

3-13-2008

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Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "As Government Loses Control Of Violence, Hondurans Leave." (2008). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/9590>

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As Government Loses Control Of Violence, Hondurans Leave

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Honduras

Published: 2008-03-13

Honduran President Manuel Zelaya has said his government is incapable of controlling violence, particularly the soaring murder rate. Citizens increasingly do not leave their homes without compelling reasons, and, when they do, some are tending to keep right on going. Emigration patterns are changing radically. It is no longer just men, the breadwinners, who are heading to other countries for economic opportunity. In growing numbers, women and children are joining the exodus in search of a better, more secure life.

An August survey of Honduran attitudes and adjustments to crime, sponsored by the government's Comisionado de los Derechos Humanos en Honduras (CONADEH), determined that 65% of the population have stopped going out at night. Moreover, 44% have stopped using public transportation, and 43% have stopped making routine social visits to family and friends. The adult population is staying home, where 80% say they feel safe, except for going to work, where 52% say they feel secure. The media have called this a "near collapse of public life." Central America Report (CAR) received information in advance of publication of the UN's 2007 report on violence. CAR said the report's director, Julieta Castellanos, said there were 3,160 murders in Honduras for the year, up from 3,016 the previous year. The daily rate has gone from 8.26 to 8.66. The local media have reported the rate to have climbed in 2008, figures that Castellanos could not verify but which rang true to most analysts.

President holds US drug policy responsible

President Zelaya blames outsiders. "Seventy percent of the crime is, ultimately, because of outside forces," he told the media, "drug trafficking, arms trafficking, the trafficking of people." Zelaya argued that Honduras and Central America were caught between the drug producers in the south and the consumers in the north, and said, "Logically, as long as drugs are illegal in the US and there's no immediate solution to the problem, we will continue to be victims of this calamity." Zelaya pointed to the counterproductive nature of international drug policies, noting, "While we take actions to stop the traffic, we're just making the drug business more lucrative and powerful." He said the traffickers "buy everything in their path...and are stronger than Central American governments."

Zelaya's views tend to have the support of workers in the human rights and forensic fields. Reina Rivera of the Centro de Investigacion y Promocion de los Derechos Humanos (CIPRODEH) has tracked a four-year growth of the presence of organized-crime involvement, especially in the kind of crime that has led to the runaway violence. Castellanos' data back that up. UN forensic evidence shows professional killers behind 35% of murders in 2007. Criminal organizations outstrip the usual Honduran suspects, gangs, in responsibility for the murder rate. The data find gangs contributing

only about 15%. The UN data go back only to 2005, but other data show a decline in the gang contribution.

Tomas Andino, congressional deputy and writer on gang violence, said gang violence has fallen off for several reasons. First, their numbers have been reduced by extrajudicial executions, "social cleansing." This has driven many other gang members from crime and left their businesses and territories subject to takeover by organized cartels. Andino supported Zelaya's comment on the strength of traffickers. "It is true that the drug traffickers have more power than Central American governments," he said. "Security forces know who the drug traffickers are but allow them to walk freely on the streets."

It is also strongly alleged that organized crime has infiltrated the government, an element left out of Zelaya's analysis but not out of that of Ismael Moreno, Jesuit priest and correspondent for the Nicaraguan magazine *Envio*. "Every government institution is caught up with some network, whether it is the traffic of arms, drugs, stolen cars, or people," he said. These allegations seem solid to most observers. They come from credible sources including former Minister of Security General Alvaro Romero, who told forensic expert Dennis Castro Bobadilla about Honduran police officers belonging to Mexican crime organizations. Assistant attorney general Omar Cerna has announced that several politicians and business people are being investigated for drug trafficking. Moreno said the degree of corruption is such that "there is no willingness in the government to take on crime or violence."

Recently, the government announced an initiative to join the military and the police in a program to stop traffic entering cities and search for weapons. In effect since Feb. 1, the program has failed to impress critics. Said CIPRODEH's Rivera, "The program has succeeded in collecting small arms, but we know that the big crime groups often use guns like AK-47s." The program also recalls past attempts to clean up crime by fusing the police and the army that were abusive. Zelaya won election in part because his opponent, Porfirio Lobo Sosa, advocated just such draconian measures to combat crime (see *NotiCen*, 2005-02-24, 2006-02-02 and 2006-05-18). Government failure to curb violence has, in the eyes of the critics, begotten more such crime.

