

U.S. Complacency in Honduran Human Rights Abuses

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Between August and September 2010, Witness for Peace sent two delegations to Honduras in response to reports of continued politically motivated human rights violations under the post-coup government of Porfirio Lobo. The U.S. government immediately recognized the election that resulted in Lobo's presidency, despite the fact that the Organization of American States (OAS), the European Union and the Carter Center refused to even send election observers. Since the November 2009 elections, the U.S. State Department has pushed for international recognition of Lobo's government, most recently calling for Honduras' reintegration into the OAS.

The following report details the delegations' findings a year after the military coup and includes policy recommendations for the United States government as well as actions that U.S. citizens can take to stand in solidarity with the people of Honduras. WFP delegations heard testimony from civilians as well as human rights organizations in Tegucigalpa and in Southern Honduras. A list of individuals and organizations that the delegations met with follows the report. These testimonies included reports of increased hate crimes against the LGBTTTI community, high levels of femicides, continued police violence towards protesters, threats against political activists and journalists, assassinations and widespread impunity.

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Thousands of Honduran teachers went on strike and took to the streets in August to protest corruption in the government's handling of funds designated for teachers' pensions and a law that has been introduced to privatize high schools.

(Photo courtesy of Christine Goffredo)

I. Human Rights Abuses in Honduras

While Washington maintains that the current Honduran government has taken adequate steps to address the human rights situation, the international human rights community finds that serious violations continue to occur.¹ The push to legitimize the Lobo government and continue military aid to the Lobo administration illustrates the United States government's preference to overlook the crisis in Honduras.

Human rights activists describe the violence since January 2010 as systematic and targeted. Since the daily demonstrations that occurred immediately following the coup have slowed, a more insidious repression has taken hold as it often occurs off the streets and out of public view. Politically motivated assassinations are more difficult to link to the state when they are rarely investigated and police simply write them off as a result of gang violence or delinquency. However, when there are public demonstrations in the streets, police repression still closely follows. For example, police reportedly beat a group of teachers in demonstrations like the one photographed on Page 1 of this report.

Violence against Women

"In Honduras we have seen a step backwards of almost 40 years in the issue of human rights. We have seen all of our achievements as human rights organizations thrown into the trash. Instead of struggling for rights such as freedom of expression, the right to abortion, the right to contraceptives, we are now fighting for rights as basic as the right to life in this country." - Rosa Amelia Nuñez of the Collective of Feminist University Women (COFEMUN)

The growing rate of femicides in Honduras marks a disturbing trend. The number of femicides almost doubled in 2009, rising from 252 in 2008 to 405 the year of the coup. The rate of femicides under Lobo has already surpassed the 2009 total. In the first six months of 2010 407 femicides were recorded.² Of these murders, only 10 have been investigated.

Blanca Dole, executive director of COFEMUN and recognized women's rights activist, currently resides in New Jersey after being granted asylum in the United States for the persecution she's faced since the coup. Three days after the coup, Blanca was forced to flee her apartment and hide in the homes of friends out of fear for her personal safety. Her apartment and office were under permanent surveillance and she, along with other members of COFEMUN, have been followed, received threatening phone calls and had their photographs taken by unknown individuals. The daily intimidation continued until Blanca fled Honduras. Another member of COFEMUN also fled Honduras for her safety and now resides in Panama.

COFEMUN still faces persecution; their website has been locked and they receive suspicious phone calls from individuals enticing staff to incriminate themselves by supplying information on abortions or emergency contraceptives, which are both prohibited.

Before the coup, COFEMUN and other women's rights organizations celebrated Zelaya's legalization of emergency contraceptives only to



*Blanca Dole, executive director of COFEMUN, is one of two hundred political dissidents forced to flee Honduras after the coup.
(Photo courtesy of Blanca Dole)*

see the de facto government prohibit them once more, along with criminalizing sharing information about the “morning-after pill.” COFEMUN continues working for women’s rights. However, as Nuñez notes on the previous page, sadly that now means fighting for the right to stay alive.

