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Security Minister Fonseca Under Fire

by LADB Staff

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Honduran Security Minister Guatama Fonseca has been at the center of several recent controversies and could face criminal or corruption charges as the rate of violent crime continues to rise. The government has once again militarized the crime fight while business leaders demand the declaration of a state of emergency.

Partido Liberal (PL) leader Jaime Rosenthal Oliva has called the crime situation a national emergency and laid much of the blame on the poverty and unemployment that drives people into drug trafficking. He said the National Assembly should declare a state of emergency in the northern city of San Pedro Sula, where crime rates are especially high. "I agree that, at a certain moment, we have to disarm the delinquents and guarantee the security of the people, because without that, there will be no sources of work and no security," said Rosenthal Oliva.

Authorities have calculated that 500,000 military weapons are in the hands of civilians. Crime problem unchanged in recent years The situation today is remarkably similar to the situation in 1997 when then President Carlos Roberto Reina (1994-1998) sent troops into the streets instead of declaring a state of emergency as requested by private-sector leaders of the Consejo Hondureño de la Empresa Privada (COHEP). A series of high-profile kidnappings in San Pedro Sula prompted calls for increased criminal penalties, adoption of capital punishment, more police, and the suspension of civil guarantees (see EcoCentral, 1997-05-08).

Last year, a report by the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) rated Honduras as one of the most violent nations in Latin America. The report said Tegucigalpa had a homicide rate of 51 per 100,000 population and San Pedro Sula had 95. President Carlos Flores announced an anti-crime plan in mid-2000, shaking up the security bureaucracy and putting soldiers in the streets, but arguing that the situation did not warrant a state of emergency (see NotiCen, 2000-08-31).

After a meeting June 8 of this year with Fonseca, Defense Minister Enrique Flores Valeriano, and Armed Forces Chief of Staff Gen. Daniel Lopez Carballo, Flores again announced that the crime problem was not serious enough to declare a state of emergency. Instead, he called the army out to help police patrol "every street corner" in San Pedro Sula. Later, the operation was to be extended to any city where crime rates were high. Defense Minister Flores Valeriano said that, for the time being, only the army would be involved in the police effort but that the navy and air force might also be deployed if the situation warranted it.

The daily La Prensa reported June 10 that, despite the joint patrols, violent crime had not declined in San Pedro Sula. Authorities said there were not enough patrols to cover all the high-crime zones in the city. Business leaders in the city called on President Flores to take additional steps to attack the problem.

COHEP members complained that crime was hurting tourism and investment. COHEP president Juliette Handal said the recent kidnapping of a Chinese business executive had dissuaded a Chinese mission from investing in Honduras. She also said that 10 maquiladora plants had closed, in part because of the security problem. COHEP has again called for a state of emergency. Fonseca has been in office since last August, replacing Flores' first appointee, Elizabeth Chiuz, during a purge of the security apparatus. Fonseca first ran into trouble last December, when he withdrew patrols from part of the Guatemalan border area prompting critics to claim he left the border wide open to the flow of contraband coffee and other goods.

Fonseca said he had been pressured to remove the patrols but did not say where the pressure originated. Rumors have it that the pressure came from top Cabinet officials. Fonseca said that he did not agree with the pullback order and that those who pressured him said the move would not damage the nation. He denied it had to do with contraband but said he had received a report indicating that some border police were taking bribes.

In January, Fonseca charged that Assembly deputies and coffee producers were involved in the contraband trade in coffee. "We have the names," he said. He defended police director Alvaro Flores Ponce, who had previously been accused of allowing 70 truckloads of contraband coffee to cross the Guatemalan border into Honduras. Fonseca said those making the accusations "have been emitting a smokescreen to discredit the work of the police and Armed Forces, some because they are involved in the [contraband] business." Later, he charged that unnamed police and prosecutors were linked to organized crime.

Weeks later, Attorney General Roy Medina said he had asked Fonseca in writing to supply the names and the evidence to support the charges, but that he was still waiting to hear from Fonseca. Now, Fonseca may be facing criminal charges. In April, Andres Pavon, head of the *Comite para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos en Honduras* (CODEH), wrote President Flores that he believed Fonseca was turning the country into a police state. After reciting several examples of what he considered Fonseca's excesses, Pavon warned the president that, if he did not take action, Fonseca's behavior could come to the attention of international human rights organizations. Among the examples Pavon cited were Fonseca's use of violence against various public protests and demonstrations.

In September 2000, police used force to turn back some indigenous demonstrators in the capital and then had some of them violently removed from a public park in Copan. In October 2000, police used violence against a group of workers demonstrating for a wage increase.

In February of this year, police used violence to stop a group of environmental protesters. Other examples Pavon cited were police actions against CODEH and Social Security workers. Pavon sent a similar letter to Attorney General Roy Medina in June. He told Medina that the Security Ministry had fallen into a pattern of "systematic violence" against human rights and called Fonseca's behavior "irrational." He alleged that CODEH had information about an attempt against the life of a CODEH worker. Without identifying the source of the threat, Pavon said legal maneuvers were planned against human rights defenders.

Humberto Palacios Moya, chief prosecutor in the attorney general's office, said in June that he was looking into the Efraim Valladares Escoto case. Valladares had been arrested for auto theft and assault, and Fonseca wanted him released. After Valladares mysteriously disappeared while in custody, investigators asked if Fonseca had ordered his release. Anti-corruption prosecutor Angel Aguilar said he was collecting evidence in the matter for a possible indictment against Fonseca.

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