

Rights Action

Day 113, HONDURAS COUP RESISTANCE – Report from the streets, “Smashing the Silence”

(October 18, 2009, Honduras Coup Alert#81)

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NEEDED: MONEY FOR THE PRO-DEMOCRACY MOVEMENT

Without question, it is the Honduran people’s movement, with support from the people’s “international community”, that is holding this oligarchic-military (and its Honduran and international backers) to a stand-off. To donate tax-deductible funds to the pro-democracy movement in Honduras – see below.

NEEDED: DELEGATIONS, HUMAN RIGHTS OBSERVERS, JOURNALISTS

The Honduran people’s movement continues to call for international delegations, human rights accompaniers and journalists to go to Honduras to observe and bear witness to their peaceful pro-democracy movement.

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To get on/off Rights Action's email list:

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FOR INTERVIEWS & MORE INFORMATION: Grahame Russell, 860-352-2448, info@rightsaction.org, www.rightsaction.org

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SMASHING THE SILENCE

by JOSEPH SHANSKY, October 16, 2009, <http://pulsemedia.org/>

Since the few days of renewed excitement around the “secret” return to Honduras of democratically-elected President Manuel “Mel” Zelaya, there has been a disturbing omission of the Honduran political crisis in the international news. It would be reasonable to think that with each passing day an exiled president was camped in a foreign embassy (as Zelaya has been in the Brazilian embassy since September 21st), tensions would rise and all eyes of the world would be on that lone building. Instead the opposite has occurred and it appears

as though the international press had lost interest without action to follow. The subsequent collapse and renewal (and collapse again, etc.) of ongoing “negotiations” with Roberto Micheletti’s coup government did little to breathe life into this story.

Here in Tegucigalpa, life continues under subtle siege for ordinary citizens. The city gets dark faster at night now and the people seem more frightened in general. The curfew remains. Small groups huddle together and glance around anxiously, couples hug closer, young girls grasp hands tighter and walk faster. Militia is everywhere of course, made up of young, mostly uneducated kids who twirl their guns with abandon, dig their batons into the dirt and wait for a notice for action. It can come at a whistle’s call here, and sometimes it feels as though the entire country is poised, frozen in battle.

The most recent momentous note in this political standoff occurred when Micheletti declared an impromptu State of Emergency following the massive street rallies on the day Zelaya returned. He then imposed a “decree” which stripped Hondurans of almost all basic civil liberties, including the right to assemble freely and access to media outlets which did not strictly toe the coup government line. He also imposed a continuous and rather vague curfew, allowing open interpretation for street police to constantly monitor and harass citizens. After a brief but immediate international outcry, Micheletti apologized and promised to withdraw the decree, but has done no such thing. Instead, he’s used this legal loophole to clean house by first attacking the primary ingredient of a democracy: the free press.

The studios of Radio Globo and Channel 36 were assaulted in the middle of the night and their transmitters were sabotaged and taken, thus leaving the majority of the country without access to the few independent news sources they had depended on for so long. He then forcibly evicted 55 local farm workers who had occupied the headquarters of the National Agrarian Institute for months since the June coup. According to Honduras Resists, a leading online source for Resistance support, the Institute “houses the land titles that had been attained by small rural farmers and communities through years of struggle, many of which were finally granted under the Zelaya administration, angering the powerful landholders who are responsible for the coup and now want to halt and reverse the process of land reform in Honduras.”[1]

One major effect of this curfew and the violations that it brings is that Micheletti has unwittingly drawn people to the resistance movement against the coup government who may not have otherwise been involved. The demonstrations have continued daily for four months now, sometimes taking on different forms.

An example of the varied support for Zelaya’s restoration (and against the coup in general) has been factions of the religious community. A few days ago, a group of Evangelical Christians gathered together in front of the abandoned

Channel 36 television station. They planted themselves there to sing and pray for the station, for the resistance, and for Honduras. Several speeches were also made by organizers and religious figures, including priests.

When they had completed the blessing of this censored independent media outlet, they continued making the rounds, next going to Radio Globo to perform the same songs, the same prayers. It was a striking image, the Bible lying on the table next to the microphones in the studio. It conjured up big notions of God and Information and Truth and good people who believe that these ideas are not mutually exclusive.

Under the decree, the military domination has also expanded into lesser populated areas. The police have stormed neighborhoods ranging from inside the city center all the way to Greater Tegucigalpa and its outskirts. The same has happened around the country. In turn, these remote and generally much poorer neighborhoods have begun organizing independently, as they now feel the effects of constant police raids on houses and communities. These barrios, usually ignored and left to their own devices, have begun to take action.

