

Ashamed to be Canadian: Corruption, Fear, Humiliation and Militarization in Honduras

by Janet Spring, mother-in-law of Honduran political prisoner Edwin Espinal

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Day #491 – Edwin Espinal, political prisoner illegally jailed in max-security Honduran military prison. Edwin is married to Karen Spring, Canadian human rights defender and director of Honduras Solidarity Network. Since January 19, 2018, Edwin has been illegally held in a max-security military jail, facing trumped up charges filed by the corrupt, repressive U.S. and Canadian-backed Honduran regime.



Ashamed to be Canadian: Corruption, Fear, Humiliation, and Militarization in Honduras

By Janet Spring (mother-in-law of Edwin Espinal, political prisoner in Honduras), May 26, 2019

I am writing this article as I sit by the Caribbean Sea in the evening of May 26 in Trujillo Bay, Honduras. Trujillo is a Garifuna community that is in a land struggle against the Honduran government and Canadian tourism businesses that are trying to or have already stolen Garifuna land for economic gain.

As I visit this community, I am embarrassed and ashamed to be Canadian as corrupt Canadian investors have given Canada a bad name.

I am traveling with 16 people – 4 Canadians from the broader Simcoe County area (Ontario), and 12 US citizens – on a delegation sponsored by the Honduras Solidarity Network and Cross Border Network, based in Kansas City, Missouri. The delegation is focusing on the 'Roots of Migration,' which is taking us along the north coast of Honduras to La Ceiba and Trujillo.

“Little Canada” tourism corruption and violence

The cruise ship docks are located here; tourists disembark and enter these communities, and most do not know that they are on disputed indigenous Garifuna territory and that tensions are high. Little do they know that corruption abounds here and that it is perpetuated by Canadian business interests supported by the corrupt narco-trafficking illegal government of Juan Orlando Hernandez.

The delegation began on May 25th with our first stop in El Progreso. Here we participated in a march in support of political prisoners and walked through the streets with the leaders of the movement that demand Hernandez resign. We also met with a member of the El Progreso community who provides support to families who choose to join migrant caravans to the US.

The presenter explained how the deep-seated corruption, extortion, drug cartels, lack of employment, fear, and marginalization forces the Honduran people to leave their country. He remarked that 48% of 5th and 6th grade students wish to leave the country due to the lack of hope perpetuated by the corrupt oligarchy families and drug-trafficking government that control the population.

Our group left with a greater understanding of why people leave the country that they love and the desperation migrant families feel for their children’s future.

This coming week, our group leaves the north coast and travels back to El Progreso, the site of the 1952 banana plantation struggles, to La Esperanza, home of Berta Caceres (assassinated March 2, 2016), and finally to the capital of Tegucigalpa. We will meet with the US Embassy staff and have also requested a meeting with the Canadian Embassy. The group will participate in a dialogue with a very well respected former presidential candidate – Carlos Reyes – who will provide a perspective of the current political situation, listen to the struggles that Hondurans face through corruption at all levels of the Hernandez government, and about gang violence and drug trafficking.

Later in the week, our group will travel to La Tolva prison, hoping to get in to see my son-in-law Edwin Espinal and another political prisoner Raul Alvarez. We have sent in all documentation required for this visit but as the government does not follow their own laws, we may be denied entry.

My visit to La Tolva military prison

This past week before the delegation began, I went to La Tolva prison to visit Edwin. When I traveled to La Tolva for my first scheduled visit on a 'visitor pass,' the visit was horrendous on many levels. Firstly, it took two trips to La Tolva to present my documentation that I received from the National Penitentiary Institute (NPI). Each time I travel to Honduras, I must go through this process. We handed the documentation to the prison both on Friday the 17th and then when the guards at the gate asked for further documentation - my flight information, something that was never requested by the prison - Karen drove the extra documents to La Tolva on Saturday the 18th.

When we arrived (Karen was the driver), the officers at the gate said that no papers had been submitted. The director of the prison finally came out and the papers were eventually found. But this took over an hour and a half, minimizing my visitation time. I was expected to get 4 hours. (We got there at 1 p.m. because if you go any earlier, they will not process anyone after 11 am due to upcoming lunch break, and any earlier they just make visitors wait anyway until 1 p.m.)

This kind of delay tactic is a prime example of how the prison officials humiliate visitors in an attempt to discourage them from returning.

In a discussion that Karen had with the officials at the NPI the next day, they advised her that the guards and the director of La Tolva do not have the authority to question any documentation after the permission is granted by the NPI. The permission is signed by the director of the NPI so it must be accepted. They are not supposed to request any further documentation after it has been processed yet more and more this documentation is questioned. Yet the guards do not follow the rules and make their own rules up as they please.

