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George Rodríguez

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Corruption Scandals Blow Up in Honduran President Orlando Hernández’s Pet Security Forces

by George Rodríguez
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News about police officers stealing confiscated drug money or kidnapping a man in broad daylight would hardly shock anyone in Honduras, whose police ranks are a case study in massive, unyielding corruption and abuse of authority. But recent media reports that such crimes were committed by officers in two of the country’s newest militarized police forces—among President Orlando Hernández’s pet security projects—were cause for scandal in this Central American nation.

In the first case, 22 members of the Tropa de Inteligencia y Grupos de Respuesta Especial de Seguridad (TIGRES, an acronym for the Spanish word for tigers), are facing legal proceedings, charged with having stolen US$1.3 million of the US$12.5 million they had confiscated while arresting the leaders of a drug-trafficking structure.

TIGRES is an élite force created in 2013, officially mandated to be in direct contact with communities as part of an effort to revamp the negative image—as ridden by widespread, unchecked corruption—the regular police force has with most Hondurans (NotiCen, Sept. 5, 2013).

The second case involves four officers of the Policía Militar de Orden Público (PMOP) who were caught while kidnapping the owner of a fruit shop in a market in the southern sector of Tegucigalpa, the country’s capital.

PMOP—the newest of the two—was also created to perform special operations besides regular police work with the official aim to diminish spiraling crime rates—some of the highest worldwide—which, different estimates indicate, have skyrocketed to more than 90 homicides per 100,000 population.

TIGRES and PMOP are among the new police forces (NotiCen, Feb. 6, 2014), some militarily oriented, that have come to life with decisive backing from JOH—as Hernández is locally referred to—within the framework of the Policía Nacional (PN), among them the Dirección Nacional de Investigación Criminal (DNIC), Dirección Nacional de la Policía Preventiva (DNPP), and Dirección Nacional de Servicios Especiales de Investigación (DNSEI).

Perfect crime turns out not to be

Local media reported that, the morning of Oct. 5, 2014, more than 70 troopers of two police bodies—including 22 TIGRES—took part in an operation in the town of Florida, in a mountainous area of the western Honduran department of Copán, close to the border with Guatemala. The PN says that 71 officers took part in the operation—51 members of TIGRES and 20 of the Unidad Especial de Lucha contra el Narcotráfico.

Two top leaders of the Valle Valle narcofamily—brothers Miguel Arnulfo and Luis Alonso—wanted for extradition to the US, where arrested. After the arrest, the police officers began a thorough inspection of the area, and TIGRES members stumbled on a mound hiding a plastic tank inside of which they found 19 bags containing some US$12.5 million.
But the TIGRES decided to keep some of the cash, and, before officers of the other force reached the spot, they hid two bags in the thick vegetation—a total of US$1.3 million—and reported the rest. The money was taken away, in fractions, by different TIGRES, as they left the scene of the police operation. Authorities later delivered the Oficina Administradora de Bienes Incautados (OABI)—the authority responsible for confiscated assets—a little more than US$11.2 million that had been officially reported as seized.

What seemed to be a perfect crime eventually blew up in the thieves’ faces, because members of the group immediately began committing a series of elementary mistakes, which, in as little as 72 hours, made the TIGRES intelligence service suspicious that there was more than met the eye.

The press—mainly the morning daily El Heraldo, which was the first to report the case—said that, some two months after the operation, the 22 split the money.

A police source quoted by El Heraldo said that the TIGRES, in possession of their shares, began "living la vida loca," some of them hiring "pre-paid prostitutes." Other officers began buying goods well beyond their means—including an expensive house or a sports car—and some started giving away money to friends. Intelligence investigators even found that one of the officers involved wrote, in his Facebook account, "Thank God for this gift and for being able to leave poverty."

