



## 8th International Witness Delegation to Honduras

25 November – 2 December 2009

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### The “Election” Delegation

After Honduran President Manuel Zelaya was forcibly removed by a military coup d’etat on June 28, 2009, Honduran social movements put out a call for international presence on the ground, in hopes of reducing state violence against the nonviolent anti-coup resistance movement, and breaking through the mainstream media blackout on the subject. The Quixote Center was one of a handful of international organizations to respond, and helped to organize a series of international witness delegations to Honduras.

Over the last five months, as we and other solidarity and independent media organizations have reported on the egregious human rights violations and other anti-democratic measures committed by the illegal coup regime, that regime has sought to legitimize itself through the execution of the national electoral process originally scheduled for November 29th. The 8th Quixote Center delegation, co-sponsored with Common Frontiers-Canada, was in Honduras for that event.

This delegation was **not** an official election observation delegation. We do not believe that the elections were legitimate, as constitutional order has yet to be restored in Honduras. Our purpose was to bear witness to what was going on in the streets, neighborhoods, and villages of Honduras during the week surrounding the event. To that end, our group of nineteen US and Canadian citizens split into five groups over election weekend and spread out about the country.

In the days leading up to and immediately following the process, members of our delegation met with a range of representatives from the Honduran resistance movement to understand better their objectives, as well as their decision to boycott the elections. We also met with Canadian and US government officials about our respective governments’ decisions to support and recognize the electoral process executed by the coup regime.

This report is a summary of what we saw and heard that week. It includes suggestions for US and Canadian citizens interested in acting in solidarity with Hondurans as they carry on the struggle for true democracy and peace in Central America.

## Election Day in Honduras

**Low Participation** With the exception of San Pedro Sula (see “postcard” right), the streets of Honduras were mostly empty. The resistance movement had called for a “people’s curfew” to protest the elections – a reminder of the real military curfews and states of siege implemented by the coup regime – in which potential voters would stay home in peaceful protest of the illegal and fraudulent electoral process.

**Media Manipulation** Despite the low numbers on the streets, Honduran corporate media consistently reported high turnout. The Supreme Electoral Tribunal went so far as to extend the voting day an extra hour, to lend the impression that polling stations were packed. Throughout the country, the message provided by government-friendly media was of Hondurans eager to vote and put this political crisis behind them – without any thought to constitutionality or accountability.

**Threats and Fear** These “elections” took place in a latent environment of fear, intimidation, and militarization. The same state security forces responsible for more than a dozen deaths and countless beatings and detentions of peaceful protesters were responsible for the safekeeping of the ballot boxes. Rumors flew that the leaders of the anti-coup resistance movement would be assassinated if they showed their faces in public. Hospitals were ordered to postpone non-emergency procedures to make room for the expected bloodbath. People were told there would be violent retaliations against them by police and military forces if they did not vote. Are these “free and fair” conditions?

**Economic Manipulation** Farmers in rural areas were told by local officials that they would be fined the equivalent of three months’ earnings if they did not vote. Army reservists were offered large sums of cash to work to protect ballot boxes on election day; those who declined were told – incorrectly and illegally – that they’d be fined for refusing. Large corporations offered 40% off for consumers who came into their stores with inked fingers, the mark of having voted -- a move one delegate dubbed “2-Day Sale Democracy.”

**Impunity** The courts were illegally closed on election day, so that writs of habeas corpus could not be filed on behalf of those detained.

When democratically elected President Manuel Zelaya was forcibly removed at the end of June, Hondurans took to the streets and they have stayed in the streets. They formed the National Resistance Front Against the Coup, now called the National Front of Popular Resistance. What began as an umbrella group for already-organized sectors of a diverse social movement – unions, feminists, farmers, students, etc. – has absorbed and been bolstered by more and more participation from previously unaffiliated citizens tired of repression and human rights violations.

### **San Pedro Sula Witness Report**

The march started about noon with about 200 people. It was a completely peaceful march with lots of flags, banners and a truck with a loud speaker.

The numbers increased during the march and about 500 people gathered at the square. Along a side street I could see a huge water canon truck, a large military truck, and police jeeps. A crowd gathered in front of the military truck. A loud speaker of the march leadership advised people to move to the public square, to sit down, and not to provoke the police.

Sitting on the pavement in front of the police line, the crowd sang the national anthem. Shortly after, the police fired the water canon and tear gas into the crowd.... Once the tear gas cleared a little, we stayed in the square and observed several people who were injured because they were beaten by the police or injured in the confusion of the escape from the tear gas.

We visited polling stations, which were mostly empty, then set off to a police station where a number of people had been detained after the rally at the square. One of the young men had been beaten and pepper-sprayed so badly that he could not see. We gave another young man a ride home and he showed us the welts on his arms and legs from the beating he had endured.

