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HONDURAS

President Zelaya Softens Government's Anti-Gang Policy

On 12 Apr, President José Manuel Zelaya Rosales said he wants to focus his administration's law enforcement activities on violent gang leaders, rather than against all gang members, arguing that the "Mano Dura" (Heavy Hand) policy of his predecessor was more of "a show" to generate political support for his administration and to divert attention from what Zelaya called the true source of violence—drug-trafficking from Colombia through Honduras of cocaine bound for US consumers.

"There was a ... political campaign to blame the crime problem on the youth," stated Zelaya, who took office on 27 Jan. "[My predecessor governed] under a specter of fear. If there is fear, the protector can appear." Zelaya argued that the *Mano Duro* policy gave rise to death squads, imprisoned countless innocent youths, and caused hysteria while doing little to lower the nation's crime rate.

Oscar Alvarez, the former Minister of Security who oversaw the *Mano Duro* policy under President Ricardo Maduro, declined to comment about Zelaya's statements. In the past, he has highlighted the brutality of the gangs and downplayed reports of police abuse as isolated incidents by a few rogue officers.

Police officials estimate there are up to 30,000 gang members in Honduras, a deeply impoverished nation of 7.3 million, with one of the highest homicide rates in Latin America.

Maduro's "zero tolerance" approach was popular, particularly among owners of Honduras' duty-free assembly plants, local business owners, and residents of poor neighborhoods where the rival gangs often clash.

However, President Zelaya has tapped into the growing concern about police repression and abuse of gang members, whether or not they have committed any crimes.

On Election Day, 27 Nov '05, Zelaya won a close victory over his opponent, Porfirio Lobo Sosa of Maduro's National Party, who wanted to continue the *Mano Duro* policy and reestablish the death penalty.

Zelaya said he will continue to go after gang-related crime and will form a new military unit to help police patrol violent areas; but he added that he also would consider a truce, easing up on youths who may be inclined to be rehabilitated, and providing them with job-training programs.

"I have gotten calls from the bosses of Mara 18 about the possibility of starting a social dialogue so that both sides could receive a pardon ... for what gangs have done to society and what society has done to gangs," said Guillermo Jimenez, executive director of the government's gang prevention program.

Zelaya said he would not offer any type of amnesty, but believes that dialogue alone could help cut down on gang violence. The *Mano Duro* policy has filled prisons far beyond their official capacities but the crime rate has not diminished.

Zelaya Pledges All-Out Offensive Against Illegal Logging

On 17 Apr, President Zelaya, who himself made a lot of money in the logging industry, pledged an all-out offensive against illegal tree harvesting and trafficking that is decimating the forests of Honduras.

Zelaya made this commitment after meeting with his Cabinet in the eastern town of Patuca, in his native province of Olancho, which covers more than 21,000 square kilometers (8,100 square miles) and is one of the areas suffering most from the indiscriminant looting of its forests.

"There are 10,000 chain saws at work in Honduras every day, and they have to be stopped; we have to stop them," said the president, a former head of the Honduran Lumber Industrialists' Association.

After the Cabinet meeting on 17 Apr, Zelaya invited delegates of the diplomatic corps and international organizations to see first-hand some of the environmental damage in the area. Located in the region is the Platano River Biosphere, a World Heritage Site that environmental groups claim is being sacked by illegal logging operations.

Zelaya stated that, in the Patuca sector, "they remove the resources any way they can, and the people sent here to do the work are paid by powerful white-collar tycoons." "Powerful interests send some to get wood, others to sow grass, others to cultivate pastures for grazing livestock." He added, "We have to begin putting this place in order, but that has to extend to the higher-ups as well."

Zelaya warned that the Honduran Armed Forces will identify by name those who are financing the destruction of the forests from the country's big cities, and said that "the law will be applied equally to everyone." "We're not just going to catch the poor people here. There are also those who are financing them from the cities. We have to put an end to that," the president said.

