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After 5 Years, Survivors Await Justice in Killings in Honduras' Moskitia

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Two pregnant women, a teenager, and a young man were killed five years ago, and several people were injured, by US and Honduran security forces during what was described by officials as a counter-narcotics operation in the indigenous Moskitia region of eastern Honduras. The survivors are still demanding justice.

The victims were on a boat taking 16 Miskito civilians on a seven-hour scheduled trip back to Paptalaya, their village in the Ahuas municipality on the Patuca River in the coastal province of Gracias a Dios. During the incident, which occurred on May 11, 2012, at around 2 a.m., M60 machine guns were fired from at least one of four US helicopters transporting personnel from the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and Honduras' Policía Nacional (National Police, PN).

The official story

According to official versions, occupants of a light airplane that had landed in the area about an hour before the incident had placed 700 to 900 kg of cocaine in a pipante, a rustic, canoe-like boat. The pipante had been left, disabled, to drift downstream and was boarded by US and Honduran security officers. When the officers spotted the passenger boat, a larger vessel, they opened fire against it, an action that was followed by gunfire from one of the US helicopters flying over the area and transporting members of a DEA Foreign-Deployed Advisory and Support Team (FAST) and of the PN's Equipo de Respuesta Táctica (Tactical Response Team, ERT).

The early official accounts also portrayed the FAST and ERT officers as having been the target of hostile fire coming from the passenger boat, an alleged attack that led them to open fire in self-defense.

But survivors and other witnesses gave precise testimony of how bullets had been unexpectedly sprayed on their boat from a US helicopter, and how wounded survivors who had fallen in the water managed to reach the shore only to be attacked by DEA and ERT personnel, who prevented them from receiving medical assistance. The civilians' accounts also detailed violent house searches later carried out by US and Honduran agents in Ahuas.

On Feb. 28, 2014, the Honduran office of the public prosecutor (Ministerio Público, MP) charged three Honduran security officers with homicide and attempted homicide. Two of the men, according to local media, had been assigned to a specialized US anti-drug unit.

During a hearing held in the Caribbean coastal town of Puerto Lempira, the capital of Gracias a Dios, charges were also pressed of unlawful detention, torture, and cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment of several people by US and Honduran security personnel.

Victims' rights

These additional charges were requested by a human rights NGO that defends the rights of relatives of disappeared persons (Comité de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos en Honduras, COFADEH).

The legal team of the accused argued that the defendants had acted in legitimate self-defense and were fulfilling their duty, since the helicopters had been attacked. In May, three years after the court hearing, local media reported that the case had been “temporarily dismissed” for two of the accused men, while the third would be tried under charges of homicide and abuse of authority.

As legal proceedings drag on, survivors and relatives of the victims insist on their demand that the crime not go unpunished.

One such voice was heard during a recent national meeting of an organization of indigenous and black Honduran women (Segundo Encuentro Nacional de Mujeres Indígenas y Negras de Honduras), when Marlen Zelaya Jackson, whose sister Juana was killed in the incident, addressed the forum.

“My sister was massacred,” she said then. “Her body was floating in the river’s waters, and she had four bullet wounds. She was just 28 and was five months pregnant. I’m a single mother of four children, and I had to take care of her two children; a very difficult situation, terrible. I’m alone and I don’t know how to keep going.”

Zelaya complained that the victims’ relatives had had no reply from the authorities. “Those people are guilty ... We’ve always been right, and now they have to pay for what they did,” she said at the gathering, held May 24-25 in Tegucigalpa, the Honduran capital.

Two reports produced five years apart have concluded the Miskitos were in the right.

Days after the incident in Ahuas, COFADEH issued a lengthy report containing details that countered the official explanation. The report was written by the three COFADEH members who made up a verification commission sent to the area to document the events. They were accompanied by representatives of local human rights organizations.

Analyzing testimony detailing the crime scene, the three concluded, “the military ignored their own protocols as they fired without warning on the civilian vessel, allegedly trying to confiscate several kilos of cocaine ... The presence of agents of the Honduran state and the DEA, with helicopters and weapons of all calibers, caused terror among the inhabitants of the municipality, whose houses were violated in search of supposed drug traffickers.”

Five years after the COFADEH report, and coinciding with many of the points it made, Office of the Inspector General at the US Department of Justice (DOJ OIG) and the State Department Office of the Inspector General (State OIG) issued a joint report on three events, all described as “Deadly Force Incidents,” that occurred within a three-month period in Honduras, on May 11, June 23, and July 3, 2012.

Written by Inspector General Michael Horowitz of the DOJ and his State Department counterpart, Steve Linick, the report noted that the operations that resulted in the incidents “were conducted jointly by the State Department, DEA, and the Government of Honduras (GOH) pursuant to a program known as ‘Operation Anvil.’”

About the May 11 event, the report noted, "Not only did the DOJ OIG find no credible evidence that individuals in the passenger boat fired first, but the available evidence, which was available to DEA at the time, places into serious question whether there was any gunfire from the passenger boat at any time."

Highlighting "a note about the DOJ OIG's access to information necessary to this review," it pointed out that "during 2014 and early 2015, DEA failed to timely produce numerous responsive e-mails of certain senior DEA officials connected to Operation Anvil, without justification. Some of those e-mails were not produced for as much as 11 months."

The report also said that DEA had initially failed to produce highly relevant reports and statements related to specific issues under review. "These delayed productions necessitated additional interviews with witnesses and caused an entirely avoidable delay in the production of this report," it said, adding that the DEA had taken action since mid-2015 to ensure that the DOJ OIG receives timely access to information.

Miriam Miranda, coordinator of a local human rights group focused on black Hondurans (Organización Fraternal Negra Hondureña, OFRANEH) said the report "proves that the victims' relatives were right regarding the human rights violation ... that statements, both by DEA and by the State of Honduras were false." Miranda told local media in May, "Now they'll have to answer for their lies and for having manipulated the events and having even stigmatized the Miskito communities ... Once more, it is proved that the alleged policy to combat drug trafficking causes violation of local people's and communities' human rights."

But OFRANEH's view of the killings reaches beyond the incident itself, which it sets in a context of historic aggression, with an economic component, against the Miskito, who are an indigenous people settled on the coastal Caribbean region of Honduras and Nicaragua ([NotiCen, Oct. 29, 2015](#), and [Sept. 15, 2016](#)).

OFRANEH argues that, partly as a result of the Moskitia's diverse natural resources, including oil, Miskitos have been repeatedly targeted for attacks such as the Ahuas incident and stereotyped as involved in drug trafficking.

An ongoing "media demonization" of the Miskito people ignores "the feudalism that exists in Honduras, the enormous poverty that affects the indigenous peoples, and internal colonialism," the organization said in a 2012 press release.

"The undertone of the message is clear," OFRANEH said. "It is the gradual eviction of the vernacular population from one of the richest biodiversity settings in Central America ... [and its] enormous hydrocarbon deposits both in the continental platform and on dry land."

-- End --