

Rights Action
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INTERESTED?: info@rightsaction.org

WILL OBAMA'S LEGACY BE A DEATH SQUAD GOVERNMENT IN HONDURAS?

[This article was published in The Guardian (UK) on March 30, 2013 (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2013/mar/30/congress-us-support-honduras-death-squad-regime>)]

The video (<http://www.elheraldo.hn/Secciones-Principales/Sucesos/Repudio-e-indignacion-por-crimen-de-sicarios-en-capital-de-Honduras>), caught randomly on a warehouse security camera, is chilling. Five young men are walking down a quiet street in Tegucigalpa, Honduras. A big black SUV pulls up, followed by another vehicle. Two masked men with bullet proof vests jump quickly out of the lead car, with AK-47's raised. The two youths who are closest to the vehicles see that they have no chance of running, so they freeze and put their hands in the air. The other three break into a sprint, with bullets chasing, and the second team of assassins firing. Miraculously, they escape, with one injured – but the two who surrendered are forced to lie face down on the ground. The two students, who were brothers 18 and 20 years old, are quickly murdered in front of the camera with bullets to the back of the head. In less than 40 seconds after their arrival, the assassins are driving away, never to be found.

The high level of professional training and modus operandi of the assassins have led many observers to conclude (<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=174551406>) that this was a government operation. The video was posted by the newspaper El Heraldo last month; the murder took place in November of last year. There have been no arrests.

Now the Obama administration is coming under fire for its role in arming and funding murderous Honduran police, in violation of U.S. law. Under the “Leahy Law,” named after Vermont Senator Patrick Leahy, the U.S. government is not allowed to fund foreign military units who have committed gross human rights violations with impunity. The Director General of Honduras’ national police force, Juan Carlos Bonilla, is himself implicated in death squad killings; and members of the U.S. Congress have been complaining about it since Bonilla was appointed in May last year. Thanks to some excellent investigative reporting by the Associated Press (http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2013/03/23/world/americas/ap-lt-honduras-death-squads.html?partner=rss&emc=rss&utm_source=twitterfeed&utm_medium=twitter&_r=4&) in the last couple of weeks – showing that all police units are in fact under Bonilla’s command -- it has become clearer that U.S. funding of Honduran police is illegal.

Now we will see if the “rule of law” or the “separation of powers” means very much here in the capital of the country that likes to lecture “less developed” countries about these principles.

Why would the Obama administration be so stubborn as to deceive and defy Congress in order to support death squad government in Honduras? To answer this question we have to look at how the current government of Honduras got to power, and how big a role its violent repression of political opposition plays in keeping it there.

The government of Honduran President Pepe Lobo was “elected” after a military coup overthrew the democratically elected government of President Mel Zelaya in June of 2009. Zelaya later told the press that Washington was involved in the coup itself; this is very believable, given the circumstantial evidence. But what we know for sure is that the Obama administration was heavily involved in helping the coup government

survive and legitimize itself. Washington supported Lobo's election in November 2009 against the opposition of almost the entire hemisphere. The Organization of American States and the European Union refused to send observers to an election that most of the world viewed as obviously illegitimate.

The coup unleashed a wave of violence against political dissent that continues to this day. Even the Truth and Reconciliation Commission established by the coup government itself found that it had "undertaken political persecution. . . and that it was responsible for a number of killings committed by state agents and those acting at their behest, in addition to the widespread and violent repression of rights to speech, assembly, association ..."

This was noted by the Center for Constitutional Rights (New York) and the Paris-based International Federation for Human Rights, in a report [PDF, <http://ccrjustice.org/files/Honduras%20ICC%20Submission.pdf>] submitted to the International Criminal Court. The CCR/FIDH report also identifies "over 100 killings, most of which are selective, or targeted killings, occurring even after two truth commissions concluded their investigations. ..." Their report goes through October 2012.

The killings are one horrific manifestation of the broader attack which is also characterized by death threats against activists, lawyers, journalists, trade unionists, and campesinos, as well as attempted killings, torture, sexual violence, arbitrary arrests and detentions. The True Commission [the second, independent Truth Commission] described the regime's "attack" as one of using terror as a means of social control

Which brings us the elections that are scheduled for later this year. There is once again a social democratic party in the race, including people who courageously defended democracy against the military coup of 2009. Its presidential candidate is Xiomara Castro de Zelaya, the wife of the president that Washington worked so hard to get rid of. This party is among the victims of the government's political repression: in November, LIBRE mayoral candidate Edgardo Adalid Motiño was gunned down after attending a rally for Xiomara Zelaya.

So there you have it. A death squad government may not be the Obama administration's first choice for Honduras, but they prefer it to another left

government that people might elect if they were able to organize in a free election. The current government belongs to Washington, as does the U.S. military base that the Pentagon would like to keep there indefinitely.

If all that sounds disgusting, and reminiscent of President Reagan's death squad governments in Central America of the 1980s, it's because it is both. The question right now is what are members of the U.S. Congress going to do about it?

