

## NOBEL WOMEN'S INITIATIVE DELEGATION TO MEXICO, HONDURAS AND GUATEMALA 2012

### BRIEFING NOTE: HONDURAS<sup>1</sup>

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#### **Introduction:**

With a population of 8.14 million, 65% of the Honduran population lives [below the poverty line](#). The nation suffers from vastly unequal distribution of income and high un- and under-employment, which has led to rising emigration—more than a million Hondurans live abroad, most in the United States.

Honduras has a long history of human rights violations, particularly during the period of nearly uninterrupted [military governments](#) (1963-1982) and in the eighties under a U.S.-backed campaign against leftwing organizations in the region that included establishing a military base in Honduras to support Nicaraguan counter-revolutionary forces. This period of repression was characterized by a strategy of forced disappearances and extrajudicial executions within the country. The U.S. government continues to wield tremendous influence in Honduras, in its politics and in the economy, which relies heavily on exports to the U.S. market, U.S. investment and remittances from the U.S.

A military-backed coup d'état overthrew the elected government of President Manuel Zelaya on June 28, 2009. Highly contentious elections were organized by the coup regime on Nov. 29, 2009, which led to the election of incumbent President Porfirio Lobo. While the Organization of American States (the OAS) questioned the elections and did not re-admit Honduras until June 1, 2011, the U.S. and Canada recognized these elections and resumed full support, including expanded U.S. military activity in the country.

The Lobo government has accelerated economic integration under the Central American Free Trade Agreement, in an effort to attract foreign investment—often at the cost of the welfare of its own population and human rights. The National Congress has approved at least 79 investment projects, most of which involve foreign investment, that have led to widespread displacement of native and Garifuna communities from their territories. In addition to the destructive effects of these projects on the country's rivers, forests, mineral deposits, and biodiversity, they are devastating the lives of the population itself, with particular consequences for women. The Patuca Dams I, II and III project and 74 hydroelectric dam projects in other areas of the country threaten massive displacement, as do various wind energy and mining projects. Legislation has been passed to create “model cities” and mega-tourism projects such as Tela Bay, all in clear violation of the ILO Convention 169, the Universal Declaration on the Human Rights of Indigenous Peoples and other international instruments.

A strong and united pro-democracy movement, the National Resistance Front, developed during the coup regime, with unprecedented feminist leadership and women's

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participation, combining a call for the restoration of democracy with specific women's rights demands.

## **I. Context: Factors shaping injustice**

### **1) Weak institutions, corruption and crackdown on social movements.**

Since the 2009 coup, Honduras has maintained a heavy military presence in the political system and in the streets. In some communities, such as Bajo Aguan and Zacate Grande, this military presence is so extreme as to constitute a full-blown occupation. The growing influence of gangs, organized crime and drug cartels combined with the lack of effective rule of law, high levels of corruption and the criminalization of social movements and pro-democracy activists, have eroded citizen security and respect for human rights in the country—so much so, that Honduras is now ranked the most violent country in the world with a murder rate of 82.1 per 100,000 inhabitants, according to the United Nations Office against Drugs and Crime (UNODC). Military officials, many executors of the 2009 coup, occupy key positions in the current regime and one, retired general, Romeo Vasquez Velasquez, recently announced he will be running for President in the upcoming elections.

The Lobo government has also begun a process of dismantling hard-fought economic, social and political rights. In fact, the first policy measure taken by the post-coup government was to reverse the law assuring access to emergency contraception for all women.

Despite dire social needs, Honduras increased its military expenditure from USD\$63 million in 2005 to USD\$160 million in 2010; the government cites efforts to combat crime and the war on drugs to justify the military buildup. However, under this government's rule, drug trafficking activities have increased and the military has been involved in serious violations of human rights against its own population. In Bajo Aguan, reports show that the military has joined with private security forces to repress peasant organizations seeking to protect their land from the expansion of palm oil cultivation, leading to assassinations and illegal detentions, among other violations. Violations of human rights in that region were presented before the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights (IACHR) on October 24, 2011, including 42 assassinations between September 2009 and October 2011 of members of peasant organizations attempting to protect their land.

The army and police have actively repressed peaceful citizen protests. A recent example is the weeks-long violent attacks on the teachers' strike, which protested privatization of the education system and militarization. Several deaths resulted from the actions of security forces (see below).

The government has also shown shocking negligence in attending, punishing and preventing cases of domestic violence against women and assuring quality healthcare. For example, in the recent case of Aracely Lemus, age 30, doctors failed to attend a dangerous labor and the young woman died in the hospital. She was one of seven pregnant women who died while being treated in the Occidente Hospital within one week, from October 15 to October 21, 2011. Family members filed a complaint through the Human Rights office in Santa Rosa de Copán, charging that Aracely was not treated in a timely manner, leading to her death.

### **2) Violence against Women and Femicides**

The conservative government has espoused an anti-women's rights agenda, in collusion with conservative groups that have acquired enormous power and influence in the post-

coup period. Under the cover of corruption and impunity, assault, sexual abuse and rape against women committed by police, military and private security forces as well as conservative private-sector organizations are rising (see documented cases reported by Feminists in Resistance to the IACHR and the Mesoamerican Assessment Report on the Situation of Violence against Women's Human Rights Defenders, below).

The growing political influence and direct involvement in governance by the military and conservative religious institutions has led to the dismantling and reversal of democratic and women's rights legislation, the product of steadfast advocacy and organizing by women's and other social movements since Honduras' military dictatorships. The post-coup government has blocked ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which is critical to addressing and curtailing violations of women's human rights by state and private agencies.

