Opinion
Guest Voices



San Pedro Sula, Honduras: Participants in the ecumenical delegation were told that without the delegation's presence, a march like this could not have taken place. All of the military presence surrounding the church where this march began after Mass and along this highway was removed. (Tom Webb)

by Tom Webb

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SAN PEDRO SULA, HONDURAS — January 26, 2018

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Editor's note: *Tom Webb is traveling with an ecumenical delegation to San Pedro Sula, Honduras, Jan. 24-30 to witness the repression against peaceful demonstrations to the recent presidential election. NCR will continue to have reports from the delegation in the coming days.*

An ecumenical delegation of 50 U.S. citizens journeyed Jan. 24 to San Pedro Sula, Honduras, to learn more about the furious national political turmoil following the mid-December announcement by the Supreme Electoral Tribunal declaring incumbent president Juan Orlando Hernández the winner of the Nov. 26 election.

Delegates representing 48 different denominations, religious communities, faith-based advocacy groups and Latin American solidarity networks from 13 U.S. states gathered at the Sisters of Notre Dame Retreat Center in El Progresso in northern Honduras for an overview of the current state of Honduras, to learn more about the events leading to and following the election and hear the witness of local groups of their experiences over the past several weeks. They were joined by four people from Canada, Colombia, El Salvador and Argentina.

Ordinarily, one would not expect such turmoil within days following a presidential election. The opposition candidate, Salvador Nasralla, of the Alliance of the Opposition Against Dictatorship party, was winning the election by about 5 percentage points a day after the voting ended. But then the computer system used to tally the votes suddenly and inexplicably went down.

About 36 hours later, the vote count resumed. President Hernández had substantially cut the lead of Nasralla. By mid-December, following a re-count, Hernández was declared the winner by the Supreme Electoral Tribunal with 42.9 percent of the vote. Nasralla gathered 41.2 percent.

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Outrage swept the country. Huge but peaceful demonstrations took place in Tegucigalpa and other cities. Street blockages, burning tires and uprooted trees were used by demonstrators to express their discontent at what was widely-

perceived as a fraudulent election count. The Honduran military forces used tear gas and other measures to disperse the protestors. As the unrest persisted, government-ordered crackdowns began. At least 30 people have been killed by government forces. Hundreds have been jailed for virtually no offenses.

The Organization of American States, which had 90 election observers around the country, also sounded a note of alarm. The organization found numerous problematic issues with the electoral process, noting evidence of "deliberate human intrusions in the computer system, intentional elimination of digital traces and pouches of votes open or lacking votes." They reported that the irregularities were so pronounced that a new election should be required.

Following the announcement by the Supreme Electoral Tribunal, the Trump administration congratulated Hernandez. The congratulations were joined by several other countries, including Guatemala and Israel. While the U.S. State Department noted the irregularities reported by the Organization of American States, it called for a "robust national dialogue."

