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Rights Action

How Low Can Honduras Go?

Dana Frank, October 12, 2012

<http://www.thenation.com/article/170543/how-low-can-honduras-go>

The Obama administration's "partnership" with the ongoing coup regime in Honduras is getting harder to defend every day—with every act of brutality against the opposition committed by the corrupt government and its allies.

Two recent atrocities against leading voices of the opposition signal an escalation of the government's lethal crackdown.

One occurred on Saturday night, September 22, as Antonio Trejo Cabrera, a lawyer for the land-rights group MARCA (Movimiento Auténtico Reivindicador de Campesinos del Aguán) stepped outside of a church in the capital, Tegucigalpa, where he'd just finished officiating at a wedding, to answer an urgent phone call from a stranger. Two shots hit him in the head, two in the torso, and one in the leg, and he died soon after in the hospital.

Two days later, in Choluteca, unknown assailants shot eleven bullets into Eduardo Manuel Díaz Mazariegos, a prosecutor in the government's human rights division, killing him immediately.

On June 29 Trejo had won an unprecedented legal case against Miguel Facussé Barjum, the biofuels magnate and powerful political figure whose security guards have been accused of killing dozens of campesinos (small farmers) struggling for land rights in the Aguán Valley. Trejo's case restored to the campesinos land that Facussé had claimed. In the months afterward Trejo received multiple death threats; campesinos on the land reported that they were shot at, tortured, and menaced by Facussé's guards.

In late August Trejo was illegally detained by Honduran authorities along with over two dozen campesinos and their allies after they tried to pursue legal redress at the Supreme Court.

The other dead man, Díaz Mazariegos, was one of seven famous government prosecutors who staged a 38-day hunger strike in 2008 in front of the Honduran Congress in protest against the corruption of the prosecutors' office by politicians and elites.

Trejo and Díaz are the most prominent political assassinations of the opposition since Alfredo Landaverde, the former police commissioner who denounced police corruption, was gunned down on December 7, 2011.

But they are just two among hundreds of Hondurans killed for speaking up since the June 28, 2009 military coup that deposed democratically-elected President Manuel Zelaya. Hundreds among the living have received threatening messages or are followed home by strangers in dark cars, and count their futures in days, not years.

The Obama Administration, in the face of growing and serious pressure from Congress and those concerned with human rights, is just beginning to acknowledge that Honduras might have serious problems.

In early August, the U.S. announced that it had suspended funds to Honduras' new National Chief of Police Juan Carlos "El Tigre" Bonilla and anyone under his jurisdiction, until allegations that he was a death squad leader in the late 1990s and early 2000s are investigated.

After the Honduran Air Force shot down two drug planes in July in violation of worldwide protocols, the U.S. suspended radar cooperation tracking drug flights and ensured that the head of the Honduran Air Force was fired.

When Trejo was killed, the State Department issued a statement saying it was "saddened and outraged" and called for investigation. That's new.

Even so, where it really counts, the State Department is clinging to its relationship with the corrupt post-coup regime of President Porfirio Lobo Sosa. U.S. military and police funding, with the exception of the tiny portion diverted from Bonilla, continues to flow at higher levels annually since 2010, much of it under the rubric of the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI). Obama's proposed budget for 2013 doubles a key part of U.S. policy and military funding to Honduras. Contractors are

busily expending \$24 million in US funds to construct newly permanent barracks for U.S. troops at Soto Cano Air Force base.

The Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), meanwhile, still maintains an office in Honduras, despite the May 11 incident in the Moskitia in which DEA agents allegedly participated in the killings of four civilians. The incident remains to be investigated by the U.S. (even though a report by Rights Action and the Center for Economic and Policy Research, along with other evidence, has revealed serious contradictions between the State Department's version of the incident and the testimony of survivors).

On September 13, Maria Otero, Under Secretary of State for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights, visited Honduras and signed a Memorandum of Understanding between the two countries that speaks to "pressing threats to citizen security" in Honduras. It reaffirms the "close existing security and prevention relationship" between the U.S. and the Lobo administration. We are treated once again to photographs of U.S. officials smiling and shaking hands with President Lobo.

Bertha Oliva, coordinator of the leading Honduran human rights group, COFADEH (Committee of Relatives of the Disappeared in Honduras), was quick to point out the pact's contradictions: "You don't fight impunity with lies, nor with more militarization or involvement in a supposed solution with those who promote and are complicit in impunity."

Under Secretary Otero, in a speech during her visit, did speak of attacks on "vulnerable groups" including journalists, LGBT people, human rights defenders and trade unionists. But the State Department still utters nary a peep about the ongoing repression of the post-coup opposition as such—including most of the prominent cases of murdered LGBT individuals and journalists, who were part of the resistance.

The pact itself barely mentions human rights, choosing instead to emphasize the drug war first and foremost, along with investigative capacity, youth programs, and financial crimes--once again asserting that the U.S. will not back down from its militarized approach to the drug question.

The United Nations, by sharp contrast, on September 26 in its own response to Trejo's assassination, explicitly condemned the larger pattern of attacks on human rights defenders. "When the perpetrators know they are very likely to get off scot-free, there is nothing to deter them from killing off more of country's finest human rights defenders," declared Navi Pillay, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, on September 26.

The State Department regularly denounces such repression by regimes it doesn't support all over the world, such as Burma, Iran, and North Korea. Why is it so obviously, and shamefully, silent about Honduras?

The Obama administration may soon be called to account for its ongoing support for the Honduran coup regime. On October 2, Rep. Howard Berman (D-Calif.), Ranking Member of the House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs, sent a letter to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton sharply criticizing the administration for its policy in Honduras, including a weak commitment to human rights and silence about the coup and its role in the repression, and calling for the investigation of Miguel Facussé.

The next day, the Honduran civil society Truth Commission issued its long-anticipated report documenting human rights violations from the coup onwards. It calls for the removal of coup perpetrators from office, their prosecution, closure of all the U.S. bases, and an end to U.S. intervention in Honduran affairs.

The day that Antonio Trejo, the campesinos' lawyer, was killed, he had gone on national television to denounce the so-called "Model Cities" project, which establishes special zones in which the entire Honduran legal structure and constitution do not apply and where transnational corporations are free to invent their own societies from scratch. The Honduran government announced three actual sites in mid-September--one of which sits on traditional Afro-Indigenous land--and at least one contract has been awarded for these ultra-neoliberal fantasylands, which have been profiled sympathetically in *The Economist*, *The New York Times*, and the business press worldwide.

As some of the most powerful economic forces in the world descend on Honduras, the price of dissent for the Honduran people continues to rise.

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