

ROOT CAUSES OF MIGRATION,  
HONDURAS 2019 PILGRIMAGE BRIEF:

# U.S. Responsibility and Roadmap for Change

03 July 2019



# Root Causes of Migration, Honduras 2019 Pilgrimage Brief:

## **U.S. Responsibility and Roadmap for Change**

An international delegation of 75 faith leaders involved with issues of social justice and immigration traveled to Honduras from March 18th to 25th, 2019, led by the SHARE Foundation, Interfaith Movement for Human Integrity, Leadership Conference of Women Religious, and Sisters of Mercy of the Americas' Justice Team. We went to listen, learn, and witness. Our objectives were to bring back to the U.S. a better understanding of what is at the root of the flow of migrants, especially youth and families, from Central America (and particularly Honduras), and to act in solidarity with people striving for freedom, safety, and justice under law. Now, we are working to turn what we learned into concrete action.

The findings and stories in this brief are very personal and important to us. We listened to and conferred with hundreds of Hondurans, and have seen the truth of their struggle. We bring you an account of daunting problems, tempered by the determination to face them squarely, as the people we met do every day—with bravery, hope, and compassion.

### **The root causes of migration**

are myriad and intermingled: an extractive economic model causing displacement, environmental degradation, and worker exploitation; militarization of society; arms proliferation; land theft; and corruption of state institutions. These underlying root causes are interrelated with pervasive violence and murder, especially of women, and, for all these, the near-total impunity of transgressors. The United States—our government, corporations, and citizens—bears significant responsibility for these precipitating conditions. Fortunately, that means we have the power to effect significant change for the better. Most immediately, we ask for support of H.R. 1945, the Berta

Cáceres Human Rights in Honduras Act, suspending security assistance to Honduras until human rights violations cease and the rule of law and due process are restored.<sup>1</sup>

U.S. policy towards Honduras perpetuates a regime that quashes dissent, reinforces and rewards bad governance and corruption, and disregards human rights—creating unlivable conditions and decimating the institutions of civil society, directly driving the exodus. Honduras, after a decade of large-scale forced migration, is the country of caravans: the diaspora now comprises 2 million Hondurans living outside the country—roughly 22% of the total population.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/1945>

<sup>2</sup> Padre Ismail Moreno ("Padre Melo"), director of Radio Progreso and ERIC.



As these migrants reach the U.S., they face enormous hurdles to safety and asylum. We believe that our moral standing as a society is measured by our actions toward those most vulnerable among us—those newly arriving at the U.S./Mexico border as well as those struggling for justice in order to be able to stay in their countries of origin.

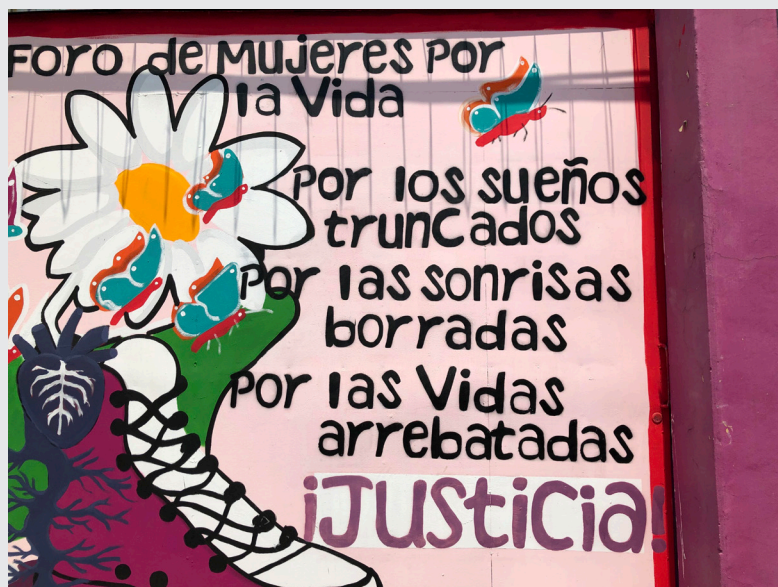
With the guidance of Radio Progreso, a Jesuit-run, independent media institution, we investigated the situation on the ground in a number of rural and urban communities. We saw that Honduras is a country rich in natural resources, and yet the vast majority of Honduran people are falling deeper into impoverishment. We learned that the roots of the poverty and violence, and the forced migration, are failed U.S. foreign policies toward Honduras, as well as corporate-driven economic policies imposed on the region. Continued U.S. military and security assistance is making matters worse.

