

Rights Action

Day 30 of Honduran Coup Resistance
July 28, 2009, Alert #36

MARCHING TO THE BORDER TO MEET "MEL"

By Karen Spring

Over the past few days, thousands of Hondurans marched to the Honduras-Nicaraguan border, to meet up with and hopefully accompany the return of President Zelaya and his entire government. Karen Spring, of Rights Action, sends this report.

UPDATE FROM ALERT #35

As it turns out, the army & police did not detain Salvador, Zuniga, Miriam Miranda and Berta Caceres two days ago; they avoided capture by staying in the mountains. This morning (July 28), close to 70 members of COPINH were illegally detained. More information to follow about this and other acts of repression by the military regime, and about on-going actions of the pro-democracy, pro-Zelaya movement.

- Please widely re-distribute, re-publish this info
- WHAT TO DO: see below ...

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MARCHING TO THE BORDER TO MEET “MEL”

By Karen Spring (Rights Action), spring.kj@gmail.com

The Honduran people are determined to reach the Honduran-Nicaraguan border in order to meet President “Mel” Zelaya who recently announced, once again, his possible return to Honduras, almost one month after the coup d’etat on June 28th.

Members of the community based campesino-indigenous group COPINH (Counsel of Indigenous and Popular Organizations) walked and caught rides when they could from Tegucigalpa. The entire journey was 70 km (over 45 miles).

When unable to pass yet another military checkpoint, the group climbed into the mountains where they were pursued by military patrols that, allegedly, had orders to kill upon finding them.

Despite being pursued, the group continues to walk on foot, only resting when absolutely necessary. Their goal: Keep walking. Get to the border. Support the return of President Zelaya and his entire government.

Below is an eyewitness account of that journey.

FRIDAY JULY 24, “THESE PEOPLE WILL WALK ALL NIGHT IF NECESSARY”

Gathered at El Via del Sol in the capital city of Honduras, members of COPINH waited with a large crowd of Hondurans to catch a bus or pick-up trucks to the Nicaraguan-Honduran border in order to greet President Zelaya.

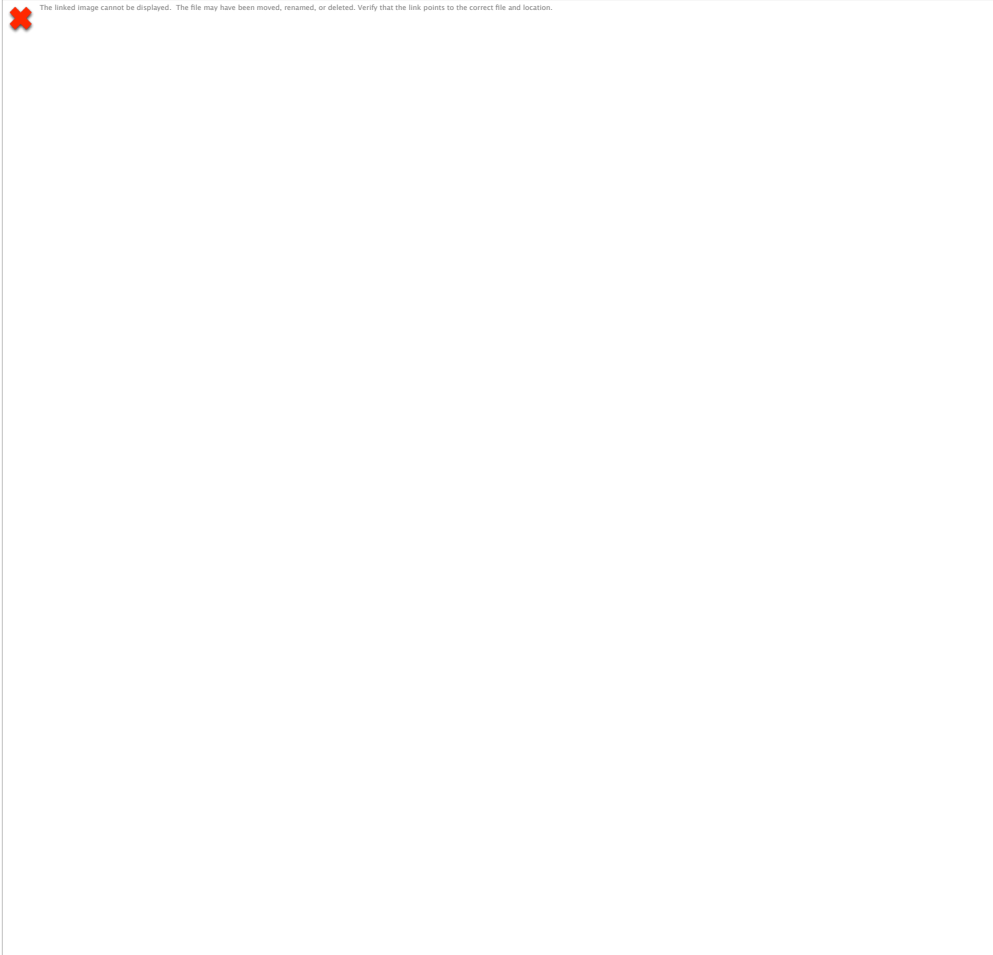
While waiting for transportation to arrive that would take groups of people as close to the border as possible, military planes flew over head intimidating the large crowd who in turn would point, yell and salute the plane. The Honduran woman sitting next to me, turned to me, pointed to the sky, and asked, “bombs ... are you scared of the bombs?”

