WHEN FLEEING IS YOUR ONLY OPTION

REPORT ON HONDURAN MIGRATION BY THE CROSS BORDER NETWORK

“They’ve taken so much from us that we’ve even lost our fear.”

In late May 2019, a group of 15 activists from the U.S. and Canada organized by the Cross Border Network, traveled to Honduras to investigate the stories behind the caravan of migrants trudging north to the U.S.

Here’s what we found
INTRODUCTION

For the last two years, a river of Central American migrants has streamed north to the United States. Some flow into Trump’s concentration camps, while others are pushed back into shantytowns in Mexico or to so-called “safe third countries” – Guatemala for Hondurans and Salvadorans and Honduras for Guatemalans, making a farce of our asylum laws. Upon arrival parents and children have been torn apart, even parents from nursing babies. Some are subject to horrific conditions, callousness, and racism by ICE agents and the Border Patrol.

For 20 years the Kansas City based Cross Border Network has focused on the growing issues of globalization and displacement of people from nations to the south of us. Imperialism has brought us a bounty of immigrants – a “harvest of empire” as journalist Juan Gonzalez calls them. CBN promotes international solidarity for working people while constantly drawing the connection between the politics of globalization and the declining rights of people in the global south. Our maxim is “We support workers across borders and who cross borders!”

After working for a decade in Mexico, we began work in Honduras in 2009 after the coup. We were stunned by the power and courage of the Resistencia that quickly emerged to oppose the oligarchs who took power and their U.S. backers. We joined the Honduras Solidarity Network (HSN), which brings together local organizations throughout the U.S. and Canada and pressures our governments to change their policies. We sponsored several delegations and worked to raise awareness of the rapid deterioration of human rights and the quality of life for Hondurans.

Many people asked why, despite the inhumane U.S. policies, people keep coming, both in small groups and in caravans for protection. We decided to find out why and organized a delegation to explore the roots of migration. We invited other members of HSN to join us – the Task Force on the Americas based in the San Francisco Bay Area, the Interfaith Committee on Latin America from St. Louis, and the Simcoe County Human Rights Monitor from Elmvale, Ontario, Canada. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 79. One was a retired probation and parole officer, one wanted to “heal the effects of colonialism,” one is a photojournalist and another wants to be one. We had a retired legal aid attorney, an international relations student, two former Peace Corps volunteers, a middle school teacher, a grass-roots organizer and several retired teachers. We all wanted to learn and share what we learned.

According to UNHCR 247,090 people were internally displaced in Honduras. Many have joined caravans seeking asylum in the U.S.1

Members of the delegation and friends. Back, left to right: Honduran man, Diane Bohn (CA), Mel Marsh (KS), Corliss Jacobs (KS), Maria Robinson (CA), Judy Ancel (KS), Ellen Ziegemeier (MO), Padre Ismael “Melo” Moreno (Honduras), Karen Spring (Ontario, Canada), Lexie Salamone (MO), Vicki Monague (Ontario). Front, left to right: 3 Honduran boys, Morgan Goetz (MO) Adrianne Aron (CA), Melissa Stiehler (MO), Christina Dismang (KS), Honduran girl. Right: Ben Powless (Ontario).
This document reports what we learned. We hope it is read and helps counter the myths and the hate so prevalent in the U.S., and that it eventually contributes to a change of policy in both the U.S. and Canada. We firmly believe that the crises that are driving so many to migrate from Central America will only be solved when the policies of militarization, support of dictators and extraction are changed.

This group of 15 activists set off for Honduras in late May, 2019. Our guide was Karen Spring, the Honduras-based coordinator for HSN. She lives in the capital, Tegucigalpa. We began to investigate the stories behind the caravans. We wanted to hear people’s stories first-hand. We wanted to find out why they come to counter Trump and other politicians’ claims that migrants are dangerous and are coming to the U.S. to take advantage of our freedom and to steal the American Dream from us.

In fact, fewer immigrants are entering the U.S. than before 2007, and the fastest growing numbers are from India and China. At the same time, patterns of migration from Latin America have changed. Since 2014, more Central Americans from the countries of Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador have come, and their numbers have overtaken the numbers of Mexicans. Also, significantly, more families and unaccompanied minors are coming than before.

Leaving behind one’s property, family and friends, familiar language and culture is not done on a whim. We wanted to learn what was happening in Honduras that made people desperate enough to take their young children on such a long, dangerous trek. We know that the decision to leave made by many of our ancestors who came mostly from Europe was born in hunger, desperation, and even death threats, and so we wondered what choices are for the Hondurans opting to trek north. We wanted to learn what options they had before they made the ultimate choice to leave. What we found was that, as the array of options for Hondurans narrowed, mass exodus followed. According to Bartolo Fuentes, an activist, professor, and researcher on migration, Hondurans today who stay have very poor choices. They may be victimized by police, army, gangs, and even employers, or they may even have to become criminals to survive. The only other choices available to them are to join the resistance, risking arrest or death—or flee.

