

Rights Action – January 26, 2012

BELOW:

**Central America's Free-Fire Zone**  
**Our Opinion: Dramatic Crisis In Honduras Demands Action**  
The Miami Herald | EDITORIAL

**Honduras "Is A Disaster Zone"**  
Commentary by Grahame Russell

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It is widely accepted, now, that Honduras is the 'murder capital' of the world, it has become one of the 'journalist-killing capitals' of the world, that it has one of the highest levels of repression against and killing of LGBT people in the world.

This is not a 'crisis' or a 'tragedy'. State repression, violence, corruption and impunity for the powerful sectors are the predictable norm in Honduras.

This horrible situation is a logical result of the aftermath of the violent military coup of June 2009 that was orchestrated the Honduran military and economic elites and that was legitimized and effectively supported by the governments of the USA and Canada. The international business community – companies and investors – are direct beneficiaries of this atrocious situation, ignoring the repression, violence and impunity, pushing ahead with 'business as usual'.

Despite this dire situation, the Honduran pro-democracy movement, coordinated through the National Resistance Front, continues with their courageous and heroic work and struggle for real democracy, for justice and a return to the rule of law.

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The Miami Herald | EDITORIAL  
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**CENTRAL AMERICA'S FREE-FIRE ZONE  
OUR OPINION: DRAMATIC CRISIS IN HONDURAS DEMANDS  
ACTION**

<http://www.miamiherald.com/2012/01/24/2606175/central-americas-free-fire-zone.html>

The recent withdrawal of America's Peace Corps volunteers from Honduras is one more sign that the security situation in that Central American country has deteriorated to crisis levels not seen since the civil wars of the 1980s. The country is quickly turning into a disaster zone.

After the tide of civil war receded, the armies went back to their barracks and the insurgents laid down their arms. But then narcotics traffickers flooded in, and the violence has spiked dramatically ever since. The DEA estimates that 25 tons of cocaine move through the country every month heading north.

This time, however, there appears to be no effective U.S. strategy to combat the wave of crime and the gradual destruction of the country. To make matters worse in Honduras, there are indications that elements of the U.S.-backed government are complicit in the violence and criminality.

A report in Sunday's Miami Herald by Frances Robles offers an eye-opening look at the rampant mayhem. Honduras has become a free-fire zone, with parts of Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula particularly dangerous. The murder rate of 82.1 per 100,000 residents (compared to 5.5 per 100,000 in Florida), gives Honduras the highest homicide rate in the world. Nearly 7,000 homicides were recorded in 2011, a 250-percent increase in half a dozen years.

Security officials are accused of not only allowing the violence to go unpunished, but of acting as enforcers and bodyguards for drug traffickers. Despite occasional shake-ups in the hierarchy, there is little sign of a change in direction. A few courageous prosecutors and whistleblowers, as well as news reporters, have spoken out, only to be killed. Journalists in particular have been targeted.

They and others have pointed the finger at top members of law enforcement, such as José Ricardo Ramírez del Cid, newly named director of the National Police. The head of the police department's own internal-affairs unit said there are numerous reports of violations against the new director that have never been pursued.

Up to now, President Porfirio Lobo has seemed content to look the other way, but he cannot evade responsibility for Honduras' dire predicament. If he wants to lead the way toward improvement, he should start with a thorough housecleaning of the corruption-ridden National Police and other institutions, including the prison system. But it's not just about the police — lawmakers and other members of the government are believed to be involved in corruption, as well.

Honduras has to become more active in combating drugs, including allowing extradition of indicted traffickers to the United States and taking other strong measures to combat crime. That includes establishing an effective witness protection program for those who report drug and corruption-related crimes, and allowing independent investigations of allegations of human-rights abuses against the Ministry of Security.

Nudging Honduran leaders to do the right thing hasn't worked. Time for Washington to get serious and put U.S. aid on the line, starting with an accounting of where U.S. dollars have ended up. The U.S. government helped fund a program to train Honduran prison guards, but has since lost track of where those guards wound up.

Historically, the United States has been the biggest bilateral donor of aid to Honduras, but where's the accountability? Congress should withdraw assistance if the Honduran government blocks reforms. This crisis requires more than tough talk.

