

## Honduras Coup Exposed Rapid-Response Delegation Findings *De Facto* Regime Maintained Through Violence and Repression

### Witness in Honduras

Between September 5 and September 12, 2009, a ten-member delegation representing Witness for Peace traveled to Honduras in response to accusations of wide-spread human rights abuses on the part of the *de facto* Honduran government led by Roberto Michelleti.

During our time in Honduras we received testimony of massive human rights violations committed by police and military forces in the wake of the *coup d'etat*. The *de facto* regime is maintained through violence and repression, with police and military cracking down on peaceful protestors. Independent media outlets have been threatened and some have been taken off the air. Opposition voices, members of Honduran social movements, and human rights workers have become targets of repression.

Though the U.S. State Department has increased pressure on the *de facto* regime in recent weeks through the revocation of visas and the cutting of aid, these steps were delayed and do not represent the full spectrum of actions available to the U.S. if it is to unequivocally support the return of Constitutional order in Honduras. Such an ambiguous approach by the United States – marked by delays in decision making around Honduras and convoluted messages about the U.S. stance towards the *de facto* government – has undoubtedly served to prolong the regime's duration in power.

The following report provides an in-depth account of our delegation's findings, offers recommendations to the U.S. government, U.S. citizens, and international media, and is followed by an analysis of the U.S. response to the coup and underlying U.S. policy in Honduras. A delegation itinerary can be found at the end of the report.



Witness for Peace delegates accompany a peaceful march in Tegucigalpa, forming a "fourth line" between police and protestors.



Military and police forces surround and repress peaceful marches. Brutal human rights violations have been committed in the wake of the *coup d'etat*.

## Delegation Findings

From information we received while in Honduras and our experiences on the ground, our delegation concludes that the events that occurred on June 28, 2009 in Honduras constitute a military backed *coup d'état*. The role of the Honduran armed forces in the realization of the *coup d'état* and the maintenance of the *de facto* regime was and continues to be vital. Though the *de facto* regime has chosen to install former President of the National Congress Roberto Michelletti as "interim president," thereby providing a civilian face in the highest government position, it is only through the complicity and support of the armed forces that the *de facto* regime maintains power in Honduras. Military personnel patrol the streets, set up road-blocks, and surround peaceful protests throughout Honduras. The *de facto* regime argues that that Manuel Zelaya's removal by the armed forces has a legal basis in an arrest warrant issued by the Supreme Court. However, we were informed that this legal argument is unsubstantiated for a number of reasons, including a) the fact that the Supreme Court order was not released until after Zelaya's removal, b) the Constitution of Honduras explicitly outlaws the forced expatriation of a Honduran citizen and, c) the armed forces are subject to the authority of the President of Honduras.<sup>1</sup> The military nature of the *coup d'état* is being denied by the *de facto* regime.

Our witness in Honduras gives us cause to support the findings of international human rights organizations including Amnesty International and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, which reveal and denounce serious and systemic violations of human rights since the June 28 *coup d'état*. We documented many reports of human rights violations, including violence and threats against social activists, opponents of the coup regime, and independent media; arbitrary arrest and imprisonment; beatings; torture; sexual harassment, assault, and rape; disappearances; death threats; and even assassinations. All of these are committed with the obvious aim of silencing opposition voices. These horrific violations of basic human rights have been widely reported and documented, yet they have not been investigated by the *de facto* regime's Public Ministry (Justice Department), Attorney General's office, or Human Rights Commission. (See insets for information on two individual cases we bore witness to)

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**Crisna Peña**, a social work student in Tegucigalpa, joined the resistance movement in the days following the coup. She was one of thousands of Hondurans that attempted to reach the Honduras-Nicaragua border in July to welcome constitutional president Manuel Zelaya. Crisna walked through numerous military roadblocks on her way to the border, enduring the harassment of police and military personnel ("Whore. You're only in the streets because you don't have a husband that has sex with you"). Upon arriving in Danli in southern Honduras, Crisna and other peaceful protestors were attacked by the police and military with tear-gas, nightsticks and metal rods. An illegal curfew was put into place that lasted for 24 hours. She attempted to avoid arrest during the curfew by hiding in different homes. However, Crisna was discovered, arrested and held captive in a soccer stadium by police for days without food. Upon her release she learned that the body of a close friend and fellow protestor, **Pedro Magdiel Muñoz** - who was last seen in police custody - had been discovered in a field showing signs of torture. Crisna knows that the assassination of her friend and her own arrest and torture are actions intended to put an end to the resistance movement. She vows to continue the struggle for the restoration of Constitutional order in Honduras.



