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Almagro Hails Work of OAS Anti-Corruption Unit in Honduras

by George Rodríguez

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In a Twitter message, Organization of American States (OAS) Secretary General Luis Almagro wrote on Jan. 16 that he was about to visit Honduras, where the organization's anti-corruption and anti-impunity team was producing what he described as evident results.

Almagro, a former Uruguayan foreign affairs minister, wrote that the Misión de Apoyo contra la Corrupción y la Impunidad en Honduras (Support Mission against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras, MACCIH), which began operation on April 16, 2016, "shows concrete results vs. corruption" ([NotiCen, Nov. 12, 2015](#), [Feb. 18, 2016](#), [May 26, 2016](#)).

The following day, as a witness to the signing of a law on surveillance, funding, and transparency for political campaigns (Ley de Fiscalización, Transparencia y Financiamiento de Partidos Políticos y Campañas), Almagro listed MACCIH's accomplishments. Among the achievements, Almagro mentioned MACCIH's involvement in the passage of the campaign funding law, which he said creates "a rigorous mechanism to select judges and magistrates" by designing a special group of attorneys to work on anti-corruption issues (Unidad Especial de Fiscales Anticorrupción). He also cited the mission's work with the Ministerio Público (Public Prosecutor's Office, MP) in the case of the 2013 plundering of Honduras' social security program (Instituto Hondureño de Seguridad Social, IHSS), one of the country's biggest corruption scandals ([NotiCen, July 2, 2015](#), [Aug. 27, 2015](#), [Oct. 29, 2015](#)).

MACCIH has decisively supported the prosecutor's investigation of the IHSS case, Almagro pointed out, adding that the OAS task force also contributed to "optimizing the struggle against corruption" with recommendations for the new Penal Code bill now undergoing congressional debate.

The bill seeks "to better persecute corruption crime ... raising sentences and eliminating mechanisms that prevent the prosecution of corruption cases. All that in line with the standards of the Inter-American Convention against Corruption," Almagro explained.

MACCIH has also been instrumental in "the creation of the decentralized system of criminal justice observatories, in charge of ascertaining that the nation's resources are not inappropriately seized," he added, pointing out that "the observatories will create spaces for dialogue, thought and social participation, and accountability."

Almagro pointed out that when MACCIH began working in Honduras, he hadn't foreseen an easy path, "given the challenges implied in this struggle." And he added: "Despite all setbacks and challenges we don't change our course of action. Before corruption, ZERO tolerance ... By constructing ... MACCIH, we took a transcendental step in that direction, creating expectations of change in public opinion which we're ready to fulfill." Almagro attributed MACCIH's early success to the work of the government, civil society, "and the courage of many Honduran men and women committed to making this country a better place for all."

A 'historic' day

During the signing, Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández called the occasion “a historic day for the country’s exercise of transparency,” stressing that “the law has been widely socialized and approved by all political sectors.” He said that the new legislation “guarantees that no political party will receive money from organized crime.”

As Almagro put it, “Honduras joins the list of countries that, through financial and fiscal armoring of political parties, carry out prevention work in fighting corruption and impunity.”

Passed by Congress on Oct. 20, 2016, the law sets a ceiling for presidential campaign spending of 396 million lempiras (just over US\$16.7 million). It also establishes that financial statements, balances, and contribution reports must be submitted to a government funding and transparency unit (Unidad de Financiamiento, Transparencia y Fiscalización) to be stored for six years for accountability purposes. According to the law, the unit’s three commissioners will be appointed by Congress.

The law prohibits anonymous donations, establishes regulations for other contributions, and sets penalties for violations that could lead to a political party’s dissolution.

After the vote, Mauricio Oliva, the president of Congress and a member of the ruling and right-wing Partido Nacional (PN) said, “The country’s political class has shown in an overwhelming way the will to have clean, transparent political processes without incidents.”

And José Alfredo Saavedra, head of the congressional committee on electoral affairs, pledged to follow a transparent process to select the unit’s commissioners.

But Congressman Jari Dixon Herrera of the opposition Partido Libertad y Refundación (Liberty and Re-founding Party, Libre) warned that the new electoral legislation would not be fully complied with, and pointed to the risk that, “in the end, the surveillance will be a mirage.”

