



Nicaragua-United States
Friendship Office
of the Americas



Religious Delegation to Honduras **December 6-12, 2012**

Purpose of delegation

This delegation to Honduras was organized by the Institute Justice Team of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas and the Friendship Office of the Americas for two purposes:

- to learn about the political, economic and social situation in Honduras in order to raise consciousness about the Honduran reality in the United States and to be more effective advocates with the United States government regarding justice and human rights Honduras.
- to offer a gesture of solidarity and accompany the people of Honduras, especially our own Mercy sisters and associates, at this time of crisis in their country.

Participants

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Delegation Leaders

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Brigitte Gynther, Honduras Accompaniment Project - interpreter

Cities/areas visited

San Pedro Sula
El Progreso
Caribbean coast – Triunfo de la Cruz
Tegucigalpa

Individual/Group meetings

- Sisters of Mercy and Mercy Associates
- Association of Judges for Democracy

- Casa Corazon de la Misericordia
- Forum of Women for Life
- Network of unions and NGOs working on labor rights
- Radio Progreso
- Padre Ismael Moreno, SJ, *Envio* correspondent, Honduras
- Center for Reflection, Investigation and Communication (ERIC)
- Network of Christian Communities of Resistance
- Triunfo Land Defense Committee
- Carlos H. Reyes, labor/social movement leader, former presidential candidate
- Maria Louisa Borjas, former police commissioner, Division of Internal Affairs; Candidate for Mayor of Tegucigalpa, 2012
- Rufino Rodriguez, National Coordinator of Delegates of the Word and Kolping Honduras
- Committee of Families of the Detained and Disappeared in Honduras (COFADEH); Berta Oliva
- Honduras Accompaniment Project (PROAH)
- United States Embassy, Tegucigalpa, Honduras

Historical Perspectives

The challenges facing Honduras today have a long history. In 1821, Central America achieved independence from Spain as one country. However, dissention soon followed and the region splintered into five weak republics (Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador Nicaragua and Costa Rica). It was in the interests of imperial Britain, local oligarchies (eleven or twelve families that control the country through their ownership of land, businesses, media, etc.) and the United States (which was rapidly becoming an influential player in the hemisphere) to prevent these countries from developing in ways that promoted local development and benefited workers and campesinos.

By the 1870s governmental reforms had fostered a community of interest between local oligarchs and U.S. investors. Banana plantations and mining emerged as cornerstones of the Honduran economy. This was a dependent capitalist model of development. Honduras did not develop its own model. Mining and banana companies controlled the government. The term *banana republic* was coined to describe poor tropical countries that depended on the export of one to two crops to undergird the economy. These countries were also plagued by weak governments, largely controlled by foreign investors.

In 1954, a strike by banana workers led to dramatic changes in the relationship between workers and companies. New measures supported unions, regulated the activities of corporations and protected the rights of indigenous peoples. By the 1970s and 80s, strong social movements had developed in Honduras. Private sector unions were even more powerful than public sector unions, and unions influenced the political process.

However, these developments were not looked upon favorably by the oligarchs and the United States. By the late 1970s, popular movements in Nicaragua and El Salvador were focusing attention on the grave injustices in the region and calling for radical changes that would promote greater equity. These changes threatened the status quo.

The response was low-intensity warfare in Central America. Honduras served as a base for United States sponsored counterinsurgency activity throughout the region, especially for the Reagan administration's Contra war against the Sandinista government in Nicaragua. Joint Task Force Bravo was created in 1984 "to exercise command and control of U.S. Forces and exercises in the Republic of Honduras, and is a subordinate command of the United States Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM)." [From JTFB Fact Sheet] The United States military continues to operate in Honduras.

Social progress achieved between 1954 and the 1980s began to collapse. Popular movements were weakened. There was targeted repression in which people disappeared or went into exile. Crime

increased, and the peace agreements reached at the end of the 1980s served to entrench the neoliberal (free market) economic model of development.

Significance of June 28, 2009 coup

On June 28, 2009, democratically elected Honduran President Jose Manual Zelaya was overthrown in a military coup. He was removed from the presidential palace in the middle of the night and flown to San Jose, Costa Rica. Later that day, the Honduran Congress voted him out of office, replacing him with the president of Congress, Roberto Micheletti.

