

## **Rights Action**

### **Day 25 of Honduran Coup Resistance, July 22, 2009, Alert #31**

Article by Jonathan Treat, "Voices from Catacamas, Hometown of Honduran President, Manuel "Mel" Zelaya"

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**UPDATE by Jonathan Treat in Tegucigalpa** ([504] 8877-4161, [jonathantreat@gmail.com](mailto:jonathantreat@gmail.com))

Today, July 22, marks the 25th day of non-violent resistance to the coup and the de facto regime of Roberto Micheletti in Honduras. The atmosphere in Tegucigalpa is tense, marked by sense of uncertainty and fear. The Micheletti regime has shown an unwillingness to seriously negotiate a peaceful solution to the current political crisis, and the talks in Costa Rica moderated by Oscar Arias have been postponed.

In Tegucigalpa today, supporters of the coup government organized marches, sparing no irony in labeling them pro-"Peace and Democracy". Using tactics reminiscent of the cold war, they invoked images of Hugo Chavez to raise the specter of "communism/socialism", fuel fears and justify the coup as an attempt to preserve "democracy" in Honduras.

The pro-democracy/pro-Zelaya movement also staged demonstrations throughout the city. Fortunately, there have not been reports of any violent confrontations between the two groups or with authorities.

In Honduras' new "democracy", curfews remain in place—anyone in the streets late at night can be arrested and jailed without question. Throughout Tegucigalpa the military presence is pervasive, and troops and police regularly are stopping vehicles to demand identification.

The Micheletti regime seeks to close the only pro-democracy/anti-coup television station in Honduras, Canal 36. They are hoping to apply a constitutional clause related to media, citing the channel's 'threat to national security'.

Throughout the week, the regime has blocked the broadcast of channel 36 news as reports denounced the de facto regime and its repression of the popular movement.

The remaining local media coverage of current events in Honduras is shamelessly supportive of the Micheletti regime—not surprising considering the interests they represent.

In the U.S., the lack of objectivity of mainstream corporate media (difficult to watch from the perspective of the popular, nonviolent, pro-democracy movement here in Honduras) was manifested in CNN's broadcast, yesterday, of Patricia Janiot's "interview" with deposed Honduran President Manuel "Mel" Zelaya. Patricia Janiot's coverage was more a manipulated cross-examination of the elected leader of Honduras than an interview.

It is recommended viewing for anyone trying to understand the manipulated media coverage taking place at the international level, all of which puts the peace and security of a majority of pro-democracy, pro-Zelaya Hondurans at greater risk.

Yesterday a taxi driver in Tegucigalpa asked, "Who will be the victims of the violence that might break out any day? It won't be rich Hondurans. We are a peaceful people. Hondurans haven't known war," he said. "Nicaragua, Guatemala, El Salvador—they have known violence. People there knew how to fight repressive governments. Here in Honduras, war is something we don't know much about." Some observers worry that perhaps that fact is something that the current regime is banking on.

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ARTICLE:

## **VOICES FROM CATACAMAS, HOMETOWN OF HONDURAN PRESIDENT, MANUEL "MEL" ZELAYA**

By Jonathan Treat (in Tegucigalpa, July 22, 2009)

"... you have to be careful. There's no law here these days."

### **HOUSE SITTING IN HONDURAS**

A few horses lazily graze the rolling green pastures surrounding the modest ranch house of currently deposed Honduran president Manuel "Mel" Zelaya. It is an unlikely place for a tense standoff. But the bucolic setting for the president's personal residence in Catacamas, Olancho is a potential tender box.

On the one side are Honduran military troops, and national police. On the other, a diverse mix of pro-Zelaya supporters from the community—local leaders of the pro-democracy movement, housewives, farmers, ranchers, students, professors, business owners, and workers.

The burning issue here: the return of the President Zelaya to Honduras—and to the seat of the presidency.

On July 17, when townspeople learned that the military had surrounded the president's family house, more than four thousand protesters marched to the house to take it back. When confronted by the crowd, the fifty or so soldiers quietly retreated.

