

Rights Action

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Honduras Coup Alert #17 - Eyewitness reports from Sunday's huge march

HONDURANS POUR INTO THE STREETS DEMANDING ZELAYA'S RETURN

by Medea Benjamin, in Honduras

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(Tegucigalpa) The day started out full of joy, as thousands of Hondurans converged in front of the National Institute of Pedagogy, intent on marching about three miles to the airport to greet the plane that was supposed to bring deposed President Zelaya back to Honduras.

"Our president's coming home today, this is going to be a great day," said Jose Rodriguez, a campesino who came from Santa Barbara with his farmer's group to join the anti-coup movement. The military tried to stop them from getting to the capital, so they had to divide up and take local buses from town to town. "It took us two days to get here, and we slept outside in the forest last night, but we had to be here," said Rodriguez.

A group of young girls came with their church from Olancho. They were determined to greet Zelaya, who they said was sent by God to be president. "The Cardinal is against our president, but he doesn't represent many of us in the religious community. Our pastor is against the coup and so are we," said Alejandra Fernandez, a 23-year-old university student.

I asked why she supported Manuel Zelaya, or “Mel”, as his supporters call him. “The government said he broke the law and is guilty of 18 crimes,” she said. “Do you know what they are?” She pulled out her cell phone and started to read from a list: He raised the minimum wage, gave out free school lunches, provided milk for the babies and pensions for the elderly, distributed energy-saving lightbulbs, decreased the price of public transportation, made more scholarships available for students.”

Suddenly a crowd gathered around us and started chiming in. “He fixed the roads,” said one. “He put schools in remote rural areas, like my little village, that never had them before,” added another. “He let anyone go into the Presidential Palace and converted it from an elite residence to the people’s house,” said another.

“You see?,” Alejandra smiled. “He is guilty of even more than 18 crimes. That’s why the elite classes can’t stand him and why we want him back. This is really a class struggle.”

The march wound its way through the streets of Tegucigalpa, gathering more and more people along the way. The massive crowd sang and chanted slogans like “No somos cinco, no somos cien. Prensa vendida, cuentenos bien” (We’re not five, we’re not 100, you sold-out press, count us well)—referring to the fact that the mainstream press has been ignoring or grossly undercounting the movement that had been holding street demonstrations every day since the June 28 coup.

“I’ve never had anything like this in my lifetime,” said an ecstatic Miriam Nunez, a 46-year-old teacher from Tegucigalpa. “Look around you—you can’t even see the beginning or the end of this march! It’s full of teachers, students, campesinos, union workers, indigenous people. One thing the coup succeeded in doing is bringing together the social movements in a way that never existed before in this country.”

What made the march particularly exciting is that as it approached the airport, there were rows and rows of soldiers and police in riot gear blocking their path. Each time the security forces tried to stop the crowd, there would be negotiations with the police, who would finally back down and allow the protesters to get closer and closer to the airport.

Luis Sosa, a university professor and anti-coup leader, was one of those negotiating with Police Commissioner Mendosa. “Mendosa and I went to school together 20 years ago and we play soccer together every Sunday. So he knows that if his men get rough with us, there will be hell to pay next Sunday,” laughed Sosa. “But seriously, we’re trying hard to maintain

discipline among our ranks—taking sticks and rocks away from people who want to provoke violence—and the police say that as long as we are peaceful, they'll let us go all the way to the airport.”

Sure enough, the crowd made it to the airport peacefully and waited patiently for Zelaya's plane to arrive. Suddenly, a plane flew in low and circled around the airport. The crowd went wild, cheering and jumping up and down, but became angry when they saw that the plane was not able to land.

Military vehicles and soldiers were on the runway, making it impossible for the pilot to maneuver safely.

On the far end of the airport, a group of mostly young people tried to get through the fence to make their way to the tarmac. According to Al Jazeera cameramen Alfredo Delara, some of them started throwing stones and bottles at security forces. The troops responded by lobbing tear gas and then firing their weapons in the air. Suddenly, at least one soldier pointed his weapon directly at the crowd.

“A young boy was hit right in the head, his brains gushing out. He was killed instantly,” said Delara. “His mother came running, screaming hysterically ‘My son, my son, they've killed my son.’” Others in the crowd were wounded and it was reported that another person was killed.

Between the violence and the fact that President Zelaya was forced to fly on to El Salvador, the crowd became despondent. The organizers tried to keep up their hopes. “Perhaps the United Nations will send peacekeepers,” one of the leaders shouted through the sound system. The crowd cheered and yelled, “We want the blue helmets, we want the blue helmets.”

“Can you believe this?,” asked indigenous leader Berta Caceres, her eyes welling up with tears. “Now they are killing our people. Where will this end? We need the international community to step in and stop the crazy people who have stolen our country.”

Meanwhile, another piece of news circulated—that the government had just moved up the curfew from 10pm to 6:30pm. The crowd rushed to disperse, fearing they could be arrested for violating the curfew. But they vowed to keep up the fight. “We will be marching again tomorrow, come join us,” the leaders announced. “This struggle is not over.”

“If they think that we are going to give up, they are badly mistaken,” said Caceres. “The events of today make us more determined than ever to overthrow this terrible coup.”

[Medea Benjamin (medea@globalexchange.org) is cofounder of Global Exchange (www.globalexchange.org) and CODEPINK: Women for Peace (www.codepinkalert.org). She is part of a delegation an International Emergency Delegation to Honduras that includes members of Nonviolence International, Global Exchange, CODEPINK and Rights Action. If interested in coming to Honduras as an emergency accompanier, contact: Andres@nvintl.net.

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FUNDS ARE NEEDED FOR EMERGENCY RESPONSE IN HONDURAS

Rights Action staff are in Honduras working with the pro-democracy and rule of law sectors. Funds are being sent to Honduras and used by community development and human rights organizations for: food and shelter, transportation and communication costs, urgent action outreach and human rights accompaniment work.

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AMERICANS AND CANADIANS SHOULD CONTACT YOUR OWN MEDIA, MEMBERS OF CONGRESS, SENATORS & MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT, TO DEMAND:

- unequivocal denunciation of the military coup
- no recognition of this military coup and the 'de facto' government of Roberto Michelletti and the unconditional return of the constitutional government
- * increasing economic and military sanctions against the coup regime
- respect for safety and human rights of all Hondurans
- justice and reparations for the illegal actions and rights violations committed during this illegal coup