In addition to the increase in femicides since the coup, sexual violence on the part of police and military remains a serious issue. The December 2009 Inter American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) report highlighted incidents of female protesters allegedly being raped, sexually assaulted and harassed by police or military during detention.³ In a more recent report issued June 2010, the IACHR finds that sexual violence by military and police continues under the new administration.⁴

Increased Hate Crimes against the LGBTTTI (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Transsexual, Transvestite and Intersex) Community

Another sector of the population targeted by the post-coup violence is the LGBTTTI community. Feminists and members of the sexual diversity movement believe that the Lobo administration fosters a hostile environment for those who do not conform to traditional norms. The lack of serious investigation into these hate crimes demonstrates that the state has not taken the steps needed to fully address these human rights violations.

The number of hate crimes against transgender women has spiked in the past year. Between 2004 and March 2009 seventeen assassinations of trans women were recorded and in the first four months of the coup alone there were thirteen.



After the coup there was also a spike in assassinations of gay rights activists. One high profile case was the murder of gay rights activist, Walter Orlando Trochez, a human rights defender who documented abuses against the LGBTTTI community and those living with HIV/AIDS, was shot and killed on December 13, 2009. An Inter American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) report published in December 2009 details that Walter Orlando Trochez was beaten by seven soldiers on July 8, 2009 as well. Witnesses heard the soldiers threaten to kill Trochez.

However, the case remains unresolved. Sadly, this trend continues under Lobo’s administration. As this report was going to print, another gay rights activist, Wilmer Alvarado, was found dead in his apartment in San Pedro Sula.

Assassinations and Threats against Journalists

This year has been the most dangerous for journalists in Honduran history: nine journalists were assassinated in the first eight months of 2010.⁵

Miguel Angel Vasquez Corrales, a nineteen year old community leader, has recently received death threats for his work at Zacate Grande’s small radio station. The station sits along the Gulf of Fonseca, where a violent land dispute has erupted between wealthy landowner Miguel Facusse and the farmers who have lived there for generations.

A week after the delegation's visit, on August 22, 2010, a violent confrontation erupted between Facusse employees and community members defending their rights to use the land. The employees were allegedly accompanied by police who stood by while community members were injured.

Vasquez is one of only a handful of remaining members from a group of seventeen youth that began the radio project in April 2010 in order to spread information to the community about the land in dispute.

In the doorway of the station, Vasquez recounted what had happened at the community radio station. On June 13, 2010 a group of approximately 300 police attempted to shut down the radio station by threatening to detain individuals working with the radio. After this incident, Vasquez and other youth began taking turns watching the station out of fear that it will be destroyed. Now Vasquez rarely goes anywhere besides his house or the radio station. Due to the series of death threats he began receiving at the end of August, he no longer walks alone. On September 20 an unmarked car stopped another community leader involved with the radio and pointed an automatic rifle at him. The unknown assailants did not shoot but the message was clear.

On October 5, Vasquez stated, "there are still threats, but we still continue with the radio." The threats that Miguel and others have received are not empty. Nahum Palacios, a journalist who covered a land dispute in the Bajo Aguan region between farmers and the same landowner, was assassinated in March 2010 by unknown gunmen. He had reportedly received threats before his murder.⁶ The chilling rise in assassinations of journalists not only adds to the gravity of the violence in Honduras, but limits freedom of expression.



Miguel Angel giving his testimony to a WFP delegation on the steps of La Voz de Zacate Grande.

(Photo courtesy of Jules Gimbrone)

I. United States Policy in the Year after the Coup

This year's Witness for Peace delegations found that violence and repression continue under the Porfirio Lobo government and that the United States government's ambivalence is exacerbating these conditions. While the U.S. Embassy and the State Department frequently express concern about human rights violations since the coup, U.S. policies don't back up the stated concerns. According to the U.S. government, the international community should not isolate Honduras. But many Hondurans human rights activists told Witness for Peace delegations that engagement with the international community will help end the repression and impunity.

The U.S. government has been too quick to push for reconciliation and legitimization of Lobo's presidency. The human rights advancements applauded by the U.S. government, such as the introduction of a human rights unit in the National Police, have not had any real affect for those who continue to live in daily fear or have lost their lives.