Since then, the pro-democracy movement in Catacamas has maintained a constant vigil at the president's residence. The home has become a symbol of popular resistance. Hundreds of people from communities around the state of Olancho gather here daily to guard the property and wait anxiously for the return of President Zelaya. Military planes and police helicopters circle in the skies above the crowd—an ominous reminder of the powers they're confronting.

### **CATACAMAS, OLANCHO—STRONGHOLD OF THE PRO-ZELAYA/PRO-DEMOCRACY MOVEMENT**

The small (30,000) agricultural town of Catacamas, Olancho, is about four hours west of the capitol of Tegucigalpa. Informal conversations with a variety of townspeople—at the local plaza, in taxis, stores, restaurants, Internet cafes—reveal widespread support for President "Mel" Zelaya. The local, hometown enthusiasm is natural, but the consistently positive comments of people in the community of Catacamas reveal more than a "local boy makes good" dynamic.

"I completely support the president. Look, I'm going to be frank—I've never voted before. But I know too much about Mel," said one man, a self-described campesino who farms a small plot of land. "He's not like other presidents I've seen. He's humble. You see him eating at local markets, attending funerals and fiestas with the people—he's not arrogant."

A local taxi driver had this to say: "My father worked for Mel for 11 years, before he became our president. And I know he helps people. Since he's been president, he has shown that. He's done good things for the poor—giving pensions to the elderly, raising minimum wage, and improving schools and clinics. He's a good man."

Marlon Escoto, rector of the National University of Agriculture, was more measured in his critique. "President Zelaya isn't perfect. But he's much better than other presidents, and he has definitely made some positive changes that are benefitting the poor," he said. "The elites here thought that during his campaign he was just saying populist things to get elected. But he has followed through. And that has alienated many in the ruling elite in Honduras."

People in Catacamas also seem to be unanimous on another point—that the de facto government seized power illegally, through a military-supported coup.

"I just don't understand this argument about whether it was a coup or not. The OAS, the United Nations, every country in the world, and Obama have all called it a coup" said one Catacamas taxi driver. "A coup is exactly what it is—and it's shameful."

At the local town plaza, a couple of men sit on a bench, watching some children kick at a limp soccer ball.

When asked about the current situation, one shakes his head sadly. "For a poor man, the coup is cruel. We've suffered before, but not like now. When you have to struggle to put enough food on the table, well, it's an injustice."

The other man adds an ominous note. "The coup is creating a dangerous situation. There are lots of guns in Olancho, since the (US-backed, anti-Nicaragua) Contra war (of the 1980s). Mel needs to come back, and soon."

## **REPRESSION IN THE STATE OF OLANCHO**

Not surprisingly, the pervasively pro-Zelaya sentiment of people here—and their consistent, active non-violent resistance—isn't popular with the current regime.

On June 28, the day after the military coup, roughly 2000 people from Catacamas and neighboring communities mobilized to make the four-hour journey to Tegucigalpa to join the groundswell of popular opposition to the coup. But less than an hour into the trip, the caravan of cars and some thirty buses were confronted by military troops. An eyewitness reported that the soldiers opened fire with automatic weapons, shooting out the tires of ten of the buses, bringing the caravan to a halt.

Since then, military checkpoints are commonplace throughout Olancho state. There is a strong sense of indignation in the community, but it tempered with caution.

"The military regularly stops people leaving the town," said one Catacamas resident. "You have to give them your documents, and tell them where you are going and why you're going there. And people who are known as leaders of the movement against the coup have been told to turn around and go back home, or face arrest."

One local taxi driver was stopped by the military when driving through town. "They have no right," he said angrily. "It's against the constitution for military to stop civilians—only police have that authority. I was furious, but you have to be careful. There's no law here these days."

There is also an ongoing curfew here—anyone on the streets after 11 p.m. risks being jailed. One young man said that the previous night he didn't make it home in time. He showed me nasty cuts on his wrists from being roughed up by authorities while handcuffed.

## **VILLA LINDA—PRESIDENT'S HOME TURNED STRONGHOLD OF NONVIOLENT RESISTANCE**

The road that leads to President Zelaya's personal residence is not what one might expect. Turning off the highway is an archway with a simple wooden sign announcing "Villa Linda". The only guards to at the entrance to the property are cattle guards—anyone can approach the house unquestioned. And these days many people do—on foot, packed into the beds of old pickups, and in latest model trucks with their conspicuous curves, chrome and polarized windows.