That was election day in Honduras.

*-Irene Lanzinger - President of the British Columbia Teachers Federation (BCTF)*

The resistance movement has maintained its original demand for the restitution of Manuel Zelaya to the presidency, as a first step to restoring constitutional order in Honduras. But they have kept their focus on the constituyente, a constitutional assembly designed to reform the constitution. Zelaya was removed on the day he had planned to hold a non-binding survey about constitutional reform – something mainstream media often attributes to unfounded plans to extend his presidency, but which in actuality was something long advocated by social movements.

The resistance movement was clear that the electoral process held on November 29th was a way for the coup regime to justify its existence and erase any need for accountability, in the name of democracy. Many anti-coup politicians withdrew their candidacies, and the resistance kept its focus on real social change with the rallying cry, “elecciones no, constituyente si.”

### **Comayagua Witness report**

The day before the election, we received a call that the Red Comal, a grassroots training center about an hour away, was being raided by the police and we were asked to go to investigate.

When we arrived about 50 police and military were still inside and would not allow us past the gate. After about 45 minutes they left. The director asked us to come in to the various buildings to see the damage. They had broken doors down and ransacked desks, cabinets etc. They took checks, money (4200 lempiras) and posters and propaganda. They had cuffed and roughed up the guard but had not detained anyone.

Down the road at another of their installations, the military and police had taken laptop computers, files, minutes, paperwork of all kinds that contained names and information of hundreds of workshop participants.

*-Sylvia Metzler*

### **Tocoa Witness Report**

*“As I write this at ten at night, the day before the election, the streets are deserted and all the shops and restaurants closed. Last night these same streets had a steady stream of cars and people walking along the sidewalks. The hotel, tonight, has a guard armed with a shotgun circulating around the hotel.*

*All the schools and other buildings that will be used as polling places have been taken over by soldiers. A nearby rural community, Guadalupe Carney, faced 200 to 300 soldiers in the vicinity of their homes and there was fear that the community would be attacked. This was an area where the community was in a conflict over land last August. The man who claims to own the area also has links to the police and about half the soldiers are at his hacienda.*

*In the town of Tocoa, as elsewhere in Honduras, teachers make up a significant element of the resistance. The leadership has been threatened, often by calls to the homes by the military.*

*The resistance has been carrying out activities to reach people with the message not to vote, using posters, leaflets and graffiti. We saw some of the graffiti today, with the message being “election no, constitutional assembly yes”. One wall had on it a quote from a section of the existing constitution that says that citizens don't have to follow the laws of a usurping government.*

*We heard that the resistance believes that there are 60 to 80 Colombians here whose role would be to carry out assassinations and then get out. We heard that some of them are staying at the very hotel where we are staying and where our discussions are taking place.*

*We heard that these paramilitaries are driving vehicles with no license plates. As we walked around the city in the afternoon, we saw a number of vehicles, mostly with blacked-out windows that were without license plates. A police and military checkpoint by the central park was stopping all the cars*

*to check them out. When vehicles with no license came by, they simply waved them on without stopping them.*

*We asked about the situation of teachers and schools. The de facto government wanted the schools closed early, hoping that if teachers were on vacation that they would not be organizing against the coup. Teachers have had trouble getting their pay. Four hundred teachers have not received pay since February, even before the coup. This was a result of the way the economic crisis has hit Honduras. Negotiations between teachers and government are supposed to take place with an agreement reached before the end of each year. However, no negotiations have taken place since the coup.*

*The public schools have very poor infrastructure. In line with World Bank requirements, over the last decade most of the funding has gone to community schools that are locally set up. These are essentially charter schools. One aim of this approach is to weaken the collective strength of teachers”.*

- Larry Keuhn - Director of Research at the BCTF

### **Delegates met with officials from their own governments**

The Canadian and US members of this delegation each met with representatives of their governments. In both cases, the Northern governments stressed that the political and human rights crisis in Honduras is the result of a very personal conflict between two men – Manuel Zelaya and Roberto Micheletti. This idea is not only false but dangerous, as it turns the numbers of Hondurans in the streets in resistance into unthinking loyalists to a particular politician, rather than acknowledging them for what they are -- members of a dignified movement committed to social justice.

The US Deputy Chief of Mission, Simon Henshaw, whose familiarity with the region comes from his time with the US Embassy in El Salvador in the 1980's, claimed that the US would recognize the Honduran “elections” because “the United States would never want to deny a people the right to vote.” Reminded that the non-governmental human rights organizations had declared proper conditions for election non-existent in Honduras, Mr. Henshaw said that the US government had a different opinion. When pressed, however, he seemed unsure how exactly to define “free and fair.” Nor did he respond clearly when asked if the United States government believed people had the right to *not* vote.

