

Rights Action
January 7, 2013

Inside The World's Deadliest Country: Honduras

December 31, 2012

http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-202_162-57561301/inside-the-worlds-deadliest-country-honduras/

While the article below – “Inside the world's deadliest country: Honduras” – provides little context as to why Honduras is now the “world’s deadliest country”, it provides a somewhat stark description of what it is like to live there, from one foreign journalist’s perspective.

Honduras’ exceedingly high levels of violence and State repression are rooted directly in the June 2009 military coup that has been legitimized and effectively supported by the United States and Canada. There are no signs that this repression and violence will decrease in 2013, even as the pro-democracy sectors of Honduras, many grouped under the National Resistance Front, will courageously support the LIBRE political party that will participate in the September 2013 presidential elections ... in a hope of putting an end to the corruption, repression, impunity and fundamental lack of democracy.

WHAT TO DO / HOW TO SUPPORT: See below

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Abner Soul Estrada Palma, 24, recovers in a hospital ward after being recently attacked with a machete on July 19, 2012, in Tegucigalpa, Honduras. Honduras now has the highest per capita murder rate in the world and its capital city, Tegucigalpa, is plagued by violence, poverty, homelessness and sexual assaults.

With an estimated 80 percent of the cocaine entering the United States now being trans-shipped through Honduras, the violence on the streets is a spillover from the ramped rise in narco-trafficking.

TEGUCIGALPA, Honduras - Every Saturday morning, one of my taxi drivers pays about \$12 for the right to park his cab near a hospital, about two blocks from a police station.

But it's not the government that's charging. An unidentified man pulls up in a large SUV, usually brandishing an AK-47, and accepts an envelope of cash without saying a word. Jose and nine other drivers who pay the extortionists estimate that it amounts to more than \$500 a year to park on public property. During Christmas, the cabbies dish out another \$500 each in holiday "bonuses."

Meanwhile, Jose pays the city \$30 a year for his taxi license. "Who do you think is really in charge here?" Jose asked me.

It is an interesting question, one I have been trying to answer since I arrived here a year ago as a correspondent for The Associated Press. Is the government in charge? The drug traffickers? The gangs? This curious capital of 1.3 million people is a lawless place, but it does seem to have its own set of unwritten rules for living with the daily dangers.

Jose, who did not want his last name used for fear of reprisals, says his extortionists are from "18th Street," a powerful gang that started in U.S. prisons. The taxi drivers don't bother to report the crime, he says, because they suspect police are involved in the racket. In the first six months of 2012, 51 taxi drivers were killed in Tegucigalpa — most of them, Jose's colleagues believe, for failing to pay extortionists.

When I moved to Tegucigalpa last March several friends back home in Spain wanted to know why. The big story was in Egypt, Libya and Syria; what was I planning to do on the other side of the globe? "Bear witness," I said, "to the most violent place in the world, to a country in crisis."

I am the only foreign correspondent here, with no press pack to consult on questions of security, or to rely on for safety in numbers. I fall back on instincts honed in war zones, but they are not always sufficient when you are covering a failing state.

When you are in the trenches of Libya, you generally know where the shooting comes from. But in Honduras, you never know where danger lurks.

Three weeks after I arrived, I attended a ceremony in the capital where U.S. Assistant Secretary of State William Brownfield delivered 30 motorcycles to President Porfirio Lobo to help Honduras fight crime. A neighborhood leader, however, had complained to me that the narcos had bribed some police officers to look the other way. I asked the officials if they weren't afraid the motorcycles would end up in the hands of the bad guys.

I got no answer. Instead a Honduran reporter wrapped his arm around my shoulder and whispered, "We don't ask questions like that here." If I wanted to survive in Honduras, he said, "Keep a low profile."

More than two dozen Honduran journalists have been killed in the last two years. Some reporters carry weapons to protect themselves, others use the armed guards that President Lobo offered after a prominent Honduran radio journalist was assassinated last May — reportedly in retaliation for a government crackdown on cartels.

It is not hard to become a fatality. A few months ago, I interviewed a lawyer, Antonio Trejo, who was defending the peasants of Aguan Valley in a land dispute against agribusiness tycoon Miguel Facusse, one of the most powerful men in the country. Trejo had warned repeatedly that he would be killed for helping the campesinos. Two days after I interviewed him, he was shot six times as he was leaving church by two men on a motorcycle.

In August, I took a walk on a Sunday with a couple of friends in a sad dilapidated park — one of only two in the city. I got a call on my iPhone. I stepped away from friends and began to walk as I talked, as you would in a normal city, a normal park. Suddenly two teenagers approached me, asking first for a cigarette, then for the phone. I hung up, put the phone in my pocket and shouted over to my friends, who helped me chase the young men away — once we realized they weren't armed.

But I learned my lesson. Unwritten rule: Do not walk around talking on an iPhone, which costs about three times a monthly salary in Honduras. And forget the park.

Like most Hondurans who can afford it, my family and I live behind high gated walls with a guard out front. After the park episode, I gave up my morning ritual of newspapers and espresso at an outdoor cafe. I don't go out at night.