## Our immersion in Hondurans' struggle for dignity and justice

began with an invitation from Father Ismael “Padre Melo” Moreno to make the pilgrimage. Padre Melo, a leader in defense of human rights, is the director

of Radio Progreso and ERIC (Equipo de Reflexión, Investigación y Comunicación). Through those connections and others, the delegation met with numerous local organizations, community leaders, environmental and human rights defenders, journalists and brave ordinary citizens, Honduran government officials, the Office of the U.N. High Commission for Human Rights in Honduras, and the U.S. Embassy's Charge d'Affaires.

In the rural Bajo Aguán Valley and Santa Barbara, as well as the urban areas of San Pedro Sula and El Progreso—key regions experiencing a heavy presence of the military, displacement, and human rights abuses—we learned firsthand of day-to-day life. We met with organizations fighting the underlying causes of migration, communities of subsistence farmers, and the indigenous Lenca and Garifuna communities, who are challenging the theft of their lands and extraction of their natural resources. In response to peaceful protest and resistance, they face targeted threats and assassinations of their leaders. We listened to the powerful voices and stories of strong women, who are fighting against impunity for the murders of more than 400 women annually, leading land-rights battles, starting businesses, and helping each other. We heard from those caring for children



Women's Forum  
for life  
for the dreams  
cut short  
for the smiles  
erased  
for the lives  
snatched away  
Justice!



## Meeting the Lenca Community: Betty Vasquez

Activist and leader of the Lenca community, Vasquez calls herself a feminist environmentalist... then smiles and says that makes her a double criminal in Honduras! “I had to move from San Pedro Sula to Santa Barbara when gang members literally moved in and took over my house.” Now, due to her efforts to stop the destruction of land and rivers by hydroelectric corporations, she has received death threats.

with HIV, and those fighting for the survival of their towns; teachers and students; faith leaders, journalists, organizers, and ordinary citizens.

We witnessed steadfast determination in the people we met: their multifaceted resistance, embrace of difference, and willingness to step in where services of government have been criminally withdrawn and withheld. We wrestled with our country’s own culpability in shaping the harsh realities facing many Hondurans, and the forces that contribute to the decision to leave their homes and communities. We got a glimpse into the incredible battles being waged by people, often at great personal risk, to provide a secure future for themselves, their families, and their communities, there, in the country they love. We heard repeatedly that they emigrate only under great duress.

Gangs are lethal and prevalent, but they don’t exist in a vacuum. The power of the gangs is predicated on the climate of impunity and corruption that flows from the top. Legal and illegal arms are everywhere, and gangs commonly brandish military weapons. Many are the foot soldiers of the drug cartels that have infiltrated, corrupted, and now operate in concert with the highest levels of the Honduran government and economic elites. A full perspective makes clear that gangs and extortion are not stand-alone root causes of migration, belying the disingenuous

narrative put forward by the U.S. administration. Gangs, like the migration overall, are the result of the systemic gutting of the rule of law in Honduras.

Frustration and disillusionment among Hondurans followed the June 2009 coup d’état, which the United States did not challenge. Instead, the U.S. quickly recognized the subsequent government—for which we need to recognize our complicity. The aftermath included the removal of checks and balances, the stacking of the courts with regime loyalists, and an epidemic of corruption. Add to this, irregularities and fraud in every election since then; deepening inequality and worsening unemployment; assassinations and threats made against human rights defenders and community leaders, with near total impunity for the perpetrators; and the giveaways of nearly one third of the country’s land to mining and extractive industries, with reckless disregard for human and environmental health.

Another key event that unmasked the nation’s corruption and led to massive popular disillusionment was the November 2017 presidential election, in which Juan Orlando Hernandez was declared the winner for a second term. This violated the Honduran constitution, which prohibits re-election, and moreover, the election process was considered so fraudulent that the Organization of American States called for a new election.

That did not happen; instead, the U.S. quickly recognized Hernandez once more. Massive protests broke out across the country, met with massive repression by the Honduran security forces.

