

“Supporting political prisoners: One year in U.S.-style torture centres in Honduras”

by Karen Spring, Feb.2, 2019

<https://mailchi.mp/rightsaction/is-honduran-political-prisoner-edwin-espinal-victim-of-a-canada-us-honduras-backroom-deal>

Is Edwin Espinal, husband of Canadian human rights expert Karen Spring, stuck in a Honduran military jail in exchange for Honduran support of the U.S. and Canada coup attempt in Venezuela? Below: A heart-breaking description, by Karen Spring (Edwin’s wife), of the punitive and tortuous conditions in which Edwin is being detained, “awaiting trial” on trumped up charges related to protesting.

- **[“Supporting political prisoners: One year in U.S.-style torture centres in Honduras”](#)**, by Karen Spring, Feb.2, 2019

It has been over a year since Edwin was arbitrarily detained while protesting –along with 10s of 1000s of people– the fraudulently stolen November 2017 presidential elections, and stuck away in the ‘La Tolva’ maximum security military jail. Since Edwin’s jailing, Karen and their family in Elmvale, Ontario, Canada, led by mother-in-law Janet Spring, have been relentlessly in discussions with Canadian and U.S. embassy and government officials, to have them take action to secure the release of Edwin.

Even to hardened human rights advocates, it has been surprising that the Canadian and U.S. governments have done nothing at all to secure Edwin’s release. Have the Canadian and U.S. governments simply agreed not to criticize the Honduran regime’s appalling human rights record – including dozens of government killings and dozens of political prisoners jailed, just since the fraudulent November 2017 elections – in exchange for Honduras agreeing to be a “democratic ally” in the U.S. and Canadian-led efforts at forced government change in Venezuela?

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[Supporting political prisoners: One year in U.S.-style torture centres in Honduras](#)

By Karen Spring, Feb.2, 2019

<http://www.aquiabajo.com/blog/2019/2/2/one-year-in-us-style-torture-centres-in-honduras-espaol-abajo-1>

One year ago, I made the trip for the first time to the military-run, maximum-security prison known as La Tolva, located in southeastern Honduras. I thought it would be pretty simple to drop off food and clothes for my illegally jailed husband, Edwin Espinal.

Arrested on January 19, 2018, Edwin was immediately sent the following day (January 20) to La Tolva by Judge Claudio Aguilar of the national jurisdiction court system on request from the Public Prosecutor's office. Raul Alvarez, the other political prisoner from Tegucigalpa, was sent to La Tolva a few days before Edwin.

U.S.-Style Maximum-Security Torture Centers

Very quickly after my first trip to La Tolva, I would come to realize that La Tolva is not at all a jail. As Honduran human rights organization COFADEH first called it, La Tolva is a torture centre.

It is a torture centre where the Honduran government sends people (many of whom have not been found guilty or gone to trial such is the case with Edwin and Raul) to psychologically, emotionally and physically torture them and their family members who attempt to visit and care for them while incarcerated.

The two maximum-security torture centres - La Tolva and El Pozo (known as 'El Pozo II') jails look like they were physically picked up from some location in the US and dropped down in Honduras. They are large, cement compounds, complete with three layers of security fences, decked out with modern equipment and infrastructure. They were built by the Juan Orlando Hernandez regime to allegedly house the most dangerous criminals in the country.



ONE OF THE TWO US-STYLE MAXIMUM-SECURITY PRISON IN HONDURAS

I have too many examples of why these jails are torture centres and how prison authorities and the Honduran government go out of their way to create a hell that is hard to imagine for those that have never been in these jails or don't have family members imprisoned there.

The Honduran government and media even brag about the 'hell' of these jails in a sociopathic manner that perpetuates further exclusion and isolation of an already marginalized and stigmatized population in the country.

When a riot occurs there, when inmates are killed or disappeared, when family members denounce the poor conditions, the health crises, the abuses, prison authorities are often quick to lie and give a version to the Honduran media that is far from the truth. With such little access provided to outside human rights organizations and attorneys, it is extremely difficult to tell a different and truthful version of what really occurs inside these torture centres.

