9-13-2012

By Decree, Honduran Campesinos in Bajo Aguán Cannot Own or Carry Guns, a Ban Not Applying to Landowners’™ Feared Security Guards

George Rodríguez

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiCen by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.
By Decree, Honduran Campesinos in Bajo Aguán Cannot Own or Carry Guns, a Ban Not Applying to Landowners’ Feared Security Guards

by George Rodríguez
Category/Department: Honduras
Published: 2012-09-13

A few hours into this month, the Honduran unicameral Congreso Nacional passed a decree banning possession of guns in part of the northern region. The measure specifically applies to the northern department of Colón, where the violence-stricken area of Bajo Aguán, the stage of a bloody land struggle (NotiCen, Nov. 17, 2011), is located.

The ban, passed Sept. 1 and in force as long as Congress does not decide otherwise—as the text specifically points out—applies to the local population of Colón, an Atlantic (Caribbean) department, but not to local large landowners’ security personnel.

This is pointed out by the local campesino organization Movimiento Unificado Campesino del Aguán (MUCA) and the human rights organization Comité de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos en Honduras (COFADEH) as a move aimed at increasing campesinos’ disadvantage in the clash with landowners, their private security, the Army, and the police.

"Permits to carry weapons are suspended in…Colón. This provision will be in force until the Congreso Nacional orders otherwise," reads the decree, which modified Article 37 of the Weapons Control Law. "In case of disturbance of public peace, the authorities in charge of implementing this law will take…the measures needed to ensure strict compliance with it, including the suspension or immediate cancellation of permits to carry weapons."

"In such cases, the Policía Nacional, with cooperation from the armed forces…will proceed to immediately confiscate and suspend the permits to carry a weapon of all citizens carrying or owning a legal weapon in regions of greater social conflict," the decree adds. This is "to combat terrorism, weapons trafficking, and organized crime, as well as to reinforce the struggle against violence and crime within the national territory."

Congress secretary Rigoberto Chang, of the ruling Partido Nacional (PN), says that "150 weapons of different calibers have been confiscated from different people, and it’s not permitted that a person can own a gun and kill other Hondurans, and in the Aguán zone there are many violent acts."

"We believe Honduras deserves better luck so that we may have security and stop recording so many deaths," the pro-government deputy told reporters. "The important thing is that we’re empowering authorities to act according to the law, and also so that there is a general ban on weapons in Colón."

Human rights advocates say campesino-owned guns not the problem

But MUCA secretary-general Yoni Rivas says otherwise. "In two and a half years of permanent militarization [in Bajo Aguán], they haven’t confiscated any type of weapon from us. The landowners’ security guards are the ones carrying high-caliber weapons, and they use them against..."
the campesinos," he said. "A moment will come when the [Honduran] people won't take this situation any more, and they're going to go out into the streets in protest until Congress revokes this absurd decree."

"We're very concerned. Congress handled this issue as if it were a general ban on weapons, but it's being enforced only for the population, not the armed groups protecting the landowners," Rivas told reporters. "It's a major threat to campesino communities, because those security bodies are the ones responsible for kidnapping, torturing, and executing campesinos."

Rivas said, "What they're doing is armoring and rewarding those armed groups led by landowners, so they can continue to openly execute defenseless campesinos. They want to give the impression that Bajo Aguán is a conflict zone with a 'national security' problem and with campesinos linked to drug trafficking and organized crime. For them it's easier to beat and jail campesino families and keep backing and benefitting major transnational companies."

Human rights activist and head of COFADEH Bertha Oliva told NotiCen that "in Bajo Aguán, there are death squads, there are hired killers, there are paramilitary groups, and there are also police forces, military forces, and private security companies."

They are exempt from the decree, "even though all the evidence shows that the private security companies are the ones responsible for the more than 60 killings of campesinos," Oliva said. "So, this shows that campesinos are deprived of their guns in order to be further exposed" to violence "from those sectors."

"Even today, it hasn't been possible to prove that the Bajo Aguán campesinos are armed people, as has been claimed [by large landowners] from the start," Oliva said. "Weapons were found on some campesinos, and they're not even high-caliber weapons but commercial ones, and with their permit."

Oliva said the guns were basically revolvers. The crackdown should be on "the illegal arms trade, dating back for years," said Oliva. The decree "is clear evidence of the lack of protection one is in, and more people are going to be killed despite the decree, campesinos continue to be killed," she warned.

**Land ownership at the root of the violence**

In a historic, never-ending cycle of violence, land ownership in Honduras has been at the core of the ongoing conflict between a rich minority of large landowners and the always impoverished majority of campesinos in need of land. Bajo Aguán is a particularly fertile area of Honduran territory, where wealthy landowners Miguel Facussé, Reynaldo Canales, and René Morales own 20,000 hectares of the rich soil (NotiCen, May 24, 2012).

During the abruptly interrupted administration of former Honduran President Manuel "Mel" Zelaya (2006-2009), a decree made campesinos the owners of idle land, but the de facto régime arising from the bloody coup that toppled Zelaya (NotiCen, July 9, 2009) overturned the decree. Six months later, despite landowner violence—by private security as well as military and police forces—campesinos who were driven from their land began taking it back.

The process has been harsh, since more than 60 campesinos have been killed, but around 7,300 families have managed to recover some 7,100 ha—a stark contrast to the figures of the wealthy trio.
-- End --