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Excerpts: "inside Honduras"

by Deborah Tyroler

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Following are excerpts from the recently-published book, "Inside Honduras: The Essential Guide to its Politics, Economy, Society and Environment." The book, authored by LADB political affairs editor Kent Norsworthy, was published by the Inter-Hemispheric Education Resource Center. (Order information can be obtained from the Resource Center, Box 4506, Albuquerque, NM, 87196). The excerpts provide background elements essential for understanding military reform initiatives which have been sweeping Honduras since early this year (see CAU 02/26/93, 03/12/93, 03/19/93): Following decades of intermittent direct rule by the armed forces, the army formally returned to its barracks in 1981. The deal to allow civilians to run the government turned out to be a good one for the armed forces. Behind the veneer of elected governments, and despite the fact that the country was neither at war nor facing an internal insurgency, the 1980s witnessed an unprecedented build-up of the Honduran armed forces. Between 1978 and 1984 US military aid increased more than twenty-fold, while the armed forces doubled in size. Equally important as this quantitative expansion, during the 1980s the military consolidated its grip on the key levers of national policy formulation and decision making. As one observer put it, "The military has all the power and the civilians have all the problems." But by the early 1990s, even the well-entrenched Honduran military establishment was finding it hard to remain sheltered from the winds of change sweeping the region. As the Central American conflagration of the 1980s receded further into the background, the military's central role in Honduran society looked more and more anachronistic. Likewise, civilian politicians interested in pursuing political reforms and democratization within the Honduran state increasingly saw the longstanding tradition of military autonomy as a hindrance to their plans. Roots of the Honduran Military In Honduras, as in much of Latin America, today's military institutions trace their roots to paramilitary groups that traditionally fulfilled two essential functions. First, groups of armed men were formed and then supported by political parties, sectors of the oligarchy, and in the case of Honduras, the US banana companies, with the objective of assuring the installation of favored individuals in the presidency. Second, these same groups served effectively as a police force to squelch worker and campesino unrest, usually on the basis of personal relations between a local barracks commander and the plantation or factory owner. The first major efforts to transform what had started out as armed groups supporting one or another elite faction into a unified, standing military force responding to national objectives took place during the dictatorship of Gen. Tiburcio Carias (1932-48). In 1946, the Carias regime created the country's first separate armed force charged specifically with police functions a body that eventually evolved into the Public Security Force (FUSEP). Efforts at modernization and professionalization of the emerging Honduran military, including establishment of the nation's first military academy in 1952, were further consolidated during the National Party government of Juan Manuel Galvez (1949-54). The process of modernizing the Honduran military was further intensified after 1954 when the US concluded a Bilateral Military Assistance Treaty and sent Army and Air Force missions to train and equip their Honduran counterparts. In the most immediate sense, the treaty was part of US efforts aimed at securing Honduran assistance in the campaign to overthrow the Arbenz government in neighboring Guatemala. But in the larger picture, the treaty was but one element of a larger project that sought to complete the transformation of what had been a gendarme for US fruit companies

