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HONDURAS

“Heavy-Hand” Approach to Crime Fails

Despite a recent offensive by government authorities, violent crime continues to rise in Honduras (Vol. 25, Nos. 9, 10, 11).

On 31 Aug, President Manuel Zelaya launched an offensive called “Operation Thunder,” employing thousands of police officers, military troops and private security guards to respond to criticism that his administration was not doing enough to combat crime. Although authorities arrested more than a hundred suspected delinquents during the operation’s first few days, kidnappings and murders have increased since then.

In the first eight months of ’06, there were 18 reported kidnappings in Honduras, as opposed to only three in ’05. In the month of Sep alone, there were four reported kidnappings.

According to studies released by Casa Alianza (the Latin American branch of the US Covenant House) and the Observatory of Violence, someone is violently killed in Honduras every three hours. By June, the country’s murder rate was already 23.1 homicides for every 100,000 people, compared to the yearly world average of 8.8 per 100,000, and violence has increased since then. In the first quarter of ’06, there was an average of 230 homicides a month, but by the third quarter that figure had reached 251 monthly.

Honduran Human Rights Commissioner Ramón Custodio, in an interview with *Interpress News Service*, said that the majority of the murders are extra-judicial executions of minors. In Sep, 30 suspected gang members between the ages of 15 and 22 were killed, for which no one has been prosecuted.

Many human rights advocates have been concerned about the training and accountability of private security guards working with Operation Thunder. In a report by the Honduran newspaper, *Proceso*, the coordinator of the Committee of Families of the Disappeared and Detained in Honduras, Bertha Oliva, said that most of the owners of these private security businesses have been members of death-squads. She specifically mentioned Alexander Hernández and Billy Joya, who have been accused of being directors of the infamously brutal Battalion 3-16. Private security guards outnumber police officers by at least 4 to 1 in the country.

Meanwhile, President Zelaya admitted in a press conference in Sep that organized crime had penetrated the police force itself to such a degree that it made reform difficult.

Transparency Law Approved

On 22 Nov, after much debate, congress approved the Transparency Law, which gives citizens access to government and public records.

The legislation not only provides access to federal records, but also requires municipal governments as well as all non-governmental organizations that administer public funds to make their records available. The law has checks, which protect individual privacy and restrict information when the damage it could cause outweighs public interest.

Congress also approved the creation of the Institute of Access to Public Information (IAPI), which will be responsible for regulating transparency processes and facilitating access of information to citizens. Normally, the public will direct information requests to the relevant departments or agencies, but the IAPI will act as an intermediary if necessary.

The make-up of the IAPI was one of the most contentious points of debate. Eventually it was agreed that the president, the Congress, the national human rights commission and the general accounting office will each propose two representatives, and Congress will elect three commissioners from these candidates.

The new law is a response to pressure from the public as well as foreign governments that the Honduran government combat corruption, particularly in regard to funding anti-poverty campaigns. As a Highly-Indebted Poor Country, Honduras has received debt cancellations from donors known as the G-16—made up of industrialized nations and multilateral financial organizations such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB)—with the caveat that a part of the money saved be used for poverty reduction. But citizen's groups like The Social Forum on Debt and Honduran Development (FOSDEH) have protested the government's lack of accountability in making these funds available. FOSDEH recently published a 12-page newspaper-insert called "National Reality," which criticized the current and former government administrations for misuse and lack of transparency in distributing debt-forgiveness funds.

On 21 Nov, just after the IDB approved a new debt cancellation for Honduras of up to \$1 billion (the exact figure will not be available until Jan), US Ambassador Charles Ford and Spanish Ambassador Augustín Nuñez met with congressional leaders, demanding transparency in poverty-reduction spending and lobbying for congress to pass the Transparency Law.

Two days later, the 38-article legislation was approved. According to congressional Vice-President Lizzy Flores, the Honduran law is "more open than laws in Mexico, Canada, and the US and will generate better citizen participation."

Although the law will not officially take effect for a year, congress is asking public agencies and governmental departments to begin complying with information requests now. The World Bank has agreed to loan Honduras \$380,000 to create the infrastructure necessary to enact the legislation.

Microcredit for Hondurans

On 12 Nov, Zelaya was an opening speaker at the World Microcredit Summit in Halifax, Canada. Borrowing words from Honduran poet Roberto Sosa, he said, “The poor are many, and for that reason, it is impossible to forget them.”

Zelaya said that the government will make \$50 million available for micro-loans in Honduras, and that by the end of '06, new funds will be allocated to create a vice-ministry dedicated exclusively to small businesses.

Microcredit is the extension of very small loans to people who are unemployed or living in poverty and who lack collateral and credit history to secure regular bank loans. It has enabled extremely impoverished people (many women) to create a means of self-employment and generate income.

Zelaya and other world leaders joined Prof. Muhammad Yunus, who recently won the Nobel Peace Prize for his pioneering work with microcredit in Bangladesh, in inaugurating the event. Representatives of international banks, UN agencies, and more than 2,000 delegates from around the world attended the international conference focusing on the eradication of poverty. Zelaya extended an invitation that the next World Microcredit Summit be held in Honduras.

Investment for *Campesino* Projects

Honduran peasants have won \$15.8 million in federal investments, which will support agricultural development over the next three years.

On 22 Nov, the Secretary of Livestock and Agriculture (SAG) designated these funds for projects that include palm oil production, ranching, beekeeping, irrigation, grain storage and rural credit banks. About \$5.7 million was assigned to specific projects, to be paid in increments from '07 to '09; peasant federations will receive \$635,000 in institutional support beginning Dec '06; and the government will create a commission to allocate the remaining \$9.5 million.

The SAG announcement is the culmination of several months of negotiating between *campesino* groups and the government. On 30 Aug, the Coordinating Council of Peasant Organizations, the National Peasant Center and the Honduran Peasant Women's Federation met with President Zelaya and defined the needs that the allocation of funds eventually addressed. In late Oct, these groups united 47 peasant organizations to pressure the government, threatening massive protests in the capital if the government did not take action on agricultural reform. Finally, in Nov, representatives from the federal agricultural sector signed an agreement with the peasant organizations that established the new agricultural investment plan.

—Honna Veerkamp