As reported by the U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, there has been practically no investigation of the murder of at least 22 people who were killed protesting the last election,<sup>3</sup> never mind convictions, while thousands of people are under indictment on charges stemming from engagement in legal peaceful protests.<sup>4</sup>

The economic development model in Honduras includes mono-cropping, mining, and other extractive industries, resulting in the contamination of the environment and displacement of large numbers of people. These industries are protected by a militarized police force, in which military troops have been commonly deployed domestically. Human rights and environmental activists are criminalized for their work against transnational and domestic corporations, and development projects, that threaten their livelihoods and lands. Prominent leaders have been assassinated, including indigenous environmentalist Berta Cáceres, killed while protecting the river of Gualcarque from a hydroelectric project (according to independent, expert investigation<sup>5</sup>) by sicarios—a death squad—with logistical support from organized crime and military officers.

In just the last three years, the U.S. government has appropriated roughly \$2.1 billion to Central America through security and aid initiatives, such as the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI). Roughly half of this money has gone to fund security and military projects.<sup>6</sup> (In theory, at least; our hosts explained that much of the money earmarked for

humanitarian assistance is diverted—often appropriated for further militarization.)

According to Reuters (March 30, 2019), the U.S. provided about \$98 million to Honduras in 2016 alone (the latest year on which they have reported). U.S. money continues to fund the militarization of police and security forces, and buys weapons, technology, and surveillance equipment manufactured by U.S. companies.



Spent canisters of U.S.-made tear gas used against people protesting alarming irregularities in the 2017 election.

Clearly, the United States' current response to forced migration, focused on border walls, detention, and deportation, has little to do with addressing why people are fleeing for their lives. What's more, U.S. support for the Honduran government, and for economic policies that mostly enrich the elite, actually precipitates and exacerbates the 'push factors'—impoverishment, displacement, crime, violence, and impunity—at the root of mass migration. Concrete action is required now to address these root causes and change the situation on the ground in Honduras.

3 [https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/HN/2017ReportElectionsHRViolations\\_Honduras\\_EN.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/HN/2017ReportElectionsHRViolations_Honduras_EN.pdf)

4 <http://www.oas.org/en/iachr/multimedia/2016/honduras/honduras-en.html>

5 Grupo Asesor Internacional de Personas Expertas. <https://gaipe.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/GAYPE-Report-English.pdf>

6 <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R44812.pdf> U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America: Policy Issues for Congress, Updated June 12, 2019. Congressional Research Service <https://crsreports.congress.gov/R44812>

# Root Causes of Migration from Honduras

**1 Environmental Degradation:** Significant environmental damage, and natural resource lands taken, in pursuit of mega-projects like dams, mining, tourist resorts, plantations, and highways. Harm to human health, loss of subsistence ability, and often forced displacement of whole communities of small farmers and indigenous populations. Breaking of national and international law protecting national parks and wilderness, and assuring free, prior, and informed consent to indigenous communities anticipating natural resources impacts.

*Strategic Action: A, C, D1, D2*

**2 Fear and Violence:** Systemic and state-sponsored violence, which permits gang violence, street crime, domestic violence, and an epidemic of femicide—on average, more than 400 murders of women each year.<sup>7</sup>

*Strategic Actions: A, B, D2, D3*

**3 Lack of Jobs:** Widespread unemployment, unfair wages, and illegal employment practices (like rampant age discrimination and union-busting) by international companies and sweatshop owners.

*Strategic Actions: A, D*

**4 Repression and Criminalization:** Repression of peaceful, constitutionally protected civil protest through use of military force, private security services, and gangs, and a campaign of criminalization (false allegations used to round up dissenters, and illegal arrests of people peacefully protesting) waged against land defenders, journalists, and union leaders.

*Strategic Actions: A, C, D*

**5 Extreme Poverty and Inequality:** An estimated 65% of Hondurans live in poverty.<sup>8</sup> Local, national, and global economic and political systems promote an economy of extraction, privatization, and the accumulation of wealth in the hands of the very few.<sup>9</sup>

*Strategic Action: A, D*

**6 Public and Private Corruption:** Widespread corruption and blatant complicity of police, military, corporations, and Honduran elite in drug trafficking and the resulting violence, as well as in forced displacement, suppression of journalists, and misappropriation of aid funds.