I recently traveled one night with several other foreign journalists to a neighborhood on the outskirts of the city. Arriving amid mountains of trash, I immediately heard a cacophony of homemade percussive sounds, people drumming on whatever was freely available. We came upon hundreds of people of all ages marching in the dark together – families shouting, singing, chanting, blowing whistles, banging on nearby doors to rouse their neighbors. Along the sidelines, others watched from windows and front steps, staring fearfully and somewhat enviously at their neighbors' courage in defying the curfew. This was just one of many similar nightly neighborhood rallies since the decree banning such gatherings.

The crowd surged up a hill and turned into an alley where a car was parked with a film projector sitting atop. After a few minutes, the organizers were able to project the image onto the side of a nearby house. The video was a compilation of homemade footage documenting many of the recent abuses their peers had suffered at the hands of the police. In one scene, the camera followed a single police officer from behind as he ran with his gun drawn directly at group of demonstrators nearby, shooting wildly and recklessly. Others showed the police randomly isolating and dragging non-violent protesters out of the street and into unmarked cars.

The images were designed to enrage the crowd, and it worked. Cries of “¡Asesinos!” (Murderers!) rang out in the night, the excitement and anger grew to a palpable climax, and for a moment I was sure that we'd soon be experiencing our own live replay of the scenes in front of us as soon as the local police took notice. These people were loud.

But aside from provocation, the video was also used as a tool to educate people who live in outlying areas to the realities of what much of the city was going through on a daily basis. It was a form of the news which had been missing from the public since Radio Globo and Channel 36 were taken off air.

This kind of sudden unity is not a novelty limited to one area of the city. The day after the decree, twenty four separate neighborhoods were listed as openly defying the curfew to protest the coup d'état. The resistance which has held steadfast for almost four months now has grown in true grassroots style. Like a domino effect, as the coup's fear tactics increase, the opposition grows tremendously.

Regardless of what happens from the top-down politically, it would be wise to take note of the remarkable manner in which these communities have come together at ground level. On a very fundamental level, this is innovative democracy in action. Using any means possible, these citizens are courageously breaking through the information blockade that has paralyzed so much of the country and isolated much of the world from the events taking place in Honduras.

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IS THE U.S. SOFTENING ITS OPPOSITION TO THE HONDURAN COUP?

By Tim Padgett, Oct. 16, 2009, TIME

<http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1930835,00.html?xid=rss-world-yahoo>

The negotiations that were revived this week in the hope of resolving the Honduran coup crisis still haven't cracked the critical issue: whether ousted President Manuel Zelaya will be restored to office and allowed to finish the final three months of his term. The U.S., the Organization of American States (OAS) and every other nation in the world have condemned the June 28 military coup as antidemocratic - and they've warned the installed President, Roberto Micheletti, that they won't recognize the results of Honduras' long-planned Nov. 29 presidential election if Zelaya isn't reinstated beforehand.

But there are growing signs that the U.S. may be willing to abandon that condition. A number of well-placed sources in Honduras and the U.S. tell TIME that officials in the State Department and the U.S.'s OAS delegation have informed them that the Obama Administration is mulling ways to legitimize the election should talks fail to restore Zelaya in time. "We're suddenly hearing from them that the one may no longer be a for the other," says a Western diplomat in the Honduran capital of Tegucigalpa, where Zelaya is currently holed up in the Brazilian embassy.

Zelaya warned this week that legitimizing the election "without the reinstatement of the constitutional President would only legitimize" the coup.

But U.S. officials, while insisting they've not given up on restoring Zelaya before Nov. 29, acknowledge they're considering a Plan B - perhaps brokering more international oversight of the balloting while forging a deal that reinstates Zelaya after the election so that he can finish out his term, which ends on Jan. 27. "We've always preferred a restoration of constitutional and democratic order in Honduras that includes the restoration of Manuel Zelaya," one State official tells TIME. "But the elections are going to take place either way, and the international community needs to come to terms with that fact."

The official concedes that recognizing an election held while an illegitimate regime is in power is a "significant challenge."

It may be even harder given recent actions by that regime: in the past three weeks, Micheletti has cracked down on civil rights, shuttered pro-Zelaya broadcasters and decreed that more media will be muzzled if they "transmit messages that incite national hate."

