

# *MESOAMERICA*

*Volume 25, Number 6, June 2006*

---



## **HONDURAS**

### **Human Rights Workers Denounce Battalion 3-16 Participation in Zelaya Government**

According to *Inforpress Centroamerica*, at least seven former members of the infamous Battalion 3-16, who acted as agents of repression in the nation's "dirty war" in the '80s as part of the state security apparatus and who have been accused of human rights abuses, are currently occupying key positions in the administration of President José Manuel ("Mel") Zelaya Rosales of the Liberal Party, who won the last election on a platform of "power to the people," transparency and honesty.

According to Matías Funes (a former congressman and director of the Democratic Unification party), although former Battalion 3-16 leaders have kept a low profile for many years, now a few of them who have evaded punishment for their crimes are back in business as functionaries of the Zelaya administration, although some of them also worked for the previous administration of President Ricardo Maduro ('02-'06) of the Honduran National Party.

The accused include Alvaro Romero (currently, Secretary of Security), Erick Sánchez (now a national security advisor), Onofre Oyuela Oyuela (who works for Sánchez), Billy Joya (who works for Romero as a national security advisor), as well as Napoleón Nassar, Salomón Escoto Salinas and René Maradianga Pancharé, all of whom currently work in the nation's intelligence community despite their dubious past.

Daniel Pavón of the Committee in Defense of Human Rights in Honduras (CODEH) claims that the accused former members of Battalion 3-16 were never convicted of any crimes "because they received State protection and impunity before a compromised judicial system," although CODEH and other human rights organizations "have stacks of proof regarding their guilt."

According to Bertha Oliva, the coordinator of the Committee of Families of the Detained-Disappeared, former Battalion 3-16 members form "a brotherhood that always sticks together, shares power and helps one another" within the shadows of the Honduran intelligence community.

Oliva and other human rights workers have expressed surprise at the silence of Ramón Custodio, the highly respected current Ombudsman for Human Rights, regarding the reappearance of tarnished former members of Battalion 3-16 (now officially disbanded) and their current participation in the Zelaya government.

### **Background and Update on Battalion 3-16**

When the Central Intelligence Agency of the US government trained Battalion 3-16 in the '80s, the Honduran Army unit's main mission was to gather intelligence to protect its national security as US forces deployed to support the *contra* rebels fighting against the marxist Sandinista government in neighboring Nicaragua. But today, Battalion 3-16 is remembered as a veritable death squad—blamed for the abduction and assassination of at least 184 leftist guerrillas, sympathizers and other political foes of the ruling right-wing government.

Beginning in '79 through '84, a special military intelligence unit within the Honduran security forces carried out a series of abductions, disappearances, and extrajudicial killings against suspected political subversives. The unit with principal responsibility for carrying out these actions, initially known by various informal names, eventually was organized as "Battalion 3-16" in late '82. Battalion 3-16 and its precursors operated under the direction of the Honduran Armed Forces General Staff, in particular its intelligence division known as G-2, or under the control of or in coordination with the National Directorate of Investigation (DNI), and its operational forces. Most of these activities took place during the military government of Gen. Policarpo Paz García ('78-'82) and the administration of Dr. Roberto Suazo Córdova ('82-'86) of the Liberal Party, who was democratically elected on 29 Nov '81, thereby ending 18 years of military rule.

As the chief of the DNI from '78 to '82, and later of intelligence for the Armed Forces General and Joint Staffs between '82 and '84, Col. Juan Evangelista López Grijalba (who studied at the US Military's School of the Americas in '63, '68, '73 and '75 in Panama) had the legal authority and practical ability to exert control over subordinates, which included personnel of the DNI and Battalion 3-16 that participated in the abduction, torture, disappearance and extrajudicial killing of hundreds of alleged subversives. López Grijalba had a duty under customary international law, multilateral treaties, and Honduran law to ensure the protection of civilians and to prevent violations of international law by the military and security forces under his command. He failed or refused to take all necessary measures to investigate and prevent such abuses committed by or attributed to his subordinates, or to punish personnel under his command for committing such abuses.

