

Rights Action
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Below:

HONDURAS: TEARGASSED OPEN FOR BUSINESS

By Dana Frank

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- Read and comment on the state of affairs in Honduras, given that Canada and the US are the two strongest supports and 'legitimizers' of the military-backed regime of Honduras
- Work to suspend all military and economic relations with the Honduran regime, including the police and army
- Work to ensure that the regime of Honduras is not allowed back into the OAS (Organization of American States), given the situation of State-sponsored repression and impunity
- Consider coming to Honduras, on a fact-finding mission that Rights Action can help organize, to learn for themselves, first-hand, of all that is set out in this article
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HONDURAS: TEARGASSED OPEN FOR BUSINESS

By Dana Frank, TheNation.com, May 5, 2011

<http://www.thenation.com/article/160472/honduras-teargassed-open-business>

In Honduras, it's come to this: when 90 percent of the city's 68,000 public schoolteachers went out on strike in March to protest the privatization of the entire public school system, the government tear-gassed their demonstrations for almost three solid weeks, then suspended 305 teachers for two to six months as punishment for demonstrating, and

then, when negotiations broke down, threatened to suspend another five thousand public schoolteachers.

The level of repression in Honduras, after a nationwide wave of attacks on the opposition in March and early April, now exceeds that of the weeks immediately following the June 28, 2009 military coup that deposed President Manuel Zelaya, as current President Porfirio "Pepe" Lobo Sosa wages war on entire swaths of the Honduran population.

Ilse Ivania Velásquez Rodríguez was one of those striking teachers. A 59-year old elementary school teacher and former principal in Tegucigalpa, she rushed to the Presidential Palace to defend Zelaya the morning of the coup. She was one of hundreds of thousands of Hondurans took to the streets for weeks to protest the new coup government of de facto President Roberto Micheletti -- who Honduras' oligarchs hoped would roll back Zelaya's mild leftward moves and resistance to further neoliberal privatization.

Last summer she was one of thousands in the Honduran opposition who circulated petitions -- eventually signed by 1.25 million people, roughly one in three adults -- demanding a Constitutional Convention to re-found the country from below. "My sister wanted to retire this year," her sister, Zenaida, who lives in San José, California, told me. "But they told her she needed to be on a waiting list," behind two thousand others, because the teachers' government-managed retirement fund was bankrupt -- looted by Micheletti's post-coup government.

The morning of March 18, 2011, the second day of the strike, Ilse joined other teachers at a demonstration in front of the Tegucigalpa office of their state-run retirement agency, to demand her pension and protest the privatization plan. As police and soldiers stormed down the streets and aimed tear gas at the demonstrators, the teachers, to signal their nonviolence, raised their hands up high. The police started rapidly launching tear gas anyway.

At 10:44 a.m., as Ilse tried to run away, one of them deliberately shot a tear gas canister directly in her face at close range. She fell to the ground, unconscious, into an asphyxiating cloud of gas. The driver of a passing television truck, himself affected by the fumes, ran over her right

side. She lay face down in a pool of blood seeping out from her body. Three hours later, she died in a hospital.

Teachers like Ilse have been the shock troops of resistance to the coup. During the 1990s and 2000s, teachers deployed regular mass mobilizations to increase their salaries and pensions under legislation that granted them special labor protections at a national level. With the military coup, they were the first to take to the streets. "From the beginning, we felt obliged to defend democracy against a government imposed by force," emphasizes Jaime Rodriguez, president of COPEMH (Colegio de Profesores de Educación Media de Honduras), the Honduran middle-school teachers' association. "That united almost all the teachers, apart from what the government did to the teachers themselves."

By this past March the teachers' grievances had become enormous. Not only was their pension fund gone, but they are also owed six months' back pay. At least twelve teachers in the opposition have been killed or disappeared since the coup.

Last August, the government of Pepe Lobo -- himself placed in office during Micheletti's reign, in a fraudulent November 2009 election boycotted by international observers and most of the opposition -- promised to pay them back. But the money is still nowhere to be seen.

On March 31, despite the protests, the Honduran congress approved a law opening the door for privatization of the entire country's public school system. The legislation passes control of education to municipalities, who are free to organize for-profit enterprises or work with nonprofits modeled on a pilot program developed during the presidency of neo-liberal Ricardo Maduro (2002-2006). Maduro will now head a new nationwide program in which teachers, instead of being hired through their professional associations, will work on yearly ten-month contracts with no job security, be paid as much as one-third their current salaries (placing them below the minimum wage), and receive no pensions.

The day before the bill passed, the Frente Nacional de Resistencia Popular (FNRP, or the National Front of Popular Resistance), in solidarity unleashed a nationwide paro civico or "civic strike" to oppose the law, protest the repression, and demand a new minimum wage, lower prices of food, fuel, and public utilities, and, above all, a constitutional

convention to re-found the nation from below. The FNRP unites the broad national coalition that came together right after the coup, embracing the labor, campesino, women's, gay, indigenous, and Afro-indigenous movements.

