up the land. Many are hungry and eat only one meal a day. Children take a sip of coffee and a piece of bread. We see families with beds made of sticks and leaves. We see the misery in which people live, and we ask: if we don’t struggle, who else will? Hit men are after us. The state is after us, and puts warrants out for our arrest. Some of our leaders have been killed, but we’re not going to stop.”

Our delegation met with leaders of peasant organizations who are working to acquire land. They want to be able to grow their own food and not be dependent on food handouts from the government. They view handouts as a form of control as it is much easier to keep people in line when they are dependent on the government for food. *Campesinos* also want to practice sustainable farming methods rather than rely on pesticides and other agrochemicals to produce their food. Communal ownership is a way to protect the land and the people. As one person said, *land is to be defended, not sold.*

Nevertheless, peasant farmers in Honduras continue to be thwarted in their efforts to obtain title to their land. They presented an agricultural reform plan to the government but it was not accepted. They say the government has little or no interest in agricultural reform and, instead, is intent on selling land to transnational corporations and large landowners for industrial scale agriculture.

Working for land rights in Honduras is extremely dangerous; many *campesino* leaders have been threatened, arrested and murdered. Often such persecution of land rights activists is carried out by state agents in collaboration with private security guards. Many cannot live with their families because of the danger; they know that their phones are tapped and that they are being watched. Yet in spite of the extreme danger, they are willing to stand up for their rights.

There is a significant amount of land in Honduras that is not currently under cultivation. *Campesinos* have requested that land owned by the state be made available to them. This has not happened. This lack of access to land is fueling migration from Honduras.

War on Drugs

“Drug trafficking is a big problem for Honduras, but it is not the main problem. The main problem is the State.”

While the growing strength of drug cartels is a major concern for the Honduran and U.S. governments, our delegation heard strong critiques of the highly militarized “War on Drugs,” seen by many as a pretext for U.S. attempts to regain control in the region and to do so, in the case of Honduras, by strengthening the military. Despite spending billions of dollars, there seems to be little progress in curbing the flow of drugs to the U.S.

The drug trade has become increasingly complex over the past twenty years. Honduras is a transit point for drugs coming from Colombia and Peru on their way to the United States. Local cartels which were originally involved in networking and transit have become more powerful and have cut into the profits of the big cartels, primarily in Colombia, and the big distributors in the United States.

Banks, including some of the largest, play a pivotal role in the drug trade by providing financial services, including money laundering, to drug traffickers. HSBC (a major British bank) and Wells Fargo were named as having been implicated in the drug trade. Nevertheless, the U.S. government tends to be very lenient toward the international banks. They have been fined but not indicted or prosecuted for criminal activity.

On the other hand, Banco Continental, a Honduran bank which is part of Grupo Continental, the conglomerate of the influential Rosenthal family, was closed overnight in October 2015, when three members of the Rosenthal family were accused of laundering money for several drug trafficking organizations. The United States sanctioned the Rosenthals under the Foreign Narcotics Kingpin Designation Act (Kingpin Act), freezing their assets in the U.S.

Role of Media

Journalists in Honduras today are limited in what they can publish. The slant of a story determines whether it will appear. We were told that the media is tightly controlled by the government, which provides debt relief for stations that broadcast government propaganda.

There is little mainstream media coverage of human rights abuses. *Radio Progreso* (run by the Jesuits) is a key source of alternative information on issues, and two dozen small community radio stations also have sprung up. Honduras has been ranked among the deadliest countries in the Americas for journalists by Reporters Without Borders (<http://en.rsf.org/ameriques-infographic-the-deadliest-30-09-2014,47028.html>). Since the 2009 coup through July 2015, at least 50 journalists have been killed (Human Rights Watch, Honduras country report for 2015: <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2016/country-chapters/honduras>.)

Role of the Churches

Conditions in Honduras today have led to an explosion of Protestant fundamentalism. We were told that some pastors urge their congregations to tithe, preaching a Gospel of Prosperity, and that these pastors have become very wealthy. Fundamentalism bolsters the corruption that prevails in Honduras today by viewing the accumulation of power and wealth as signs of God's blessing.