Our big question: why do families abandon their lives and property to take a risky and arduous journey north, despite threats of incarceration and separation on arrival or the dreaded “remain in Mexico” policy?

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This report was written and edited by Judy Ancel, Corliss Jacobs, Mel Marsh, and Christina Dismang, and special thanks to Melissa Steihler, Esmie Tseng, Karen Spring, Gabriel Fumero, Janet Spring and all the members of the delegation for their solidarity and observations along the way. Photos by Ben Powless and Morgan Goetz.
SOME BACKGROUND

In 2009 a military coup, condoned by the U.S., took out the popular president, Manuel Zelaya. What followed was a decade of stolen elections and radical neoliberal transformation. Not coincidentally, emigration increased by 25.4% between 2010 and 2017 when 55,000 people left. Then in 2018-19 it surged as caravan after caravan included hundreds if not thousands at a time. The “experts” blame gang violence, a poverty rate of 66%, and one of the world’s highest murder rates, but these are only symptoms of deep structural problems of inequality, oligarchy and corruption.

Before Zelaya was overthrown, he enacted a series of reforms that improved lives for the poor. His government returned land stolen by the rich back to campesinos, funded teachers and education, and improved labor rights. This made Zelaya very popular with the people, but Honduras’s ruling families viewed him as a class traitor. The Obama administration turned against him when he made a deal for oil with Hugo Chavez of Venezuela and talked about a new commercial airport on land occupied by the U.S. Air Force base at Comayagua, which the U.S. interpreted as a step toward kicking them out.

Hondurans responded to the coup against Zelaya with a massive protest movement. The Front for National Popular Resistance (FNRP) appealed to the Organization of American States and the U.S. to repudiate the coup and cut off aid to the Honduran military unless Zelaya was restored to office. Instead, after a few months, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called for new elections, and the U.S. recognized newly “elected” President Porfirio Lobo who, upon assuming office declared, “Honduras is open for business.” What ensued was a form of extreme neoliberalism, impoverishing the majority of Hondurans.

We believe the systemic breakdown of Honduran society is intimately linked to U.S. hegemony over Honduras and the narco dictatorship it has spawned.

Juan Orlando Hernández (JOH) was a major coup supporter and National Party leader in Congress in 2012 when they illegally fired four of the five Supreme Court judges who objected to new unconstitutional laws. JOH replaced Lobo as President in 2013. In 2015 the replacement judges ruled JOH could run for a second term despite a constitutional prohibition. The new judges ruled the constitution was “unconstitutional.” Meanwhile it came out that JOH stole millions for his 2013 campaign from the Social Security public health care system, leaving it bankrupt. By 2017 when JOH ran for a second term, he was thoroughly despised by a majority of the country.

On election night, the count clearly showed JOH losing by an unassailable margin—then the Supreme Electoral Tribunal mysteriously went offline. The shutdown lasted for two days. When it revived, JOH was winning. The fraud was obvious, and huge demonstrations ensued, lasting for months. They were met with massive repression, including the use of live ammunition on peaceful demonstrators. Within days, the Trump administration certified that Honduras had made progress in respecting human rights and congratulated JOH on his reelection.
WHAT WE LEARNED
LAND AND RESOURCE GRABS

Our delegation visited Garifuna communities in Trujillo. The Garifuna are Afro-Indigenous with a unique and rich culture. They have primarily lived off fishing in villages along the north coast of Honduras, but unfortunately, their coastal land is ripe for development of resorts and retirement communities for rich Hondurans, foreign tourists, and retirees.

The Garifuna have traditional, collective titles to their lands, and they want to keep ownership for the common good. No individual member of the group has the right to sell the land on which they live. Nonetheless, fraudulent land “sales,” government expropriation for private projects including a port facility, and encroachment of narcotrafficking make life difficult and dangerous for the Garifuna community. But the Garifuna persist and resist.

Kamemu, a young Garifuna man, emigrated to the U.S. as a child and grew up there. After he was deported, he returned to find that in place of his Garifuna village and fishing area, there was now a Canadian developer selling residences in its “undiscovered NJOI Trujillo Beach” where North Americans could “own [a] slice of Caribbean Paradise.” Clearly, NJOI was selling stolen land to unsuspecting retirees wanting to move into their dream homes.