At 11:30 am, the Micheletti de facto government announced a military curfew that was set to start at 12:00 pm (noon) and end at 6:30 am the following day.

After waiting for five and a half hours for a ride, the COPINH group and others who had waited, fit as many people as possible into a school bus

and started on their long journey to the border. The mood on the bus was optimistic, determined and ready for the long unknown journey ahead.

Roughly 20 minutes into the bus-ride, we were stopped at a military check-point and told the bus was not permitted to pass. Without hesitation, the entire group got off the bus, passed peacefully through the check-point and began walking on the main highway towards the border of Los Manos. Most of the rest of the journey is on foot.



(All photos: Karen Spring, Rights Action)

As we walked along the highway, cars and trucks sped by, many raising their fists and yelling out support for the group of approximately 100 people that walked together on the side of the road. Often, locals stopped and filled up the back of their pickups with people with promises to return and pick up the rest.

We stopped to eat lunch and gathered around a television in a road-side store to watch the Venezuelan news station, TeleSur, that was covering the events at the border.

By this time, President Zelaya had crossed onto Honduran soil and was attempting to negotiate with the commanding officer on site. Reports being received by radio and phone messages declared that the military was using tear gas against the protestors at the military blockade close to the border and were shooting at the crowd both to intimidate and “maintain order”.



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(Watching Telesur)

After a brief stop for lunch, and despite the difficult news from the border, the group continued the walk.

After walking and hitching rides for 8 hours, it started to become dark. Because some of the group had managed to find a ride earlier in the day, they had been dropped off just before a major military road-block, ahead

of the rest of the group. Reports earlier on in our walk had told us that people on foot would not be allowed to pass.

Hoping that numbers would influence their peaceful march past the military, the group waited for others to arrive near the checkpoint at a village called Las Crucitas. With 150 people, in the dark, the COPINH group marched peacefully through the blockade, with no problems.

One man walking beside me insisted, "We are not alone. God crosses the blockades with us ... everytime."

The idea was to continue as long as possible in order to reach the village of El Arenal where many human rights organizations and the First Lady (President Zelaya's wife Xiomara Castro de Zelaya) were camped out and protesting against the final military blockade by which no one, except the press, were able to pass.

In the pitch black with only lights coming from cell phones and a few flash-lights, the group marched on. In order to keep track of people, we were each given a number in case one went missing, lagged behind the group or as one compañero told me "at night, we're all the same. You can't identify who is who and we need to be careful of infiltrators."

