4-19-1989

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Hondurans Speak Out Against Contra Presence, U.S. Policy
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Category/Department: General
Published: Wednesday, April 19, 1989

On April 14 during a speech at the Institute of the Americas in San Diego, Juan Almendares, professor of medicine at the National Autonomous University of Honduras, demanded the removal of the Nicaraguan contras from his country. Almendares said that all Honduran political parties want the contras out, but that the government was bowing to US pressure to keep the contras at their bases. Almendares, who served as president of the National Autonomous University in 1979-82, said he received two threats last year from rightwing death squads. The University is the largest in Honduras, with an enrollment of 32,000. "The contras are in Honduras because US foreign policy put them there," said Almendares. He added that the contras constituted more of a threat to Honduran stability than the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua. Next, Almendares said the government of President Jose Azcona was controlled by the Honduran military, and that there would be no democracy in Honduras until the departure of both the contras and US forces. About 1,100 US military personnel are stationed in Honduras, with other US troops flying in periodically for joint exercises with Honduran counterparts. Almendares said Honduras was on a "war economy, that was suited for war but not economic development." As a result, he said, the real wages of the average Honduran were around $60 a month. Also appearing at the Institute of the Americas discussion were Hondurans Gladys Lanza, president of 2,500-member National Electrical Energy Workers Union, and Zenaida Velasquez, founder of the Committee of the Families of Detained and Disappeared. Both said their views reflect those of most Hondurans. Velasquez claimed that political persecution in Honduras was getting "worse and worse every day," and that "state terror" was being used in an effort to silence those who criticize the Azcona government. Velasquez's brother, Angel Manfredo, vanished in 1981. In 1988, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights found the Honduran government guilty of his disappearance. The court, based in San Jose, Costa Rica, is an agency of the Organization of American States. The court's decisions have no force of law, but Tegucigalpa agreed to accept its jurisdiction in the Velasquez case. Union leader Lanza stated that while the contras enjoy good medical care, Hondurans who cannot afford medical treatment "were giving birth on hospital floors and even in the street." In response, Honduran Foreign Ministry spokesperson Eugenio Castro asserted that the suggestion his government was a military dictatorship was a "terrific lie." He said Honduras has "the most aggressive press in all of Central America," which would be never be tolerated in a country under military rule. Speaking from Tegucigalpa, Castro said the departure of the contras from Honduras would depend on a precise timetable for their return to Nicaragua that will be developed by the five Central American presidents at a summit scheduled for June in Honduras. "There is no pressure whatsoever from the United States to keep the contras in Honduras," he said. According to Castro, purely "humanitarian reasons" motivated the Azcona government to permit the contras and their family members to stay in Honduras. Moreover, Castro said, Almendares and his traveling companions are "leftists," whose motive for coming to the US was to "discredit" the Azcona government. "The majority of Honduran society do not give much credence to these people," he added. The three Hondurans began four days of public appearances in San Diego on Friday. They arrived in San Diego on a seven-week tour of the US, sponsored by the San Francisco-based Central American Exchange, a non-profit group opposed to US policy in the region. (Basic data from Copley News Service, 04/14/89)