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HONDURAS

New Military Recruitment Underway

After meeting with President Manuel Zelaya, his cabinet announced that it will gradually increase the number of troops in the Armed Forces by 40%, from 10,000 to 14,000 soldiers, during the coming year.

According to a press release distributed after the meeting, “[the cabinet] has ordered the Secretary of Defense to, through the Armed Forces, initiate a military-educational recruitment campaign for the purpose of integrating 4,000 young people [into the military] in ’06.”

The addition of new forces takes place at a time when the country’s efforts to curb rising trends of violence is a top priority. The government hopes to deter gang violence through a stronger military presence, as well as by offering an alternative to gang life for young adults.

“What we want is that instead of young people joining gangs, they enlist in the Armed Forces, where they have a world of opportunity,” said Gen. Romeo Vásquez, head of the Joint General Staff of the Armed Forces.

The nation’s Armed Forces, which, during the ‘80s, totaled 26,000 men, was reduced substantially by the administration of former President Carlos Reina (’94-’98). Reina eliminated obligatory military service in ’95 and made the police force into a separate organization, which at the time had 6,500 service members.

Soldiers Transferred to Police Duty

In the first round of changes to the National Police (PN), 250 soldiers from the Armed Forces were transferred from military service to their new posts as police officers. President Zelaya was on hand for the 23 Feb ceremony in which the first group of what will eventually be 1,000 former military members were reassigned to the PN.

This move, ordered by Zelaya, is also intended to help increase citizen security throughout the country. The majority of the new officers will be placed on patrols in Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula. Their

assignments will begin after a three-month training period at the Center of Police Instruction, located in La Paz.

Most of the new PN officers have prior experience working on police patrols because they had been reinforcing police forces during the implementation of the national security program known as “Safe Honduras.”

“I am sure that just as they have been excellent soldiers, they will also be excellent police officers,” said Gen. Romeo Vásquez. “The PN awaits them with open arms,” said Minister of Security Álvaro Romero.

Zelaya took the opportunity to point out the fact that these officers have been given the mandate to work in the service of the Honduran people. He criticized unspecified “powerful groups” who have been pressuring the PN to act in their favor, and alluded to past administrations that allowed these groups to continue exercising influence.

“These groups want to continue keeping this country in poverty, hungry and without medicine, in order to continue enjoying their privilege, including using all types of evils that you couldn’t even imagine,” Zelaya said. He did not give details about what “evils” he referred to in his speech.

The new officers will receive a monthly salary of 5,000 Lempiras (or about \$277), medical insurance, life insurance and a retirement plan.

Lost Government Funds?

On 31 Jan, the General Accounting Office (GAO) revealed that the government had “lost” nearly \$9.97 million of public funds due to poor management and illicit enrichment by public officials.

The news was made public on the third anniversary of the GAO as it presented its “Achievements of ’05” report with the objective of informing the public of all the most relevant activities and projects completed throughout the year. Two days later, the office of the District Attorney Against Corruption released a report making formal accusations of 12 incidents of illicit enrichment against 18 former public officials, all members of former President Ricardo Maduro’s administration.

The GAO has compiled a list of 185 incidents involving public officials who mishandled more than \$7 million. In addition, 65 cases regarding administrative responsibility were sent by the GAO to the Office of the General Prosecutor of the Republic, in which another \$1.53 million are involved.

It could be a long time before all of the cases are processed. The TSC is only responsible for reporting abnormalities in the audits it performs. It must then send its findings to the prosecutor’s office, which in turn decides whether or not to press charges.

In all of the cases denounced by the GAO thus far, only third and fourth level officials such as sub-managers, managers, and administrators and have been implicated. No former government ministers or other high level officials have been charged.

The Answer to the National Energy Crisis

The National Electrical Energy Company (ENEE) announced plans to lay off 1,200 of its 4,000 employees in the coming months in order to allow the company to recuperate financially from a \$601 million deficit and to avoid blackouts in parts of major cities throughout the country. In order to increase its productivity, ENEE will bring in an international auditing firm to assess its current situation and advise about how to prepare for the future. The ENEE will also purchase crucial equipment that will help make the company more productive and efficient.

Late last year ENEE reeled from high oil prices and had to ration energy on a regular basis in order to avoid a large-scale energy crisis (Vol. 24, No. 11). Since then, the national company has decided that a massive lay off of employees is the best way to reduce costs without raising consumer energy prices.

“Four years ago there were 2,800 employees and today there are more than 4,000,” said ENEE manager Juan Bendeck. “I believe that 2,800 employees will be sufficient in order to operate, so we will contract an international company to perform an audit in order to review the personnel and the strengths of ENEE as well as the future of energy [production and distribution].”

The planned audit will assess the warehouses of the ENEE and present an inventory of the company’s property. It has also accelerated plans for the purchase of new transformers to replace those that the ENEE considers to be deficient, and in their current state could provoke blackouts in both San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa.

—*Ian McLoone*