

NYTimes Op-Ed: Human Rights in Honduras In Honduras, a Mess Made in the U.S.

By DANA FRANK Published: January 26, 2012 SANTA CRUZ, Calif.

IT'S time to acknowledge the foreign policy disaster that American support for the Porfirio Lobo administration in Honduras has become. Ever since the June 28, 2009, coup that deposed Honduras's democratically elected president, José Manuel Zelaya, the country has been descending deeper into a human rights and security abyss. That abyss is in good part the State Department's making.

The headlines have been full of horror stories about Honduras. According to the United Nations, it now has the world's highest murder rate, and San Pedro Sula, its second city, is more dangerous than Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, a center for drug cartel violence.

Much of the press in the United States has attributed this violence solely to drug trafficking and gangs. But the coup was what threw open the doors to a huge increase in drug trafficking and violence, and it unleashed a continuing wave of state-sponsored repression.

The current government of President Lobo won power in a November 2009 election managed by the same figures who had initiated the coup. Most opposition candidates withdrew in protest, and all major international observers boycotted the election, except for the National Democratic Institute and the International Republican Institute, which are financed by the United States.

President Obama quickly recognized Mr. Lobo's victory, even when most of Latin America would not. Mr. Lobo's government is, in fact, a child of the coup. It retains most of the military figures who perpetrated the coup, and no one has gone to jail for starting it.

This chain of events — a coup that the United States didn't stop, a fraudulent election that it accepted — has now allowed corruption to mushroom. The judicial system hardly functions. Impunity reigns. At least 34 members of the opposition have disappeared or been killed, and more than 300 people have been killed by state security forces since the coup, according to the leading human rights organization Cofadeh. At least 13 journalists have been killed since Mr. Lobo took office, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists.

The police in Tegucigalpa, the capital, are believed to have killed the son of Julieta Castellanos, the rector of the country's biggest university, along with a friend of his, on Oct. 22, 2011. Top police officials quickly admitted their suspects were police officers, but failed to immediately detain them. When prominent figures came forward to charge that the police are riddled with death squads and drug traffickers, the most famous accuser was a former police commissioner, Alfredo Landaverde. He was assassinated on Dec. 7. Only now has the government begun to make significant arrests of police officers.

State-sponsored repression continues. According to Cofadeh, at least 43 campesino activists participating in land struggles in the Aguán Valley have been killed in the past two and a half years at the hands of the police, the military and the private security army of Miguel

Facussé. Mr. Facussé is mentioned in United States Embassy cables made public by WikiLeaks as the richest man in the country, a big supporter of the post-coup regime and owner of land used to transfer cocaine.

And yet, in early October, Mr. Obama praised Mr. Lobo at the White House for leadership in a "restoration of democratic practices." Since the coup the United States has maintained and in some areas increased military and police financing for Honduras and has been enlarging its military bases there, according to an analysis by the Fellowship of Reconciliation.

Congress, though, has finally begun to push back. Last May, 87 members signed a letter to Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton calling for a suspension of military and police aid to Honduras. Representative Howard L. Berman of California, the ranking Democrat on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, wrote to her on Nov. 28, asking whether the United States was arming a dangerous regime. And in December, Senator Patrick J. Leahy, Democrat of Vermont, and others obtained conditions on a small portion of the 2012 police and military aid appropriated for Honduras.

Why has the State Department thrown itself behind the Lobo administration despite brutal evidence of the regime's corruption? In part because it has caved in to the Cuban-American constituency of Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, the Republican chairwoman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, and her allies. They have been ferocious about Honduras as a first domino with which to push back against the line of center-left and leftist governments that have won elections in Latin America in the past 15 years. With its American air base, Honduras is also crucial to the United States' military strategy in Latin America.

As Honduras plunges into a tragic abyss, it's time to finally cut off all police and military aid. "Stop feeding the beast" is the way Ms. Castellanos, the academician whose son was killed, puts it. She, like other human rights advocates, insists that the Lobo government cannot reform itself.

The State Department is beginning to help address the situation behind the scenes. But Honduran human-rights activists, along with many of us in the United States who care about Honduras, do not believe that this administration can, or should, manage a cleanup of the very cesspool it helped to create by supporting a government that owes its power to a coup.

Instead, we need to respect proposals for alternative approaches that Honduran human-rights advocates and the opposition are beginning to formulate. These come from people who are still fighting against the coup and who continue to risk paying the price of being shot dead by state security forces.

They, not the State Department, have the right to lead their country forward.

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