Neeyo, another Garifuna man deported from the U.S., built a house on land across the road from NJOI to stop them from putting in a pipeline to steal Garifuna people’s water. NJOI bribed the local mayor, so the mayor offers no help in fighting for Garifuna rights. Now, thugs regularly drive by and point guns at Neeyo and his kids.

Land grabs and racism in Honduras have pushed well over 100,000 of the Garifuna to migrate to the U.S., but the only choice Kamemu and Neeyo have as deportees from the U.S. is to stay in Honduras and fight back.

“For every tourist development is from the U.S. or Canada. The target market is Americans and Canadians. The profits go to owners in those countries—not Hondurans. The purpose of the companies’ and government’s actions is to put severe pressure on the indigenous residents to promote desperation.” Melissa Stiehler

For the Lenca people of Reitoca, a remote and very poor town in the southern mountains of Honduras, staying and fighting back is the best option even though life is very hard. They are subject to a different kind of land grab. It happens when the government unilaterally makes a concession to a private (often foreign) investor to develop hydroelectric power or a port or a mine without consulting indigenous people, which is a violation of International Labor Organization Convention 169 guaranteeing the rights of Indigenous and Tribal Populations.

Foreigners or cronies of the oligarchs then come in and clear away the people like some kind of weed for their project. In Reitoca they built a dam, cutting off access to water. However, in Reitoca, unlike many other communities, the people stood up. They burned the dam. Their resistance is truly inspiring, but their poverty and harassment from the authorities lead many to leave as well.
In both of these cases, “Honduras is open for business” means corruption and no rule of law. It means public officials actively join with corporations and cronies to expropriate land and extract resources without the consent of or benefit to the people. Corruption in the name of economic development drives people from the land and turns them into migrants. This hollows out the community.

AN ISLAND OF SECURITY IN AN URBAN WAR

Lidia lives in San Pedro Sula, in the barrio of Rivera Hernandez, said to be one of the most dangerous and poorest neighborhoods in Honduras. Lidia worries constantly about her adolescent son, Julian, who is constantly harassed and threatened by gangs and police. She feels he is relatively safe only when he’s in school—but education gets less than 5% of the nation’s public school budget and JOH recently cut the school day to half-days rather than reverse these cuts to education. Like many mothers in her neighborhood, Lidia wants Julian to get a good education so he can attend college, but the conditions of the local schools continue to worsen.

Because the teachers’ union was a major supporter of the Resistencia after the 2009 coup, both Presidents Lobo and Hernández (JOH) retaliated against it. Salaries are abysmal. In addition to school supplies, Lidia even had to buy a desk for Julian herself so he wouldn’t have to sit on the floor. Rather than tax the rich to pay for education, Honduras’ government continues to squeeze the poor like Lidia, demanding they contribute to the parents’ school building maintenance fund. As public schools deteriorate, some parents who can scrape enough money together may opt to put their kids in private school, but many kids eventually drop out because families cannot even afford the public school fees. Meanwhile, pressure to privatize education increases.

Lidia had been thinking of joining one of the caravans heading north, rather than watch Julian get recruited or killed by the gangs. She was thrilled when she found the Paso a Paso (Step by Step) after-school program. Now, even though she gets home late from her job at a maquila,7 she knows Julian is safe and getting educational and personal enrichment. Paso a Paso even has a coop store where she can get groceries at low prices and fresh vegetables from the garden that the kids take care of.

Paso a Paso gives students the knowledge and skills they need to pursue higher education and succeed in life. The program is aligned around the teachings of the assassinated Salvadoran Bishop Oscar Romero and assassinated Honduran activist and leader Berta Caceres. Paso a Paso is funded primarily by European NGOs. When compared to USAID programs, which are also aimed at gang diversion, it’s clear there are very different philosophies at work. Near Paso a Paso is a park remodeled by USAID as an intended sanctuary for youth. We were told, however, that the park is policed by the same local cops who are paid off by the gangs and virtually indistinguishable from them. Some of the kids at Paso a Paso told us that girls who go to the park get sexually harassed by the cops, while the boys get photographed and put into a database later used to criminalize them. The U.S. touts the park as part of its “successful” program to stop migration, but the kids in the Paso a Paso program refuse to go there. Paso a Paso offers an alternative to migration to families living among bad schools, dangerous gangs and frequent murders, but it’s a rarity in Honduras. Most of the country’s families do not have such an alternative.

“I talked to some kids who spoke English. An 11-year-old gave me advice, which was: ‘Don’t let your kids outside so they won’t get shot.’”

