

Background- Honduras¹

Honduras is a Central American country known for its successful banana industry, which has been the subject of repeated conflicts between workers and often U.S.-based landowners. In the 1970s and 1980s, Honduras avoided the descent into civil war experienced by many of its neighbors, but its right wing government provided a base for training combatants in the nearby civil wars and disappeared left wing activists within Honduras. Since the 1990s, there have also been regular murders of environmentalist and indigenous activists protesting the commercial exploitation of indigenous land. Additionally, Honduras has persistently struggled with one of the most severe crime problems in Latin America, including murders of police, prosecutors, and ordinary people by criminals and the abuse and murder of suspected criminals by police. Honduras' efforts to combat these problems have been hampered by political disruptions, including accusations of corruption against high level politicians and the successful 2009 ouster of a leftist president suspected of planning a Hugo Chávez-style power grab.

Before its emergence as a modern nation, Honduras was occupied by the Spanish, British, and a variety of indigenous peoples. At the time the Spanish arrived in the 1500s, Honduras was on the southeastern edge of the Mayan empire and home to other smaller tribes. The discovery of first gold and then silver caused Spanish prospectors to flock to the region but hindered the development of agriculture. Honduras' Caribbean coast was the subject of continual attacks by pirates and the British, who allied with the Miskito to temporarily wrest control of the coast away from the Spanish. The British used the Honduran coast as a site of exile for the Garifuna, descendants of Carib Indians and African shipwreck survivors who had populated the recently conquered Caribbean island of Saint Vincent. The Spanish regained full control of Honduras from the British in the late 1770s but Honduras soon joined Mexico in declaring independence from Spain in 1821, then joined the other Central American state in declaring independence from Mexico in 1823.

In its early years, Honduras experienced frequent conflict between domestic political parties and foreign interests, spurred by economic struggles. Politicians throughout the United Provinces of Central America were divided between Conservatives, who supported strong central government and a large role for the Catholic Church, and Liberals, who supported free trade, decentralized government, and a reduced role for the Church. In 1838, a Honduran Liberal, Francisco Morazán, attained the presidency but conflict with Conservatives led to Honduran independence in 1838 and to Morazán's ouster in 1840. Conservatives remained in power until 1871, when Liberals obtained control. Both parties failed to solve Honduras' persistent poverty and their efforts to encourage foreign investment in the fruit industry aroused the ire of Nicaraguan Liberal dictator José Santos Zelaya, who was deeply concerned by U.S. involvement in the region. In 1906, Zelaya overthrew the Honduran government, prompting the United States to send in the marines to protect U.S. banana companies. Soon after the restoration of the Honduran government, Honduras was struck by the Great Depression and, frustrated by the economic ineffectiveness of both the Liberals and the Conservatives, Hondurans elected leaders from the

¹ Caitlin Hunter, *Author, Foreign and International Law Librarian at Loyola Law School*; Erin Gonzalez, *Chief IACHR Editor*; Cesare Romano, *Faculty Advisor*