Rivera said that in Copan, where the murder rate is, at 71.67 per 100,000, the highest in the country, "Community leaders have told us that, when delinquents are caught, they are killed." The national murder rate averages 46.2 per 100,000. Social cleansing also counts as murder, despite the name it goes by. Police investigators have determined that police, private security companies, and gangs were behind 60% of the murders in this category. There is no certainty about the authorship of the other 40% because the police, said Jose Manuel Capellin of Casa Alianza, "have shown no interest in investigating." Casa Alianza is a youth-advocacy group intensely focused on police and institutional violence against young people.

Greater risks for greener pastures

So the people, many of them, stay home. But more and more are leaving the country by whatever means possible. Despite the anti-immigrant stance of the US government, Hondurans are still heading north, and the patterns of their peregrinations are changing. A change that has

authorities and migrant-support organizations particularly worried is an upsurge in the numbers of unaccompanied children undertaking the long, brutally difficult journey. Data from the Direccion de Migracion y Extranjeria show that 500 Hondurans leave their country to become "illegals" somewhere else every day and that of that number 100 are minors. The agency also knows these young people are subjected to more abuse and sexual exploitation than are adults. But it does not know how much more because they have only the denouncements of the victims who survive and speak up to go by.

Sometimes these adolescents and children are sent by their parents, who hope they will connect with relatives in the US. Sometimes the young leave seeking parents who have emigrated in order to send money home. And sometimes they are babies between six months and a year of age, said Edith Zavala, secretary general of the Foro Nacional de Migraciones. She explained the parents arrange for women "coyotes" to take care of the infants, but, even when the women are known "more or less" to the parents, "they abandon the babies on the Mexican border at the first sign of trouble."

Official figures from the Instituto Nacional de Estadistica (INE) showed a steady pattern of 80% adult-male emigration, with an upturn in female emigration starting in 2000. Women now account for 29.6% and men for 70.4% of migrants. Most recent figures indicate 65% are between the ages of 15 and 29 years of age, with those under 15 showing steady increases. There has been an increase in the numbers of better-educated Hondurans, those with some professional training. Many of these migrants had never found work in Honduras corresponding to their level of education or training. Also changing are the areas of the country from which migrants typically come.

Until 2000, it was the rural poor who provided the bulk of the exodus. But from that date on, the country experienced rapid urbanization, and now most migrants are coming from the largest cities, Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula. Zavala identified three main groups among the migrant populations. First are the socially mobile; they have some economic resources and can obtain a US visa. Second are those who cannot get visas but who can take advantage of the free transit across Central America open to regional citizens. They get easily to the Mexican border and try to arrange to get to the US from there. Third are those without resources, the ones whose difficulty starts the moment they set foot out their own front doors. All groups have in common the high probability of getting caught and returned somewhere along the way, or in the US, but the first two groups can, in descending order, usually find some way of trying again. The third group stakes everything on a single attempt and, if they fail, can often not even go home again because of the debt they have incurred, which, having been ejected from the Promised Land, they have no prospect of repaying. These are the people who live precariously on the various national borders as permanent temporary residents whose only job is to watch for any opportunity to set forth again. Among those who do get home to Honduras, some after extended stays in the US, many have attempted to get back north as many as ten times. Often they return worse off than when they left, many taking up lives of crime, something they had never done before they left. The UN has taken an interest in the youngest migrants.

The UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) representatives from Honduras and the rest of Central America visited Mexican border towns at both ends of the country to address the repatriation of unaccompanied migrants. Their data show more than 5,700 children and adolescents were deported

through Mexico to Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. The UNICEF workers are traveling to promote policies that will lead to greater protection of this special category of migrant. They want to establish a common agenda for an inter-agency and inter-institutional network to facilitate their safe transport and protection en route. They began with concentration on Central American child migrants in Tapachula in the south of Mexico and Tijuana on the northern border

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