Micheletti, a devout Roman Catholic who has said he's on a calling from God, lifted many of his emergency decrees during a visit last week by U.S. Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, the ranking Republican on the House Foreign Affairs Committee and a Micheletti supporter. But human-rights groups like Amnesty International say police and soldiers are still blocking street protests.

Micheletti insists Zelaya was overthrown because he defied a Supreme Court order against holding a referendum on constitutional reform that could have lifted Honduras' ban on presidential re-election. And he claims he's protecting Honduras from the sway of Zelaya's left-wing ally, Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez.

But critics say Micheletti is acting a lot like just the kind of authoritarian caudillo he accuses Chávez of being. Micheletti recently fired back at visiting OAS delegates that they and his other critics "don't know the whole truth, and at times it appears that you don't want to hear it." Neither Micheletti nor his spokespeople have answered queries from TIME.

The U.S. holds the most leverage over Micheletti and his partners in the Honduran military and business élite. Since the coup, the U.S. government has revoked their U.S.-entry visas as well as more than \$30 million in aid for Honduras. Even so, many in the hemisphere have questioned Obama's wholehearted commitment to thwarting the coup and getting Zelaya reinstalled.

A Latin-American diplomat close to the Zelaya-Micheletti talks says the acting leader's own aides showed him an e-mail last month from a high-level official in the U.S.'s OAS delegation concurring that Zelaya's return should not be a condition for approving the election. What's more, says the diplomat, the missive

suggests that insisting on Zelaya's restoration has handed a victory to Chávez and other anti-U.S. leaders in the region.

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HONDURAS. "TWELVE TRADE UNIONISTS HAVE BEEN KILLED SINCE THE COUP"

Monday 12 October 2009,

<http://www.larevolucionvive.org.ve/spip.php?article423&lang=en>

Workers are the main casualties of the coup d'état that overthrew the Honduran president, Manual Zelaya, on 28 June. Trade unions continue to mobilise to demand a return to democracy, although many of their members have been killed, imprisoned and tortured. The de facto government controls the press.

Erasto Reyes, a lawyer working for the trade union movement and one of the leaders of the National Resistance Front against the Coup (1), denounces the abuses committed since the overthrow. He calls for international trade union solidarity.

Thousands of Hondurans took to the streets to peacefully protest against the coup, but met with brutal repression at the hands of the authorities.

WHAT IS THE TOLL SO FAR?

The repression of coup opponents has claimed over 20 lives in total. Another 500 have been injured and 3000 have been arrested. Twelve of those killed were trade unionists. Some were killed in their homes, others during demonstrations held in protest against the coup. Women and young people are particularly involved in the peaceful resistance against the coup.

There have been numerous cases of physical and psychological torture. A photo reporter from the El Libertador newspaper, Delmer Membreño, was abducted and tortured. A teacher active in the trade union was raped by four policemen. I could quote many other cases like these, such as that of Augustina Flores López, a member of the Civic Council of Indigenous Peoples' Organisations in Honduras (2), who was severely beaten by the police, in public even, in front of the media. Images of the beating were recorded and presented to a judge, but he refused to take them on board. She is still in prison, on charges of "sedition and terrorism".

Dozens of Hondurans have been arrested on these grounds, including elderly people.

To the great rage of employers, President Zelaya had increased the minimum wage from 126 to 202 euros at the end of 2008.

IS THIS INCREASE ONE OF THE REASONS BEHIND THE COUP?

President Zelaya had adopted a whole range of measures in favour of the workers. Quite astonishingly, given that he is from the Liberal party, he also turned towards the left in the area of international relations, joining the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas - ALBA (3). He had also invited the unions to a dialogue on a whole range of issues, including subcontracting. Legislation was proposed aimed at regulating the use of subcontracted workers, to curb the precarisation of labour.

The current authorities want to go in the opposite direction, by promoting temporary contracts, for example, that can be renewed for three years. If their plans are approved, there will not be a single trade union left in Honduras at the end of the day, as it is extremely difficult to organise temporary workers.

IS THERE ANY REASON TO BELIEVE THAT ANTI-UNION FORCES HAVE TAKEN ADVANTAGE OF THE REPRESSION OF COUP OPPONENTS TO HAVE TRADE UNIONISTS ASSASSINATED?