Conditions in La Tolva

- Prisoners have access to running water for 3 hours/day
- Prisoners receive 2 hours of sunlight per month
- There is no telephone communication & no letters are allowed in or out of the jail
- No pens, books, or paper are allowed in the prison
- 9 men share a cell and one toilet (with no walls for privacy and that are difficult to flush and keep clean considering significant water shortages)
- Prisoners are sporadically given purified water in bags (~400 ml), sometimes only one bag/day
- Food portions are insufficient and are cut when prison authorities want to punish the population.



THE WATER BOTTLE ON THE LEFT IS A SAMPLE OF WATER TAKEN FROM INSIDE LA TOLVA. WHEN PRISON AUTHORITIES DO NOT PROVIDE SUFFICIENT PURIFIED WATER, PRISONERS MUST DRINK THE DIRTY TAP WATER

Prisoners' Contact With the Outside World

Family visits are permitted one day per week after each family member hands in the following paperwork to prison authorities then waits for that paperwork to be 'processed' and then sent to the INP. This can take up to 1-3 months and costs approximately \$100 USD.

What do families have to submit to be authorized to visit?

3 photos taken in studio, 3 personal references, a proof of address given in a formal document by the municipality; police background check; criminal background check; and a copy in color of photo ID.

Conjugal visit for 40 minutes every two weeks. Partners of inmates must apply for these visits handing in the following paperwork AFTER they apply for regular prison visit authorization:

a Pap smear, syphilis test, HIV test, full blood exam, a doctor's letter saying one is in good health; a 'health card' certifying that one is not contagious; 3 colour photos taken in a studio; a colour copy of photo ID.

The detainees' lawyers are only allowed to speak with them for 10 minutes with their clients and all conversations take place in front of two prison guards – one behind the lawyer and the other behind the inmate.

In order to hand all this paperwork in, families must travel to the front gate of the prison where only ONE designated person receives them. This one person has to walk back and forth from the administrative offices all day. This is a highly inefficient system that requires family members to stand outside in the hot sun with no shade, no bathroom, nowhere to buy water or food, nowhere to sit except on the hot pavement, for hours.

Changing Prison Culture in Honduras

In La Tolva, it is really difficult if not impossible for national and international human rights organizations to enter and verify prison conditions. This gives prison authorities even more power and ability to hide or distort the reality of what does or does not occur inside these jails.

In normal Honduran jails and as per Honduran culture, dropping food, clothes and other basic necessities at the jails for family members has been the norm for years. With the construction of US-style prisons in Honduras, this has changed. Now, nothing can be dropped off at the gates of the prison without prison authorities telling you what (medical prescriptions prescribed by the prison doctor; water; the type and quantity of clothing down to the exact color, neck yoke line, style, etc). For so many poor Honduran families, providing these items down to the specificities required by the National Penitentiary Institute (INP) and the prison is impossible and very expensive.



PREPARING THE CLOTHING AND HYGIENE KITS' TO TAKE TO LA TOLVA FOR EDWIN & RAUL: 3 WHITE OR GREEN, ROUND-NECK T-SHIRTS; SWEATPANTS WITH NO ZIPPERS OR BUTTONS OR MARKINGS; TWO PAIRS OF SHORTS; RUNNING SHOES; TWO PAIRS OF BOXERS; THREE PAIRS OF WHITE, ANKLE SOCKS; ETC. HONDURAN PRISILA ALVARADO OF THE MESA DE LOS INDIGNADOS DE EL PROGRESO HOLDS UP THE KITS AND HELPS PREPARE AND PURCHASE THEM.

The majority of Honduran prisoners in these torture centres are poor people. The rich and corrupt, like all of those accused in the 8 corruption cases presented by the internationally-financed anti-corruption body, the MACCIH, are either conditionally released; on house arrest; or are jailed inside VIP rooms or jail cells in the non-US-style Tamara prison, outside of Tegucigalpa.

Sending Edwin and Raul – two people of thousands of Honduras that protested the 2017 electoral fraud – to La Tolva is the harshest, most inhumane punishment imposed by the Juan Orlando Hernandez regime against members of the opposition. The complacency of the Public Prosecutor's office and the justice system is cruel, unjust, and once again, an illustration of the unequal form in which the law is manipulatively applied in Honduras.

