NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (https://www.ncronline.org)

Honduran coup leader a two-time SOA graduate

Linda Cooper James Hodge | Jun. 29, 2009

Gen. Romeo Orlando V·squez Vel·squez

The general who overthrew the democratically elected president of Honduras is a two-time graduate of the U.S. Army School of the Americas, an institution that has trained hundreds of coup leaders and human rights abusers in Latin America.

Gen. Romeo Orlando Vásquez Velásquez toppled President Manuel Zelaya in a pre-dawn coup on Sunday, surrounding the presidential palace with more than 200 soldiers and tanks and tear-gassing a crowd outside. The president was abducted and taken to an Air Force base before being flown to Costa Rica.
The overthrow followed a showdown over a controversial term-limit referendum that was to have taken place the day of the coup.

The military moved quickly against media outlets in an attempt to stem the flow of news about the ouster and the protests that followed.

Jesuit Fr. Joe Mulligan provided NCR with a copy of an email he received about the media crackdown from fellow Jesuit, Fr. Ismael Moreno, director of Radio Progreso, the order?s radio station in Honduras.

The station was transmitting news about the coup Sunday morning when about 25 military troops stormed the building and ordered them to cancel their programming, the email said. While the soldiers were inside the station, a large group of people gathered outside to support the station?s personnel. The standoff was apparently resolved without violence, but the station had not resumed operations by Monday night. Meanwhile, protests were growing in the capital city of Tegucigalpa, and strikes were being planned by Zelaya supporters.

The events came as no shock to Maryknoll Fr. Roy Bourgeois, founder of SOA Watch, which has sought for years to shut down the Army school, which was closed in 2000 and re-opened as the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation. ?We?re not surprised. Vásquez is one of the key players, an SOA grad? who?s keeping alive the school?s nickname, ?School of Coups.?

The overthrow is re-fueling the latest effort by US peace activists to shut the school once and for all. Eric LeCompte, the national organizer for SOA Watch, said there are two pieces of legislation that are gaining support.
One is Rep. Jim McGovern?s House Bill 2567, which calls for suspending operations at the SOA/WHINSEC and investigating the torture manuals and human rights abuses associated with the school.

The second is an amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act for FY 2010, which would force the release of the names of the school?s graduates, including their rank, country of origin and the courses they?ve taken.

While the Defense Department promised transparency when it re-opened SOA as WHINSEC, LeCompte said it has refused to release the names of the instructors and the graduates since 2005 ? after it was revealed that the school was enrolling well-known human rights abusers. One ? Salvadoran Col. Francisco del Cid Diaz, a 2003 graduate ? was cited by the 1993 U.N. Truth Commission for commanding a unit that dragged people from their homes and shot them at point-blank range.

Last week the House approved the amendment, but the measure still has to survive a House and Senate conference committee later this summer.
In overthrowing the government Sunday, Vásquez Velásquez joins two other Honduran SOA graduates who deposed heads of state, Gen. Juan Melgar Castro and Gen. Policarpo Paz Garcia.

Melgar Castro ruled the country from 1975 to 1978, the years when two of his SOA underlings ? Maj. Jose Enrique Chinchilla and Lt. Benjamin Plata ? conducted an operation that tortured and executed two priests, Michael Cypher and Ivan Betancur. The priests? bodies were thrown in a well along with two women and five peasants who were baked alive in bread ovens. The massacre took place on the Los Horcones hacienda, which was owned by the father of Manuel Zelaya, the Honduran president ousted Sunday.

Melgar was overthrown in 1978 by fellow SOA graduate, Paz Garcia, whom the U.S. Army installed into SOA?s ?Hall of Fame? ten years later. Paz Garcia?s tenure was also marked by brutal military repression and the formation of Battalion 3-16, a military death squad that worked closely with the CIA in targeting suspected leftists in the ?80s. Paz Garcia?s military commander was another SOA grad, Gen. Gustavo Alvarez Martinez, who ran 3-16 and ordered the execution of Fr. James Carney, a U.S. missionary to Honduras.

