2-6-2014

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Honduras' New President Juan Orlando Hernández Pledges to Respect Human Rights While Providing Security

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Category/Department: Honduras
Published: 2014-02-06

In his inaugural speech, Honduras’ new President Juan Orlando Hernández, often referred to as JOH, insisted he will keep his campaign promises, among them, his commitment to improve this Central American nation’s appalling situation regarding security—or lack of it. He also guaranteed that, in so doing, all actions would be carried out within the framework of the law and fully respecting human rights (NotiCen, Nov. 7, 2013, and Dec. 12, 2013).

But in human rights ranks, the president's words, at best, are not taken as sincere, and the forecast in this regard is somber.

"During the election campaign I clearly exposed my principles, and I firmly took on commitments with the Honduran people. Today, I am here to ratify those commitments, to tell Hondurans that, as of today, we start to fulfill them, that I will consult and inform the country, day after day, about what we do and how we do it for the benefit of the people, the workers and campesinos, those who are members of organizations, and those who are independent workers, in cities and villages and in the countryside deep inside Honduras," Hernández said.

"During my campaign, I stated, 'I, Juan Orlando Hernández, am going to do whatever I have to do to bring peace and tranquility to the country, within the law and with the support of the Honduran people,'" Hernández said during his swearing-in at the Estadio Nacional Tiburcio Carías Andino in Tegucigalpa, the Honduran capital. The stadium is named after the Honduran doctor-military strongman who ruled the country, first, briefly, after a revolution in 1924, and, through elections, from 1933 to 1949—the longest continuous period of a president in the country’s history—and was then forced by the US to step down. Carías is one of the key historic leaders of the ruling rightist Partido Nacional (PN).

"During the coming months, homicides and acts of violence will be further reduced, extortion and the sadly famous 'war tax.' There will be an increased presence of the Policía Nacional and the Policía Militar on the streets and in transport (NotiCen, Sept. 5, 2013). More troops for both forces will be recruited and trained. And today the Fuerza TIGRES will become operational," added Hernández.

Hernández thus referred to the money extracted from drivers of cars and buses by maras (youth gangs) controlling urban territory vehicles go through as well as to the Policía Nacional (PN), the country’s regular police force, the newly-created Policía Militar de Orden Público (PMOP), and the Tropa de Inteligencia y Grupos de Respuesta Especial de Seguridad (whose acronym TIGRES is the Spanish word for tigers).

Fears that Policía Nacional will regress

After having been a militarized security force during the dictatorship era of the 1970s and 1980s, the PN was turned—at least nominally—into a regular, nonmilitary police, but human rights organizations believe that, under Hernández, it will go back to its dreaded past status.
The PMOP—whose authorizing law was hurriedly passed by the unicameral Congreso Nacional before the November elections, with JOH as its president—is in charge of carrying out regular as well as specialized police work in an officially declared effort to reduce crime rates, according to the bill that created it.

Also officially, TIGRES is the police force in charge of being in direct contact with communities, in an effort to counter the negative image most Hondurans have of the regular police force, both feared and seen as one of the country’s top centers of widespread corruption.

The president—a leader of the Partido Nacional (PN)—a party with historically strong links with the military as well as with most coups staged throughout this country’s history—said that "all these operations will be coordinated and commanded by the interagency task force that today starts to take actions. The party’s over for criminals. Who’s afraid?"

"Purging … strengthening all justice operators—police, Ministerio Público, and judges—will be immediately accelerated. With the decisions we already made in the past Congress and the Consejo Nacional de Defensa y Seguridad, we will immediately begin the most comprehensive consultations possible, and we will request advice from the European Union, the US, and other nations that are friends, to put together our comprehensive security policy, with a single purpose and a single strategy regarding … prevention, repression, jail, and rehabilitation," Hernández also promised. "All that, within an important modernization of the participation of the community and the churches, preventing crime and strengthening a culture of human rights promotion."

**President lays out three-point plan**

Regarding his announced measures, Hernández said they would be applied according to what he described as "three fundamental points." The first refers to establishing what he termed a balance, "protecting all of society, and everyone’s rights and freedoms and ensuring fair treatment of criminals that fully respects their human rights, within the context of respect for everyone’s human rights, including victims, with the unwavering decision to give society peace and security."

The second deals with the Honduran state’s "duty to guarantee the security of its citizens and its territory, to organize to do it and earmark whatever resources needed to attain it … but we must be clear that society also needs to cooperate," said Hernández.

The third recognizes that "Honduras is going through its history’s most difficult times regarding security, since 80% of the drugs going to North America comes through here, leaving us a trail of death, corruption, impunity, and pain that is unbearable," the president added. "This is why we have begun talks with President Juan Manuel Santos of Colombia and President Enrique Peña Nieto of Mexico, as well as the other presidents in Central America, to increase cooperation between our countries."

As Hernández delivered his first presidential speech at the stadium before presidents and other high officials from different countries and other guests, within a vast security operation by the military, some 300 members of the opposition Frente Nacional de Resistencia Popular (FNRP)—which assembled immediately after the bloody 2009 coup to oppose it—held a street demonstration to protest against the new president, whose election victory the FNRP has described as rigged (NotiCen, Jan. 13, 2011).
The protest was headed by Juliette Handal, a former leader of the country’s private sector, and Juan Barahona, a union leader, two of the three vice presidential candidates—the third was former vice minister of foreign affairs Eduardo Enrique Reina—with the opposition Partido Libertad y Refundación (LIBRE), whose acronym means free, founded by former President José Manuel "Mel" Zelaya (2006-2009), deposed during the 2009 coup (NotiCen, July 2, 2009, and June 14, 2012).

But the inauguration ceremony was being broadcast on the national radio and television network, thus the protest had no live coverage by local radio or television.

**Human rights activists doubt president’s promises**

Skeptical, at best, of Hernández’s statements in general, and particularly so of his inauguration speech, Honduran human rights activist Bertha Oliva told NotiCen that, with Hernández at its helm, Honduras is headed for stormy waters.

The head of the Comité de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos en Honduras (COFADEH), Oliva forecast that "the new régime … will be worse than what we had," referring to the previous administration of former President Porfirio "Pepe" Lobo (2009-2013), also of the Partido Nacional, elected in November 2009 under the de facto régime established by the coup.

"And I say this for the following reason: prior to the swearing-in, more than 300 bills were passed by the Congreso Nacional, which, at this point in time, we don’t know anything about … but, yes, some of them—the ones that have come up publicly—are laws that tell you that what they [the new government] want is to legalize arbitrariness," Oliva said.

As an example, Oliva mentioned the law that created the PMOP, saying, "The very law is, in itself, unconstitutional" because, among other reasons, there already exist military forces as well as an armed forces law. "The armed forces already have a defined role," and the PMOP law "creates a separate body, which, at the end of the day, is a hybrid because its name says military police."

Oliva also said that the PMOP actually "became operational … before the law was passed," and its members have already committed human rights violations, including threats and a house search against a community leader and member of the FNRP in Tegucigalpa. "And the other thing is the law was not shared as it was being drawn up, and everything is imposed, without consulting anyone."

In Oliva’s view, Hernández is "an illegitimate president" because the November elections were rigged. "It was one of the most blatant [election frauds] ever. So, I don’t see that, short term, we’ll be able to come out of what we’re in. I know there are difficult days ahead, difficult times."

-- End --