“WE’RE WITNESSING A REACTIVATION OF THE DEATH SQUADS OF THE ‘80S”:

An Interview with Bertha Oliva of COFADEH

by Alex Main, 29 March 2013

<http://www.cepr.net/index.php/blogs/the-americas-blog/were-witnessing-a-reactivation-of-the-death-squads-of-the-80s-an-interview-with-bertha-oliva-of-cofadeh>

Bertha Oliva is the General Coordinator of COFADEH, the Committee of Relatives of the Disappeared and Detained in Honduras. Bertha's husband was "disappeared" in 1981, a period when death squads were active in Honduras. She founded COFADEH together with other women who lost their loved ones, in order to seek justice and compensation for the families of the hundreds of dissidents that were "disappeared" between 1979 and 1989.

Since then Bertha and COFADEH have taken on some of the country's most emblematic human rights cases and were a strong voice in opposition to the 2009 coup d'Etat and the repression that followed.

We interviewed her in Washington, D.C. on March 15th, shortly after she participated in a hearing on the human rights situation in Honduras at the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR). During the hearing she said that death squads are targeting social leaders, lawyers, journalists and other groups and called on the IACHR to visit Honduras in the next six months to take stock of the human rights situation ahead of the November general elections (Bertha's testimony can be viewed here, beginning at 17:40).

Q: On various occasions you've said that what you're seeing today in Honduras is reminiscent of the difficult times you experienced in the '80s and I'd like you to elaborate on that.

In the '80s we had armed forces that were excessively empowered. Today Honduras is extremely similar, with military officers exercising control over many of the country's institutions. The military is now in the streets playing a security role – often substituting the work of the police forces of the country.

In the '80s we also witnessed the practice of forced disappearances and assassinations. In that era it was clear that they were killing social leaders, political opponents, but they also assassinated people who had no ties to dissident groups in order to generate confusion in public opinion and try to disqualify our denunciations of the killings of family members who were political opponents.

Today they assassinate young people in a more atrocious fashion than in the '80s and we're seeing a marked pattern of assassinations of women and youth. And within this mass of people that are assassinated there are political opponents.

We refuse to dismiss these assassinations as simply a result of the extreme violence that we're experiencing, as they try to tell the country. We say that it is a product of impunity and Honduras' historical debt for failing to resolve cases perpetrated by state agents...

In the '80s the presence of the U.S. in the country was extremely significant. Today it's the same. New bases have opened as a result of an anti-drug cooperation agreement signed between Honduras and the U.S.

In the '80s it was clear that political opponents were being eliminated. Today they're also eliminating those who claim land rights, as exemplified in the Bajo Aguán. More than 98 land rights activists have been assassinated. The campesino sector in the Bajo Aguán has been psychologically and emotionally tortured on top of the physical torture that certain campesino leaders have been subjected to.

Q: Today in the hearing on human rights in Honduras at the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights you discussed death squads. Death squads were active in the '80s and now you believe that this sinister phenomenon is coming back.

It's certain that death squads are a product of the impunity that we've seen in Honduras. The death squads of the past were never really dismantled. What we're witnessing is a reactivation of these death squads. And we're seeing it quite clearly. We've seen videos of incidents in the street where masked men with military training and unmarked vehicles assassinate young people. There is the recent case of the journalist Julio Ernesto Alvarado who gave up his news program from 10pm to midnight on Radio Globo because members of a death squad came to kill him, and to save his own life he had to stop doing his program.

In Honduras we had a military coup d'Etat and this resulted in persecution, an implosion of the state's institutions which has left us with a dysfunctional judicial system and this has provided cover to those who wish to break the law.

And, what's worse, state agents seem to have no political interest in improving and changing the situation. What we're witnessing is a growing professionalization of the capacity to justify illegal acts: authorities' assertion that they intend to investigate these acts, when that's simply not true. In reality it seems the intention is to continue terrorizing the Honduran people, to make them submissive so as to undermine citizen action.

What we'd like to see in Honduras is real action to try to prevent crime rather than continued justification of the lack of progress of investigations into crimes.

Q: COFADEH is providing legal counsel to the victims and the families of the victims of the emblematic case that took place in May of last year in Ahuas, in which there was a police operation that involved U.S. agents and Honduran security agents that killed four people and injured a few others. Can you discuss the status of that case, over ten months after the killings took place?

Yes, we are the legal representatives of the victims in this case and, on the one hand, we are filing a complaint with Honduras' judicial authorities to show or verify the responsibility of Honduran agents and DEA agents that participated in this incident.

But we're also trying to reach out to the general public so that the case is better known and debated as this is the only real recourse we human rights defenders have: publicly denouncing the incident to see whether this will allow for some protection of the victims and of ourselves. But legally we see this as a very difficult case to move forward and this is where we can see that the authorities aren't interested in investigating, let alone sanctioning, those responsible. The crime of the tragic attack against this indigenous community has been compounded by the crime of violating due process in the investigation.