Zelaya reported that the Maria Karla Rivera Environmental Task Force, made up of 186 army troops, has been created to protect the Olancho forest reserve and other nearby regions. The task force, which has two helicopters and a speedboat among its logistic resources, is named after Panamanian student

Maria Karla Rivera, who died 21 Mar while helping put out a forest fire near Tegucigalpa. Rivera studied agronomy in the Pan American Agricultural School at El Zamorano, some 30 kilometers (19 miles) east of Tegucigalpa.

Honduran Army Active in Dismantling Clandestine Lumber Mills

On 24 Apr, the daily *La Prensa* reported that tactical operations by the Honduran Army were beginning to show signs of success in combating the problem of illegal logging by closing down 583 clandestine saw mills throughout the county, principally in forests along the Caribbean coast in the departments of Olancho and Gracias a Dios.

Since 28 Jan '06, the Honduran Armed Forces have utilized about 2,000 soldiers, six helicopters, 13 small boats and 182 vehicles in this special operation to dismantle clandestine lumber businesses that operate without licenses or permits. Many of these illegal logging activities involve groups of men who use axes, picks and handsaws to fell trees and harvest the wood, whereas other clandestine operations use more sophisticated machinery to strip forested areas of marketable timber and sell it fraudulently to international buyers, such as the Home Depot in the US.

As a result of its activities during the past three months, the Army has confiscated about eight million board feet of lumber and detained about three dozen people, five vehicles, a boat and an assortment of hand and power tools that were involved in illegal logging. This special Army unit will soon begin the task of reforestation in areas affected by illegal logging and forest fires, according to the Head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Romeo Vásquez Velásquez, with the goal of planting five million seedlings during '06.

Undercover Investigation Reveals Illegal Logging and Environmental Crises

Last Nov, two US ecological groups denounced the massive and illegal exploitation of forests in Honduras, saying it fosters both corruption and poverty. The complaint was based on evidence collected in a secret year-long investigation in Honduras by the Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) with the support of the Center for International Policy (CIP).

The investigation, which resulted in the report entitled "The Illegal Logging Crisis in Honduras," found that the illegal importation of Honduran wood by the US increases poverty and corruption and devastates the forest and the communities in the region. It calls on retailers, like Home Depot, to follow their own internal guidelines and refuse to buy lumber from illegal loggers.

EIA president Allan Thornton said the investigation revealed the extent of the destruction of Honduran forests by a corrupt network of politicians, bureaucrats, logging firms, mayors, police and other public officials. Thornton stated that EIA's investigation and report "document an epic tragedy for Honduras... The US is the biggest importer of Honduran timber; EIA is calling on the US government to urgently enact the commitment they made at the G8 Summit to stop the import of illegal wood."

Retired US diplomat Robert White, who heads the CIP, said that the illegal logging "destabilizes democracy and weakens civil society in Honduras."

Father Andrés Tamayo, a local Roman Catholic priest and an activist with the Environmental Movement of Olancho, said at the presentation of the report at the National Press Club (3 Nov '05) in Washington, DC, that the unorganized and illegal logging "has caused an environmental crisis, eroded soils, [led to] the disappearance of surface and underground water supplies [and resulted in] disease and misery." Father Tamayo, who has received death threats for opposing the illegal logging activities, said, "in the face of this situation, the Honduran state is indifferent and does not defend the citizens' right to life and to a healthy environment."

One Million Children Vaccinated

During the week of 24-29 Apr, the Secretary of Health implemented a vaccination plan to immunize one million children in Honduras, as part of the '06 Vaccination Program of the Americas in 35 countries. Also to be included were women of childbearing age. In '05, the Honduran Ministry of Health vaccinated 873,351 children under five years of age.

The free vaccination program includes 11 immunizations to combat a variety of diseases: polio, whooping cough, tetanus, diphtheria, tuberculosis, measles, rubella, mumps, Hepatitis B, Haemophilus Influenzae and yellow fever. Participating were 500 doctors, 900 licensed nurses, 4,000 nurses' assistants, and 400 other health workers. It was contemplated that the program would be extended until 5 May to accomplish all of its objectives in every part of the country, utilizing existing health department facilities in urban areas and by means of house-to-house visits in outlying regions.

—Clifton L. Holland