*Strategic Actions: B, C, D*

**7 Weapons Proliferation:** The uncontrolled proliferation of legal and illegal small arms throughout every level of society. Many if not most of these firearms are manufactured in the U.S.<sup>10</sup>

*Strategic Actions: B, D1, D3*

**8 Militarization by U.S.:** U.S. military and police aid, weapons sales, and security assistance that amplify militarization of Honduran domestic forces, equipping and underwriting the escalating violations of human rights.<sup>11</sup>

*Strategic Actions: B, D1, D3*

**9 Impunity:** Roughly 95% of violent crimes in Honduras go unsolved.<sup>12</sup> The experiences of those we met show that looking to law enforcement for help is as likely to lead to persecution as to a remedy. Public officials seldom, if ever, face serious investigations for violations. This culture of impunity, where murderers walk free, enables and exacerbates all of the other root causes.

*Strategic Action: A, C, D1, D2*

<sup>7</sup> <https://iudpas.unah.edu.hn/dmsdocument/6970-muerte-violenta-de-mujeres-y-femicidios-nacional-enero-diciembre-2017-ed-13>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.oxfam.org/en/countries/honduras>

<sup>9</sup> <http://cepr.net/documents/publications/Honduras-2013-11-final.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> The delegation has a fact sheet on arms sales and trafficking, citing sources, available upon request.

<sup>11</sup> <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R44812.pdf> U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America: Policy Issues for Congress, Updated June 12, 2019. Congressional Research Service <https://crsreports.congress.gov> R44812

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.cfr.org/background/central-americas-violent-northern-triangle>



## Strategic Actions to Address Root Causes

Understanding what is at the root of the flow of migrants requires us to act in solidarity with people striving for freedom, safety, and justice under law, and take concrete action.

The U.S.' deterrence and enforcement-only strategy is having chaotic and devastating impacts on arriving asylum seekers and is, in many ways, actually fueling the very migration it seeks to reduce. People of conscience are stepping into this void, providing accompaniment, direct services, legal services, and humanitarian aid to vulnerable migrants, and advocating for fundamental policy changes. Action and advocacy aimed at eliminating the root causes of forced migration from Honduras requires similar strategic multifaceted work.

We call on members of Congress to recognize the U.S.' role in worsening the poverty and violence that force people to migrate, and to take the following necessary measures:

- A.** Co-sponsor—and then pass—**H.R. 1945, the Berta Cáceres Human Rights in Honduras Act**: the suspension of U.S. security assistance to Honduras until human rights violations by security forces cease, perpetrators are brought to justice, and the rule of law is restored.<sup>13</sup>
- B.** Support **Senate Bill 459 (Menendez), the Stopping the Traffic in Overseas Proliferation of Ghost Guns Act** and companion bill **H.R. 1134, the Prevent Crime and Terrorism Act of 2019**. Keep arms trade oversight authority with the State Department and Congress, not the Commerce Department.
- C.** Contact the State Department ASAP, and urge that the U.S. Embassy in Honduras speak out against the repression of protestors by state security forces. Post on social media calling for human rights protections in Honduras.
- D.** End support for the current central government of Honduras and the illegitimate presidency of Juan Orlando Hernandez.
  - 1. Publicly denounce human rights abuses and repression of peaceful public protest: the use of live ammunition and tear gas against protesters and against civilians in their homes; the illegal search, seizure, and prosecution of peaceful protesters; and the criminalization of human rights defenders and environmental activists.
  - 2. Publicly call for investigations and judicial accountability for those responsible for the assassinations of protestors since November 27, 2017.
  - 3. Stop training Hondurans at the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC) (formerly the School of the Americas) and elsewhere. Stop the flow of U.S. weapons to the military and private security forces. Stop excusing the illegal role of Honduras' military/paramilitaries in domestic police functions.
- E.** *(Immigration Policy Reform and the Border Crisis)* Pass meaningful reforms that prioritize human rights. Uphold access to asylum in the U.S., in a manner that offers a genuine humanitarian response, as required under both U.S. and international law.
  - 1. End family separation immediately.
  - 2. Provide decent, humane accommodations and access to legal services for all those in detention. Demand accountability from contractors and agencies responsible.
  - 3. End the Migration Protection Protocols (a.k.a. 'Remain in Mexico') policy, which puts asylum seekers at risk as they wait in what are often dangerous situations.<sup>14</sup>
  - 4. Safeguard the DACA program and TPS protections. Create a permanent pathway to citizenship.

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/1945>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/26/us/asylum-officers-trump-migrants.html>

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