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Honduras Launches Anti-Corruption Effort after Reports of Murder Conspiracy among Leaders of National Police

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For a country whose history is filled with corruption and impunity in as many forms as imaginable (NotiCen, May 8, 2014, April 2, 2015, and Oct. 29, 2015) and whose people have had it with both, things have taken a surprisingly fast turn in Honduras this year.

The fast chain of events began in April, with media coverage of official records that expose the extent of police involvement in criminal activities. First, early that month, a local daily revealed that, in 2009, the top authorities of the Policía Nacional (National Police, PN) and some of their immediate subordinates had planned the murder of a retired general who was then the country’s “anti-drug czar.” Immediately after the articles were published, the government announced—and Congress quickly approved—the creation of a work group whose job is a most complex task, and one that has proved to be impossible in earlier attempts: cleansing the highly corrupt police force.

A few days later, two Organization of American States (OAS) anti-corruption work teams arrived in Tegucigalpa, the nation’s capital. The Misión de Apoyo contra la Corrupción y la Impunidad en Honduras (Support Mission against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras, MACCIH), and the Mecanismo de Seguimiento de la Implementación de la Convención Interamericana contra la Corrupción (Mechanism for Follow-Up on the Implementation of the Inter-American Convention against Corruption, MESICIC), took center stage (NotiCen, Nov. 12, 2015, Feb. 18, 2016, and May 26, 2016).

MACCIH, created in January, was beginning its four-year job, while MESICIC was at the start of a four-day visit, its fifth since 2004, to study Honduras. Among MACCIH’s several areas of action is the PN, where high- and low-ranking cops are said to be involved in a variety of criminal activities ranging all the way from kidnapping and robbery to drug-related murders carried out by hit men, with an ample middle ground.

The effects of impunity

When impunity is the name of the game, major criminals—uniformed or otherwise powerful delinquents—become used to it, confident that, regardless of their unlawful actions, nothing will happen to them. But even in places where high-level corruption goes unpunished, sometimes something unexpectedly snaps and criminals get caught. According to reports published in the daily El Heraldo, such was the case of the top-core PN group, which in 2009, on precise orders—and with abundant cash—from one of the country’s major drug lords, planned the murder of retired general Julián Aristides González, nicknamed “El Tieso” (“The Stiff One”), who was the head of the Dirección de Lucha contra el Narcotráfico (Anti-trafficking Agency, DLCN). They also successfully plotted, in 2011, to kill Alfredo Landaverde, who had closely worked with González as his top aide, and before that had been an anti-drug czar himself, El Heraldo reported (NotiCen, Dec. 15, 2011, and March 21, 2013).
The events began to quickly unfold on April 5, when El Heraldo published a series of articles, based on official records, exposing top police involvement in the murder of both anti-drug fighters. The following day, President Juan Orlando Hernández hurriedly announced through the media that he had sent Congress a draft decree to declare that police cleansing—a repeated popular demand dating back to 2012—would be treated as an emergency.

In an unusually fast action, Congress passed the decree, which created the Comisión Especial para el Proceso de Depuración y Transformación de la Policía Nacional (Special Commission for the Process of Cleansing and Transforming the National Police), giving the work group 12 months to clean up the PN and produce a plan to restructure the force. The hastily-appointed, four-member commission immediately got to work, and by May 17—in just over a month—it had studied 164 cases, confirming 88 cops in their posts, sacking 56, and suspending 12, with four voluntary retirements.

According to the series of reports by El Heraldo, based on records of the official investigation into the 2009 murder, including written documents, videos, and recordings, the plotters realized early on that security cameras were being used in the office of the PN director, where the plotting occurred. The newspaper reports, “One of them goes to where the screen is and, not knowing how to turn off the equipment, yanks a cable and unplugs it. He believes the cameras are disabled, but that is not so. Although seemingly turned off, the equipment continues recording, leaving a record of the planning of the anti-drug czar’s murder.”

Without mentioning most of the officers’ names, El Heraldo reported that the plot took place “with the aim to plan the murder of the head of the fight against drug trafficking, because of the arrest of 12 DNIC policemen the murdered general had carried out in La Mosquitia [on the western Honduran Caribbean region] on July 10, 2009.” The daily was referring to the Dirección Nacional de Investigación Criminal (National Criminal Investigation Bureau, DNIC), later dissolved and replaced by the present Dirección Policial de Investigaciones (Police Investigations Bureau, DPI).

$20,000 for the hit men

González’s execution took place the morning of December 8, 2009, in the Tegucigalpa neighborhood of El Guanacaste. The previous evening, in a late-night meeting and as security cameras recorded, one of the police chiefs distributed bundles of dollars among the conspirators, setting aside $20,000 for the hit men.

El Heraldo—which did not include the names of most of the participants, identifying them with letters, instead—offers this account: “Once all the officers entered, the briefcase is placed on the director’s desk. Afterward, Commissioner General X takes the dollars out of the brief case and places them on the desk, in parts and bundles… He begins to hand out the dollars, because it is seen that they came in bundles ready to be handed over to each officer.” Then Commissioner General X tells two subordinates, “These are the hit men’s $20,000,” and gives the orders, “The operation must be done tomorrow.” To which, according to El Heraldo, Sub-Commissioner B replies, “Tomorrow we fold him.”

El Heraldo continues: “Afterward, all officers leave the office and only Commissioner General X and Commissioner General Y stay. Commissioner X calls a friend, W, and reports that they would carry out the mission tomorrow, telling him, ‘Sir, watch the news tomorrow. We’ll do everything in the morning. Good night, Sir.’”
Unlike the local daily, which did not mention most of the conspirators’ names, The New York Times provided names in two lengthy articles it carried 10 days after El Heraldo’s reports, and also based on official records. According to the Times, the officer who distributed the money was General José Luis Muñoz Licona, who had been appointed as Police Director in 2010, and the cash in the briefcase “had been brought to him from the village of Planes, in the Colón department [province], where Winter Blanco had its base of operations.” The men on the phone call, the Times reported, were Muñoz Licona and Winter Blanco, “the head of a drug cartel based in the Caribbean coast, according to the investigators’ files.” The implicated officers have denied the allegations.

El Heraldo also exposed a vivid example of the level of impunity within the police. When members of the investigating team tried to question two of the cops involved in the actual hit, it reported, the latter “used foul language, with threatening hand gestures and said, ‘What the f—— do you want to know? Do you want us to burn you as well, sons of bitches? Go and ask the director, General X.’” Quoting from the investigations file, El Heraldo added that, referring to high authorities, the policemen said, “They ordered us and paid us $20,000. Don’t you know that the guy [González] didn’t like policemen. Look at how he arrested the DNIC colleagues in La Mosquitia… What are you thinking? Are you’re going to put all of us in jail? It’s possible that you’ll be discharged first. Don’t be papos [stupid]. We only followed the order from high up.”

Interviewed April 10 on the Honduran television program 30/30, President Hernández assured the public. “There’s no other option but to cleanse the police, certify it and enhance it,” he said. He took the opportunity to send a message to officers whom he described as “good policemen,” and to those how have done anything they could regret: “Be fully assured that we’re going to see to it that we’re watchful so that no offense is committed… I want to ask policemen to keep doing their job, those who have been doing it, and if they have information of people who have deteriorated the image of their police, it’s also the moment to speak.”

Hernández continued, “Those who are good [policemen] and have walked down the good road have nothing to worry about, and anyone who took part in something he might regret, well, say it and face reality, because that will also give them some level of space with justice operators,”

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