newly formed National Party. However, Honduras suffered a further economic blow when World War II prevented regular exports, leaving Honduran bananas and coconuts rotting in storage and Honduran workers unemployed. From the 1940s to 1960s, Honduras experienced repeated military revolts as power changed hands between military leaders affiliated with the Liberal or National Parties.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Honduras participated in some of the conflict and violent repression of left-wing activism that engulfed Central America but remained comparatively stable relative to its neighbors. In 1969, struggling to control unemployment, Honduras expelled thousands of migrant workers from neighboring El Salvador just before the two countries' soccer teams faced off in the World Cup qualifying matches. Fighting broke out at the matches and an actual war broke out shortly afterwards, killing 4,000 people in four days. This "Football War" contributed to El Salvador's descent into civil war but prompted Hondurans to elect their first civilian president since the 1963 coup by Colonel Osvaldo López Arellano. López swiftly staged another coup but surprised Hondurans by bowing to popular pressure to initiate land redistribution programs. However, in 1974, the public turned on López after learning that his government had accepted \$2.5 million in bribes from United Fruit in exchange for cutting export taxes on bananas.² In 1975, López was removed in a coup by Colonel Juan Alberto Melgar Castro. Melgar slowed land redistribution and peasants protested, marching, blockading bridges, and invading the farms of wealthy ranchers. In Olancho Province, ranchers recruited the army's assistance to murder peasants and the Catholic priests who supported them.³ Honduran newspapers published a series of exposes detailing the military's involvement in the Olancho massacres, in killings and kidnappings associated with the drug trade, and in breaking up a worker's farming cooperative in exchange for bribes from Standard Fruit Co. The public was disgusted and the military was infuriated that Melgar had failed to prevent the newspapers from publishing.⁴ In 1978, the military forced Melgar to step down but proceeded with his promise to hold civilian elections and, in 1981, voters elected President Roberto Suazo Córdova of the Liberal Party. Cordova was a pro-U.S. anti-communist who allowed the U.S. to use Honduras as a base to train Salvadoran counter-insurgency units and Nicaraguan Contras to fight against their countries' left-wing insurgents. Cordova's government also disappeared left-wing activists in Honduras itself, with military and the police snatching an estimated 150 people off the streets between 1981 and 1984.⁵ Additionally, Cordova displayed limited respect for democracy, passing on the presidency in 1986 to a fellow Liberal, despite the fact that the National Party candidate had actually won. Despite these problems, Honduras never deteriorated into civil war and protests by ordinary Hondurans successfully pressured the government into reducing its involvement in neighboring civil wars and joining the peace talks that brought the civil wars to an end. Gradually, Honduras moved towards true civilian democracy. In 1984, protestors

² Robert Graham, *A Modern Banana Republic*, FINANCIAL TIMES (Feb. 17, 1990).

³ *Blood and Land*, TIME 36 (Aug. 18, 1975).

⁴ *President Ousted in Bloodless Coup*, FACTS ON FILE WORLD NEWS DIGEST (Aug. 11, 1978).

⁵ The Inter-American Court found that Honduras was responsible for disappearances of a student and teacher's union leader in *Velásquez Rodríguez v. Honduras*, Merits, Judgment, Inter-Am. Ct. H.R. (ser. C) No. 4 (July 29, 1988), <https://iachr.ils.edu/cases/velasquez-rodriguez-v-honduras>; *Godínez Cruz v. Honduras*, Merits, Judgment, Inter-Am. Ct. H.R. (ser. C) No. 5 (Jan. 20, 1989), <https://iachr.ils.edu/cases/godinez-cruz-v-honduras>. The Inter-American Court was unable to establish that the government was responsible for the disappearances of two teachers in *Fairén Garbí and Solís Corrales v. Honduras*, Merits, Judgment, Inter-Am. Ct. H.R. (ser. C.) No. 6 (Mar 15, 1989), <https://iachr.ils.edu/cases/fairen-garbi-and-solis-corrales-v-honduras>.

successfully forced out a military chief who had exerted significant behind the scenes power and, in 1990, the National Party candidate won again and this time was allowed to take office.

By the 1990s, Honduras was a democracy but continued to struggle with poverty and violence over land distribution. United Fruits' successor, Chiquita, faced falling profits due to European tariffs favoring banana imports from their former colonies. To cut costs, Chiquita reduced their permanent workforce and relied increasingly on independent, non-unionized farms. Workers struck repeatedly and refused to leave their land after they were laid off. Chiquita repeatedly called in the army to break up strikes and remove workers from Chiquita-owned land at gunpoint.⁶ In 1998, Hurricane Mitch destroyed most of Honduras' infrastructure and banana crop. Chiquita sent millions in aid but also laid off thousands of banana pickers and announced plans to move production to Ecuador and replace workers with machinery.⁷ Disappearances of leftists continued into the early 1990s⁸ and, in the mid to late 1990s, there were a spate of murders of environmentalists who spoke out against the appropriation of protected indigenous lands for logging and mining.⁹ The Garifuna were particularly hard-hit, as the government appropriated Garifuna land for hydroelectric projects, petroleum extraction, and tourist resorts.¹⁰ When one Garifuna community organized against the appropriation of their land, developers and their allies destroyed the community's crops, killed fifty-two community leaders, and arrested community leader Alfredo López Álvarez on dubious cocaine charges. López was handcuffed so tightly his wrists bled, forced to confess without being told the charges against him, denied the right to testify at trial, and imprisoned for two years after a higher court annulled his conviction.¹¹ Despite repeated Inter-American Human Rights cases, violence persists into the present day. Violence against farm workers unions peaked in 2012 and has since fallen but

