

Honduras Continued: Opposition to Coup Government; Human Rights Abuses Not Ended

by Carla Riehle

Although news from Honduras has all but disappeared from the mainstream press, massive opposition to the government continues following the coup d'état on June 28. Along with fellow Minnesotan Joe Callahan, I was able to observe this recently as part of a human rights delegation to Honduras organized by the Chicago group, La Voz de Los de Abajo. La Voz has been traveling to Honduras for about ten years in support of campesino collectives.

The June coup received considerable media coverage, as soldiers abducted President Zelaya, still in his pajamas, and took him to Costa Rica. The drama continued when Zelaya was able to secretly reenter Honduras and take refuge in the Brazilian embassy. He was unable to leave the embassy because of the threat of arrest on charges relating to his alleged criminal violation of the constitution. It is widely believed that his real offenses included raising the minimum wage and bringing Honduras into ALBA, the alternative Latin American trade organization that includes Venezuela, Cuba, Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and several small Caribbean countries.

The coup was also significant because it was the first such event to occur in Latin America since the failed 2002 coup against President Chavez in Venezuela and was the first successful coup since the end of the Cold War. Although it received near-unanimous worldwide condemnation and the U.S. State Department termed it a "coup," our government declined to legally classify it as such, which would have meant the suspension of all aid (in September the U.S. did briefly suspend some assistance, but has resumed almost all of it).

Ultimately, the State Department brokered a deal that resulted in a "reconciliation" government formed without the ousted president's agreement. Nevertheless, it provided political cover for the U.S. to recognize the elections that were held in November even though they were held under martial law and boycotted by a large number of voters. Most of Latin America has not recognized the new government, although they are under increasing pressure from the U.S. to do so.

Virtually all of the people our delegation met with told us they believed the U.S. was deeply involved in the coup. It's no secret that the U.S. and Honduras have been very closely allied for decades, and that a significant part of the Honduran military was trained at the notorious School of the Americas (renamed The Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation) at Fort Benning, Georgia. More specific evidence includes the fact that the first stop made by the plane carrying the kidnapped Zelaya was at the massive U.S. Palmerola military base, which is located near the city of Comayagua. That, and the presence in Honduras immediately prior to the coup of such Cold War warriors as Otto Reich and other individuals experienced in efforts to

undermine the Cuban and Venezuelan governments, contribute to evidence that the U.S. sees Honduras as the first step in rolling back the “pink tide” in Latin America. Venezuelan journalist Eva Golinger has written extensively on the subject; her article at <http://www.chavezcode.com/2009/07/washington-coup-in-honduras-here-is.html> is particularly informative.

We learned on our delegation that despite the coup and the ensuing “election” of coup supporter Pepe Lobo, the resistance remains strong in Honduras. The National Popular Resistance Front or the “Frente” is made up of most of the mass organizations in Honduras, including all of the major union confederations, as well as human rights, women’s, LBGT, Christian, and campesino groups. We met with leaders of many of these, including the leader of the Frente, Union Confederation President Juan Barahona. The resistance remains unarmed and committed to nonviolent protest.

Although there is a long history of political activism in Honduras, opposition organizations had never come together before the coup, which galvanized them into a single resistance front. Their stories are amazing; most have witnessed or been victimized by the coup government’s brutalization. Human rights groups count over 50 deaths and hundreds of attacks against the resistance.

Our visit coincided with the installation of the Pepe Lobo as president and President Zelaya’s departure from the Brazilian embassy under a safe passage guarantee. We participated as human rights observers in a mass march that culminated in a rally at the airport in Tegucigalpa, where massive cheers erupted for the ousted president as his plane took off for the Dominican Republic.

On the other side of the coup, we also met for an hour with the U.S. ambassador to Honduras, Hugo Llorens, who assured us that all was now well in Honduras, although “a few bad things” had happened in the past. When we spoke about the widely held belief that the U.S. government was behind the coup, he dismissed it as “conspiracy theories.”

Since our departure from Honduras on January 31 there have been numerous attacks against resistance figures and at least three assassinations. The attacks are generally carried out anonymously by people in unmarked vehicles, but there is no question where they are coming from. Another mass opposition march took place on February 25, and the resistance has vowed to continue to march each month. On February 23, Juan Barahona announced that most of the country is organized into the resistance.

Here in the U.S., Human Rights Watch has asked for an investigation into the repression of the resistance, and nine members of Congress, including Minnesota Representative James Oberstar, have signed a letter to Hillary Clinton condemning the abuses. Unfortunately, Clinton’s trip this past March to Latin America included calls for support of the coup government.

However, a growing network of groups in the U.S. has formed in solidarity with the opposition. Here in Minneapolis and St. Paul, a coalition is working to keep the news about Honduras in the spotlight and to bring members of the resistance to the U.S. to speak about their experiences. We also encourage people to join a delegation to Honduras and see for themselves what is happening. The local Hands off Honduras coalition has an informative website at www.hondurasfreedom.blogspot.com and can be reached at handsoffhonduras@gmail.com.

Carla Riehle provided this eye-witness account from her experience participating in the La Voz de Los de Abajo, the Chicago solidarity and human rights delegation, which visited Honduras in January 2010. Carla is an attorney and has been active in Hands Off Honduras.