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Article by Annie Bird

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<http://rightsaction.org/action-content/relief-funds-needed-victims-us-dea-massacre-honduras>

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**Militarizing The Police And Killing Natives:
How The Us Drug War Is Ripping Honduras Apart**

August 29, 2012

By Annie Bird (annie@rightsaction.org)

<http://www.alternet.org/world/militarizing-police-and-killing-natives-how-us-drug-war-ripping-honduras-apart?page=0%2C0>

Since the Central American peace processes began 25 years ago, a tremendous effort has been made to remove militaries from policing, an effort now apparently being reversed in the US's increasingly militarized and multinational war against drugs.

On May 11, the US Drug Enforcement Administration led an operation that ended in the deaths of four indigenous Miskitu villagers on the Patuca River near the town of Ahuas, Gracias a Dios, Honduras. US and Honduran officials claimed the boat that came under fire was part of a trafficking operation. Neighbors, local authorities and human rights organizations claimed they were innocent bystanders.

Though the US Embassy provided technical assistance for the Public Prosecutors' investigation, little probing occurred. In the weeks following the shooting US and Honduran officials made statements criminalizing the victims, Miskitu communities and local authorities.

In response, the Miskitu indigenous federation, MASTA, requested that two Washington-based organizations undertake an independent investigation. Through witness testimony, and interviews with Honduran and US Embassy officials, Rights Action and the Center for Economic and Policy Research brought into focus a disturbing picture of a peaceful indigenous community ripped apart by the US drug war. This disturbing picture has been created by the transfer of counter-insurgency strategies used in Afghanistan to Central America and a regional push to create militarized police forces.

FULL REPORT: <http://rightsaction.org/action-content/honduras-%E2%80%93-%E2%80%9Ccollateral-damage-drug-war%E2%80%9D>

The report was released August 15. Then, on August 27, Honduran Human Rights Commissioner Ramon Custodio, highly criticized for his role in the June 2009 military coup and coverup of abuses that followed, announced that his commission had also completed its investigation and intends to request that the US House and Senate Judiciary Committees investigate the shootings.

Gracias a Dios is Honduras' largest region, and the country's most peaceful. While Honduras suffers from the highest reported murder rate in the world, 86 per 100,000 residents, courts in Gracias a Dios, with a population of 76,000, registered six murders in 2011 and two in 2010. The last violent death in Ahuas occurred in 2004; it hardly seems like a hotbed of drug trafficking.

Survivors of the [US-DEA May 11th] shooting explained that the boat had taken lobster divers to a commercial fishing boat in Barra Patuca, about six hours away. They brought passengers on the return trip, including two families moving to Ahuas from Roatan, a diver who had been treated for decompression sickness and family members of divers.

Just moments before arriving in Ahuas, the boat driver saw an apparently unmanned boat float by, and the passengers were awakened by low flying helicopters that soon opened fire on them. Survivors and the wounded explain they struggled to get to shore while two helicopters dropped security forces just 20 meters away at the town's boat landing. Hilder Lezama got a call from a survivor who had swam to shore and borrowed a neighbors' telephone to tell him that his mother, the 53-year-old boat owner, was wounded in the river. He hurried to the landing, just as the helicopters descended.

The first helicopter dropped what appeared to be Honduran police, though some spoke mostly English, and were described as "gringos." A second helicopter landed, and stayed on the ground for over two hours. All on board were white English-speaking men--even the door gunner and pilots. All wore tan camouflage with American flags on their shoulders. To one resident who had studied near the Soto Cano Airforce base where the US Army Joint Task Force Bravo is stationed, the outfits looked like US army uniforms.

The white, English-speaking men forced Lezama to wait at gunpoint for what seemed an hour, and then ferried cocaine from a stranded boat downriver that held two gringo "soldiers" already onboard. He was not allowed to look for his mother who lay wounded on a log in the river. Security agents on shore also prevented neighbors from assisting those in the river.