Ben Powless
RESISTING PRIVATIZATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

When we met Mavis, a student activist at the Autonomous University of Honduras (UNAH) in San Pedro Sula (SPS), she described a process of privatization through strangulation. 6% of the government budget is supposed to go to higher education; most of that stays in Tegucigalpa, the capital, with just 1% of the total government budget reserved for the universities in the rest of the country. Mavis said UNAH SPS lacks professors, and the buildings, the lights, the bathrooms are all deteriorating. Some students give up and migrate; others, like Mavis, fight back. She has been an activist since she began college. She’s now in a professional course and very proud of the student struggle and its victories. Students even battled a military invasion of their campuses. They have succeeded in ousting the Rector, or head, of the UNAH system, an ally of JOH. They demanded and won student elections to the University Council, made up of students, teachers and administrators, and they stopped privatization, at least for now. There remains an ongoing struggle and rampant corruption in the system.

Even when students graduate, there are few jobs for them, and pay is dreadful. Some decide to leave because they have no hope for a better future.

BAD JOBS, NO JOBS, MEAGER LABOR RIGHTS

Wherever we went, people complained about high prices. Since electricity privatization, which was a prerequisite for an International Monetary Fund loan, energy prices have gone through the roof. Even middle class Hondurans with cars pay skyrocketing prices, including frequent tolls on the newly privatized roads. It’s the poor, though, and especially single mothers with children, who suffer the most.

Even before the Central America Dominican Republic Free Trade Agreement (CAFTADR) was enacted in 2005, USAID had financed infrastructure to entice US companies to build factories in and around San Pedro Sula and ship the products to the nearby Port of Cortes on the Caribbean for convenient travel to U.S. ports. Soon Honduras became the fifth largest exporter of clothes to the U.S., and after the 2013 trade agreement, clothing also became Honduras’s primary export to Canada.

The export factories are sweatshops. Hondurans, like Mexicans, call them maquilas. The sweatshops are a magnet for rural people forced off the land by industrial commercial agriculture, especially palm oil operations, which get away with mass, illegal evictions and even massacres of the rural poor.

Women like María, who dropped out of school after sixth grade, migrate to the city and begin work as teenagers to support their dislocated families. Pay is low. Hours are long, and debilitating repetitive strain injuries are epidemic. Labor law enforcement is mostly a bitter memory, despite repeated complaints from U.S. unions for violations of CAFTA. Labor law changes since the 2009 coup have resulted in a proliferation of temporary jobs and the weakening of unions.

María works at Hanes Brand in Choloma. Every week it gets harder to afford the necessities. Her salary helps pay the “war tax” extorted by the gangs from her parents’ small business. She barely has enough left over for diapers for baby Alfredo. The daily repetition of sewing t-shirts thousands of times has damaged her arms and
shoulders. They hurt all the time, but she dares not try to get a disability diagnosis because then she’d get fired— even though it’s against the law. She often wonders if she’ll be able to continue sewing and meeting the quotas for much longer, and she thinks constantly about joining a caravan. She knows if things get much worse here, she’ll go, but she needs to wait until Alfredo is a little older. Even then, she’ll be leaving behind her parents, who couldn’t handle the trip. She hopes she’ll be able to send them money from the U.S.

Both María and her parents are deeply afraid of the gangs who roam the city extorting payments from storekeepers and bus and taxi drivers. The gangs threaten the boys of the community to either join them or die. Of course, many unemployed youth have no real alternatives, so they join. María has heard about the “cemetery” at the edge of the barrio where murdered bodies are tossed. And people like them can’t go to the police for help because so many cops are corrupt.

Pressured TO BECOME A CRIMINAL

In October 2018, President JOH accused activist journalist Bartolo Fuentes of organizing the caravans. Fuentes was arrested in Guatemala and questioned in the presence of U.S. authorities while he was accompanying a caravan, live streaming it. He was deported back to Honduras and keeps a low profile, moving frequently to avoid detection by police. In our two hours with him, he talked non-stop about government, police, and military corruption. He said that a criminal group centered in narco-trafficking runs Honduras, but drugs are only one of their criminal activities. He showered us with examples ranging from corruption to murder:

- In the department of Yoro, Arnaldo Urbina Soto, head of the National Party, not only committed election fraud in 2013 for JOH, but he’s now profiting from prostitution, narco-trafficking, livestock and timber theft. He is responsible for at least 150 assassinations, including chief of police Reyes Barahona and his wife. “No one is safe,” says Fuentes. “The police are part of it. They even use public highways as landing strips for planes carrying drugs.”

