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At dawn on June 28, 2009, just over four years ago, Honduran President Manuel "Mel" Zelaya’s Tegucigalpa home was stormed by some 200 soldiers in the beginning of a bloody coup that took the country—and Latin America with it—back to the somber, seemingly endless decades of ruthless military dictatorships (NotiCen, July 2, 2009).

Seven years before, Venezuela was the stage of a coup experiment that was quickly and violently overturned, and President Hugo Chávez was thus brought back to power (NotiSur, April 19, 2002).

The day after Mel Zelaya was ousted, Ecuadoran President Rafael Correa predicted in Quito, "After Zelaya, I’m next." A year later, a police-backed coup attempt had Correa on the brink of being toppled (NotiSur, Oct. 15, 2010).

Then it was Paraguay’s turn, on June 22, 2012, when that South American nation’s President Fernando Lugo, a former bishop, saw his term come to an abrupt end when the Senate impeached him and instantly swore in his vice president—and foe—Federico Franco to complete the 2008-2012 term and oversee new elections (NotiSur, July 13, 2012).

The vote held last April was won by multimillionaire Horacio Cartes (NotiSur, May 10, 2013), which meant the return to power of the conservative Partido Colorado (PC, Asociación Nacional Republicana, ANR), which had ruled the country for six decades, half the time during Gen. Alfredo Stroessner’s (1954-1989) harsh, corrupt dictatorship.

Unlike the other cases, the Honduran coup was a several-megaton political bomb that shook the country to its foundations and whose fallout still harms this Central American nation historically stricken by corruption, impunity, poverty, and violence.

Human rights organizations stress that such components of the endemically grim Honduran reality took a turn for the worse with the coup, whose power structure, they warn, remains intact—and strengthened—and its members unpunished.

Many seek refuge abroad
In a worsened scenario of unbridled corruption, violence—including that of organized crime—and lack of opportunities, Hondurans have begun to seek ways to survive, and for some it means refuge abroad.

These Hondurans’ preferred destination is Costa Rica, a Central American nation that abolished its army more than sixty years ago and whose image as a democratic, safe country attracts an array of foreigners ranging from tourists to investors, and undocumented migrants as well as refugees.

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) data indicates that only one Honduran requested refugee status in 2008, a figure that jumped to 26 the following year. "From the year 2009
to 2012, there was a significant increase in the number of requests for refugee status by Central Americans," said the UN’s specialized agency.

During that period, 513 requests were filed in Central America’s northern triangle—El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras—and 29% percent—147 requests—were registered in Honduras, by the same estimates. Of the latter, 24% obtained refugee status in Costa Rica, 52% of whom were women, said UNHCR.

The head of the Honduran Secretaría de Justicia y Derechos Humanos Ana Alejandrina Pineda believes the coup worsened the weakness of the country’s institutions and further deteriorated respect for human rights, in a national context of high insecurity. "We’re witnessing a trend that’s related to violence and crime" in Honduras, where "there’s an environment of much insecurity that does not allow for coexistence in normal terms," she told NotiCen.

This is particularly so in urban sectors "besieged by organized crime, by the activity of maras (organizations of young criminals operating in the triangle countries), and gangs," the secretary said. Pineda pointed to the violence in Honduras—by some accounts, the most dangerous country worldwide, outside war zones—where the homicide rate per 100,000 went from 86.5 in 2011 to 86.2 last year.

However, other estimates place the reading above 90, such as the 91.6 figure set for 2011 by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).

"The lack of effective investigation of violent deaths ... causes a serious impunity level that must be immediately addressed," the secretary warned.

UNODC data shows that the figure jumped from 61.3 in 2008 to 70.7 in 2009—the year the coup took place—triggering the upward trend that has since brought it to 82.1 in 2010 and the more recent 91.6 registered for 2011.

**Human rights violators protected**

"After the coup in Honduras not only did the human rights situation worsen but also the weakness of institutions ... mainly those in the justice sector become highly inactive," said Pineda, who considers that "the coup also had consequences in this sense." Because of this, increasing numbers of Honduras "are forced to leave their homeland, a circumstance in which they leave behind all that could mean roots, patrimony, family."

In this regard, a report released on April 18 by the civil society organization Centro de Investigación y Promoción de los Derechos Humanos (CIPRODEH) pointed to what it described as a state policy to protect those responsible for violating human rights. "The entities in the justice sector are not a part of the problem of insecurity afflicting the country but the problem itself," the CIPRODEH report said.

"The impunity caused from these structures because of the evident inability to investigate, prosecute, and punish those responsible for thousands of executions, torture, disappearances, and other human rights violations only reassures perpetrators they can act in full freedom, protected by the certainty that this system will not investigate, prosecute, or punish them," the report added.

"Internal investigation has not guaranteed true access to justice for relatives of the victims. This is a violation of rights, of judicial protection, and of judicial guarantees, which, in simple terms, means
impunity," read the report titled Respuesta del Estado en la Aplicación de Justicia ante Violaciones a Derechos Humanos: en el marco del golpe de Estado del 28 de junio de 2009.

The report also revealed, based on information provided by the Fiscalía Especial de Derechos Humanos, that the fiscalía opened for investigation 50 cases related to the coup, 15 of which were brought to trial while the other 35 were under investigation. Two of the 15 have been tried and the verdict was in favor of the human rights violators, it added.

CIPRODEH says it is clear that the coup’s structures for human rights violations are intact, and "apparently they have appointed judges and attorneys, which, conspiring with … the [2009] de facto government and the state’s security and defense structures, have placed themselves at the latter’s service."

"Those judges and attorneys have preserved and validated that pattern of impunity," a context which led CIPRODEH to conclude, in the report, that "there exists a state policy to protect human rights violators."

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