

After women's prison massacre, Honduran president places military in charge

Andrea Lobo
23 June 2023

At least 46 inmates were killed at the main women's prison in Honduras on Tuesday in a massacre that has horrified millions worldwide.

According to survivors and relatives of the victims, in the early morning, members of the Barrio 18 gang were allowed by guards—all of whom were unharmed—to enter another wing presumably inhabited by rivals.

Death threats escalated over several weeks, as the perpetrators managed to make careful preparations and smuggle in a significant arsenal, including 18 pistols, an AR-15 rifle, two Uzi submachine guns, two grenades, machetes and flammable liquid, found at the scene.

The attackers reportedly shot and hacked at inmates to force them into a cell, which they proceeded to shut with new locks and burn down. Piles of burned bodies, some of which could take months to identify, were found in the bathroom as women sought refuge from the flames but were entirely trapped. Most victims were burned to death.

The gruesome details are only as stunning as the frequency with which such incidents take place, with at least a dozen killings in Honduran prisons yearly for the past six years. The world's deadliest prison disaster took place in 2012 at the Comayagua prison in Honduras, where over 360 men died.

Despite self-contradictory attempts by officials to point to "human failures" or guards being "overrun," the incident at the women's prison could not have happened without the criminal involvement of the security apparatus.

President Xiomara Castro was compelled to acknowledge that the attack was "planned by gangs in plain sight and with the acquiescence of the security forces."

The following day, however, she announced 10 measures to allow the same security apparatus to respond with an "iron fist." Experts and rights advocates have responded with sharp warnings. After citing the well-known complicity of the police and military with organized crime, Valencia University researcher Joaquín Mejía Rivera tweeted: "it is a collapse before the military power, which has controlled the prisons during the last decade and is directly responsible for their current crisis."

The measures include indefinitely placing the military in control of security across the entire country. Castro will also renew and expand nationally a state of exception she launched last December that suspended democratic rights and sanctioned mass warrantless detentions ostensibly to combat organized crime.

Leaders of criminal organizations will be sent to a prison in the Cisne Isles in the Caribbean, while a vague request was made to the courts to find alternatives for women currently jailed without being convicted. A significant majority of women and men in Honduran prisons have never been convicted of any crime.

She named the chief of National Police, Gustavo Sánchez, a US-trained career policeman, as security minister.

Just like her predecessors, Castro will also hand over control of all prisons to the military, specifically the Military Police (PMOP), and charge it with training at least 2,000 new guards.

The current head of the PMOP, Ramiro Fernando Muñoz, was charged in 2020 by relatives of inmates at one of the three military prisons and the Committee of Relatives of the Disappeared in Honduras (COFADEH) with abusing, torturing and refusing to provide prescribed medicines to prisoners. One inmate, Angelo López, was allegedly threatened with death and beaten unconscious by three officials, including Muñoz, who bit the man's ears.

And finally, in a point largely unreported by the media, she cancelled ceremonies to commemorate the military coup of June 28, 2009. That day, 200 armed troops with masks kidnapped President Manuel Zelaya—Castro's husband—and sent him in his pajamas on a military plane to Costa Rica. The coup was overseen by the Obama-Biden administration and was aided by US military officials.

Castro remained in the US embassy during the coup and subsequently gained popularity for convoking and participating in several anti-coup demonstrations and denouncing the regime. In May 2011, Zelaya himself helped re-legitimize the coup regime by signing a "National Reconciliation Agreement," which allowed him to return to the country to tend to his significant land and business interests. Washington had opposed Zelaya for aligning with President Hugo Chávez, who offered Honduras cheap Venezuelan oil.

One of Castro's most popular campaign promises was to send the military back to the barracks. She also suggested dissolving the PMOP. In 2015, she said the unit was created "to terrorize the people and persecute oppositionists."

At the same time, she made constant reassurances to the local oligarchy and US imperialism. Washington celebrated her election and then requested the extradition of her opponent and incumbent President Juan Orlando Hernandez to face charges for working for the Sinaloa Cartel in exchange for millions of dollars.