Today, despite the widespread attribution of responsibility to Battalion 3-16, the DNI and the Honduran Armed Forces for human rights abuses, charges have been filed against military officials in only a few cases. Witnesses in some proceedings have been killed or intimidated, and the perpetrators never identified. Many former Battalion 3-16 members are now in exile in the US or other countries.

However, on 31 Mar '06 in Miami, Florida, Federal Judge Joan A. Lenard ordered Col. Juan López Grijalba to pay \$47 million to torture survivors and relatives of civilians murdered by Honduran military forces in the early '80s. Judge Lenard held López Grijalba legally responsible for torture, extrajudicial killings and disappearances in Honduras, stating that his conduct was "highly egregious."

## **May Strikes Paralyze Schools, Roads and Hospitals**

The nation's public school teachers went on strike 22 May for a variety of reasons, which affected an estimated two million students (pre-school, primary and secondary) for 24 hours. The Honduran Federation of Teachers' Organizations (FOMH) is demanding that the government modify a new law that affects educators' salary increases and social security benefits and the hiring of more teachers. Also, FOMH is demanding that President Zelaya live up to his campaign promise to provide free matriculation for public school students. The teachers' union has presented the government with a list of 17 demands of which the government has only resolved two so far.

In Comayagua, in the central region of the country, local residents blocked the main highway between Tegucigalpa (the capital) and San Pedro Sula on the Caribbean coast, thereby halting all traffic flow along this major transportation route. Protestors demanded that the government repair the northern highway, along with connecting routes from local agricultural communities. However, this strike only lasted three hours because government spokespersons agreed to meet with the protestors and seriously consider their demands.

Other groups of protestors closed the major highway between the principal cities of El Progreso and Yoro departments that connect with the port of Tela on the Caribbean coast, because the government has failed to complete construction projects in that region.

In Tegucigalpa, bus and taxi drivers staged a strike to protest the lack of public security because of a wave of assaults and the murder of several of their fellow drivers. The holdups have been perpetrated by armed gang members who demand that bus and taxi drivers pay them a "war tax" to travel through their neighborhoods.

On 16 May, 340 medical interns at government hospitals in five cities went on strike to protest that the Ministry of Public Health had not paid them their monthly scholarships since Jan, and they are also demanding a 40% increase in their payments. In addition, medical residents and nurses assistants at Hospital Escuela went on strike to demand that the government provide the hospital with needed medicine and equipment.

## **Marches Against Hunger Held**

The Mayor of Tegucigalpa, Ricardo Alvarez, and the nation's First Lady, Xiomara Castro de Zelaya, led the March Against Hunger in the capital city on Sunday, 21 May, with the participation of an estimated 15,000 people. This event is held annually and is sponsored by the UN's World Food Program.

In San Pedro Sula an estimated 10,000 marchers were led by the president of the National Assembly, Roberto Micheleti, and a commission of municipal dignitaries. Participating in the marches were students, diplomats, artists and business people, among others.

To participate in the marches, participants were required to buy a "March Against Hunger" t-shirt for 50 Lempiras (\$2.62) and donate a minimum of 25 Lempiras (\$1.31) to the nation's School Lunch Program, which provides free lunches to public school students. While participating in the marches, organizers

hoped to collect the signatures of 200,000 people for a petition to request that the National Legislature create a National Fund for School Lunches.

### **Honduran Authorities Concerned about Coffee Smuggling to Guatemala**

Some Central American smugglers are getting wealthy by sneaking large quantities of high quality Honduran coffee in pick-up truck convoys across the border into Guatemala where they benefit from higher prices and tax breaks by selling “Guatemalan” coffee to international buyers, according to Honduran officials.

Guatemalan exporters admit that some Honduran coffee is clandestinely imported but deny that the amount of smuggled beans comes close to the 767,000 60-kg bags that Honduran Coffee Institute officials claim leave their country yearly.

Higher prices are paid for Guatemalan coffee in international markets, whereas Honduran coffee growers suffer from having to sell their annual harvest at lower prices.

Honduras and Guatemala are the biggest volume coffee exporters in Central America, with a combined production total of 6.7 million bags, or 6.1% of the global output.

—*Clifton L. Holland*