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*The following report was compiled using information from the forthcoming Rights Action report on the 15th Battalion by Annie Bird. For Right's Actions Executive Summary and full report, [see below](#)*

The Honduran Army's 15th Infantry Battalion has been widely accused of leading operations that have resulted in human rights abuses, which include the notorious attack against *campesinos* protesters in a land dispute in August 2010 that resulted in the murder of a seventeen year-old boy, as well as the death of five security guards.

**Raynel Funes Ponce**

, who graduated from the Basic Infantry Officials program at the SOA in 1984, was said to be commander of the 15th Battalion in a 2011 newspaper article. In 2012 it was revealed on the Honduras armed forces website that Ponce had assumed command of the Special Forces 1st Battalion. A squad representing the 1st Battalion, led by

**Josue Sierra**

, who took a Cadet Arms orientation at the SOA in 2011, murdered 15 year-old Ebed Yanes with a bullet in the back of his head. Sierra was the first to fire of the squad. Funes Ponce ordered a cover-up of the murder.

In January 2012, as Funes Ponce was moved to command of the First Battalion, **Col. Selman D. Arriaga Orellana**

took over his post as head of the Fifteenth. Orellana attended the SOA in 1984, completing Basic Training for Infantry Officials. Orellana has been implicated in the command of operations known as

*Xatruch*

, which are joint task forces comprised of police and military personnel, and, typically, employ members of private security firms. Another SOA grad,

**Rafael Coello Moreno**

, was appointed to command a unit dispatched in a

*Xatruch*

operation. Moreno completed a Tactics and Arms orientation at the School of Americas in 1979. The ties between

*Xatruch*

operations and the 15th Battalion are difficult to discern, though the fact that a link exists is indisputable, from eyewitness accounts, to testimony by the soldiers themselves. The units that comprise

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Written by

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task forces operate out of the 15th Battalion headquarters, making the unity between these forces difficult to ignore. Another SOA grad tied to

*Xatruch*

operations is

**German Alfaro Escalante**

, who graduated from Infantry Officials' Basic Training in 1984. Escalante is reported to have replaced Rafael Moreno as commander of a

*Xatruch*

operation,

*Xatruch III*

At the head of many of these operations is **Pompeyo Bonilla**, current Minister of Security in Honduras, having moved into the position after the resignation of former Security Minister Oscar Alvarez. Bonilla graduated from the Jungle Warfare Training program at the SOA in May of 1968, and later in the year he completed Cadet Course C-2. He began his military career as a soldier, eventually becoming aide to General Oswaldo Lopez Arellano, who became Honduran head of state during two military interventions, from 1963 to 1971, and from 1972 to 1975.

Bonilla has been a major player in recent military-government joint operations. As a National Party Congressman, he was one of a group of high-ranking individuals who voted to remove President Manuel Zelaya in 2009. After moving into office after the 2009 constitutional crisis, which was condemned as a coup d'état by the international community, de facto President Porfirio Lobo appointed Bonilla to head the Instituto de Propiedad, the government department that issues land titles. This was in March of 2010, at the crest of a wave of well-known armed land grabs, in which Honduran military allied with wealthy landowners and private security firms to remove *campesinos* from land

which the *campesinos*

had been granted and held title to after fighting for the right to work their land, and through various agrarian reform programs. In 2011, Lobo re-appointed Bonilla to CONATEL, the National Commission of Telecommunications. Under his command, CONATEL helped to pass a federal resolution which halted the issuing of low-power FM broadcast licenses to community radio stations, under the notion that there was too much saturation, weakening the overwhelming authority of major broadcasters. With the help of this resolution, and legislation like this, the campaign of silence was driven down upon the Honduran people, with restrictions on voice, assembly, and right to life. While under the command of Bonilla, CONATEL also supported successful legislation that authorized federal wiretapping.

As all of this information about the 15th Battalion comes to light in which SOA graduates are implicated, one alumnus in particular, General **Romeo Vasquez Velasquez**, has been chosen by the Honduran Patriotic Alliance as standard-bearer in this November's presidential election.

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General Velasquez was the commander of the small military unit who removed President Zelaya back in 2009. He completed a Basic Combat Arms course in 1976, and returned eight years later to take an Instructors' course at the SOA. Prior to involvement in his new political party, Velasquez, like Pompeyo Bonilla, was head of CONATEL, the National Commission of Telecommunications, which has become known as a stopover of military professionals and overarching agent of state repression. The Honduran Patriotic Alliance is up against the likes of the National Party, The Liberal Party, and the new Liberty and Refoundation Party which was founded in 2011 by the National Popular Resistance Front, a leftist coalition of organizers and popular leaders who oppose the 2009 coup. The Liberty and Refoundation Party have chosen as their candidate Manuel Zelaya's wife, former first lady Xiomara Castro de Zelaya.

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## **HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS BY U.S.-BACKED HONDURAN SPECIAL FORCES UNIT**

By Annie Bird, Rights Action

FULL REPORT: [http://rightsaction.org/sites/default/files//Rpt\\_130220\\_Agvan\\_Final.pdf](http://rightsaction.org/sites/default/files//Rpt_130220_Agvan_Final.pdf)

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Over the past three years, soldiers from Honduras' 15th Battalion, based in the Bajo Aguan region of Honduras, have been directly implicated in a series of human rights violations targeting land rights movements, according to a report released today by the Washington, DC / Toronto based human rights organization Rights Action.

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The report documents 34 of those violations which on-the-ground reports link directly to the 15th Battalion. These violations include extrajudicial executions, force disappearance, torture, excessive use of force, abuse of authority and threats. There are indications that many other human rights violations have been committed by the soldiers of the 15th Battalion, and have yet to be documented.

The U.S. military has been training soldiers from the 15th Battalion and providing the unit with various forms of material assistance since 2008. "At the same time the 15th Battalion was implicated in kidnappings, killings, threats, torture and abuse of authority, it received assistance and training from the Special Operations Command South (SOCSOUTH) of the United States Armed Forces," explains the report's author Annie Bird, Co-Director of Rights Action.

The report also provides details regarding 88 killings of campesinos, small farmers, and their supporters, as well as 5 bystanders apparently mistaken for campesinos, which have taken place since January 2010. Most of the killings appear to be targeted assassinations, suggesting the presence of an active death squad in the region. Two of these assassinations occurred this past Saturday, February 16, 2013.

On February 16, 2013, land rights activist Santos Jacobo Cartagena was gunned down while waiting for a bus, and Jose Trejo was shot while driving. Jose Trejo's brother, Antonio Trejo, was a lawyer for the land rights movement who was killed last September, less than three months after winning in courts the return to campesinos of three farms in dispute. Jose Trejo had been very active in demanding an investigation into the assassination of his brother.

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The vast majority of the killings and other violations that have been perpetrated in Bajo Aguán since 2010 have not been investigated, generating a level of impunity that suggests complicity between state and local authorities and those responsible for the killings and other abuses.

FULL REPORT: [http://rightsaction.org/sites/default/files//Rpt\\_130220\\_Aguan\\_Final.pdf](http://rightsaction.org/sites/default/files//Rpt_130220_Aguan_Final.pdf)

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