By this point the Honduran resistance has hardened into a steely wall of defiance. It continues to oppose what it considers the "ongoing coup regime" of Pepe Lobo. It has no official avenues for political input at this point: Congress, chosen in the same bogus election as Lobo, is in the pocket of the oligarchs and ignores popular sentiment; since Lobo dismissed five judges and magistrates who oppose the coup government, the judiciary almost entirely supports it.

The judicial system is largely nonfunctional. To this day no one has been prosecuted or convicted for any of the politically-motivated killings of 34 members of the opposition and 10 journalists since Lobo took office, let alone for the over 300 killings by state security forces since the coup, according to COFADEH (Comité de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos en Honduras), the leading independent human rights group.

The FNRP knows if it chooses to run candidates in the 2014 elections -- a topic of fierce internal debate -- the electoral process will be controlled by the very same military that is occupying the country. Thinking long term, the Frente has spent much of the last year carefully constructing a system of national representation, community by community, building to a national assembly with 1,500 delegates this past February in Tegucigalpa that is laying the foundation for a new constitution, that it hopes to force Lobo and the oligarchs to accept.

Meanwhile, Hondurans in the opposition are using one of the few remaining weapons they have: their own unarmed bodies, placing themselves in the path of the regime, quite literally. In response, the regime is now using lethal force over and over and over again, all over the country, hoping to tear gas its own citizens into submission.

In Nacaome, in the country's south, the morning of the big civic strike police suddenly launched tear gas at teachers and their allies as they gathered in the street, getting ready to blockade it. When a group of protesters fled into a nearby house, police shot several canisters of gas

inside it, where at least five children were present, asphyxiating a two-month-old baby, Christopher de Jesús Bonilla García. When the baby stopped breathing, his father gave him mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. The police continued to blast tear gas canisters as the father tried to run away with the baby. Finally he finally climbed over a wall to pass the baby to its grandfather, who escaped on a motorcycle and reached a medical facility. The baby survived, but the long-term damage to his lungs is unknown.

At 6:30 a.m. that same morning, in Triunfo de la Cruz, a community of Afro-Indigenous Garifuna people on the North Coast, police selectively grabbed Miriam Miranda, Coordinator of OFRANEH (Organización Fraternal Negra Hondureña) and the most prominent resistance leader in the Garifuna community, out of a demonstration. Spitting racist insults, they hit her, shot tear gas at her abdomen at close range, and threw her onto the asphalt and then into jail, where, her lungs burning, she was refused medical attention and not read her rights for over for two hours -- then charged with sedition. "Despite state functionaries' plastic smiles and eagerness to obtain international recognition," Miranda declared the next day, after an international outcry freed her, "under the regime of Porfirio Lobo the criminalization of dissent has sharpened."

The campesinos have been the most defiant, and paid the highest price. Since December 2009, over 5,000 campesinos and their children, largely in the Aguán Valley, have used their bodies to occupy lands they argue were illegally stolen by Honduran elites, especially Miguel Facussé, the richest man in the country and key backer of the coup.

Over 34 campesinos involved in these land occupations have been killed since the coup, according to COFADEH, most of them picked off in ones and twos by paramilitaries. The morning of the civic strike, campesinos and their allies blocked traffic in Planes, at the entrance to the Aguán Valley, beginning at 7:00 in the morning. At 12:20, as they were about to disperse, police fired tear gas and live ammunition at them injuring at least twelve and killing a campesino, whose body was so quickly grabbed away by the authorities that he or she couldn't be identified.

Honduran security forces are now using tear gas canisters as a deadly weapon, not just against protesters but also against journalists identified with the opposition.

That same day in Tegucigalpa police surrounded and closed in on reporter Lydia Diaz and started jerking the cable to her microphone, with its clear blue, red, and yellow logo of TV Globo, an opposition station. When she objected, they shot a tear gas canister straight at her feet. Two days later, police shot a tear gas canister directly in the face of Salvador Sandoval, a cameraman for the same station, fracturing his septum. "The police have all the media identified as `resistance' or `not resistance,'" he charged from his hospital bed.

All this state-sponsored repression of demonstrations in March and April comes on top of an unrelenting daily bombardment of death threats, harassment, and assaults by paramilitaries and other extralegal agents, directed against all sectors of the opposition. In the capital, rocks rain down on cars in the parking of the union hall where many opposition meetings take place. In San Pedro Sula, an unmarked car routinely lurks daily outside the office of the Centro de Derecho de Mujeres (Center for Women's Rights) shadowing Maria Elena Sabillón, an attorney who represents victims of domestic violence. Transgender women show up dead in alleyways and garbage dumps.

Through all of this, the Obama administration's response has been to blame the victim. In response to queries from U.S. human rights activists when Garifuna leader Miriam Miranda was seized, Jeremy Spector, the U.S. Embassy's Human Rights and Labor Attaché in Tegucigalpa, wrote back with an extended attack on the teachers for being violent, called on them to return to the classroom, and insisted that Ilse Velásquez was merely "run over by a press vehicle."