Supporters of the coup claim that this action was necessary to preserve constitutional order. They say that Mr. Zelaya was taking steps to alter the constitution so that he could run for a second term. Many Hondurans dispute this claim. What President Zelaya was proposing was a national non-binding referendum to determine whether or not Honduras should hold a constituent assembly that would write a new constitution. Such an assembly would open the process to all sectors of society, something that the oligarchy opposed.

Zelaya's opponents used scare tactics to generate opposition to the referendum. They accused Zelaya of communist sympathies and ties to Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez and Castro's Cuba. They said under the new laws, children would be taken away from their parents and people's cars would be confiscated.

The real reason for the coup seems to lie in President Zelaya's failure to follow dictates from various sectors of the business elite and their international allies including the United States government. He raised the minimum wage to keep pace with the cost of living, lowered gas prices, gave land titles to *campesinos* who had been on the land for fifteen years and resisted efforts to privatize various sectors of the economy including telecommunications, ports, electricity and water. Even though Mr. Zelaya came from the upper classes, he broke with their interests.

In November 2009, elections backed by the United States government brought Porfirio "Pepe" Lobo Sosa to the presidency. Many candidates withdrew in protest and many Hondurans boycotted the elections. These elections took place in a climate of fear and intimidation and were not recognized by the international community. Yet, the United States recognized the new president. A number of social sectors within the "resistance movement" in Honduras still regard his Administration as illegitimate.

Since the coup, the situation in Honduras has gone from bad to disastrous. San Pedro Sula is now the most violent city in the world, surpassing even Ciudad Juarez, Mexico. Organized crime has taken over and infiltrated all sectors of society. Small businesses face extortion from gangs. Many sectors of the government are heavily involved in drug trafficking. The police are not effective; corruption is rampant in the Honduran police and military. There is a high degree of cross-over between organized crime and state security forces. Police and military have repeatedly used excessive force against peaceful protests. Community organizers are under attack and it is dangerous to support victims of violence and those working for social and economic change.

The Sisters of Mercy and Associates, who have been in Honduras since 1959, have invested much time, energy, and finances in ministries with the Honduran people. They also have experienced first-hand the violence that is pervasive in the country, including having been robbed several times at gunpoint and the abduction and disappearance of one of their co-workers—a mother of three young children and relative of a Mercy sister. They also have personally witnessed security forces attacking peaceful protest.

There are many conflicts in Honduras—politics, land, education, health—that are not being resolved. Lack of political will and leadership to resolve critical issues is resulting in entrenched and worsening violence. Poverty and economic inequality are becoming even more deeply entrenched, and many youth

are fleeing north to escape what feels like a “furnace of violence.” Factors contributing to this situation include: concentration of wealth, a military culture, an authoritarian culture, fragmentation of power, the accumulation of unresolved conflicts, discredited political parties and impunity.

One person described the political reality in Honduras today as *authoritarian democracy* and *armed neoliberalism*. He said the Honduran government is run by the rich for the rich. Honduran elites and business interests are closely aligned with international capital. Honduras has become a laboratory for implementation of the neoliberal trio: deregulation, privatization and the gutting of social programs. The United States military presence serves to assure the success of this plan.

Institutional Weakness/Corruption

Among the manifestations of institutional weakness in Honduras are a blatant disrespect for the rule of law and endemic corruption among those charged with upholding the law. The coup only exacerbated these issues. Two examples of this reality are the dismissal of four judges in 2009 and the corruption that characterizes the police. This corruption makes it all but impossible to investigate crimes and results in impunity for the perpetrators.

The four judges who were dismissed opposed the coup and called for a return to constitutional order. The removal of these judges was an attempt to weaken and destroy Judges for Democracy, a group that works to promote integrity within the judicial system and to address the problems facing Honduran society. The Supreme Court, which supported the coup, accused the judges of meddling in politics. Actually, it was the Supreme Court that acted in a political manner by supporting the coup. In Honduras, the Supreme Court appoints judges, and these appointments are often based on political considerations rather than on the qualifications of the candidate. The case is now before the Inter-American Human Rights Commission and will address the broader context of the issue which is the absence of the rule of law in Honduras. (Note: On the day our delegation left Honduras, Dec. 12, 2012, the National Congress removed four more judges of the Supreme Court, another demonstration of the lack of independence of the branches of government and breach in the rule of law.)

Police corruption is one of the most serious problems facing Honduras today. There is little if any effort to investigate the many crimes plaguing society. The citizenry has no confidence in the police department due to the high percentage of crimes which are committed by police. As a result, criminal activity is escalating because perpetrators know they will not be held accountable.

