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## University Head Says Honduran Police in Dire Need of Purging, Doubts Government's Claim It Is Underway

by *George Rodríguez*

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The corruption-ridden Honduran police force needs urgent purging, according to academics and human rights activists. Involvement of police, from chiefs all the way down to bottom-ranking officers, in criminal activities—homicide, drug-trafficking, car theft, among others—is known by authorities, yet nothing is being done, they claim.

Countering criticism, President Porfirio Lobo's government says purging is in process, and corrupt *Policía Nacional* members have been discharged—an action critics see as cosmetic.

Heading a civil-society movement for major surgery in this Central American nation's police, *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Honduras* (UNAH) rector Julieta Castellanos has repeatedly pointed out, after her youngest son was murdered by police in October 2011 ([NotiCen, Dec. 15, 2011](#)), that the much-needed purge is nowhere near taking place. If it were to happen, the moment for this is 2012, according to Castellanos, an Honduran historian.

Police impunity dates back to the 1970s, when the force was linked to the *Fuerzas Armadas de Honduras* (FAH), and its cadres were trained by the military, Castellanos and human rights activists point out.

"People are murdered by the police, and we, the families, have spent weeks and months requesting justice," Castellanos said last month. "The problem in this country is that the military of the past and the police of today see themselves as an untouchable élite, above us all, above the law," as a result of "being arbitrary, being authoritarian, using force in an illegitimate, disproportionate fashion, abusing power, and causing fear."

### *Corrupt police not purged, not punished*

"What causes more concern is that the police release those responsible for murder," while it is a known fact that in certain police stations "there are police gangs, and nothing happens. They're not suspended, they're not discharged, to the extreme that...people were promoted without prior investigation, and it is known they have been assigned to those stations and that they probably benefited from corruption," Castellanos said. "It's shameful to see those police officers promoted," she said, adding that Police Chief Ricardo Ramírez "knows who they are, because he was the head of Police Intelligence."

Referring to the campaign for next year's elections, Castellanos added, "2012 is very important, because many politicians will be offering things to voters, and we will see how deeply they will commit to the issue of security. We're going to monitor the politicians' offer, and we will determine whether it's an offer that solves the citizens' problems."

Castellanos suggested that Security Minister Pompeyo Bonilla should ask Ramírez to "tell him who the officers are who colluded with crime, suspend them, investigate them."

Bonilla said that, following orders from President Lobo, the police purge is underway. "Purging is a task entrusted to us by the president, and we're carrying it out in a responsible but prudent way. There's no one in the police, at any moment, resisting compliance with what has to be done at the request of the Honduran people, and it is done consciously by the good police, who are many, in Honduras," said the minister.

Eduardo Villanueva, assistant director of the recently created Dirección de Investigación y Evaluación de la Carrera Policial (DIECP)—which replaced the police's Dirección de Asuntos Internos—said the new structure was "conceived to carry out a permanent task."

The DIECP, which began working three months ago, "has set itself the goal of coming up with, in six months, results in the purging of police linked to illicit acts," Villanueva said.

Regarding the dismissal of 52 members of the police force announced on Jan. 6 by the Secretaría de Seguridad, Villanueva told reporters two days later that the DIECP had not received from the ministry the list of those discharged.

### *Government efforts seen as purely cosmetic*

On this, Castellanos told reporters on the day of the announcement, "I have no elements yet from the Ministerio de Seguridad and the Policía Nacional to believe this is a purge. We believe this was an action aimed at calming the citizens' demand for the police purge."

"To know whether this is a purge, we'd like to have more information, and to know as well whether they've been discharged and whether the proper investigation is taking place, or whether it's only been a suspension" with the police "still receiving their salaries as officers on duty," added the UNAH rector.

Castellanos said it is possible "that the police are stalling for time, so they can tell the executive and decision makers" that action is being taken.

Another possibility is that police authorities could be trying to have enough time "to clean up all the files and all the elements that could be incriminating," Castellanos added. "It's been three months, and that's time enough for them to try and erase all evidence, so any corruption actions in which [police officers] could be implicated remain in impunity."

"It could also be that they're stalling for time, waiting for the sectors requesting this purge to get tired," while the police "could be setting the stage for repression or for intimidating actions against those of us who are requesting investigation, purge, and punishment," Castellanos said. "I can't make a general statement that all police are corrupt, but we've not yet seen a group of honest Policía Nacional officers making themselves clearly heard," and that is "because they're trapped, hiding probably because of intimidation, or fear of losing their jobs, or because of the risks they might run. For the moment, we know they exist, but we can't say who they are."

A human rights source who requested anonymity told NotiCen that although it could be thought of as a new force, detached from the FAH—as a result of a 1996 constitutional reform—this country's police is old, because many of its present members were trained by the military in the late 1970s.

The levels of police penetration by organized crime have been repeatedly pointed out by human rights organizations, but it became a state issue mainly when Castellanos' son was murdered three

months ago. On Nov. 11, the UNAH rector made public the university's proposals for improving security in Honduras, including, as a top priority, purging the police.

During the event, Castellanos said the UNAH has been working on the security issue since 2004, when the homicide rate in the country was approximately 30 per 100,000 inhabitants, adding that it has skyrocketed to the present 82, and she warned it would jump to 86, according to figures by the university's Observatorio de la Violencia.

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