- The Ministries of Health, Agriculture, Education, and Housing use a network of NGOs and foundations and ghost companies to provide fictitious services or to overcharge for services and rake in money. For example, a company will “sell” a lot of medicine to the Ministry of Health, but all the paperwork is phony, as is the medicine. Irrigation projects are funded and paid for, but they don’t happen. Some government ‘contractors’ go so far as to have fake rosters of employees who draw salaries. A well-known NGO program of JOH’s called Vida Mejor (Better Life) contracted to train business startups. But the trainees don’t exist, and dead people did the training.

- In 2017 the Supreme Electoral Tribunal announced JOH’s probable defeat for reelection, then mysteriously shut down. When it reopened, it reversed the results in JOH’s favor. Citizens demanded a recount, alleging fake tally sheets and “voting” by thousands of dead people.

Who are Mara Salvatrucha and the 18th Street Gang?

Both gangs formed in Los Angeles in the 1980s by Salvadoran refugees from the U.S. sponsored war in El Salvador. They formed to defend themselves against LA’s Mexican Mafia. Many members were deported back to El Salvador. Many continue to be deported. As neoliberal governments introduced austerity regimes, which reduced opportunity for youth and as US War on Drugs money and arms, increased in the Northern Triangle, the gangs grew to tens of thousands. The “maras” or gangs infiltrated police and took over the drug trade.
“Donald Trump supports a government that forces the population into desperation,” said Fuentes of the current U.S. president. “He says we should stay home and find jobs; however, in these caravans are thousands who did exactly that, but when they got paid they were robbed with guns or extorted. For example, I know a taxi driver who pays three bribes to three different gangs. After that he has nothing left. Or, there’s the guy in La Ceiba who sold chickens and didn’t pay the ‘war tax,’ (a payment extorted from anyone with a business by the gangs). One day someone showed up and said his boss wanted 30 chickens. That was the guy’s entire profit. In San Pedro Sula there’s not one transportation company that isn’t paying the war tax. None pay only one. They pay two to four. Some do direct deposit into the bank accounts of the gangs. There is an anti-extortion police unit, but it just arrests the poor people who are forced to collect the money. The gangs have even forced evangelical pastors to do it, threatening to beat up their parishioners if they refuse.”

“People get sucked into the gang activity to alleviate their poverty. The police are all involved. So people join the caravans because they don’t want their kids to become criminals…. The cause of migration isn’t just poverty or lack of jobs, but that’s what corrupt government officials and the U.S. say.”

TO REBEL—OR TO FLEE?

When our group arrived in Honduras, it had been a decade since the coup. Not only had there been massive pillage of the country’s wealth, but also the international debt had skyrocketed from $3 billion to more than $9 billion. The economy survived on remittances sent by Hondurans who had migrated. Then, in early May 2019, the IMF signed a stand-by agreement for an additional $311 million loan which would require further privatizations targeting healthcare and education.

The country erupted in strikes and protests. Education and healthcare workers understood that privatization would probably mean pay cuts and job losses. JOH and his cronies had already stolen teachers’ pension funds. If public services are privatized for profit, many people believe reasonably that even the current, stripped-down healthcare and education systems will be destroyed.

The protesters spanned generations. They clogged streets, set up roadblocks every day, and occupied the main airport in Tegucigalpa, shutting it down. We were struck by the tremendous courage of people in confronting heavily armed military and police. Honduras has seen waves of protests since the 2009 coup, and after JOH stole the 2017 election, he gave orders to use live ammunition on unarmed protesters. Between 27 and 33 people were killed, and those arrested have suffered long periods of pre-trial incarceration.

Thus, the decision to stay and fight often means that even when Hondurans reject becoming criminals to survive, the government criminalizes or kills them anyway. It takes great courage to stay and resist.

Edwin Espinal is a Honduran activist who has stood up against injustice many times and has been targeted for years by the government so severely that the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) issued protective measures for him, which the Honduran government ignored. Edwin joined the massive protests after JOH’s illegal 2017 election. The authorities observed him in a demonstration at the Marriott Hotel in Tegucigalpa where some furniture was destroyed. They arrested Edwin on January 19, 2018, the eve of a week-long nationwide strike, and charged him with arson, property damage, and use of a homemade explosive.

Raúl Alvarez was also picked up for demonstrating. Both he and Edwin were sent to the maximum-security military-style prison, La Tolva.
Under cover of the drug war, the U.S. encouraged many countries to copy its own philosophy of punishment and build prisons modeled after U.S. “supermax” facilities. Authorities held Edwin and Raul there for almost 20 months, although they had not been found guilty of any crime. They were housed with violent criminals from the gangs and narco trafficking.