The First Few Days After Edwin's Arrival to La Tolva

Shortly after arriving to La Tolva, we would find out later that both Edwin and Raul were held in solitary confinement – Raul for approximately 20 days and Edwin for 15 days. Edwin tells me that he almost went crazy the first few weeks. He was enclosed inside a small cell with no bathroom. He begged another prisoner that he saw on his one-hour outside a day (it would later be one hour every two weeks) to let him borrow the Bible. It

was the only thing that kept his mind from running wild and one of the few books in the last year that he's been able to get his hands on.

US Companies Profit from These Torture Centers & Detention of Political Prisoners

The most outrageous part of the conditions and practices of Honduran authorities is that the two maximum-security prisons – La Tolva (or El Pozo II) and El Pozo - are made, designed, and a source of profit for US prison contractors and companies.

Inside La Tolva, one quickly can see that the majority of the equipment, building materials, bullet proof windows, even the large industrial fans on the ceilings of the visiting areas, have been purchased from US companies.

The Honduran government has purchased various types of equipment for the jail that have never been used. For example, there is a large, industrial clothing washer and dryer that is never used, possibly because the prison suffers from a severe water shortages. Instead, the equipment just sits there unused while a US company received likely thousands of dollars selling it to the Honduran government.

All windows including in the cellblocks and visitation areas are bullet proof and money has been spent on all kinds of US-style equipment, yet there is little to no medical equipment or medications inside the health clinic that allegedly has a 24-hour physician on staff 7 days a week. Yet prisoners constantly complain of the lack of urgent and regular medication attention including Edwin and Raul who went on hunger strike demanding to see a physician in the first few months of their arrival to the La Tolva.

As far as the inmates and prison guards understand, inside La Tolva torture centre there are wood working workshops and gyms filled with various types of equipment. These areas and equipment are not used by the inmates - they just know that they exist. The kitchen has industrial style equipment that is more likely than not, purchased from a US company and imported into Honduras.

At one point, a private US company installed telephones and inmates that wanted to contact their family members had to purchase phone cards costing 100 Lempiras (\$4.20) for 12 minutes. The phones were taken out on April 2018. A US company also services and runs the security cameras inside the prison but the name of the company is not public information and difficult to verify.

Meeting Courageous Honduran Women At The Front Gate

Standing outside the front gate of La Tolva (known as 'Customs One,' almost like you're entering another country and leaving all your rights behind) has become the norm for me.

Almost on a weekly basis, I wait outside of the torture centre with Honduran women from the organization, the Mesa de los Indignados de Progreso, that lead the fight to free the political prisoners.

We, and all the female family members of other inmates, constantly have to fight the various military and police forces at the gate, either to accept medications prescribed by the “in-house doctor”; accept additional nutritional supplements; and simply demand that prison authorities respect the law. When one demands this, I have myself been laughed at and dismissed by the security forces who tell me: “you’re in Honduras, sweetie.”

At La Tolva torture centre, laws do not apply. Every single legal mechanism that establishes the prison norms, rules, procedures, and laws in Honduras are violated in La Tolva.

The more you mention that the prison authorities are breaking the law, the more the various security forces present inside the jail like the Military Police, the National Penitentiary Institute (INP) police, the military, and the new National Force to Control the Prisons (that are just US-trained military soldiers in balaclavas with only their eyes exposed and black and green uniforms) make it more and more difficult for you to get in to see your family members.

The military prison director also finds his way of punishing those that demand that the law be respected. In many cases, the directors (who are rotated every 6-7 months) will make you wait outside in the hot sun where there is no shade or trees, nowhere to buy water, use the bathroom, or sit down.

I have spent hours after hours outside of the La Tolva standing next to mostly Honduran women that are doing the same things I am: waiting to be let in to visit, drop off medications and prescribed nutritional supplements, or await the answer to simple questions.



WAITING IN A LONG LINE UPS OUT IN THE HOT SUN IN 'CUSTOMS ONE' IN LA TOLVA IN ORDER TO DROP OFF CLOTHES AND HYGIENE KITS FOR EDWIN AND RAUL

I have met countless Honduran women at the gates of La Tolva as I wait, yet again, to either get a written confirmation of something or permission from the Director to enter. All of the women tell me endless stories of abuses; sexual abuse and harassment; of times when they have attempted to demand their rights and then been punished by having their visitation rights taken away for 6 months; of fighting for their brothers, sons, and husbands and end up frustrated with no response from the Honduran government.

