

Emergency Religious Leaders' Delegation to Honduras

January 24-30, 2018

Executive Summary

"Your people will be my people." Ruth 1:16

DELEGATION MANDATE

On January 24th, 2018 fifty faith and civic leaders from the United States, Canada, Colombia, and Argentina embarked on a six-day Emergency Religious Delegation to Honduras in the aftermath of a contested presidential election and reports of state-sponsored human rights violations against the Honduran people. Eight religious denominations were represented by the 40+ faith groups and human rights organizations that sent delegates from 13 states in the U.S. The group traveled to Honduras in response to an invitation from Jesuit Father Ismael "Melo" Moreno, director of Radio Progreso and ERIC (*Equipo de Reflexión, Investigación y Comunicación*), and other faith groups in Honduras who accompany impoverished and marginalized people.

We were invited to:

- accompany and lend protection to Fr. Melo and the Honduran people as they exercise their rights to freedom of speech and assembly;
- observe human rights violations perpetrated against peaceful protests of the recent reelection of president Juan Orlando Hernandez;
- take the testimony of human rights defenders, activists and victims of the state-sponsored terrorism;
- meet with US Embassy representatives regarding US support for the regime; and
- report back to our home communities, public officials and global community.

OBSERVATIONS

Our delegation primarily spent time in San Pedro Sula and Progreso in the north of Honduras, and also traveled to the capital of Tegucigalpa. We met with the staffs of the Jesuit-sponsored Radio Progreso and ERIC. Radio Progreso is one of the few independent media stations in Honduras. ERIC is a leadership development program that promotes civic participation and community development. They have trained more than 900 young people under the age of 30, including indigenous, *campesinos*, religious and lay men and women around the themes of human rights, democracy, gender and ecological justice, and have sponsored a legal team to represent human rights defenders.

In addition, we met with Catholic congregations of men and women religious. We accompanied them to religious gatherings in support of a just resolution to the current crisis in the country. We met with survivors and relatives of victims who had been shot and killed by the National Police and Military using live ammunition to break up peaceful protests. We took testimonies of family members whose loved ones were arrested and tortured by the Honduran Security Forces. We wept and prayed with these victims, including a young father of two, who was left paralyzed and brain-damaged after being shot while walking home from work near a protest.

Our delegation witnessed the use of tear gas against peaceful demonstrators first-hand. We were told of the military and police throwing tear gas cannisters into homes, forcing families to flee. Peaceful protesters carried towels dipped in vinegar to offset the burning of their eyes and skin from exposure to the tear gas and pepper water sprayed on peaceful demonstrators as well as bystanders from military

grade water cannons. We intervened to stop the arrest of the wife and children of an opposition leader who had received anonymous death threats. Fr. Melo and his team have also suffered recent and repeated death threats, as have other human rights defenders around the country. Many ordinary Honduran citizens shared stories of their fear and vulnerability in the context of shrinking space for free expression. As one woman expressed to our delegation following a public “Stations of the Cross” faith witness for justice, “*We fear that after the (January 27th) inauguration, they will come and hunt us all down.*”

The election of President Juan Orlando Hernandez was marred by significant irregularities, a conclusion corroborated by the Organization of American States (OAS) and the European Union (EU). The Hondurans with whom we met consistently reported their lack of confidence in the election and described the events surrounding it as a serious blow to Honduran democracy. The flawed process and the United States’ rush to endorse it destroyed any remaining trust in the integrity of the current political process.

The level of frustration was palpable. Many reported having been disillusioned by the 2009 coup d’état, and the subsequent removal of checks and balances, the stacking of the courts and governmental agencies by operatives loyal to economic and political elites rather than the Honduran constitution, and an epidemic of corruption as evidenced by the documented embezzlement of millions of dollars from the Public Health Ministry. The frustration and disillusionment were compounded by deepening inequality, threats of violence and assassination against human rights defenders and community leaders with near total impunity for the perpetrators, and the giveaways of nearly half the country’s land to mining and extractive industries.

The January 27, 2018 inauguration of the fraudulently-elected president, Juan Orlando Hernandez, was the culmination of this ongoing, systematic betrayal of the democratic process.

FINDINGS

- 1. The reelection of President Juan Orlando Hernandez is both unconstitutional and fraudulent.** According to the Honduran constitution, no president can be reelected for consecutive terms. This constitutional law was overturned in 2015 without the consultation and consent of the Honduran people, and only after President Hernandez replaced four out of five Supreme Court justices. Furthermore, while the US has officially recognized the reelected regime, the OAS concluded that the election was “characterized by irregularities and deficiencies” and had called for a new general election. The Alianza Party, whose candidate challenged the National Party’s candidate, Hernandez, in the November 2017 election, has denounced the JOH government as “dictatorial.”
- 2. Peaceful protests have been met with state-sponsored violence, repression and impunity.**
 - *The constitutional right to peaceful assembly has been violated.* Since the November 26, 2017, elections, Honduran security forces have killed at least 37 Honduran activists, protesters and bystanders with total impunity. Many more have been disappeared, imprisoned, and beaten¹.
 - *The constitutional right to a free press has also been undermined.* Fr. Melo and other members of ERIC/Radio Progreso, have received anonymous death threats and faced police intimidation (including at the San Pedro Sula airport on their way to meet our delegation), and the radio station’s tower was sabotaged in December 2017.
 - *Basic human rights have been violated.* In addition to hearing victims’ testimonies, members of our delegation witnessed the disproportionate presence of national police, military police, and military at protest sites, as well as their excessive use of teargas (in once instance firing over 100 canisters) and beating of protesters.