And the State Department enthusiastically backs not only Lobo but the neo-liberal economic agenda behind the coup, which the Honduran congress is swiftly trying to enact. "Since the first day President Lobo took office he has focused on...the creation of investment to generate employment with the support of the national congress by establishing the legal framework to gain the confidence of domestic and international investors," Eduardo Atala, President of the American Chamber of Commerce in Honduras, summarized coyly on April 14.

The privatization of education and simultaneous destruction of the teachers' unions are just one piece of that agenda, which also includes a

proposed labor law reform that would convert full-time jobs to part time, making workers ineligible for unionization; astonishingly, it would allow many employers to pay 30% of their employees' paychecks in company-issue scrip, rather than real money. The oligarchs also plan rapid privatization of the country's ports and publicly-owned water, telephone, and electrical systems.

Biofuels are also central to the oligarchs' agenda. Miguel Facussé, the Aguán Valley oligarch, has planted much his vast acreage with African palms for biofuel. Not coincidentally by any stretch, the United States just named as its next Ambassador to Honduras Lisa Kubiske, an expert on biofuels.

From May 4 through 6, an array of megafigures will converge in San Pedro Sula, the country's second largest city, for a promotional extravaganza celebrating the new agenda, entitled "Honduras is Open for Business." Alvaro Uribe, the former president of Colombia, Carlos Slim, the richest man in Mexico and the world, and Francisco J. Sánchez, Undersecretary for International Trade at the U.S. Department of Commerce, are all coming to town. Bill Clinton was originally scheduled to speak but recently pulled out.

Asked to comment on the conference, current Ambassador Hugo Llorens crowed: "The country is once again politically stable, and President Porfirio Lobo's government of national unity is working to heal the divisions caused by the coup" -- days after the recent wave of resistance and repression.

Meanwhile, on March 23, precisely as the riot police were tear-gassing Hondurans, across the border in El Salvador, President Obama visited the grave of Archbishop Óscar Romero, who was assassinated in 1980 and remains the most important symbol of resistance to the repressive Salvadoran government during the 1970s and 80s backed by the United States. Despite Obama's baldly hypocritical gesture, we should have no illusions that his policies in Honduras -- and beyond -- now match those of Ronald Reagan and the long history of extended U.S. support for repressive regimes in Latin America.

The State Department is obsessed with getting Honduras readmitted to the Organization of American States, so that the Lobo's regime can

regain international legitimacy. The sticking point, though, is Zelaya's safe return to the country. Although the Honduran courts just dropped the last of their trumped-up charges against Zelaya, it's unclear whether it will ever be safe for Lobo's illegitimate government to have Zelaya, an immensely popular symbol of the resistance, speaking freely within Honduras -- or whether Zelaya could safely step on Honduran soil without being killed by paramilitaries.

In the face of ongoing assaults from both their own government and the U.S., Hondurans in the opposition have two choices: either continue to resist the oligarchs' agenda with the clear knowledge they could be killed, or watch as their country is rapidly turned into a model extractive zone for global capital.

They themselves have a quite different vision of the Honduran future, based on democracy, ordinary people's rights, and social justice. To support their vision, Latin American solidarity activists demand an immediate stop to all U.S. funding for the Honduran military and police, and a halt to US pressure on the Organization of American States to admit Honduras.

Dana Frank, May 5, 2011

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WHAT TO DO - MAKE TAX-DEDUCTIBLE DONATIONS for HONDURAS' PRO-DEMOCRACY MOVEMENT

To make a tax-deductible donation for community based organizations in Honduras' pro-democracy movement working to defend human rights and the environment and to eradicate poverty and re-found their nation-state, make check payable 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>; or go to: www.rightsaction.org. (Credit card donations can be done anonymously)

FOR DONATION OF STOCK: contact info@rightsaction.org. (Stock donations can be done anonymously – have your stockbroker contact info@rightsaction.org)

(On request, we can provide summary of all groups we have funded in Honduras' pro-democracy movement since the June 28, 2009 coup)

WHAT TO DO – WATCH

REPORT FROM LAND OCCUPATIONS IN POST-COUP HONDURAS:

Poor farmers are taking land from agribusiness that supported the 2009 military coup - and paying with their lives

(The Real News, March 31, 2011, 9:46 minutes)

http://therealnews.com/t2/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=31&Itemid=74&jumival=6513

WHAT TO DO – DELEGATION TO GUATEMALA

RIGHTS ACTION DELEGATION: JULY 3-10, 2011
“ELECTIONS; NO DEMOCRACY”

Join a Rights Action delegation to Guatemala and

MEET WITH:

Human rights organizations pressing forward the ‘exemplary cases’ against war crimes; even as they meet constant setbacks;

Land rights movements of communities that support each other against the appropriation of their lands by politically influential plantation owners and organized crime bosses;

Indigenous rights movements that seek full recognition of their rights including recognition of traditional authorities and their territory;

Justice reform activists who seek to reform legal mechanisms that maintain impunity and criminalize human rights defenders; and

Communities defending their territory against transnational interests (mines, dams or biofuels) backed by political power holders.

WHAT TO DO - QUESTIONS, COMMENTS, MORE INFORMATION?

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