In the daytime, I use trusted drivers like Jose to guide me through Tegucigalpa's chaotic streets, past its barbed-wire fences, mounds of garbage and packs of dogs. I keep the tinted windows up, the doors locked, and we don't stop at the lights, so we won't get carjacked.

I vary my routes. I try not to fall victim to the permanent sense of danger that hangs over the capital, where the conversation is invariably about whose relative was just killed, or what atrocity happened on the corner. Yet I constantly check the rear and side mirrors of Jose's car for approaching motorcycles. Honduras has the world's highest murder rate, and paid gunmen almost always travel by motorcycle to make a quick getaway through impossible traffic.

The violence is a stark contrast to the friendly feel of a land where many have a Caribbean attitude about life, happy and easygoing. Once you leave the cities, the landscape is amazing — wild, healthy, and savage, from the waterfalls of La Tigra National park, just half an hour from the capital, to the islands of the Caribbean and the world's second largest coral reef.

Our babysitter, Wendy, sells Avon products door-to-door to make extra money after her child's father disappeared on his clandestine journey to the U.S. to find work.

Last month, she was on her way to deposit her Avon earnings in the bank when a robber pointed a knife at her waist and told her to hand over the cash. He took 5,000 lempiras — about \$250 — which was everything she had earned, including the money she owed Avon.

Again last week, Wendy encountered thieves, this time as she left my house about 7:30 p.m. Half a block away, she passed a group of basketball players just as three gunmen threw them up against a wall,

stealing their money and phones. "They looked like police," she said of the gunmen.

Two days later, a neighbor in her poor barrio of ramshackle huts and dirt roads was robbed by an armed drug addict. The neighbor escaped, went home for his own gun and returned to kill the drug addict. "Police thanked him for the favor," Wendy said.

My best friend here is a man named German who studied art and opened a tattoo parlor with a business partner. They were talented and developed a good clientele, particularly among youths looking to leave the street gangs and get rid of the signature tattoos. German learned how to convert numbers such as 18 into pirate ships, and to turn other gang symbols into random designs. He saw this as a kind of social service, removing a stigma from the skin of a gangster who wanted to return to civilian life, and he asked to borrow a camera of mine to take pictures of their work.

Some days later, German's partner was walking home when a black car drew near. He tried to run until the front-seat passenger screamed at him to halt. "Get in and put this on," the man said, handing him a black hood.

They took him to a dark room where they removed the hood and claimed he spied on them. They tortured him for several hours before letting him go, with a broken rib.

My friend closed his shop and moved to a new house. He knows they are looking for him. German comes from a family of means. Here, violence is democratic.

Honduran officials receive aid from the U.S. to fight the trafficking of cocaine headed for the U.S. market. The country has 640 kilometers (400 miles) of northern Caribbean coastline, with plenty of tree cover and great uninhabited stretches for moving drugs. It is flanked by the port town of Puerto Lempira in the east and San Pedro Sula in the west.

While Hondurans blame their police for much of the crime, police say they are overwhelmed and outgunned by the drug traffickers and criminals. AP photographer Esteban Felix and I decided to see this for ourselves, and rode with police in San Pedro Sula, the country's largest and wealthiest city.

In one night, we saw the bodies of two bus drivers who had been killed for refusing to pay a cut to gangs, a police officer executed on a highway with a single shot to the head, and three people shot dead in a pool hall for what was described as "a settling of accounts."

The hospital emergency room looked like a scene out of a civil war, with mop-wielding orderlies failing to keep up with the blood pooling on the floor.

The owner of the bus company urged his employees to remove the drivers' bodies and collect the fares from the bloodied bus before police did. Once again, I made the mistake of asking a question, this time of the owner of the bus company. He turned in anger and ordered me not to publish what I had seen, while asking me repeatedly, "Where are you staying?"

Needless to say, I did not stay the night in San Pedro Sula. I returned to the capital, which, despite the violence, has become my home. My two-year-old daughter can say Tegucigalpa — which is not easy. And every time she sees the flag, she waves and says "Honduras," as she was taught in her preschool. Somehow, we already belong to this country. After 10 months living here, I have learned the rules of survival. If Jose pays his weekly extortion fee, chances are he'll survive. And since I'm usually sitting in the passenger seat, chances are, so will I.

WHAT TO DO?

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'. State 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.

GET INFORMED / GET INVOLVED

- **SPEAKERS:** Contact us to plan educational presentations in your community
- **JOIN A DELEGATION:** Form your own group or join one of our delegation seminars to Guatemala and Honduras to learn first hand about community development, human rights and environmental struggles
- **BALANCED DAILY NEWS SOURCES:** www.democracynow.org / www.therealnews.com / www.upsidedownworld.org / www.dominionpaper.ca / www.rabble.ca / www.fsrn.org /
- **GOOD READING:** Eduardo Galeano "Open Veins of Latin America" / Howard Zinn "A People's History of the United States" / James Loewen "Lies My Teacher Told Me" / Ronald Wright "Stolen Continents" / Naomi Klein "The Shock Doctrine" / Dr Seuss's "Horton Hears A Who" /

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