It is possible, because most employers support the coup. It has to be said, however, that being a trade unionist was already a dangerous activity when President Zelaya was in power, as seen with the killings and shootings of several trade unionists in 2008... It's true, and trade union membership rates were already very low: barely 3% of the workforce in the maquilas (4) and 8% of the total active population. There were a number of disturbing incidents. In 2008, for instance, trade unionists from the National Autonomous University of Honduras intercepted so-called police officers who had infiltrated the campus. They were carrying a list with the names of trade unions to be targeted along with the names of numerous trade union leaders, including that of the general secretary of the Honduran workers' confederation, CTH, Rosa Altagracia Fuentes, who was assassinated in April 2008 (5).

In spite of the trade union rights violations prior to the coup, the unions are nonetheless demanding the restitution of the former president, as the situation has seriously deteriorated since 28 June.

HAVE HONDURAN TRADE UNIONS BEEN ABLE TO OPERATE SINCE THEN?

All trade unions have seen a fall in activity for fear of being attacked during any meetings held. All trade union leaders are receiving threats. A bomb exploded in the toilets at the head office of the beverage industry union STIBYS (6); no one was hurt because the incident took place just after the departure of the members who had gathered for the funeral of a trade union leader who had been assassinated.

Some trade unions brave the danger, such as STIBYS, which even held its congress in August of this year. It also has to be said that many trade unionists

have less time for their union activities as they are also involved in the National Resistance Front against the Coup.

DO YOU NOT FEAR FOR YOUR OWN LIFE, HAVING DENOUNCED THE ABUSES COMMITTED SINCE THE COUP?

Yes, of course. Anyone who speaks out is taking a serious risk, but we cannot remain silent in the face of what is happening in our country. That is why we are asking the ITUC and all its affiliated organisations to support us, to do everything they can to draw attention to the abuses committed in Honduras, so that they are stopped.

HOW CAN NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL UNIONS HELP YOU?

Firstly, by condemning the coup and disseminating information about what is happening in Honduras. Secondly, by sending trade union missions to see the situation on the ground, to observe the human and trade union rights violations for themselves. We would, in addition, like trade unions to press their governments not to send observers for the elections of 29 November (the present government is counting on these observers and financial aid for the holding of the elections). We also need material and financial assistance, especially food and medical aid. Many trade unionists are suffering from fractures as a result of the repression, but the hospitals no longer even have pins to mend broken bones.

The international community has widely condemned the coup, but this does not seem to impress its instigators much...

Things will not be resolved overnight; it's going to be a long hard fight, but, at the end of it, we want to see those responsible for these human and trade union rights violations answer for their crimes. We hope it will serve as an example, to prevent other atrocities and coups in the future.

If the international condemnations have not had any impact so far, more concrete measures must be taken, combined with continued pressure from the people of Honduras. The international trade union movement could call for economic sanctions against the current government. Simply threatening to exclude Honduras from the Central American Free Trade Agreement could have an effect, as the economic losses would be huge.

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE ECONOMIC SITUATION OF THE AVERAGE HONDURAN?

Honduras is one of the poorest countries in the region. President Zelaya had increased the minimum wage to 202 euros, but this is still 20% lower than the income needed to cover a person's day-to-day needs.

On top of that, very few workers receive the minimum wage. The global economic crisis has also affected Honduras: some 20,000 jobs have been lost

since the beginning of the year. It's not going to get any better, as companies say they have been losing millions since the beginning of the coup, for numerous reasons, including the roadblocks and the fact that many people have not been able move freely to get to work.

Employers in the maquilas are now forcing the workers to do very long overtime hours, to make up for the time lost because of the state of siege declared by the de facto government.

* Interview by Samuel Grumiau

(1) Frente Nacional de Resistencia Contra el Golpe de Estado. The ITUC's three affiliates in Honduras (CUTH, CGT and CTH) are part of this movement. (2) Consejo Cívico de Organizaciones Populares Indígenas de Honduras (COPINH). (3) ALBA is a political, social and economic organisation promoting cooperation between the socialist countries of Latin America and the Caribbean. (4) Export processing zones. (5) For more information on this subject, please consult the ITUC Annual Survey of Violations of Trade Union Rights. (6) Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Industria de las Bebida y Similares, affiliated to the IUF.

Also see the latest ITUC press release (23 September 2009) reiterating its condemnation of the coup and the serious human and trade union rights violations perpetrated by the authorities: The resolution adopted by the Trade Union Confederation of the Americas (TUCA) on 8 July 2009.

