**Ten years after the coup, repression rages in Honduras**

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July 2019

Just more than a decade ago this month, a coup led by a Central American general trained on American soil took place in Honduras. Since that fateful day, repression, violence, and the new regime have haunted the lives of the people of Honduras.

The situation is so dire, the United States should urgently reconsider the military aid we send there.

Thousands of desperate Hondurans have joined migrant caravans moving northward, crossing miles of dangerous terrain through Guatemala and Mexico in search of safety, refuge, and a better life in America.

Meanwhile, as the Trump administration slams the door shut on asylum seekers, the United States Department of Defense provides generous military aid to Honduran security forces, and works closely with its police and military, ostensibly to combat gangs, violence and drug trafficking.

Unfortunately, the Honduran security forces use our military support to terrorize the Honduran people, forcing them to flee their communities as those same security forces commit human rights abuses while engaging in violent criminal activity, including drug trafficking.

​It is well past time for the U.S. to cease providing military assistance to Honduran security forces, which have proven to be beset with drug traffickers and human rights abusers. Our nation must acknowledge that President Juan Orlando Hernández’s government is a repressive regime terrorizing its own people through intimidation and violence.

​For these reasons, I recently reintroduced the Berta Cáceres Human Rights in Honduras Act, which if passed, would immediately suspend funding for security aid and assistance to Honduras until the human rights abuses cease, and the perpetrators are brought to justice.

​[Berta Cáceres](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/04/world/americas/berta-caceres-indigenous-activist-is-killed-in-honduras.html?searchResultPosition=2) was a prominent environmental activist and leader of the Indigenous Lenca people of Honduras. She gave her life trying to protect her people’s beloved Gualquarque River from ruin causedby the construction of a hydroelectric dam.

On March 2, 2016, she was assassinated by members of the Honduran military and others working with Desarrollos Energéticos Sociedad Anónima (DESA), the company building the dam. While seven men — including the then head of intelligence for the Honduran military — have been convicted for her assassination, the evidence implicates many others, including members of an elite family in Honduras and a top political figure. They remain free despite worldwide calls for justice.

​Cáceres’s assassination is only the tip of the iceberg of criminal activity and human rights abuses committed by the Honduran military. In November 2017, President Juan Orlando Hernández ran for reelection in direct violation of the Honduran Constitution’s single-term limit, then claimed victory despite an unconstitutional candidacy and clear evidence of fraud.

Hondurans, heartbroken and outraged that their aspirations for a more humane and democratic government were thwarted once again, poured into the streets to peacefully protest. Honduran security forces, particularly the military police, responded by killing as many as 22 protesters and bystanders, according to a [United Nations report](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/HN/2017ReportElectionsHRViolations_Honduras_EN.pdf). State security forces used live bullets against peaceful protesters under orders from commanders at the top. Shamefully, financial support by the United States of America contributed to these acts of anti-democratic violence.

​Beyond these acts of violence, there is growing evidence that Honduran security forces are complicit in drug trafficking. The Minister of Security, Julian Pacheco Tinoco, [has twice been named in U.S. federal court](https://theintercept.com/2017/11/26/honduras-election-pacheco-security-minister-is-running-drugs-according-to-court-testimony/) indictments as overseeing drug trafficking flights while serving as a general in the Armed Forces. President Hernández’s own brother, Honduran Congressman Tony Hernández, has been in jail in New York since November 2018 on charges of drug and arms trafficking. These instances, [and many others](https://www.apnews.com/8fc59ef97060483091a8bec94a47ef14), reveal that high level officials in the Honduran government have a history of conspiring with drug traffickers over the years. And while the U.S. purports to fight drug trafficking by providing military aid and assistance to the Honduran military, the truth is that our aid enables the drug traffickers.

President Hernández’s answer to the security crisis has been a military takeover of policing. Just over a week ago, after a series of protests against the Honduran government’s moves to privatize healthcare and education, Hernández responded by directing the military to assume full command and control over the nation’s police force. At least two protestors have been killed, and over thirty were injured. This is nothing short of the criminalization of civil dissent. Meanwhile, as the crisis gets worse for the people of Honduras, on June 21, 2019, the Commander of the United States Southern Command traveled to Honduras to reaffirm and celebrate the U.S.’s commitment to the Honduran military. The United States urgently needs to reevaluate our support for a military that sustains a vicious regime.​

​When American journalists interview Honduran migrants in the caravans about why they are fleeing, their stories are full of death threats from the police and military, of police working with gangs, and of beatings, murders and terror committed by state security forces. As Honduras deteriorates with a collapsing economy and failing state services, this past October, U.S-backed military police in the Rivera Hernández neighborhood of San Pedro Sula shot and killed three children in a van as their father drove their 14-year-old pregnant sister to the hospital. As we hear these horror stories, the reason why Central American migrants choose to leave their homes to take the treacherous journey north seeking refuge, security and freedom, becomes crystal clear.

​The state of affairs in Honduras shows a government that terrorizes and represses its own people for the benefit of a corrupt few. Corruption has escalated dramatically since the June 28, 2009, military coup that deposed the democratically elected president Manuel Zelaya, and continues to worsen. As we recall those events just over a decade ago, we are remiss if we deny the inextricable link between the coup, and the violence, human rights abuse and disfunction of Honduras today.

​So, what is justice for the Honduran people? Where is their solace and refuge when our own nation, under the leadership of this president, creates cruel conditions at our border for those fleeing violence and repression? Let’s start in Washington. Let’s stop sending our tax dollars to the very police and military forces who kill children and peaceful protesters, terrorize human rights defenders, and extort small businesspeople while participating in drug trafficking.

The [Berta Cáceres Human Rights in Honduras Act](https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/1945) can help us to accomplish that. Ten years later, our response to the violence, impunity, and corruption of the Honduran government should be clear: not with our money, and not in our name.

*Rep. Hank Johnson is a member of the House Judiciary Committee and the Transportation & Infrastructure Committee. He chairs the Judiciary Subcommittee on Courts, Intellectual Property & the Internet.* ***He is the original sponsor of the Berta Cáceres Human Rights in Honduras Act.***

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