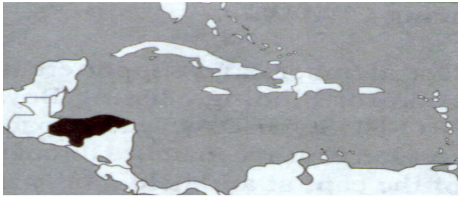


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HONDURAS

Manuel Zelaya Sworn in As President

Manuel Zelaya of the Liberal Party (PL) was sworn in as president of Honduras on 27 Jan, pledging to complete his campaign promises and govern “with honor and transparency.”

Zelaya acted immediately on one of his promises by signing the Law of Citizen Participation during his inaugural speech, describing it as “a law that gives participation to the people to keep watch over the government so that corruption is ended in Honduras.”

In a stadium filled with 45,000 people, Zelaya announced that he would confront the nation’s grave economic and social problems with valor. “We are beginning today the good governance of Honduras so that the poor have options in the development of the nation.” He added that “we will have a small government, but a great and developed nation that will attend to the excluded classes.”

As part of his small government plan, Zelaya ordered 30% of administrative employees to be fired. Zelaya is the seventh president to be democratically elected in Honduras since ending of the military dictatorship ‘80.

Gangs and Government Call for Dialogue as Violence Continues

In an unprecedented move, imprisoned members of one of the biggest gangs in Honduras, Mara Salvatrucha, painted a mural in the National Penitentiary asking the Honduran people for forgiveness. The 266 members of Mara Salvatrucha who are inmates in the National Penitentiary, along with the 167 inmates from the rival Mara 18, said that they are ready to talk with the new government.

“That says it all,” said Mara Salvatrucha member Juan Carlos Ochoa, pointing at the mural. “We are proposing peace. After we make an agreement, if they catch us committing crimes they should put us in jail, but not just for having a tattoo.”

Under the tough anti-gang law created under the last president, Ricardo Maduro, a person can be arrested for “illicit association” and jailed for up to 10 years for having a tattoo with gang symbols.

“We already asked for a dialogue and we’re hoping that the commission we have named meets with the government people in the next few days,” stated “Lucifer,” an imprisoned leader of Mara 18.

Two days prior to the publication of the gangs' request in the Honduran daily *La Prensa*, newly appointed Minister of Security Alvaro Romero announced that the government would look for alternatives to Maduro's zero-tolerance approach towards gangs. Romero said that he had contacted several gang leaders to inform them that they could have a place within Honduran society, as long as they are willing to lay down their arms.

Romero's announcement does not seem to indicate that the new administration will be easy on gangs, however. The day after Romero announced the government's desire to reintegrate gang members into society, his spokesperson announced that police would be redoubling their anti-gang efforts under orders from Romero. The increased police activity is in response to the killing of police officer Percy Castro, who was shot by a presumed member of Mara Salvatrucha on 23 Jan.

Despite the calls for dialogue and peace from both gangs and government, gang violence continued. Gang members were thought to be responsible for the death of a 15-year-old boy who was doused with gasoline and set on fire, as well as for the murder of a hotel administrator and her daughter for refusing to pay a "war tax" to a gang.

The national human rights commissioner, Ramón Custodio, publicly volunteered to mediate a discussion between gang members and government officials. "In my role as human rights commissioner, I am obligated to listen to all the citizens of this country, and if the young people who belong to gangs want to talk, they must be heard."

Stalemate in Congress

Congress fell into a weeklong stalemate in mid-Jan when party alliances prevented majority rule in the election of a directive board. The crisis finally ended on 19 Jan, when the leftist Innovation and Unity Party (PINU) broke off its alliance with the conservative Liberal Party (PL). Robert Micheletti of the conservative National Party (PN) was then voted president of Congress.

Alliances among the five political parties represented in Congress had divided the 128-person legislative body into two 64-person factions.

Congress officially began the '06 session on 25 Jan. Its first act was to approve a law intended to promote transparent government and prevent corruption, one of Honduras's most pressing problems. As expected, President Zelaya confirmed his signature on the bill on 27 Jan during his first speech as president.

Honduran Electricity Mired in Troubles

The National Company of Electrical Energy (ENEE) is mired in troubles, from overwhelming debt to insidious corruption.

The new manager of ENEE, Juan Bendeck, announced on 18 Jan that half of ENEE's annual losses of \$160,000 are due to embezzlement and altered equipment. "Speaking frankly, examples of corruption exist at all levels of ENEE.... There have been serious situations, shameless thefts, rigged readings and meters that have false numbers and names."

On 30 Jan, an ENEE computer program was found to have been manipulated to erase the names of some wealthy clients and reduce the electricity bills of others. The bill-altering program was

discovered after the new government declared an “energy emergency” on 31 Jan to investigate ENEE losses.

Amnesty International Defends Three Prisoners of Conscience

Amnesty International issued a report on 19 Jan charging that the imprisonment of three indigenous leaders was a politically motivated attempt to obstruct their efforts to secure communal land titles for their communities. The three men have allegedly been tortured in prison and pressured to sign admissions of guilt.

Two of the jailed activists, brothers Marcelino and Leonardo Miranda, were sentenced on 16 Dec '03 for a murder committed in '01. The third, Feliciano Pineda, was charged with the same murder—among other crimes—on 6 Jun '05. Amnesty International reports that the evidence against the men was fabricated in retaliation for their community activism.

The three men are affiliated with the Civic Council of Indigenous and Popular Organization (COPINH). COPINH's campaign for communal land titles has led to clashes with landowners who want to use the contested land for logging, coffee growing and cattle ranching.

In response to the Amnesty International report, human rights commissioner Ramón Custodio denied that there had been foul play and stated that justice had been served in the cases of the three men.

—Emily Heinlein