After calling ahead to the blockade at El Arenal (roughly 20 km from the town of Danli), a pick-up truck was sent for those in the group most exhausted from the day's 10 hour walk.

Upon arriving in two groups to El Arenal, we gathered around the different fires that had been made in the middle of the road by the people from the resistance movement that had arrived earlier.

Exhausted and with no way to pass peacefully through the military checkpoint, the group stopped for the night. In groups, we found places to sleep in the grass, and inside and underneath a bus for shelter.

The night proved difficult – lots of rain, cold, obviously uncomfortable sleeping conditions and anticipation for the events to come the following day.

SATURDAY JULY 25

“We are going to the border to salute the constitutional president of Honduras, Manuel Zelaya Rosales, and accompany him in his return to Tegucigalpa where the people will reinstate him.”

“We have been walking for 18-20 hours, nevertheless with high spirits, convinced that the peaceful resistance will produce results. Our president has to return to the country to continue with the integration of Latin American and social transformation.”

This is how Salvador Zuniga, a campesino-indigenous leader of COPINH, woke us, early Saturday morning. Wet, tired and sore from the previous day, the COPINH group did not waste anytime continuing their march at 5:30 am.



Unable to pass through the 2 rows of military and police, the group bypassed the blockade by climbing into the forest to go around the authorities. Ducking, running through mud and small rivers as it started to rain, we ran through the forest for 15 minutes until we had cleared the blockade enough to walk on the main road.

Knowing that we had secretly by-passed the military road-block, and that the entire area was under strict military curfew, the fear and anxiety of the group was much higher on this second day.

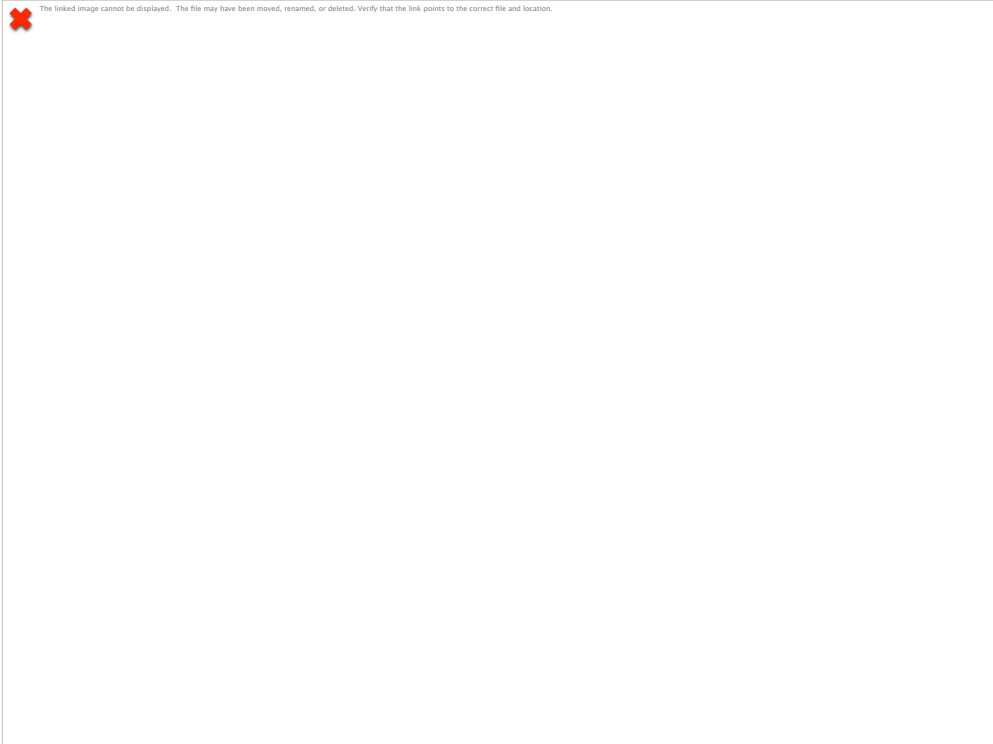
After stopping for breakfast, we continued walking, taking a secondary road that diverged from the main highway in order to avoid passing military and police vehicles that would try to stop the group on the main highway.