A twenty-six year veteran of the police force who was head of the division which investigates corruption among department personnel sent reports on the criminal activities of four officers to her superiors. Even though the evidence (including murder) against these officers was overwhelming and the court issued a warrant for their arrests, they were not removed and remained on the payroll. She sent the report to other government agencies and received no response. Instead, she was removed from her position and continues to receive death threats. Her family members also have been arrested and threatened with death. While these reports were issued several years before the 2009 coup, it is particularly noteworthy that several of the people implicated in her investigation were given key positions in the post-coup government; for example, Oscar Alvarez was named Minister of Security by Lobo, and Juan Carlos “el Tigre” Bonilla, is the current chief of the Honduran National Police.

The United States government continues to maintain a close relationship with the current national police chief, even though there is strong evidence that he had ties to death squads that operated in the 1980s. The U.S. Embassy denies that he currently has ties to death squads, and instead believes he is the best hope for cleaning up corruption in the force. His presence as head of the national police, however, engenders fear and sends a powerful message to those in social movements, some of whom are torture survivors and others who remember his past as an “assassin” responsible for the deaths of their loved ones.

The creation of joint police-military units within the police department is a very disturbing development in Honduras today, although the US Embassy expressed confidence that the model is working well in at least two areas. These units are reported to be trained in counterinsurgency tactics and follow military law, though paid for from the police budget. There are reports that the U.S. military is involved in this training. This move is reminiscent of the notorious *Battalion 316* death squad of the 1980s which enlisted off-duty police officers to murder labor leaders and others working for justice. It appears that death squads have made a comeback in Honduras.

While the United States is involved in training security forces with the justification of stopping narco-trafficking, given the deeply embedded structures of impunity, efforts focused on training and improving the investigative capacity of police have not been very effective. The overall impact has been to strengthen corrupt structures within the security forces and to further militarize the so-called drug war.

Labor Issues

The plight of workers has deteriorated significantly since the coup. Organized labor, which has been very involved in the resistance to the coup, has become a target, and there is a concerted effort to weaken and destroy unions. Such efforts are viewed as consistent with the neo-liberal (free market) model in which labor is seen as just another input into the productive process and the goal is to obtain it at the cheapest possible cost. This model is driven by transnational capital. Under this model, the role of government is simply to cut corporate taxes and gut environmental regulations in order to create a favorable climate for foreign investment.

Workers face harsh sweat-shop conditions including long hours, unrealistic production quotas, sexual harassment, health problems and reproductive health problems. The sweat-shop model (long hours and low wages) is being replicated in other industries such as melons, shrimp and fast-foods. Other issues include non-payment of the minimum wage and suppression of labor unions.

Laws dealing with hourly work have been especially destructive. Under these laws, hourly workers are not entitled to receive benefits such as collective bargaining and vacations, and up to forty percent of the workers at a company can be hourly employees. A worker from a beverage company said that 700 out of a total work force of 1,500 (almost half) at his company are hourly workers. It is very difficult for unions to organize when such a large percentage of the workers are hourly. Unionization is based on full-time, permanent work.

When the hourly employment decree was presented, beverage workers filed a complaint with the International Labor Organization (ILO) demonstrating that the provision would deprive workers of vacation and other benefits including collective bargaining. The government's response was that the ILO approved the provision for hourly workers. There are efforts underway, including a petition drive, to declare the hourly employment decree unconstitutional.

Because Honduras has failed to live up to its obligations under the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), workers have filed a complaint in Washington, D.C., citing CAFTA violations. The government of Honduras is not regarded as capable of addressing these issues. This complaint will also provide an opportunity to address the larger issue of so-called *free trade agreements*. It is becoming clear that one of the major goals of *free trade agreements* is to deregulate the labor market.

The undemocratic nature of free trade agreements was further demonstrated in a 2010 summit between the European Union and the countries of Latin America to craft a free trade agreement between these two blocs. Summit participants did not have access to the text of the agreement and there were no labor provisions.

Foreign Investment in Honduras

The banana industry in Honduras is controlled by Chiquita (the former United Fruit) and Dole (the former Standard Fruit). Up until the 1990s the banana industry in Honduras was highly unionized. Strong Honduran unions helped neighboring countries unionize. Banana workers in Honduras earn about \$12/day compared with only about \$4/day in Nicaragua. The banana companies have divided up Central America with most Central American bananas going to the United States. The U.S. has cheaper bananas than Europe. Conditions and wages are much worse in the flower industry.

