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U.S. delegation enters tense Honduras

by Linda Cooper by James Hodge



Gen. Romeo Orlando Vásquez Velásquez: sketched by Jonathan Hodge

Analysis

Answering a call from Honduran relatives of the disappeared, a delegation of seven U.S. citizens managed Tuesday to enter Honduras where tensions have been high since the military toppled the country's president.

Costa Rican President Oscar Arias, meanwhile, agreed Tuesday to try to resolve the political crisis sparked by the overthrow of President Manuel Zelaya, who was ousted at gunpoint and flown into exile June 28.

The coup - Central America's first since 1993 - was led by Gen. Romeo Orlando Vásquez Velásquez, a two-time graduate of the U.S. Army's School of the Americas, which also trained two other generals who seized power in Honduras.

The U.S. delegation answered a call from Bertha Oliva, the founder of the Committee of Relatives of the

Disappeared in Honduras, who asked for international volunteers to be observers of the military crackdown, said Hendrik Voss, Communications Coordinator for SOA Watch.

"We have been in contact with the group several times a day for the last week and became very concerned about the increased repression there," Voss said.

The military opened fire Sunday on peaceful crowds, killing one and injuring several others after about 10,000 demonstrators showed their support for Zelaya in the capital city of Tegucigalpa.

SOA Watch sent seven volunteers, Voss said, including its Latin America Coordinator Lisa Sullivan, West Point graduate Laura Slattery, Jesuit Father Joe Mulligan, lawyer Kent Spriggs, SOA Watch founder Father Roy Bourgeois, Dan Kovalik, senior counsel from the United Steelworkers Union and Tom Loudon, co-director of the Quixote Center in Washington.

The delegation had attempted to fly into the country on Sunday, but flights were cancelled after the military effectively shut down the airport to prevent Zelaya's return. Zelaya's plane, which was also carrying UN General Assembly President Miguel D'Escoto, tried unsuccessfully to land several times.

It is not surprising that Oliva's Committee of Relatives of the Disappeared is fearful of the military's resurgence and has turned to human rights organizations like SOA Watch for help.

Not only has the group lost family members in the past, but new death threats have come this year, threats which Amnesty International believes are connected to the organization's campaign for reparations for the relatives of the disappeared. In one threat, Oliva was told: "you may turn up with your mouth full of worms. And in a rubbish bag."

For Oliva, the threat conjures up June 1981, when six men wearing black ski masks burst into her home in the middle of the night and dragged away her husband Tomas Nativi, a university professor. Pregnant at the time, she was left bound hand and foot and her husband was never seen again. He had been taken by a unit of Battalion 3-16, a notorious death squad created and commanded by SOA-trained officers.



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A total of seven SOA graduates were linked to Nativi's kidnapping and disappearance in the 1994 report of the Commissioner of Human Rights in Honduras, entitled "The Facts Speak for Themselves." They include:

- Gen. Policarpo Paz Garcia, who came to power in a coup and whose portrait hung for years in SOA's notorious Hall of Fame at Ft. Benning, Ga.;
- Gen. Gustavo Alvarez Martinez, Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces;
- Gen. Daniel Bali Castillo, Police Commissioner and three-time graduate of the school;
- Col. Juan Lopez Grijalva, head of the G-2 military unit, four-time graduate and two-time guest speaker at the school in the 1990s;
- Juan Ramon Peña Paz, Battalion 3-16 executioner, who took a counterinsurgency class at the school;
- Capt. Pio Flores, a four-time graduate whose home was frequently used as a detention center; and
- Ricardo Lau, a Nicaraguan contra and former commander in Somoza's National Guard, who was assigned to help the Honduran counterintelligence unit. He took four classes at the school.

Oliva's group, known by its Spanish acronym COFADEH, has also campaigned for Honduras to follow the lead of other Latin American countries that have severed their ties to SOA, renamed the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation in 2000.

The school has trained more than 4,000 Honduran officers. It's not clear how many officers are currently enrolled since the Defense Department has refused since 2005 to release much information about the school. Last month, however, the House passed an amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act

for FY 2010 that would force the release of the names of the school's graduates, including their rank, country of origin and the courses they've taken. The measure still has to survive a House and Senate conference committee later this summer.

International pressure to reinstate Zelaya has continued to mount since the UN General Assembly passed a resolution calling for his return and the Organization of America States suspended Honduras, an action taken only once before in its history.

The Obama administration, however, has continued to send mixed messages about the Honduran situation. While Obama has called for Zelaya's reinstatement, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton failed to re-state that position Tuesday when announcing that Arias would mediate the crisis.

Both Zelaya and Roberto Micheletti, the head of Honduras' de facto government, have agreed to Arias' mediation, which is to begin on Thursday.

Zelaya, however, has stated that his reinstatement as president was "non-negotiable."

Zelaya - once a conservative rancher who moved to the left, befriending Venezuela's Hugo Chavez - unnerved the powers that be in Honduras by calling for a referendum on whether to amend the constitution and permit more than a single presidential term. While Zelaya has said he has no plans to run again, his attempt to revise the constitution set the coup in motion.

The referendum - although not binding - would also have given the people some voice in how the country is governed, something COFADEH believes was the real reason for the coup.

It is not clear where the Catholic Church stands in the fray, but after the coup, Honduran state television repeatedly broadcast a statement from Honduran Cardinal Oscar Rodriguez, telling Zelaya not to return because he feared a "bloodbath." In 1991, Rodriguez spoke at SOA - two years after six Jesuits were massacred in El Salvador and one year after Congressman Joe Moakley revealed that they had been killed by SOA graduates.

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.

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