



Public Security in Honduras: Who Can Citizens Trust?

Editor's Note: This is the third part of a series by Latin America Working Group Education Fund on the intersection of human rights, migration, corruption, and public security in Honduras and El Salvador. You can find the full series at lawg.org/BetweenDangers.

Honduras and El Salvador are two of the most dangerous countries on earth not currently at war.

El Salvador led the world in homicides per capita in 2015 and 2016, wresting from Honduras the infamous title it held in 2014. In Honduras and El Salvador, youth are under assault: as victims of gangs; as gang members killed in gang violence; as victims of organized crime. They are also victims of state violence. Of the top countries in the world with the highest child homicide rates, in 2015, the last year available, all are in Latin America, and Honduras is number one, El Salvador number 3. [1]

El Salvador's approach to gang violence is on paper more comprehensive and balanced, but in practice now focuses on hardline strategies. Honduras's security forces play a major role in repressing social protest and restricting freedom of speech and assembly.

In both countries, tough public security strategies seem to have resulted in a reduction in the homicide rate but are failing to protect many citizens, including children, teenagers, young adults, journalists, human rights activists, indigenous people, women, and members of the LGBTI community. Today's blog will focus on the challenges to developing rights-respecting public security in Honduras. In the next blog, we will look at El Salvador.

Violence in Honduras

The murder rate in Honduras is the still-stratospheric figure of 59.1 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants in 2016, similar to 2015, after a substantial drop from a high of 93.21 in 2011 to 63.75 in 2015. [2] But the increasing militarization of public security, persistent and serious abuses by police and Military Police, and pervasive allegations of involvement of public officials in organized crime and drug trafficking reveal more disturbing trends.

The Honduran government contends the drop in homicides shows the success of its public security strategy. Many civil society organizations and journalists are skeptical of recent violence statistics, pointing out that the government has restricted access to crime data and questioning whether the statistics published by the government and the Violence Observatory at the Autonomous University of Honduras (UNAH) are capturing the full picture. They also note that violence in some areas of the country, including San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa, remains far higher than the national average. San Pedro Sula was the third most dangerous city in the world in 2016, trailing only San Salvador and Acapulco. [3]

Violence in Honduras is sometimes depicted as largely a product of gangs, but gangs are only one part of the picture. Organized crime, a very different phenomenon, is a major contributor to violence. Violence

by state agents harshly affects certain sectors, including human rights defenders, communities protesting economic projects, journalists, and LGBTI Hondurans.

Police Reform: A Step Forward, but Far to Go

A police reform initiative—launched after police were implicated in the 2009 assassination of Honduras’s drug czar and, two years later, his advisor Alfredo Landaverde—has resulted in several thousand personnel, including officials, being purged from the National Police force. A reformed police law and a new police career law were approved and recruitment and training of new police has accelerated, according to the official Police Purge and Reform Commission. [4] This marks a more serious effort than previous failed police reform attempts.

Yet few of these dismissed police have been brought to justice. Lack of punishment undermines disincentives for corruption and abuse in the police, and dismissed police may join private security forces or organized crime. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights office in Honduras (OHCHR-Honduras) points out that the overwhelming majority were dismissed on grounds of “internal restructuring” or “voluntary resignation,” while by the end of 2016 the files of just 15 separated officers were referred to the Office of the Attorney General for investigation. According to the United Nations, “Until these cases have been dealt with by the judicial system, the purge will not be seen to have addressed the demand that the police be held accountable vis-à-vis allegations of pervasive corruption and criminal activities.” [5]

The government has set a goal of expanding the civilian police, nearly doubling to 26,000 members by 2022. Adequately vetting and training these numbers of new police recruits will be a challenge. [6]

Militarized Policing

Meanwhile, the Honduran government has relied upon a policy of deploying military to police streets, neighborhoods and even schools in areas of high violence. These Military Police battalions are composed of soldiers who have received three months of police training. The Honduran government has promised U.S. and other international donors that this is a temporary strategy that will be phased out when homicide rates have declined and the civilian police have been strengthened.

Yet the Honduran government continues to expand, not withdraw, the role of the military in internal policing. President Hernández tried, but failed, to obtain a constitutional reform that would have made the Military Police a permanent institution. In July 2017, two additional new battalions of 500 troops each were deployed in Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula, bringing the total number of Military Police to at least 5,000 troops. [7] Since 2013 they have carried out, according to the Honduran government, 51,000 patrols, registered 165,000 people, and carried out 32,000 inspections of vehicles. [8] The government celebrates the Military Police with parades and publicity. [9]

Military Police have been involved in a number of serious abuses, including extrajudicial executions, excessive use of force, torture, robbery, and rape. Military Police methods fail to address impunity or protect communities: they lack the training for careful investigations, and the methods of patrolling, conducting sweeps and then withdrawing from communities can result in gang members conducting reprisals and stepping up recruitment in those areas, or spreading to outlying areas.

One case this year involved the fatal shooting of a 17-year-old boy, Edgardo José Moreno Rodríguez, in January 2017. Responding to reports of a dead body in Santa María del Real, Olancho, Military Police tried to detain two teenagers who were standing nearby. The teenagers ran, and the Military Police shot and killed Moreno, who had recently graduated from high school. Angry townspeople burned down the Military Police's post. One neighbor commented to a reporter, "We don't want to see the Military Police anymore in this municipality, it would be better if they could send us the Preventative [civilian] Police, because I believe they are better trained and because the military has committed a number of abuses of people in this town." [10] Another noted that he had been detained for telling members of the Military Police to stop brutally beating a young man.