Several people spoke with heavy hearts about the Catholic hierarchy not acting in solidarity with the people, and not speaking out on human rights violations, particularly when carried out

by state security forces. Very conservative Catholic groups like Opus Dei and the Neo-catechumenal Way are active in Honduras.

Violence, Impunity and Police Corruption

“We live in fear. We feel the chaos has been created to weaken the social network. Organized crime is able to recruit judges, state security agents and business people. When we document this, the government says we are bad Hondurans. Children are executed by criminals, police and military. We live a culture of death and terror.”

We heard that between seventy and eighty young men are killed every month. Instead of investigations, there is a concerted effort to treat poor and marginalized youth as criminals. Impunity also makes it easy to hire killers, since they’re confident that they will not be brought to justice.

This climate of violence and impunity enables street gangs to thrive. They control entire neighborhoods. They come in and demand that people leave their homes by the end of the day, saying that if they don’t, they’ll be raped and murdered.

People avoid reporting crime to the police because often the police are linked to the perpetrators. The police have access to military grade weapons and other equipment. The Leahy Law prohibits the U.S. government from funding security forces that engage in human rights violation; yet despite the abundance of such violations, the Leahy Law is not enforced.

Private security companies, many of them operated by former military personnel, have proliferated and are a lucrative business. There is a new security tax, but little accountability for how the money collected under it is being used. We heard that spending on security is calculated at \$1 billion/year. Businesses get large contracts to manufacture and distribute high tech security equipment, such as cameras and panic buttons on buses. Human rights groups are asking if the real purpose of these cameras is to provide evidence for criminal investigations, or to provide surveillance of citizens. In a high profile case of the beating of the director of *Casa Alianza* by the Military Police in front of the Presidential Palace, the government has refused to release the tape from one of the two cameras that captured the beating.

Private security forces, often in collusion with state security forces, are especially active in going after those who oppose mining and other resource extraction operations.

Militarization of Society

“Since the coup, the armed forces have been strengthened and given a role in policing, which is against the Constitution. The entire country is militarized. The Government has tried to convince people that the military is the solution to crime and violence.”

Police corruption is rampant and widely recognized. Several commissions have made recommendations for reforming the police, but almost none of those recommendations have been acted on. The latest effort, the Meza Commission, was quickly disbanded just before President Hernández took office. He has deployed thousands of soldiers to handle police functions, and named a top military figure to oversee the regular police. He established the new military police force in August 2013, while serving as head of the Honduran Congress.

Yet the military, like the police force, reportedly has ties to organized crime and drug traffickers, and has carried out human rights violations. We also were told that the death squad structures of the 1980s were never dismantled, including the infamous “Batallion 316.”

Our delegation repeatedly heard concern about the presence of soldiers on the street, and the various ways the government is trying to impose a military mindset, e.g. having a strong military presence in parks and soccer fields. Particularly concerning is “Guardians of the Fatherland,” a program in which children between the ages of 5 and 20 are trained at military installations. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) has raised concerns about this program and the various ways the government has given the Armed Forces a central role in society.

Violence Against Women

“Everyone is afraid. Women began to appear in plastic bags, dismembered. The phenomenon of femicide is clear. We became aware of the role of forced disappearances, for which there has been no documentation or response from the State.”

While violence is endemic in Honduras and has been for some time, the violence perpetrated against women simply because they are women is particularly insidious. It even has a name – *femicide*.

Members of the Women’s Forum, founded in 2003 in solidarity with the women of Iraq during the war there, said that they, like their sisters in Iraq, are living in conflict zones. The group has continued meeting and working on the situation of women in Honduras. Between 2003 and 2013, there were 4,430 documented cases of *femicide*; seventy percent were committed with firearms. Ninety percent of these cases were never even investigated. The way the bodies are left, mutilated on the streets, sends a message of terror to the victims’ families and the general public. Women’s groups say this makes it easier for the government to sell its vision of militarized security.

Alliance for Prosperity

“We see the Alliance for Prosperity as a danger, nothing else. We see it as part of the U.S. security strategy. We believe that U.S. support for the Honduran government does great damage.”