Body of Pedro Magdiel Muñoz



On August 12, 2009, **Milko Durán Céspedes**, a Colombian national born in Venezuela, was in a hotel in downtown Tegucigalpa. He had been in Honduras for a number of days vacationing with his girlfriend. Milko decided to leave the hotel in the late afternoon, believing that day's protest to have ended. He was detained by police upon leaving the hotel. Police said that he matched the description of a suspect charged with assault on a Congressman. Upon arriving at the police station it was discovered that Milko possessed a Venezuelan passport. Police claimed that he was an "agent of Chavez" sent to Honduras to cause disturbances. Milko was held in jail for one week and charged with "acts of terrorism." While in jail he was tortured: officers beat him and threatened to use electric shock or cut off his fingers if he refused to sign a confession. Milko signed and is currently on restricted release that does not allow him to leave Honduras.

*(Delegation Findings continued...)*

The *de facto* regime is supported by important actors from a number of Honduras' most powerful institutions. Manuel Zelaya's ouster has been supported by the presidential candidates for the scheduled November 29, 2009 elections from both the Liberal and National parties (Elvin Santos and Porfirio Lobo, respectively). The National Congress, Supreme Court, Public Ministry (Justice Department), Attorney General's office and Human Rights Commissioner's office have all either publicly declared support for or acted in complicity with the *de facto* government. A huge majority of the Hondurans we interacted with pointed to the business elite as the main supporters and beneficiaries of the *coup d'état*. The Catholic hierarchy (including Cardinal Oscar Rodriguez) and leaders of the Evangelical Church (including outspoken Pastor Evelio Reyes) have made statements defending the *de facto* regime. The coup has left Honduras a society deeply divided. While exact figures are hard to procure, it is clear that there are both portions of society that support Michelleti's government portions that are deeply disturbed

by the collapse of Constitutional order in Honduras and express a deep mistrust of Honduran governmental institutions, religious institutions and the business sector. On multiple occasions we were told by Honduran citizens that the *coup d'état* and the determined opposition it has faced are manifestations of class struggle in a country that sees 70% of its population living under the poverty line and 40% subsisting on less than \$2 per day.

It is important to recognize these profound divisions - especially those of socio-economic nature - that the June 28 coup has brought to the surface within Honduran society. Most international media outlets present a picture of the situation in Honduras as one that can be resolved through the simple return of Manuel Zelaya. Though Manuel Zelaya's return is demanded by the Honduran social movements as a necessary pass towards the restoration of Constitutional order, they have also moved towards a position that recognizes the convening of a National Constituent Assembly and the writing of a new constitution with broad input and representation from diverse social sectors as the basis of their struggle. While the return of Manuel Zelaya under the negotiated San Jose talks would undoubtedly help to pacify the situation on the ground in Honduras, it will not mean an end to Honduras' political crisis. We wish to express our deep concern that this continuing crisis might see new, violent eruptions as pressures mount surrounding the scheduled November 29, 2009 elections. The *de facto* regime claims that these elections will provide a legitimate avenue towards the restoration of Constitutional order in Honduras. The National Front Against the Coup in Honduras is thus far calling for a boycott of the elections.

