8-22-2013

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Honduran Human Rights Advocate Sees Effort to Justify Militarization in Journalist's Killing

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Category/Department: Honduras
Published: 2013-08-22

On the morning of July 9, a gruesome finding shocked this country, however used to violence it may be. The dismembered body of Honduran television journalist and university professor Aníbal Barrow was found more than two weeks after the victim was kidnapped.

The first report was given the following day by Gen. Juan Carlos "El Tigre" Bonilla, the chief of the Policía Nacional (PN), who told a press conference that human remains—a skull and two arms, plus pieces of clothing—had been found in a mangrove-swamp area close to the northern town of Villanueva, some 240 km northeast of the capital Tegucigalpa.

Villanueva is close to the city of San Pedro Sula, the country’s main industrial maquila center, the city where Barrow was abducted on June 24 in the vicinity of the local Estadio Olímpico Metropolitano.

The head of the corruption-ridden police force said, "Some findings indicate to us that, presumably, it’s the person, our friend and esteemed journalist, Mr. Aníbal Barrow."

"We have some sound evidence, such as a savings-account book found at the scene, also the clothes he was wearing," Bonilla told journalists, adding, "We also have 10 possible people linked to the case."

Later the same day, Roberto Ramírez, the chief prosecutor with the Ministerio Público (MP), confirmed Bonilla’s statements. "We want to confirm the finding and to say ... that the scientific evidence confirms by 100% that the person found is the citizen Aníbal Barrow," the prosecutor told a press conference.

Ramírez also reported that the finding was possible through cooperation from a protected witness who took part in the crime, and he said that the seven people arrested included a minor and that arrest warrants had been issued for three fugitives. Regarding those responsible for having planned the homicide, Ramírez said no information would be issued "to protect the investigation."

Journalists associations demand government action
The day after Bonilla’s and Ramírez’s announcements, two international journalists organizations issued statements going beyond the official reports.

On July 11, from its Miami headquarters, the Inter-American Press Association (IAPA) requested Honduran President Porfirio Lobo’s administration to protect journalists. "This case once again shows the precariousness surrounding the practice of journalism" in Honduras, Claudio Paolillo, the president of IAPA's freedom of the press and information committee, said in a communiqué.

Paolillo thus referred to different estimates—including figures by the Comité de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos en Honduras (COFADEH)—showing that at least 30 journalists have
been murdered in Honduras since the 2009 coup that toppled then President Manuel "Mel" Zelaya (NotiCen, July 2, 2009).

The local newspaper Tiempo also reported on July 11 that "Honduras is the most violent country worldwide, and, according to the Observatorio de la Violencia of the [state] Universidad Nacional [Autónoma de Honduras, UNAH], in 2012 there were 85.5 homicides per 100,000 population, ten times the world average (8.8)."

The head of the Honduran Secretaría de Justicia y Derechos Humanos, Ana Alejandrina Pineda, told NotiCen earlier this year that 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). UNODC data indicates 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.

Also on July 11, two international news agencies, the Spanish EFE and the French Agence France-Presse (AFP), reported, out of Paris, that a "powerful" figure had paid for Barrow's murder, according to the Honduran daily La Prensa.

The Paris-headquartered nongovernmental organization (NGO) Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF) called for those behind the homicide to be identified and tried, according to the same report. "A protected witness assures that a gang of criminals operating in the area allegedly received 400,000 lempiras [almost US$20,000] for killing the Honduran journalist Aníbal Barrow, a sum which, according to media in the country, was allegedly paid by a ‘powerful’ figure," La Prensa reported.

RSF "today expressed its ‘dismay’ at the reporter’s death, and called for the ‘intellectual authors' of the murder to be identified and tried," La Prensa added. "‘Although the ongoing investigation has produced results, impunity will prevail as long as the murder’s intellectual authors are not identified and tried. The professional clue—that the crime was related with his work—seems highly probable in this tragedy,’ RSF stated in its communiqué," said La Prensa.

**Journalists only part of the targeted killings**

Coinciding with this view, Bertha Oliva, a Honduran human rights activist who heads COFADEH, told NotiCen that the viciousness of Barrow’s murder fits an aim by sectors in power to instill massive fear in the population, in a bid to justify what she described as increasing militarization.

Barrow’s homicide fits in a trend of selective killings, aimed not only at journalists but at lawyers and teachers as well, Oliva pointed out, and explained those crimes started with the 2009 coup. COFADEH estimates place the number of slain lawyers at 75, followed by journalists (30), and teachers (27).

"All this tragedy Honduras is living, especially regarding rights violations, and mainly the spectacular killings that are taking place, has several lines [of explanation]," she said. One of them "is to justify militarization," and she added that "the country’s militarization is dramatic."

"The aim is not a purged police, a police that is accessible to the community, let’s say a community police—such as that of Nicaragua—no, not that. The bet is on going back to the old times," Oliva said, referring to last century’s years of dictatorships. "And the people, as desperate as they are, out
of fear of losing their lives, although they know what the effects of militarization are, of the military out on the streets, some people believe that's the alternative to have a little protection, safety."

"So, it's well looked upon that some people call for it, justifying all the military presence, even justifying military cooperation between countries. In Honduras, we're living something like the old times," updated "with higher levels of violence and repression," said Oliva. "Because, then opposition politicians were singled out, and it was covered up. They'd do it at night, but not today," because "nowadays, on the one hand, terror groups act outside the law, arresting, kidnapping, murdering, but, on the other hand, the police and the military are also carrying out barbaric acts."

"Teams ... such as paramilitary squads are operating here, outside the law," and in cases such as Barrow's murder, "the intended message is to cause fear, to cause fear in the people, through the level of sadism," Oliva said. "We believe the purpose is to impose the culture of fear, to paralyze action, protest, and citizen action."

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