

Rights Action
December 4, 2012

Obama: Stop Training And Equipping Death Squads In Honduras
Commentary by Annie Bird, annie@rightsaction.org

Rights Action and the School of the Americas Watch are asking the White House to stop training and equipping death squads in Honduras, and to assist Honduras in the struggle against impunity and for human rights by addressing our own role in killings, like the May 11, 2012 massacre of four Miskitu bystanders during a May 11, 2012 drug interdiction.

Deputy National Security Advisor Denis McDonough, rumored to be one of Obama's closest foreign policy advisers, traveled to Honduras on November 27 and 28. His visit was book ended by death squad killings in the Aguan, where the US has trained and equipped the military battalion most implicated in coordination with the death squad.

On November 26, 2012, in the Aguan, campesino Adelmo Leiva was shot dead in front of his young daughter and wife as they boarded a bus. On November 29, 26 year old farmer Wesler Santos Avila was shot dead as he drove into the town of La Confianza.

McDonough traveled with Assistant Secretary of State William Brownfield and Undersecretary of Defense Kathleen Hicks in one of the highest level diplomatic missions to Honduras since the June 29, 2009 coup. During the trip, McDonough noted that, "The United States and Honduras have enjoyed a close bilateral partnership over the years –at no other time in recent memory has our engagement been so robust," and went on to affirm the U.S. commitment to supporting Honduran security forces through CARSI, the Merida Initiative or Plan Colombia for Central America.

In the letter, Rights Action and SOA Watch explain to McDonough that a special forces unit that operates out of the 1st Battalion in Tegucigalpa and the 15th Battalion in the Aguan has been implicated in death squad activities, including the murder of 15 year old Ebed Yanes in May 2012, has been trained by the US Army Rangers, and is commanded by a SOA/ WHINSEC graduate.

We call on the White House to begin combating impunity in Honduras by seriously looking into U.S. responsibility in human rights violations, not only by the 1st and 15th Battalions but also the May 11, 2012 killings in Ahuas during a Drug Enforcement Agency led operation.

Please join SOA Watch and Rights Action in telling President Obama to stop training and equipping death squads in Honduras, through this link:

http://salsa.democracyinaction.org/o/727/p/dia/action/public/?action_KEY=12051

PUBLIC SIGN-ON LETTER

Deputy National Security Advisor
Denis McDonough

It was with great interest that we read of your visit to Honduras and Colombia with Assistant Secretary of State William Brownfield and Undersecretary of Defense Kathleen Hicks. As you are aware Honduras is in a very difficult moment in its history.

On Sunday November 26, just the day before your arrival in Honduras, 41 year old Adelmo Leiva was stepping on to a public bus when he was shot in front of his wife and young daughter. The day after you left Honduras, on November 29, Wesler Santos Avila, a 26 year old farmer part of the Brisa del Eden Campesino Business, was shot as he drove in the community of La Confianza.

These killings are part of a pattern of over 80 murders in less than three years of farmers, and their supporters, who defend their legitimate land rights in the Bajo Aguan region. In many of the murders witnesses identified the participation of Colon police department and members of the 15th Battalion, with the collaboration private security forces and other units of Honduran public security forces.

In July 2010, several green Ford F350's trucks began operating out of the 15th Battalion, shortly after General Ken Keene from the U.S. Southern Command presented the Honduran military with a fleet of green Ford

350s. A similar truck was identified in the investigation of the May 27, 2012 shooting death of 15 year old Ebed Yanes in Tegucigalpa.

Yanes had snuck out of his house to visit a girlfriend, when a Ford truck driven by US trained and equipped Honduran soldiers from the 1st Battalion pursued him through alleys, then shot and killed him. The first soldier to allegedly fire at Yanes was Josue Sierra, a 2011 graduate of WHINSEC/School of the Americas. He has been charged with covering up the crime. A second SOA graduate, Lt Col. Reynel Funes, is alleged to have ordered his subordinates to cover up the crime by swapping weapons.

On October 12, 2012 Honduran press reported that Reynel Funes commands a Special Forces unit which receives initial six weeks of training in the 1st Battalion and then moves to the 15th Battalion for specialized training to conduct 'clandestine' operations, infiltration, long distance sharp shooting, intelligence, urban operations, close combat and offensive driving. All of these are techniques that have been employed against land rights defenders in the Aguan over the past three years.

Another report described Reynel Funes' participation with his troops in a graduation ceremony from a 33 day U.S. Army Ranger training class conducted in the 15th Battalion on August 30, 2011. These are just a few of numerous reports from journalists and local human rights activists that the US Army Rangers, with the help of Colombian specialists, over at least the past three years have trained members of the 15th Battalion.

These killings are part of a larger pattern of death squad killings across Honduras, which became widespread after Porfirio Lobo became president through elections that the United States and Canada were the only countries in this hemisphere to recognize.

As you know, primary elections were held just ten days before your visit, elections in which the LIBRE opposition party participated. Candidates carried out their campaigns amidst violence; Congressional candidate Eric Martinez and mayoral Candidate Edgardo Motino were assassinated and mayoral candidate Maria Luisa Borjas and congressional candidate Yoni Rivas suffered assassination attempts.

All were clearly targeted specifically because of their political and advocacy activities, while many others were killed and attacked in less clear incidents. This was just during the primary elections; there is widespread concern about increased violence during the coming year leading up to the elections.

We note that during your visit you made statements that underscored the importance of respecting human rights, and that you made an effort to meet with some civil society organizations. However it is important to emphasize that you undoubtedly did not meet with many of those who are the target of repression because many organizations are afraid to meet with representatives of the United States government. As Representative Howard Berman noted in a letter to Hillary Clinton on October 5, 2012, that “we have not convinced Hondurans that the rule of law, human rights and ending impunity for the violation of those rights are our guiding principles.”

The complete impunity which surrounds the May 11, 2012 killing of four Miskitu villagers on a boat in the Patuca River in Ahuas, Gracias a Dios during a Drug Enforcement Agency led operation contributes to Honduras’s lack of confidence in the U.S. commitment to the rule of law and ending impunity.

Representative Berman noted that he is one of over a hundred House members and seven Senators who have addressed Secretary Clinton with concerns regarding Honduras policy. “Many of us were taken aback when the State Department recently granted Honduras a human rights certification that freed up a relatively small amount of U.S. assistance,” he noted, and went on to conclude that the US must stop pretending the coup did not happen and that “US policy in Honduras needs a reset.”

The U.S. must start by addressing our own contributions to the human rights crisis. Current events highlight exactly why we must immediately stop all training and funding of Honduran security forces, and examine the role the Special Forces troops trained by the School of the Americas / WHINSEC and the U.S. Army Rangers have played in the killings.

The U.S. must also take action to seriously investigate and address the impunity that exists for the May 11, 2012 Drug Enforcement Agency led interdiction operation that left four Miskitu villagers dead. No serious

investigation of those killings has occurred and some reports indicate that U.S. security forces may have committed abuses. We must reset U.S. policy in Honduras.

Sincerely,

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Please send copies of this information, and your own letters, to your Canadian and American politicians (MPs, Congress members and Senators) and to your own media. Since the June 2009 military coup, that ousted the democratically elected government of President Zelaya, Honduras has become the 'Murder Capital of the world'. Military-backed repression has again reached the levels of the worst years of the 1980s. Since the coup, the U.S. and Canadian governments have 'legitimized the illegitimate' post-coup regime. North American companies and investors have increased their business activities in Honduras since the coup. In no small part, this regime remains in power due to its political, economic and military relations with the U.S. and Canada.

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