⁶ John Otis, *Bruised Bananas: Chiquita Produce Slipping In Honduras*, THE NEWS (Feb. 17, 1997); *U.S. Protesters Say Chiquita Unfair To Honduras Workers*, DOW JONES INTERNATIONAL NEWS (Sept. 30, 1996); *Chiquita - Honduras Squatters -2-: Says Govt Offers Refused*, DOW JONES NEWS SERVICE, (Feb. 1, 1996); *Honduras/Clash/Chiquita -2: Workers Blame Govt For Violence*, DOW JONES INTERNATIONAL NEWS (July 27, 1995).

⁷ Andrew Bounds, *Commodities & Agriculture: Chiquita Cuts Back in Honduras*, FINANCIAL TIMES (July 5, 2000); Sandra Amrhein, *Chiquita Starts All Over Again In Honduras*, THE CINCINNATI ENQUIRER (April 26, 1999); Julie Watson, *Dole, Chiquita Workers Suffer Fallout From Hurricane Mitch*, THE GLOBE AND MAIL (Dec. 29, 1998); Sudarsan Raghavan, *Banana Crop Bears Brunt Of Hurricane Mitch Is Long Gone, But Its Devastating Effects Linger For Thousands Of Dole And Chiquita Workers In Honduras*, THE PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER (Dec. 1, 1998).

⁸ Juan Humberto Sánchez v. Honduras, Preliminary Objection, Merits, Reparations and Costs, Judgment, Inter-Am. Ct. H.R. (ser. C) No. 99 (June 7, 2003), <https://iachr.ils.edu/cases/juan-humberto-sanchez-v-honduras>.

⁹ Luna López v. Honduras, Merits, Reparations and Costs, Judgment, Inter-Am. Ct. H.R. (ser. C) No. 269 (Oct. 10, 2013), https://iachr.ils.edu/sites/iachr.ils.edu/files/iachr/Cases/Luna_Lopez_v_Honduras/ogden_luna_lopez_v_honduras.pdf; Kawas Fernández v. Honduras, Merits, Reparations, and Costs, Judgment, Inter-Am. Ct. H.R. (ser. C) No. 196 (Apr. 3, 2009), <https://iachr.ils.edu/cases/kawas-fernandez-v-honduras>.

¹⁰ Garifuna Punta Piedra Community and its Members v. Honduras, Merits, Reparations, and Costs, Inter-Am. Ct. H.R. (ser. C) No. 304 (Oct. 8, 2015), <https://iachr.ils.edu/cases/garifuna-punta-piedra-community-and-its-members-v-honduras>; Garifuna Triunfo de la Cruz Community and its Members v. Honduras, Merits, Reparations and Costs, (ser. C) No. 305 (Oct. 8, 2015), <https://iachr.ils.edu/cases/garifuna-triunfo-de-la-cruz-community-and-its-members-v-honduras>.

¹¹ López Álvarez v. Honduras, Merits, Reparations and Costs, Judgment, Inter-Am. Ct. H.R. (ser. C) No. 141 (Feb. 1, 2006), <https://iachr.ils.edu/cases/lopez-alvarez-v-honduras>.

sporadic murders by private security guards continue.¹² Murders of indigenous land activists and environmentalists remain an ongoing problem, including the widely covered 2016 murder of indigenous activist Berta Caceres, who was shot to death in her home by a police officer and the manager of a hydroelectric project she had protested.¹³

