

As Zelaya accepts amnesty for coup leaders

Human Rights report reveals brutal repression in Honduras

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In negotiations held over the weekend, deposed Honduran President Manuel Zelaya agreed to a proposal by Costa Rican President Óscar Arias that, as a price for his returning to office, he accept a government of “unity and national reconciliation” that would essentially make him a powerless puppet of the very forces that overthrew him and sent him into exile.

Representatives of the coup regime in Tegucigalpa, however, rejected the proposal Sunday, insisting that they would not allow Zelaya to return.

The mediation by Arias is designed to legitimize the coup and consolidate its main aims. Before talks broke down, Zelaya reportedly agreed to abandon his call for a referendum on a constitutional convention, the main pretext for his ouster.

In accepting Arias’s terms, Zelaya was also reported to have agreed to a total amnesty for the military and political figures who carried out the June 28 coup and to the repressive forces that assaulted, arrested, beat and in some cases murdered workers and peasants protesting Zelaya’s removal.

While the Obama administration formally condemned the coup, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton commissioned the mediation effort by Costa Rican President Óscar Arias—one observer compared it to the police demanding that a rape victim sit down and compromise with her rapist—to achieve precisely these aims.

Hand in hand with this process, figures close to the administration and to Clinton have conducted a media and lobbying campaign to whitewash the June 28 coup as a “defense of democracy.” Lanny Davis, who served as counsel to President Bill Clinton and is one of Hillary Clinton’s closest political supporters, emerged as a lobbyist for right-wing Honduran businessmen. Appearing before Congress, he declared that “democracy and civil liberties are flourishing in Honduras.”

A preliminary report issued by the Committee of the Families of the Disappeared and Detained in Honduras (COFADEH), the country’s leading human rights group, exposes the criminality of the Obama administration’s policy and of the Democratic apologists for the coup like Davis.

Issued in the Honduran capital of Tegucigalpa July 15, the report, entitled *Violations of Human Rights in the context of the Honduran coup d’etat*, provides a devastating exposure of the actions carried out by the coup’s organizers against the Honduran people.

The 45-page preliminary report carefully details the treatment meted out to those who opposed the coup. So far, COFADEH has documented 1055 human rights violations in the first two weeks since Zelaya’s overthrow. These include 1046 illegal detentions, 59 beatings, 16 threats, 27 assaults on reporters and attacks on the independent press, six serious injuries, and four executions. In each case, the victims of the attacks have been workers, peasant farmers and the press.

In what amounts to naked state terror reminiscent of the 1972-1981 dictatorship, workers and peasants have been detained and kidnapped by military and security personnel. “Of particular concern,” says the preliminary report, “is the repression in the Department of Colón,” which is on the Caribbean coast in northeast Honduras. Among the human rights violations described in the COFADEH document is the herding of peasant families into a soccer field, “in the style of Nazi concentration camps.” The operation was carried out by military and security police.

The town of Guadalupe Carney, in the vicinity of the city of Trujillo, also in Colón, was occupied on July 13 by police and army personnel, who terrorized the 600 peasant households, threatening to execute the town’s mayor and impose military rule. Municipal authorities across Honduras have been threatened with execution, the expropriation of their property and exile.

Among the cases discussed in detail in the report is that of Isy Obed Murillo, who was killed by the armed forces at a protest in the Tegucigalpa airport on July 5. The case of Obed Murillo, 19, exemplifies the courage and determination of the Honduran working class, as well as the immense dangers it confronts. The young man was killed by the Honduran army when soldiers fired on a mass protest that demanded that an airplane carrying Zelaya back from exile be allowed to land at Toncontín Airport in Tegucigalpa.

Obed Murillo had come to Tegucigalpa five years earlier from Santa Cruz de Guayape in the Department of Olancho, a town of 4000 inhabitants in eastern Honduras. This journey is typical of the many thousands who have migrated to the cities and make up the country’s young proletariat. In Tegucigalpa he had held various jobs; at the time of his death he worked at a supermarket.

On the day of the airport demonstration, when the troops attacked the protest with tear gas, Obed Murillo became separated from his father, sister and two brothers. He was killed after the troops fired

several volleys into the crowd.

At the youth's funeral, Obed Murillo's father, David Murillo, described his son as a person who was "self-educated in the principles of social rights, he knew that the powerful have exploited us and have trampled on our labor rights.

