

Rights Action
July 4, 2009

"No press freedom in post-coup Honduras"

By Medea Benjamin

Today, there are tens of, tens of thousands of pro-democracy, pro-rule of law Hondurans marching in the streets, against the military coup and de facto regime of Roberto Micheletti Bain, in favour of the return of President Mel Zelaya and the rule of law. Click on link to view CNN report about on-going protests in Honduras against the coup:

<http://edition.cnn.com/2009/POLITICS/07/02/honduras.aid/index.html#cn nSTCVideo>

NB – one thing of note in this CNN report. President Zelaya was NOT trying to initiate a process of establishing a National Constituent Assembly, so that he could be re-elected in the November 2009 elections. This is incorrect.

In response to yesterday's visit of the head of the OAS, the military government of Honduras has formally pulled out of the OAS – further isolating itself.

- CONTACT in Honduras: Grahame Russell (Rights Action co-director), info@rightsaction.org, tel, from USA or Canada: [011] 504 9507-3835
- WHAT TO DO: see below
- Please re-distribute this information all around
- To get on/ off Rights Action's email list:
<http://www.rightsaction.org/lists/?p=subscribe&id=3/>

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NO PRESS FREEDOM IN POST-COUP HONDURAS

by Medea Benjamin (in Honduras)

When José David Ellner Romero heard the soldiers breaking down the door of the Globo radio station on the evening of the June 28 coup, he had a flashback. His mind conjured up the terrible images from the 1980s, when he was arrested by the military, thrown into an underground prison and tortured. "I couldn't stand the thought of going through that hell again, so I got out on the ledge of the windowsill and jumped," Elnor told our International Emergency Delegation. His fractured shoulder, ribs and bruises were minor given that he jumped from the third floor.

The owner of the station, Alejandro Villatoro, was thrown to the ground by soldiers who put their guns to his head and demanded to know where the transmitter was. Villatoro also happens to be a deputy in the National Assembly from the governing Liberal Party, but that didn't afford him special treatment. While Villatoro was not a fan of deposed President Mel Zelaya, he believes in free speech and always guaranteed his employees that freedom. After the military invaded and censored his station, he now supports Zelaya's return. "If this new government says it's for democracy, then why is it censoring the press? This is the 21st century," he told us. "We shouldn't have coups and censorship and thugs running the country."

Radio Globo is now back on the air, but one of its most critical programs, *Hable como habla*, is still banned and the host of the show, Eduardo Maldonado, is in hiding. And every now and then, like when they broadcast an interview with the deposed president, their signal is suddenly blocked.

Reporter Luis Galdamez, who hosts a show on Radio Globo, is back on the air but the military told him not to criticize the new government. He refuses to buckle, but he's scared. "I get death threats every day. I don't even read my text messages anymore, they're so grotesque" he said. On our insistence, he pulled out his iPhone and randomly picked from the 64 new messages he had. "We're watching you," the message read. "We know where you live and how many children you have. If you keep talking shit, we're going to hang you and cut out your tongue for talking shit. Remember what happened in the 80s."

Galdamez, a single father, is under tremendous pressure. At night, he sees cars without license plates outside his house, rifles pointing out the window. He wants to leave the country, but doesn't know where he and his children could go.

Another radio station under attack is Radio Progreso in the city of Progreso. Four hours after the coup around 25 soldiers stormed into the studios of the community-based station and closed it down. Hundreds of local people quickly gathered to defend the station and demand that the military leave. Thanks to the tremendous outpouring of support, Radio Progreso opened the next day, Monday, but by Tuesday the soldiers were back again. The station is now transmitting clandestinely.

While the coup leaders say they are bringing back democracy by deposing an autocratic president, their first actions after kidnapping the president and flying him to Costa Rica was to keep the public in the dark. At the time of the coup on June 28, they cut the electricity and when it

came back on four hours later, news programs had been replaced by music shows, soap operas, sports and cooking lessons.

By day two, most TV and radio stations were back on the air, but the National Telecommunications Commission (CONATEL) notified cable TV operators of a ban on broadcasting certain international TV stations such as Telesur, Cubavisión Internacional and CNN Español. The pro-Zelaya Channels 36, 45 and 50 were also banned, their studios surrounded by soldiers. Another TV station not allowed to broadcast was Canal 66 Maya TV. "They've taken off the air everyone who does not support the coup," said Santos Gonzalez, a Channel 50 reporter.

The owner of Channel 36, Esdras Amado Lopez, received threats that he would be arrested and went into hiding. A week after the coup, the station was still shut and surrounded by soldiers. The government-operated Channel 8, located inside the heavily guarded presidential palace, was taken off the air but was back in business on Wednesday—transmitting the new government's propaganda. All of the TV stations are now decidedly pro-coup, devoting significant coverage to demonstrations in favor of the new government while ignoring or minimizing mass rallies supporting Zelaya.

The only reason there is not more press censorship in Honduras today is because most of the media—TV, print and radio—is owned by businesspeople who support the coup. Edgardo Dumas, publisher of the large circulation daily La Tribuna and the country's former Defense Minister, claims that rumors about censorship are "totally and absolutely false." In a July 2 interview with W Radio in Bogotá, Colombia, Dumas claimed, "I don't see any limit on freedom of the press. The four newspapers are putting out impartial and true news. No TV or radio station has been interfered with." When asked why CNN was cut, he said it was "misinforming" the public and was "on the payroll of the dictator of Venezuela Hugo Chavez."

The more educated Hondurans are now seeking information from the internet and text messages, but most Hondurans are getting a daily dose of pro-coup propaganda and journalists who oppose the government are doing so at great risk to themselves and their families.

The Honduran people should have the right to know what their new leaders, in the name of democracy, are doing to destroy the very basic foundations of a democratic system—a free press.

[Medea Benjamin (medea@globalexchange.org) is cofounder of Global Exchange (www.globalexchange.org) and CODEPINK: Women for Peace (www.codepinkalert.org). She is in Honduras as part of an International Emergency Delegation to Honduras that includes members of Nonviolence International, Global Exchange, CODEPINK and Rights Action. For more information or to join the delegation, contact Andres@nvintl.net]

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FUNDS ARE NEEDED FOR EMERGENCY RESPONSE IN HONDURAS

Rights Action staff are in Honduras working with the pro-democracy and rule of law sectors. Funds are being sent to Honduras and used by community development and human rights organizations for: food and shelter, transportation and communication costs, urgent action outreach and human rights accompaniment work.

Make tax deductible donations to Rights Action and mail to:

UNITED STATES: Box 50887, Washington DC, 20091-0887

CANADA: 552-351 Queen St. E, Toronto ON, M5A-1T8

CREDIT-CARD DONATIONS: <http://rightsaction.org/contributions.htm>

AMERICANS AND CANADIANS SHOULD CONTACT YOUR OWN MEDIA, MEMBERS OF CONGRESS, SENATORS & MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT, TO DEMAND:

- unequivocal denunciation of the military coup
- no recognition of this military coup and the 'de facto' government of Roberto Michelletti
- a return of the constitutional government
- respect for safety and human rights of all Hondurans
- justice and reparations for the illegal actions and rights violations committed during this illegal coup