U.S. companies such as Walmart have taken a foothold in Honduras, and fast food chains, including medium-priced chains from the U.S., are viewed as “having invaded the country” in terms of putting small, locally-owned restaurants out of business.

Land Issues

Conflicts over land also result from efforts to impose a neoliberal (free market) economic model on the people of Honduras. This struggle has come into sharp focus in the northern coastal areas of the country. During the 1800s, the British deported an Afro-indigenous people from the Caribbean island of St. Vincent to the north coast of Honduras. Today, their descendents, the Garifunas, form about fifty communities scattered along the coast. They make their living by farming, fishing, hunting and selling crafts made by the women.

As an indigenous community, the Garifuna’s hold communal title to their lands. This right is protected by the International Labor Organization’s (ILO’s) Convention #169. However, investors are now trying to obtain title to this prime beach front land to build hotels, resorts and other tourist attractions. Garifuna leaders told us that the Honduran government does not respect Convention #169. It is beholden to investors and passes laws to benefit business. The Garifuna people have experienced much persecution and one of their leaders had to seek political asylum. There are also informers within the community who collude with the government. It is a classic divide and conquer strategy.

This effort to confiscate Garifuna land began when the nearby city of Tela expanded the city limits to include the Garifuna community of Triunfo, and then proceeded to sell off parcels of Garifuna-titled land to city employees in an effort to divide the community, in violation of Convention #169. Developers told the people that the new tourist facilities would provide jobs.

The Garifunas said the government is taking away their lands and selling it to transnational corporations. The proceeds from these sales never reach the local communities; instead, it is used against them. In response, the community formed a committee for defense of the land. They feel that if they lose their land, they lose their culture. They also filed a case against the government with the Inter-American Human Rights Commission (IAHRC). The case is still in process and the Garifuna people are grateful for the international support they have received.

Another area where conflict over land is leading to violence is in the Bajo Aguan Valley in northeastern Honduras. Campesinos are locked in a struggle with wealthy landowner and industrialist Miguel Facussé, who wants the land to expand his African palm oil plantations. African palm oil, which is used for food and making soap, is now in demand as a biofuel. The area is highly militarized and about sixty campesinos have been murdered over the past two years.

Media and Communications

The Honduran media played a key role in keeping the population uninformed about what was happening during the June 28, 2009 coup. Media ownership in Honduras is concentrated in just a few hands so news

is carefully managed to serve the interests of corporate media owners. This void is filled by the community radio stations which provide in depth reporting and analysis of the situation in Honduras.

We visited Radio Progreso, a station founded by the Jesuits in 1956. RP's initial mission was literacy, basically *schools on the air*. However as the reality of the country changed RP adapted its mission to accompany campesinos and focus on land reform issues. It has played an important role in responding to disasters such as Hurricane Fifi (1974) and Hurricane Mitch (1998) and received Golden Microphone awards from the government on both occasions.

In 1979 Radio Progreso was closed down for the first time when it opposed government policies. Protests and demonstrations by RP supporters forced the government to allow the station to reopen. The station was closed down for a second time during the 2009 coup. Radio Progreso had been critical of the government prior to the coup. On the day of the coup, RP reported that a coup had actually taken place. This reporting was in stark contrast to the mainstream media which was telling people that nothing had happened and encouraged them to go about their daily lives.

Radio Progreso made the decision to close down to prevent the military from destroying their equipment. However, they explained to their listeners why they were taking this action. In the ensuing weeks, RP returned to the air and was able to provide context and analysis and create space for others to talk about the coup.

Community radio has also been critical for the Garifuna communities on the coast. The Garifuna community in the United States was instrumental in getting a Garifuna radio station up and running. It came just as the land issues were surfacing. In 1998, the military destroyed the station, but it was restored with assistance from Italy and Germany. As with Radio Progreso, those in power are threatened by the truth. The best way to silence the community is to destroy the radio station. On January 30, 2010, just seven months after the coup, the Garifuna radio equipment was stolen and the station was burned down. The police did not respond to this incident.

Journalism is a very dangerous profession in Honduras today. Since the coup, thirty-three journalists have been assassinated. Few of these cases have been investigated and nobody has been brought to trial. Other journalists and media workers, including Fr. Moreno, receive persistent death threats.

