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## **Honduran Civil-Society Leader Says Murder of Journalists Reflects General Deterioration in Human Rights**

*by George Rodríguez*

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The count of journalists murdered in Honduras since the 2009 coup was 22 as of May 12—an average of seven per year—says local human rights organization Comité de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos en Honduras (COFADEH).

However, one more murder was reported three days later, when Alfredo Villatoro, abducted May 9, was found on May 15 in one of southern Tegucigalpa's residential sectors—the Residencial Las Uvas—with two bullets in his head, his face covered with a piece of red cloth, and dressed in the uniform of Los Cobras—the Honduran police's élite unit.

Local press reports said the news coordinator for the widely heard Radio HRN was kidnapped while driving his car to work early that day to conduct the four-hour newscast *Diario Matutino* that started at 6 a.m.

Three members of the Banda Los Osorio have been arrested for allegedly being directly responsible for Villatoro's abduction and murder—Osman Fernando Osorio, his brother Edgar Francisco Osorio, and Marvin Alonso. They were captured May 27 during a house search in the northern city of Puerto Cortés, on Honduras' Caribbean Coast, some 300 km northwest of Tegucigalpa, the capital. The evidence collected included several heavy firearms, one of which was used to kill Villatoro.

At least ten other gang members fled after Villatoro was killed and remain fugitives. The local daily *El Herald*, quoting a source involved in the investigation, reported that, "after executing Villatoro," the murderers fled northward, fearing the criminals who planned the crime might kill them, thus guaranteeing their silence.

"For the moment, say the sources, those who planned the journalist's killing have the upper hand, since they know [personally] the members of the criminal group that was paid to execute Alfredo Villatoro," the paper said. "This makes the Ministerio Público (MP) and the Dirección Nacional de Investigación Criminal (DNIC) step up the investigation process to capture other suspects before those who planned the murder get ahead and finish them off."

Police Commissioner Juan Carlos "El Tigre" Bonilla told the morning daily that the investigation is ongoing and that more results are being obtained, "but I can't say what we're doing."

Jorge Coronado, a leader of the Costa Rican and Central American social movement, said, "The fact that journalists are being murdered bears witness to a general situation" in Honduras.

"What's taking place is a process of total deterioration of human rights," which began with the 2009 coup and "is worsening this year," said Coronado, head of the Costa Rican Comisión Nacional de Enlace, a member organization of the Alianza Social Continental, a network of Latin American social-sector movements."

## *Human rights abusers now in public office*

"There's something that is very serious, and that's human rights violators from the 1980s, who even headed paramilitary structures...death squads, who are now appearing." Coronado told NotiCen and went on to mention El Tigre as an example.

"Those actors who for...almost three decades were in the shadows are coming back...in this second part of the [President Porfirio "Pepe"] Lobo administration," Coronado warned. "So, there's an ongoing process in which formal institutions in Honduras are deteriorating, thus making it possible for those actors to nowadays head the military-police bodies. And, if we add police corruption, there we have the full cocktail of deterioration of the minimum democratic institutional structure, which doesn't exist anymore."

The repression simultaneously unleashed against the campesino and indigenous sectors shows that "those operating for the 'narcos' are already operating politically, as ministers and other high officials," Coronado pointed out.

Coronado also mentioned the murder, a week before Villatoro, of journalist Erick Martínez, who was also a human rights activist and a member of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex (GLBTI) community. Martínez was about to take part in this month's upcoming primary elections by the leftist Partido Libertad y Refundación (LIBRE)—whose acronym in Spanish means "free"—and was seeking to run for Congress in next year's general elections.

Libre was founded in June 2011, during an Extraordinary Assembly of the Frente Nacional de Resistencia Popular (FNRP), which is headed by former Honduran President Manuel "Mel" Zelaya (2006-2009), who was toppled during the 2009 coup ([NotiCen, Aug. 6, 2009](#)).

## *Killing could be political message*

Such actions "could lead us to think that political cleansing is taking place and that murder is being used as a political weapon, and also to send messages, to send threats, to scare sectors," suggested Coronado.

In this regard, in a telephone interview from Tegucigalpa with Costa Rica's Radio AND in San José, the Costa Rican capital, David Romero, chief editor for Honduras' Radio Globo, said that Villatoro "had an ideological position...on the right, he backed the coup and all that. But he was a full journalist, a journalist devoted to his role as a journalist, for thirty years."

"That's why [his murder] has captured our attention and has dealt a blow to Honduran society," Romero said. "We, in particular, believe he was a circumstantial victim of a power conflict...within the police, that he was grabbed, kidnapped, and executed, as a message. It was like telling the president, 'stop right there,' and telling the present police leadership, 'you stop this.' It's how we understand this message."

The journalist thus referred to the process by which Lobo has begun to purge the Policía Nacional. Academics, human rights activists, and leaders of civil society organizations say it is urgent to purge what they describe as this country's corruption-ridden police. Police at all levels, from top echelons to low-ranking officers, are involved in criminal activities that include car theft, drug trafficking, and homicide, they repeatedly point out.

Demands for measures to be taken were triggered after the October 2011 murder, by police officers, of Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Honduras (UNAH) rector Julieta Castellanos' son. Castellanos headed a civil society movement demanding the police be purged.

President Lobo's administration has repeatedly said that purging is underway and that corrupt cops have been fired ([NotiCen, Jan 26, 2012](#)). Last month, Lobo removed the entire police leadership, including Commissioner Luis Muñoz.

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