The Honduran women that continue going to La Tolva to visit and support their family members are truly incredible. I have come to deeply respect their courage, strength, and solidarity as we share testimonies and stories at the front gate of the torture centre.

A Failed 'Security' Strategy But a Successfully Profitable One

These torture centres do nothing to ensure the safety of the prison population or the safety of the general Honduran population. Honduran women are the people most affected by this new security policy implemented under the Juan Orlando Hernandez and with the positive view of the US government that promotes US economic interests in Honduras over human rights and prisoners' rights.

These jails must be closed down. In normal Honduran jails, conditions must be improved.

Edwin message to U.S. and Canadian people

"In Honduras, we have jails instead of schools, weapons instead of medicine, bullets instead of books. This just makes our world more unsafe. Lets build a better world. Ask your governments to stop supporting dictatorships."

Hold U.S. and Canadian governments accountable

Keep on sending this information to your elected politicians in the U.S. and Canada holding them to account for their support for the Honduran regime, turning a blind eye to the systematic human rights violations, killings, corruption and impunity ... including the illegal detention of political prisoners.

Media silence? Send this information to your media contacts, urging them to start reporting on U.S. and Canadian complicity with the repressive, corrupt regime in Honduras.

- United States: Contact your Senators (<https://whoismyrepresentative.com/>) and Congress members (<https://www.house.gov/representatives/find-your-representative>).
- Canada: Contact your Member of Parliament and make your demands known to them (<https://www.ourcommons.ca/Parliamentarians/en/members>).
- Ambassador James Hill, Embassy of Canada in Costa Rica, Honduras and Nicaragua, James.Hill@international.gc.ca, tgipa@international.gc.ca
- Minister Chrystia Freeland, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Global Affairs Canada, 1-613-992-5234, 1-343-203-1851; chrystia.freeland@parl.gc.ca, chrystia.freeland.c1d@parl.gc.ca, chrystia.freeland@international.gc.ca
- Honduran Ambassador to Canada, Sofia Cerrato Rodriguez: ambassador@embassyhonduras.hn, 1-613-233-8900

Demands - short term

The U.S. and Canadian governments must:

- Rescind their "legitimization" of the Nov. 26, 2017 elections;

- Condemn the multiple acts of electoral fraud carried out by the illegitimate regime headed by Juan Orlando Hernandez;
- Condemn government repression, including the killing of over 40 pro-democracy protesters, and the illegal detentions of dozens of political prisoners, including Edwin Espinal;
- Suspend business and military-police-security relations with the government of Honduras, until the political / electoral crisis has been resolved and impartial justice processes are proceeded against the intellectual and material authors of the electoral fraud and stolen elections, and killings and illegal jailings.

Demands - medium term

There must be legislative inquiries in the U.S. and Canada into the causes of Honduras' now endemic repression and exploitation, corruption and impunity, with specific focus on the role played by the U.S. and Canadian governments:

- In support of the 2009 military coup
- In support and legitimization of fraudulent and violent elections in 2009, 2013 and 2017
- In support (in the case of Canada) of the promoting and signing of the potentially illegitimate "Free Trade Agreement" with the government of Honduras;
- In support of the expansion of corporate investments in Honduras (mining, garment "sweatshop" industry, bananas, hydro-electric dams, tourism, African palm, etc.), while turning a blind eye to and – in effect – benefitting from repression, fraud, corruption and impunity.

More information

- Karen Spring, Honduras Solidarity Network, spring.kj@gmail.com / <https://www.facebook.com/freeEDWINESPINALlibertad/> / <https://twitter.com/EdwinLibertad> / <http://freedwinespinallibertad.blogspot.com/> / freedwinespinal@gmail.com
- Janet Spring (Karen's mom, Edwin's mom-in-law), Simcoe Country Honduras Rights Monitor <https://simcoecountyhondurasrightsmonitor.wordpress.com/> / janet.spring@utoronto.ca
- Grahame Russell, Rights Action, grahame@rightsaction.org

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