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## **GRAFT, GREED, MAYHEM TURN HONDURAS INTO MURDER CAPITAL OF WORLD**

By Frances Robles, Miami Herald, January 23, 2012  
([frobles@MiamiHerald.com](mailto:frobles@MiamiHerald.com))

TEGUCIGALPA, Honduras -- Sitting in the plant-filled patio of his home outside the capital, anti-corruption crusader Gustavo Alfredo Landaverde uttered what few people have the courage to say out loud in this poor Central American nation:

“We are rotten to the core,” he said of the drug-related graft infecting virtually every layer of law enforcement in Honduras. “We are at the border of an abyss. These are criminal organizations inside and out.” The soft-spoken, bespectacled former deputy drug czar had been fired, sued for libel and saw his last boss murdered. “I have asked myself: ‘Why am I still alive?’ ”

Two weeks later, the 71-year-old security expert was dead. Hit men on motorbikes approached him at a traffic light Dec. 7 and peppered the driver’s side window of his Kia sedan with bullets. Landaverde has become another tragic figure in the country’s ongoing struggle with corruption that threatens nearly every major government institution in Honduras.

It’s a country where the son of a university president was gunned down by cops, where prisoners are forced to leave the jail to run drugs and are then shot down, and where the Peace Corps has pulled out, saying conditions are too dangerous to carry out its mission.

Honduras, a nation of 7.6 million, now has the highest homicide rate in the world — 82.1 murders per 100,000 residents, compared to 5.5 per 100,000 in Florida. Landaverde was one of few who dared to say that elements of the Honduran National Police are closely tied to drug cartels which, in turn, are protected by politicians, judges and prosecutors. According to Honduran law enforcement, military and human rights sources, crimes committed by authorities here range from murder to extortion to car theft. Even drug operations are often run by police, with complicity of their bosses who drive luxury cars and live outside their means.

When one congressman was carjacked last year, he found the culprits — when he went to file a report at the police station, a leading human rights investigator said. The last Minister of Security publicly accused police of being “air traffic controllers” for drug planes.

Landaverde was one of only a handful of people willing to be quoted by name in this story. Other high-ranking police officials, a military intelligence officer, top law enforcement investigator and human rights activists insisted that they not be identified, lest they be killed. “It never occurred to me when I took over this ministry that inside police stations there were people committing crimes and acting against human life,” said Security Minister Pompeyo Bonilla, named recently to lead a sweep of law enforcement. “We have a serious problem.”

#### A MURDER, ARRESTS AND THEN THE SUSPECTS GO FREE

Despite rampant mayhem, it was not until October — when police officers murdered the son of a highly respected university president and then tried to clean up the evidence — that the department truly came under intense scrutiny. That killing, and subsequent release of the now fugitive suspects, shocked the nation and led to a shake-up that cost the director of the National Police and dozens of others their jobs.

The killers’ police station was raided and 40 people were suspended. Every week, investigative reporters publish more stories about missing caches of police weapons and top police officials tied to drug traffickers. Congress created a special government office to “evaluate police careers” and purge the 14,000 member police force.

But Miami Herald sources say those tapped to head the department have some of the worst reputations in Honduran law enforcement and are notorious for taking bribes, ordering hits and offering protection to drug traffickers. “I have seen suitcases filled with cash, and I have seen that on two or three occasions,” one law enforcement official told The Herald. “When I was going to file a complaint, my men told me: ‘No, boss, don’t. They’ll kill you.’ ”

Added a military intelligence investigator: “You write a report, give it to your boss and then realize it was him who was committing the crimes. I have friends who are criminals and hit men. It’s the police, the army, the

security ministry — it's not just police or armed forces. It's even prosecutors."

Once, he and his unit saw a caravan of 15 Toyota Prados rumble past, filled with men carrying AK-47s. "We stood there and let it go by like nothing," he said. "I can be sitting on the best information, and I won't report it. The honest people I know were given administrative jobs where they are not in charge of anything."

That was the case with María Luisa Borja, the former head of police internal affairs who was sidelined eight years ago after repeatedly denouncing high-ranking police brass. "The minister of security took away my gas budget so the cars couldn't move. I started paying my own gas," she said. "So he took my car." Eventually her office was stripped of files and she was suspended for leaking information. The people she accused of murder and evidence-tampering were promoted, one of them to vice minister of security.

Another ranking police investigator told The Herald he discovered that his supervisor allowed members of the special forces squad to double as bodyguards for drug traffickers. That supervisor is now a commissioner, the highest rank in the police department. "Maybe the ratio of honest to corrupt in the police is 10 to 1. But it doesn't help that nine are clean if the one who is dirty is in charge," the investigator said. "In this country, bosses are named to specific posts with the purpose of facilitating the entry and exit of drugs."

Every case the investigator probed that led to a police officer, soldier or politician crumbled, he said. He often conducted undercover drug investigations only to find the traffickers already knew who he was. The most controversial name in law enforcement is Commissioner José Ricardo Ramírez del Cid, the newly named director of the National Police.

