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Honduras Is Creating Two New Police Forces: a Military Police for Public Order and a Community Police

by George Rodríguez
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With its Policía Nacional (PN) in a hopeless, and seemingly endless, state of corruption (NotiCen Jan. 26, 2012, and Jan. 24, 2013), Honduras, a Central American nation with some of the highest levels of criminal violence worldwide, is setting up two new security forces, combining police and military power.

One new body is the Policía Militar de Orden Público (PMOP), in charge of carrying out regular as well as specialized police work in an effort to reduce crime rates. Congress approved its creation in late August.

The other is the Tropa de Inteligencia y Grupos de Respuesta Especial de Seguridad (whose acronym TIGRES is the Spanish word for tigers), a police force thought up to be in direct contact with communities, in an effort to improve the abysmal image the vast majority of Hondurans has of the regular police force—which they either fear or abhor, mostly both.

Congress is still debating the bill creating TIGRES—an acronym coincidentally matching PN chief Gen. Juan Carlos Bonilla’s nickname, El Tigre.

Congressman says US backs new force
Described by its promoters as the Honduran SWAT, the PMOP was to begin operating with 5,000 troops, but budgetary restraints lowered the starting number to 1,000. The 14-article law passed by Congress on Aug. 21 defines the PMOP as a unit assigned to the Fuerzas Armadas de Honduras (FAH).

In statements picked up the following day by the local daily newspaper El Heraldo, Deputy José Simón Azcona, of the traditional and former-ruling Partido Liberal (PL), said that the idea to create a security force such as PMOP is not new and that the US had expressed interest in it.

"The United States government had offered cooperation, and four Fuerzas Armadas battalions were to be converted into military-police units, during the previous administration," said Azcona, the son of the late former President José Azcona, (1986-1990).

The congressman said the idea was to reinforce public security though a force with a different chain of command—meaning a military one.

The head of the country’s military, Gen. Oscar Osorio, chief of the Estado Mayor Conjunto of the FAH, told journalists, two days after the PMOP law was passed, that the first 1,000 members would be divided equally into two battalion-level units and would begin operations in Tegucigalpa, the nation’s capital, and the northern city of San Pedro Sula, some 250 km northwest of the capital. Both cities are particularly hard hit by criminal violence, and, by some international estimates, San Pedro—the country’s textile maquila-industry center—is the most violent city worldwide.
The PMOP members will be trained in basic police work as well as in ballistics, intelligence, and investigation. Requirements to join the new force include having been in the armed forces for at least one year and passing personal tests—to determine whether candidates can be trusted—to be carried out with the support of the Dirección de Investigación y Evaluación de la Carrera Policial (DIECP).

Osorio said, "Troops will be added every two or three months," to reach the original figure of 5,000 PMOP members. "The aim is that we all help in the problem of lack of security. The tasks to be assigned to the Policía Militar are aimed at lowering the crime figures. We’re going through an internal threat, and we’re losing lives," the general warned. Steps such as creating the PMOP "are political decisions, each country is entitled to decisions."

Regarding the "tigers," the congressional debate is ongoing. The idea consists of a 200-strong security team to fight off violence and organized crime, starting, as well, in Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula, eventually adding more members and expanding nationwide.

Promoters of the PMOP and the TIGRES bills say that the initiatives do not collide but are instruments with the same aim: to reduce crime and violence in this country where various local and international estimates indicate the homicide rate has reached 86 and even more than 90 per 100,000 population.

The Observatorio de la Violencia of the state Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Honduras (UNAH) says this country’s homicide index is about ten times the world average of 8.8.

TIGRES is aimed at operating in neighborhoods, in close communication with those communities’ members, according to the bill.

Referring to both security initiatives, Christian Democratic Deputy Augusto Cruz told Congress in May, "What we have to clearly understand is that decisions are needed regarding security," adding that "as many forces as needed" must be created to combat crime and violence.

In Cruz’s opinion, "enough discussion has been held … the conditions exist" for such forces to operate.

During a high-level meeting on Aug. 12 at Casa Presidencial, Arturo Corrales, the recently appointed Comisionado de Defensa y Seguridad, presented his report for the first 100 days in office and explained the government’s new security policy, which includes creating the two forces.

Referring specifically to the TIGRES task force, Corrales said, "What’s needed is the alliance between the police and society," because "the police alone can’t [fight off crime], the police accompanied by society won’t defeat it," thus the need for the new community police.

Corrales, a former foreign minister in President Porfirio Lobo’s administration, said, "There is a state policy and … there is a plan" to combat crime and violence during the remainder of this administration—which ends in January.

**Concern among human rights groups**

The creation of the new military police has sparked concern in civil-society quarters. The day after the congressional approval of the PMOP law, Honduran human rights activist Bertha Oliva told
reporters that the initiative "causes concern and sadness, and more sadness, because it is a step 
backward in society’s demilitarization and the country’s democratization."

"The rule of law can’t be imposed by militarizing society. The military who have come out on the 
street have left more people dead, death, and grief, because they’re not prepared to guarantee 
security," Oliva went on to say.

In separate statements, fellow human rights activist Omar Rivera said that "nowhere in the world 
has the military solved security problems."

Argentina’s 1980 Nobel Peace Prize laureate Adolfo Pérez Esquivel also expressed concern. "In their 
origins, police forces have an origin of values, they’re prevention and social safety forces of support 
to society and defense from crime," the South American human rights activist told NotiCen. "In 
time, such noble police tasks were totally altered, and they became forces of repression, of social 
control, and of persecution against social protest."

"The case of Honduras is paradigmatic," Pérez Esquivel said. With the 2009 bloody coup that 
topped Honduran President Manuel "Mel" Zelaya (NotiCen, July 2, 2009), the country "entered a 
cone of darkness, of disintegration, and of protected violence. This is not done for no reason. I mean, 
there are reasons of social, political, economic control, and behind that are the big interests of the 
United States."

"Honduras has always been considered—I’m not talking about now but from way back—as the land 
aircraft carrier of the US, for the region," Pérez Esquivel pointed out, adding that there is "now, 
police militarization, social control, persecution, murders. What’s happening is terrifying."

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