

By Liz Scherffius

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A climate of fear and repression has taken hold of Honduras in recent years. After the June 2009 coup-- in which Porfirio Lobo Sosa, a man loyal to the ruling elite and its armed forces cronies, replaced Manuel Zelaya-- violence against Honduran activists has increased sharply.

Today, Honduras has the highest murder rate in the world, according to the UN. The Committee of Relatives of the Disappeared in Honduras (COFADEH) found that, since the coup, state security forces have killed over 300 people, with 34 opposition members disappeared or murdered. The Committee to Protect Journalists reported that at least 22 Honduran journalists have been slain, while citizens have filed over 10,000 official complaints regarding police and military abuses. Reviewing the current political climate, the United Nations declared last February that the state enjoys “pervasive impunity” in the Honduran judicial system.

Death squads are responsible for many of these killings. A fixture in Honduras throughout the 1980s, recently these groups have reemerged under different names in the new, post-coup political context. But their objectives—and supporters—remain the same. Washington backs them every step of the way as they silence the population into fearful compliance with government initiatives.

These groups first appeared during the Contra War in Nicaragua (1981-88), when the US government sought allies in neighboring Honduras, hoping both to find an operations base there, and to convert the country into a bulwark against the Sandinista “contagion.” Washington found an ally in General Álvarez Martínez, an SOA graduate who, while head of the national police in 1981, informed CIA Director William J. Casey that Honduras would gladly serve as a training ground for anti-Sandinista forces. Martínez was chief of the armed forces from 1982 to 1984, and founded the Battalion 3-16 death squad, which was later implicated in the disappearances of dozens of Hondurans, according to a 1993 report by the National Commission on Human Rights in Honduras.

The CIA supported Battalion 3-16 from its creation, and subsequently funded the group and provided training for its members. Argentine military officers instructed the squad in torture techniques, which they had perfected en route to disappearing 30,000 of their country's citizens. Under Martinez, Battalion 3-16 worked to eliminate the Honduran opposition, relying on terror to meet its goal. At least 184 leftist guerrillas, sympathizers and suspected political opponents were disappeared in the process. Their actions were only one part of a broad terror campaign, which dominated Honduras from the first extrajudicial killings in 1981, until the decade's end.

All this was done with active complicity from the US State Department under President Reagan. John Negroponte, US ambassador to Honduras throughout Battalion 3-16's terror campaign, met frequently with General Martinez; according to a series of 1995 reports in the *Baltimore Sun*, Negroponte worked closely with Martinez to increase US aid flowing to the Honduran government and its armed forces. Martinez complied by implementing the US National Security Doctrine in Honduras, and was rewarded for his efforts with the Legion of Merit, which the Reagan administration presented him in 1983, citing his attempts at "encouraging the success of democratic processes in Honduras." Negroponte's cables and memos from this period fail to mention any of the Honduran human rights atrocities, despite the fact that the Honduran press published over 300 stories about these and other crimes.

Since Battalion 3-16 ceased its activities, only about a dozen Honduran officers have faced formal charges for their offenses, while only two have been held accountable for human rights violations. Nineteen members of Battalion 3-16, and three Honduran generals, are SOA graduates. The Committee for the Defense of Human Rights in Honduras (CODEH) has reported that seven members of the death squad held prominent positions in Zelaya's government as of 2006:

- Alvaro Romero—Secretary of Security
- Billy Joya—Romero's advisor
- Erick Sánchez—national security advisor
- Onofre Oyuela—Sánchez's advisor
- Napoleón Nassar Herrera—intelligence advisor
- Salomón Escoto Salinas—intelligence advisor
- René Maradianga Panchamé—intelligence advisor

Little changed under Zelaya's populist government, as these individuals were not brought to justice, but rather were rewarded for their past actions. After taking office in 2005, Zelaya unexpectedly won support from labor unions and the poor. Despite his background in an oligarchic political party, he pursued closer trade and diplomatic relations with Venezuela, alarming the elite and business classes. Partially due to these new alliances, Zelaya was ousted in late June 2009, in the first Central American coup since the Cold War.

Porfirio Lobo Sosa became Honduras' next president in 2010 via a fraudulent election, which the US supported. His government has overseen an increase in drug trafficking, violence, and state-sponsored repression. One of the most disturbing new developments is the Comando Álvarez Martínez (CAM) death squad, named for the SOA graduate described above. The group has been threatening journalists and international observers ever since the coup.

One of its first actions was the bombing of Channel 36 News' headquarters on September 12, 2009. Channel 36, Choluteca, was critical of the coup, and its staff has received numerous death threats. Amnesty International reports that the CAM also sexually threatened journalist Dina Meza, a reporter on human rights issues for the website Defenders Online (Defensores en Línea), and COFADEH's press officer and co-founder. Meza received text messages from the CAM earlier this year, on February 22, and a follow-up string of threatening phone calls on April 14. On April 6, while walking in her neighborhood with her children, she noticed two men taking photographs of them. On April 23, and again three days later, French and British volunteers for the Honduras Accompaniment Project (you can read more about PROAH here <http://proah.wordpress.com/>) received death threats from the CAM via text message. The CAM's targets include both supporters of Zelaya's government, as well as those opposed to the current regime—much in the same way its inspiration, in the 1980s, attacked suspected communists, along with opponents of policies promoted by Washington and its elite Honduran allies.

Continued US support for the Honduran regime facilitates its judicial system's impunity and corruption, which, in turn, have allowed SOA-trained agents of terror to reach top governmental positions. With these officials in charge, the CAM is given a free pass to repress the population.

To improve human rights in Honduras and throughout the hemisphere, we must shut down the School of the Americas. School of the Americas Watch (SOAW) works constantly to close this institution through its investigations of SOA graduates, press releases, and lobbying and activist efforts. SOAW's annual vigil at the gates of Fort Benning, Georgia is happening from November 16-18. You can learn more at <http://soaw.org/take-action/november-vigil>