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Honduras: Government, Human Rights Community Each Appoint Truth Commissions To Probe Coup

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The events that took place prior to, during, and after last year's coup d'etat in Honduras (see NotiCen, July 16, 2009) must be investigated to determine what really happened, so the truth may prevail.

President Porfirio Lobo's administration and the opposition Plataforma de Derechos Humanos, holding different, clashing points of view, stress this to be essential for the country and its society to close the violent chapter the coup opened in this Central American nation's often violent history and move on.

The government appointed the Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación as a means, as Lobo puts it, to bring to light the true facts of the constitutional crisis unleashed by the coup.

Lobo's statements are rebutted by the human rights community, which points out that the links of members of the official commission to coup leaders or sympathizers will, at best, limit its autonomy. Thus, the Plataforma appointed its own Comisión de Verdad.

President Lobo sets up commission, lists accomplishments
"Pepe" Lobo, as the Honduran president is usually referred to and addressed by supporters and adversaries alike and by local media, set up the official commission on May 4. "On this day we offer the world yet another demonstration of our firm purpose and unwavering will to heal the wounds, to learn from our mistakes, and to construct the future together," he said at the ceremony during which he signed the decree setting up the commission and its members were sworn-in.

"Over the past three months," since he took office Jan. 27 (see NotiCen, February 04, 2010), "Congress passed the amnesty for political crimes that I requested. I kept my promise to set up a national unity government. We passed an austere and balanced budget without sacrificing social investment. External funding has resumed. And my government is committed to upholding human rights public ethics and fighting corruption," Lobo said.

This was outlined in the Tegucigalpa-San José Accord signed on Oct. 30, 2009, by representatives of toppled Honduran President Manuel "Mel" Zelaya's administration and representatives of the de facto regime headed by Roberto Micheletti, Lobo pointed out (see NotiCen, November 05, 2009).

The accord was a combination of the San José Agreement promoted in July 2009 by then Costa Rica President Óscar Arias, as the unsuccessful mediator in the Honduran conflict, and a later version of the text worked out in Tegucigalpa under intense US pressure (see NotiCen, July 23, 2009).
As Lobo described it, the official commission, which will work for eight months, "will have to help us in a positive way, since its aim is not to judge but to reveal the facts of the crisis."

This working group is headed by Eduardo Stein, former Guatemalan foreign affairs minister (1996-2000) and vice president (2004-2008), as coordinator, accompanied by Canadian diplomat Michael Kergin; former Peruvian Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) president María Amadilia Zavala; Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Honduras (UNAH) rector Julieta Castellanos; former UNAH rector Jorge Omar Casco; and Honduran sociologist Sergio Membreño as its technical secretary.

Speaking at the May 4 ceremony, Stein said that, "regardless of the voices that have tried to disqualify it or at least suggest it was a 'lightweight' commission serving as a showcase in order for the page to be turned with no consequences for what happened, it is not the commission's job to establish judicial consequences."

The group's work aims at "elucidating the facts around this conflict and present elements for this not to be repeated," according to Stein. "Just as we in no way shall exclude anyone and wish to listen to all the voices of those who may want to share their own experience during the events with the commission, in our probe we want to be certain not to leave out any issue, however difficult it may be, including human rights agendas, regardless of corruption that might have taken place."

The day before the official commission was installed, Plataforma leaders held a press conference in Tegucigalpa during which they expressed concern about the commission created by the government and announced a Comisión de Verdad, which victims of human rights abuse deserve.

The human rights community's commission "aims at an autonomous investigation process, with no conditions, with the mandate to uncover crimes committed and their perpetrators," the Plataforma explained in a communiqué issued during the press conference. "To that extent, this truth commission will be made up of national and international personalities of recognized prestige and commitment to the defense of human rights, professionals who feel honored for having been called upon by the Plataforma de Derechos Humanos to fulfill this historic obligation."

**Plataforma leader cites commission members' ties to de fact regime**

The organization reiterated its interest "in the search for truth" and voiced its "deep concern" regarding the government's commission, which it said is "ambiguous, leaves out the victims, and lacks procedures to ensure effectiveness and impartiality."

Regarding the makeup of the official working group, Gilda Rivera, executive director of the Centro de Derechos de Mujeres (CDM), criticized the commission members' positions vis-à-vis the coup.

Regarding Castellanos, she said that the UNAH rector's statements "on several occasions seemed more to help Roberto Micheletti's de facto regime and not to condemn the human rights violations that occurred inside the university's campus."
Casco "is very much linked to the armed forces, to corruption, and has never been close to human rights," added Rivera.

Membreño is close to Cardinal Óscar Andrés Rodríguez, the archbishop of Tegucigalpa, "and we know the sad role he (Rodríguez) played" during the constitutional crisis, since, as "an emissary of the divine order he should hold a more respectful position and one of clear commitment to human rights," she also said, referring to the support the cardinal gave the coup and its leaders.

And Stein "has never tried to talk with the Plataforma de Derechos Humanos," and "what he has done is to talk independently and individually," Rivera pointed out. It has been very obvious that what he has tried to do is to cleanse the coup of human rights violations, after which he's had no intention to approach is."

The Plataforma's commission – scheduled to start work on June 28, to mark the first anniversary of the coup, and submit a report one year later – is made up of Nobel Peace Prize laureates Adolfo Pérez Esquivel (Argentina) and Rigoberta Menchú (Guatemala); human rights activists Nora Cortinas (Argentina) and Teo Van Boven (Holland); Ecuador's Comisión de la Verdad member and Maryknoll sister Elsie Monge; Honduran priest Fausto Milla – persecuted by the de facto regime; and Honduran writer and human rights activist Helen Humaña.

Founded after last year's coup, the Plataforma is made up of the CDM, the Centro de Investigación y Promoción de Derechos Humanos (CIPRODEH), the Comité de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos en Honduras (COFADEH), the Comité para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos de Honduras (CODEH), the Centro de Prevención, Tratamiento y Rehabilitación de las Víctimas de la Tortura (CPTRT), and FIAN International.

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