Additionally, since the 1990s, Honduras has struggled with severe crime and, in its efforts to combat it, has often engaged in violence and mistreatment of suspected criminals. Thanks to its persistent use as a site to traffic drugs from South America to North America, Honduras consistently has the highest or one of the highest homicide rates in the world.¹⁴ Gangs such as MS-13 and the 18th Street Gang traffic drugs and people and attack and murder police, prosecutors, journalists, and human rights activists who speak out against them.¹⁵ Corrupt police officers accepted bribes from gangs to murder antinarcotics officers and prosecutors.¹⁶ In their efforts to combat crime, the government has acted aggressively and in violation of human rights. To prevent possible gang violence at Honduras' 1995 Independence Day Parades, police preemptively rounded up 128 suspected criminals. Three teenage boys arrested in the raid were beaten, stabbed, and then shot to death. An adult man was sexually assaulted and then shot to death.¹⁷ Preemptive round ups of suspected gang members have contributed to overcrowded prisons that lack the food, water, and medical supplies to support their burgeoning population and the staff necessary to control violence and maintain the prison buildings.¹⁸ In 2004, a fire broke out at San Pedro Sula prison due to its poorly maintained electrical system. Guards were unable to put out the fire because the sprinkler system had no water and refused to release prisoners pleading for help, fearing that doing so would result in rioting between rival gangs. Ultimately, 107 people died.¹⁹ Worse fires followed. In 2012, a prison fire killed 367 people and, in 2014, a prison fire killed 361 people.²⁰ Today, Honduras is pursuing various initiatives to improve prison conditions but has yet to implement the necessary reforms to prevent future

¹² U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE, COUNTRY REPORTS ON HUMAN RIGHTS PRACTICES FOR 2016: HONDURAS 3-4 (2016), <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/265808.pdf>.

¹³ *Id.* at 2; Elisabeth Malkin, *Who Ordered Killing of Honduran Activist? Evidence of Broad Plot Is Found*, N.Y. TIMES (Oct. 28, 2017), <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/28/world/americas/honduras-bertha-caceres-desa.html>; Rachel Nuwer, *The Rising Murder Count of Environmental Activists*, N.Y. TIMES (June 20, 2016), <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/21/science/bertha-caceres-environmental-activists-murders.html>.

¹⁴ Joseph Goldstein & Benjamin Weiser, *After 78 Killings, a Honduran Drug Lord Partners With the U.S.*, N.Y. TIMES (Oct. 7, 2017), https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/06/world/americas/after-78-killings-a-honduran-drug-lord-rivera-partners-with-us.html?_r=0; Robert Muggah & Steven Dudley, *The Most Dangerous City in the World Is Not Where You Think It Is*, THE ATLANTIC (Aug. 28, 2013),

<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/08/the-most-dangerous-city-in-the-world-is-not-where-you-think-it-is/278963/>; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, UNDOC Statistics, <https://data.unodc.org/> (Browse to Crime and Criminal Justice > Homicide > Homicide counts and rates (2000-2015) and Download as... Microsoft Excel. As of June 1, 2017, Honduras had the second highest homicide rate of countries reporting data for 2015.)

¹⁵ U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE, *supra* note 12, at 4-5.

¹⁶ U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE, *supra* note 12, at 2-3 (2016); Goldstein & Weiser, *supra* note 14.

¹⁷ *Servellón García et al. v. Honduras*, Merits, Reparations and Costs, Judgment, Inter-Am. Ct. H.R. (ser. C) No. 22 (Sept. 21, 2006), <https://iachr.ils.edu/cases/servellon-garcia-et-al-v-honduras>.

¹⁸ *Pacheco Teruel et al. v. Honduras*, Merits, Reparations, and Costs, Judgment, Inter-Am. Ct. H.R. (ser. C) No. 241 (Apr. 27, 2012), <https://iachr.ils.edu/cases/pacheco-teruel-et-al-v-honduras>; *López Álvarez v. Honduras*, Merits, Reparations and Costs, Judgment, Inter-Am. Ct. H.R. (ser. C) No. 141 (Feb. 1, 2006), <https://iachr.ils.edu/cases/lopez-alvarez-v-honduras>; U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE, *supra* note 12, at 5-7.

¹⁹ *Pacheco Teruel*, Inter-Am. Ct. H.R. (ser. C) No. 241.

