

A Bio-Fuels Ambassador: President Obama names a new ambassador to Honduras

By Annie Bird, April 17, 2011

On April 14, President Obama announced the nomination of Lisa Kubiske as the new ambassador to Honduras. It seems surprising that a diplomat with no previous ambassador level positions would be named to Honduras, currently an extremely sensitive nation in US foreign policy in the Western Hemisphere.

But a closer look reveals the interests behind the nomination: biofuels. Also, her recent experience in Santo Domingo and Brazil may also be helpful in promoting the reintegration of Honduras to the OAS.

Throughout her career Ms. Kubiske has focused on science, agriculture and business, and currently she is the Deputy Chief of Affairs in the US Embassy in Brazil. She was awarded a State Department Superior Honor Award for her efforts on behalf of United States-Brazil biofuels cooperation. She was also awarded a Superior Honor Award for her participation in a public outreach campaign in favor of the US-Peruvian free trade agreement.

SUBSIDIZING CORPORATIONS, PROMOTING RIGHTS ABUSES

Given her history, Kubiske has apparently already come into close contact with rights violations that benefit transnational corporations, an issue she will undoubtedly come across in Honduras.

The Brazilian biofuel industry is among the largest in the world, and has been highly criticized for extreme rights violations including labor rights violations so severe they amount to modern day slavery.

In the lead up to the signing of the Peruvian free trade agreement, which went into effect in November 2009, Peruvian President Alan Garcia issued an executive decree which essentially put much of the Amazonian rainforest up for grabs to transnational corporations, and forced the indigenous people of the Amazon into a massive campaign of protests to save the forests and defend their rights, tensions that resulted in the June 2009 massacre in the Bagua province.

US corporations have a strong interest in the biofuel market as climate change mitigation measures are expected to result in a tremendous growth in demand for biofuels.

In December 2009, scandal erupted around a US Embassy cable released by Wikileaks that described a February 2010 visit to Honduras by Republican Senator Dana Rohrabacher who took advantage of an official visit to bring a group of investors, including representatives of California based SG Biofuels, while lauding the military coup.

Then Ambassador Llorens coordinated a meeting between the SG Biofuels representative, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Millennium Challenge Corporation.

Apparently not only do coups make for great investment opportunities, but US “development” or “anti-poverty” programs are there to help out transnational corporations.

BIOFUELS GENERATE HUNGER

Globally, as competition for agricultural lands rises, and food prices soar, biofuel promotion is a source of extreme concern for food security. In September 2009, in recognition of the crisis, the World Bank Group's International Finance Corporation put a moratorium on palm oil financing, while it developed a “palm oil sector strategy.”

On April 1, 2011 the new strategy was adopted and the WB announced it was once again funding palm oil production. Just two weeks later, the WB reported that global food prices have risen 36% in the past year, driving 44 million people into extreme poverty, meaning that they do not have sufficient income to purchase the food they need, less than \$1.25 per day. Among the factors cited for the rise in food prices is biofuel production.

The biofuels industry in Honduras has been a source of grave human rights violations, to the degree that after investigating violations such as the massacre of campesinos in land rights conflicts, on April 8, 2011 the German Public Bank for Development (DEG) announced it was canceling a \$20 million loan to Dinant, a Honduran palm oil company.

A few days later the French electricity giant, Electricity of France (EDF) canceled its agreement to purchase carbon credits from Dinant.

The World Bank as yet had not taken any action related to its September 2009 loan to Dinant.

Unfortunately the US Embassy in Tegucigalpa is clearly more interested in business opportunities than human rights, an interpretation of US interests that is not in the interest of the vast majority of US citizens who would most benefit from stable governments and healthy economies in the region, conditions that can only exist when fundamental human rights are protected.

US DIPLOMATS EXCUSE RIGHTS ABUSES

The lack of real interest in human rights in the US Embassy in Tegucigalpa was recently made evident in comments from human rights officer Jeremy Spector. He grotesquely distorted reality portraying the non-violent, pro-democracy protest movement in Honduras as violent. His comments provoked outrage in Honduras.

Though the comments are outrageous they are not surprising, they were simply the latest, and most extreme, expression of what has been the consistent message coming from the US State Department since Porfirio Lobo took office, a message so clear that it can only be described as the policy, not the isolated expression of one officer.

The State Department is promoting a false narrative of violence on two sides, which contrasts with abundant documentation that reports that an enormous protest movement committed to the principals of non-violence and expressing legitimate concerns about their government is are being subject to massive state repression.

Heavily armed security forces consistently and repeatedly use extreme and often lethal force against protesters while death squads with participation of police and military kill and torture with impunity. There is no equivalence between the two groups.

US EMBASSY IN TEGUCIGALPA, PROMOTING HUMAN RIGHTS OR MILITARY INTELLIGENCE?

Spector, the human rights officer on duty at the US Embassy in the country with possibly the worst human rights context in the hemisphere at the moment, is not actually a specialist in human rights, his background is military intelligence. According to his Linked In profile, he served ten years in the Navy, including posts in the Joint Intelligence Operations Center in Afghanistan, the National Geospatial Intelligence Agency and studies at the Joint Military Intelligence Agency.

But again, the problem is not so much the person as it is the qualifications the State Department deems appropriate for this job, and leads to the obvious questions, is positioning military intelligence officers in the human rights posts a standard practice?

Does the US commitment to human rights amount to no more than an entry to access intelligence?

KIDNAPPING AND TORTURE WITH BIOFUELS AND EMBASSY CONNECTION?

Just one of the many examples of State Department's attempts to portray the Resistance as violent was in January 2011 when a regional leader of the Frente Nacional de Resistencia Popular, Juan Chinchilla, was kidnapped by police, military and paramilitaries he recognized as associated with Dinant palm oil company.

It was feared he was being tortured and would be killed, so activists contacted the State Department, knowing that the Embassy could have influence over those that detained him.

The response they received was that the State Department will ask about Chinchilla but is very concerned about the threats that the Cardinal Rodriguez had been receiving since the coup. Since the Cardinal is identified as a strong supporter of the coup, the implication is that the resistance movement is violent.

There is no equivalence between a kidnapped campesino leader, kidnapped by police and paramilitaries, undoubtedly being tortured and possibly moments from death and a Cardinal Rodriguez Maradiaga who has received threats from unknown sources.

Juan Chinchilla was able to escape as his captors attempted to move him to a more secure location, but he was tortured, and he reported that English speakers traveling in what appeared to be the same make and model of trucks that were donated by the US Southern Command to the Honduran Armed Forces in April 2010, were present in his torture and coordinated the logistics necessary to move him between locations.

The selection of the new ambassador to Honduras demonstrates once again what the State Department's priorities are in Honduras, and it is not respect for human rights.

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QUESTIONS, COMMENTS, MORE INFORMATION?

Annie Bird, annie@rightsaction.org

Karen Spring, in Tegucigalpa, spring.kj@gmail.com

Grahame Russell, info@rightsaction.org

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