US and Honduran officials, in contradictory statements, say that security forces fired in self-defense after the passenger boat rammed into and then fired upon a drug boat that had been seized by two Hondurans and one US agent. Honduran and US officials agree that only Hondurans controlled the helicopters' mounted guns, and that the pilots were Guatemalan military and contractors. At least two of the helicopters were titled to the US State Department.

It is still unclear exactly what security forces were present. The Honduran Human Rights Commissioner says a DEA FAST team participated in the May 11 operation. FAST teams are a military policing model developed in Afghanistan, Iraq and Colombia that operate with the logistical support of the US military to interdict drug shipments. It appears that DEA agents permanently assigned to Honduras may have also participated.

What is clear is that Honduran and US officials claim it was the Honduran police that pulled the trigger. DEA and embassy officials explained that the DEA officers in Honduras work beside a special unit of the Honduran police, the Tactical Response Team (TRT), which was created by and reports directly to the DEA. In the past, the US military joint task force in Honduras had piloted helicopters for the teams, but claim they did not participate on May 11.

In early August, the State Department issued a report explaining it was “carefully limiting assistance to special Honduran law enforcement units, staffed by Leahy-vetted Honduran personnel who receive training, guidance and advice directly from U.S. law enforcement and are not under [Juan Carlos] Bonilla’s direct supervision,” while it investigates allegations that the current director of Honduran police had directed a death squad in 2002.

This description appears to fit the TRT and a new security force being created as the State Department issued the report, the Intelligence and Special Security Response Groups Unit (TIGRES). Though it's unclear whether the force has received training, guidance and advice directly from the US government, the team’s mandate closely matches US strategic interests in the region.

According to Honduran press, the TIGRES will live in military barracks, be commanded by military and police officers, and report directly to the Minister of Security, though they will report to the Minister of Defense in times of war. The force will focus on intelligence, information and communications technology; areal and maritime combat; control of population and territory; and combating organized crime, drug trafficking, and illicit association. The TIGRES will operate with “embedded” justice officials, public prosecutors and judges.

The day the law to establish the new force was presented, July 26, Honduran officials announced the Inter American Development Bank (IDB) would fund the force with a \$57 million loan. Two hundred TIGRE agents were already in training, scheduled to be completed in August.

The IDB loan is one of 22 planned for Central America within the framework of the Central American Regional Security Strategy of the

Central American System for Regional Integration [SICA], an initiative spearheaded by the Inter American Development Bank and the US Department of State. A group of friends was created to promote the strategy, including Chile, Colombia, the US, Canada, the OAS, the United Nations and others. Chile, Colombia and the US are playing a hands-on role in implementing the strategy, which clearly promotes the use of the military in policing.

Chile's Carabineros -- a militarized police force renowned for forming death squads and reprimanded by the Inter American Commission on Human Rights in October 2011 for excessive use of force in recent student protests -- are working closely with SICA and the OAS to reform the region's police forces. The US has partnered with Colombian police who are training Central American police and military in a new center located in Panama.

Despite the international partnerships it's clear that the US is leading the implementation of the drug war in Central America. This year the US is partnering with Central American security forces in Operation Anvil, a Central America wide anti-drug operation involving the US military, DEA and Central American police forces and militaries.

The May 11 massacre was just one of several Operation Anvil interdictions which stirred up controversy.

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One interesting example is the June 13 operation in which a drug plane crashed, killing both pilots. Though US and Honduran officials claimed the plane crashed while under pursuit, Honduran newspapers reported it had been shot down. On August 25 the Honduran daily La Tribuna reported that the head of the Honduran air force was forced to resign after an US investigation uncovered that a Honduran Tucano fighter plane had shot down the drug plane, and that one of the pilots was a DEA agent. US officials denied a DEA agent was on board.

Amidst the complexities of undercover DEA operations and corrupt police and military forces that make it difficult to distinguish the trafficker from law enforcement; the introduction of counter insurgency tactics to a region without a war; and multinational coordination of security efforts, one resident of Ahuas proposed a solution: the US must find a way to solve its drug problem that does not turn indigenous communities into battlefields.

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