

An insecure and corrupt model



Honduras' economic model, driven by transnational investment, tourism and the concession of natural resources to foreign interests is causing an increase in poverty, inequity, criminality, gender violence and discrimination, all of which pose a serious threat to human security. The final ingredient in this scenario of insecurity is a corrupt and out-of-touch political system that is closed to dialogue with civil society.

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Causes and effects

The Honduran economy is characterised by foreign investment in *maquila*¹ industries, an industrial tourism sector and transnational investment to exploit natural resources, reflecting the country's commitment to globalisation. The direct and indirect effects of this neo-liberal model are obstructing the achievement of human security in all its dimensions.

Industry and gender violence

According to the Central Bank, there are 252 *maquila* plants, mostly in the textile sector, which generate 105,000 jobs of which 60% are occupied by women.²

Urban concentration around the industrial estates is creating problems of insecurity and violence, above all for female workers.

The main *maquila* district is Valle de Sula, where the female population rate is high, and where there is also a lack of basic services, pay is low, and labour rights are unheard of. Women's organisations have reported violations of workers' human rights, like denial of the right to organise, the closing of factories without redundancy payments, the dismissal of workers who get pregnant, compulsory pre-hiring pregnancy tests, bad sanitary conditions and age discrimination.

The San Pedro Sula Women for Life Forum has reported that, according to data from the Central Criminal Investigation Department, between January and June 2003 146 women suffered a violent death, 71 with a firearm or knife, 42 in accidents, and 33 that are still under investigation. By December 2003, the total had risen to 398 women. According to these same data, these murders share characteristics like shots in the head or the heart, decapitation and signs of torture, and the cutting

up of the bodies; the majority of the women had been sexually assaulted before being murdered. In the same area, according to data from Forensic Medicine, in more than 60% of reported sexual attacks on minors the victims were girls.

The abuses of the tourist industry

Industrial tourism on the Caribbean coast is growing, coastal areas are being taken over, and the black communities there are being pressured into selling their lands. There is also increasing pressure to develop large tourist complexes in protected areas.

Linked to tourism is the phenomenon of sexual exploitation. At least 30% of girl and adolescent victims are abused by foreign tourists.³

Education

Successive governments have cited the economic situation as their excuse for not adequately attending to standards of secondary and university education in the country. At the present time, a little over 50% of secondary school students are in private schools, which have a greater number of teachers than state schools. The quality of the education system in general, and especially that of the public system, is considered "low". The National Survey of Epidemiology and Family Health reports that 40% of girls and boys between 7 and 14 years old have come up against one of the three barriers to normal development in the education system: late enrolment, dropping out of the system, or slow progress up through the grades.

There are no formal obstacles impeding access to education for girls, and their participation percentages are similar to those for boys (only 2% fewer in primary education). However, they are the first to leave school when the family has some kind of problem.

People leave, the dollars come in

Poverty and lack of employment are prompting emigration, and consequently there is a steady traffic in people, mainly women, girls, boys and adolescents.

It is estimated that 35,000 citizens leave the country every year, principally for the United States.

This emigration is profitable for the State and for a wide range of private financial operators. In 2003 the income in foreign currency from remittances, mostly sent back to their families by Hondurans in the United States, amounted to some USD 1 billion, and the figure might be even higher given that an estimated 25% of the money is sent in ways that are not controlled by the State. The current Government considers its foreign policy a success for having obtained another year's extension to Temporary Protection Status, under which special migration treatment is authorised for some 75,000 Hondurans who do not have the required documents. These remittances are now the main source of foreign currency, and the country is established as an exporter of cheap labour.⁴

Penal reform and murders

In his electoral campaign, the current President Ricardo Maduro, stressed the question of citizen security. He then pressured Parliament to reform the penal code, particularly article 332, to specify more severe penalties for members of gangs and other citizens "... who conspire to carry out actions designed to cause bodily harm, damage property, threaten people or commit extortion, or to commit any other act that constitutes an offence..." The penalty is from 9 to 12 years' imprisonment. Nearly 800 young people suspected of being members of gangs (called "maras") have been sent to prison since the reform was passed in mid 2003. In some neighbourhoods there has been a noticeable drop in *mara* activity. This reform has been denounced as unconstitutional by the Public Ministry, the National Commissioner for Human Rights, the Bar Association, and human rights organisations. However, Maduro has insisted on maintaining the reform.

