



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Human Rights and Corruption in Honduras

Wednesday, December 11, 2019

2:00 – 4:00 p.m.

2255 Rayburn House Office Building

As prepared for delivery

Good afternoon and welcome to today's Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission hearing on *Human Rights and Corruption in Honduras*.

I especially want to welcome our witnesses and thank them for their indispensable efforts on behalf of human rights in Honduras and more generally.

On Monday, December 9th, we observed International Anti-Corruption Day. Yesterday, December 10th, the world commemorated Human Rights Day and the anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

These commemorations give us an opportunity to highlight the progress that's been made in advancing human rights around the world and in fighting corruption. But they are also a stark reminder of all the work that's left to do.

Honduras is a country where there is not a lot to celebrate on either front. And where there's a lot of work to do.

It's not every day that the brother of the president of a country that is supposed to be an American ally gets convicted in U.S. federal court for conspiring to import cocaine into the United States – after funneling some of his illicit gains into that president's presidential campaigns.

In Honduras corruption is pervasive. It is systemic. It is baked into the operating system.

Investigations by the National Anti-Corruption Council, a Honduran civil society organization, found that from 2014 to 2016, at least \$300 million was embezzled from the Honduran public health care system by state officials.

To give you a sense of how much money we're talking about, total U.S. assistance to Honduras in Fiscal Year 2017 to promote democracy and human rights, combat corruption and strengthen rule of law came to \$52 million.

As bad as that sounds, there has been improvement in recent years due to the work of the OAS-backed Mission to Support the Fight Against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras, known as MACCIH.

MACCIH has successfully advocated for important legal reforms like the creation of anti-corruption courts and campaign finance regulations.

And it has worked closely with a specialized anti-corruption prosecution unit to present more than a dozen major corruption cases – including one in which former first lady Rosa Elena Bonilla de Lobo was sentenced to 58 years in jail for misusing \$800,000 intended for social welfare programs.

At least 115 Hondurans are facing prosecution, among them more than 70 cabinet ministers, legislators, and other government officials.

But MACCIH's 4-year mandate expires next month in January of 2020.

And the decision as to whether or not to renew the mandate is up to the current president, the same one who benefitted from his brother's illicit drug activity.

When it comes to human rights in Honduras, the picture is equally grim.

As we will hear today, human rights defenders – including union leaders, LGBTQ+ and women activists, Garifuna, indigenous and other community leaders – are at daily risk of threats, legal harassment, and assassination.

Two years ago the NGO Global Witness ranked Honduras the most dangerous place in the world for land and environmental activists.

Many of you are likely familiar with the case of Berta Cáceres, a Lenca indigenous leader.

Berta was murdered in her home on March 2, 2016, days after she was threatened for opposing the Agua Zarca hydroelectric project. Just last week sentences finally came down for seven men directly responsible for her killing, more than a year after they were convicted.

So that was good news, but it has taken years of concerted international pressure; there is still no accountability for those who ordered and financed her killing; and there are many, many more cases in total impunity.

Finally, we should not forget that Honduras is a very poor country with one of the most unequal distributions of income and resources in the world.

It ranks 133 out of 189 on the most recent Human Development Index. According to the World Food Program, 23% of children under 5 are chronically malnourished.

This is a country that doesn't offer its young population many opportunities.

I hope we will talk about this aspect today as well because during the first nine months of Fiscal Year 2019 Honduras was the primary source for unlawful immigration to the U.S. in proportion to its population.

I don't see how we expect people to stop migrating in search of a better life when they cannot make a living at home, daily face threats of extreme violence, and when their governments, infiltrated by drug trafficking and organized crime, rob the resources meant for development.

The Honduran government is not only failing to protect the civil and political rights of its people. It is failing dramatically to protect their economic, social and cultural rights.

The question for us today is what more the U.S. Congress can and should be doing to address these deeply rooted problems. How can we best contribute to protecting all of the human rights of Hondurans?

I look forward to hearing the witnesses' recommendations.