

US backs police purge in Honduras

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As part of an executive decree approved April 10, Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández announced the closing of the police headquarters in Casamata and a purge within the National Police, after recent documents suggest that high-ranking members of the force were involved in the killings of three leading anti-drug officials between 2009 and 2013.

The Honduran daily, *El Herald*, published the documents, which were prepared by the General Inspectorate of the National Police and the Directorate of Police Intelligence. They revealed that a drug lord ordered the murders, several police chiefs concealed the files, and the inspector general's office of the police and the security minister attempted to prevent the Honduran attorney general from carrying out an investigation since members of the ruling National Party would be implicated.

The Honduran police apparatus has come under increasing pressure since the murders of the indigenous leaders Berta Cáceres and Nelson García, and now these reports on the National Police have pushed the conservative National Party government to make some changes and allow for greater involvement by international and local investigators.

However, the purge in the National Police is consistent with increasing militarization and repressive measures in the interests of the Honduran oligarchy and imperialism.

President Hernández stated that his government will, "either eliminate the National Police or create one that gains the confidence of the people."

As part of the purge, the president formed a Special Commission for the Cleanup of the National Police made up of three civilians, who will work with the Ministry of Security in carrying out "confidence tests" to determine whether police officers stay or go.

Nevertheless, the security minister, Julián Pacheco, revealed that they already have a predetermined list of 1,400 police officers to fire, which would represent 10 percent of the entire force. If they don't voluntarily leave before they get fired, the ministry's spokesperson said, they will lose all retirement benefits. At least 32 middle ranking officials have already been asked to retire or have taken the initiative themselves.

Even though the police director, subdirector, and several other high-ranking officers are being allowed to participate in the purge and restructuring only to resign afterwards, other police officers can be dismissed "without justification."

These measures parallel those made between 2012 and 2015 after police agents connected to organized crime killed a group of university students in 2012.

According to a report made by the now defunct Commission for the Reform of the Public Security System, after spending \$7 million, the government investigated less than 15 percent of the 12,000 police during that period. Other than the two police agents directly involved in the murder of the students, who went to prison, only 3 percent of the 230 police officers proved to be connected to organized crime were fired.

According to a security analyst, Marco Tinoco, the 2012 cleanup "was at first just an internal conflict among high ranking officials for control of power within the police. Some police were fired, but only those of lower ranks."

On April 14, the *New York Times* described the latest documents as "a chilling portrait of impunity at the very top of Honduras's police hierarchy: the unchallenged power to carry out assassinations and force a cover-up of the investigation." The article concludes that the new Support Mission against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (MACCIH) will likely challenge the Honduran president's resistance to investigate his government's involvement in organized crime.

MACCIH, proposed in February and approved by the Honduran Congress in March, is an OAS-led and US-backed commission designed to bring back national and international credibility to the government of the local oligarchy and its repressive institutions.

Impunity is by no means limited to police officers, but rather extends to virtually all of organized crime in the country. The Honduran NGO, Alliance for Peace and Justice, and the Violence Observatory of the National Autonomous University of Honduras (UNAH) reported last year that only 9 percent of homicides get investigated and only 4 percent lead to convictions.

The same National Police being purged, supposedly for corruption, has also participated in the terrorization of those who actively opposed the US-backed military coup in 2009, when ex-president Manuel Zelaya was forcefully deposed.

Since then, the coup regime's few attempts to investigate the crimes committed by security forces against demonstrators—described by Human Rights Watch as resulting in "various deaths, numerous injured and thousands of arbitrary detentions"—have been merely for show. They have led to only

20 cases being documented by the OAS-backed Commission of Truth and Reconciliation, and to a single arrest related to the coup. In 2014, former army Colonel José Arnulfo Jiménez was sentenced to five years in prison for using a military contingent to shut down television channel 36 on June 28, 2009, the day of the coup.

On top of the hundreds of death threats, persecutions and executions, according to COFADEH, the Committee of Families of Missing Detainees in Honduras, the coup was followed with “militarized roadblocks that affected 16 departments in the country, illegal and prolonged curfews, airport closings, and the immobilization of buses by shooting at their tires.”

The tactics used since the coup against civilian opposition, leading to the deaths primarily of workers and youth, are being orchestrated by the same military and police officials who used them during the Central American civil war in the 1980s, when torture and political killings were rampant.

The state’s armed forces are still the main props for US imperialist interests in the country. Since the coup, the security forces have given direct orders to their ostensible commanders-in-chief—presidents Roberto Micheletti, Porfirio Lobo, and Juan Orlando Hernández.

The purge in the National Police is being directed largely by the US State Department, with the support of the oligarchical elite.

The US ambassador in Honduras, James Nealon, confirmed that Washington is actively participating in the restructuring of the police. “This is the moment to work together to clean up the police, so that you can have the police you deserve,” said the ambassador in a video released by the office of the Honduran president.

Washington is using the issue of corruption as a means of gaining greater control over the Honduran government and its security forces.

These efforts are being carried out in conjunction with the \$750 million being spent by the US government in its Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle (El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala).

Underlying this campaign are broader geo-strategic considerations, particularly combatting the rise in Chinese influence and investments in the region—like the \$20 billion interoceanic railway a Chinese company has agreed to build in Honduras.

The regional corollary to US imperialism’s belligerent pivot to Asia has been an active campaign to destabilize the bourgeois nationalist “left turn” in Latin America, which has gone hand-in-hand with the growth of Chinese trade and investment. The deposing of Zelaya, who had forged friendly ties with the Chavez government in Venezuela, was part of this campaign.

The US still retains a 70 percent share in total foreign direct investment (FDI) into Honduras. The high dependence on US

capital has been accompanied by attacks on the living standards and basic rights of the Honduran working class.

According to the UN Economic Commission for Latin America, ECLAC, the 2008 crisis led to a massive growth in FDI into backwards economies and a tripling of yearly speculative portfolio investments to \$96 billion in Latin America. The agency notes that, while FDI profitability fell in most of the region, in Honduras it showed increases in 2012 and 2013, leading to a surge in FDI, equivalent to 57 percent of the country’s GDP in 2014 compared to 36 percent in 2007.

During Lobo’s administration, the US Embassy offered to finance and helped create a military police force with four battalions. Then, after Hernández came to power in 2013, with the promise “to put a soldier in every corner,” the Military Police was officially instituted and became active in January 2014.

The ambassador’s promise of a “police you deserve” was directed to foreign investors and the local oligarchy. The police they need, not deserve, is a militarized one prepared to suppress all tensions caused by the country’s mounting inequality, even if that requires killing and terrorizing protesting workers, peasants, and indigenous people.

The government’s security and military budget increased 55 percent in 2015 to \$593 million.

According to a 2015 Oxfam report, the average Honduran multimillionaire (with at least \$30 million in assets) makes 16,460 times the median yearly salary of a person in the lowest quintile of the population, the most unequal ratio in Latin America and the Caribbean.

The report also stated that the business elite has acquired public assets by “leading public entities into bankruptcy—CONADI’S case [the National Investment Corporation]—increasingly channeling public resources into private enterprises—ENEE [National Electric Energy Company] and Public Health’s cases—or simply eliminating the competition for the private sector—Hondutel’s case.”

Public spending in health, one of the lowest in the region, is equivalent to just 80 percent of the \$650 million in estimated tax write-offs for the wealthy.

ECLAC estimated that only 34 percent of teenagers in the poorest quintile are attending school, compared with 73 percent of those in the top quintile, the highest difference in the region. With increasing unemployment and over 60 percent of the population living in poverty, many workers and youth are forced to choose between joining criminal organizations or fleeing the country.



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