

Honduran death squads kill four student protesters, including a 13-year-old

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The remains of 13 year-old Soad Nicole Ham were found in the Honduran capital of Tegucigalpa last Wednesday after a death squad kidnapped and murdered her for participating in recent student demonstrations against the country's crumbling education system. A medical examination of the girl's remains, which were discovered in a plastic bag on the street, revealed signs of brutal torture.

Soad Nicole was the fourth demonstrator to be killed by death squads in Tegucigalpa last week. The bodies of Elvin Antonio López, Darwin Josué Martínez, and Diana Yareli Montoya—all between the ages of 19 and 21 and all actively involved in student protests—were also discovered in various neighborhoods of the city. Yareli Montoya, whose body was riddled with 21 bullets by masked attackers, took two painful days to die.

The victims and the timing of the killings underscore the likely complicity of the rightist government of President Juan Orlando Hernández Alvarado, with the help of his Education Minister, Marlon Escoto.

In the days prior to the disappearances, thousands of high school and university students were carrying out large demonstrations against the country's education system. Many of the capital city's middle schools, high schools and universities were on strike against poor education conditions and a lack of adequate school resources.

Students were further enraged by Education Minister Escoto's callous proposal for changes to the school schedule, which is divided into morning and afternoon shifts. Under the March 16 proposal, students would be forced to travel to and from school either in the early morning or late evening hours, when darkness makes it easier for the armed gangs who roam the streets to attack them.

According to the non-profit Casa Alianza, 86 students are killed each month on the way to and from school in Honduras—a figure that has doubled since the 2009 US-backed coup that toppled the elected government of President Manuel Zelaya.

Soad Nicole herself was targeted because of a brief statement she made to a Globo-TV news crew at the scene of a demonstration in the days before her death.

As students chanted, “We need school desks and we receive gunshots,” Soad Nicole told reporters, “It's not possible for us to be seated on the floor like dogs! We don't even have chairs!”

Addressing the Education Minister, she added: “Man, buy chairs, you son of a bitch!”

It is a testament to the real state of social and political life in Central America that such a statement of justified indignation from a 13-year-old is sufficient to earn her the penalty of death by assassination squad.

The government has responded to the students' demands by deploying heavily armed soldiers to fire tear gas, flash grenades and water cannon, as well as by placing schools under military lockdown. On March 17, Escoto announced that to suppress the demonstrations, the Honduran military police would begin occupying schools in the capital.

“Beginning this afternoon [March 17], the police will be at the gates to ensure that those students who want to come in to study can do so,” he said, noting further that the government had been “tolerant enough” with the peaceful student protesters.

As the crackdown on protestors continues, Escoto has taken to posting pictures of demonstrators on his Twitter account and publishing their names, sending the message that they too could end up like Soad Nicole Ham.

In the course of the demonstrations, several

journalists have reported being harassed by the police, including two who said that a police official approached them, held up a pistol, and provocatively unlocked the gun's safety mechanism. Many students have also been wounded in clashes with police.

As demonstrations began on the morning of March 16, Escoto's office issued a statement requesting that teachers provide lists of those students who were participating in demonstrations. According to the Education Ministry, this was being undertaken so that the government could "apply corrective measures" to demonstrators.

Though the government has of course not admitted to carrying out the murders itself, there is every indication that it is precisely such "corrective measures" that were applied to the four young people whose bodies have since been found abandoned in the streets of Tegucigalpa.

Behind the brutal acts of the Hernández administration stands American imperialism, whose role in enforcing police-military terror on the countries of Central America dates back to the 19th century.

The Obama administration backed the military coup of 2009 and has supported all the regimes that followed, including those headed by coup leader Roberto Micheletti and Porfirio Lobo, winner of an election organized by the coup regime, with less than half the population voting.

Hernandez himself was named victor amid charges of vote fraud and violent intimidation by supporters of his opponent, Zelaya's wife, Xiomara Castro. He ran in the election on a campaign promise of "a soldier on every corner," and has since made good on his vow to militarize policing in Honduras, despite the prohibition against using troops for this purpose in the country's constitution.

At the time of the coup, a US official, speaking on the condition of anonymity, told the *New York Times* that the State Department spoke to "military officials and opposition leaders" about "how they might remove [former president Manuel Zelaya] from office, how he could be arrested, on whose authority they could do that."

By 2011, the Pentagon had increased military spending to the Honduran police and military by 71 percent, to \$53.8 million, while providing \$1.3 billion for US military electronics to the Honduran regime. In

2012, Defense Department contracts increased to \$67.4 million—tripling the total from 2002. It costs the Obama administration \$89 million per year to house 600 US troops at the Soto Cano air force, which was recently expanded to the tune of an additional \$25 million.

Recently, the US has announced the deployment at Soto Cano of a new Special Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Force-South, or SPMAGTF-South, consisting of 250 Marine special operations troops who are charged with rapid intervention wherever in the region Washington sees fit.

The status of Honduras as the "murder capital of the world" and one of the poorest countries in the Western Hemisphere is the product of over a century of oppression by US imperialism. Washington invaded the country seven times in the first two decades of the 20th century to defend the interests of United Fruit Company, making Honduras the first country to be branded a "banana republic."

The CIA used the country as a staging ground both for its 1954 coup that overthrew Guatemala's democratically elected president, Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán, and for the Nicaraguan Contra forces who carried out a bloody campaign against the Sandinistas and the Nicaraguan peasantry in the 1980s. During this latter campaign, the Honduran military, with the aid of the CIA, utilized its own death squads to hunt down and murder trade unionists, leftists and students.

The recent events in Honduras underscore the fact that cold-blooded murder at the hands of the state is becoming an increasingly common element of everyday life for young people all over the world. The events in Honduras closely parallel last September's government-backed killing of 43 student teachers in Ayotzinapa, Mexico. In both cases, the killings were carried out in response to widespread opposition to social inequality, poverty, and lack of quality social programs and education. In Honduras, as in Mexico, what follows will be a government cover-up with the full backing of the United States.



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