

**Testimony to Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission: Human Rights
in Honduras
July 25, 2013**

Co-Chairman McGovern, Co-Chairman Wolf, Members of the Commission, I appreciate the opportunity to testify in front of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commissions on an issue that is not only important to the people of Honduras, and United States foreign policy, but is personally important to me. I want to thank both of Representative McGovern and Representative Wolf for their dedication to shining a light on human rights issues that need Congressional attention.

Over thirty years ago, I took a year off from law school to live in Honduras and work with Jesuit Missionaries. It was 1980, and Central America was dangerous. There was a military dictatorship in power in Honduras. It was the tail-end of the Cold War. Civil wars in El Salvador and Guatemala were pouring refugees into Honduras. The United States was using the northern part of the country as a staging ground

for the conflict in Nicaragua. My Jesuit colleagues lived under tremendous threat, and some were imprisoned and even lost their lives.

Once I left Honduras, I stayed in touch and engaged with the Jesuit community in Honduras, and was able to visit again in 2004 with my wife Anne. My experience in Honduras shaped my worldview. As a young man I was able to genuinely appreciate the safety and freedoms of the United States. In the early 1980s in Honduras, citizens did not even have the opportunity to vote. That is why what has happened in Honduras over the subsequent decades is so troubling.

As I said, in the early 1980s, a military dictatorship was in power in Honduras. And as the country has transitioned to a democracy, it may be less safe today. Honduras faces significant human rights challenges. As the general security situation in the country has deteriorated in recent years, human rights abuses—including attacks on the press and extrajudicial killings by security forces—have increased. Over the last

decade, homicide rates have sky-rocketed. In 2012, Honduras had the highest homicide rate in the world with 86 murders per 100,000 residents. Due to violence, the United States has suspended Peace Corps operations in Honduras after nearly 50 years of productive partnership. Some of this has to do with a lack of capacity and lack of resources, but the more troubling part is corruption in Honduran institutions, and a lack of accountability for those responsible.

The Lobo Administration has taken a number of steps, sometimes under U.S. or international pressure, to improve human rights in Honduras. That is why hearings such as this one are so important – continued attention on these issues can be effective. For example, in January 2013, the Lobo Administration adopted a new human rights policy and plan of action that had been drafted by the Secretariat for Justice and Human Rights after extensive consultations with civil society. But many of the reform efforts have stalled.

Some have questioned whether the Lobo Administration has the political will to carry out the reforms necessary to clean up and strengthen the country's security forces and justice sector institutions. Human rights organizations maintain that President Lobo's efforts have been insufficient. His Administration has failed to hold accountable those responsible for attacks on victims based solely on their profession or activism.

The United States Administration and Congress have pursued a number of policies to address the human rights situation in Honduras. The backbone of the Administration's approach is the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI), which has allocated approximately \$60 million to Honduras. Some of this funding has been used to set up a Special Victims Task Force to investigate attacks against journalists and other high profile violent crime cases. There has also been support in the past for police reform, although progress has stalled.

Just this past Tuesday, I heard from the Jesuit community in Honduras. They recently translated an audit done of the Special Prosecutor for Human Rights in Honduras, with the hopes of pinpointing places where the Honduran government could invest to combat impunity in human rights abuses by state authorities. The audit revealed that already this year, the Human Rights Special Prosecutor has received nearly 500 complaints of human rights abuses by state officials -- the overwhelming majority inflicted by police. Yet there is only one dedicated investigator who is working full time, and that investigator is detailed from the police that he is tasked with investigating. I would encourage this Commission to press the Administration to engage with the Honduran government as a new Public Prosecutor is chosen. This will be critical to ensuring accountability for state-sponsored human rights infractions.

Some of the most disturbing individual cases that the Jesuit community in Honduras continues to follow involve the coopting of

State officials and entities to carry out the will of powerful private individuals. Specifically, mining company coercion and intimidation of campesino communities in the Tela municipality of Atlántida are disturbing. I do commend the State Department, and the Embassy in Tegucigalpa, for responding to some of my concerns and those of my friends in the Jesuit community in Honduras. But more certainly can and needs to be done.

When I heard I would be serving on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in the Senate, I saw it as an opportunity to work on foreign policy issues in the Western Hemisphere. For too long, the United States has focused its foreign policy on an east-west axis, often times neglecting the north-south work that needs to be done. As a Member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and member of the Western Hemisphere subcommittee, I am proud to work on, and raise the profile of, these issues.

I thank the Commission for its continued dedication to the broader calling of educating Members of Congress on the most pressing human rights issues of the day, and I am honored to participate and have my testimony be submitted for the record for this hearing on the human rights situation in Honduras.

Thank you Co-Chairmen McGovern and Wolf, and members of the Commission.