The drug trafficker Hernandez, who was installed by the same coup regime in fraudulent elections, did not only create the PMOP and several other special units, but much of the current military and police leadership was promoted under his two terms in power.

The ties of the Honduran state and the local business elite to the Mexican and Colombian drug cartels were drastically strengthened as the United States used trafficking routes and resources to smuggle weapons and train the fascist Contra militias in their dirty war against the petty-bourgeois nationalist Sandinista government in Nicaragua throughout the 1980s.

During that period, the CIA also trained and sponsored death squads formed by Honduran police and soldiers to kidnap, torture and kill left-wing workers, students and activists. Many of these death squads were organized under Battalion 3-16, which “disappeared” at least 184 people.

Zelaya had named several Battalion 3-16 veterans to top posts, including the retired general Álvaro Romero as his security minister and Billy Joya as a security adviser, with the latter playing a prominent role in the 2009 coup.

Similarly, Castro has maintained Jackeline Foglia Sandoval, a West Point graduate who also belonged to Battalion 3-16, as head of the National Council of Investments, an influential liaison of the government with the private sector. Roland Valenzuela, a minister under Zelaya, accused Foglia as the “person in charge of coordinating and operating the coup” in 2009.

The main purpose of the interventions of US imperialism in Honduras has been to safeguard corporate interests in the region while crushing opposition from below against rampant poverty and social inequality.

US imperialism and its partners in the local oligarchy have created a hell for the vast majority of Hondurans.

Today’s main gangs in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala—Mara Salvatrucha and Barrio 18—were founded in Los Angeles. They spread and thrived in the dire conditions of Central America as a result of mass deportations targeting gang members under Bill Clinton and George W. Bush.

According to the National Statistics Institute, 73 percent of Hondurans live under official poverty and a majority under extreme poverty. Reaching a quarter of the country’s GDP, remittances sent by migrant workers have become a lifeline for hundreds of thousands of households, but the waves of deportations under Obama, Trump and Biden—700,000 of the 1 million Honduran migrants in the last decade have been deported—have had a devastating effect.

Meanwhile, the Biden administration has partnered with Castro to deploy troops with US advisers to contain migration and turn the country into an open-air prison.

Pro-corporate policies have created a situation, according to the UN, where 72 percent of families with children lack access to social assistance and less than one in 10 of the elderly receive a pension.

In 2019, Puerto Rico, Honduras and Myanmar were declared by the Global Climate Risk Index as the most affected countries by climate change, which is driven by the greenhouse gas emissions of the largest corporations and militaries globally. This classification was made even before the back-to-back Hurricanes

Eta (Category 4) and Iota (Category 5) that caused billions of dollars in damage across Nicaragua and Honduras.

Droughts worsened by global warming and El Niño in 2015–16 sent hundreds of thousands fleeing the country as crops failed, while another Super El Niño is expected to wreak havoc in 2023–24 given that emissions and warming have continued to accelerate.

As the coup regime launched a wave of privatizations, regulatory cuts and social austerity, the security forces killed at least 20 demonstrators and participated in the selective murder of anti-coup activists like environmentalist Berta Cáceres in 2016.

After its creation in 2013, the PMOP crushed demonstrations against Hernandez’ second electoral fraud in 2017, killing 23 people, and it has used lethal force against demonstrators repeatedly since.

In 2019, mass strikes and revolts against layoffs and a privatization of healthcare and education were brutally crushed, leaving at least six dead. On June 24 of that year, the PMOP invaded the National Autonomous University of Honduras (UNAH) and sprayed a crowd of students with live ammunition. Then, in 2020, as the poorest Hondurans blocked streets across the country to demand economic assistance to shelter from COVID-19, the government again responded with brutal repression and the premature reopening of workplaces.

In these conditions of military dictatorship and economic and social devastation, US imperialism and the ruling elite advanced Xiomara Castro to provide a democratic and “left” fig leaf as they continue to plunder the country and prepare to crack down on future social explosions.

This maneuver was enthusiastically supported by the pseudo-left internationally, particularly *Jacobin* magazine of the Democratic Socialists of America, which promoted Castro as “a socialist” who had defeated “neoliberalism and its brutal foreign instigators” and who is “trying to revive democracy.”



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