

# Honduran troops kill anti-coup demonstrators at Tegucigalpa airport

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Honduran troops on Sunday fired on anti-coup demonstrators outside the airport in the capital, Tegucigalpa, killing at least two and wounding many more. Thousands had converged on the heavily guarded airport to show support for deposed President Manuel Zelaya, who flew from Washington DC earlier in the day in a bid to return to Honduras and reclaim power.

The coup government, headed by former parliamentary speaker Roberto Micheletti and backed by the military, the Congress, the Church and the dominant sections of the business establishment, had vowed to prevent Zelaya's charter plane from landing. It had ringed the airport with troops and parked military vehicles on the runways. The government, installed following a military coup on June 28 that forced Zelaya into exile, has defied broad international condemnation and issued warrants for Zelaya's arrest on treason and other charges, should he attempt to return.

Zelaya, who was accompanied on his plane by United Nations General Assembly President Miguel D'Escoto Brockman, a Nicaraguan diplomat, and several aides and journalists, landed in Nicaragua on his way to neighboring El Salvador. A separate plane, carrying a delegation supporting Zelaya including the head of the Organization of American States (OAS), José Miguel Insulza, and presidents Christina Fernandez de Kirchner of Argentina, Rafael Correa of Ecuador and Fernando Lugo of Paraguay, flew to San Salvador, the capital of El Salvador.

From his plane, Zelaya told the Venezuelan-based news network Telesur that he had been denied landing rights in Honduras.

The clash at the airport was evidently the bloodiest since the coup and followed several days of growing anti-coup protests involving trade unionists, rural poor, youth and students. The protests have swelled despite a state of emergency, a 10 p.m. to 5 a.m. curfew, the closure of media outlets sympathetic to Zelaya as well as international media outlets, and an unknown number of arrests. Masses of troops and riot police have been deployed throughout Tegucigalpa and other cities and members of Zelaya's cabinet have been detained, deported or are in hiding.

The coup regime has organized its own anti-Zelaya demonstrations, which even the American media has acknowledged to be dominated by wealthier and more privileged layers of the population.

The clash at the airport followed a 33-0 vote Saturday by the OAS to suspend Honduras from the organization for failing to heed a 72-hour deadline the organization set last week for the regime to allow Zelaya to return and resume his presidency. "Interim President" Micheletti sought to preempt the vote by announcing that Honduras had withdrawn from the OAS, but the OAS refused to recognize the withdrawal, calling his government illegitimate.

With the country teetering on the edge of civil war, the coup regime announced that it would be willing to open up negotiations with the OAS. At the same time, it reiterated its opposition to allowing Zelaya to return to power.

The Obama administration has publicly denounced the coup and joined with the OAS, the United Nations General Assembly, the European Union and other international bodies in demanding Zelaya's reinstatement. However, the US is playing a double game. While many Latin American countries and the 27 member states of the European Union have recalled their ambassadors from Honduras, Washington has not withdrawn US Ambassador Hugo Llorens.

The administration has refused even to formally declare Zelaya's ouster at gunpoint a coup, claiming it is studying the situation. This is a thinly disguised ploy to avoid cutting off military aid and imposing other sanctions against the coup regime, which it is required to do under a US law prohibiting such ties to a government installed through the military overthrow of an elected leader.

The US maintains an air base with some 800 troops and other personnel about 60 miles from the Honduran capital. It has for decades trained and equipped the Honduran military, and used Honduras as a base for counterrevolutionary interventions, military coups and other destabilization operations throughout the region. These include the 1954 CIA coup that toppled Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán in Guatemala and the US proxy war in the 1980s against the Sandinista government in Nicaragua. The US was involved in three previous coups in Honduras, in 1955, 1963 and 1972.

The two military officials who led the coup against Zelaya were trained at the School of the Americas in Fort Benning, Georgia.

There is evidence that the Obama administration was intimately involved in pre-coup plans to oust Zelaya. The *New York Times* last week cited an unnamed US official as saying that Llorens and Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Thomas A. Shannon, Jr. spoke to "military officials and opposition leaders" in the days before the coup. The official said, "There was talk of how they might remove the president from office, how he could be arrested, on whose authority they could do that."

Both Llorens and Shannon were top advisers on Andean affairs to President Bush in the period leading up to and during the US-backed coup that briefly toppled Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez in 2002.

Since the Honduran coup, the Obama administration has refused to take

any serious measures against the new regime. It has merely suspended some military contacts, pending the results of its “study” to determine whether a coup actually occurred.

The US accounts for 70 percent of the country’s exports, and remittances from Hondurans in the US comprise 20 percent of the impoverished country’s gross national product. Were Washington to impose a trade embargo, the new regime would be forced to back down.

It is inconceivable that the coup regime would maintain its hard line without tacit backing from Washington. US State Department spokesmen, moreover, publicly urged Zelaya not to attempt to return to Honduras, and the US, through its closest allies in the OAS—Canada, Mexico, Costa Rica and Colombia—defeated provisions in the OAS declaration suspending Honduras that would have required member states to cut off bilateral cooperation with the country.

