

Rights Action
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Honduran Police Accused As Death Squads

By Alberto Arce, Associated Press, May 13, 2013

<http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/ap-impact-honduran-criminals-missing-arrest-19170294#.UZFRHoKhDfY>

At least five times in the last few months, members of a Honduras street gang were killed or went missing just after run-ins with the U.S.-supported national police, The Associated Press has determined, feeding accusations that they were victims of federal death squads.

In a country with the highest homicide rate in the world and where only a fraction of crimes are prosecuted, the victims' families say the police are literally getting away with murder.

In March, two mothers discovered the bodies of their sons after the men had called in a panic to say they were surrounded by armed, masked police. The young men, both members of the 18th Street gang, had been shot in the head, their hands bound so tightly the cords cut to the bone.

That was shortly after three members of 18th Street were detained by armed, masked men and taken to a police station. Two men with no criminal history were released, but their friend disappeared without any record of his detention.

A month after the AP reported that an 18th Street gang leader and his girlfriend vanished from police custody, they are still missing.

The 18th Street gang and another known as Mara Salvatrucha are the country's biggest gangs, formed by Central American immigrants in U.S. prisons who later overran this small Central American country as their members were deported back home. Both engage in dealing drugs and charging extortion fees under threat of death. Now the 18th Street gang says its members are being targeted by police death squads, described by witnesses as heavily armed masked men in civilian dress and bullet-proof vests who kill or "disappear" gang members instead of bringing them to justice.

In the last two years, the United States has given an estimated \$30 million in aid to Honduran law enforcement. The U.S. State Department says it faces a dilemma: The police are essential to fighting crime in a country that has become a haven for drug-runners. It estimates that 40 percent of the cocaine headed to the U.S. — and 87 percent of cocaine smuggling flights from South America — pass through Honduras.

"The option is that if we don't work with the police, we have to work with the armed forces, which almost everyone accepts to be worse than the police in terms of ... taking matters in their own hands," U.S. Assistant Secretary of State William Brownfield told the AP via live chat on March 28. "Although the national police may have its defects at the moment, it is the lesser evil."

Alba Mejia, Deputy Director of the Committee for the Prevention of Torture, said her group has documented hundreds of death squad cases in the country since 2000. The squads burst into homes with no warrants and take away young men, she said.

"We are convinced that there is a government policy of killing gang members and that there is a team dedicated to this activity," Mejia said. Federal prosecutors say they have received about 150 complaints about similar raids in the capital of Tegucigalpa over the last three years.

The 18th Street gang originated in Los Angeles and spread through Central America after many of its members were deported in the 1980s and early 1990s. In Honduras, the gang controls entire neighborhoods, with entrance impossible for outsiders, while gangsters extort what is called a "war tax" on small business owners and taxi drivers, even schools and corporations.

Drug cartels, which are much larger than the gangs, oversee the movement of cocaine from South America northward to the United States. It is widely believed that the cartels pay the gangs in drugs for protection and assistance in moving the narcotics, and as a result the gangs fight each other over the territory.

Honduran National Police spokesman Julian Hernandez Reyes denied the existence of police units operating outside the law. He asserted that

the two gangs are murdering each other while disguised as law enforcement.

"There are no police death squads in Honduras," Hernandez said in an interview. "The only squads in place are made of police officers who give their lives for public safety."

But there is mounting evidence of the existence of squads of police in civilian dress, apparently engaged in illegal executions.

An AP reporter covering the aftermath of an April 7 shootout between police and gang members saw one such squad, whose masked members were directing more than 100 uniformed policemen in an offensive against gang members. The officers had surrounded a house where two gangsters had holed up after a chase with police. Witnesses said that when one walked out with his hands up, masked police shot him dead. "Killers! Killers!" a crowd of women shouted.

Last year, the U.S. Congress withheld direct aid to Honduran police chief Juan Carlos Bonilla after he was appointed to the top law enforcement post despite alleged links to death squads a decade earlier. Bonilla, nicknamed "the Tiger," was accused in a 2002 internal affairs report of involvement in three homicides and linked to 11 other deaths and disappearances. He was tried in one killing and acquitted. The rest of the cases were never fully investigated.

The U.S. State Department has resumed funding to the Honduran police, but said the money only supports units vetted by the U.S. So far this year, the U.S. has provided \$16 million to the police force, and argued last month that the money isn't sent directly to Bonilla or any of his top 20 officers.

U.S. Sen. Patrick Leahy of Vermont, chairman of a Senate Appropriations subcommittee on the State Department and foreign operations, has led a group in Congress concerned about the alleged human rights abuses, and has held up \$10 million, despite State Department pressure.

"A key question is whether we should provide aid, and if so under what conditions, to a police force that is frequently accused of corruption and involvement in violent crimes," Leahy said. "If there is to be any hope of making real progress against lawlessness in Honduras, we need people

there we can trust, who will do what is necessary to make the justice system work. That is the least Congress should expect."

Two weeks before a visit to Central America by President Barack Obama, U.S. Sen. Robert Menendez of New Jersey toured Honduras amid questions over how U.S. aid is spent.