The spike in femicides—the systematic murder of women with government complicity or responsibility—is particularly alarming. According to data compiled by the Center for Women's Rights (CDM), the femicide rate jumped by 257.3% between 2002 and 2010. The figures continue to escalate in 2011, with more than one woman murdered, on average, per day from July to September 2011. Consequently, women, feminists, and human rights defenders must carry out their defense and activist work within this context of growing state repression and unchecked violence.

## **II. Cases**

**1) Elba Rubio:** Elba Rubio, a human rights defender and correspondent for the community radio station *Voz de Zacate*, was arrested December 15, 2010 while reporting on a government-mandated illegal eviction, carried out by the police and marines in the peasant community of Zacate. The government charged her with “disobedience and sedition”, claiming that she did not have permission to report on the act of repression. During her arrest she suffered physical and sexual violence by authorities and her reporter's credentials were confiscated along with key equipment, including her camera, tape recorder, and notes. Since then, Elba has been forced to comply with restrictive measures mandated by the government that force her to walk through three different communities to register periodically in the courthouse. This measure forces her into dangerous terrain, exposing her to risk of sexual assault. She has also received death threats.

These acts are meant to criminalize defenders, like Elba and others in her community, and force them to cease reporting on community land rights struggles against illegal land seizures orchestrated by Miguel Facussé, Honduras' richest landowner, for the expansion of his palm oil production. Radio communications are critical to this community's land struggle, and a target of frequent physical attacks and repressive measures by private interests and government. Elba, along with all 18 reporters of *Voz de Zacate*, must take extra measures to ensure their safety. Despite protective measures mandated by the IACHR requiring the government to ensure their safety, they remain subject to constant threats by the military and Facussé's employees and private security guards. Like many other women human rights defenders in Honduras, Elba has attempted to denounce these incidents and force the State to guarantee protection, but her petitions and claims regarding her safety and that of her community have gone unanswered. On several occasions, the District Attorney's office has offered to suspend the restrictive measures imposed on her in exchange for a guilty plea, but Elba refuses.

**2) Ilse Ivania Velásquez Rodríguez:** an anti-coup activist, member of the opposition and elementary school teacher, took part in the teachers' strike of this year. On March 18, 2011 police shot her in the face with a tear gas canister. She later died in the hospital. Her sister, a U.S. citizen, has written to the U.S. Congress to call on them to "stop the support of Porfirio Lobo's regime in Honduras, and to stop the repression, assassination, incarceration, illegal detentions, torture and killings of the Honduran people." To date, no one has come to trial for Ilse's murder.

### **3) Women and children in the Siria Valley**

In 2007, a study found that residents of Nuevo Palo Ralo, in the Siria Valley in Honduras showed high levels of heavy metals in their blood and a series of illnesses plagued the population. Goldcorp ran the nearby San Martín Mine, which was identified as the source of the poisoning and the company was fined. The community was forcibly relocated to its present location. Five-year old Lesly Yaritza died on September 25, 2010 after testing extremely high for lead and arsenic. Lesly suffered birth defects typical of the effects of heavy metal poisoning, constituting a serious violation of reproductive rights. Although the mine was closed, no follow-up on human and environmental health was done and the Supreme Court exempted Goldcorp from paying its fines, saying that there was no evidence of responsibility. There have been widespread accusations of corruption. The Honduran government study was not released for four years, indicating a massive cover-up of violations of health and environmental rights. [International Civil Society](#) groups have entered into talks with Goldcorp.

**4) Anonymous Women Human Rights Defender:** One woman human rights defender in Honduras, a member of the Legal Promoters Network, was forced into exile due to threats and fear for her safety from the military and violent gangs, including threats of sexual abuse against her and her adolescent daughter (the Mesoamerican Assessment Report on the Situation of Violence against Women's Human Rights Defenders, p.11).

## **III. FACT SHEET**

1. According to the Honduran Women's Center (CEMH), a total of 210 femicides were registered in the first seven months of 2011, of which 81% were by gunshot and 70% remain unsolved, leaving the guilty parties on the streets without bringing them to justice. According to the CDM, the homicide rate of women increased by 257.3% between 2002 and 2010.
2. Fifty-nine politically related assassinations in this year alone (2011); 61 last year, according to the Chicago Religious Leadership Network, with data from FIAN.
3. An increase in maternal deaths has recently been registered in the country's most important maternal hospitals for causes that remain unexplained by the authorities. The cases have not been properly documented or investigated and authorities refuse to release the information.
4. The November 2009 report to the IACHR cites between 4,000 and 6,000 illegal detentions in Honduras since the coup d'état.

## **IV. Petitions to the Government of Honduras**

1. Denounce the violation of women's human rights caused by the presence and influence of conservative religious institutions in government structures. Demand that the gains made by women's rights groups be respected and built upon.

2. Demand a full investigation and appropriate judicial proceedings of all the cases pending regarding women's rights defenders, as well as the maternal deaths and incidents in Bajo Aguan.
3. Denounce militarization and the continual violation of women's rights committed by military forces.
4. Ensure freedom of expression by all journalists and activists involved in human rights activities, including reversing the sentence against Elba Rubio.
5. Urgent measures must be taken to end impunity in general, in particular in the case of femicide. These measures must include annulment of recently adopted measures that represent a setback for women's and feminist organizations in terms of research and legislation.
6. Crimes committed during the coup regime must be thoroughly investigated and punished, as well as continuing crimes against women, and particularly against women human rights defenders, throughout the country.

**Links and resources for more information:**

Center for Women's Rights (CDM) [www.derechosdelamujer.org](http://www.derechosdelamujer.org)

Honduran Women's Center (CEMH): <http://www.cemh.org.hn/>

Video of the Manzanal struggle: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HoKo1uacPU>

Blog: [www.forodemujeresporlavidazonanorte.blogspot.com](http://www.forodemujeresporlavidazonanorte.blogspot.com)