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Religious delegation decries human rights' abuses in Honduras

by Thomas C. Fox

NCR Today

A religious delegation recently returned from a week-long visit to Honduras and issued a statement calling upon the U.S.:

- to be unequivocal and very public in denouncing the brutal human rights violations committed by Honduran military and police forces;
- to cancel diplomatic as well as tourist and business visas for a broader group of those implicated in orchestrating or leading the coup;
- to freeze the accounts in U.S. banks of these same coup leaders; and
- to follow the example of other nations by recalling Ambassador Llorens until the legitimate president of Honduras is restored to office.

The following is the full statement:

We are the sixth international delegation that has come to Honduras since the coup d'état of June 28, 2009. We have come from Panama and the United States as people of faith ? Catholic Christians -- to accompany the pain of the Honduran people and to understand more clearly the reality they are living. We represent the Justice Team of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns and Pax Christi International.

We have been in Honduras from August 18-25, visiting Tegucigalpa, Progreso, San Pedro Sula, Santa

Rosa de Copan and Santa Barbara. What we have seen and heard here has broken our hearts and evoked in us deep concern.

It also has given us hope as we met with many sectors of Honduran society that demonstrate amazing courage and capacity to organize a diverse and strong popular resistance to the coup and subsequent repression. Clearly, Hondurans have enduring hope for a country that promotes the common good, justice and human rights.

We have heard first-hand from victims of horrific human rights violations inflicted by Honduran military and police forces upon ordinary people peacefully exercising basic rights guaranteed by the Honduran Constitution and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. These abuses, including beatings, rape, harassment and intimidation, arbitrary arrest, disappearances and even death, have been well documented by the Honduran Human Rights organization, COFADEH, and in recent reports from Amnesty International and by the InterAmerican Human Rights Commission, also present in Honduras this week.

We are alarmed to see people and patterns of abuse re-emerging from the shadows of repression in earlier decades. Impunity in the past for criminals and violators of human rights has left Hondurans vulnerable to a painful repeat of history. Militarization, disinformation, extreme attempts to control the civilian population and a terrible polarization of the citizenry have far-reaching ramifications for a people yearning for a just end to poverty and exclusion.

We are distressed by the implications for the region and beyond of what we have seen in Honduras. We are convinced that the conflict here is not only about Mel Zelaya, although the return of the legitimate president to office is imperative, but about the abuse of political and military, and especially of economic, power. That does not bode well for the future of the hemisphere or for any country in the world where the basic rights of citizens to a decent life, to a healthy environment, and to participate in important decisions that affect their lives challenge the privileges and power of a few — be they individuals, institutions or business interests.

We are heartened by the strong response of the international community to events on June 28th. The United Nations, the Organization of American States (OAS), the European Union, and many individual countries around the world have denounced the coup and have taken strong measures to isolate the illegitimate government.

We are concerned, however, by what we believe is an inadequate public response of the U.S. government to the coup and to the ensuing repression. We were encouraged by the initial U.S. response, but, caught in the controversy over constitutional technicalities, subsequent actions were neither timely nor sufficiently strong.

We urge the U.S. government

- to be unequivocal and very public in denouncing the brutal human rights violations committed by Honduran military and police forces;
- to cancel diplomatic as well as tourist and business visas for a broader group of those implicated in orchestrating or leading the coup;
- to freeze the accounts in U.S. banks of these same coup leaders; and
- to follow the example of other nations by recalling Ambassador Llorens until the legitimate president of Honduras is restored to office.

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Although the process hosted by Nobel laureate Oscar Arias may facilitate the return to Honduras of President Zelaya, long term peace will depend on ensuring that the poor and marginalized sectors of society be included in the economic and political life of the country.

One of our deepest preoccupations, however, is about the profound divisions in and animosity surrounding the vibrant Honduran Catholic community, when the rich resources of our faith tradition should be guiding the nation toward a just resolution to this intolerable situation.

We have heard from many people about the deep hurt, anger and loss of credibility occasioned by the July 3rd statement of the Honduran Bishops' Conference. Despite our attempts, we were unable to secure a meeting with Cardinal Oscar Rodr'guez Maradiaga, SDB to hear his perspective on this and try to understand his words and actions that have created such an intense reaction from the Honduran people.

The Gospel and Catholic social teaching clearly articulate the values, principles and priorities that should offer a framework for the Church's engagement with Honduran society at this painful moment. In particular, the preferential option for the poor, which is one of the distinguishing features of the Latin American and Caribbean church (Aparecida #391), and the virtue of solidarity should place the Church clearly on the side of Hondurans whose basic dignity is now being abused.

We met courageous priests, women religious and lay women and men who accompany people from all walks of life whose human rights are being violated. Many of these pastoral workers have been threatened and attacked as well. We had a long conversation with the bishop of Santa Rosa de Copan and heard clearly his commitment to the poor and his perspectives on the influence of economic interests in facilitating the coup. That analysis we heard repeated many times over in our visits throughout the country. We pray that the official Catholic Church in Honduras will listen with care to the pain of those who feel abandoned and assume a role of speaking out forcefully for an end to the pattern of intimidation and official abuse against those non-violently expressing their opposition to the coup.

We also urge the Catholic community worldwide and all people of good will to strengthen international solidarity with the Honduran people, accompanying those whose basic human rights are being violated, advocating for a just and enduring resolution to this crisis, and addressing the many ways in which international greed for minerals and markets, wealth, power and control provide fertile ground for the suffering in Honduras. Long-term peace and stability depend on ensuring that the poor and marginalized sectors of society be included in the economic and political life of the country.

We believe that Hondurans ? including civil society, the Catholic Church and all communities of faith, the military and police, the private sector, organized labour, politicians, scholars, lawyers ? can come together to create a just society and end the crisis they are now living. To move in that direction will require a return to legitimate government of and for ordinary people, an end to the abuse of power that characterizes the Honduras we have visited in these days and a deep commitment to honest and broadly participative dialogue across the differences that now divide Honduran society.

We commit ourselves to supporting this endeavour and to helping to animate action in solidarity with the people of Honduras in the international networks of religious communities and people of faith of which we are a part.

Sisters of Mercy of the Americas-Justice Team:

tSister Diane Guerin, Justice Minister, Mid-Atlantic Community
Sister Edie Lopez, Justice Minister, Central and South America Community
Jean Stokan, Director, Institute Justice Team

Marie Dennis, Co-President, Pax Christi International and Director, Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns
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