If the United States government continues to promote international recognition and legitimization of the Honduran government, decisive steps must be taken to address abuse and impunity. Without taking concrete actions to pressure Honduras to end human rights violations, the U.S. government's expressed concerns do not help the people of Honduras living under repression.

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Military Aid and the War on Drugs

One facet of U.S. support for the Honduran government is continued military aid. Some of this aid comes through the Mérida Initiative, a plan intended to fight drug trafficking in Mexico and Central America. The U.S. suspended some of this aid immediately after the coup, but reinstated it fully in February 2010.⁷ The U.S. embassy in Tegucigalpa and State Department attribute much of the violence in Honduras to gangs and drug related crime, echoing mainstream Honduran media reports. However, the delegations heard repeatedly from human rights activists that this discourse is misleading and deflects blame from the military and police.

The U.S. Department of State Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs stated in a March 2010 report that since the coup, the Honduran counternarcotics police and military units are now “focused more on internal security matters related to the political crisis and the suspension of U.S. assistance contributed directly to an increase in the flow and transshipment of drugs by narcotics traffickers.”⁸ The report does not explain exactly how the military and police address “internal security matters.” However, according to the May 2010 Inter American Commission on Human Rights report on Honduras, there are accounts of military and police committing human rights abuses that have yet to be investigated. The U.S. should not provide aid to a military that abuses human rights, despite policy officials’ justifications that the aid is to combat the drug war.

U.S. Economic Interests in Honduras

The U.S. continues to look for partners in Latin America willing to support neoliberalism and the free trade model. Many analysts believe that Zelaya’s economic policies scared the Honduran business elite and triggered the coup. Some of these policies include joining the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of America (an alternative to free trade initiated by Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez), raising the minimum wage, and threatening to limit concessions to the fast-food industry. The Honduran business elite, which played a key role in instigating and financially maintaining the coup, is intimately tied to U.S. and transnational corporate interests. Since the coup, Honduras withdrew from ALBA, attempts have been made to roll back Zelaya’s minimum wage hike, and laws have been proposed to privatize public resources such as rivers for dam projects. These policies are more favorable to U.S. business interests in Honduras and concord with the neoliberal economic policies favored by the United States.

International Recognition and Support for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission

The U.S. State Department is pushing for the reinstatement of Honduras into the Organization of the American States (OAS). The delegation heard from many individuals in Honduras that they fear the human rights situation will worsen once the current administration receives further international legitimization through this reintegration. Other nations in the OAS who remain opposed to the reinstatement of Honduras, such as Brazil and Argentina, argue that Honduras still has significant steps to take in addressing human rights abuses and political corruption before it should be reinstated. The U.S. government cites the Truth and Reconciliation Commission as one of the signs of progress.



*Military officers block the path of teachers' demonstrations in Tegucigalpa in August 2010; an example of one of the “internal security matters” that the military and police are involved in with the support of U.S. funding.
(Photo courtesy of Christine Goffredo)*

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission rises from the San Jose-Tegucigalpa Accords, an agreement signed by Zelaya and Micheletti (who took power after the coup on October 30, 2009) in order to form a government of national unity. The U.S. government cites the creation of this Commission as progress under Lobo's "unity" administration, despite the fact that government was ultimately created without Zelaya's participation. The delegations heard widespread criticism of and skepticism about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission from many human rights organizations in Honduras.

First of all, the Commission is only mandated to investigate the events surrounding the coup, not the human rights violations that occurred under the de facto regime of Roberto Micheletti or continue to occur under the Porfirio Lobo government. Secondly, the Honduran Supreme Court already granted amnesty to the top military generals that implemented the coup. Finally, the selection of Commission members – which was decided unilaterally by Lobo's administration - has been called into question by some of the human rights activists that spoke to the delegations. For example, one controversial member of the Commission is the rector of the UNAH who allowed police to enter the campus in August and September 2010 to break up the student protests. The altercation ended with police injuring a group of students on campus. Due to lack of confidence in the Commission, human rights leaders from organizations such as the Committee for Families of the Detained and Disappeared (COFADEH) have come together to form an alternative commission.