Mr. Henshaw estimated electoral participation at around 50%, though members of this delegation witnessed mostly empty polling stations. The resistance movement estimated participation to be closer to twenty-something percent. While many traditional international election observing organizations, such as the Carter Center, did not recognize – and therefore did not observe – these elections; Mr. Henshaw referred to the observations of some twelve hundred observers from the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and International Republican Institute (IRI).

## **Santa Rosa de Copan – Witness Report**

*“En route to Copan we witnessed several military checkpoints along the highway. When our bus was stopped at one of these checkpoints, the military ordered the men off the bus to be searched.*

*When we arrived at Santa Rosa de Copan, we met with Father Fausto Milla, a Honduran priest and long-time defender of the poor. Fr. Fausto had been detained and tortured during the 1980’s for his work to expose military impunity. Today Fr. Fausto denounces the coup d’état. His faith and views differ with those of the institutional Catholic Church in Honduras; he openly speaks out against the involvement of the Honduran Cardinal Oscar Andres Rodriguez in the coup.*

*In Lapaera, we met with Father Esteban Guzman at the Church of Santiago Apostale. Fr. Guzman had been accused by the military of coercing people to boycott the elections. As a result he had been receiving threats from the military. The military claimed that Fr. Esteban was planning an event on Sunday to block the elections. This “event” the military referred to was his weekly mass.*

*We traveled to the nearby community of La Somata where a large portion of the community has been involved in the resistance. Community members reported a high level of military presence in the region. That week the community was having its monthly assembly meeting when soldiers arrived and occupied the meeting for an hour. The soldiers asked for the whereabouts of community leaders.*

*Our meeting in La Somata was disrupted briefly when we heard that military had broken into a nearby school building where elections were to be held on Sunday.*

**-Erin Cox**

**As always, the discussion comes back in the end to the same resolution. There must be a new constitution and a constituent assembly to create it. This is in its essence a demand for a non-violent way of producing a more just society.**

**US and Canadian Government**

### **Specific Recommendations for U.S. and Canadian Citizens**

- Demand that U.S. and Canadian governments should join the majority of other governments in the hemisphere in non-recognition of the electoral process held by the illegal coup regime in Honduras on 29 November 2009...
- ...And that U.S. and Canadian governments condemn the rapidly deteriorating condition of human rights in Honduras as well as the impunity enjoyed by those responsible.
- ...That the United States government cancel all aid and assistance to the Honduran military, police, and security forces. The U.S. Army should disinvite Honduran military personnel from participating in trainings at the Western Hemispheric Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC, formerly called the School of the Americas (SOA)).
- ...That the Canadian government disinvite Honduran military and security forces from participating in regional “peacekeeping” trainings and publicly disclose its military efforts/support in the region.
- Organize northern organizations – unions, churches, etc. – to write letters in support of the Honduran resistance and condemning human rights abuses and the illegal regime to partner organizations – unions, churches, etc.. Send copies of such letters to the US/Canadian and Honduran governments.
- Pressure U.S. and Canadian governments and pension plans to demand that mining companies such as Goldcorp and other companies involved in the extractive industries (e.g., logging) withdraw operations from Honduras.
- Ask government representatives to come to Honduras – to meet with human rights and grassroots organizations -- to judge the situation for themselves.

### **Canadian members of the Common Frontiers/Quixote Centre delegation to Honduras Nov. 25 - Dec 2, 2009**

Five Canadians participated in a human rights observation delegation in Honduras at the time that the de facto military-backed regime held ‘elections’ their November 29 ‘elections’. The five delegates are:

- Irene Lazinger – President of the British Columbia Teachers Federation (BCTF) currently on leave from the Vancouver school district where she is a teacher of Math and Physics;

- Larry Kuehn – Director of Research at the BCTF and responsible for the BCTF International Solidarity Programme.
- Scott Marshall – Executive Officer on the Provincial Executive of the Ontario Secondary Schools Teachers Federation (OSSTF) was a Special Education teacher from 1997-2004 with the Hastings and Prince Edward District School Board before taking up his union duties;
- Domenic Bellissimo – OSSTF Executive Assistant and responsible for the OSSTF Human Rights Committee and for International Programmes;
- Jackie McVicar – Breaking The Silence (BTS) Coordinator and a member of the Atlantic Region Solidarity Network (ARSN).

**U.S. Participants were :**

Molly Sweeney  
 Justin Erickson  
 Chris Dadok  
 Jordan Larigan  
 Joe Caldwell  
 Julie Moentk  
 Erin Cox  
 Sylvia Metzler  
 Dale Sorenson  
 Mardy Townsend

Lisa Sullivan  
 Patricia Adams  
 Sydney Frey  
 Tom Loudon

**Interested in participating in a Quixote Center International Witness Delegation to Honduras?**  
 Contact Jenny Atlee at [jennya@quixote.org](mailto:jennya@quixote.org) for details.