

July 15, 2010

The Honorable Hillary Clinton
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Clinton,

We write to express our grave concerns regarding gross violations of human rights directed against human rights defenders, activists and journalists in Honduras that have taken place since the inauguration of the government of Porfirio Lobo Sosa on January 27th of this year. Many of those who have been threatened, attacked and killed were affiliated with the National Popular Resistance Front or otherwise opposed the coup that took place on June 28, 2009. We urge the State Department to condition assistance to Honduras upon prompt and vigorous investigation of these cases and effective measures to ensure an end to these abuses.

Among the assassinations of social activists in 2010 are: Julio Fúnez Benítez, union leader, killed by gunmen on a motorcycle; Claudia Maritza Brizuela, daughter of union leader Pedro Brizuela, killed at home in front of her two small children; Francisco Castillo, activist; Juan Manuel Flores Arguijo, national resistance leader and teacher, gunned down in front of his students; Adalberto Figueroa, environmental leader, shot by hooded gunmen; Gilberto Alexander Núñez Ochoa, resistance leader; Pedro Antonio Durón Gómez, brother of President Zelaya's cabinet member Arcadia Gómez, and Vanessa Zepeda Alonzo, union leader, who was shot to death after being abducted upon leaving a union meeting. According to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), at least seven of the eight activists were associated directly or through their family members with opposition to the coup. Activists have also reported being attacked by assailants who made threats regarding their political activity. The IACHR has also expressed "deep concern" over information it received that indicates "children of the leaders of the Resistance Front were being kidnapped, attacked and threatened, as a strategy to silence the resistance."

Violence against journalists has been unprecedented, with Honduras becoming the most dangerous country for journalists on the continent. Eight journalists were killed in the first half of 2010. Prior to the June 28th coup, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) registered three killings of journalists in the six and a half years from 2003 through mid-2009. "This wave of deadly violence," according to the CPJ, "is seriously limiting the media's ability to report the news." According to testimony by the Center for Justice and International Law (CEJIL) before the House Western Hemisphere subcommittee, the slain journalists are: David Meza Montesinos of Radio America and Radio el Patio, who had received threats related to reporting on drug trafficking and was active in opposition to the coup; Nahúm Palacios, news director for TV Channel 5 in Aguán, who had received death threats after the coup; Joseph Hernández Ochoa of Channel 51, shot dead as he drove in a car with another journalist, Karol Cabrera, who had reported receiving threats from those opposed to the coup, and was wounded; Manuel Juárez and José Bayardo Mairena, who had reported on land conflicts and organized crime, shot dead in

their car in Olancho; Luis Antonio Chévez Hernández of Radio W105, along with his cousin, Julio Alberto Hernández; Jorge Alberto “Georgino” Orellana, who had left his employer Televiscentro because he disagreed with the station’s support for the coup, shot dead in San Pedro Sula; and Luis Arturo Mondragón Morazán, owner of 19 Paraiso TV. Journalists—including staff of radio and TV stations that had been closed by or suffered harassment from military or police following the June 28 coup, such as Radio Progreso and La Voz de Occidente—continue to be confronted by death threats.

The Honduran government has failed to create a climate in which human rights defenders, social activists and journalists can carry out their important work. Human rights defenders are specifically targeted for death threats and other acts of intimidation. Rampant violations of human rights and freedom of expression by the coup government created an atmosphere in which abuses mounted. Yet in the first six months of the Lobo administration, virtually none of the abuses that took place since June 28th are being seriously investigated. For example, the IACHR has observed that the arbitrary detentions of journalists or abuses that occurred as radio and TV stations were occupied by security forces following the coup have not been punished. Moreover, according to the IACHR, the murders, threats and harassment of journalists and social activists that have taken place in 2010 “are not being properly investigated by the judicial system.” Indeed, in its May visit, the IACHR and the IACHR’s Office of the Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression declared their “deep concern over the absence of effective investigations that could lead to the clarification of these events.”

In addition, the Honduran government has failed to vigorously implement protective measures for persons at risk as ordered by the IACHR, which has described the government’s response to these measures as “rare, late, deficient, and in some cases, nonexistent.” Freedom of expression is also curtailed by the government telecommunications agency CONATEL’s continued authority (executive order #124-2009) to close media outlets and actions such as the Supreme Court’s recent dismissal of four judges who openly opposed the coup. It is not only the threats and attacks against human rights defenders, social activists and journalists, but also the government’s failure to address these abuses and to institute necessary reforms, that creates a chilling impact on freedom of expression and assembly.

We urge the State Department to consistently and publicly denounce the violations taking place against human rights defenders, social activists and journalists in Honduras. We ask that the United States condition U.S. assistance upon the completion of steps that would demonstrate a commitment by the Honduran government to uphold the rule of law. This includes promptly and effectively investigating these violations; immediately suspending, investigating and prosecuting any security force official implicated in tolerating or participating in such actions; dismantling armed civilian groups operating outside the law implicated in any such actions; and effectively implementing protective measures as requested by the IACHR. The escalation of violence following the coup against LGBT activists, and its causes, must be also be thoroughly investigated and addressed. We stress that the existence of a “Truth and Reconciliation Commission,” does not in any way, as the IACHR strongly asserts, “relieve the State of its international responsibility to investigate, prosecute and punish, through the courts, any State agents who have committed human rights violations.”

In addition, we urge the U.S. Embassy to encourage necessary reforms, such as revoking executive order #124-2009, removing military personnel from inappropriate roles such as the head of the telecommunications agency and immigration, ensuring that the military does not continue to carry out law enforcement functions, and implementing measures to strengthen the independence of the judiciary. Finally, given the pervasive nature of human rights violations over the past year, we urge the State Department to encourage the Honduran government to agree to the establishment of an office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in Honduras with a broad mandate to strengthen the rule of law and to provide support for such an office once established.

In your meeting with Foreign Minister Mario Canahuati in April, you remarked that the United States wants “to work with the government and the people of Honduras to get them back fully on the path of democracy, the rule of law, good governance.” There is still a great distance for the Honduran government to travel toward that path, and the first most basic step is creating a climate in which human rights defenders, social activists and journalists can carry out their essential work.

Sincerely,

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