In a hierarchal institution, two senior classes of police administrators were oddly passed over when Ramírez was named to his post. U.S. embassy officials, Honduran government authorities and prosecutors acknowledge that even in a nation rife with nasty rumors, the allegations whispered against Ramírez are worse than most. "That's the first I hear of that," Ramírez said when asked about his reputation in the department. "If they

named us to our posts, it's because they trust us. There's a lot of common talk. Show proof."

The head of the police department's internal affairs unit said there are at least four cases and multiple boxes of reports against Ramírez, involving allegations such as abuse of authority that have never been probed. "I was surprised when he was named, because I saw people of higher rank who were passed over and I thought, 'why weren't those people named? What's happening here?'" said internal affairs Commissioner Santos Simeon Flores. "We are going to reactivate those cases. We really shouldn't have cases up in the air like that."

He said internal affairs received 580 complaints against police officers in 2009. By November 2011, the year's tally had ballooned to 1,000. About 28 percent were forwarded to prosecutors but many cases got dropped, either by prosecutors or judges, he said.

Ramírez, the top cop since late October, said he has not had enough time on the job to purge the police of all its ills. He insists that the murder rate is down since he took office. Cynics scoff that that's because the police are under so much heat that they have stopped killing people. "We don't deny that there are problems," he said. "We are firing officers daily, constantly. Little by little, we are going to straighten this ship and take it to safe port."

Many Honduran activists have called for the United States to intervene and help run the police. American technical security experts will head to Honduras soon. Colombia and Chile have sent teams to help investigate high-profile cases, and the Organization of American States sent a mission to figure out what role that diplomatic organization can play.

"There's no question we're very concerned. It's important for the Honduran government to do this cleaning-out process and do it willfully and effectively, as quickly as they can manage," U.S. Ambassador Lisa Kubiske told The Herald. "The police do not enjoy the confidence of anybody in the country right now."

#### LAW ENFORCEMENT REAPS MILLIONS FROM THE U.S.

The security issue is so important that Honduran President Porfirio Lobo, his security minister and the president of Honduran Congress met

Wednesday in Miami with top U.S. National Security Council and State Department officials to discuss that and a proposed constitutional change that would allow extradition. After the meeting, Washington praised Honduras' steps toward reform, such as appointing judges with national jurisdiction, approving a security tax, authorizing wiretapping and reestablishing a dormant police advisory board.

The U.S. government has given Honduras some \$50 million since 2008 to fund law enforcement projects, for things like training prison guards. The embassy has since lost track of those guards, and U.S. officials acknowledge that on joint jail raids and drug busts, the bad guys already knew they were coming.

The U.S. aid allocation included \$2.5 million to help fund a maximum security prison. Among the inmates who were sent there: Celin Eduardo Pinot Hernández, aka "Cabeza," leader of the notorious 18th Street Gang. For an inmate, Pinot had pretty good perks. He had a cellphone and was regularly let out to run drugs and visit his various girlfriends. Photos show him at the lockup in a police uniform, gripping a gun.

"For the past two and a half years, he was always let out at 9 a.m. Tuesdays and Thursdays and, if not, on weekends," a childhood friend of his told The Miami Herald. "He was doing business for the boss — drugs, weapons. He would deliver drugs and bring money." "The boss," his friend says, was the high-ranking cop who runs prisons.

In Honduras, managing prisons is one of the most lucrative jobs in the hierarchy of the National Police. Inmates pay bribes for everything from phones to freedom and are let out to commit more crimes at the behest of their captors, people familiar with the practice say.

After spending his nine-year sentence doing illegal bidding for police buddies, Pinot, 30, was released on Oct. 13. He was immediately gunned down, felled by gunshots a few hundred yards from the prison gate. Two women who had come to pick him up and take him home that evening told human rights activists that they saw police officers do it. A few days later, the officer who accompanied Pinot on his get-out-of-jail outings was murdered. Then one of the witnesses to Pinot's killing was stoned to death. The other vanished.

“It’s very difficult to investigate the jails,” said human rights prosecutor Sandra Ponce. “They tend to self-govern. There are inmates with de facto authority.” Ponce said her office is looking into Pinot’s death, because there were enough “irregularities” to suggest law enforcement involvement, including the fact that he was released from prison at night, an unusual move that helped make the surprise attack easier.