<sup>1</sup> Interview with Jari Dixon, September 6, 2009, Tegucigalpa, Honduras



## Delegation Recommendations

Following our week in Honduras, our delegation strongly urges:

### *The United States government:*

- 1) To immediately and unequivocally condemn the violent and brutal tactics being used by the *de facto* regime against peaceful protestors, human rights organizers, independent media, and opposition voices generally
- 2) To make a clear statement, especially now that Manuel Zelaya is in Honduras and the San Jose accords have been rejected by the *de facto* regime, that the only acceptable resolution for the U.S. government is a return to constitutional order through the reinstatement of Manuel Zelaya as the legitimate President of Honduras
- 3) To unequivocally state that elections held under the *de facto* regime will not be recognized by the United States
- 4) To immediately take stronger action against the *de facto* regime, including the freezing of coup member's assets in the United States and the implementation of targeted trade sanctions
- 5) To launch an independent investigation into the interactions between the U.S. Embassy and U.S. government officials and members of the *de facto* regime in the period leading up to and following the *coup d'etat* in Honduras

### *The United Nations, Organization of American States and human rights organizations:*

- 1) To provide permanent human rights observation delegations in Honduras while the *de facto* government remains in power

### *The U.S. and international media:*

- 1) To immediately increase presence in Honduras
- 2) To provide nuanced coverage of the events occurring in Honduras, including coverage of the repressive measures taken by the *de facto* regime against peaceful protestors, human rights workers, and independent media
- 3) To submit all reports and releases to a rigorous process of fact-checking

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Berta Oliva of COFADEH speaks with the Witness for Peace delegation. COFADEH has played an essential role in documenting and reporting human rights violations following the coup. Its offices have been tear-gassed on multiple occasions and various members of its staff have been threatened.



Graffiti in Tegucigalpa. Few media outlets report on the resistance and independent media sources have been attacked, threatened, and removed from the air.



(Recommendations continued...)

**U.S. Citizens:**

- 1) To call the State Department at (202) 647-4000 and deliver the following message:  
"Work for the unconditional immediate reinstatement of President Zelaya. Pressure the Honduran military to stop the violence against the people and their democratically elected president, Mel Zelaya."
- 2) To call the White House comment line at (202) 456-1111 and deliver the same message
- 3) To contact your members of Congress and demand that they support a return to Constitutional order in Honduras. Tell them to support to the Delahunt-McGovern Resolution (H Res. 630) demanding the return of legitimate president Manuel Zelaya
- 4) To remain informed about the events unfolding in Honduras



By the second week of the crisis the United States was breaking ranks with the rest of the international community (including the Organization of American States, the European Union, and the United Nations) by refusing to call for the "immediate and unconditional" return of elected-President Manuel Zelaya. Rather, Hillary Clinton and the State Department began pushing forward with plans for negotiations to be held between Zelaya's government and the *de facto* regime under the mediation of Costa Rican President Oscar Arias. Though the U.S. claims not to recognize the *de facto* government as a legitimate actor, the so-called "San Jose accords" offered the *de facto* government an international forum in which its demands would be recognized and incorporated into negotiations. The U.S. State Department also refused to offer a legal classification of the military *coup d'etat* as such, thereby delaying a decision as to whether all non-humanitarian aid to Honduras would be revoked (to the date such a definition has not been offered).

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### United States Response to the Coup

Statements by President Barack Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton condemning the coup in its immediate aftermath and the announcement that military aid and military cooperation with Honduras would be terminated were taken as signs that U.S policy in Latin America was indeed taking a new direction and that the *de facto* government would be vigorously opposed by the administration. However, the approach of the United States to Honduras in the nearly three months that have passed since the *de facto* government took power has, at best, been ambiguous.



U.S. Embassy building in Tegucigalpa

While U.S. aid managed through the Millennium Challenge Corporation was suspended the day following a *coup d'état* in Mauritania and three days after a *coup d'état* in Madagascar, the Millennium Challenge Corporation did not announce a suspension of aid to Honduras until September 9, 2009 – seventy-three days after the coup took place.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, of the \$215 million allotted in the Millennium Challenge Corporation agreement with Honduras, only \$15 million will finally be terminated because the rest has been earmarked for spending and its termination would cause legal complications.<sup>3</sup>