Forty-eight schools have been assigned Military Police to patrol schools, thirty-three of them in Tegucigalpa. [11] There have been reports of Military Police sexually abusing or harassing female students and beating and strip-searching other students. [12]

Public Security and Repression of Activists

Military Police, soldiers, and members of the civilian police routinely use excessive use of force on protestors. Use of tear gas, attacking journalists covering the protests, and beatings of protestors are regular tactics.

State security forces are used as enforcers for mining, dam, palm plantations and other economic projects that face community protests. This has been documented vividly in the case of the assassination of indigenous leader Berta Cáceres.

Honduran prosecutors have charged 8 people, including former and current military members and employees of the DESA dam company, with Cáceres's murder. But, according to an independent group of experts looking into the case, GAPE, the investigation has not yet reached the intellectual authors. [13] GAPE investigators explain how company officials worked with public security forces, based on a series of texts and phone messages retrieved by Honduran government investigators:

The conversations reveal, the lawyers said, that the orders to threaten Copinh and sabotage its protests came from Desa executives who were exercising control over security forces in the area, issuing instructions and paying for police units' food, lodging and radio equipment.

"There was this criminal structure comprised of company executives and employees, state agents and criminal gangs that used violence, threats and intimidation," said Roxanna Altholz, the associate director of the Human Rights Law Clinic at the University of California, Berkeley, and a member of the lawyers' group. [14]

The independent group of lawyers concludes, based on examining just a fraction of the evidence available to government prosecutors:

"The existing proof is conclusive regarding the participation of numerous state agents, high-ranking executives and employees of Desa in the planning, execution and cover-up of the assassination." [15]

The evidence of state collusion in the Cáceres case is damning. But this is just **one** of numerous cases in which police, military and former public security forces are in the service of private companies seeking to undermine and suppress protests and social conflict related to their companies' operations.

Targeting Youth: Extrajudicial Executions, Lack of Prevention and Rehabilitation

Public security forces as well as private security and shadowy “death squads” are believed to be involved in “social cleansing” killings of suspected gang members.

The UN Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial Executions, who conducted a 2016 visit to Honduras, summed up:

Police corruption further affects the atmosphere of insecurity, with reports of police elements being involved in soliciting bribes, extortion and even murder. In at least five cases, police officers have been implicated in death-squad style killings of gang members. During the visit, I encounter numerous reports of killings at the hands of police, military police and military officers. According to a report by the Observatory on Violence at the National Autonomous University of Honduras, police killed 285 people between 2012 and 2015. Not all these cases are unjustified, but they are often not properly investigated. Impunity is the rule. Investigations and effective prosecution for these crimes seems to be limited to only a few high profile cases or cases in which the families of the victims had to personally push the investigations or assist in obtaining evidence.

A good number of these killings seem to have targeted the youth, either as a result of profiling of victims, typically as member of gangs, or in response to their participation in demonstrations and other forms of protests or public demands. [16]

José Guadalupe Ruelas, the head of the nongovernmental Casa Alianza which offers services to street children, says that the government often does not investigate the killings of young people. [17] “Hardly ever is there an investigation. They simply assume that murdered young people, often with signs of torture, must have been up to something. They condemn the murder victims, not the murderers. And in that way this feeds the perception that it is the young people who are guilty of all the violence, not that they are the main victims.”

Honduras lacks adequate well-developed prevention programs to offer alternatives to young people in gang-affected neighborhoods, nor does it have sufficient rehabilitation programs for those wanting out of gang life. Violence prevention programs, some funded by international donors including USAID, make an important contribution but their scope is far from the scale needed. Outreach centers may not reach the youths most at risk. And the limited number of programs offered for youth at risk of gang involvement or needing gang rehabilitation services are not offered to those 18 and older—although young men aged 18 to 25 are in great need of this kind of help.

Penetration of the State by Organized Crime

Growing evidence and allegations of organized crime and drug trafficking network penetration of government and political party actors undercuts the Honduran government's "tough on crime" rhetoric. [18] The unfolding drama of investigations by the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Southern District of New York of the Cachiros drug trafficking network has resulted in the conviction of Fabio Lobo, son of ex-President Porfirio Lobo, the first president elected after the June 2009 coup, on drug-trafficking charges. It has also raised allegations that other politicians, including ex-President Lobo as well as President Hernández and some opposition party leaders, as well as police, bankers, and businessmen, may have accepted bribes and offered protection and other services for drug-trafficking networks. [19] Porfirio Lobo and Hernández deny the allegations. But the story continues to unfold.

To develop rights-respecting public security, Honduras must fully implement police reforms, including by investigating and prosecuting abusive officials and strengthening oversight and disciplinary systems. It should immediately move to phase out the Military Police. And it should end the systematic use of police and armed forces to suppress protest and acts as enforcers for mining, dam, palm plantations and other economic projects that face community protests. Strict use-of-force policies should be established and those who abuse or intimidate human rights activists and journalists must be effectively investigated, disciplined, and prosecuted. And no crime-reduction strategy will succeed if any of the nation's top officials get away with industrial-scale corruption.

By Lisa Haugaard

End Notes

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