

# *MESOAMERICA*

*Volume 24, Number 1, January 2005*

---



## **HONDURAS**

### **Bus Massacre Enrages Hondurans**

On Dec 23, a public bus full of mainly women and children who were returning home from Christmas shopping was fired upon by three men armed with AK-47's and an M-16 assault rifle. Of the 57 bus passengers, 28 were killed and 29 were injured in the bloody massacre. The event took place in the residential district of San Isidro de Chamelecón in San Pedro Sula. After their murder spree, the assassins attached an enormous piece of paper to the back window of the bus with an ironic message that spoke out against re-implementing the death sentence that lawmakers abolished from Honduras in 1957 (Vol. 23, No. 9).

Angered by the carnage, President Ricardo Maduro, who has adopted a no-nonsense policy toward this type of violence, responded to the massacre by saying he will ask for a life sentence in prison for the assassins. "If there are people willing to be savages and animals ... they will feel a hard hand, ultra and super strong," assured Maduro.

Security officials responded immediately by mobilizing 1,200 police officers in a search for the criminals responsible, while an additional 1,300 agents, including military troops, beefed up security operations in and around San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa, the nation's capital. Within four days, officials caught the three alleged assassins who reportedly confessed to their direct participation in the massacre. All three are members of the gang known as the "Mara Salvatrucha" (MS).

During the first days of Jan, police captured two alleged intellectual authors of the massacre: Juan Carlos Pantera Miralda (alias "La Pantera") and Juan Bautista Jiménez Mejía (alias "Él Pájaro"). Both are members of MS. With more than 100,000 members, the MS and Mara-18 control the poor districts of the main Honduran cities.

The violent crimes committed by MS and Mara-18 causes many Hondurans to live under constant fear of attack. According to a telephone survey conducted by the Ministry of Defense and turned to President Maduro on Dec 28, 98% of the population supports the presence of the military in the streets. Furthermore, the study stated that 93% consider that such military and police presence contributes to the reduction of criminal activity. If such statistics prove to be accurate, the recently increased presence of

the army in the streets of San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa on Dec 28 is important in giving Hondurans an increased sense of security.

A major and immediate question for investigators was where the assassins obtained their firearms. The answer came less than one week after the massacre when police identified a Honduran Army captain as the person responsible for selling the AK-47's and M-16. The captain, whose identity remains undisclosed, received \$1,700 for the guns. In response to the reported arrest, Minister of Defense Federico Brevé told reporters: "We have the responsibility to investigate that report, which damages the image of the Armed Forces; and if some military person was involved, he will be dealt with to the full extent of the law."

However, in the case of the bus massacre, corruption is only secondary to the issue of organized gang violence, which, among other negative consequences, has contributed greatly to deaths by firearms. This has many Hondurans concerned. In Tegucigalpa, Roman Catholic Cardinal Oscar Andrés Rodríguez made a call to President Maduro and to the Minister of Security, Oscar Álvarez, to ask why they have not implemented and enforced the Law of General Disarmament. This law punishes with a prison term without bail those who carry illegal weapons. The Cardenal, like many Hondurans, is tired of the constant barrage of deaths due to gang shootings.

### **CAFTA on the Horizon?**

Honduras expects to approve the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) in the days following its primary presidential elections on 20 Feb. According to legislator Leonel Ayala, recent conversations between the president of Congress and representatives of major political parties show that enough support now exists to ratify CAFTA. This would make Honduras the second nation after El Salvador to ratify the agreement.

The director of the National Association of Industries, Guillermo Matamoros, maintains that CAFTA will bring more jobs to Honduras. Supporters of the agreement are optimistic that ratification will attract more *maquilas* (drawback industries) to the country and provide over 130,000 new jobs, which means that almost a million Hondurans will benefit indirectly. The Honduran Association of Maquiladores (AHM) projects that this industry will provide 15,000 new jobs by the end of '05 alone. The president of the AHM affirmed that four companies have already promised to make investments in the textile industry, three from Brazil and one from the US.

In addition, CAFTA will give a commercial advantage to Honduras for the exportation of tilapia, shrimp, jalapeños and other products to the US. Supporters of CAFTA are eager to ratify it because they argue that with the expiration of the Caribbean Basin Initiative in '07, and the ending of the system of textile tariffs imposed on China underway, Honduras will not be as competitive in the world market if it cannot export its products tariff free to the US.

Those who oppose CAFTA voice concerns about human rights abuses in the *maquila* industry within the country among other issues. In general, the opposition believes that the negotiators who drew up the free trade agreement did not create a fair agreement for everyone involved (Vol. 23, No. 1).

## **Tourism on the Rise**

Tourism generated \$411 million in '04, a 10% increase from the previous year. This makes Honduras the country with the highest growth in the tourism industry in all of Latin America for the year '04. The country's mountains, pristine forests, picturesque hillside villages and 400 miles of beach along the Caribbean, are among the reasons the *Washington Post* chose Honduras as one of the top 10 tourist destinations in the world last year. Currently, tourism is the country's third largest source of income.

Minister of Tourism Thierry de Pierrefeu Midence explained that the arrival of cruise ships to the island of Roatán was one of the main reasons for the increase in tourism. Since '01, Honduras has approved 57 new tourist projects. The country has an ambitious strategy to further develop the industry in the coming years. The largest immediate tourist project, the "Micos Beach & Golf Resort," consists of building seven hotels, 168 country estates, and a shopping mall in Tela Bay at a cost of \$300 million during the next several years. In addition, the administration is focusing on increasing tourist security, the effective promotion of national attractions in regional and international markets, and the creation of a fund to encourage increased investment in small and medium businesses throughout the country.

Besides producing income for the country, tourism generated an estimated 8,533 more jobs in '04 than the previous year, for a 10% increase in employment in the industry. "To reach the goal of reducing poverty, we obviously need sustainable economic growth that includes all sectors... [Tourism] is a way of creating the resources that we need," said President Maduro.

—*Paul Lubliner*