

# *MESOAMERICA*

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## **HONDURAS**

### **Alarm About Recent Murders of Six Lawyers**

In mid-Dec, human rights advocates and attorney's associations expressed their outrage and alarm over a series of assassinations of lawyers in Honduras during the past three months. Since Oct '06, six lawyers have been murdered and a seventh fled the country after receiving death threats.

Some observers, including Dr. Ramón Custodio (the National Human Rights Commissioner), believe that the murders were carried out by contracted hit men. All of the lawyers had received death threats before they were assassinated, but no specific motives or suspects have been identified yet by police investigators.

Custodio denounced that a series of death threats also had been made to law professionals and staff members of the Association for a More Just Society (ASJ), including Jesús Martínez Suazo (a former judge and Law School dean) who abandoned Honduras on 15 Dec to seek safety elsewhere. ASJ has been actively investigating the assassination of several attorneys who were involved in criminal cases against organized-crime figures.

President Manuel Zelaya of the Liberal Party publicly stated that he thinks the deaths are part of a campaign by the opposition National Party (PN) to make his administration seem incapable of controlling public security in the nation. However, most family members and friends of the victims, including the president of the Honduran Attorneys' Association, disagree and are demanding that further investigations be conducted to find out who is responsible for these crimes and why.

On 17 Dec, former President Rafael Leonardo Callejas of the National Party told reporters that the recent assassination of lawyers has nothing to do with an organized campaign by opposition parties to discredit the current government, rather "it is a reflection of the national reality, of the existing insecurity, and therefore the subject should not be treated superficially; we have to find solutions..." However, he denounced the Zelaya administration for not giving the fight against delinquency the proper attention that it deserves.

Custodio has brought the murders of these lawyers and related death threats against other attorneys to the attention of the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights. Also, in a letter to President

Zelaya on 14 Dec, Custodio expressed his “profound concern for the elevated and uncontrollable levels of criminal violence in Honduras.”

### **Municipal Officials Accused of Corruption**

According to *Diario La Prensa* on 5 Dec, an audit carried out by the Superior Tribunal of Accounts (TSC) uncovered the misappropriation of \$53 million in government funds during the last five years. Irregularities were found in the bookkeeping of four municipalities: San Pedro Sula, La Ceiba, Puerto Cortez and Tegucigalpa.

The alleged crimes range from civil offenses, such as paying personal cell phone bills, gasoline expenses and trips outside the country, to more serious crimes, such as obtaining unauthorized bank loans, falsification of public documents, misuse of public funds, signing illegal contracts, abuse of power and complicity to commit fraud.

After concluding the TSC audit, several current and former municipal mayors and their associates were formally accused of civil and criminal offenses. The TSC formally notified each municipality as well as every person accused in the audit document.

The municipality of San Pedro Sula was found to have to the most irregularities and the largest amount of money misused, more than \$9 million. The five-year period audited includes the administration of Mayor Oscar Kilgore as well as the first year of the current administration of Rodolfo Padilla Sunseri.

On 11 Dec, a criminal court ordered arrest warrants for ex-mayor Kilgore and four of his close colleagues on the charges of fraud, misappropriation of public funds and falsification of public documents. Kilgore and the former director of Communications and Strategies, Serapio Umanzor, turned themselves in shortly after the warrants were issued and proclaimed their innocence of all charges. A trial is expected to start as soon as all accused parties have been located and legally notified. Kilgore has been suspended from his current city council position until the trial is completed.

### **More Money Available to Fight Crime**

The approved national budget for '07 grants the Ministry of Public Security a 25% increase over the '06 budget to fund continued efforts to combat delinquency in Honduras.

The Secretary of Security has proposed several goals for '07, including a reduction in crimes against persons, of which 5,641 cases were reported in '06, as well in crimes and violence carried out by gang members. He also aims to reduce traffic accidents—8,254 cases were reported in '06. With the new funding, the police force will be increased from 10,374 officers to 12,374 by Dec '07.

Although goals have been set and the money awarded, several legislators are upset with the decision and do not agree that a raise in the police budget will produce a drop in the crime rate. Congressman Jorge Ramón Hernández Alcerro asked why the legislature should raise the police budget every year if the results are always the same? In the past five years, Honduras has spent \$119 million on public security but the crime rate continues to rise every year. Hernández feels that the country needs better policies to fight delinquency that include the participation all sectors of Honduran society.

## **Emigration, Deportation and Remittances**

Emigration, deportation and remittances are increasing by 30% every year according to a report on “Migration and Remittances in Honduras,” presented on 17 Dec in Tegucigalpa by Jan Rogge, a consultant for both the German Development Agency (GTZ) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

According to research by the GTZ, about 270 Hondurans emigrate every day, most to the US, in search employment and a better life due to economic hardships in Honduras. Currently about one-million Hondurans live in the US, some with and others without legal documents. Those without legal documents are often caught by US and Mexican immigration officials and sent back to Honduras.

Last year 23,754 Hondurans were deported from the US by plane and an estimated 60,000 were deported by bus from the US and Mexico, giving Honduras the highest rate of deportations in Central America. The number of deported Hondurans has been rising every year since '97 when only 3,992 Hondurans were returned. These escalating numbers have called attention to the need for new immigration policies with Mexico and the US.

The Honduran government currently is working on agreements for guest worker programs in Spain and Canada where Honduras would recruit and send workers abroad based on the needs of the receiving countries. The government also has been making progress in assisting Honduran migrants living abroad. The Legislative Assembly has approved a \$6.5 million increase in the budget for the auxiliary fund. This fund was set up to help Hondurans living abroad return home when they are diseased or seriously injured. Also, the fund helps human trafficking victims and minors, mostly women, return to Honduras, and assists with the cost of repatriating bodies, which can cost as much as \$3,000.

One of the newest projects is a “2 for 1” development program. For every dollar invested by Hondurans living abroad into a development project in Honduras, the government, with help from GTZ and IOM, will match that dollar two to one.

The money sent home by Honduran migrant workers is maintaining the macro-economy of Honduras. These remittances are the principal source of foreign exchange along with the *maquilas*, foreign-owned assembly plants. According to the Central Bank of Honduras, \$2.35 billion was received in remittances in '06. The amount of remittances from abroad has surpassed the income from local economic sectors such as tourism, bananas, coffee, wood and sea food. Two out of five Honduran families receive money from abroad with each migrant sending, on average, \$2,700 a year back home.

According to studies by the World Bank, remittances are positive for the growth of the economy and the fight against poverty, but it is not a solution to this problem and Honduras still needs to take responsibility by designing and executing programs that will help people rise out of poverty.

## **Lake Yojoa Contaminated**

Areas around Honduras' largest natural lake, Lake Yojoa, are on alert due to the pollution of its water. Approximately 80,000 people are being exposed to diseases caused by the lake's contamination, while hundreds of fish have died, further effecting the surrounding populations who eat and sell fish taken from the lake.

In reaction to this situation, representatives from various sectors have met to discuss the possible causes. Theories included a damaged drain pipe from a nearby mine, Ampac; increased sedimentation in the lake; volcanic activity under the lake; and the potential lack of oxygen in the water. The causes are still unclear but investigations are being carried out by the Center for Studies and Control of Contamination.

The Association of Municipalities of Lake Yojoa is concerned that no direct cause has been identified and that the national government has shown little interest in the issue. Although Congress has been discussing a law for the protection and better treatment of Lake Yojoa for over a year and a half, so far no corrective action has been taken.

—*Stephanie Luckam*