It appears that the US is seeking either to keep Zelaya out of Honduras or to broker a deal that would return him to power under conditions where his government would be crippled and faced with the constant threat of military intervention. Under US pressure, Zelaya told reporters last week, following a speech before the UN General Assembly, that he had abandoned plans to hold a non-binding referendum on convening a constitutional assembly and that he would not seek a second term in office.

Elections are scheduled in Honduras for November, and Zelaya’s term expires in January of 2010. The Honduran constitution presently prohibits a second presidential term, and his opponents charged that he was seeking to amend the constitution in order to secure a new term in office, a charge which he denies.

The referendum became the pretext for the coup on June 28. Zelaya was planning to go ahead with the referendum on that day, in defiance of a Supreme Court ruling declaring it unconstitutional, which was backed by the military and the Congress.

The real reasons for the coup were Zelaya’s domestic policies and his alliance with Chávez and Chávez’s left nationalist allies in the Bolivarian Alternative for the Peoples of Our America, which include Bolivia, Ecuador and Nicaragua. Elected as the candidate of the bourgeois establishment Liberal Party on a law-and-order platform in 2005, Zelaya had shifted in the intervening years toward populist domestic policies and an alignment with Latin American countries deemed by Washington to be hostile to US interests.

He particularly won the enmity of the Honduran business establishment and its allies in the military, the Church and Congress when he increased the minimum wage by 60 percent and began denouncing the “oligarchy.” The business elite responded to the minimum wage decree by laying off workers or simply ignoring it.

Zelaya earned the hostility of Washington a year ago when he broke from a free trade agreement with the US and joined the Bolivarian Alternative, which was formed to undermine support for the US-based hemispheric trade accord.

“Over the last year, Zelaya’s positions moved to the left. He pushed social programs and more attention for the poor who have no work,” said Giuseppe Magno, the outgoing Italian ambassador. “This switch was not in line with the program he was voted in for. He was too close to [Nicaraguan President Daniel] Ortega and Chávez, a position the middle

and upper classes did not appreciate.”

Doris Gutiérrez, a lawmaker who supports Zelaya, told the *Washington Post*, “There are people in Congress who are against the coup, but they remain in silence.” She added, “The business sector has been strong, very strong, in supporting the coup.”

Obama is able to rely on a subservient US media to conceal the role of Washington in the coup and give the administration a free hand to work out a settlement favorable to US imperialist interests. The US media has barely reported the tumultuous events in Honduras, and made no issue of the coup regime’s repression or crackdown on news media in Honduras, including US-based networks such as CNN.

This policy stands in the sharpest contrast to the US media propaganda campaign against an alleged electoral coup in Iran—a charge that it has never substantiated. The reason for the difference is the simple fact that the US opposes the victim of the Honduran coup and supports the faction of the Iranian establishment that lost the June 12 election.

Though he is being denounced by the coup leaders and their allies as a socialist or communist, Zelaya is neither. He is a bourgeois politician who sought to use nationalist and populist demagoguery to defuse growing popular discontent—70 percent of Hondurans live below the poverty line and 40 percent live on less than \$2 a day—which is being intensified by the impact of the global economic crisis, and who concluded that he could obtain a better economic deal by accepting Chávez’s offer of cheap oil.

The aim of the US in brokering a deal that could include allowing Zelaya to serve out his term is indicated by the intervention within the OAS of US allies. Echoing US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who last week said any settlement had to take into account the “underlying causes” of the coup, Peter Kent, Canada’s minister of foreign affairs, said, “... there is a context in which these events happened... There has to be an appreciation of the events that led up to the coup.”

Aljazeera’s Latin American editor Lucia Newman on Friday reported that under one scenario being discussed to solve the crisis “this de facto government, as the OAS calls it, would issue a blanket amnesty that would annul the arrest order for Zelaya. In exchange, elections would be brought forward. But the deposed president would have to be reinstated [pending the election’s outcome]. I understand that this proposal was put forward by Argentina.”

In a *Washington Post* column published Friday, Edward Schumacher-Matos, a supporter of the coup, wrote: “President Obama was correct in calling Zelaya’s ouster illegal, while Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton declined to call the action a coup—in hopes of bringing Zelaya back into government but with wings clipped. In this instance, the US government played the morally right hand.”

To call Zelaya’s return to office under such conditions a victory for “democracy” is a travesty. This, however, is the position of the left nationalist leaders aligned with Chávez. Nicaragua’s Ortega declared that if Zelaya were returned to power, the coup authors would suffer no punishment.

He, along with Chávez and Zelaya himself, is reduced to appealing to Obama to take a harder line in demanding Zelaya’s reinstatement. Indeed, Zelaya’s wife and son have taken refuge in the US embassy in Tegucigalpa. These bourgeois left leaders are no less petrified at the prospect of an eruption of mass working class opposition in Honduras

than are the coup leaders.



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