I. Recommendations

Following our research in Honduras we strongly urge:

The United States Government to:

- Suspend military aid until concrete actions have been taken to address human rights abuses committed by the military and police in Honduras;
- Vote against the reinstatement of Honduras into the Organization of the American States until there have been real marks of improvement in the human rights situation, including thorough investigations and prosecutions for crimes committed;
- Take a stronger public stance in denouncing current human rights violations and to question Honduras' supposed progress in this area while political assassinations and repression have not ceased;
- Re-examine the purpose and efficacy of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, considering criticisms from the Honduran human rights community, which has established a parallel body.

The U.S. and international media to:

- Dedicate more coverage to the human rights abuses and political repression taking place in Honduras;
- Support Honduran journalists who are being limited in their freedom of expression.

U.S. citizens to:

- Call on the U.S. State Department to denounce the human rights abuses occurring in Honduras and stop legitimizing the current administration until concrete progress has been made in addressing human rights abuses;
- Contact members of Congress to express concern over funding a military accused of serious human rights violations;

- Consider joining a Witness for Peace delegation to Honduras in 2011 to document human rights violations, provide protective accompaniment and share firsthand testimony in your community. Contact Ken Crowley for more information at 202-423-3402 or ken@witnessforpeace.org.
- Volunteer to provide protective accompaniment for individuals at risk in Honduras. Contact the Witness for Peace International Team for more information at Nicaragua@witnessforpeace.org

V. Appendix

Witness for Peace Delegations met with the following individuals and organizations:

- Association for the Development of the Zacate Grande Peninsula (ADEPZA)
- Berta Caceres, COPINH, Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations in Honduras
- Berta Oliva, COFADEH, Committee of Family Members of the Detained and Disappeared in Honduras
- COFEMUN, Collective of Feminist University Women
- COHEP (Council of Honduran Private Business)
- CARITAS Honduras
- Fernando Reyes, sexual diversity activist
- Hugo Llorens, U.S. Ambassador to Honduras
- Jari Dixon, lawyer
- Javier Espinal, Artists in Resistance
- Jose Pantoja, Victor Cocoy and Oscar Danilo Gutierrez (fired university workers on hunger strike at the UNAH)
- Juan Almeyda, CPTRT, Center for the Prevention, Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture Victims
- Luis Soza, COPEMH, College of Middle School Teachers of Honduras
- Miriam Flores, SITRAUNAH, Union of Workers of the National Autonomous University of Honduras
- Nectali Rodezno, Lawyer's Front
- Simon Hendrick, Deputy Chief of Mission in the US Embassy

¹ Human Rights Watch, "Honduras: Ongoing Attacks Foster Climate of Intimidation" (July 29, 2010) <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2010/07/29/honduras-ongoing-attacks-foster-climate-intimidation>

² Meeting with COFEMUN, September 8, 2010

³ Inter American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) "Honduras Human Rights and the Coup d'état," <http://cidh.org/countryrep/Honduras09eng/Chap.5.a.htm#G>.

⁴ Inter American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), "Observations of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights on its Visit to Honduras May 15-18 2010," <http://scm.oas.org/pdfs/2010/AGSC00258E-2A.pdf> Preliminary "Observations of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights on its Visit to Honduras May 15-18 2010"

⁵ Oleskyn, Veronika, "Watchdog: 52 journalists killed through August," Associated Press Sep 12, 2010
Committee to Protect Journalists, Nahum Palacios Arteaga, <http://cpj.org/killed/2010/nahum-palacios-arteaga.php>

⁵ US Department of State Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement, [International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, Volume I: Drug and Chemical Control](http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/137411.pdf), March 2010: <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/137411.pdf>

⁶ Committee to Protect Journalists, Nahum Palacios Arteaga, <http://cpj.org/killed/2010/nahum-palacios-arteaga.php>

⁷ Seelke, Clare Ribando, "Merida Initiative for Mexico and Central America: Funding and Policy Issues", Congressional Research Service, April 19, 2010: http://assets.opencrs.com/rpts/R40135_20100419.pdf

⁸ US Department of State Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement, [International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, Volume I: Drug and Chemical Control](http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/137411.pdf), March 2010: <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/137411.pdf>