#### LEAK TO NARCOS BRINGS BRUTAL DOUBLE KILLING

Prisons director Danilo Orellana insisted he has cleaned up the jails and that escapes, murders and crime are all on the decline, despite widespread overcrowding and a lack of resources. He said he had heard rumors that Pinot was sometimes let out, but denied that prisoners regularly go on drug runs. “I can tell you that during my term, it isn’t happening. The jails have changed a lot,” Orellana said.”

Since this is Honduras and murder is so common, Pinot’s death didn’t cause a ripple in the news media. The killing of Fernando Zelaya Maldonado never made the front page either. Zelaya, 32, was a lieutenant in the army counter-intelligence unit who in 2010 was dispatched to his hometown, Olancho, to solve the kidnapping of President Lobo’s cousin.

Two law enforcement sources told The Herald that Zelaya irked corrupt members of the police and military, because his team not only killed the kidnappers but recovered both the hostage and the ransom money. Someone close to the operation leaked his name to the drug traffickers responsible for the kidnapping, a law enforcement source said. He was ambushed and shot dozens of times just before Christmas 2010. His 20-year-old sister Johana in the passenger seat suffered the same fate. “Authorities know very well who the narcos are, and they do nothing about it,” Zelaya’s father, Francisco, said. “Everybody has been bought.”

Someone apparently believes the elder Zelaya, 56, is out for revenge. A month after the death of two of his children, another of his sons, 36-year-old Javier, was also gunned down. In November, the Zelaya home was attacked with grenades. Protected by a single soldier in their current hideaway, the family was denied visas to travel to the United States. “There will come a day,” Zelaya said, “when they will find us here.”

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## **CRIME BOOMS AS CENTRAL AMERICANS FEAR POLICE SWITCHED SIDES**

Tim Johnson. McClatchy Newspapers. January 20, 2012

SAN PEDRO SULA, Honduras — In a city that's just earned the title of the most dangerous in the Americas, few people dare go to the police with complaints. Rather, they view police officers with fear, scorn and disgust. "Society has completely lost confidence in the police. The citizenry is more afraid of the police than the criminals," said Jhon Cesar Mejia, a federal prosecutor assigned to look into abuses by the state.

In recent months in Honduras, evidence has turned up of police units involved in murder-for-hire plots, drug trafficking, extortion, auto theft and kidnapping. Distress over police corruption has grown only more intense in the three months since the dean of Honduras' national university fingered police in the murder of her son and the widow of a slain national drug czar blamed police for his assassination.

Deep-rooted police corruption is just one reason for the deterioration of public security that's shredding the social fabric of Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala, a region known as the "Northern Triangle" of Central America. Drug cartels have migrated to the Northern Triangle to escape heavy law enforcement pressure in Mexico and Colombia, flushing hundreds of millions of dollars in drug profits into the regional economy, buying off legislators, judges and army generals, and making weak institutions even weaker.

Soaring murder rates are the most tangible sign of the public security crisis. Just last week, a nonprofit group in Mexico, the Citizen Council for Public Security and Criminal Justice, said San Pedro Sula had overtaken Ciudad Juarez on Mexico's border with Texas as the most murderous city in the Americas. The 1,143 homicides that San Pedro Sula suffered last year was a rate of 158 murders per 100,000 residents, the group said.

Murder rates remain stubbornly high across the region. El Salvador tallied 4,354 murders last year, slightly under Guatemala's 5,618 and the 6,723 that Honduras registered. The Northern Triangle now approaches far more populous Mexico in the total number of homicides.

It's in Honduras, though, where the security crisis has most deeply altered the routines of the nation's 8 million people and tested the viability of the state.

In this modern manufacturing city, private armies of security guards protect the well off, who live in compounds with coils of concertina wire atop high walls. Perched atop the walls of many gated compounds are turrets with gun ports. Inside are well-armed guards ready to fend off heavy assault.

Soaring crime is only one facet of the lawlessness. "Around here, you only comply with the law if you want to. If you don't want to, you don't do so, and nothing happens," said Luis Larach, the head of the Chamber of Commerce and Industries of Cortes, the state surrounding San Pedro Sula. Larach said drug lords "have bought tremendous tracts, ranches, farms (and) coastlands" in Honduras, and the drug profits have filtered into sectors such as banking, construction, sports teams, restaurants, auto sales and private security.

In a sign of money laundering, he said, unknown companies are winning bids "on huge infrastructure projects, like highways and bridges, and no one knows where the money is coming from."

Unlike other parts of Central America, where organized crime has relied on enforcers recruited from street gangs and unemployed youth, in Honduras entire units of the national police appear to work for drug and crime groups, preying on the public and gunning down foes.

Worries about worsening crime have rippled to Washington, which pulled all 158 Peace Corps volunteers out of Honduras in the past week to evaluate security.