Powerful lobbyists with direct links to the Clinton family, including Lanny Davis (who served as White House counsel to President Bill Clinton) and Bennet Ratcliff (who also has ties to the former president), were hired to advise the *de facto* government.<sup>4</sup> Unconfirmed reports allege that former U.S. ambassador to Honduras and current advisor to Secretary of State Clinton, John Negroponte, was in Honduras in the weeks before the coup took place in meetings with future members of the *de facto* government (the U.S. Embassy denies that this visit took place). While ambassadors in Honduras from Latin America and the European Union were withdrawn, U.S. Ambassador to Honduras Hugo Llorens was not called back from his post. The U.S. Embassy claims that he has no direct contact with the executive branch of the *de facto* government, but serves to pressure the business elite in Honduras to accept the San Jose accords. Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of the U.S. reaction to the coup and its aftermath has been the administration's silence surrounding the massive violations of human rights the *de facto* regime is committing. Thus far we have not seen a willingness on the part of Washington to openly recognize (much less strongly condemn) the brutal methods by which Michelletti's government is maintaining power.

Such an ambiguous approach by the United States – marked by delays in decision making around Honduras and convoluted messages about the U.S. stance towards the *de facto* government – has undoubtedly served to prolong the *de facto* government's duration in power. This ambiguity reinforces the necessity of an independent investigation into the actions of the U.S. Embassy and the U.S. military at the Soto Cano Airbase in Honduras in the period leading up to and following the *coup d'état*. Full transparency in regards to U.S. government actions is imperative.



The U.S. Embassy in Tegucigalpa has been the site of many peaceful protests.

The recent increase in pressure on the *de facto* government by the United States, including the revocation of visas of coup participants, must be applauded. The announcement that the U.S. will not accept the scheduled November 29, 2009 elections if Zelaya is not returned to power is also a positive sign. However, with the breaking news that Zelaya has covertly returned to Honduras and with the increased repression of peaceful protests that we have already seen, the U.S. must take a strong stance condemning any violence against the population on the part of police and military forces, and must support the return to Constitutional order through Zelaya's reinstatement as president. This holds true even though Zelaya's return did not take place under the stipulations of the San Jose accords, which the *de facto* government is now claiming are defunct. Even if Zelaya is reinstated quickly, the scheduled November elections must be approached with extreme caution as their ability to be held in a fair and transparent manner in the wake of the *de facto* government's extended rule is very questionable.

<sup>2</sup> Main, Alexander and Jake Johnston, "The Millennium Challenge Corporation and Economic Sanctions: A Comparison of Honduras with other Countries". CEPR, August 2009. <http://www.cepr.net/documents/publications/mcc-sanctions-2009-08.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Nathan Macklin, U.S. Embassy, September 11 2009, Tegucigalpa

<sup>4</sup> Democracy Now. "US Lobbyists with Clinton Ties Hired to Defend Honduran Coup Regime". July 15, 2009. <http://www.democracynow.org/2009/7/15/honduras>

## United States Policy in Honduras:

The *coup d'état* of June 28, 2009 does not exist in a vacuum. As many Hondurans related to us, the coup and its aftermath represent the explosion of social tensions that have been bottled for decades. Certain policies that Manuel Zelaya adopted during his presidency (including Honduras' entrance into Petrocaribe, an expanded relationship with Venezuela through ALBA, a sixty-percent increase in the minimum wage, and efforts to hold a non-binding referendum to determine the public's perception of a proposal to rewrite the Honduran Constitution) were perceived as threats to a political and economic *status quo* that the political and business elite refused to see disrupted. The implementation of these policies served as the catalyst for the *coup d'état*. The coup, in turn, has served as catalyst to underscore and give definition to pre-existing social divisions. As U.S. citizens concerned with the role of U.S. policy in Honduras, we find it important to address not only the current response on the part of the U.S. to the *coup d'état*, but also to analyze the historical relationship between Honduras and the United States and to critique the underlying U.S. policy that has often contributed to social and economic inequality in Honduras.

Honduras has a long and sordid historical relationship with the United States, and especially with U.S.-based transnational companies. The overwhelming influence of transnational fruit companies (especially Standard Fruit and United Fruit) throughout the first half of the twentieth century earned Honduras the title "banana republic." These companies were granted massive concessions during this period, most importantly the rights to control land surrounding company-built railroads. Land concessions through railroad construction left the fruit companies with ownership over vast areas of land in northern Honduras. The companies wielded their immense power to shape Honduran law to their liking – buying off politicians; creating mercenary armies; even relying on U.S. naval support to suppress strikes on banana plantations.

