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The Fuerzas Armadas de Honduras (FAH) claim Honduran kids are not being properly taught the needed values and principles to rule their lives. So, the nation’s military have decided to fill the disturbing gap. Their weapon: a program called Guardianes de la Patria (Guardians of the Homeland).

The initiative, aimed at covering some 25,000 youngsters in the 5-15 age group in low-income, densely populated neighborhoods nationwide, is being implemented at FAH installations since March. Military authorities—including their commander in chief, Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández—insist the program’s aim is not to recruit or otherwise militarize poor kids but to prevent them from being prey for organized crime and local gangs. In his inauguration speech, Hernández pledged to respect human rights while improving Honduras' high rate of insecurity (NotiCen, Feb. 6, 2014)

Human rights organizations warn, however, that the program has a Nazi-type component, exposing kids to a political-military culture of weapons to make up for a failed strategy to draft youngsters into the volunteer military service.

Heading the March 29 launching ceremony at the First Infantry Battalion’s Campo de Parada Marte in Tegucigalpa, the country’s capital, Hernández said, "Today we inaugurate ... this prevention program’s first phase," which covers children in the 5-9 age group. "Each Saturday, more than 25,000 children nationwide will receive civic and religious training that will allow them to develop a feeling of love for Honduras."

Quoted by local media on April 28, Col. Gustavo Adolfo Amador, head of Plans, Policies and Programs of the FAH’s Joint Chiefs of Staff, stressed that "in Honduran society, the principles of not lying, not killing, and not stealing should be strengthened, particularly in children."

With that purpose, the program is aimed "specifically at children at social risk and with no access to formal education," and in it "the child’s interests are involved," Amador said. "The beneficiaries are children practically living in city dumps, and others with no access to school, those who have no father or mother to provide them with a family and support."

"With children who have a family, the mothers take part in the activities and help prepare meals," added the colonel. "Most of the population is in favor of this program. There’s no teaching linked to military orientation, and there’s no use of weapons, which they don’t even see, because the area they go to is the [military installation's] social area."

"They receive formal and nonformal education, such as workshops, lectures, Christian education, training in technical work, physical training, sports, recreation activities according to age groups, and there is a school for fathers and mothers," Amador said.
Regarding religion, "they acquire knowledge of the Bible, Christian values and principles, respect for God’s places, and the importance of belonging to a church," said Amador, adding that the program "is focused on discipline and values, thus seeking to strengthen and reach harmony at the core of families settled in neighborhood considered at social risk."

The colonel said that the children involved in the program’s first stage take part in "kids’ games, story reading, writing, values, self-esteem, and motivation to go forward. The program was designed by specialists, priests, pastors, psychologists, and people knowledgeable of the problem at hand."

**Human rights organizations not buying this**

Two days before Amador’s lengthy explanation, leaders of the Coordinadora de Instituciones Privadas Pro las Niñas, Niños, Adolescentes, Jóvenes y sus Derechos (COIPRODEN)—an Honduran nongovernmental organization (NGO) created in 1989—held a press conference and demanded that Hernández stop the program, warning that it violates the minors’ rights.

The demand was part of a declaration, read by COIPRODEN leaders, in which the organization said that "it opposes the implementation of the Guardianes de la Patria program because it transgresses the rights of Honduran girls, boys, and adolescents."

"Because of their lack of physical and mental maturity, [children] need protection and special care, seeking that they develop and receive education in an atmosphere of peace, something the Guardianes de la Patria program contravenes," added the organization.

COIPRODEN also pointed out the specific constitutional mission of the military, which completely differs from the program’s contents, adding that "it is up to parents, legal representatives, the education system, churches, and other institutions, not the armed forces, to encourage in children and teenagers their love for their country, to teach values, to promote a culture of peace, and to train honorable citizens."

"Rescuing boys or girls at social risk is a task for Juzgados de la Niñez y la Adolecencia and for the Instituto Hondureño de la Niñez y la Familia (IHNFA)," the human rights group said. "The armed forces must cooperate with those institutions but in an auxiliary capacity, because it is not their responsibility to do it directly."

Thus, COIPRODEN demanded that Hernández instruct the Ministerio de Defensa and the FAH Chiefs of Staff "to immediately stop the Guardianes de la Patria program and, instead of investing resources in the armed forces to that end, transfer the budget to state institutions whose mission is to care for vulnerable children and teenagers to meet their technical and financial needs."

The head and co-founder of the human rights organization Comité de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos en Honduras (COFADEH) Bertha Oliva said, "That’s a neo-Nazi project. We’re going to have youngsters with only military training since their childhood, and they’re having, with all that, all their rights … violated. It’s a project to annihilate a country’s dreams and the hope one places in youth. It’s a horror, what we’re living."

"This is anti-country, this is not democracy, children are taken for military training at military units," Oliva said. "Meanwhile, television and radio programs bring children, some of them with mothers and fathers, to say that it’s a fantastic project. This, to have children’s and teenagers’ defenders fight not with the state but with parents who are saying it’s a phenomenal project."