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HONDURAS

IDB Forgives Honduran Debt

On 16 Mar, the Inter-American Development Bank's (IDB) Board of Governors quietly announced that it had approved 100% debt relief for Bolivia, Guyana, Haiti, Nicaragua and Honduras on outstanding loan balances as of the end of fiscal year '04. The IDB will cover the debt relief from its Fund for Special Operations.

Under an agreement endorsed by representatives from its 47-member countries, the IDB will forgive approximately \$3.4 billion in principal payments and \$1 billion of future interest payments for the five countries. Honduras will receive approximately \$1.4 billion in IDB debt relief, which includes cancelled loan balances and interest payments.

The benefits will be retroactive to 1 Jan '07 because Honduras has already reached the "completion point" under the enhanced Initiative for Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC), an earlier debt relief program.

This decision represents an historical opportunity, a new beginning for the five countries," declared IDB president Luis Alberto Brown. "The agreement, endorsed by our members, will help to release resources to invest in education, health and other services of quality that their people need to overcome poverty," he said.

The annual IDB meeting, held this year in Tegucigalpa, was attended by leaders of the five countries benefited by the debt relief program, including Honduran President Manuel Zelaya Rosales (Liberal Party of Honduras). During the meeting Zelaya articulated his concern that the countries of Latin America should do more to combat poverty in the region and join together instead of squabbling over less important matters.

As in the past, there are conditions to this round of IDB debt relief. Honduras must apply the savings from debt relief to its Strategy to Reduce Poverty program (ERP). However, the ERP is not without its detractors. Eduardo Facussé, a leading Honduran businessman and member of the ERP's Consultative Council, said previously that nearly \$4 million in ERP funds were squandered as a result of corruption and wastefulness.

In addition, Agustín Núñez, the Spanish ambassador and pro-tempore president of the Group of Countries and Cooperative Organizations (known as G-16), a group of 10 countries and six lending institutions that created the ERP, felt that the savings could be used in a more effective manner than in previous years. He noted that the ERP has been effective in the past, but monies also should be applied toward creating a quality education system that would allow for a longer school year. The average length of the Honduran school year has been only 70 to 75 days.

Business of Kidnapping Grows in Honduras

The industry of kidnapping is apparently growing in Honduras. During the last 15 months there have been a reported 24 kidnappings with nine of them happening in Feb alone. In an investigation conducted by the daily *El Heraldo*, as of Jan '07 only two victims have been released and the police have prevented only a handful of kidnappings.

In Honduras, these types of crimes began to receive notoriety in '96 when a college student was kidnapped and her family paid a ransom of about \$400,000. In addition to the potential cost, most of the kidnappings are not reported to the police by family members for fear of losing their loved ones.

“Honduras is living in a climate of public, legal and social insecurity. We are living in a state of anarchy,” proclaimed National Commissioner of Human Rights in Honduras, Ramón Custodio, in a speech on 26 Mar.

Custodio was referring to the soaring rate of kidnappings in the country during the first three months of '07. Five women, six men and a 15-year-old are among the recent victims. The commissioner added that the desperation within the population demands a greater amount of security, but not a repressive policy. Despite the increase in kidnappings, Custodio maintained that Honduran authorities lack an immediate plan to face the problem and that President Manuel Zelaya is ultimately responsible for finding answers.

Human Rights Violations of Indigenous Groups

In early Mar, the Civic Council of Popular Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (COPINH) denounced the police for having burned the homes of 40 indigenous squatters near the town of La Paz, 80 km northwest of Tegucigalpa. “The owner of this land is demanding it back and justice is always on their side,” stated Salvador Zúniga, an advisor to COPINH. The indigenous group contends that the contested land is their ancestral home and plan to stay there. In addition to the 40 homes burned, the authorities torched the group’s coffee fields, which also seared 400 acres of forest.

In another area of Honduras, to the east along the Nicaraguan border, Nicaraguan Miskito Indian women in the fishing community of La Esperanza on the Tuk Tuk lagoon are alleging rape and other violations by members of the Honduran Armed Forces. They claim that at least eight area women have been sexually and physically abused by Honduran soldiers in recent weeks.

However, according to Ramiro Archaga, a Honduran Armed Forces spokesman, the women are fabricating the stories of abuse. He claimed that the women are prostituted by their men and are only now using this accusation of rape against the army in an attempt to get the soldiers off their land.

These types of incidents were reported at the annual meeting of the National Commission on Human Rights (CONADEH), held 6 Mar. According to commissioner Custodio, 9,390 reports of human rights abuse were presented in the '06 annual report. These serious human rights problems have been

exacerbated by a corrupt government and by murders and arbitrary executions by members of the National Police. Furthermore, the report referred to systematic violations of the peoples' right to basic education, healthcare and decent housing.

Some state institutions were on the list of human rights offenders including: the Ministry of Security and its dependencies, uniformed police and the National Police, non-uniformed investigative police in the Department for Criminal Investigations and the National Transit Police.

The American Dream Starts in Roatán

It appears that many Cuban and Chinese immigrants are looking for the American dream via Honduras' Caribbean coast, specifically on the island of Roatán. During the last several months hundreds of Cuban and Chinese nationals have been using the Honduran territory as a way to travel to the US via Mexico. Roatán, in the department of the Bay Islands, is located about 300 km north of Tegucigalpa. The island, a popular stopping point for cruise ships, has become the destination for many migrants trying to get into the US illegally.

During the month of Mar there were numerous arrests and detentions of both Cuban and Chinese nationals attempting to move through Honduras from the departments of the Bay Islands or Gracias A Dios. The most common routes are reportedly from Jamaica to Puerto Lempira in Gracias A Dios, or from Grand Cayman to the Bay Islands or from Belize.

Cuban migrants have reportedly paid around \$22,000, while the Chinese have paid \$55,000, to be smuggled into the US. According to the Director of Migration, German Espinal, over 500 Cuban nationals have entered Honduras illegally in the last year. Moreover, while illegal immigration is nothing new, Espinal stated that the number of Cuban migrants coming through Honduras is alarming because in the past 10 years only about 150 Cubans have entered the country illegally. There are no figures on Chinese migration through Honduras.

Normally the government of Honduras does not return illegal immigrants to their countries of origin, but makes an attempt to find a third country in which to place them. Because the same networks are implicated in trafficking minors for prostitution and sex slavery there is concern for the safety of foreign migrants. Furthermore, these networks are often involved in drug-trafficking as corresponding routes have been identified for both human and drug trafficking.

The Office of Corruption and Organized Crime has initiated an investigation into these recent cases. The Special Prosecutor Against Corruption, Henry Salgado, is looking at a ring of human traffickers based on the island of Roatán with a possible connection to the mayor of the island, Henry Dale Jackson, who is believed to have received payments for abetting the smuggling network.

The government also has suggested that the mayor's office has given aid and shelter to the illegal immigrants, which is against Honduran law. In an interview with the daily *La Prensa* on 27 Mar, Espinal said that, "he [the mayor] has already received a high sum of money for human trafficking," adding that, "this is a shameful act."

Adding more intrigue to these circumstances, on 30 Mar, 22 Cuban illegal immigrants disappeared from custody of the mayor's office. The Office of Migration has called the disappearances "an act of magic."

—Jason Howd