In La Tolva, human rights violations occur every day. Edwin and Raul were put in a concrete pod with eight other inmates, most of whom were gang members and violent. There was access to running water only about 20 minutes per day; the toilet is only flushed when there is water. As there is no wash basin, inmates are forced to wash their clothes in the toilet. Medical care is infrequent and available only when a patient is in danger of dying. Inmates receive no mail or reading material, and the food is inadequate. The prison guards are members of the military. They carry automatic weapons and wear uniforms and face masks, similar to those worn by terrorists. Political prisoners like Edwin face daily threats and violence from both staff and inmates. There is no recourse.

On August 9, 2019, after many months of continuing protests from human rights organizations and the Honduran people to free political prisoners, Edwin and Raúl were released on recognizance bonds and now are awaiting trial in May 2020. However, other political prisoners remain locked up in La Tolva and other supermax prisons under inhumane conditions even though they’ve never been tried nor convicted. The struggle for their release continues.

Migration, joining a caravan, or taking your chances on your own is for many the best of a range of desperate and dangerous choices. Many people told us how migration weakened their communities, how some village schools were left with only one teacher and just a few students, and how families suffered from being split apart. Those who had chosen to stay and resist—at least for now—also understand why families need to escape the danger posed by gangs, poverty, and corruption.

Despite the Trump administration’s draconian and illegal attempts to keep migrants out by violating our laws on asylum, by illegally separating children from parents, by long periods of brutal incarceration, they’re still coming. Now they have no choice but to try to enter illegally rather than present themselves at a port of entry or be given a number to wait in Mexico, Guatemala, or El Salvador. They still come because life is unbearable in Honduras for many, and they have no alternative. And despite bleeding migrants, popular disruption, and investigations of narco trafficking, JOH clings to power.

“The torchlight march made me realize that people have been doing this for 10 years. They are so resilient. They face challenges. They find happiness—even though they face terrible tragedies. They still haven’t gotten what they deserve. In fact, it’s actually worse. I admire their strength.”

Ellen Ziegemeier
TIO SAM BEHIND THE CURTAIN

Much of the disaster that is Honduras is a function of failed U.S. policies and the "support" of both the U.S. and Canada. Canada has failed to rein in its poisonous mining companies or protest the corruption, lack of democracy, the 2009 coup and the human rights violations since the coup. Toward the end of our time in Honduras, we managed to get appointments at both countries' embassies. The Canadians stalled and passed the buck to the U.S. At the U.S. Embassy, we met with Dana D. Deree, Consul General and Deputy Chief of Mission, who was acting as Chargé d'Affaires because the previous one was transferred,11 and also with the Political and Human Rights Officer Nate Rettenmayer.

Deree said people are migrating because of lack of jobs and climate change. The latter astounded us, given the Trump administration's refusal to acknowledge that climate change exists, but Deree was unfazed by the contradiction. We asked why the U.S. continued to support JOH with his deepening authoritarianism and ties to narco trafficking,12 and we wondered what it would take for the U.S. to withdraw support for his regime. We asked why the U.S. didn't condemn shooting protesters by the military.

"As embassy diplomats, we must deal with the government that is there," said Deree. "Behind the scenes, we have exceptionally frank conversations with government officials about government problems.13 We also talk with opposition party officials.”

Clearly for the Trump administration, Honduras is not a candidate for regime change. Dereen then changed the subject to the success of police reform, noting that police now need to have a high school diploma. In fact, “reform” means for many police and military training in all the techniques of repression to uphold the government.14

As if by cosmic design, the sirens mounted on the walls began blaring, and the loudspeaker bellowed, “Duck and cover. Duck and cover. The embassy is in lockdown.” Beefy guys rushed around, barking orders, and employees filed into the hallways crouching down as if it were an air raid. No one made us to duck and cover. We soon found out that there were tires burning at an Embassy entrance. We were not permitted to leave for an hour.

When we got outside, the air was thick with teargas. Two members of our party were waiting for us, eyes streaming from the gas. Fully armored police and private security hung around.

News later reported that 23-year-old student, Rommel Herrera, son of striking teachers, had been arrested and sent to La Tolva, accused of arson. That evening, a photo emerged of Herrera throwing a tire on already burning tires. Then another photo emerged depicting men in masks placing the tires by the Embassy door and lighting them. They had on gloves, fancy backpacks and masks, and were probably provocateurs. At the edge of that photo was a police van filled with tires.

After five months in La Tolva Prison, Rommel was sufficiently traumatized that his lawyers were able to get him transferred to a psychiatric hospital, where he remains incarcerated.
What was clear to us was that the U.S. and Canada care little about the repression, the gangs, or the poverty produced by their policies in Honduras or about what’s causing people to leave. Instead, fleeing Hondurans are used as scapegoats by American politicians. Ironically, Americans who fear immigrants and the migrants who flee a country that can no longer meet their most basic needs are both the targets of the same neoliberal policies which enrich a few at the expense of the many.

