

Hondurans demand US withdrawal over civilian deaths

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19 May 2012

The killing of at least four Honduran civilians, including two pregnant women, in an attack by a US helicopter last Friday has triggered angry protests in Honduras's remote northeastern Mosquito Coast area.

The attack was carried out in an anti-drug operation carried out under the direction of American commandos working as part of a Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) team deployed in the area. The DEA in Washington acknowledged Wednesday that its armed agents were in the helicopter when it strafed a boat in the northeastern Patuca River, killing two men and two women.

The mayor of the nearby town of Ahuas, Lucio Vaquedano, told the Associated Press in a telephone interview that "Innocent villagers having nothing to do with the drug problem were traveling in the boat as part of their daily activity of fishing...and they machine-gunned them from the air." Those who were killed were reportedly diving for lobsters and other seafood at the time of the attack.

Residents of the area burned down government buildings in the wake of the attack and demanded that US personnel, including both special operations troops and agents of the US Drug Enforcement Agency, be withdrawn.

"Those who were in the boat are fishermen, not drug traffickers," read a statement issued by leaders of the local Miskito indigenous groups that populate the area. "For centuries we have been a peaceful people who live in harmony with nature, but today we declared these Americans to be persona non grata in our territory."

The *Washington Post* quoted Serene Trapp, a cousin of one of the slain women, Candelaria Trapp, described as a single mother of six. "The boat was transporting people and some cargo. They were coming to town to spend Mother's Day," she said. In a telephone interview, she insisted that "None of them were smugglers."

US and Honduran officials said that the incident took

place during a drug seizure operation mounted after a US military surveillance plane detected an illicit flight into the area. Honduran forces responded on the ground backed by four US helicopters. They claimed that the only dead were two narcotics traffickers, who had fired on one of the helicopters.

US officials have confirmed that American DEA agents were in the helicopter that strafed the boat, but claim that they did not fire their weapons in the attack. This does nothing to mitigate Washington's responsibility for the deaths, however, as the helicopter itself was a US aircraft and its crew composed of Guatemalan contractors hired by the US government. The raid was launched based on intelligence provided by US forces, and there can be little doubt that in such operations it is US personnel that literally call the shots.

A US official who spoke to the *Washington Post* said that a surveillance video showed a large number of people unloading the drug plane, demonstrating that "many members of the impoverished community of Ahuas were involved in drug trafficking."

"There is nothing in the local village that was unknown, a surprise or a mystery about this," the official said. "What happened was that, for the first time in the history of Ahuas, Honduran law enforcement interfered with narcotics smuggling."

This insinuation of the collective guilt of the entire village of 1,500 people is clearly aimed at justifying whatever deaths were inflicted in the US-orchestrated operation.

Vaquedano, the village's mayor, however explained that there were two boats in the river that night; that of the drug smugglers, which was downriver and unlit, and that of the two men and two women, which was running with its lights on. "First the narcos opened fire, and later the DEA helicopters were searching the area, and they fired with their guns at the boat with civilians, thinking maybe

they were narcos.”

The bloody incident has drawn attention to the militarized drug war that is being waged in Honduras under the direction of US military and DEA personnel.

Less than a week before the killings on the Patuca River, the *New York Times* ran a story datelined “Forward Operating Base Mocoron, Honduras”, which reported that “The United States military has brought lessons from the past decade of conflict to the drug war being fought in the wilderness of Miskito Indian country....”

The *Times* reported that Mocoron was one of three “forward operating bases” set up by the US military, drawing on “hard lessons learned from a decade of counterinsurgency in Afghanistan and Iraq, where troops were moved from giant bases to outposts scattered across remote, hostile areas so they could face off against insurgents.”

Honduras was already the site of the largest US military deployment in Latin America—Joint Force Bravo, consisting of some 600 troops headquartered at the Soto Cano air base, commonly referred to a Palmerola.

Honduras is one of only two Latin American nations that have seen increased US military spending over the past two years. The other is Mexico, where, under the 2008 Merida Initiative, Washington has committed to providing arms, training and “advisers” to prosecute Mexico’s militarized drug war, which has claimed more than 50,000 lives over the past five and a half years.

In addition to expanding the main base at Soto Cano and setting up the three “forward operating bases” at Mocoron, Naco and Aguacate, the Pentagon is also preparing to set up a major radar station in northeastern Honduras, ostensibly for the purpose of tracking drug planes.

The US military previously had a radar base in the country in the 1980s, when Honduras served as the base of operations for the CIA-directed “contra” war against Nicaragua as well as counter-insurgency operations in El Salvador, which together claimed the lives of tens of thousands of Central Americans.

In fiscal 2011, the Pentagon increased its spending on military contracts by 71 percent over the previous year, according to figures compiled by the pacifist Fellowship for Reconciliation, reaching nearly \$54 million.

This escalating US military presence is bound up with the Obama administration’s indispensable role in propping up the regime that took power in June 2009 with the military overthrow of Honduras’s elected president Manuel Zelaya and his forced exile from the country.

Washington brokered the deal that led to elections held under the auspices of the coup regime, bringing the right-wing president Porfirio Lobo to power. Those who staged the coup, subsequently carrying out killings, torture and thousands of illegal detentions, have enjoyed complete impunity, while wholesale attacks on democratic and social rights continue unabated.

Since Lobo took office, 23 Honduran journalists have been murdered, the latest being Alfredo Villatoro, the news director for HRN, one of the country’s principal radio stations, whose body was found one week after he was kidnapped on May 9. His was the second murder of a journalist just in the last 11 days. The wave of violence unleashed against peasants, workers, political activists and human rights advocates after the coup has also continued.

The right-wing and repressive government defends the interests of an oligarchy of financiers, industrialists and big landowners as well as those of the transnational corporations, against an impoverished and restive population. Honduras is Latin America’s second-poorest country after Haiti. With a total population of a little over 8 million, it has close to a million young people who are unable to find work or attend school, while the unemployment rate as a whole hovers at around 30 percent and 60 percent of the population lives in poverty.

These conditions are the legacy of more than a century of semi-colonial oppression of Honduras by US imperialism. Now, under Obama, Washington is seizing on the “drug war” as the means of reasserting its dominant role in the country and turning it into a base of military operations throughout the region.



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