Plight of Women

The situation in Honduras today is especially precarious for women. In response to the violence, twelve women's groups have come together to establish the Forum of Women for Life. They focus on raising awareness of violence perpetrated against women by reporting, conducting training sessions, publicly demonstrating, providing analysis and creating safe spaces for women to draw strength from each other.

Like other areas of Central America and Mexico, Honduras has seen a rise in femicide, a targeted attack on women, especially young working women. While dozens of young women have been raped, disappeared or murdered, there is no effort on the part of the authorities to solve these crimes. A recent report by one of the local universities drew criticism because it underestimated the incidence of these attacks on women. Indeed, almost three years after the abduction and disappearance of Mercy's co-worker, Norma Hernandez, there has been no investigation into the case other than what the Mercy congregations had pursued.

The Forum recognizes that violence against women is not an isolated issue but has its roots in militarism, land issues and police corruption, areas that also impact Honduran society as a whole. They were very critical of U.S. policy which they said is responsible for much of the violence in Honduras. However, they made a distinction between the government and the people of the United States.

The women indicated that their concerns extend beyond Honduras to all of Latin America as the problems are similar throughout the region. They noted that femicide is also an issue in Guatemala. They are working with other Central American countries to bring a case before the Inter-American Human Rights Commission to declare femicide a crime.

After engaging in a conversation on how feminism is understood differently in the U.S. and Honduras, its very limited definition in our U.S. culture became clear. In Latin America, the understanding of feminism is more expansive, and the women shared that it includes addressing violence, equality, building a different society, and challenging patriarchy, exclusion and the established order.

The situation for women has gotten worse since the coup. The independent, civil society sponsored Commission of Truth includes in its report an emblematic case documenting a pattern of repression of peaceful protest and use of sexual violence against women on the part of state security forces. (*La Voz Mas Autorizada es de las Victimas*” p. 152) Threats have increased, a number of young people have been murdered and firearms are now more widely available. The new hourly labor laws have been particularly devastating for women who struggle to support their families. In many areas, women are the backbone of the economy. A male Garifuna leader told us that the community lives off the products that the women make and sell.

Youth and social exclusion

The Honduran government, according to the perspective of several analysts with whom we spoke, is implementing a policy of social exclusion directed at young people. Youth with few educational or employment options are turning to gang activity. The government uses violent methods to confront the gangs rather than provide constructive alternatives, which would require social investment. The Sisters of Mercy’s ministry, Casa Corazon, offered an example of a positive approach. While mostly working with young children and orphans with HIV, the program gives special attention to its teen residents so that they can navigate the challenges of gang culture and work to rise above it.

In the Garifuna communities on the north coast, parents are concerned that the goal of education is “learn so that you can migrate.” A large percentage of Honduran youth leave the country and many migrate to the United States. When people migrate they lose their connection to the land and an appreciation of the value of working the land. One person said, “We are becoming a Yankee culture.”

Role of the Church

Both Catholic and Evangelical hierarchies supported the June 2009 coup. Confused and troubled by this stance, Catholics and Evangelicals came together to form the Network of Christian Communities of Resistance. Over 300 people attended the first workshop to reflect on how they can be in solidarity with those who are opposing the coup and subsequent corruption of state institutions. This is an ecumenical movement, people coming together for something new, not a new church. They have issued declarations about human rights and land issues as part of a national resistance front committed to popular organizing.

The hierarchy has spoken out about violence in general but not against the coup. They talk about the outcome of the coup but not its causes. Members of the Network expressed sadness and a feeling that the Church leaders “owe the people an apology for support of the coup.” The Jesuits, Dominicans and some diocesan priests, however, did make public statements against the coup.

Many regard the hierarchy’s close relationship with the oligarchy as sharing a common interest in terms of preserving the economic structures and status quo. Early in President Zeyala’s administration, representatives from the business community and the church met with him to push for privatization of the phone company and other sectors including ports, electricity and water. It was not clear just why the

church was present at this meeting, but it demonstrates the close ties that exist between the hierarchy and the oligarchy.

Network members noted that the mission of the church is to bring light to the darkness and wondered aloud about how to do this when the church is in darkness. They called for a return to Liberation Theology, which they feel has been done away with by the hierarchy, and a return to the example of Jesus in the Scriptures. They read the documents of Vatican II and Medellin which envision an active role for the laity in the church. The Honduran institutional Church is very conservative, with an emphasis, they feel, on dos and don'ts. Opus Dei is also active.