Now as Central Americans flee savage globalization, political leaders in the U.S. bar the door and cynically send Hondurans to Guatemala to apply for asylum as if hell with a different name is somehow safer.

The U.S. now has hundreds of troops and at least eight bases in Honduras, implanted under the pretext of fighting the drug war. They underpin a Central American security regime which provides only insecurity for Hondurans as militarization feeds corruption and narco trafficking. And the people’s outrage and resistance grow. They face weapons and gas all made in the U.S.A. wielded by elite U.S.-trained squads with no fear of punishment for their atrocities against protesters. Meanwhile the International Monetary Fund, dominated by the U.S., sends more loans requiring ever more privatization and dismantling of public services giving more reason for people to leave. USAID programs are plagued by the same corruption that justified them in the first place.

Yet back in the U.S., no politicians talk about the forces that are driving the surge of migration from Central America because to do so they and the media would have to criticize U.S. Latin America policy, which they rarely do. The Berta Cáceres Human Rights in Honduras Act has been introduced every year since the internationally celebrated environmental and indigenous rights activist was assassinated in 2016, but it never gets a hearing. The proposed act would cut off the security aid that is empowering the corrupt narco dictatorship in Honduras.

Of course, it’s not just in Honduras or Central America. We see neoliberal policies and militarization across the Global South, and like cyclones, they uproot millions of people. As these refugees search for safety, Trump and copycats demonize and criminalize them. Congress never acts. What we need is a real discussion about what to do about the growing injustice, impunity, and hunger, in the countries that are sending us migrants and our country’s role in deepening the crisis.

ENDNOTES

2 From October, 2018 to June 2019, Customs & Border Patrol apprehended 363,000 migrants in families from the three Northern Triangle countries. Migration Policy Institute migration policy.org/article/central American-immigrants-united-states-diaspora
4 The base is alternately called Palmerola or Soto Cano. It is an air force base, technically belonging to Honduras, but it houses U.S. Joint Task Force Bravo with over 500 troops. It was established in 1981 and was the main staging area for the Contra War in Nicaragua and anti-leftist operations in El Salvador in the 1980s. Today it is a key base expressing U.S. power in Central America and the Caribbean. The airport Zelaya wanted is now being constructed on land adjacent to the base.
5 Lobo’s son Fabio pled guilty to narco trafficking in the U.S. in 2016 and was sentenced to 24 years. His father is implicated as well and may face charges. His mother, Rosa, was sentenced last fall to 58 years in prison for corruption.
6 The coup cleared away any obstacles that would have existed under a democratic regime to rapid and extreme neoliberal reforms. Thus there was wholesale looting of the national wealth as dozens of rivers were privatized to make way for hydroelectric dams. Schools, hospitals and roads followed, all with little transparency, lots of corruption and nothing to show to benefit the people for the wealth they had unwillingly surrendered. The crown jewel of the neoliberal project was the Zedes – the Model Cities Project, complete privatization of a chunk of Honduras surrendered to some multinational corporation to manage. Along with that is the wholesale plunder of natural resources, forests, minerals by both cronies of JOH’s government and multinational corporations who extract and often leave communities poisoned by the waste and chemicals left behind. See Javier Suazo in alainet.
7 Maquilas are export factories often with sweatshop conditions, very low pay and serious health and safety issues.
8 In 2019 remittances set a record at almost 20% of GDP. Central American Migrant Remittances Breaking Records, Beats Foreign Investment, Forbes, 2018/5/31/19.
Endnotes cont’d

9 Laura Carlsen, As Honduras Collapses, Its People are Forced to Flee, Counterspin, 12/31/19.


12 JOH’s brother Tony Hernandez was convicted on October 18, 2019 in a court in New York City of four counts of drug trafficking for illegally importing cocaine into the U.S., illegal possession of weapons and making false statements to a US official. Witnesses testified that brother JOH accepted a million dollar payment from Mexican drug lord El Chapo Guzman for his 2013 campaign.