As we were walking along the dirt road that ran parallel to the main highway, we heard 3 gun shots go off close by. Within seconds, the entire group cleared the road, hopping under fences to hide in a field to the side of the road.

After sending leaders ahead to investigate, we continue walking knowing well that we would be met by the police sent specifically to stop our group of 150 people shortly down the road.

Peacefully, we approached a group of 8 police officers that had blocked the road with their vehicles. As neighbours watched, we were told that we could not pass despite attempts to negotiate.

Within minutes of being turned around, the entire group climbed into the backyard of a local residence and began climbing into the mountain. Determined to find an alternative route, the group decided to take to the mountains, avoid the roads and the blockades and arrive at the border.



After roughly 30 minutes of hiking, when we were back near the main road, it was decided that I would leave the group and head back to the capital. COPINH agreed with this plan, urging me to continue to inform the international community about the people's struggle. They also explained their plan of action to me – continue hiking, following the mountain tops and stop in local villages to rest and eat.

With their radios, limited water, limited food, the group continued.

NEWS FROM THE CAPITAL

After leaving the group to hike through the mountains, we received continuous updates from the group up until 6:00 am the following morning.

Alerts went out saying the group was being pursued by the military, that they had been detained and that they were in great danger. In this group are Berta Caceres and Salvador Zuniga (leaders of COPINH - Counsel of Indigenous and Popular Organizations), and Miriam Miranda, indigenous-garifuna leader and member of OFRANEH (Fraternal Organization of Black and Garifuna Peoples) amongst many individuals of both human rights organizations.

After confirming last night that the group was safe, not detained and being attended by the International Committee of the Red Cross, many from the resistance movement, nationally and internationally, were relieved.

After sharing 2 days of the journey with them, I can only imagine the difficulties and obstacles they faced while hiking through the mountains as well as the challenges that are still to come in their journey.

Many Hondurans, just like the COPINH group, have decided to by-pass the military blockades by hiking through the mountains in hopes of meeting President Zelaya at the Hondurans-Nicaraguan border. In very dangerous conditions where food and water in the regions close to the border are limited, the journey of many Hondurans continue.

The goal: Keep walking. Get to the border. Support the return of President Zelaya and his entire government.



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"There are no magic answers, no miraculous methods to overcome the problems we face, just the familiar ones: search for understanding, education, organization, action ... and the kind of commitment that will persist despite the temptations of disillusionment, despite many failures and only limited successes, inspired by the hope of a brighter future."
(Noam Chomsky)

This pro-democracy struggle is of and for Hondurans, and of and for the peoples of the Americas. Clearly beyond any possible short-term solution, this is a harsh and extraordinary on-going struggle led by the Honduran people peacefully taking to the streets, risking death, detention and further impoverishment.

WHAT TO DO

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

an end to police, army and para-military repression
respect for safety and human rights of all Hondurans
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 and targeted economic, military and diplomatic sanctions against the coup plotters and perpetrators
application of international and national justice against the coup plotters, and
reparations for the illegal actions and rights violations committed during this illegal coup

TO DONATE FUNDS TO PRO-DEMOCRACY MOVEMENT IN HONDURAS, MAKE TAX DEDUCTIBLE DONATIONS TO "RIGHTS ACTION" AND MAIL TO:

UNITED STATES: Box 50887, Washington DC, 20091-0887

CANADA: 552-351 Queen St. E, Toronto ON, M5A-1T8 CREDIT-CARD

DONATIONS: <http://rightsaction.org/contributions.htm>

Upon request, Rights Action can provide a proposal of which organizations and people, in Honduras, we are channeling your funds to and supporting.