Members of the Network also talked about global solidarity and the need for Christians around the world to unite in a wave of nonviolent resistance against neoliberalism, which is wreaking havoc across the globe, even in the industrialized countries. They said the coup was all about entrenching this model of development by turning the resources of Honduras over to private investors and international capital.

Fundamentalism

Fundamentalism has increased in Honduras since the coup. There have been attacks on the LGBT community and efforts are underway to bring a case before the Inter-American Human Rights Commission regarding sexual discrimination. Fundamentalist groups have also tried to change how human sexuality is covered in text books.

Access to reproductive health care is also under attack with efforts to criminalize emergency contraception. Cost of the Plan B morning- after contraceptive has gone from 30 to 150 lempiras, making it unaffordable for many Honduran women.

Role of the United States

United States intervention (overt and covert) in Honduras is nothing new. U.S. troops first landed in Honduras in 1905 and intervened four more times during the next twenty years. During the 1980s Honduras was the epicenter of U.S. military activity in Central America. Joint Task Force Bravo was established at this time and continues to operate out of the huge Palmerola air base outside of Comayagua. Embassy staff told us that 600 U.S. troops are currently stationed at Palmerola.

One of the most consistent themes we heard was that nothing happens in Honduras without the knowledge and blessing of the United States and that Honduras is run from the U.S. Embassy. There is little doubt among Hondurans that the United States was involved in the June 28, 2009 coup, even though initially the U.S. government distanced itself from the coup and called for a return to constitutional order.

United States intervention in Honduras today is carried out with the justification of combating drug trafficking. However, these efforts seem to be bearing little fruit and many Hondurans see the role of the U.S. military as bolstering the power of the oligarchy and transnational capital and making Honduras an attractive and safe venue for foreign investment.

Hondurans are very concerned about the militarization of their country, a phenomenon that is generating ever greater levels of violence. The social movement and religious leaders with whom we met repeatedly said that they want an end to U.S. military aid. One of the leaders of the Garifuna community on the north coast said that "if Americans want to help us, they can send farm implements to help us grow our own food, not weapons."

There are serious questions about the involvement of U.S. military personnel and U.S. training and equipping of Honduran security forces involved in several high profile killings. For example, in May, a U.S. donated vehicle was involved in an incident that left a 15-year-old boy dead. The particular police

unit had been vetted by the U.S., and a superior officer that had been trained at WHINSEC and the Naval Postgraduate School, attempted to cover up the killing by eliminating evidence. The Embassy was quick to say that the person who pulled the trigger in this killing was not vetted. However, the U.S. Congress suspended a portion of military and police aid to Honduras due to concerns about killings and allegations of abuse on the part of U.S. and Honduran Security forces in 2012.

In another case, in the Moskitia indigenous municipality of Ahuas, four civilians, including at least one pregnant woman, were gunned down by troops in a U.S. helicopter in May 2012. Both U.S. and Honduran soldiers were on board the helicopter at the time of the killings. At least ten U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) agents participated in the mission as members of a Foreign-Deployed Advisory Support Team (FAST). The U.S. Embassy maintains that the boat (a water taxi) was involved in the transport of drugs, shots had been fired and that the soldiers acted in self-defense. The U.S. Embassy account is contradicted by testimony from survivors and eye-witnesses. Investigations carried out by both national and international human rights organizations find that U.S. DEA agents played a lead role in the operation and are calling on the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee and the Judicial Committee of the House of Representatives to begin an in-depth investigation.

The U.S. Embassy has expressed a commitment to reduce violence in Honduras through police reform and the provision of training in investigative procedures. However, this expressed commitment is highly questioned by Honduran and international human rights organizations given the U.S. backing of Bonilla as Chief of Police despite widespread and serious allegations that he is responsible for grievous human rights abuses. There is also a high level of concern regarding U.S. support for the military assuming police functions in Honduras. The U.S. commitment to police reform in Honduras would be more credible if its position were consistent and coherent; insisting on respect for the rule of law and human rights in the entire chain of command and in clear demarcation of police vs. military functions.

The U.S. Embassy has made public statements on the importance of human rights and addressing impunity in Honduras, as well as dedicated staff to investigate particular cases of human rights violations, including giving special attention to “vulnerable groups” such as the LGBT community and journalists.