"He never compromised his principles," said the father. "His death, his leaving us, hurts me deeply, but I am proud that he did not die while committing a crime or out of drunkenness, but because he fought against repression."

Just days after the shooting death of his son, COFADEH took David Murillo's testimony. The 57-year old man, who had done nothing wrong, was immediately arrested outside the COFADEH office.

Obed Murillo was one of three killed on that day by troops using live ammunition. Many hundreds of peasants and workers were victimized by the Honduran Army and police in the airport protest.

The COFADEH report charges that the Honduran coup was the result of a conspiracy by the ruling elite to do away with the constitution drafted in 1982 at the end of a nine-year military dictatorship. The dispute over Zelaya's attempt to hold a non-binding plebiscite on June 28 on possible changes to the constitution merely provided the pretext.

Under this constitution, the military "continued to hold power behind the scenes throughout the decade of the 1980s, counting on a guarantee of absolute immunity" for the dictatorship's generals, who had been trained in the US military's School of the Americas and also in Chile, under the Pinochet regime, COFADEH reports.

During this period, the military strengthened its ties with industrial and financial enterprises and "kept control over key government institutions." According to the report, "That part of the armed forces that had been carefully held in check made their appearance on June 23-26 in the manner of the 1980s." This included the reconstitution of death squads.

"We think it is important to point to the militarization of public entities," the report continues. "This includes the reactivation and placing in public posts of members of the [Battalion] 3-16 death squads, responsible for the forced disappearances that took place during the decade of the 1980s. The result is violations of the sacred principles enshrined in the Declaration of Universal Human Rights."

The COFADEH report documents the harassment and repression of reporters, both Honduran and foreign. Reporters have been victims of extra-legal home invasions, detentions, expulsions from Honduras and executions. Independent media outlets have been closed by the regime. In each of these cases, due process as provided for in the 1982 constitution, was swept aside.

The assassination of Gabriel Fino Noriega, a reporter employed by several radio and cable TV stations, including Radio Estelar, Radio el Patio, and Radio América was the work of a death squad, the report states.

Noriega was shot seven times by two men as he left Radio Stelar in the city of San Juan Pueblo, in the eastern Department of Atlántida. Fino Noriega and the radio stations that employed him had been producing news reports about massacres that had been taking place along the Caribbean coast, even before the military coup. He has also reported on recent mass protests against the dictatorship.

The report also disputes the attempt of the coup's organizers to invoke the 1982 Constitution to justify their action. The constitution, approved at the conclusion of a long and brutal US-backed dictatorship, acknowledged the principle of participatory democracy

through initiatives and referendums, COFADEH said.

In practice, however, amendments to the constitution, including those that made it possible for the government to permit foreign corporations to operate with little or no regulations in special industrial zones, were carried out by the ruling elite with no popular consultation.

Two presidential decrees, issued in 2003 and 2004, severely limited the scope of popular initiatives and referendums, turning this right into a dead letter.

In recent years, COFADEH has itself been repeatedly victimized by the Honduran government for its work to expose the detention and kidnapping of union activists and human rights defenders. In a radio podcast created before the coup, COFADEH warned that the 3-16 death squad, which operated in Honduras in the early 1980s, was being reconstituted. It has also insisted that those arrested on charges of participating in criminal gangs be given due process.

In July 2008, the organization's offices were ransacked and video equipment stolen. A few days later, COFADEH Coordinator Bertha Oliva de Nativí and her daughter were followed home by unknown individuals in an attempt to instill fear and interfere with the work of the organization. The danger has escalated; in the words of Bertha Oliva, "Each morning I kiss my daughter when I go to work, not knowing whether it will be the last time I see her."

Even before the coup, death threats against COFADEH and other human rights activists had been on the rise. On June 19, following the killing of several prisoners by their fellow inmates, Bertha Oliva and several other activists received death threats. Shortly afterwards, President Zelaya gloated over the murders declaring them "a moral lesson for those who want to commit crimes such as rape of minors." This declaration was followed by a wave of violent murders in the country.

Zelaya was elected on a right-wing law and order platform, from which he has not broken. That he took some tactical steps to the "left," including organizing the plebiscite, granting a minimum wage increase and other populist measures, does not change the bourgeois character of his regime. This is confirmed by Zelaya's decision to accept Arias's compromise proposals, and make his peace with the Honduran military.



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