“Lots of U.S. aid is for local security initiatives, but the projects have been totally ineffective in addressing human rights; instead they serve to weaken security.”

In response to the crisis that erupted in the summer of 2014, when large numbers of unaccompanied children from Central America turned up at the U.S.–Mexico border, a plan called the Alliance for Prosperity, was developed by the presidents of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, in partnership with the Inter-American Development Bank and with strong support from the Obama Administration, to address the economic crisis and the violence driving migration.

We heard strong opposition to the plan from civil society groups. They see it as driven from the outside, as having heavy emphasis on energy and infrastructure to facilitate international business, and as failing to address the poverty and impunity which drive migration. Some programs focus on education and employment, but they are minuscule in relation to the need that exists.

According to civil society groups, what’s really needed are major policy changes, and no such changes are even on the table. They also talked about the negative impact of U.S.-funded programs which don’t respect existing local leadership and initiative. They said that when they criticize the Alliance, the government creates rival groups which then receive funding, undermining local leadership and community organizations; and then, the government showcases work with these newly-created groups to legitimate its actions under the plan.

Collapse of the Judicial System

The judicial system is barely functioning. Shortly after the 2009 coup, several judges who failed to support it were removed. The Inter-American Court’s recent ruling in their favor tacitly acknowledged why they were removed, and that the Supreme Court was complicit. The four judges who fired them have been nominated to the Honduran Supreme Court.

The Political Process; How to Move Forward?

Among those who identify as part of “the resistance,” some choose to engage in electoral politics, while others organize as social movements (e.g., labor, women, *campesino*, indigenous and Afro-Honduran communities, etc.) Some social movement leaders feel that the priority today is to formulate proposals for serious social change, and they fear that the 2017 elections may distract attention from that goal. There is concern that those elections, while important,

could sow greater divisions and divert the attention of the social movements at a time when a larger project is needed.

In June, 2015, the Hernández government proposed a national dialogue. It appeared to be an attempt to neutralize revelations of massive government corruption, and the subsequent calls for an independent investigation. The proposed dialogue was mainly to include groups who share Hernández' vision for the country. It eventually resulted in a Mission Against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (MACCIH), which will be described later.

Social movement groups recognize that genuine dialogue is important, but noted that they, along with independent political actors, had been excluded from Hernández' dialogue. We were also told that, given the lack of trust in the country's current political and church leaders, the mediators for an authentic dialogue would have to be international actors.

Several civil society organizations see a need to craft a proposal that could garner broad support and unite various sectors. While building consensus will not be easy, even among the social movements, doing so is seen as critical in order to counterbalance the power and influence of the government, transnational corporations, and local power brokers. They suggested that 2021, the 200th anniversary of Honduran independence, would be a propitious moment to work on proposals focusing on sovereignty, especially given the concern expressed by grassroots groups around the selling off of the country and its natural resources. The Honduran government has already awarded 848 mining concessions, mostly to foreign transnational corporations. Other struggles—for example, those against dams and tourist resorts—are also related to sovereignty, since those projects don't serve the majority of the Honduran people. The dams, for example, are being built to supply electricity for mining operations and other extractive industries, not to help the people. The jobs they create come at great cost: land and water would be degraded and become unfit for use.

U.S. Policy; Areas of Concern

There was overwhelming consensus among the individuals and groups who spoke with us that the United States has been playing a critical role in the political and economic life of Honduras and that this role is often damaging to the well-being of most Hondurans, particularly those most impoverished and marginalized. The U.S. Embassy in Honduras has been responsive on several individual cases of human rights violations, but there is serious concern about other aspects of U.S. policy, including:

Impact of U.S. support for the government of President Juan Orlando Hernández

We repeatedly heard Honduran civil society and human rights leaders express that U.S. political, economic and military support for the Hernández government is a major concern, as it strengthens corruption and impunity. Many of them feel that the U.S. embassy's response to these endemic problems has been to turn its head and even, at times, to hinder efforts to meaningfully address corruption and impunity. As one analyst put it, "We have the impression

that the U.S. supports the Honduran government unconditionally.” That impression is based, in part, on statements in the media attributed to embassy officials.

