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HONDURAS

US Suspends Visa Applications

US Ambassador Charles Ford temporarily suspended the visa application process on 16 June for ten days, thereby canceling all appointments for Hondurans desiring to enter the US. Ford said the measure was necessary to protect US national security because of “the ease of obtaining Honduran documents (such as birth and marriage certificates, identity cards and passports) for those people who do not fulfill the requirements.” The decision was announced after two Cameroon citizens applying for a US visa with false Honduran documents were arrested on 8 June in Tegucigalpa, the Honduran capital. Irregularities and evidence of corruption in the National Public Registry (RNP) and the Department of Immigration prompted the US government to react harshly.

The arrest of the Cameroonians confirmed the existence of an international human trafficking network that has been operating in Honduras for the past few years. This network was discovered to have ties with RNP and Immigration employees. Some employees have received \$3,000 to \$4,000 to process and create Honduran documents for those who do not fulfill the requirements. Immigration director Germán Espinal said that some foreigners, principally Chinese, are paying up to \$50,000 for Honduran documents with the hope of obtaining a US visa. Espinal added that many Peruvians and Cubans are paying between \$3,000 and \$15,000 for Honduran documents, and Asians and Africans are paying mafia organizations up to \$45,000 to help them acquire Honduran passports and US visas.

President Manuel Zelaya considered the US response as an ungrateful measure against his government that is willingly combating that type of fraud. “There are honest people here, working people, people who need to go to the US to do one thing or another; the US has reacted with an arbitrary, rude and unfair measure.” Between 400 and 500 Hondurans request US visa appointments daily. Zelaya mentioned that the terrorists who perpetrated the offenses on 11 Sep '01 “entered the US with legally obtained visas and passports, but now the whole world must be punished for those acts of terrorism.”

Espinal and RNP director Julián Suazo met with US officials on 17 June, immediately following the suspension announcement, to hold a “sincere, frank and friendly dialogue.” The two Honduran officials agreed to clean up the system of irregularities and corruption, and will pressure colleagues to provide the names of those individuals who are not working in accordance with immigration law. Employees found to be falsifying public documents will be terminated and will face charges from the Public Prosecutor.

Both Espinal and Suazo had been in their posts for less than one month when the US authorities announced the suspension of visa appointments.

On 5 July, Ambassador Ford threatened another suspension of visa appointments if short-term changes were not swifter. The RNP and Immigration departments are currently undergoing an evaluation and restructuring process to permanently eradicate corruption. Since 17 June, the RNP has dismissed four employees and Immigration has dismissed 10 employees, which included some regional agents. Those terminated employees are waiting to defend themselves before the Public Prosecutor.

This temporary suspension occurred at the same time that the Honduran government announced it would continue meetings with Venezuelan representatives to bid on cut-rate petroleum supplies, a policy that has been criticized by the US government.

Gender Salary Inequalities

The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) released the 2006 Honduran Human Development Report on 18 May, which states that women are still being paid less than their male counterparts. On average, women earn 67.6% of what men earn for equal labor conditions, professional training and experience. For every \$100 men earn, women earn \$67.60. The study indicated that women generally acquire a superior education, but cultural and economic barriers impede them from attaining a job that complements their qualifications.

Women occupy 51.2% of professional and technical positions; however, only 32.5% hold administrative, managerial or executive positions. Men control the majority of decision-making positions in the country. The study also reported that three aspects generally convey inequality: political participation, decision-making power and economic opportunities. "It would seem that the inequalities between men and women are more of a problem of limited space for women in the political and economic fields," stated the report.

UNDP measures salary inequalities with the Gender-Related Development Index (GDI). The GDI combines the same three variables of development as the Human Development Index. It also takes into account the sociological inequalities between men and women, such as differences in income and education. Departments with a higher GDI, indicating higher equality between sexes, are Yoro, Islas de la Bahía, Valle and Cortés. A majority of the women in these departments work in municipal offices. Departments with a lower GDI are Gracias a Dios, Lempira, Choluteca and Copán.

Child Labor Throughout the Country

Labor Minister Rixi Moncada revealed on 12 June that some 570,000 children are working in Honduras. The announcement was made a day following the World Day Against Child Labor. Reports indicate that at least 367,405 children between ages five and 17 are characterized as economically active. Moncada included that a majority of child laborers do not have the opportunity to attend school and usually do not complete primary school.

Various institutions throughout the country have been cooperating to eliminate child labor. Children generally work in garbage dumps in Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula, salt factories and melon

cultivation in the southern region, or tobacco production in El Paraíso department. The poor working conditions are creating “a health problem for the minors,” said Moncada.

Supportive Network for the Poor and Hungry

On 1 July, the government inaugurated the “Manuel Zelaya Rosales” Support Network, a project to improve the standard of living for 80,000 families living in poverty throughout the country. The support network is coordinated by Xiomara Castro de Zelaya, the president’s wife, and will provide social protections for poor families. The support package will include food donations access to education, health and shelter programs.

President Zelaya has repeatedly stated that one of his priorities is to reduce the poverty that plagues the country, which affects 5.5 million people or 74.3% of the country’s 7.4 million people. At least two million people live in extreme poverty and some 500,000 children suffer from severe malnutrition. The project is estimated to cost \$2.7 million.

Teachers Demand Salary Increase

On 4 July, 8,000 teachers from six departments crowded the streets of Tegucigalpa to demand the completion of the Honduran Teacher Statutes. Zelaya promised salary increases for all teachers during his campaign, and now the teachers are pressuring the National Congress to honor those promises. The government’s proposed \$0.11 per hour increase in June angered the teachers and encouraged them to organize.

The Statutes contain 18 points, including a \$1.16 pay increase request, from \$1.77 to \$2.93 an hour. Following the 4 July strike, teachers have continued to strike in their departments. The government is reluctant to honor the teachers’ requests because of the increased financial obligation. According to the government, the teachers’ salary demands would cost \$381 million yearly.

—*Jason Eichorst*