The visit got worse after I finally cleared the front gate. Because I could not speak Spanish, the guards laughed and made fun of me and were very disrespectful to me. The guards at the third checkpoint where the body scanner area is located, refused to accept my doctor's note because it did not have a doctor's stamp on it. After repeatedly telling them that our Canadian doctors do not use 'stamps', the guard in charge said that I could not enter without the scan.

When I got upset, they mocked me further. This was a very humiliating experience. I therefore had no choice ... they had already picked and poked through the food that I had made for Edwin, cut the fruit open with a dirty prison knife, pawed the bread, and even disallowed one of the items that is on the list of 'approved foodstuffs' to bring in. I went through the scanner against the recommendation of my family doctor.

After I went through the body scanner, which my doctor deems is very detrimental to my health condition, I had to wait another hour before I could see Edwin. Edwin finally came out at 3:30 so my visit only lasted for 30 minutes. The ridiculing and laughing behind my back continued throughout the whole visit, even when I was leaving the front gate.

Not only were my rights violated according to Honduran 'law,' Edwin was very depressed; he has lost more weight, has a constant buzzing in his ear where hearing loss has occurred due to lack of medical treatment, and the water had been shut off for two days. Edwin explained that there was NO drinking water, no water to flush the cell toilets, and no water to properly prepare food. He said that this situation was desperate.

Due to this inhumane, horrific, and degrading treatment I endured as a Canadian citizen by the FNCCP (a new special prison task force recently implemented by the Hernandez government), the military police and the military (three forces in La Tolva which participated in that day's humiliation), which is excessive only to terrorize and harass, I sent this information to the Canadian Embassy in Tegucigalpa, and requested that someone from the Embassy accompany me on my next prison visit. I did not feel safe and felt very vulnerable, and frightened that during the next visit, the taunting and humiliation would escalate.

Canadian government support for illegal, illegitimate government of Honduras

The Canadian government supports this illegal and illegitimate government of Honduras and its agencies, as well as funds programs related to the prison situations throughout the country through CONAPREV, so I requested this accompaniment. Yet my request was denied. In a second letter, I apprised the Canadian Embassy of the dire water situation in La Tolva prison. I have not yet received a reply.

Edwin and Raul's appeal cases are in limbo, shuffled from court to court only for the sole purpose of delaying them. Yet if their cases do come to trial and the appeals are heard and accepted, we must be prepared to pay for their bail, which may cost up to \$20,000 USD.

Fund-raising campaign

A Go Fund Me campaign has been launched to raise these needed funds. So far to date, one quarter of the money has been raised in less than four days. If you wish to donate to Edwin and Raul's campaign or find further information on the cause, please refer to the following:

www.gofundme.com/politicalprisonershn

The Simcoe County Honduras Rights Monitor and the Spring family thank all of those who support our cause and send their best wishes. We hope for success in Edwin and Raul's case soon.

From Honduras,
Janet Spring and the Simcoe County Honduras Rights Monitor
jspring2@lakeheadu.ca

'Roots of Migration' delegation update

From: Janet Spring [jspring2@lakeheadu.ca]

Sent: Friday, May 31, 2019

Our delegation has been going smoothly with some amazing stops. We have met very courageous resistance workers and human rights activist groups that support the resignation of Juan Orlando Hernandez. Actually everyone we have met is tired of the corruption and human rights violations that are occurring in all sectors of the country. The 'Fuera JOH' song is sung everywhere, and the slogan is seen countless times through the streets of the country.

As you have probably heard, the country is in a state of crisis right now with national strikes. Yesterday and today all medical workers and teachers are out on strike and the transportation sector has cooperated as well.

Today we had a meeting with the Canadian Embassy at 10:30 but had a hard time getting there due to the protests where people have blocked all of the major intersections and roads going in and out of the city. Then we went to the US embassy; the meeting there was cut short due to the action that set the embassy front entrance on fire. Our group was in lock down for a while.

Now we are at our hotel in Tegucigalpa and are waiting to see if we can carry on with our plans this evening where we are meeting with Carlos Reyes, the president of the bottlers' union. We hope that we can negotiate the roads later. But the protesters are doing an important job - trying to bring the government down, which is their only recourse to impunity, lack of fair judicial process, drug trafficking, an illegal corrupt president ... etc.

U.S. and Canadian government rhetoric

The embassy staff in both offices gave us the same rhetoric. Actually the US embassy was the worst, as the acting Charge d'Affairs, Dana Derree (a male) - didn't want to hear our questions but just spouted off

diplomatic BS and refused to acknowledge the corruption and insecurities in the country. It was ironic because his 'speech' was cut short with the attack on the embassy.

When we were walking to the Canadian embassy, the tear gas smell was very strong, strong enough to burn your nose. Military were firing teargas at the protesters a few blocks away. Karen said that it is the strongest she has ever smelled from such a big distance.

The Canadian embassy meeting was civil, unlike the US meeting; we met with Abebech Assifa, Linda Ehrichs, and Kyle Sundstrom on video conference from Costa Rica. Same rhetoric was spewed but at least they acknowledge the corruption and impunity of the JOH government.

