4-18-2013

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Major Stumbling Block to Improving Security in Honduras, Cleaning Out Police, Difficult at Best

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Category/Department: Honduras
Published: 2013-04-18

Weeding out dirty cops—at all levels—has proven to be, at best, a difficult enterprise for Honduran authorities in their announced move to purge the Policía Nacional (PN). Civil society sectors skeptical of the measure have signaled it as a failure, something the very institution in charge of shaping up the much-discredited force admits.

But, in its defense, the Dirección de Investigación y Evaluación de la Carrera Policial (DIECP) claims that the failure derives from elements beyond its responsibility—such as lack of funds or the Secretaría de Seguridad not firing corrupt cops.

In a document it presented the legislature early this month—after its reports of July and November 2012, and prior to its imminent third report—the Comisión de Reforma de la Seguridad Pública (CRSP) criticized DIECP as well as judicial bodies.

CRSP told the legislature that "in fulfilling its duties … it has met with DIECP Director [Eduardo Villanueva] and has requested data to learn about progress made on [police] purging and progress made in carrying out recommendations made … by Colombian experts hired with US government funds in August 2012."

In the recommendations in its April 9 document, the committee pointed out that the DIECP structure "is not functional, there is no strategic plan, human talent is insufficient, there is a lack of training, and work is duplicated."

**Recommendation that DIECP restructure**

Based on its findings, the committee recommended DIECP be restructured to fulfill the goals set in the 2011 decree that created it. "The police is the first link in the chain of justice administration, and without a purged and efficient police, the Ministerio Público (MP) will not be able to press criminal charges and the judiciary will not be able to pass sentences accordingly," it warned.

"In turn, if the MP and the judiciary are not purged, we will be unable to curb the high levels of impunity," according to the CRSP. "Every public security reform process must be built on the political will and the commitment of all actors involved. This includes changes in legislation, purge processes … continuous training, infrastructure, equipment, incentives, internal and external controls."

Appearing the same day before this Central American nation’s 128-strong unicameral Congreso Nacional, Villanueva told the deputies that the failure to purge the police falls squarely on the Secretaría de Seguridad for not having removed the more than 200 officers who failed the pruebas de confianza (trust tests).

The tests aim at detecting use of drugs, establishing cops’ psychological fitness, and determining whether property owned by officers is in accordance with their salary levels—and they include the use of the polygraph, or lie detector.
During its first year of work "with the support of the US government, DIECP passed 230 resolutions, based on the polygraph test, for career police officers to be discharged, among them 16 high officials," Villanueva said. "Let’s ask ourselves, then, where are the 230 police discharge resolutions I sent Security Secretary [Pompeyo Bonilla]. If I pass 230 binding resolutions and only seven officers are discharged, the answer to where the problem lies is obvious."

Villanueva also complained that the institution has not received the funding needed to fully carry out the police purging process but said that, nevertheless, "at no time has it lost control" of the process.

Two days later, accompanied by PN Director Juan Carlos "El Tigre" Bonilla, the secretary told lawmakers that, on the issue of purging the force, "at no time … have we been irresponsible," and he stressed that "we act according to the law."

CSJ decision hampers police cleanup

Secretary Bonilla said that the annulment by the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) last year of the Ley Especial para la Depuración Policial prevented the 230 cops from being discharged (NotiCen, Jan 24, 2013). "That sent a bad message, causing 250 more homicides, and those who decided to annul that law must carry that in their conscience," he added.

The Honduran Congress passed, on May 24 last year, a decree declaring a national state of emergency regarding public safety to allow for a speedy and reliable process to clean out the PN. The law for a police purge (Ley Especial para la Depuración Policial) thus came into being, and President Porfirio "Pepe" Lobo signed it the following day.

As he signed the law on May 25, the president pointed out that "we're certain that this powerful instrument passed by Congress will make it possible … to accelerate the process of purging the police," which he said was "imperative."

During the event, congressional president Juan Orlando Hernández of the ruling, rightist Partido Nacional (PN) said the law was passed with "the hope of contributing to having a police force that the Honduran people trust."

Hernández, a presidential hopeful in next November’s elections, thus referred to constant allegations of police corruption, including involvement in crime—even organized crime, such as drug trafficking (NotiCen, Jan. 26, 2012).

The law, which partially suspended the Ley Orgánica de la Policía and called for members of the police to undergo the pruebas de confianza, was in force for six months.

Early this month, as Congress was hearing the different versions of why the police purge has so far been unattainable, the president blamed the justice system for the failure and announced his decision to send Congress a decree declaring a state of emergency in the police.

The decree "will declare some sort of state of emergency or exception in the Policía Nacional," by means of "more direct action in police purging," he said during an event in the northern textile maquila city of San Pedro Sula, some 250 km northwest of Tegucigalpa, the country’s capital. The measures to be implemented must be those "legally allowed, because the problem is that sometimes members of the police are removed and the courts rule they must be reinstated."
The president made the announcement during an event also attended by US Ambassador to Honduras Lisa Kubiske. Quoted Jan. 23, 2012, by The Miami Herald, Kubiske stressed the US’s concern regarding the Honduran police.

"There’s no question we’re very concerned. It’s important for the Honduran government to do this cleaning-out process and do it willfully and effectively, as quickly as they can manage," the ambassador told the US daily. "The police do not enjoy the confidence of anybody in the country right now."

-- End --