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Killings in Honduras out of control, and Fingers Point at Police and Army

by George Rodríguez

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Honduras, a country severely hit by extreme poverty, is the stage for an unfolding drama of killings, threats, and general violence spiraling out of control (NotiCen, Feb. 3, 2011).

While the German-Honduran Development Cooperation reported in February that 60% of Hondurans are poor—20.9% living below the poverty line and 39.1% somehow surviving in extreme poverty—different estimates place homicides per 100,000 inhabitants above 80.

Threats are also ranking high—targeting mainly journalists and civil-society activists, as well as persons linked to security forces—in some cases numbering up to 80 intimidating phone calls a day.

Problem has worsened in past two years

Honduran human rights advocates and other civil-society leaders, as well as this Central American nation's President Porfirio "Pepe" Lobo, have voiced extreme concern about the present context, which has worsened, mainly since the 2009 coup (NotiCen, June 30, 2011).

One of the crucial points in the past two months in the present escalation of violence, with obvious political overtones, according to human rights and civil-society leaders and academics, was the murder in October of two Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Honduras (UNAH) students—one of them the youngest son of UNAH rector and historian Julieta Castellanos.

Press reports said university students Rafael Alejandro Vargas, the UNAH rector's son, and Carlos David Pineda were attacked by police officers who fired on the car in which the victims were riding, which, because of the shooting, came to a halt. Vargas, who was shot in the back and managed to tell the attackers who his mother was, died minutes later. Pineda, who had survived the shooting, was immediately gunned down and killed, added media accounts.

Castellanos said, "The death of Alejandro and Carlos was not cleared up because one of them is my son. It's been cleared up because the police didn't conduct the investigation. If the police had conducted it, it would have remained as other deaths." The Ministerio Público (MP) carried out the inquiry, she added, pointing out that "the police lost control of the investigation...when the execution pattern pointed to a police death."

In Castellanos' view, "The police have a double discourse, on the one side saying they want to catch the alleged authors [of the two murders] and on the other intimidating investigators, attorneys, and forensics personnel" within the framework of a process of constant obstruction of the investigation.

In the context of the wave of increasing violence in this country, which has claimed the lives of 113 students of different levels, "we live in anguish and fear," she said.

Another high-profile case is that of former police advisor Alfredo Landaverde, killed last week in Tegucigalpa, the Honduran capital, by hired assailants riding a motorcycle who repeatedly fired on their target, also wounding his wife in the back.
At the hospital where she was taken, Hilda Caldera, a Venezuelan citizen and Landaverde’s wife, called on the authorities to investigate her husband’s murder. "I’m asking, right now, for an investigation of what happened to my husband," said Caldera, who added, "It’s absurd to continue the impunity, to continue the silence."

"I’m here, if they want to come and kill me, so be it, but this has to be cleared up. Honduras deserves a better destiny," Caldera said. "This is a marvelous country, and it’s too bad that there’s so much crime, and there’s not enough will, enough courage to face it. Today it’s my husband, tomorrow it could be like what happened several days ago to the son of my friend, the [UNAH] rector."

Deputy Augusto Cruz of the Partido Demócrata Cristiano (DC)—one of whose founders was Landaverde—said Honduran security agencies "know perfectly well who the people are whose lives are being threatened and have taken no measures to protect them."

The crime was committed one day before the second anniversary of the Dec. 8, 2009, murder of Gen. Arístides González, former head of the Dirección de Lucha contra el Narcotráfico (DLCN), yet another unsolved murder. Hired assailants riding a motorcycle suddenly cut off the vehicle taking González, a retired Army general, to downtown Tegucigalpa, in the El Guanacaste sector of the capital city, and shot him, according to media reports.

The then head of the DLCN had told a hearing the day before that he had information about "narcoplanes" and clandestine landing strips used by drug traffickers during that year, and he added that he would later provide the names of the owners of ranches where the landing strips were, said the same sources. The general was also about to release a report on an investigation he carried on for several years, a document that supposedly linked a high official’s relative to drug-trafficking actions, the sources revealed.

González’s wife Lesly Portillo told a television debate program early this month that "it’s a known fact, and it’s certain that police killed my husband, that immediately after doing that they took the motorcycle over to Casamata [the Policía Nacional headquarters]. She also revealed that, after her husband’s murder, Secretaría de Seguridad officials called her to find out "whether my husband had told me anything about people involved in drug trafficking".

**New security minister to investigate student deaths**

Voicing concern about the situation, President Lobo said during an Oct. 31 Cabinet meeting that he would not intervene with the PN. Security Minister Pompeyo Bonilla was appointed after the killing of the two university students, replacing Óscar Álvarez, and the new official needs time to get started, as does the new police commissioner, Ricardo Ramírez, who replaced José Luis Muñoz, the president told his top staff.

"I’m not going to intervene with the police. And why is that? Because the minister has just been appointed, and so I don’t want a commission to go there. I feel that, if I’ve just appointed the man, I have to give him space to work," Lobo explained. "I’ll let the minister work and the new police authority. I do want to say that those problems aren’t new…they’re popping up now, and that’s been happening for some days. So, I think that something’s happened there for those things to be surfacing."
Meanwhile, a civil-society movement headed by UNAH is proposing a deep cleansing of the security force. Castellanos said, "As UNAH, our proposal is that there be justice and that because of the protection of the officers responsible for those killings [of the two students] there be a deep cleansing in the police, an intervention in the police, and a police reform."

"It’s not enough to know the details of police viciousness against my son and against Carlos David, because we know it was the [police] institution, otherwise they [the officers involved] wouldn’t have been protected, they wouldn’t have been released," added Castellanos. "Thus, the problem is serious, because it’s not an isolated event, it’s an institutional event."

Castellanos also pointed out the need for "a comprehensive security policy, but not through actions for results ten years from now, because short-term actions are needed, and the first short-term action is to purge the police."

In the president’s view, there is a need to review and modify laws, "and that’s undeniable."

The most recent laws passed by the Congress regarding security include one last week that prevents two persons from riding the same motorcycle and another authorizing phone tapping (NotiCen, Nov. 17, 2011).

Honduran human rights advocate Bertha Oliva says the first is ridiculous and the second is dangerous. "I do believe that the measures being take until now are media-oriented, that there’s no interest, there’s no will to solve and attack the problem," Oliva told NotiCen.

The law on motorcycles, passed Dec. 7, "is ridiculous," she said, adding, "There’s also the law on [phone] tapping," according to which "if the Ministerio Público wants to know what you and I talk about, it's going to do it."

"That’s legalized espionage in private communication, thus, it’s a violation of international conventions and treaties," warned Oliva, the coordinator of the Comité de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos en Honduras (COFADEH), a local human rights organization.

The telephone-intervention law, passed Dec. 8, aims to curb violence in the country through monitoring telephone calls "only when necessary" and with prior authorization from a judge at the request of the MP, according to the text. It states that such monitoring "will be carried out...to obtain information regarding an investigation" and that "a suspect’s communications may not be intercepted for more than three months."

In Oliva’s view, facing the situation of escalating violence in Honduras requires ethics and political will, and it is also necessary to "dismantle this structure of terror, and this practice, and this state policy." The human rights activist told NotiCen that COFADEH has made a proposal for an international commission with enough power to intervene in entities such as the Ministerio Público, the Secretaría de Seguridad, and the police."

The proposal was partly taken up by Castellanos, who said last month that "undoubtedly, we’re going to start a new strategy to look for national and international alliances to have police structures investigated."