Group visit to La Tolva

Yesterday, the whole group was successful in entering La Tolva and meeting with Edwin and Raul. It was sad and very depressing as many didn't realize what conditions they are living in. We were allowed almost 2 hours so we had a good chance to talk to them both and get their perspectives on the gang violence and control in the prison modules, and the day-to-day living in the prison.

Edwin and Raul realize I think that the only thing that is going to release them is the fall of the government, as their cases are both being passed from court to court and now are stalled while the judge overseeing their appeal case is on 'sick leave.'

“Little Canada” tourism corruption and violence

We have had some amazing meetings with indigenous Garifuna leaders from the Trujillo Bay area where all of the Canadian tourist projects are popping up and the older ones expanding. I am sending you a photo of the “NJOI” tourism compound entrance. They have two huge complexes of houses for sale and condominium time shares (I think they are time shares) all of which are on stolen Garifuna land.

It is very sad to hear about the struggles from the people who have lost this land as it had been in their possession since the late 1800s. Some of the Garifuna are reclaiming their land by coming in in groups to an area that has been fenced off (but not yet developed), carrying machetes and cutting down the fences. They then build small dwellings on these reclaimed areas and keep someone from the community there at all times to defend it.

So discouraging to see how corrupt these Canadian investors are. We actually had a discussion with the Canadian embassy about these nasty folks and they say they will follow up further.

We went to visit a wonderful children's community project in Rivera Hernandez, one of the worst barrios in San Pedro Sula (actually it is listed as the worst in the world for gang violence). Gang violence and extortion go hand in hand. I found a sad article about a man's experience trying to fight extortion: <https://www.insightcrime.org/investigations/gang-history-rivera-hernandez-honduras/>

The delegation has also gone to other areas and met leaders of the social movement, university students, and others. We also went to La Esperanza, Berta Caceres' home, met with her daughter and had a tour of the COPINH welcome centre - Utopia - and some of our delegates were interviewed on the community radio. An amazing experience!

I arrive home on June 6th as long as travel isn't interrupted. The protesters closed down the airport in Tegucigalpa yesterday and also vandalized many multinational fast food restaurants close to the airport

(McDonalds, Popeye, Burger King, and more. All of the owners of these franchises do not have to pay any taxes so they are always targets during the protests; they are owned by the richest oligarchy families in Honduras).

Feel free to re-publish any of this in an article and if you wish further information I can be reached on Whatsapp - Janet Spring - and it is linked to my cell number: 705-734-4238.

It has taken me almost a week to sit down and write this email. We have been on the move so much that by the time we stop for the night, I am so tired, I head to bed.

Thanks and take care
Janet

MORE INFORMATION

- “Honduran Presidents linked to drug-trafficking & money laundering, since U.S. & Canadian-backed coup ousted Honduras’ last democratic government”, <https://mailchi.mp/rightsaction/honduran-presidents-linked-to-drug-trafficking-money-laundering>
- “Whistleblowers, politicians & journalists needed in Ottawa: End 10 years of Canadian support for corrupt, repressive, anti-democratic regimes in Honduras”, by Rights Action, <https://mailchi.mp/rightsaction/whistleblowers-politicians-journalists-needed-in-ottawa>
- “Karen Spring strip-searched while visiting husband Edwin Espinal, a political prisoner in Honduras: Letter to PM Trudeau & Minister Freeland”, <https://mailchi.mp/rightsaction/karen-spring-strip-searched-while-visiting-husband-edwin-espinal-a-political-prisoner-in-honduras>
- “Request meeting between Spring family, PM Trudeau & Minister Freeland”, <https://mailchi.mp/rightsaction/request-for-meeting-between-spring-family-prime-minister-trudeau-minister-chrystia-freeland>

CONTACT

- Janet Spring, Simcoe County Honduran Rights Monitor, jspring2@lakeheadu.ca
- Karen Spring, Honduras Solidarity Network, spring.kj@gmail.com
- Grahame Russell, Rights Action, grahame@rightsaction.org

TAKE ACTION

Write to Canadian PM Trudeau and Minister Freeland, with copies to your MP, media and networks, expressing outrage at Canadian policies and actions that are ‘legitimizing’, enabling and empowering 10 years of corrupt, repressive, “pro-business” governments in Honduras.

TAX-DEDUCTIBLE DONATIONS TO RIGHTS ACTION

Your donations and grants will help Rights Action continue to fund community and human rights defenders groups in Honduras and Guatemala at the forefront of land, environmental, human rights and justice struggles, including work to free political prisoners and ‘criminalized’ community defenders.

Make check payable to "Rights Action" and mail to:

- U.S.: Box 50887, Washington DC, 20091-0887

- Canada: (Box 552) 351 Queen St. E, Toronto ON, M5A-1T8
Credit-card donations: <http://rightsaction.org/donate/>
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