The signing of a 1954 bilateral military assistance agreement would mark the beginning of Honduras' use by the U.S. as a strategic stronghold in Central America from which the U.S. could exert influence and carry out its policy in the region. The agreement granted the U.S. nearly unfettered military access in Honduras in return for the training of the Honduran army. In 1961 Honduras was used as a training base and launching pad for the failed Bay of Pigs invasion in Cuba.

Honduras' importance within U.S. geopolitical strategy was renewed in the 1980s following the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua and the "threat" presented by the FMLN in El Salvador. In 1982 Honduras added an annex to the 1954 military agreement that allowed for the stationing of U.S. troops in Honduras. The United States provided Honduras with \$1.6 billion in assistance throughout the 1980s, most of which went towards military training and helped to support the U.S.-backed "Contra" forces, which were stationed in Honduras on the border with Nicaragua and waged a "low-intensity" war on the Sandinista government throughout the decade.

Neoliberal economic policy was adopted early on in Honduras. Through agreements signed with the IMF and World Bank, the Honduran government was forced to adopt policies that prioritized foreign investment, urged the privatization of state companies, and cut back state funding for health care and education. As a result of these policies salaries in Honduras were kept stagnant for nearly the entire decade of the 1980s. Most recently, Honduras signed the Dominican Republic-Central American Free Trade Agreement (DR-CAFTA), going into effect in 2006. DR-CAFTA follows the model of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which has contributed to drastic increases in rural poverty in Mexico, created a greater dependency on unstable jobs provided by hyper-mobile multinational companies within the Mexican economy, and ushered in an ever-widening income equality gap.

The social divisions and inequalities that have been reinforced by U.S. policy in Honduras have become strikingly clear as a result of the *coup d'état*. The coup was heavily financed and supported by the Honduran business elite, which is intimately tied to multinational corporations. Honduran families that control the *maquila* (garment-assembly factory) sector and the fast food franchises (fast food chains are granted massive tax exemptions in Honduras) are known to have supported the coup. A number of military officers that carried out the *coup d'état*, including General Romeo Vasquez, were trained at the infamous School of the Americas (now renamed the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation). As we look towards the future in search of a Honduras that can be stable, peaceful, and less rift with social and class divisions, U.S. economic and military policy in Honduras must be modified to be supportive of justice and sustainable economic models.

## Itinerary in Alphabetical Order

Our itinerary while in Honduras included meetings with:

- **Dr. Juan Almeyda**, director of the Center for Prevention, Treatment and Rehabilitation of Victims of Torture and their Family Members (**CPTRT**)
- **Jari Dixon**, lawyer with the Honduran Attorney General's Office
- **Blanca Dole**, director of the Cooperative of Feminist University Women (**COFEMUN**)
- **Blanca Guifarro**, retired university professor, author and founder of the Women's and Feminist Studies program at the National Autonomous University (UNAH)
- **Nathan Macklin**, U.S. embassy representative from the Politics and Human Rights division
- **Father Ismael Moreno, Aracely Medina, and Karla Rivas** of the Jesuit Team for Reflection, Investigation and Communications (**ERIC**) and of **Radio Progreso** in El Progreso
- **Berta Oliva**, director of the Committee of Family Members of the Detained and Disappeared in Honduras (**COFADEH**)
- **Nectali Rodezno**, co-director of the Association of Lawyers Against the Coup
- **Father Andres Tamayo**
- Representatives of the **Trade Union Confederation of the Workers of Honduras (CUTH)** in San Pedro Sula
- Representatives of the **Forum of Women for Life (Foro de Mujeres por la Vida)** in San Pedro Sula
- Representatives of **Artists in Resistance to the Coup**
- Representatives of the **National Front Against the Coup in Honduras (Frente Nacional en Contra del Golpe de Estado en Honduras)**
- Countless Honduran citizens we met during our time in Honduras

## Delegation Members:

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