While these actions are important, the staff with whom we met dismissed our request for the U.S. to acknowledge an ongoing pattern of repression directed against social movements, human rights defenders and others in the political opposition. Embassy staff made reference to “conspiracy theories” and to “lovers’ quarrels” that often can be the “real reason why violence occurs”. With regard to the case of Antonio Trejos, the beloved lawyer of the land rights movement in the Aguan area killed last September, the Embassy disputed that there was a political motive and cautioned that the forensic report could well indicate otherwise. (Note: Trejos had received a series of death threats. Prior to his murder, Trejos had warned that he feared being killed by large landowner Miquel Facusse. Our delegation met Trejo’s grieving siblings just hours before our meeting at the Embassy, thus the way in which the Embassy quickly dismissed the political motives for his assassination was particularly distressing.)

Such posturing to dismiss patterns of politically targeted violence which have been well documented by human rights organizations, and its eager defense of the Honduran government and trust in the Honduran government’s investigations, helps explain why so many of the groups with whom we met carry deep distrust of the Embassy. Rather than elevating its friendly relationship with the Honduran government, many believe that a far more productive role would be for the U.S. to distance itself until the Honduran government demonstrates political will and takes definitive action to address corruption and impunity.

Senior State Department officials from Washington have travelled to Honduras to reinforce the message that the United States is concerned about human rights violations in Honduras, which is a positive step. However, U.S. reliance on a militarized approach to the drug war, the touting of its close ties to the Honduran oligarchy and government, including police officials with horrendous human rights records, and resistance to acknowledging repression of the political opposition-- all serve to reinforce that for the

U.S., economic interests trump human rights. This cannot be a winning strategy, and further damages broader U.S.-Latin America relations.

Signs of Hope

Even in the midst of tremendous violence and injustice, the people of Honduras who are working for their communities live in hope. They expressed being inspired by the good people around them who are trying to live with integrity. Hope also comes from the ordinary activities of daily life, including initiatives at the local level to promote nonviolence as well as many movements working for social change. The people are survivors. Even though they live in fear, they are concerned about each other.

Honduran religious leaders expressed that they draw strength from knowing that people outside the country are praying for them and are bringing their concerns to the attention of the United States government and international bodies. They speak of the need for all the people of Honduras to open their eyes to the injustices as well as the distorted information in the mainstream media and to examine who is benefitting from all the poverty and violence that surrounds them. They said elements include:

- The army is at the service of the oligarchy
- Transnational capital is at the root of the oppression in Honduras
- Honduras is being sold off (privatized) to Honduran business interests and companies in the United States, Canada and Europe

Areas for U.S. Policy Attention

There was overwhelming consensus among the individuals and groups who spoke with us that the United States is playing a critical role in the political, economic and social life of Honduras and that this role is destructive to the well-being of the majority of Hondurans. There are grave concerns about U.S. military activity in Honduras. Some questions to pursue with the U.S. State Department are:

What is the extent of U.S. military involvement in Honduras?

Embassy staff told us that the U.S. military is present to help the Honduran military and police confront narco-trafficking. They also told us that the Honduran military operates the Palmerola base and that the U.S. is simply there in an auxiliary capacity. This is not what we heard from Hondurans. In Honduras, Palmerola is seen as a U.S. base under the control of the U.S. Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM).

Hondurans also noted that most of the consumers of drugs are in the United States and Europe. If the U.S. was serious about eradicating the illegal drug trade, a more effective strategy would be to establish programs to stem demand in the United States.

What role is the U.S. military playing in the training of the police?

There are questions about the involvement of the U.S. military in the training and vetting of police units. This is a concern because it blurs the lines between military action and community policing. Here again, the justification was that the U.S. is helping the Honduran police go after drug traffickers.

There have not been satisfactory explanations for the extent of U.S. military involvement in the murder of a fifteen-year-old boy by a police unit vetted by the United States or the murder of four civilians traveling in a water taxi in the Ahuas region. The boat was attacked by a U.S. helicopter carrying both Honduran and U.S. military personnel.

Why does the U.S. continue to support individuals implicated in corruption and death squads?

There is overwhelming evidence, for example, linking police chief “el Tigre” Bonilla to

corruption and death squad activity, yet the U.S. Embassy continues to support him. This stance undermines any U.S. claim that it is promoting human rights and the rule of law in Honduras.

What can the U.S. do to press Honduras to respect international law? There were several instances where various groups reported on efforts to bring cases to the attention of international bodies, as they feel they have no recourse within their country. What can we do to support these endeavors?

