



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Briefing

Voices from Honduras: Human Rights and Accountability

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9:30 – 10:30 AM

2255 Rayburn House Office Building

Opening Remarks as Prepared for Delivery

Good morning and thank you for joining us this morning to take a closer look at the human rights situation in Honduras.

I especially want to thank three of our panelists who have come all the way from Honduras to be with us today.

They are in Washington as part of a delegation of Honduran religious and human rights defenders for the *National Days of Prayer and Action for Honduras*. They are here to draw attention to the ongoing human rights violations in their country and the consequences of those abuses, including the continuing migration of families and children from Honduras. I am happy to be here to support their efforts.

I also want to recognize Jean Stokan, Justice Coordinator for the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas. I've worked with Jean for many years. There are Sisters of Mercy in my district and in the district of my co-chair, Congressman Randy Hultgren, and I know both he and I are inspired by the passion and commitment the Sisters bring every day to their work.

Last November, the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission held a [hearing](#) on the human rights and humanitarian situation in Central America. We wanted to know why – in spite of some good news on accountability and some positive steps on the development front – U.S. authorities had apprehended nearly 200,000 migrants from the northern triangle of Central America at the southwestern border. We wanted to understand why people are fleeing for their lives, leaving behind their homes and their countries.

One piece of the explanation, a common thread in all the countries, was the high level of impunity for human rights crimes.

That hearing was before the highly-contested and controversial November 2017 presidential election in Honduras.

In the aftermath of that election, there were widespread protests. The government responded by imposing a state of emergency and a curfew, and deploying security forces, including the Military Police of Public Order.

The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights registered 23 people killed during the post-electoral protests, and identified other irregularities that led it to express concerns about the use of excessive lethal force. Non-governmental organizations documented additional abuses.

These abuses are not an aberration.

In recent years, human rights groups have alleged a wide range of abuses by Honduran security forces acting in their official capacity or on behalf of private interests or criminal organizations.

The most notorious case is that of the assassination of Berta Cáceres, assassinated in March 2016. But many other similar attacks have been carried out against leaders of indigenous, Afro-descendent, land rights, LGBT and workers' organizations.

In Berta's case, 9 people have been arrested, but no one has been convicted.

As of April, no charges had been brought against Honduran security forces for the post-election killings.

97% of crimes committed against human rights defenders remain unresolved.

What's frustrating about this is that we seem to be doing at least some of the right things.

USAID is supporting efforts to strengthen the human rights protection system and judicial institutions.

The State Department is training prosecutors and judges, helped establish a Criminal Investigative School, and has supported the OAS-backed Mission to Support the Fight Against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (MACCIH).

The U.S. has also helped set up two specialized task forces, one on violent crimes and another on murders linked to land disputes in the Bajo Aguán region.

Congress has restricted foreign assistance and security assistance out of human rights concerns.

But we don't seem to be getting the results we want and need.

Meanwhile, the administration has just ended Temporary Protective Status for 57,000 Honduras who have been living in the U.S. for nearly two decades.

So I am worried.

I am worried that change is not coming quickly enough to Honduras.

And I am worried about the fate of those who suddenly face deportation through no fault of their own. I am worried that they will be dehumanized here and could face violence there.

So I look forward to hearing from you today about what more we should be doing, or what we should be doing better. We need to know how Congress can help.

I turn now to Peter Meyer of the Congressional Research Service, who will introduce the panelists and moderate the discussion.