A recent example is the embassy’s support of the Mission Against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (MACCIH), a collaboration between the Organization of American States (OAS) and the Honduran government. MACCIH is not independent, and excludes large segments of the Honduran population. Civil society groups feel strongly that the only viable option for addressing impunity would be an independent, United Nations-sponsored commission similar to Guatemala’s International Commission against Impunity (CICIG); in other words, a CICIH. They add that even such a commission would not be enough to overcome the problems plaguing Honduras, pointing out that while the CICIG helped remove a corrupt president and vice-president in Guatemala, structural injustice continues; yet a CICIH would be a necessary and important first step.

The U.S. Embassy, however, has lent its support for the MACCIH, even as many feel its lack of independence dooms it to failure. It is widely believed that powerful actors in Honduras are fiercely opposed to a CICIG-type commission. They saw how the one in Guatemala helped bring down political officials and they fear they could meet a similar fate. Some feel that the embassy, in opting for MACCIH, has acquiesced to that fierce opposition.

Imposition of the Alliance for Prosperity

There is very strong opposition to the Alliance plan and the U.S. aid being given to it, as described above. The plan is seen by many as part of the security policy of the United States and as primarily benefiting the business community and international investors. The small amounts of funding for social service projects do not address the structural roots of the poverty and violence driving migration. For example, projects to tackle the gang problem will never succeed in the current context of massive corruption in the police force and a non-functioning judicial system. Several people characterized U.S. support for the Alliance plan as less about stemming the tide of migration, and more about wanting to gain greater control in their country. They believe that only major changes in the political and economic policies guiding the country will be able to reverse the spiraling violence and deepening poverty.

Reliance on military solutions

The U.S. has had an enhanced military presence in Honduras over many decades, and U.S. support for the growing militarization of Honduran society is viewed by many with great alarm. They suspect that the drug trafficking and gang issues are being used as a pretext for a stronger U.S. military presence when, in fact, such a presence is unnecessary, given that Honduras has no external enemies with which to contend. The influx of military equipment is a major problem; some of these weapons end up in the hands of the police and even the gangs. As is the case in so many other parts of the world, deep-seated social, political and economic problems cannot be solved through military means.

Need for continued advocacy efforts

Our delegation heard many calls for on-going solidarity from the U.S. faith community. There is a need for U.S. citizens to learn more about the situation in Honduras, and to speak out for changes in U.S. policy, including urging the U.S. to strongly and publicly denounce human rights violations, particularly by security forces. Human rights groups, both Honduran and international, continue to issue reports which serve as useful resources for monitoring developments (e.g., see recent report by the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights <http://www.oas.org/en/iachr/reports/pdfs/Honduras-en-2015.pdf>).

We were encouraged to continue the following:

- Elevate concerns with Members of Congress about the human rights crisis in Honduras and U.S. policy (e.g., congressional letters such as the one Representative José Serrano sent to Secretary of State John Kerry on August 19, 2015)
- Advocate for the U.S. to end aid for Honduran security forces and support for the Alliance for Prosperity; to prioritize human rights over business interests; to demonstrate support for a CICIH; and to encourage the Honduran government to meaningfully address the root causes of migration (e.g., support land reform for small farmers)
- Foster people-to-people solidarity efforts, e.g. delegations like this one.

Signs of Hope

Even in the midst of tremendous violence and injustice, the people of Honduras live in hope. Human rights defenders and social justice advocates courageously continue to organize even as they are threatened because of their work. They say that if they don't stand up for their rights, no one else will. They draw strength from each other and build bridges across sectors. The Women's Forum, for example, brings together urban and rural women for mutual support while advocating on the difficult issues of femicide and forced disappearances. The women refuse to live in fear.

Social movements are also aware that they are at a critical moment and that their efforts could easily be derailed, given the formidable political and economic powers they are challenging. They work to raise consciousness around who is benefitting from all the chaos and violence that surrounds them, while daily struggling to rebuild the social fabric of their communities. They said they're encouraged by knowing that people in the United States are aware of their situation and offering prayers and advocacy efforts in solidarity with them.