The crowd of people who have gathered here is diverse, and there are no obvious distinctions between class or social status. People here voice a common goal—nonviolent resistance to Micheletti regime and the return of Zelaya to the presidency. In the meantime, they intend to make sure that the army keeps its hands off the president's home.

### **INDIGNATION AND FEAR**

Over the weekend (July 19, 20), several hundred people from Catacamas and neighboring communities gather at the President Zelaya's family home. They chat in the shade of the three open air palapas (gazebos), on the front porch, or on the grassy grounds. Local vendors sell snacks and soft drinks, and kids play on swings and slides. Some dance to the music blaring out over loudspeakers. In the afternoons, there is food for everyone. One woman, a local teacher cooking up a meal for the crowd over a wood fire speaks with obvious defiance.

"We're here because we are people with conviction. We know that our constitutional president is Manuel Zelaya. We elected him, and we'll be here until he is back in power in Honduras. So we came to take this house back from the army. When they saw us coming, they left. But we know they are still around, waiting—we've seen them, some wearing ski masks," she said. "It doesn't matter. The people of Catacamas have courage. We'll be here in this struggle until the president returns home."

People gather to share the meal, chatting and laughing. Throughout the day, the atmosphere here has generally been relaxed and festive, more like a picnic than a stronghold of nonviolent resistance.

The mood changed, however, as local pro-democracy leaders provided updates of the ongoing, difficult negotiations taking place in Costa Rica. Things are not going well. Although President Zelaya has agreed to sit down and discuss and negotiate each and every point offered by moderator Oscar Arias, the de facto government of Roberto Micheletti government refuses to even consider the critical first point of Zelaya's return to the presidency—the central point that this crowd is interested in. The news has serious, worrisome implications.

"I remember very well how things were during the 1980s. I understand the pain and suffering of living under a military regime. I don't want to go back to that. We're asking the world to help us, to demand the return to constitutional law—and the return of our president," said one of man in the crowd, a professor at the local

university. "The situation is very dangerous. We don't want to see people pick up arms. We don't want to see any bloodshed."

A student, upon hearing the news of the stalled talks, says that he supports Pres. Zelaya completely but that he wants him to do everything possible to avoid an outbreak of violence.

"I want Mel to come back to Honduras. I want to see him return as president. I trust him, and I think he is sincere," he said. "But I have two daughters. I don't want to see a war. I hope he continues to negotiate."

Unfortunately, there seems to be nothing left for President Zelaya to negotiate; he has agreed to discuss and negotiate all the terms presented by mediator Oscar Arias. But in spite of the unanimous condemnation of the current regime by governments around the world, the United Nations, the Organization of American States, the suspension of all aid to Honduras by the European Union and the threat of the same by U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton—Micheletti and the military coup regime remain defiant. And Hondurans brace themselves for the possibility of a violent storm.

Note: On Tuesday, July 21 a caravan of more than 500 vehicles drove through Catacamas and neighboring communities in peaceful protest of the de facto regime of Roberto Micheletti, the ongoing military repression. They demanded the immediate return of Manuel Zelaya to the presidency. Military planes flew overhead. The electricity to the entire town was cut off for much of the day. There were at least five checkpoints between Catacamas and Tegucigalpa, attended by military troops and national police who demanded identification and searched vehicles.

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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 Micheletti
- unconditional return of the entire constitutional government
- concrete economic, military and diplomatic sanctions against the coup plotters and perpetrators
- respect for safety and human rights of all Hondurans
- application of international and national justice against the coup plotters, and
- reparations for the illegal actions and rights violations committed during this illegal coup

FOR MORE INFO: see series of Honduras Coup Alerts at [www.rightsaction.org](http://www.rightsaction.org). Contact Grahame Russell at [info@rightsaction.org](mailto:info@rightsaction.org) or Annie Bird at [annie@rightsaction.org](mailto:annie@rightsaction.org)