and the Honduran oligarchy into an autonomous, professional institution that would serve US designs. On-site training and scholarships to US military schools along with modest financial support characterized the relationship prior to the military expansion of the 1980s. Structure of the Armed Forces In Honduras, the process of militarization defined not as the quantitative build-up of the armed forces and its weaponry but rather as the encroachment of military practices and control on civil daily life stretches back many years. The Constitution of 1957 eliminated civilian authority over the military, transferring ultimate control of the institution to the chief of the armed forces, who was given the right to disobey presidential orders that he considered unconstitutional. The constitution also afforded the armed forces an active role in politics, assigning them the specific function of ultimate guardians of the constitutional order. That meant that the armed forces could step in any time they felt the constitution was being violated. The essential elements of military autonomy from civilian authority were maintained in the 1982 Constitution. Such formal authority provided a legal basis for the political independence and autonomous institutional development of the military and set the stage for its subsequent incursions into all areas of national affairs. This process has been facilitated by the long-standing atomization and weakness of the Honduran political parties, state, and oligarchy, and by the tradition among social and political groups of turning to the military for support. In much of the countryside, local military commanders wield more influence than civilian authorities. In many remote areas the army is the only representative of the central government. At the national level the military has long played the role of ultimate arbiter of disputes between rival political, social, and economic forces... Structurally, the armed forces are divided into four major branches: the army, the air force, the navy, and FUSEP. All four branches are controlled by the military's Superior Council of the Armed Forces (COSUFFAA). Although the bulk of police and internal security functions reside with FUSEP and the police forces it controls, the army is also used extensively for these purposes, especially in the countryside. In any case, unlike in many countries where the police and army are institutionally separate forces, in Honduras they are merely different appendages of the same body. This means that the Honduran military has an absolute monopoly on the "legitimate" use of armed force in the country. Estimates of the total number of full-time members of the combined armed forces range from 23,700 to 30,000. The army expanded from a few thousand troops in the 1970s to an estimated 15,000 by 1989. With the addition of two new brigades in 1989, one artillery and one infantry, the army now has five such units stationed around the country. Although much of Honduras is rugged, mountainous territory, the army's arsenal includes some 90 tanks. Led by a squadron of 37 combat jets out of a total fleet of 120 aircraft, the Honduran air force is considered the most powerful in Central America. Washington's repeated stalling on delivery of a promised dozen F-5 supersonic jet fighters the last being delivered in January 1990 became a longstanding point of friction between the two countries. With a smaller and less combat-hardened army than either Guatemala, El Salvador, or Nicaragua, the Honduran military regards superiority in air power as indispensable. In contrast to other Central American countries' use of air power merely to support ground-based counterinsurgency efforts, the Honduran air force is equipped and trained for offensive operations against installations in other countries. The naval force, essentially a coast guard, is unimposing and comprises only a handful of small patrol boats. It is, however, the focus of increased attention under the aegis of the war on drugs as a key interdiction force along the country's extensive maritime coasts. FUSEP is controlled by army officers and is subordinated to the Ministry of Defense, although it has its own general staff and a separate organizational structure. In addition to its regular police units, FUSEP controls the treasury police, the traffic police, and a counterinsurgency unit known as the Cobras. The Honduran equivalent of the FBI, the National Investigations Division (DNI), formed in 1976, is also

formally under the control of FUSEP. The DNI carries out routine criminal detective work, as well as surveillance and intelligence operations. In total, some 4,500 members of various police forces are managed by FUSEP. The intelligence section of the armed forces, known as the G-2 and functioning under the command of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, is primarily responsible for keeping tabs on political opponents and military personnel. This secret police unit in turn created and operates Battalion 3-16 and carries out propaganda campaigns against domestic opposition groups, critics, and dissenters. Although Battalion 3-16 is directed by intelligence officers, it recruits its operatives from numerous forces such as FUSEP, the DNI, and the immigration service. These operatives remain at their jobs as a cover to restrict knowledge of the unit's existence even within the military. Faced with an ever-expanding crime rate during the early 1990s, many groups called on the military to scale down the size of the standing army in order to transfer personnel and budget outlays to FUSEP's police forces. Others, anxious to break the military's monopoly on the use of force, argued that FUSEP should be subordinated to the judiciary, not the armed forces. Neither proposal received much backing from the high command. The armed forces also control several additional institutions adjunct to the military's major branches. Most important among these are the dozens of military academies and schools scattered around the country for the training of both recruits and officers. The active duty armed forces are also supplemented by stand-by and general reserve groups. The military has its own internal judicial system and, by way of a clause in the Constitution, has traditionally claimed jurisdiction over all "military matters," including crimes committed by active duty personnel against civilians. The military also controls, via power of appointment, the national telecommunications system, immigration services, and the merchant marine. In all branches of the military, officers tend to come from the middle classes and achieve their commissions through academies rather than by rising through the ranks. As a result, rivalries and divisions within the armed forces tend to follow lines of shared "promotions" or graduating classes more than political or ideological factors...For those who enter as officers, the military is an important mechanism for social climbing. The privileges that officer status provides, along with opportunities for graft and corruption, often result in quick and dramatic fortunes. Numerous Honduran officers have acquired property or a stake in agroexport industries either through illicit appropriation of state lands or as gifts received from grateful landowners. In part because being an officer in Honduras provides such attractive economic and social opportunities, the military has become top heavy, with over 300 officers above the rank of major in a force of fewer than 30 battalions... Although much of the military build-up of the 1980s was bankrolled by the US military assistance program, defense spending consistently devoured between 20% and 30% of the national budget. During the early 1990s, intense pressures were brought to bear on the military establishment to reduce spending. Cuts in US aid levels, the prevailing atmosphere of fiscal austerity, popular pressures for demilitarization, and even direct pressure brought to bear by the World Bank and the US embassy constituted a powerful incentive to at least begin taming the military appetite. Nonetheless, the high command tenaciously resisted any allocation reduction. Yet even for the Honduran generals, the writing on the walls was clear. One of the strategies they pursued to assure the long-term predominance of the military establishment, and to provide a buffer from future political and economic changes within the Honduran government, was to solidify the armed forces' role as a major economic player in its own right. Armed forces' holdings include a controlling stake in insurance, investment, credit card, and real estate companies, as well as ownership of the San Miguel Archangel funeral parlor. They also have investments in the cereal, clothing, and footwear industries. In mid-1991, a major public scandal erupted when the Military Social Security Institute (Instituto de Prevision Military, IPM) submitted the winning bid in privatization of the state-run Honduran Cement Industry (INCEHSA). Honduran private