The investigation continued, and the participating TIGRES were called in for a "conversation" about the Valle brothers’ arrest 72 hours after the police action, El Heraldo reported. "The meeting made it possible to detect something weird had happened, and that’s why the police were followed and contradictions were found, because it turned out that some talked about 19 bags and others 17 bags, which triggered doubt," the source told the paper.

The 22 were eventually subjected to a polygraph test, whose results were not revealed, arrested, and the Ministerio Público (MP) began action against the group on Feb. 17, charging nine of them with abuse of authority, violation of duties, theft, and removal of evidence. Early in March, the MP said it was preparing charges against the rest. Media reports say the TIGRES face prison terms ranging from 10 to 19 years.

Regarding the Valle Valle drug clan, Honduran police have captured four of their top members. Besides Miguel Arnulfo and Luis Alonso, their brother José Inocente and his wife Marlen Amaya were also caught last year. Their sister Digna Azucena was arrested in the US in August and charged with drug trafficking, since she was found in possession of several kg of cocaine.

In November, the Honduras Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) authorized the extradition of José Inocente and his wife to be tried in the US.

In August 2014, the US Treasury Department described the Valle Valle family as a criminal drug-trafficking organization and requested its members be extradited for trial.

**PMOP also caught red-handed**

In what seems to be a never-ending nightmare of police corruption, just over a month after news of the TIGRES’ case, four members of PMOP—better known in Honduras as la policía militar—were arrested as they were trying to kidnap a man. The victim was Luis Portillo, the owner of a fruit shop in the Mercado Zonal Belén, in Comayagüela, a crime-ridden sector in southern Tegucigalpa.
The press reported that the four armed PMOP arrived Jan. 11 at Portillo’s shop, dressed as civilians, informed him he was being arrested, and whisked him away in a pickup with no license plates.

Despite having orders to kill Portillo, the kidnappers demanded 120,000 lempiras (just under US $6,000) to spare his life. But the abductors did not realize that the victim’s brother-in-law managed to follow them and was reporting to police authorities the route the criminals were taking, which allowed officers to intercept the runaway vehicle, rescue Portillo, and arrest the four PMOP members. After searching the vehicle, the officers also confiscated several firearms and bulletproof vests.

The group remains in custody while legal proceedings take place, the local media reports. It also says that one of the military kidnappers was wanted for illegal possession of weapons and also for robbery.

**Police corruption, criminal violence worsen following 2009 coup**

Police corruption and brutality, on the one hand, and criminal violence, on the other, seem an unyielding phenomenon that the bloody 2009 coup came to worsen (NotiCen, May 8, 2014).

Expressing this view to NotiCen, Lorena Zelaya, a leader of the women’s organization Insurrectas Autónomas, said that JOH’s decision to create new security forces is far from the solution to spiraling violence in Honduras. "The violence levels in the country, according to Juan Orlando, have diminished, but we can’t actually vouch for that to be true," she said.

"When he was sworn in, he said he’d do whatever he had to do to reduce violence in the country, and that implied that his view of reducing violence was by creating armed forces to supposedly stop those violent people who go around killing other people," added Zelaya. "That has generated diverse, autonomous, independent police forces … 11 different police forces."

The extremely high levels of violence served Hernández’s aim to attract voters and win the 2013 elections, according to the feminist and human rights advocate. "The people need tranquility, for deaths to stop … collective murders, mostly youngsters, very young people, and there’s no investigation whatsoever, there’s no answer of any kind," Zelaya said. "And in the end, the dead are guilty because they were involved in organized crime, because they had something to do with drug peddling, for whatever reason."

But, actually, "many of them were people who were part of the Frente Nacional de Resistencia"—the massive popular movement against the 2009 coup—"or who had been journalists—there’s a long list of murdered journalists—nationwide, not only in big cities," Zelaya added.

Zelaya said the coup "definitely" worsened the situation, with the added component of political homicides. "The coup exacerbated, very strongly, all that, because, when there’s a mobilization as big as the one in that period … never expected by the golpistas … political repression began then, clearly."

-- End --