The ITUC represents 170 million workers in 157 countries and territories and has 312 national affiliates. <http://www.youtube.com/ITUCCSI>. For more information, please contact the ITUC Press Department on +32 2 224 0204 or +32 476 621 018

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BRITISH GOVERNMENT RE-AFFIRMS THAT THERE WILL BE NO POLITICAL CONTACT WITH HONDURAN COUP REGIME

The British government has made it clear that it "remains our policy to refrain from political contacts with the de facto government" in Honduras. The remarks were made by Douglas Alexander, the Minister for International Development about the coup regime that seized power in Honduras on June 28.

Separately Gordon Brown, the British Prime Minister, has added that "the UK will ensure that the EU continues to apply diplomatic measures, including restrictions on political contacts with members of the de facto government".

The strong statements were made in correspondence dated 7 and 8 October to Colin Burgon MP (Labour, Elmet). This followed claims in Honduran newspapers

by Gabriela Nunez, Finance Minister of the Honduran coup regime, that she was in the UK at a G20 meeting over the summer by invite of the UK government.

In response to this specific claim the Prime Minister stated clearly that "reports that I invited Gabriela Nunez to a meeting of the G20 in London on 17 August are not true".

Addressing the coup more widely, in his letter the Prime Minister added that "The UK Government has repeatedly condemned in the strongest terms the expulsion of President Manuel Zelaya"

Expressing his worries about the increase in human rights abuses the Prime Minister stated "I am also concerned about reports of growing human rights violations in the country including increasing government control of the media and repression of peaceful protesters."

The Prime Minister added that "we are looking into possible further measures" to ensure the restoration of democracy in Honduras.

Welcoming the rejection of claims by the Honduran coup representatives that they were endorsed by the British government, Colin Burgon MP stated: "The Honduran coup regime should be totally clear following these remarks that it has no support whatsoever from the British government. President Zelaya is the legitimate and recognised President of Honduras. He should be immediately restored and an immediate end brought to the repression that has left at least 10 dead, hundreds arrested and the closure of independent media".

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UN PROBE ON HONDURAS HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATION

United Nations, Oct 16 (Prensa Latina) The United Nations (UN) will investigate from next Monday in Honduras the human rights violations committed there since the coup last June 28, was announced Friday here.

The investigation will be in charge of a mission that responds to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay and it will work in Honduras until next November 7, added an official information distributed in this headquarter.

The team work responds to the stipulated by the resolution adopted last October 1 by the Council of the Human Rights.

In order to achieve its mandate, the group will ask for information to every present interlocutor in that country "as the General Assembly's resolution of last June 30 engaged", added the document that also condemn the coup, which

interrupted the democratic order and the legitimate exercise of the power in Honduras.

It also condemned the ousting of President José Manuel Zelaya, elected democratically, and demanded the immediate and unconditional restoration of the constitutional government.

The document also made a call to every State to don't admit any other regime different to Zelaya's regime, and expressed its support to the regional efforts in order to resolve the political crisis in Honduras.

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WHAT TO DO

MAKE TAX-DEDUCTIBLE DONATIONS

to support Honduran organizations and people working with the National Front Against the Coup. Make check 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>

For foundations and institutional donors, Rights Action can (upon request) provide a full proposal of which organizations and people we are channeling funds to and supporting.

AMERICANS & CANADIANS should contact our members of congress, senators & members of parliament every day, day after day, send copies of this information, and demand:

- Public and unconditional support for the return of the constitutional government of President Zelaya
- Unequivocal pressures from international community for regime to relinquish power
- No recognition of the November 2009 elections, that candidates from the dominant Nationalist and Liberal parties are campaigning for, even as the country is militarized and repression is widespread
- Suspension of all international funds and loans to the regime, and targeted economic, military and diplomatic sanctions against the coup plotters and perpetrators
- Application of international and national justice against the coup plotters and perpetrators

- Reparations to the victims of harms and damages (including loss of life, torture, rape) committed by regime

SPEAKING TOURS: “RESISTANCE TO MILITARY COUPS & GOLD MINING DEVASTATION IN HONDURAS & GUATEMALA”

In November, Grahame Russell with Rights Action will be giving public presentations in the north-east USA, showing slides and short documentaries and speaking about the on-going pro-democracy, anti coup movement in Honduras and about indigenous and community resistance to Goldcorp Inc.'s open-pit, cyanide leach mines in Guatemala and Honduras. Grahame Russell (info@rightsaction.org) in north-east USA

Thank-you for your on-going support for our work and for this amazing struggle.