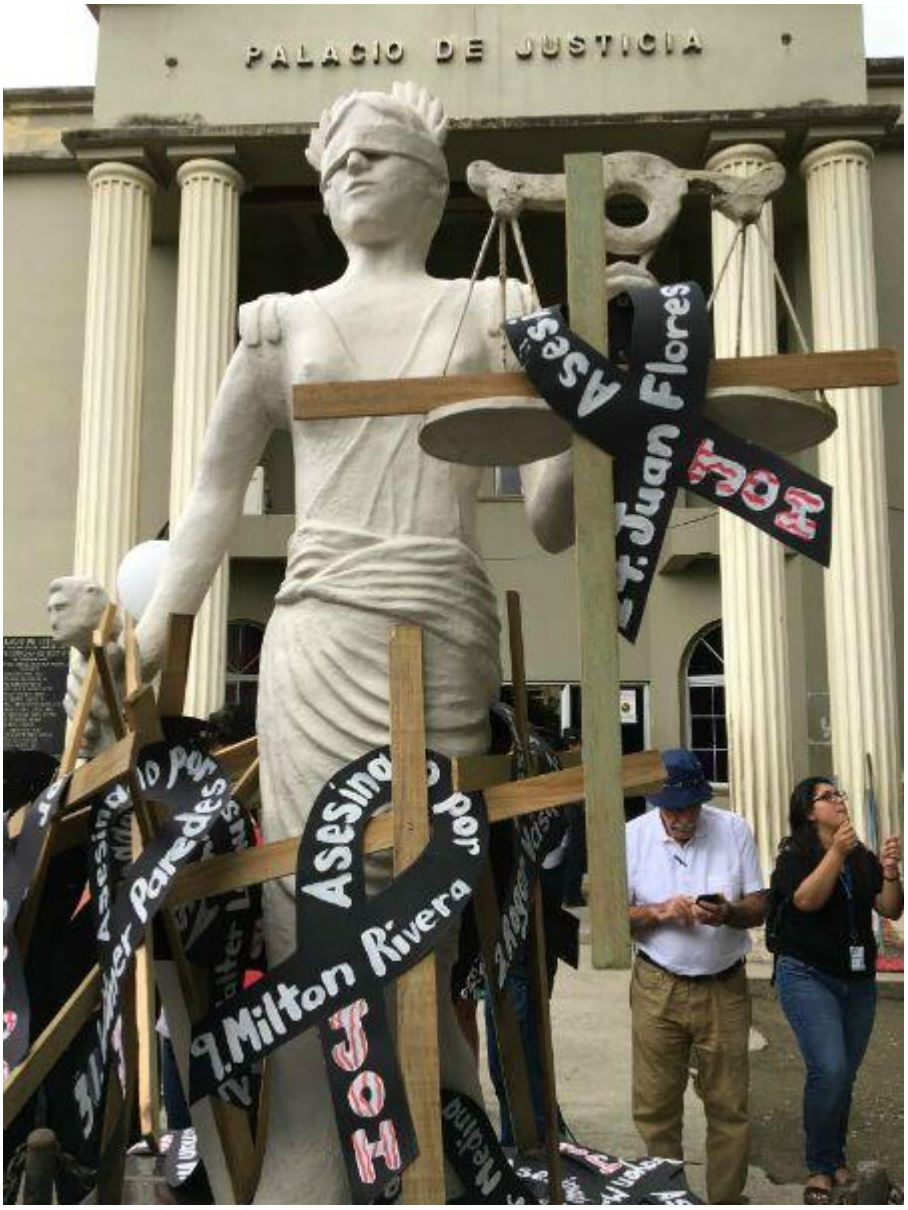
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Within days after the voting results were announced, Jesuit Fr. Ismael Moreno Coto (known as"Padre Melo"), director of Radio Progreso in El Progreso, Honduras, sent an emergency appeal to two long-time activists for assistance. José Artiga, executive director of Berkeley-based SHARE-El Salvador and the Rev. Deborah Lee, executive director of the Interfaith Movement for Human Integrity had previously visited Padre Melo several times with other delegations.

They decided to make a widespread appeal for an emergency delegation to go to Honduras for six days at the end of January. Letters were requested from local congressional representatives from across the country acknowledging and affirming the mission of the delegates.

Padre Melo and his staff at Radio Progreso operate one of the few independent radio stations in Honduras. For 60 years, Radio Progreso has aligned itself closely to the sorrows and joys of the Honduran people. Padre Melo and his staff have regularly received death threats and various forms of harassment by the government for their role in broadcasting truths which often contradict government narratives. Since the election, the death threats against Padre Melo have increased. Most recently he has

been linked to Honduran gangs and weapons trafficking by opposition forces in Honduras. Radio Progreso is also adding a second gate outside its compound for additional security.



Members of the delegation gather outside the Palace of Justice where a statue of "Justice" was draped with names of "the newest Honduran martyrs." (Tom Webb)

Upon their arrival Jan. 24, several of the delegates from the San Francisco Bay Area were met with a surprise welcome by customs officials. After they had shown their passports, they were directed to another station within the customs office. They were queried about their purposes, the place they would be residing and the length of their stay in Honduras. Conferring afterwards, it was widely believed the purpose

of the extended visit with customs officials was the government's way of acknowledging their presence in the country.

The delegation was met with a much warmer welcome by some 100 Hondurans, including Padre Melo. Holding signs, singing and chanting, the Hondurans gathered inside an airport marketplace. Their enthusiasm and joy almost immediately dissipated any concerns arriving delegates felt. Padre Melo made some preliminary remarks, and then a banner bearing names and pictures of the 30 Hondurans who had been killed by government forces in the aftermath of the election was spread in front of the delegates. This somber note reminded delegates of the precarious character of our visit.

The welcome concluded with an amusing recording of "*Ho! Ho! Afuera JOH*" ("Oh! Oh! Out with Juan Orlando Hernandez"), accompanied by an accordion. The Hondurans joined in singing this apparently popular chant with much laughter and joy.

At dinner, delegates were instructed to discuss why they had decided to come. Mercy Sr. Kathleen Erickson, volunteered that the President of the Mercy Sisters had called her and asked her to participate. The Mercy sisters have a community in Honduras.

Erikson has also been working with Central American immigrants in the United States for the past several years, including a two-month stint as a prison chaplain in the South Texas Family Residential Center which opened in 2014 at the height of the Central American immigration crisis. She noted the irony of the newly-opened facility. Despite the fact that it was dressed with an enviable array of social, educational and recreational services and facilities for detained migrant families, it remained a detention center. Guards wore no uniforms but also spoke no Spanish.

Delegates were instructed to be attentive during their six-day stay. What we heard, saw and learned was to be fodder for presentations, articles and other reports we made to our churches, communities, organizations and affiliates once we returned home.

[Tom Webb is a freelance writer and member of the Oakland Catholic Worker community.]

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