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US Embassy Warning About Crime in Honduras

by LADB Staff

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Honduran officials reacted with alarm when the US Embassy warned of the risk to visitors and investors posed by high rates of crime and a weak judicial system. Supporting the renewed concern about crime are reports of the systematic killing of street children. Despite a highly touted anti-crime program, some reports indicate crime is out of control. The crime issue has become a matter of international concern. A US State Department Consular Information Sheet updated on Aug. 17, contains grim warnings to travelers about violent crimes against tourists and foreign residents, especially in the major cities Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula.

On Aug. 13, the US Embassy in Tegucigalpa warned US citizens visiting or investing in Honduras to do so at their own risk. Embassy spokesman Carlos Bakota said, "To come for a visit, invest, or establish residence in this country represents great risk due to crime and the fragility of the judicial system." The warning added that the Embassy could not ensure the security to US citizens in Honduras because the judicial system is in a "grave crisis, and that Hondurans were also aware of "the risks they face living here." Bakota noted that 11 US citizens had been murdered in Honduras during the past three years. Private-sector leaders complained that the Embassy warning would hurt the economy. Several maquiladora plants had already pulled out before the Embassy warning.

Minister of the Presidency Gustavo Alfaro said crime was not exclusive to Honduras and that the government was doing all it could to lower crime rates. Cardinal Oscar Andres Rodriguez, the ministry of tourism, and others, took the Embassy message as a recommendation to US citizens to avoid Honduras altogether. However, Ambassador Frank Almaguer issued an official bulletin Aug. 15 clarifying Bakota's statements. The bulletin said the Embassy never intended to recommend that US citizens not visit or invest in Honduras. It was intended rather, to express the Embassy's concern about "the number and frequency of murders involving North Americans in the country," Almaguer said. The bulletin also said the US, "for now," was not considering a reduction in aid to Honduras for the modernization of its judicial system.

On the day of Bakota's warning, President Carlos Flores deployed soldiers in the streets of Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula in the wake of a gang riot in the downtown area of the capital. Press reports said more than 100 juvenile-gang members some firing AK-47s staged a shootout in the historic district of the city leaving at least one dead and 10 people mostly bystanders wounded. According to some witnesses, police were late to arrive and arrested only 10 suspects. The Comite para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos en Honduras (CODEH) complained that the current laws offer too much protection to wrongdoers and said police turned some of the suspects loose. According to government figures, there are some 90,000 juvenile-gang members in 475 gangs (maras). Some estimates go much higher and some claim that up to 40% of youth over 15 years of age are associated with gangs.

In all, nearly 15% of the population has some degree of participation in the activities of juvenile gangs, said an editorial in the daily El Tiempo. The newspaper said the troop deployment would

not cure "social decomposition." In an editorial, the daily said, "We are all aware that this measure is temporary...and though it may help calm the public, it can't be a solution to the problem." Street children victims of police, gangs Bruce Harris, executive secretary of the children's rights organization Casa Alianza, said the government was responsible for some of the 843 murders of street children recorded in the period January 1998 through June 2001. He described the killings to Inter Press Service as "social cleansing of society's neediest children."

According to Casa Alianza, police were responsible for 13% of the killings, 12% were committed by gangs, and 19% by individuals. The remainder was not attributable. "Children and young people are dropping like flies every day," Casa Alianza director Leticia Herrera told Inter Press Service in May. At the request of Casa Alianza, Asma Jahangir, UN Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary, or Arbitrary Executions, visited Honduras in August to investigate. Jahangir reported that private and public security forces have killed more street children in Honduras than in any other country in recent years. She said at a news conference that government documents show police and private security guards killed at least 66 children during the first half of this year.

Jahangir said, however, that there was no evidence the killings were carried out as state policy. "The government assured me that it would try those guilty." But she distinguished between active participation in killings and evasion of responsibility. "The enormous negligence, the responsibility that the state has not assumed in the investigation of this phenomenon constitutes negligence on the part of the state, which is a violation of human rights." The *Tiempo* editorial said that focusing on police involvement in the killings is "simplistic," and does not offer a "rational solution." Citing the murder statistics and the 70% poverty rate, the editorial concluded that juvenile crime had become an "unmanageable social problem."

Presidential candidate for the governing Partido Liberal Rafael Pineda Ponce, who is currently National Assembly president, also has focused on root causes, quoting figures indicating that nearly half of Honduran children receive little or no education. President's anti-crime proposals are three-years old In an effort to find long-term remedies, a special advisory group, Foro Nacional de Convergencia (FONAC), came up with proposals in 1998, some of which were general suggestions to reduce poverty and corruption. But the focus was on gun control and hiring more police (see *EcoCentral*, 1998-09-17).

President Flores announced an anti-crime program (Estrategia Nacional de Seguridad Ciudadana) in 1998 with Security Minister Elizabeth Chiuz Sierra in charge. The plan was heavy on policing, with new funds for hiring police officers, buying guns, uniforms, and helicopters and adopting the death penalty (see *NotiCen*, 2000-08-31). In August 2000, Flores ordered a thorough purge of the security ministry, starting with Chiuz Sierra. Since then, hundreds of police as many as one-third of the force have been fired, jailed or transferred. Chiuz Sierra's replacement, Gautama Fonseca, also came under fire earlier this year for using excessive force to control demonstrations and protests. The *Comite para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos* (CODEHD) warned that his actions amounted to human rights violations (see *NotiCen*, 2001-06-14).

Reforms have not worked

A recently released report reviewing reforms over the last three years concluded that Security Minister Fonseca's purge of corrupt and incompetent police had been ineffective and that the crime situation had worsened. The report (Police Reform, Three Years Later), said public security cannot focus on short-term measures to "put out fires." Bertha Oliva, head of the Comité de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos en Honduras (COFADEH), said that since the police reforms began, there had been no letup in complaints about police corruption. In the previous 18 months, COFADEH had received 79 complaints against police for corruption and common crimes, she said. In addition, 166 police have been accused of human rights violations in the same period. Among other reforms Fonseca made was the removal of 25 investigators from the special attorney general's unit investigating organized crime (Fiscalía contra el Crimen Organizado).

The agents were originally transferred from the attorney general's office to the Security Ministry to work out of police stations in an arrangement between Attorney General Roy Medina and then Security Minister Chiuz Sierra. Fonseca said he took the action because public prosecutors had no authority to do police work investigating crimes. But Medina said the move weakened what had been a cooperative effort between the two departments and would only open more opportunities for crime.

Mario Chinchilla, prosecutor in charge of the organized crime unit, said the 25 agents had been investigating kidnappers, bank robbers, car thieves, and traffickers in drugs and undocumented immigrants. He said their work was beginning to have an effect. Humberto Palacios Moya, chief prosecutor in the attorney general's office, said Fonseca had paralyzed criminal investigations throughout the country by transferring the agents. He said the transfer left investigation in the hands of the policía preventiva, "who have no capacity to do the job."

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