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HONDURAS

Current Wave of Criminal Violence, Kidnappings and Extortions Causes Alarm

Government officials, civil society, business and religious leaders are all alarmed by the growing wave of criminal violence, kidnappings and extortions that has swept over Honduran society, especially in major urban areas.

According to a recent World Health Organization Report on Violence, the average worldwide homicide rate is 8.8 per 100,000 people, whereas the homicide rate in Honduras during the first six months of '06 was 10.9 per 100,000. Police reports show that there were 710 homicides in Honduras between Jan and Mar of this year.

On 23 Aug, President Manuel Zelaya (Liberal Party) expressed concern about the growing number of kidnappings nationwide during '06, which he attributed to organized criminal gangs. According to the Public Ministry, there have been at least 18 kidnappings so far this year, and 90% of these cases were resolved by the capture of the kidnappers.

After President Ricardo Maduro (National Party) became President in '02, he launched a strong campaign to combat this problem, motivated in large measure by his own personal experience of suffering the loss of a son who was kidnapped, held for ransom and murdered by his kidnappers. As a result of Maduro's campaign against delinquency, during '03 only about 25 kidnappings were reported; but the number of such cases increased to 31 in '05, according to the Public Ministry.

Recently, the opposition National Party has denounced the ruling Liberal Party for failing to adequately deal with matters of public security. "We have seen the resurgence of ... kidnappings, robberies, home invasions, which have grown alarmingly," stated Porfirio Lobo, president of the National Party. He insisted that immediate measures must be taken to stop this crime wave.

"We believe that the time has come to tighten the screws to control delinquency. First of all, we are proposing, in coordination with the Presidency, the creation of a National Security Council; and, while

this is being formed, to call out the army to patrol the streets,” stated congressman Javier Hall, who presented such a motion to Congress on 30 Sep.

Hall is a relative of 34-year-old businessman Walter Hall Micheletti who was shot to death on 26 Aug during a carjacking in the northern city of El Progreso, allegedly by gang members. Hall is also a nephew of Congress Speaker Roberto Micheletti. According to a police report, at least four gunmen blocked the road to stop Hall and steal his '06 pick-up truck: “When Hall Micheletti got out of his vehicle to see what was going on, the criminals opened fire and then stole the vehicle.”

Currently, the Honduran police force has about 9,000 officers, and it is estimated that the nation needs at least 16,000 patrolmen to be effective in combating delinquency. The Honduran Army has available about 10,000 trained personnel who could be mobilized to assist the police in cracking down on criminals, including gang members, common criminals and those associated with organized crime.

In response to the growing public outcry and political pressure, on 31 Aug, President Zelaya ordered the Army to immediately assign 2,000 soldiers to begin joint patrols with the police in major urban areas, such as Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula, in order to combat criminal violence and to reassure the public that strong measures are being taken by the government to deal with this problem.

Religious and Civil Society Groups Protest Open Pit Mining Concessions

Roman Catholic Bishop Luis Alonso Santos Villeda of Santa Rosa de Copán, with the help of numerous civil society organizations, seems to be making progress in a nationwide effort to ban open-pit mining for minerals in Honduras.

Bishop Santos helped lead a protest demonstration on 25 July, when hundreds of priests, farmers, students and environmentalists shut down four sections of the Pan-American Highway in western Honduras, as well as a section of the main highway between Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula (on the Caribbean coast), to demand that the government change its mining laws for the sake of Honduran citizens and form a joint commission to address popular demands.

The proposed commission would be made up of representatives from the Civic Alliance for Democracy, headed by Bishop Santos, and government authorities. It would discuss such issues as the country's water, forestry and mining policies, and pavement of roads in indigenous territories.

The protest was organized by the Civic Alliance for Democracy, which is led by the Catholic Church and at least 15 other environmental and civil-society organizations.

Later, after Bishop Santos met with Honduran President Manuel Zelaya on 1 Aug, the bishop expressed confidence that bans on the environmentally and socially destructive mining practice will be adopted. “It seems that the president is more inclined toward our proposal,” the bishop said. But he added that a new mining law would still have to be approved by Congress. This is a change of position for President Zelaya who accused protestors a week earlier of giving the country a bad image.

Understandably, officials of the Honduran mining industry are definitely worried. “The scene in Honduras for investment and mining companies is totally clouded,” Gabino Carbajal, the president of

the national mining association, told reporters. "If open pit mining is prohibited, mining will disappear in this country."

Currently, open-pit mining techniques are used by two major foreign companies, Western Minerals (Canadian) and Glamis Gold (US), for the extraction of lead, zinc, silver, gold, mercury, iron and other minerals.

The bishop hopes that the government will halt open-pit mining permits for minerals, which allows digging a massive pit for the mining of metals. However, mining for building materials, like cement and rock, would be able to continue.

A new general mining law that would outlaw open-pit mining for gold, silver and other metals is one of the protestor's thorniest demands. The Catholic Church in Honduras has been pushing for reforms to the mining law for several years. A reform bill was submitted to lawmakers in '04, but it was never approved.

Bishop Santos and other mining foes say reforms are not enough to protect the country's natural resources and citizens' health. "We want the law to favor Hondurans, not investors," he said. They are upset about a '98 law that allowed foreigners to own as much as 34% of Honduran territory for mining operations. "We do not want foreign capital that destroys our territory," said Bishop Santos. "We will maintain our position until the mining law is abolished," he said.

Opponents of the current mining law argue that the environmental and public health costs of mining far outweigh the economic benefits and jobs brought by foreign mining companies. Currently, just one percent of mining royalties go to the Honduran government. "It should be at least 50-50," said Bishop Santos. "But even then, it's not worth it because the damage left [by mining companies] is irreparable."

Presently, mining profits total more than \$100 million yearly and mining companies employ more than 5,000 workers in Honduras.

Bishop Santos also demanded a new water law and a stop to logging permits in the western part of the country. He said his ecological conscience was based on the Bible: "There is sufficient evidence in Genesis to form a biblical theory about ecology... Man should serve creation not destroy it."

BCIE Funds Lenca Indigenous Ancestral Rescue Project

On 27 July, officials of the Central American Bank of Economic Integration (BCIE) signed an agreement with representatives of the Salvadoran Indigenous Ancestral Rescue Project (RAIS) to provide initial funding of \$175,870 "for the integration and sustainability of the Lenca people." The project aims to promote a sustainable development process that incorporates common problems that directly affect the Indigenous population. The total cost of the 12-month project is \$193,022.

The scattered Lenca people, one of the predominate Indigenous peoples in the pre-colonial era, are struggling for survival in the departments of Lempira, Intibucá, La Paz, Valle, Comayagua, Ocotepeque and Francisco Morazán in Honduras, as well as in the departments of Chalatenango, Cabañas, San Miguel, Usulután and La Unión in El Salvador.

The project, which is being sponsored by the Honduras-El Salvador Bi-National Border Program and administered by RAIS, will focus on four main areas: integration, identity, culture and sustainable development among the various Lenca communities in both countries.

—*Clifton L. Holland*