

Report exposes journalist killings in Honduras

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According to a report released on July 27 by the Committee to Protect Journalists, the killing of journalists with impunity that began with the coup that overthrew President Manuel Zelaya last year continues to this day.

The June 28 coup, carried out with the full support and foreknowledge of the Obama administration, set off a wave of popular protests.

Subsequent to the military's ouster of Zelaya, Washington brokered a deal that prevented his return and sought to legitimize the November elections that gave the coup a facade of democracy and installed Porfirio Lobo as president.

This has not stopped the regime's violations of civil and human rights of opposition supporters. In an effort to whitewash the record of the coup regime, Lobo created a so-called truth and reconciliation commission that has been cited by the US State Department as evidence that the current government has turned a corner from the crimes of the coup leaders and toward full civil and human rights for all, a claim that is not credible to most political observers.

The violence is directed against not just journalists, but also human rights activists, trade union and peasant leaders and liberal elements in the bourgeoisie. The *New York Times* cited a report released in June by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights that exposed kidnappings, unlawful detentions, illegal searches and even sexual assaults against opponents of the regime.

Tuesday's report is the outcome of an investigation carried out by Mike O'Connor, a Mexico City-based journalist for the Committee to Protect Journalists.

O'Connor writes about the unresolved cases of seven journalists who were shot dead between March and June. He calls these crimes, "an astonishing number of

murders in such a short time in a country of 7.5 million. Six of the murders occurred in the span of just seven weeks, and most were clearly assassinations carried out by hit men." Three of the victims were murdered in the course of their work. These three are: TV anchor Nahúm Palacios Arteaga, shot dead on March 14, in the town of Tocoa; radio and TV journalist David Meza Montesinos, killed on March 11, in La Ceiba and Joseph Hernández Ochoa, also a TV journalist, killed on March 1, in Tegucigalpa, the nation's capital.

O'Connor cannot say for certain that four other journalists—Luis Arturo Mondragón, killed on June 14 in El Paraíso; Jorge Alberto Orellana, killed on April 20, in San Pedro Sula; and José Bayardo Mairena and Manuel Juárez killed March 26 in Juticalpa—were shot because of their journalistic work.

Palacios had opposed the June 2009 coup and had allowed opponents of the coup to broadcast their message. Threats against this well-known journalist led the Organization of American States to ask President Lobo to provide protection for Palacios. Despite being required by international agreements to carry out this request, the Honduran government refused. By defying the OAS, the Lobo administration virtually provided his killers with a license to carry out Palacios's execution. Palacios was ambushed and killed, together with a female companion, Dr. Yorleny Sánchez.

In the months leading up to his assassination, Palacios had sided with local peasants whose land had been taken from them by wealthy landlords, in violation of Honduran agrarian reform laws.

Three days earlier, Meza was killed in the city of La Ceiba. Meza had been involved in a campaign to expose police corruption, including links between the police and a drug running organization.

Hernandez, 25, was at the beginning of his career as a

TV journalist. According to the O'Connor report, he may have been killed for giving a car ride to Karol Cabrera, one of Honduras's most controversial journalists, who had been a vociferous backer of the coup regime. "Most of the bullets hit Hernández, who died instantly, but Cabrera was seriously injured as well. As soon as she could give interviews, she repeatedly denounced the attack as being directed against her, in connection with her work as a radio commentator."

Mondragón had been receiving death threats over his anti-corruption reporting. His death came as no surprise to his family. One of his sons told O'Connor that his father had assembled the family to discuss the death threats: "But my father had the attitude that he was going to go ahead anyway. He said he had to continue. He said, 'If they are going to kill me they won't threaten first, they'll just do it.'" The son said the list of people in El Paraíso who could have ordered the killing is short, and that everyone knows who they are.

Orellana was gunned down on April 20 as he left his TV station in San Pedro Sula, Honduras's second largest city. Though known for his left-wing political views, the official story, according to the San Pedro Sula police chief, is that Orellana was killed by a mugger intent on robbing his cell phone.

While Mairena and Juárez were small town TV and radio reporters who supposedly stayed away from "dangerous" subject matter, they were ambushed in much the same way as all the others. Other reporters told O'Connor that they were caught in the middle of a war between two powerful oligarchic families, which has already created dozens of victims.

O'Connor's cautiousness notwithstanding, none of these were random assassinations. All seven journalists were assassinated by gunmen who had lain in wait for them.

When it comes to investigating the crimes against the journalists, O'Connor describes scenes worthy of the Keystone cops. Forensic evidence is "lost." Autopsies are performed badly, if at all. Arrest warrants are issued, but nobody is actually taken into custody.

According to O'Connor, the government's lack of aggressiveness in investigating these crimes, and indifference to the killings, is strong evidence that "the murders have been conducted with the tacit approval, or even outright complicity, of police, armed forces, or

other authorities." This has resulted in an atmosphere of impunity.

The extraordinary number of killings has had the effect of intimidating the press: "You get the impression that the government wants you in terror so you don't know what to report. Is this story about drugs too dangerous? What about this one about political corruption? At the end you don't report anything that will make powerful people uncomfortable," said Geovany Domínguez, a senior editor of *Tiempo* newspaper in Tegucigalpa. This is in fact a signal from the Lobo government that any serious journalism that questions any aspect of the regime will not be tolerated.

These murders give the lie to the US claim that the Honduran government has restored civil and human rights.

A month ago, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton demanded that the Organization of American States—which had expelled Honduras in the wake of the June coup—readmit that nation, claiming that the Lobo government was taking steps to reconcile the opposing sides and to respect democratic rights.

These political crimes by death squads in the service of the landowners, drug gangs, the military and the Lobo administration are indicative of a ruling class—desperate to defend its privileges—that is conducting a war against the nation's workers and peasants, with the full support of the Obama administration.



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