Amnesty International not as optimistic

Despite the law’s enactment, the human rights watchdog organization Amnesty International (AI) described the local context for 2016 as grim. In its World Report 2017, released in January, AI stated that “rampant crime and impunity for human rights abuses remain the norm in Honduras.”

The report noted: “Despite a downward trend in recent years, the murder rate is among the highest in the world. Journalists, peasant activists, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals are among those most vulnerable to violence ... Efforts to reform the institutions responsible for providing public security have made little progress. Marred by corruption and abuse, the judiciary and police remain largely ineffective.”

Referring to sectors particularly at risk, the report quoted the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), which described Honduras as “one of the most hostile and dangerous countries for human rights defenders,” where “journalists, lawyers, and human rights defenders suffer threats, attacks, and killings” ([NotiCen, July 30, 2015](#), [Jan. 7, 2016](#), [March 24, 2016](#)).

And quoting the office of the local human rights commissioner (Comisionado Nacional de Derechos Humanos, CONADEH), AI pointed out that 21 journalists had been murdered during the 2014-2016 period alone.

As a specific example, AI singled out Berta Cáceres, a prominent environmental and Lenca indigenous-rights activist killed in March 2016 ([NotiCen, April 7, 2016](#)), and noted, “Although she had reported to police 33 threats on her life, none were investigated.”

The day Almagro arrived in Honduras, Mexican environmentalist Gustavo Castro, who was a guest at Cáceres’ house at the time of the attack and was wounded as he witnessed the killing, rendered his testimony before IACHR. Castro told the commission that authorities in Honduras had not asked him to identify a hit man from among the eight suspects so far arrested, which he said was “proof that they don’t want me to cooperate in this process.” He pointed out that Cáceres’ family members were not being informed of any progress in the case, and stressed the need to end what he described as the silence surrounding the murder investigation.

Eleven days after Almagro’s optimistic Twitter message, AI issued an “urgent action” report on what it termed an “increasing smear campaign against [human rights] defenders.”

According to AI, the campaign is focused on the international organization Global Witness, as well as the local human rights and environment defenders Centro Hondureño de Promoción para el Desarrollo Comunitario (Honduran Center for the Promotion of Community Development, CEHPRODEC), Movimiento Indígena Lenca de la Paz (Independent Lenca Indigenous Movement of La Paz, MILPAH), and the Consejo Cívico de Organizaciones Populares e Indígenas de Honduras (Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras, COPINH), which Cáceres cofounded in 1993.

All “are facing a smear campaign against them for their work defending land, territory and environmental rights in the country. This increasing campaign puts them at risk of further harassment and physical attacks,” AI warned.

AI reported that on the last weekend of January, a poster began to circulate on social media, accusing members of CEHPRODEC, COPINH, MILPAH, and Global Witness “of discrediting the country, being allied with radical groups, and of funding smear campaigns against Honduras.”

On Jan. 31, Global Witness “launched a new report about the situation of land, territory, and environmental defenders in Honduras,” AI added. It pointed out that on Feb. 1 it had “called on the Honduran authorities to publicly recognize the legitimate and important work these human rights defenders do,” only to see the intensity of the smear campaign increase after members of the organizations appeared on a Honduran television program.

“Participants in the show criticizing Global Witness’ report called indigenous peoples and organizations who supported the report ‘liars, opponents of development, and enemies of the Honduran people who are looking for jobs and willing to get out of poverty,’” according to AI’s account.

AI said it was concerned about the intensity of the smear campaign and the failure of Honduran authorities to reject statements that stigmatize the organizations’ activities and facilitate physical attacks against their members.

“Due to their work on issues related to the rights of indigenous communities, territory, and natural resources, COPINH and MILPAH have received repeated threats, attempts to criminalize their work, and physical attacks and harassment for many years,” AI reported. “Amnesty International

continues to receive concerning information about several security incidents against organizations or individuals that have accompanied or raised their voice against Berta Cáceres' murder."

A week after AI's call for urgent action, Bertha Oliva, who heads a committee of relatives of detained disappeared people (Comité de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos en Honduras, COFADEH), told reporters that "the situation of human rights defenders in Honduras is at a critical moment, at the worst moment in decades, as in the 1980s," when 184 persons were disappeared under the military regimes then ruling the country.

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