Honduras’ Sexually Diverse Community Is Target in Post-Coup Violence

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Category/Department: Honduras
Published: 2014-08-21

The habitually unsafe environment in which people go about their daily activities in Honduras was exacerbated by the coup that toppled President Manuel "Mel" Zelaya in June 2009 (NotiCen, July 2, 2009), and the danger has not waned since.

Added to that of common as well as organized crime, the post-coup violence has focused on specific sectors, including anti-golpistas, journalists, campesinos, and the sexually diverse community, dozens of whom have been murdered during and after the bloody military-civilian uprising that put an abrupt end to Zelaya’s populist administration.

A minority in the slightly more than 8.5 million national population, the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, and intersex (LGBTI) community has seen 50 to 60 of its members killed in the past decade, according to different accounts.

Of that figure, more than 30 hate crimes have been committed since the 2009 coup, say civil society organizations, such as the pro-LGBTI rights organizations Asociación por una Vida Mejor en Honduras (APUVIMEH), Red Lésbica Catrachas, and Red Trans Catrachas. The latter two take their name from the feminine form of the popular local expression catracho, meaning Honduran.

HRW documents widespread mistreatment

Discrimination and violence against sexually diverse persons is nothing new in Honduras, a Central American nation where, according to a report issued in May 2009 by the international organization Human Rights Watch (HRW), attacks on members of the LGBTI community are commonplace, despite the official discourse.

In the report’s Summary, HRW said, "Nearly every transgender person Human Rights Watch interviewed during research in Honduras in late 2008 and early 2009 spoke of harassment, beatings, and ill treatment at the hands of police. And bias-motivated attacks on transgender individuals by private actors are endemic."

"Transgender people also spoke of police inaction and failure to investigate cases that they have registered with the police," HRW further said. "The problems begin with Honduran law itself. Provisions of one of the key laws governing policing in Honduras, the Law on Police and Social Affairs (Ley de Policía y de Convivencia Social), are vaguely worded and all but invite arbitrary enforcement by the police."

Thus, "police often use these provisions to justify harassing and arbitrarily arresting transgender people. The provisions also encourage arrests by Honduran police of transgender people engaged in sex work, itself not a crime under Honduran law," HRW added.

"Another factor contributing to ongoing violence against transgender people is impunity. Inefficiency and ineffectiveness in police investigations runs like a thread through all Honduran
criminal investigations but they are a particular problem in cases involving violence against transgender people," HRW pointed out. "We are aware of no successful prosecutions of police accused of violence against transgender people over the past five years in Honduras."

"State inaction in response to attacks on transgender people in Honduras feeds the violence, and encourages discrimination against them by state and non-state actors," the report said.

As part of the "Key Recommendations" in its report, HRW suggested, "Honduras’ specific public commitments to ending violence on the grounds of gender identity and expression should translate into concrete actions that diminish violence against transgender people."

The recommendations also advised, "Honduras should end violence against transgender people by law enforcement officers and ensure investigations and prosecutions of state and non-state perpetrators of violence against transgender people."

"Honduras should repeal provisions of the Law on Police and Social Affairs that penalize public conduct on arbitrary and vaguely defined grounds. Authorities should send a clear message to all law enforcement institutions that violence against transgender people, as well as gay, lesbian, and bisexual people, will not be tolerated," HRW said. "Honduras should also conduct independent, impartial, and effective investigations into the general phenomenon of this violence and into specific allegations of police brutality, extortion, and ill-treatment against transgender people, leading to the identification and prosecution of the perpetrators."

"Honduras should guarantee protection against cruel and inhuman treatment of transgender people in police stations. … The Office of the Attorney General, as well as non-governmental organizations that document violence in detention settings, should pay special attention to the vulnerabilities of transgender people," read the recommendations.

HRW said, in general, "The government of Honduras should ensure that all attacks against members of the transgender community are investigated and the perpetrators brought to justice."

"By supporting the OAS [Organization of American States] Resolution on Human Rights, Sexual Orientation, and Gender Identity in 2008, Honduras made a commitment to protecting transgender people, which should now be matched by specific actions. Honduras prides itself on its young democracy. As such it should reaffirm equality, non-discrimination, and the promotion and protection of human rights for all its people. … It is the international obligation of the Honduran state to ensure that this happens, and to act upon its commitments made in the OAS General Assembly," said the report.

**Bad situation worsens after coup**

HRW issued the report shortly before the bloody coup of June 2009, which worsened the already high violence levels in the country as it unleashed massive repression against peaceful street demonstrations demanding Zelaya be reinstated as the country’s legal president and selective repression against opposition leaders and minority groups—including the LGBTI community.

As part of the fallout from the coup, violence remains high, with estimates placing homicides at levels ranging from 80 to more than 90 per 100,000 inhabitants, according to different international estimates—well beyond the 10 established by the World Health Organization (WHO) as the figure above which violence is considered a pandemic.
Iván Banegas, coordinator of Colectivo Violeta, an LGBTI rights Honduran organization, said that, at the time Zelaya was toppled, "We knew what a coup meant and how that would harm us. That’s why we protested."

The community’s fears became reality because, "after the coup, the Army and police came down especially hard on the transsexuals, many of whom live on prostitution and were in the streets in the middle of the curfews” daily put in force by the de facto régime during its seven-month rule, Banegas recalled.

In gay leader Donis Reyes’ view, in Honduras, "there is total impunity" regarding hate killings, with "no murder solved."

Regarding the more than 30 hate crimes committed since June 2009, an emblematic case is that of Walter Orlando Tróchez, an LGBTI rights leader and a political anti-coup activist gunned down in December 2009 in Tegucigalpa, the country’s capital.

Tróchez was a health promoter with APUVIMEH, having played an active role in the nongovernmental organization's programs on HIV/AIDS education and prevention and also an active member of the Frente Nacional de Resistencia Popular (FNRP), a popular movement created immediately after the coup to oppose it (NotiCen, Aug. 6, 2009, and April 22, 2010). As a member of APUVIMEH, one of the risk groups he worked with was that of transgender women working the capital’s streets.

Civil society groups said that Tróchez was being threatened and had been briefly kidnapped on Dec. 4, 2009, nine days before being murdered by two unidentified assailants riding a motorcycle.

Human rights organizations’ demands for an investigation have remained unheeded by authorities, and no prosecutions have been made in the case, which is seen as both a hate crime and a political killing.

In its report, HRW offered a key element in the LGBTI situation: "Transgender people in Honduras repeatedly told Human Rights Watch that all they wanted was for people to see and treat them as human beings."

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