¹<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/13/world/americas/honduras-election-juan-orlando-herandez.html>; and <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jan/02/us-silent-as-honduras-protesters-killed-in-post-election-violence>; and <http://www.latimes.com/world/la-fg-honduras-election-20171201-story.html>

3. The militarization of Honduran society, combined with impunity at every level of government, is a primary driver of inequality, human rights violations and migration.

Military and police spending has increased significantly since President Hernandez first took office in 2013, while social services like health and education have been systematically ignored. Increased militarization is inextricably linked to the structural violence of rampant poverty and social inequality in Honduras. Militarization only exacerbates unchecked violence and increasing poverty, both crucial drivers of migration of Hondurans to the United States.

The prevailing economic model in Honduras is based on export-focused African palm production, extractive industries like mining, and tourism that displaces indigenous and afro-descendant communities—all of which benefit a small, entrenched elite at the expense of the vast majority of Hondurans and that despoils the country's rich natural resources. We heard a clear call from the Hondurans we met for land reform to benefit small farmers, greater investment in small businesses, and a respect for the territorial rights, lands and resources of indigenous and afro-descendant peoples currently subject to exploitation by mining and extractive industries. Such measures would greatly mitigate the out-migration of Hondurans to other countries, including the United States.

The current US immigration policy characterized by cancellation of Deferred Action for Children Arrivals (DACA) and Temporary Protective Status (TPS) for Hondurans and other Central Americans, the attack on sanctuary cities, the criminalization of migration, aggressive immigration raids, and the proposed border wall do not address the political-economic structures in Honduras that drive immigration. While the US Embassy defends its role in helping support Honduras' "historically weak institutions" and justifies the role of the military in police functions until several thousand new police can be trained, recent history in Central America and current evidence in Honduras shows that such militarization only exacerbates and further destabilizes civil society through the corruption of political, social, judicial and security institutions.

4. US support for, and security assistance to, the current Honduran government plays a fundamental role in abetting human rights violations in Honduras.

Two days after the controversial elections of November 26, 2017, the U.S. State Department certified Honduras to receive aid, including for their military and security forces, concluding that the country had progressed on issues of human rights and corruption. This certification, as well as its timing, sent a terrible signal of U.S. support for a regime engaged in repressing peaceful protest, and it misrepresented the reality of the rampant corruption and human rights violations conducted with total impunity in Honduras.

In mid-January, the Honduran Congress passed a bill that cripples the work of the Mission to Support the Fight against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (MACCIH), an OAS body. In effect, the new law immediately stops investigations of corruption among current and former politicians, benefiting the president of the Legislative Assembly and nearly 30 others like him who knew they were under MACCIH investigation. Shortly after our delegation's return to the United States, Juan Jimenez, the Peruvian head of the MACCIH resigned, accusing Honduran authorities of failing to provide adequate support. Continued aid to Honduran security forces also undermines a path towards peace and accountability, as the weapons, armor, and tear gas manufactured in and exported from the US to Honduras will continue to be used against the Honduran people.

As all of the above makes plain, the US failure to denounce the presidential election as unconstitutional and fraudulent undermines peace and democracy in Honduras.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CALLS TO ACTION

The International Emergency Delegation calls upon the Honduran government to:

1. Stop the Repression
 - Free protesters who have been jailed for participating in peaceful demonstrations.
 - Cease repressing peaceful public protest.
 - Cease the use of live ammunition.
 - Cease the use of tear gas against protesters and against civilians in their homes.
 - Stop the illegal search, seizure and prosecution of peaceful protesters.
 - Stop the misuse of the justice system to convict and sentence peaceful protesters to long jail terms.
 - Stop the militarization of Honduran civil society and remove the military and the military police from the streets.
2. Ensure investigations and judicial accountability for those responsible for the assassinations of protestors from November 27, 2017 to the present.
3. End the violence, character assassination and death threats directed against Rev. Ismael “Melo” Moreno and the staff of Radio Progreso/ERIC, as well as other human rights defenders and leaders of social movements.

The International Emergency Delegation calls upon the U.S. government and other governments to:

1. End support for the current central government of Honduras and the illegitimate presidency of Juan Orlando Hernandez.
2. Support the call for national dialogue to address the fraudulent election and current crisis--with an international mediator.
3. End military and security aid to Honduras as per HR 1299, the [Berta Caceres Act](#).
4. End the militarization underway in the region.
5. Stop deportation of Hondurans and other Central Americans, and support immigrant rights.

We call on all people of faith and good will to deepen efforts to build solidarity and sister relationships with the people of Honduras. Get educated, participate in delegations, and lend support for the social movements and human rights defenders at risk.

Most immediately:

1. Donate to an [emergency fund set up by the SHARE Foundation \(www.share-elsalvador.org\)](http://www.share-elsalvador.org) to support the vital work of Radio Progreso/ERIC and the Honduran faith communities working with victims of the repression
2. Participate in a *Day of Prayer for Justice and Peace in Honduras* in Washington, D.C., on May 18, 2018.
3. Educate your elected representatives and invite them to visit Honduras.
4. Join accompaniment delegations to Honduras sponsored by the SHARE Foundation:
 - May 19, 2018, to accompany Fr. Melo & his delegation home from Washington, D.C.
 - December 2, 2018, for a Women’s Delegation
 - March 2, 2019, for the 3rd anniversary of Berta Caceres’s assassination
 - July 4, 2019, for a Young Adults’ Delegation

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