

MESOAMERICA

Volume 26, Number 8, August 2007



HONDURAS

President Zelaya asks US to Treat Migrants Humanely

During a meeting with US Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice on 10 July in Washington, DC, Honduran President Manuel Zelaya Rosales requested that US authorities deal more humanely with hundreds of thousands of Honduran immigrants living in the US, of whom an estimated 40% are undocumented.

According to Roberto Flores, the Honduran Ambassador to the US, “After President George W. Bush’s immigration reform bill failed to prosper in Congress, President Zelaya came to deliver a message and to find out about the condition of Hondurans in this country.”

“We asked that immigrants be treated humanely, so that family members are not separated, and we received a favorable response,” Flores added.

So far during '07, the US government has deported almost 40,000 Honduras who entered the US illegally. “This is a dramatic situation,” stated Honduran consular official Ramón Valladares during a 12 July press conference. “And we expect that this figure will double before years’ end, because US immigration authorities are deporting at least 200 of our fellow citizens daily,” he added.

The majority of the deported Hondurans were living in the cities of Washington- DC, New York, Cleveland, Chicago, Kansas City, Los Angeles, Houston, Omaha and Minneapolis, according to Valladares.

Since '97, the US and Mexico have deported 310,543 undocumented Hondurans from their national territories. The Honduran government estimates that every 15 minutes a Honduran begins his migration journey to the US without the required legal documents, but only about 17% of those who try are successful.

Although an estimated 50,000 Hondurans request a US visa yearly, only about 10,000 receive one from US consular officials in Honduras. More than one million Hondurans live in the US, and about 400,000 are there illegally, according to Honduran authorities.

This situation is critical for the 7.5 million Hondurans living in their home country, as nearly 30% of the economy depends on the \$3 billion in “remesas” (money-transfers) that their relatives living in the US send them yearly from their hard-earned wages.

During '06, an estimated 90,000 Hondurans were deported from the US and Mexico, which “increased unemployment and poverty in the homeland,” stated Ambassador Flores.

Zelaya Taunts US Support by Visiting Nicaragua

President Zelaya of the Liberal Party, after trying to win favors with President Bush and Condoleezza Rice during his recent trip to Washington, DC, seemed to taunt the Bush administration by traveling to Nicaragua on 19 July to meet with presidents Daniel Ortega of Nicaragua and Hugo Chávez of Venezuela, both of whom are on Mr. Bush's black list.

Zelaya made the trip to Nicaragua at the invitation of President Ortega to participate in a celebration of the 28th anniversary of the triumph of the Marxist-led Sandinista Revolution ('63-'79), which brought Ortega to power in July '79 despite the concerted efforts of the US government to keep that from happening.

Zelaya's presence at this well-publicized celebration prompted Charles Ford, the US Ambassador to Honduras, to declare: “I believe that the [Zelaya] government, in a very clear way, has defined its interests, has defined the persons with whom it wants to associate.”

Enrique Ortez Colindres, a former Honduran Ambassador to the UN, stated that Zelaya “was extolling an anti-Yankee government and provoking division in Central America.”

Even worse, according to some observers, Zelaya seemed very much at home with socialists Ortega and Chávez, both of whom are considered political enemies of the US government and its neoliberal and neocolonial foreign policy in Latin America.

In his speech at this celebration, Zelaya declared: “It is important that Central America maintain a united path as the only way to confront those who want to sow seeds of hate, destruction and division among our people, of those who want to keep us in poverty and ignorance,” in a clear reference to the neoliberal policies of the Bush administration.

After hearing about Ortez' comments above, Zelaya stated: “I have good relations with the US, I have excellent relations Mexico, South America and Europe, and I am not going to favor one foreign interest above the interests of Hondurans.”

Zelaya further irritated the Bush administration on 17 July, when he appointed lawyer Jorge Arturo Reina as the new Honduran Ambassador to the UN. Reina, a well-known leftist politician and a person friend of Fidel Castro and Hugo Chávez, had his US visa cancelled by the US government in '87

because of his alleged “terrorist” ties. He is the current Minister of Government and Justice, formerly served as a Liberal congressman and as Vice President of the Legislative Assembly; also, he is the brother of former President Carlos Roberto Reina (’94-’98 of the Liberal Party), who died in ’03.

Protesters Demand End to Open-Pit Mining

On 17 July, hundreds of protesters blocked major highways in different parts of the country to demand a new mining law that would prohibit “open-pit” mining and the use of cyanide, mercury and other toxic substances in all mining activities, which cause damage to the environment.

According to news reports, dozens of protesters were injured when the police forcibly removed them from the blocked roadways. “They attacked us with batons and several were injured, and 10 demonstrators were arrested here,” stated Salvador Zúñiga, who led one of the protests in Siguatepeque, located about 120 km north of the capital city, Tegucigalpa. Zúñiga represents the Coordination Council of Campesino and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras. Similar incidents occurred in other parts of the country as the police cleared the highways of protesters.

Police spokesperson Héctor Mejía confirmed that hundreds of protesters were removed from the roadways “because they were violating the Constitution” by blocking traffic on the nation’s busiest highways, but he did not say how many people were injured or detained in these incidents.

Francisco Machado, president of the Association of Non-Governmental Organizations, stated: “The Civic Alliance for Democracy demands a new mining law; we do not want reforms because these are just cosmetic changes to the existing law.” He claims that 34% of the national territory has been given in concessions to mining companies, which presents many risks to the environment and to the health of local communities.

Machado argued that open discussions should be held in the affected communities to decide if the people want the mines to operate there or not, and to require that the mining companies adhere to existing environmental protection regulations. He also stated that the mining companies should pay the State 15% of their profits, rather than the 1% currently required, and that they also should pay local municipal taxes.

Police Agents Denounced as Kidnappers

The Committee for the Defense of Human Rights in Honduras (CODEH) denounced, on 27 July, that an estimated 180 police officials are involved in criminal gangs that commit assaults, kidnappings and other crimes.

This denunciation followed the arrest on 26 July of Police Inspector Ronald Maradiaga, an alleged member of a criminal gang that kidnapped Johana Vigil, a 22-year-old student, who was freed on 25 July after a ransom was paid.

Maradiaga was apprehended by police investigators after another member of the criminal gang was arrested and confessed everything, including Maradiaga’s involvement in the kidnapping.

A police spokesman later admitted that Maradaiga was arrested in Mar for letting a vehicle loaded with cocaine pass through an inspection point, but that he was released from custody due to a lack of evidence.

Vice Minister of Security Jorge Rodas stated that Maradaiga “will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law” if found guilty of the charges against him.

—*Clifton L. Holland*