Distress at corruption in the national police, which was a branch of the military until 1998, has grown so acute that Honduras' Congress agreed on Nov. 29 to a request from President Porfirio Lobo to deploy soldiers against drug cartels, giving them full powers to make arrests, conduct searches and execute warrants.

A former chief of internal affairs for the national police, Maria Luisa Borjas, said rival criminal groups entrenched in the force battled each

other for dominance. "Right now, there are two cartels fighting it out within the police," she said, adding that a purge of the force that Lobo announced last fall is only "cosmetic." "The officers they are removing now aren't the really corrupt ones," she added.

Street cops earn an average of \$330 a month but police commanders often enjoy great wealth. Some own restaurants and others operate fleets of trucks as sideline businesses. "You find police who are living in grand houses and driving cars that ordinary people could never own," said Arnulfo Aguilar, the director of Radio Uno, a news station here.

Alleged rot in the 14,913-member national police grabbed headlines last September when then-Public Security Minister Oscar Alvarez said that at least 20 police commanders were part of drug cartels. Some of them, he said, were tasked with guiding in drug-laden aircraft from South America. Alvarez was ousted days later.

It was the police slaying of two university students on Oct. 22, though, that ignited deeper outrage. One of the victims was the 22-year-old son of Dr. Julieta Castellanos, a former member of the National Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which probed the country's 2009 coup, and the dean of the National Autonomous University of Honduras, the nation's largest. Backed by forensic investigators, Castellanos and her supporters pieced together how a police unit fired at the car as the two students returned from a party, then dumped the bodies on the outskirts of Tegucigalpa. The dean's demand that Lobo send the killers to trial and conduct a deep purge of the police emboldened another grieving victim.

The widow of retired army Gen. Julian Aristides Gonzalez, Leslie Portillo, told a television station in early December that police riding a motorcycle carried out the 2009 execution of her husband, the nation's top counter-drug official. Portillo obtained information that "the motorcycle that was used later was ridden into a police precinct," Castellanos said in an interview.

Castellanos, a sociologist, said many Hondurans viewed police corruption as a litmus test of whether the state could stave off an onslaught of gangsters. "People are really indignant, worried, but above all frightened. If nothing happens, if the police are not purged, where is the country headed?" she asked. "Who will be governing in a few years?"

U.S. diplomats fret. The top diplomat for Latin America, Roberta S. Jacobson, noted in a speech Dec. 1 that 95 percent of the illicit drugs that go from South America to the United States pass through Central America. Jacobson, who's awaiting Senate confirmation as the assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs, said the rise in crime had taken its highest toll on Central America's poorest.

"It is tempting to retreat behind high walls and hire private security guards, and often there's a perception that the well-off suffer the most in security costs, threat of kidnappings or forgone investment. But in fact, it is the poor and middle class that suffer the most," she said. Jacobson said those without resources had no recourse when police and courts didn't offer protection or justice.

The vulnerability of the poor to organized crime is particularly apparent in neighboring Guatemala, where President Otto Perez Molina, a former army intelligence chief, came to office earlier this month on a law and order platform. Organized crime groups linked to street gangs constantly attack bus lines to pressure transport companies to pay extortion. Killings occur almost daily. Most victims are bus drivers and fare collectors, but they include passengers and security guards.

According to the Office of the Human Rights Prosecutor in Guatemala City, the assaults left 216 people dead in 2008, 318 dead in 2009, 298 dead in 2010 and 228 in 2011 through September. The crime wave is taking an enormous economic toll in Central America. The Inter-American Development Bank put the price tag at \$6.5 billion, about 8 percent of the region's economic output.

Honduran police say they can clean their own ranks, but in mid-December national Chief Ricardo Ramirez del Cid announced that he'd uncovered a plot by fellow officers to kill him and had beefed up his personal security. "The corruption of the national police," journalism professor Patricia Murillo said, "has come at us like a cancer, and I'm afraid it has metastasized."

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WHAT TO DO

## **DEMAND AN END TO ‘POLITICS AND BUSINESS AS USUAL’**

Please keep on sending copies of this information, and your own letters, to Canadian and American politicians and government officials. Since the June 2009 military coup, that ousted the democratically elected government of President Zelaya in Honduras, the governments of the USA and Canada are the governments that have most supported and legitimized the post-coup, repressive regimes of Honduras. North American companies and investors have increased their business activities in Honduras since the coup. The repression, violence, corruption and impunity that characterize daily life in Honduras are significantly due to the political, economic and military interests of the USA and Canada.

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