"I understand that there are concerns among my colleagues in both the Senate and House about certain U.S. assistance to Honduras," said Menendez, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. "The U.S. has a moral and legal authority to ensure U.S. assistance is not tainted by human rights concerns."

The latest string of attacks began with gang leader Kevin Carranza Padilla, who disappeared with his girlfriend, Cindy Yadira Garcia, on Jan. 10. Witnesses said he was arrested, and a police photo leaked to the local press showed Carranza with his hands tied and face duct-taped. The couple has not been seen since, and police say they were never arrested.

In March, Carranza's close friend, Billy "Babyface" Jovel Mejia, 23, and another gang member, Wilder Javier "Sadboy" Alvarado, 20, were on the run, changing houses every couple of days, when they called a friend to say they had been surrounded by police.

A woman named Kelsa, who asked that her last name not be used for fear of reprisals, had helped the two hide out. She told the AP of a call one night from a panicked Jovel, whom she quoted as saying: "The police are coming for us. They are going to enter the house. Tell our families that they are coming to kill us."

"I could hear pounding," she said. "Billy told me he couldn't explain what house they were at. ... I could hear screams. Billy left the phone and then the call dropped."

As often happens in such cases, his mother, Maria Elena Garcia, went from station to station in search of information from police. "I went to the 4th district, from there they sent me to the 7th, then to the metropolitan police headquarters," Garcia said. "At 5 a.m. they called me to tell me that they had found two bodies."

Garcia and Alvarado's mother identified their sons, whose bodies were found dumped at the edge of the capital. Each had a single 9 millimeter gunshot to the head, and their hands were tightly bound. Jovel was missing his right eye, Alvarado his left. "The blood was still fresh and the bullets were still there," Garcia said.

Alvarado's mother, Norma, said police had raided her home at least six times in search of her son in a neighborhood called the United States, one of many named for a country. She described the same routine each time: They would come in civilian clothes with bullet-proof vests and ski masks and identify themselves as police. They were teams of six to eight men in large, expensive SUVs without license plates. "There were times when I would close the door to give him time to escape," she said. "They even came on New Year's Eve."

In the middle of the night on Feb. 14, six masked men who identified themselves as police took Alvarado's 13-year-old grandson. She told them he was studying, that he was a good boy.

"I begged them not to take him, not to kill him," Alvarado told the AP, crying. "There was only one car outside our door, but at each end of the street there were more cars. It was a big operation."

The boy, whose name is being withheld because he is a minor, said in an interview that they covered his face with his own shirt and pushed him to the floor of the SUV. Two agents kept him down with their feet while another drove the car around for half an hour, asking about Wilder, the boy's cousin.

"They wanted to know where my brother was. They thought Wilder was my brother. They wanted to know where the weapons were," the boy said. "They kept punching me, and because I wasn't telling them anything, they would punch me more."

The boy was taken to an office. "They were six men. I could only see them when they took the shirt off of my face to put a black, plastic bag over my head. They always wore the ski masks. I was sitting down and they were asphyxiating me with the bag. When I would faint they would beat me up to wake me up and they would do it again," he recalled.

The boy said he could see photos of 18th Street gang members pinned to the walls. He doesn't know why, but suddenly they let him go, and the following day his family filed a complaint with the prosecutors' office. They have heard nothing about the investigation.

The 18th Street gang leaders told the AP that the attacks against its members are not the work of rival gangs. Members say police have declared war on them, especially in the southeast Tegucigalpa neighborhood once led by Carranza.

Carranza's partner, Elvin Escoto Sandoval, known as "Splinter," was detained by police on March 13, according to his wife, Doris Ramirez, now seven months pregnant with their first child. Nilson Alejandro "The Squirrel" Padilla, 21, said he was taken into custody along with Splinter and another member identified only as "Chifaro."

"There were seven in civilian clothes, bulletproof vests, ski masks, automatic rifles, and a police badge hanging with a string from their neck. They pushed me against the ground and told me not to lift my head. They were traveling in two cars," Padilla recalled.

"They took us to the National Criminal Investigations offices," he added. "They told me and Chifaro that we didn't have a record and we were released that afternoon. They didn't even question us."

By then, Ramirez was at the station, asking police about the fate of her husband, "Splinter."

Police told her they had only detained two men, not three, she said.

"We then went to all the police stations in the area and finally filed a complaint on his disappearance at the police headquarters," she said.

Ramirez still goes to the morgue every time she hears of an unidentified body. She has also been to the "little mountain," a known dumping ground outside Tegucigalpa for bodies of murdered young men. Her husband has disappeared.

Chifaro is missing now, too.

UPCOMING FACT-FINDING DELEGATIONS

- Delegation to Guatemala, July 6-14, 2013: Mining injustice & Impunity ~versus~ Community well-being, human rights & the environment. MORE INFORMATION: info@rightsaction.org
- Delegation to Honduras, July 13-21, 2013: Struggle for democracy, human rights & the environment ~versus~ Military-backed regime, & global companies & investors. MORE INFORMATION: springkj@gmail.com

AMERICAN / CANADIAN CONNECTION

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 Honduras, the country 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 repressive regime remains in power due to its political, economic and military relations with the U.S. and Canada.

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