²⁰ *Pacheco Teruel*, Inter-Am. Ct. H.R. (ser. C) No. 241; U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE, *supra* note 12, at 5-6.

fires.²¹ Additionally, despite active government efforts to prosecute violence by law enforcement, police and prison guards continue to shoot and beat both adults and minors.²²

Honduras has also struggled with a chaotic political situation, including the illegal 2009 ouster of its president and high profile corruption allegations. In 2006, Liberal Party candidate Manuel Zelaya won the presidency, defeating National Party candidate Porfirio Lobo Sosa. Zelaya's father had been at the epicenter of the Olancho massacre and was briefly imprisoned after the bodies of six peasant activists and two priests were pulled from a well on the Zelaya family ranch.²³ Despite or perhaps because of this family history, Zelaya was a leftist in the style of Hugo Chávez. He accepted \$300 million in aid from Venezuela, joined Chávez's Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas, and, like Chávez before him, sought to amend his country's constitution to allow himself to run for reelection. In 2009, alarmed that Zelaya might follow Chávez's lead in attempting to retain power indefinitely, the military overthrew Zelaya and flew him to Costa Rica. However, Zelaya had done nothing beyond call for a democratic constitutional referendum and the Organization of American States (OAS) condemned the coup and suspended Honduras. Within Honduras, protestors took to the streets to oppose Zelaya's ouster and the police and army responded with tear gas and gunfire. Members of the Association of Judges for Democracy participated in the protests, wrote editorials decrying the coup, and pursued domestic legal remedies against the coup. The government responded by removing them from office.²⁴ Despite the international and domestic outcry, Honduras' legislature refused to reinstate Zelaya, instead waiting for the regularly scheduled 2010 presidential elections, in which Zelaya's vice president lost to Lobo. Zelaya never returned to the presidency but was allowed to return to Honduras, as a condition of the OAS's agreement to readmit Honduras.²⁵ In 2013, Zelaya's wife, Xiomara Castro, ran for president but lost to National Party candidate Juan Orlando Hernández. Hernández reduced the murder rate and purged police officers found to have committed murders at drug traffickers' behest.²⁶ However, he also faced allegations that he had committed electoral fraud and embezzlement and that both he and Lobo had accepted money from drug traffickers.²⁷ Hernández and Lobo vehemently denied drug traffickers' claims to have worked with them. However, Lobo's son was unable to shake similar allegations and, in 2017, he was sentenced to 24 years in prison for conspiring with cocaine traffickers, including escorting cocaine through police checkpoints.²⁸ With Hernández's support, the OAS has launched the

²¹ U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE, *supra* note 12, at 5-6, 8-9.

²² U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE, *supra* note 12, at 3, 5, 7; Mattathias Schwartz, *D.E.A. Says Hondurans Opened Fire During a Drug Raid. A Video Suggests Otherwise.*, N.Y. TIMES (Oct. 23, 2017), <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/23/world/americas/drug-enforcement-agency-dea-honduras.html>.

²³ Will Weissert, *Zelaya Hometown Provides Look At Divided Honduras*, ASSOCIATED PRESS (July 7, 2009), <http://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/sdut-lt-honduras-divided-070709-2009jul07-story.html>.

²⁴ López Lone et al. v. Honduras, Preliminary Objection, Merits, Reparations and Costs., Inter-Am. Ct. H.R. (ser. C) No. 302 (Oct. 5, 2015), <https://iachr.ils.edu/cases/lopez-lone-et-al-v-honduras>.

²⁵ Deborah Charles, *Honduras Readmitted to OAS After Coup*, REUTERS (June 1, 2011) <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-honduras-oas/honduras-readmitted-to-oas-after-coup-idUSTRE75063P20110601>.

²⁶ Goldstein & Weiser, *supra* note 14.

²⁷ *Id.*; Associated Press, *Protesters Across Honduras Take On Alleged Social Security Embezzlement*, THE GUARDIAN (June 1, 2015), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/01/honduras-protests-social-security-embezzlement>.

²⁸ Goldstein & Weiser, *supra* note 14.

Mission to Support the Fight against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras to root out corruption in Honduras.²⁹

More information

Additional background was provided by the sources below.

For historical background, see the [Encyclopedia Britannica](#) and [BBC Country Profiles](#).

For an overview of the current human rights situation, see the [U.S. Department of State's 2016 Human Rights Report](#).

For information about human rights, including all relevant treaties and legal documents, see [Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights](#).

²⁹ <http://www.oas.org/en/spa/dsdsm/maccih/new/mision.asp>