

Honduran coup regime launches brutal crackdown

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In an attempt to suppress the growing popular resistance to the regime installed just over a month ago by the June 28 coup that overthrew Honduran President Manuel Zelaya, police and troops carried out a brutal crackdown against demonstrations in the capital of Tegucigalpa Thursday.

According to press reports, as many as 150 people were arrested and dozens injured as the cops and soldiers attacked demonstrators with tear gas, water cannons, clubs and gunfire.

One of the wounded, 38-year-old teacher Roger Vallejo, was left fighting for his life after suffering a bullet wound to his head. It was unclear where the shot came from, but witnesses said that the gunfire was initiated by plainclothes policemen who had infiltrated the demonstration. He was listed in critical condition at the hospital where he was taken by co-workers, having suffered two heart attacks en route.

Among those arrested was Carlos Reyes, the president of the Honduran beverage workers union and an independent candidate for president. After he submitted to arrest, Reyes, who is 70 years old and diabetic, was beaten badly by the security forces suffering a broken arm and a head wound.

Also detained was Juan Barahona, a trade union official and leader of the Frente Nacional contra el Golpe de Estado (National Front against the Coup).

The troops and police also turned violently against reporters, who before had been allowed to operate freely during the protests. According to the Mexican daily *La Jornada*, Roberto Barra of Prensa Latina and Oscar Estrada of *Habla Honduras* were beaten up and had their equipment damaged. "It is your fault that this country is screwed up, there is nothing to report here," police told reporters. They added, "If you're a *nica* [Nicaraguan] we'll kill you."

According to a report from the Committee of Relatives of the Detained and Disappeared in Honduras (COFADEH), one of the country's main human rights groups, agents of military and police intelligence were dispatched to emergency rooms to search for wounded protest leaders in order to follow and capture them.

The repression was unleashed as thousands of demonstrators attempted to block highways leading out of the city, a form of protest that has been going on for the past weeks, with security forces in most cases looking on but not attacking those involved.

The evening after the crackdown, the leader of the coup regime, Roberto Micheletti, appeared on Honduran television, declaring, "We are going to impose order, we are going to impose order in this country. The people cannot expect 110 people to be blocking the country."

It was clear, however, that Micheletti was responding to the concerns, not of the "people," but rather of the Honduran oligarchy and foreign capital, which have expressed growing frustration with the impact of the protests and strikes as well as the drying up of foreign credit.

The AFP news agency cited a foreign diplomat in Tegucigalpa who reported that Micheletti ordered the violent dispersal of the highway blockades after business leaders complained that they were causing millions of dollars in losses by blocking the movement of manufactured goods to Honduran ports. Some factories have seen a drop in production of 25 percent or more.

An organization representing workers in the export industry sector, the Women's Collective of Honduras, said that Honduran workers were paying a price for this deepening crisis in terms of their jobs. "The *maquiladores*, which financed the coup, now are feeling the consequences," said the group's president, Maria Luisa Regalado. "But more than them, the workers will be the victims of this situation created by a group of oligarchs."

Earlier this month, the Honduran Association of *Maquiladores*, which includes several major US-based clothing firms, issued a statement backing the Micheletti regime.

"Notwithstanding the political crisis that Honduras is experiencing, we recognize that our Constitution is in effect, that the three branches of the government have not ceased to exist and perform their functions, that the economic, financial, labor and social activities are being performed as

usual without modifications or violation from the Government of Honduras,” the statement said.

This of course was a lie from beginning to end. It was issued under conditions in which the elected president had been overthrown by the military and forced by troops onto an aircraft that flew him into exile. Well over 1,000 of those who have opposed the coup have been subjected to arbitrary arrest; media critical of the coup regime have been shut down and several oppositionists involved in protests have been killed by death squads.

Earlier this week, three of the biggest US firms operating assembly plants in the country—Adidas Group, Nike Inc. and Gap Inc.—made public a letter written to US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declaring themselves “deeply concerned about recent events in that country.”

The statement continued, “We understand that serious disagreements exist between the elected President, Congress and the Supreme Court, but these should be resolved through peaceful, democratic dialogue, rather than through military action.”

The statement made no call for the restoration of Zelaya to the presidency and appeared to be an appeal for the continuation of the mediation efforts undertaken by Costa Rica’s President Oscar Arias at the behest of Washington. These talks have served to legitimize the coup regime while allowing it to drag out negotiations with the aim of keeping Zelaya out of the country at least until elections are held for his successor in November.

Honduras is the world’s third largest market for US textile mill products and the fourth largest supplier of apparel to the US market. Among largest investors in the Honduran clothing sector are the US-based Fruit of the Loom/Russell Corporation and Hanesbrands, and the Canadian firm Gildan.

In another punitive action aimed at suppressing opposition to the coup, the Micheletti regime announced that it is sending inspectors to state offices and schools, in order to determine who is absent from work. Those found not working will have their salaries reduced accordingly. This action is aimed particularly at teachers, who have been the backbone of the anti-coup protests, staying in the classrooms three days a week and taking to the streets on Thursdays and Fridays.

While the repression was being unleashed in Tegucigalpa, Manuel Zelaya was in the Nicaraguan capital of Managua, meeting with a delegation from the US State Department that included the American ambassador to Honduras, Hugo Llorens, a holdover from the Bush administration who reportedly had extensive discussions with Micheletti and other coup leaders before the overthrow of Zelaya last month.

After the meeting, Zelaya praised Llorens for his “sincerity.” “Today we have opened up a channel of communications and we have to expect results,” said Zelaya. He said he had asked that the US government step up pressure on the coup regime, including by widening the suspension of visas for its officials. Earlier this week the State Department announced that it had withdrawn the visas of four members of the regime.

From the outset of the coup, Zelaya has looked to Washington place him back in office. He has repeatedly accepted the terms of the so-called San José accord brokered by Costa Rica’s Arias, which would return him to the presidency as a figurehead in a government of “national unity and reconciliation” dominated by those who overthrew him. The accord also offers a blanket amnesty for those who carried out the coup, as well as the repressive crimes against the Honduran people that have followed.

Micheletti reacted angrily to the Llorens-Zelaya meeting, calling it an “act of interference” in the internal affairs of Honduras.

It had been reported earlier in the week that Micheletti had indicated that the regime was prepared to consider Zelaya’s return to the presidency. He appealed to Arias to send an envoy to help convince sections of the oligarchy that remained opposed to any such settlement.

Late Thursday, however, Micheletti reiterated his earlier position, insisting that Zelaya would be allowed to return to Honduras only in order to go on trial for alleged abuse of power, “but under no circumstances will we let him take possession of the government.”

The Obama administration has issued no condemnation of the repression in Honduras. It has facilitated the delaying tactics of the Micheletti regime. With the Arias mediation, it has sought to consolidate the aims of the coup, which, there is every reason to believe, Washington supported from the outset.



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