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One Hundred and Thirteenth Congress
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Statement of Rep. James P. McGovern
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing
“Human Rights in Honduras”

2255 Rayburn HOB – Thursday, July 25, 2013 – 10:30 AM – 12:30 PM

Good morning, everyone. Welcome. Thank you for attending this important hearing on human rights in Honduras. I want to thank J.P. Shuster and the staff of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission for organizing this hearing. I also want to thank our witnesses – some who have traveled from Honduras to be here with us this morning – for testifying and for everything that they do to promote and protect human rights in Honduras.

As a longtime follower of events in Latin America, I am especially honored to engage our distinguished witnesses on the current human rights situation in Honduras. The past few years have been difficult and turbulent ones for the people of Honduras. As many of you know, in June 2009, a coup ousted then-President Manuel Zalaya [Zah-LYE-Yah] from his office, and Roberto Micheletti [Mee-sha-let-ee] was appointed interim President. During the period of the Micheletti Administration, the human rights situations deteriorated considerably: public demonstrations were often met with a disproportionate use of force, and many people were arbitrarily detained and held in cruel, inhuman, and degrading conditions. Honduras became increasingly militarized, and there was a surge in racial and gender discrimination across the country, among other grave violations of civil and political rights.

Regrettably, security and human rights in Honduras have not improved since President Lobo was elected in November 2009,

and if anything, they have deteriorated. As widely publicized, last year Honduras gained the unwanted title of being the homicide capital of the world, with 86 murders per 100,000 people – and is viewed as one of the most dangerous place in the world.¹

Remember, this is not a country fighting a civil war; it is not somewhere on the other side of the world. Honduras is a neighbor, an ally, and a friend.

Among the most worrying aspects of this violence – and one I am particularly interested in examining today – is the severe threat to press freedom and the protection of journalists in Honduras.

According to Honduras' own National Commission for Human Rights, at least 36 journalists and social communicators have been killed since 2003, with 29 of the murders occurring during the current Lobo Administration. In the most recent case, the charred and mutilated body of radio journalist Anibal Barrow was discovered just two weeks ago on a riverbank near the city of San Pedro Sula. Exactly one year ago today, during a Commission hearing on global press freedom, we heard testimony from Jesuit priest Ismael Moreno Coto, also known as Father Melo, who works for Catholic community radio station Radio Progreso. Less than two weeks after he returned to Honduras, Radio Progreso was raided by Honduran police and reporters and local campesinos who were there being interviewed were threatened. This was not an extreme or unusual case, but rather the norm faced by many Honduran journalists.

So, I am deeply concerned about the role that police and military units have played in Honduras' ongoing human rights crisis. Elements of the Honduran police are alleged to be carrying out extrajudicial killings of suspected gang members and other perceived criminals as part of "social cleansing" operations. Honduran Police Chief Juan Carlos Bonilla [Bo-NEE-yah] has been linked to three homicides and 11 other deaths or

¹ See, <http://www.npr.org/blogs/parallels/2013/06/13/190683502/honduras-claims-unwanted-title-of-worlds-murder-capital>.

disappearances, while many of the country's police are suspected to be involved in organized crime. Most troubling for me is the fact that the United States may be bolstering these very same offenders through our foreign assistance, which includes \$16 million to fund Honduras' police units so far this year.²

This is not a new problem: In May 2011, I felt obligated to lead a letter with 87 Members of Congress asking the State Department to suspend U.S. assistance to the military and police in Honduras, due to the lack of any mechanism to ensure security forces are held accountable for abuses. Last month, my colleagues in the Senate called into serious question the State Department's certification of Fiscal Year 2012 funds designated for Honduran military and police. That certification effectively told the Honduran government that U.S. human rights conditions in the FY 2012 appropriations bill were sufficiently met. I think this appears far from the case.

I am also concerned about the rule of law in Honduras, and especially, the justice sector's inability to investigate crimes and capture, try, and convict those responsible.

These are all important issues to discuss in light of a critical U.S.-Honduras strategic dialogue, which I understand is scheduled for next week.

In a National Public Radio story broadcast earlier this month about soaring corruption among Honduras' police ranks, the interviewer spoke with the mother of a young man who had gone out to a store one night and was found at 4:00 in the morning with two bullets in the back of his head. She told the reporter, "We are plagued with questions. We want to know what happened, why it happened." Her enormous suffering is made more severe with the knowledge that only 2 percent of crimes are solved in Honduras.

² See, <http://news.yahoo.com/effort-clean-honduras-police-force-stalls-002128337.html>

We are here today because we owe it to that mother to ask those same questions – “what is happening and why is it happening.” As a government that provides assistance to the Honduran government, we are also obligated to ask what the U.S. can do to improve human rights protections for the people of Honduras.

Finally, on a sadder note, I want to take a moment to recognize that just yesterday, Honduran Judge Mireya Mendoza Peña, a member of the Executive Committee of the Honduran Association of Judges for Democracy, was assassinated in Honduras in broad daylight. She was murdered while driving her car by two men on a motorcycle who sprayed her vehicle with 20 bullets, according to the initial media reports. I wish to express my deepest sympathies to her family, friends, colleagues and loved ones, some of whom are here today. Our thoughts and prayers are with you. And I call on the Honduran authorities to investigate and bring to justice the perpetrators of this heinous crime.

With that, I would now like to turn to our witnesses for this morning’s hearing. Along with their oral testimony, I would like to submit into the Record any written testimony provided by our witnesses today.

It is now my pleasure to welcome our first witness, Senator Tim Kaine, who represents the people of the Commonwealth of Virginia. Senator Kaine is a longtime advocate for justice and peace in Honduras. We are grateful you are here to share your perspective on these critical issues with us.

Senator Kaine – if you would please begin.