13 According to deposed President Manuel Zelaya, those frank talks include giving the President a list of people who he should appoint to government positions. Zelaya said sarcastically, “It’s democratic because there are three names to choose from for each position” (The Real News, 1/2/2020)

14 Our largest base in Latin America is in Honduras. See The Gray Zone 7/20/19 and U.S. Military Construction/Bases in Guatemala and Honduras. 146 Honduran security personnel received training in 2019 at the School of the Americas. SOA (now called WHINSEC) is operated by the United States Army. In Honduras, since the 2009 coup, led by SOA graduates, human rights groups have documented 13 forced disappearances and over 160 social activists and land defenders have been killed, including two convicted in the assassination of Lenca leader Berta Caceres. (Defensores en Línea)

Further Reading

Books


Juan Gonzalez, Harvest of Empire; A History of Latinos in America (2011)

Greg Grandin, Empire’s Workshop: Latin America, the United States and the Rise of the New Imperialism (2006)

Greg Grandin, The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America (2019)

Tania Kerssen, Grabbing Power: The New Struggles for Land, Food and Democracy in Northern Honduras (2013)


Periodicals and News Sources

The Real News
The Intercept
The Guardian
Telesur English
NACLA
Democracy Now
Aquí Abajo (Karen Spring’s blog)
Subscribe to HSN Presente List

Solidarity Organizations

Honduras Solidarity Network
Alliance for Global Justice
The Cross Border Network
Interfaith Committee on Latin America
Task Force on the Americas
Witness for Peace Solidarity Collective
Rights Action
International Labor Rights Forum
Grassroots International
Simcoe County Honduras Rights Monitor
La Voz de los de Abajo (FB)
WHAT YOU CAN DO

- The Cross Border Network is one of few organizations in Kansas City that talks about the roots of migration and makes the connection between migration and imperialism, militarism and neoliberalism. Also, climate change is becoming another major factor dislocating people. Therefore, it's absolutely key to join with others to expose the roots of migration and seek policies which mitigate the forces of dislocation.
  - Invite the Cross Border Network or your local HSN affiliate to speak at your organization, church, union.
  - Talk to your friends and neighbors about why people migrate.

- Support HR 1945, the Berta Cáceres Human Rights in Honduras Act. “This legislation will suspend U.S. military funding to Honduran security forces and discourage multilateral development bank lending until the Honduran government investigates and prosecutes those in the military and police who have violated human rights.
  - Make sure your member of Congress is a co-sponsor of the bill, and push Congress to hold hearings on it.
  - Ask your elected representatives to conduct hearings on U.S. AID funds and other programs aimed at either development or stopping emigration. Ask them to investigate World Bank and IMF requirements to enact austerity and privatization in exchange for loans.
  - Pressure to abolish concentration camps for immigrants, family separation, detention and high bail, all the violations of asylum law like “remain in Mexico” and “safe third country and to abolish ICE.

- Help fund the Resistance to the Honduran dictatorship. Money is needed for legal fees to defend those who are criminalized, to investigate human rights violations, to support families of those incarcerated unjustly. Send donations for the Resistance made out to The Cross Border Network with a note that it is for the Honduras Solidarity Fund. Donate at www.crossbordernetwork.org and select donation category: “Honduras Solidarity Fund”

- Get involved in the Cross Border Network
  - Get on our mailing list – send an email with name, address, phone to info@crossbordernetwork.org
  - Invite us to speak at a meeting

When the US supports the Honduran dictatorship and deepens its domination over the region, it facilitates the extraction of resources and profits by global corporations. In doing so it dislocates hundreds of thousands and also sends a stream of cheap, desperate, and exploitable labor north to toil in the fields, in kitchens and in construction all along the way.

- Join a solidarity delegation
- Donate on our web page www.crossbordernetwork.org

- Volunteer for other projects:
  - Safe and Welcoming Kansas City
  - Deportation Defense Legal Network
  - AIRR accompaniment project
  - IJAM immigration court watchers

- Don’t take cruises or that vacation in paradise without checking the impact on local and indigenous peoples. And that retirement home in the tropics, may be on stolen land. Check it out.

Action in Canada

Join Simcoe County Human Rights Monitor (SCHRM) in April 2020 to go to Ottawa, Ontario to meet with Members of Parliament. We will be demanding action on the human rights crisis in Honduras and meet with representatives from Canadian human rights organizations based.

SCHRM is sponsoring a third Canadian delegation to Tegucigalpa, Honduras around the trial dates of Edwin and Raul, from May 11 - 16, 2020 to attend their trial, meet with representatives from the US and CDN embassies, the Honduran judiciary, human rights organizations, and representatives of the Honduran political parties. If you are interested in joining our delegation, contact us at: simcoecountyhondurasrights@gmail.com.

Vicki Monague, a Canadian Beausoleil First Nations environmental activist brought clean water as an act of international indigenous solidarity from Canada to Honduras. She performed a ceremony at Reitoca, where the indigenous Lenca people are in a struggle to save their clean water.

(Front cover top left) Laura Zúñiga Cáceres, daughter of slain Lenca leader Berta Cáceres, broadcasts on community radio from La Esperanza, Intibuca, Honduras.