

# ***MESOAMERICA***

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## **HONDURAS**

### **Public School Teachers' Strike Continues Amidst Violence**

What began as a peaceful protest march in Tegucigalpa—the nation's capital—on 4 July by 8,000 public school teachers, who demanded that President Manuel Zelaya honor his '05 campaign promise to increase teachers' salaries, led to a massive national strike in all public schools in the country's 18 departments on 1 Aug, which affected about 61,000 teachers and 2.5 million students.

Police officers and military personnel were on hand in an effort to maintain order, but there were no initial reports of violent confrontations. However, on 9 Aug, things turned ugly in Tegucigalpa after demonstrators blocked several major highways and the police and military used force to clear the roads. The police used tear gas to disperse protestors, who responded with clubs and rocks, and at least 15 persons were injured: 13 policemen and two teachers.

On the first day of the nationwide strike, about 20,000 teachers gathered in Tegucigalpa to participate in a massive public protest to demand a decent pay increase and to denounce the government for its failure to live up to its commitments. Educators are demanding that the government and the Ministry of Education honor the 18 points stipulated in the Honduran Teachers' Statutes, approved by Congress in '97 but not honored by two successive governments, or by the current administration.

The teachers arrived in rented buses, private vehicles and public transportation and soon filled the campus of the Teachers' College, Universidad Pedagógica, on the south side of Tegucigalpa, where classes had been suspended and the installations turned into headquarters for the protestors. The heat was oppressive in the overcrowded gym where the leaders of the six different teachers' associations addressed the educators.

“Here we will remain in permanent session awaiting the call to dialogue with the government,” stated Edwin Oliva, one of the demonstrators' chief spokesmen. Oliva emphasized that the demonstrations so far had been peaceful and he hoped that the government would not respond with repressive measures.

On 6 June, the teachers' unions had emphatically rejected the government's proposal for an \$0.11 per hour wage increase, and demanded a pay raise of \$1.16 per hour for the average teacher who currently earns \$298 monthly (see Vol. 25, No. 7).

President Zelaya stated in a press conference on 1 Aug that the nation was on the brink of anarchy because of the frequent strikes, boycotts and blockage of roads by all kinds of protestors—teachers, doctors, nurses, public employees, truck and taxi drivers, etc. Zelaya has been pressuring Congress to pass a law that would punish those arrested for blocking public roads with a five-year prison sentence, and without bail while awaiting trial.

Finally, on 6 Aug, Zelaya agreed to begin negotiations with the educators, despite his earlier refusal to talk with strike leaders until the teachers had returned to their classrooms. But, he insists that his hands are tied because of restrictions imposed by IMF accords, which limit the State's capacity to raise salaries more than 11% in the public sector. The government maintains that the educators want a 33% increase in salary, which would represent about \$368 million in next year's budget, whereas the teacher's unions argue that the increase would amount to only about \$42 million.

After 14 hours of negotiations between government and union representatives, it appeared that a tentative agreement had been reached by noon on 8 Aug. However, union leaders, dissatisfied with the government's proposal, decided to call on their supporters to begin blocking major highways on the south side of Tegucigalpa, which led to a violent confrontation with civil authorities during the afternoon.

Any government proposal would have to be discussed and ratified by union members before the strike would end. The results of this process are pending; meanwhile, the strike continues.

### **Healthcare System under the Microscope**

The Honduran healthcare system has come into focus lately because of growing discontent about irregularities in the purchase of pharmaceuticals, insufficient medical supplies and staffing, and generalized corruption. This culminated in the resignation of the Secretary of Health, Orisón Velásquez in late July.

During his six months in office, Velásquez was inundated with reports that there were insufficient supplies of medicines in the public hospitals. The exact percentage of deficit varied; different organizations reported different figures. However, despite Velásquez' claims that the hospitals were always 90% or more supplied, it was evident that this was not the case. In Feb, Hospital Escuela, in Tegucigalpa, did not have sufficient supplies to treat a 14-year-old boy for hemophilia and he died. The deficiency of drugs was blamed on poor administration, corruption, thievery and lack of funds.

During the next few months, several reports revealed that Velásquez was behind in placing orders for pharmaceuticals. Consequently, the acquisition of pharmaceuticals was delegated to the UN Development Program and the Roman Catholic Church, among other organizations, to increase transparency. However, there are still reports of shortages in hospitals.

Despite the recent rumors of corruption, the healthcare system has always had its problems. Dr. Oscar

Ponce from the Colegio Médico de Honduras, which is a voluntary association of doctors, reports that there have never been enough medicines in public hospitals. He stated that the Colegio Médico plans to create a structured proposal for achieving better healthcare.

For those who can afford it, private healthcare is available; but the majority of people living in Honduras have to use state hospitals, such as Hospital Escuela in Tegucigalpa. However, another healthcare issue is that, in rural parts of Honduras such as Lempira and Gracias a Dios, access to state hospitals is difficult.

Yenny Meza is currently the Secretary of Health; and, although it is too early to know exactly what impact she will have, she certainly has made her presence known. During early Aug, Meza ordered that thousands of contracts of healthcare employees be terminated because of over-spending by Velásquez.

### **Polemic in Congress about Alleged Irregularities in Health Ministry**

Angry words were exchanged between legislators of the ruling Liberal Party and members of the opposition National Party on 27 July, regarding a motion to investigate alleged irregularities in the Ministry of Health, which was prompted in part by the recent resignation of the Secretary of Health, Orizón Velásquez, and by rumors of corruption and mismanagement.

Congressman Antonio César Rivera Callejas (National Party) presented a motion in a plenary congressional session to create a special commission to investigate irregularities in the Ministry of Health, including the direct purchase of medicine and the hiring of temporary and permanent personnel without adequate budget approval. His motion was supported by members of his own party, as well as by members of Democratic Unification, Christian Democrat Party, and the National Innovation and Unity parties.

After discussion, the motion was brought to a vote and was defeated by a simple majority of mostly Liberal Party legislators, despite an almost unanimous vote by other members of Congress. This led to an angry exchange between Rodolfo Irias Navas (National Party) and José Alfredo Saavedra (Liberal Party): Irias accused Liberal Party members of not wanting to investigate corruption in their government, while Saavedra defended his party's honor and the validity of the majority vote.

—*Clifton L. Holland*