The three Honduran generals fit into the larger picture of coup leaders trained by the U.S. Army school, which used to boast about how many of the school?s graduates had become heads of their countries.

The boasting, which stopped after the graduates? undemocratic paths to power became better known, celebrated such figures as:

- Argentine Gen. Leopoldo Galtieri, who seized power in a bloody coup, bringing down another SOA grad, Gen. Roberto Viola, who came to power during Argentina?s Dirty War.
- Guatemalan dictator Gen. Efrain Rios Montt, who seized power in a coup in 1982 and conducted a

scorched earth campaign against the Mayan Indians.

- Panamanian dictators Gen. Omar Torrijos, who overthrew a civilian government in a 1968 coup, and Gen. Manuel Noriega, a five-time SOA graduate, who ruled the country and dealt in drugs while on the CIA payroll.
- Ecuadoran dictator Gen. Guillermo Rodriguez, who overthrew the elected civilian government in 1972.
- Bolivian dictators Gen. Hugo Banzer Suarez, who seized power in a violent coup in 1971, and Gen. Guido Vildoso Calderon, who grabbed power in 1982.
- Peruvian strongman Gen. Juan Velasco Alvarado, who in 1968 toppled the elected civilian government.

In ousting the Honduran president Sunday, Vásquez Velásquez had the help of other SOA graduates, including Gen. Luis Javier Prince Suazo, the head of the Honduran Air Force.

Another two-time SOA grad, retired Gen. Daniel López Carballo, told CNN that the coup was justified because Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez would be running Honduras by proxy if the military had not acted.

Records show that Vásquez Velásquez took a basic combat arms course at SOA in 1976 and another course on small military units in 1984, while Prince Suazo took a 1996 course on joint operations.

President Zelaya ? whom the Honduran Congress replaced Sunday with Roberto Micheletti ? was a businessman who had leaned to the right when he was elected in 2006. Zelaya surprised many when he started to loosen the strong ties Honduras has had with the United States, which has controlled the country to such a degree that it was once called the U.S.S. Honduras.

Zelaya enjoyed wide support among the poor and union leaders, but increasingly drew the wrath of the powers that be and clashed with foreign oil companies and the U.S. Embassy when he sought to reduce the price of oil for Hondurans.

Restricted by law to a 4-year term, he attempted to have a referendum that would ask voters to change the constitution and permit a second presidential term. Zelaya said a single term makes it impossible to address long-standing poverty issues in a country where half of the residents live on less than one dollar a day and have little voice in how the government operates.

The controversy heated up when Zelaya dismissed a Supreme Court ruling that held that the referendum was illegal. ?The court,? he said, ?offers justice for the rich, the powerful and the bankers, but only causes problems for democracy.?

Zelaya had also replaced Vásquez Velásquez as Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces after he refused to give logistical support for the referendum.

The coup has brought wide-spread condemnation by world leaders, and the Organization of American States called for Zelaya's reinstatement.

U.N. General Assembly President Miguel D'Escoto Brockmann ?categorically? condemned what he called ?the criminal action by the army? and asked the U.N. to find a way to restore the president to power.

D'Escoto also called for President Obama to condemn the coup, noting that Obama announced a new policy toward Latin America at the Summit of the Americas in Trinidad last month. But he added, "Many are now asking if this coup is part of this new policy as it is well known that the army in Honduras has a history of total collaboration with the United States."

The U.S. has sent mixed signals about the coup. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said the US was not

insisting that Zelaya be restored to office. But later, Obama stiffened his stand, calling for his return to power. Still, he stopped short of calling for sanctions or threatening a cut off of U.S. aid to the country.

Linda Cooper and James Hodge are the authors of Disturbing the Peace: The Story of Father Roy Bourgeois and the Movement to Close the School of the Americas.

Source URL (retrieved on *03/29/2017 - 05:37*): https://www.ncronline.org/news/global/honduran-coup-leader-two-time-soa-graduate