businesspeople were outraged, arguing that selling a government industry to the military was hardly "privatization" and even tried to have the deal annulled on grounds that government revenues, in the form of salaries for military personnel, were being used to purchase INCEHSA. Yet despite the protests, the deal was allowed to stand. The IPM, in addition to its highly profitable cement works, also controls the armed forces own bank (Banco de las Fuerzas Armadas), a securities firm, and factories where military uniforms and gear are manufactured. The IPM is not required to make public its earnings... Current armed forces chief Gen. Luis Alonso Discua who assumed the post in December 1990 has presided during a period of unprecedented pressures for changing the military establishment's role in society. Those pressures had been building for years, the product of a complex web of factors. As social and economic situation of the country deteriorated, it became increasingly common for attention to be focused on military abuses and excesses. According to Manuel Gamero, editor of El Tiempo daily newspaper: "The military is viewed here as the single most important force in the country's life. When the economy and the political system don't deliver, the military is held responsible. This growing popular digruntlement has made the military even more willing to turn against its US benefactor, hoping to deflect attention from its own role." Discua had only been in office for six months when the case of Riccy Mabel Martinez rocked the nation and the armed forces. Martinez, a young student from a Tegucigalpa teachers training school, was brutally tortured, raped and murdered in July 1991. In the face of overwhelming evidence implicating two military officers in the crime, unprecedented pressures brought to bear by the US embassy, and in part to defuse a public outcry that threatened to become uncontrollable, the Honduran government decided to encourage civilian courts to try the two officers. Despite steadfast resistance on the part of some in the armed forces, a subsequent cover-up campaign, and attempts to tamper with evidence in the case, the two were eventually turned over to civilian authorities for trial, albeit after having received discharges in order to avoid a precedent-setting prosecution of active-duty officers. Nonetheless, the case appeared to mark the beginning of the end of the longstanding tradition of military impunity in Honduras. In the words of Honduran political analyst Victor Meza, the Martinez case was crucial in that it "permitted anti-militarism to become public. The army is no longer a taboo subject." Less than one month after the Martinez murder, Innovation and Unity Party (PINU) deputy Carlos Sosa introduced a bill in Congress aimed at instituting a series of reforms designed to ultimately subordinate the armed forces to the civilian government. Sosa's bill, a similar proposal discussed within the armed forces leadership, and reportedly yet another version sponsored by the US embassy, all aspired to reducing the powers attached to the post of armed forces chief, transferring most of that authority to a civilian-appointed defense minister, and designating the Honduran president as military commander in chief. Under these bills, COSUFFAA, the deliberative body overseeing the military in conjunction with the armed forces chief, would be reduced in size and importance. Another aspect of the proposed reforms would eliminate the current practice of budget secrecy within the armed forces, forcing the military to open its books to outside scrutiny and subjecting it to the same fiscal regulations as other elements of the Honduran state. In the words of Carlos Sosa: "Now, there is no excuse for allowing the military a hegemonic role in politics. [The proposed reforms] are basic...they exist in every democratic country in the world."

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