

# ***MESOAMERICA***

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## **HONDURAS**

### **Corruption Scandal Shakes up Judicial System**

On 25 June, agents of the Office of Criminal Investigation (DGIC) in San Pedro Sula arrested Rosibel Amador Luna, a regional judicial inspector, whom they accused of soliciting and accepting a bribe of \$2,500 allegedly to obtain a favorable ruling from Judge Nicolás Barahona on behalf of Sergio Omar Argüelles, a car salesman who had been arrested and was awaiting trial on drug charges.

The accusations against Amador were made in secret to the DGIC on 20 June by Aura Argüelles, Sergio's sister and defense lawyer. She stated that Amador had solicited \$5,000 from her in the name of Judge Barahona to drop the charges against her brother, who was accused of drug possession and trafficking. On 24 June, Judge Barahona ruled in favour of Sergio Argüelles, who then was released from judicial custody, and Amador was arrested the following day.

However, prosecutor Omar Menjívar stated he had requested that Judge Barahona drop the charges against Argüelles because "the evidence had been obtained illegally" by police investigators who forcefully invaded Argüelles' home on 24 Feb without a search warrant, took him out into the street in his underwear, and later allegedly found nine grams of cocaine in his house. He was arrested and jailed while awaiting trial.

On 9 Apr, while in jail, Sergio Argüelles' wife and children mysteriously died when their house burned down, reportedly due to arson caused by unknown criminal hands. This raised a lot of speculation regarding the case. So far, no suspects have been identified, arrested or charged with this crime.

Meanwhile, Judge Barahona and prosecutor Menjívar have proclaimed their innocence regarding the extortion and bribery scandal involving Amador, who was released from custody on 28 June and placed on administrative leave while awaiting trial.

## **Mercaplan/Vox Populi Poll Results**

The recent judicial corruption scandal has tainted the opinion of most citizens regarding the entire criminal-justice system, with nine out of ten persons stating their belief that an organized corruption network functions within the justice system, according to a Mer Kaplan/Vox Populi poll conducted in San Pedro Sula and published on 2 July in *La Prensa*.

Most people (68%) believe that the “organized corruption network” involves judges who accept bribes from politicians, organized crime figures and accused criminals to obtain a favorable verdict.

## **Military Officers Appointed to Run State Electric Company**

A polemic exploded among Hondurans after President Manuel Zelaya named 15 military officers to run the national electrical energy company (ENEE) on 4 June in response to charges of corruption, mismanagement and sabotage against company officials.

Zelaya argued that the government, not the military, intervened in the management and operations of ENEE “to save the company from bankruptcy” by naming an intervention team from the Ministries of Finance and Defense. The Finance Ministry appointed two of its officials to manage ENEE’s financial affairs. The Defense Ministry appointed Gen. René Oliva as ENEE’s Managing Director, Col. Julián Pacheco as Director of Human Resources, Lt. Roberto Castillo to manage the Suyapa substation, and other military officers to manage similar electrical distribution facilities in San Pedro Sula, Choluteca and La Ceiba. The Chief of Military Intelligence, Gen. Mario Villanueva, was named to investigate continuous complaints about the theft of electrical energy (via illegal cable connections), cables and street lights; and Lt. Col. Porfirio Moreno became the official spokesman of the intervention junta.

“None of these new officials, whether military or civilian, will receive additional salaries for serving in these new positions,” stated Defense Minister Arístedes Mejía, who is president of the intervention team. He indicated that these appointments will be in effect for a minimum of three months.

One of the first steps taken by the new management team was to fire 106 employees who were earning salaries of \$3,000 or more monthly, the majority of whom were administrative personnel.

However, some business and labor leaders immediately criticized President Zelaya’s decision. “This measure indicates that, according to the government, we civilians do not have the capacity to take charge of our responsibilities,” stated Mario Canahuati, president of the Private Business Council. He added, “We are concerned about this decision.”

Daniel Durón, president of the General Central de Trabajadores, said: “The President’s action constitutes disrespect for the labor unions.”

Miguel Aguilar, president of ENEE’s employees union, complained that “military officers have replaced civilian executives, despite the fact that the company needs trained technicians.” This union has an estimated 4,000 members.

According to the government, ENEE has accumulated a debt of \$26 million during the past 15 years, mainly from an estimated 15,000 businesses and 3,000 residential customers who have not paid their electricity bills. However, a large number of ENEE customers have complained that the government has added taxes totaling 49% of their monthly electrical bill, which has created a financial hardship.

Mejía stated that the purpose of the intervention team is to strengthen the institution by reversing its downhill debt spiral, to reestablish ENEE with a new administration and a new management plan, in order to provide the public with sufficient electrical energy and low tariffs for the disadvantaged sectors of society in three or four years. He said that his mission was to cooperate with the government in finding solutions to the nation's problems, and not to lead a "military intervention."

### **Emergency Declared in State Prison System**

Government authorities declared a "state of emergency" in the nation's prison system on 25 June after a wave of revenge killings took place, particularly at the National Penitentiary in Tegucigalpa. President Zelaya fired the Director of Prisons, Rafael Castro Avila, and instructed the Minister of Public Security to implement all necessary measures to guarantee respect for human life and to maintain order and security in all penal institutions.

On 19 June, hundreds of prisoners at the National Penitentiary attacked three new inmates who had been convicted of the rape and sadistic murder by machetes of a 13-year-old girl and 9-year-old boy in the community of La Nava. The three convicts were stabbed to death, mutilated and burned in a bonfire in the prison yard by a mob before the eyes of prison guards and authorities. Another inmate who participated in the murders of the children in La Nava also was murdered by fellow inmates at the Juticalpa prison on 20 June.

### **Thousands affected by Flooding in Tegucigalpa**

An estimated 1,900 residents of the nation's capital, Tegucigalpa, were victims of a torrential downpour on the afternoon of 14 June, when floodwaters destroyed all or part of their belongings, as well as some of their homes.

What was not damaged by flooding was stolen by neighborhood delinquents who took advantage of the situation to search through the damaged homes during the night and take what they wanted from their neighbors.

The Permanent Contingency Committee declared a "yellow alert" in Tegucigalpa and surrounding areas, especially in high-risk zones along the banks of rivers and streams, and where previous mudslides and flooding have occurred. Despite these precautions, the Municipal Emergency Committee and the Fire Department had to rescue at least 94 families and provide them with temporary housing because their homes were partially or completely destroyed by floodwaters. The barrios of Morazán, La Guadalupe and Los Jucos suffered the most damage, but authorities reported no loss of life.

—Clifton L. Holland