We the legal representatives of the victims should have access to the case file. The Public Ministry [equivalent to the Attorney General's Office in the U.S. – ed.] shouldn't allow any obstacle to come in the way of our access to the file. They can't legally prevent us from learning about the actions that have been taken in the course of the investigation because we are part of the defense. It is prohibited for either of the parties to be denied access to the case file. The file can be classified with regard to the general public, but not with regard to the parties representing the victims and the accused.

We haven't seen all the files in this case. They haven't been inserted in a binder [as is normally the case] in order to allow them to remove information when we ask for the file. How can we participate effectively in a trial when we can't see all of the case file?

Q: And what evidence do you have of their having removed parts of the case file before sharing it with you?

One is that when we've been shown the case file it basically only contains documents that we've produced. We know the Public Ministry has carried out its own investigations; it has carried out the exhumation and autopsies of the deceased victims' bodies for instance. As a side note, we weren't informed that they were carrying out the exhumations of the victims. We're left with the impression that the intention isn't to find evidence but rather to remove [borrar] evidence... Our Public Ministry

should be called a “Public Laundromat” because they’re engaged in destroying evidence.

Q: So you didn’t see the reports on the exhumations and autopsies of the victims in the Ahuas case file?

We haven’t seen them, just as we didn’t see the report that was sent by [Honduran Attorney General equivalent] Luís Alberto Rubi to the State Department of the United States. This indicates to us that they remove information and documentation from the case file that they don’t want us to see.

The Public Prosecutor [Attorney General equivalent] sent a report to a representative of the State Department, Maria Otero, with – for instance – the names of the Honduran police agents and military personnel that participated in the operation, though not the names of the DEA agents, with the apparent goal of barring them from any sort of responsibility.

Q: But you did end up managing to see the Public Ministry report sent to the State Department?

Yes, but not through the Public Ministry, but thanks to people outside Honduras who managed to get hold of a copy.

Q: In this report there is information based on testimony provided to the Public Ministry by police agents that participated in the Ahuas operation. Have you been able to see any of this original testimony?

No, we haven’t seen any of the testimony of the police agents.

Q: What is the current situation of the surviving victims of the Ahuas incident, and of the families of the victims?

The situation of the families, of the survivors, of the community is really very critical. They are emotionally and psychologically affected. Being on the receiving end of an armed aerial attack is a shock for a remote community that never expected an attack of this nature. Some of the community members were woken up by armed agents, were physically attacked and had certain belongings stolen.

I think that those that survived are no longer directly threatened but not all of them have recovered their physical abilities. For instance, a young man sustained a serious injury to his hand requiring an operation that cost 100,000 lempiras [over \$5,000 – ed.]. Where can this boy, who doesn't have anything, find this kind of money?

COFADEH ended up having to take care of him and he's still in treatment in Tegucigalpa, far from his community. We are paying for his treatment and lodging him, feeding him and paying for his studies. This is the responsibility of the state and it has refused to assume this responsibility even though we requested urgent protective measures from the state. The state is good at providing technically well-designed reports before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, but it has been incapable of dealing with the needs of the survivors of this attack. This sort of thing is a clear demonstration of their lack of interest in resolving and combatting the insecurity we're experiencing, the political violence and the high level of impunity.

Q: What about the other injured victims?

We've had to bring them to Tegucigalpa to be treated. In the case of one boy they left studs [clavos] jutting out of his arm. He almost lost his arm because after the operation they sent him back to his community but with no medicine.

We've also had to provide care for other relatives of the survivors and the deceased victims. It's impressive the level of neglect of these victims on the part of the state.

We [the human rights defenders] return to our country with the fear that the attacks will extend to us as a result of our decision to come and denounce a state that has shown itself incapable of assuming its responsibility.

Q: COFADEH has received threats and recently its offices were raided. Can you talk to me about your situation, your vulnerability, and what people in the U.S. can do to help?

Our situation isn't good at all. I confess that we're frightened because we love life, that's why we dedicate ourselves to defending the lives of

others. And I don't want to die or be tortured. And I don't want to have to confront state agents. But despite their machinery of hate and actions against us, they should know that they can't stop us.

Fortunately we can count on support from people in the U.S. and the rest of the world, and I can reaffirm today that this support and this commitment of people abroad inspires us and makes us feel less alone. Because the worst that can happen for a human rights defender facing threats is to feel alone. That's why we call on you to continue supporting us to defend the life and liberty of the citizens that need our help.

RIGHTS ACTION

The roots of Rights Action's work go back to 1983 in Guatemala. Since then, and particularly since 1995, Rights Action has been funding grassroots organizations working for community development and the environment, for disaster relief, for truth, memory, justice and human rights, and for democracy and peaceful resolution of conflicts in Guatemala and Honduras, as well as in southern Mexico and El Salvador. The Canadian Rights Action Foundation, founded in 1999, is independent from Rights Action (USA). Grahame Russell and Annie Bird are co-directors of Rights Action (USA); Grahame is director of Rights Action (Canada).

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