Garifuna communities and Convention #169 (International Labor Organization)

This convention protects the rights of indigenous peoples to their lands. The Garifuna communities have brought a case to the ILO to protect their lands from sale to developers. They said that the current Honduran government does not respect Convention #169 and that it enacts laws and implements policies that favor international investors.

Garifuna communities and the Inter-American Human Rights Commission

The Garifuna community has also filed a case with the Inter-American Human Rights Commission to protect their lands.

Labor groups and the International Labor Organization (ILO)

Labor groups are very concerned about labor legislation that is eliminating full-time work in favor of hourly wage labor without benefits. These laws are seen as an attack on working people and a method to destroy unions. Labor groups are preparing to file a complaint with the International Labor Organization.

Labor groups and the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA)

The rights of workers are also being violated under provisions of the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) and there are plans to file a complaint in Washington, D.C. The Honduran government is not capable or willing to address these issues.

Femicide and the Inter-American Human Rights Commission

Women's groups in Honduras are working to have femicide declared a crime and have filed a case with the Inter-American Human Rights Commission.

Judicial integrity and the Inter-American Human Rights Commission

Judges for Democracy is working to reinstate the four judges who were dismissed because of their opposition to the June 28, 2009 coup. This was a blatantly political move. Judges for Democracy is bringing the case before the Inter-American Human Rights Commission.

Commission of Truth Report, "La Voz Mas Autorizada es la de las Victimas"

The independent, civil society led Commission of Truth report calls for the investigation and sanction of the intellectual and material authors of the coup d'état and resultant human rights violations and for annulment of the January 2012 Amnesty Law. The report also calls for an end to military and security agreements between the U.S. and Honduras and closure of U.S. military bases in Honduras.

It will be a challenge to press the U.S. government to work with Honduras on these issues given the dismal record of U.S. compliance with international law and its history of contentious relationships with international bodies.

Need to continue advocacy efforts

There is a need for U.S. citizens to speak out about the situation in Honduras and press for policy changes that address the above-mentioned concerns. Human rights groups within Honduras continue to provide reports and other information to resource these efforts and they need to be made available to U.S. policy-makers.

We were especially encouraged to continue the following:

- Promoting congressional letters on human rights and the need for U.S. policy change in Honduras (such as the one Representative Howard Berman sent to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on October 2, 2012)
- Lobbying to suspend military and police aid
- Calling local police stations when someone is abducted
- Fostering people-to-people solidarity efforts, like this delegation

Summary

The spiral of violence and poverty in Honduras today has deep roots in efforts to impose an economic model that serves the interests of the economic elite and international capital rather than the needs and aspirations of the majority of the Honduran people. The resources of Honduras—land, minerals, forests and even the labor of its people—are looked upon as commodities to be exploited for profit. These profits accrue to transnational corporations and local elites rather than to the country and its citizens, leading to the increasing concentration of wealth in few hands.

Since this model is so destructive to the lives of ordinary people, it has to be enforced by violent means. The June 28, 2009 coup was carried out to remove a president who was not carrying out this plan to the satisfaction of national and international investors. The cornerstones of the neoliberal philosophy are the selling off of the nation's assets to private investors (privatization), the gutting of regulations that are seen as detrimental to business, even laws enacted to protect workers, consumers and the environment (deregulation), and cutting government spending, particularly by eliminating programs that serve basic human needs, such as education, health care and subsidies for food and fuel.

Under the justification of assisting Honduras stamp out narco-trafficking, the U.S. government is playing a crucial role in promoting and maintaining these neoliberal (free market) economic policies. The U.S. military has close ties to both the Honduran military and police, despite their involvement in human rights violations and corruption. Joint Task Force Bravo, a cooperative arrangement between the U.S. and Honduran militaries, has been in effect since 1984.

The Honduran people are very much opposed to the presence of the U.S. military in their country and see U.S. military aid as a prime contributor to the endemic corruption and impunity which characterizes institutional life in Honduras today and leads to high levels of violence. Honduran elites are partners with the United States in this project. Those Hondurans who are excluded by this model call on U.S. citizens to act in solidarity with them and advocate for an end to U.S. military involvement in Honduras. Instead, what is most needed are policies and practices that eliminate impunity and that promote justice and long term sustainable development so that the dignity and basic needs for the majority of Hondurans are met.