In the context of urban violence, the Catholic Church and certain private and state humanitarian organisations have denounced the existence of "death squads" (in which some police participate), which are guilty of some of the murders attributed to gangs in the city of San Pedro Sula.⁵

1 The *maquila* are plants of a foreign or transnational company which are set up in countries where labour is cheaper, to manufacture or assemble some components of finished product.

2 Central Bank of Honduras. "Actividad Maquiladora en Honduras 2002". www.bch.hn/download/Maquila-2002.pdf

3 Information from the Direction of Criminal Investigation.

4 Data from the Social Forum of the Foreign Debt and Development.

5 Palencia, Gustavo. "Terror y dudas generan decapitaciones", in *Raíces desde El Salvador*. www.desdeelsalvador.com.sv

In 2003 Carlos Arturo Reyes, an Olancho peasant (Olancho is a province of Honduras), who was a campaigner for the protection of Honduras' forests and an opponent of a hydro-electric project, was murdered, as was the journalist Germán Rivas, from Santa Rosa de Copán, who was challenging the interests of the MINOSA mining company. Another journalist, Aristides Soto, from Tegucigalpa, was murdered on 6 October 2001 and his killers still go unpunished.

Insecurity and overcrowding in prisons tend to spark off violent episodes, like the murder of 58 convicts on 5 April 2003 at the El Porvenir prison farm near the city of La Ceiba.

From corruption to injustice

If laws are not enforced there can be no human security. In 2002, the country was in 71st place in the Corruption Perceptions Index of Transparency International, a year later it had dropped to 106th place (out of a total of 133 countries).⁶

Certain politically-connected economic groups responsible for the bankruptcy of a number of banks and private financial institutions, with losses that exceed USD 200 million, have gone unpunished, and the law has not been applied effectively. The funds belonged to small savers, mostly pensioners, and these people have had to be compensated with public money.

Another example of corruption was the approval given by National Congress for the cancellation of more than USD 250 million in debts in favour of defaulting farmers, above all coffee producers, among whom the main beneficiaries were members of the political class including the President of the Congress, who had one of the highest debts. Another scandal, which became the number one story in the press, involved Mario Facusse, a National Party member and current President of the Central American Parliament, who was prosecuted by the Director of Public Prosecutions for the alleged purchase of state land at artificially low prices.

In 2003 some members of the National Congress and the Central American Parliament were revealed to have links to drug trafficking, but the

law has been unable to completely clarify the facts and it is very probable that corruption and impunity will prevail. According to recent reports, one of those tried for the crime of drug trafficking was sentenced to 15 years imprisonment, but this does not guarantee that all those involved, some of whom have powerful political connections, will be brought to justice.

The legal system itself is also involved in cases of corruption. Judge Blanca Valladares, a member of the Supreme Court of Justice, resigned alleging that there existed corrupt practices and that in certain cases decisions were biased in favour of government groups. The judiciary has also been criticised for the case of the seven official pardons granted to former President Rafael Callejas, who is accused of corruption and abuse of power.

Another area in which the inadequate functioning of the legal system is generating insecurity concerns gender discrimination in access to justice. Cases of domestic violence make up 60% of the total cases of violence and delinquency reported to the Preventive Police, indicating the serious scale of the problem. In the two biggest cities in the country, Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula, only 10% of cases in which legal proceedings are initiated result in a sentence, with low income women being most disadvantaged. One of the obstacles to women pursuing their cases are the high costs that they have to pay to get summonses issued against the guilty parties, although the law clearly states that this procedure should be free of charge.

Civil society: faced with the Government's monologue

In 2003, the Presidency was assailed by intense social and labour conflict, above all in the teaching and medical professions, where the unions oppose the abolition of the statutes governing professional and trade unions and the freezing of salaries, a measure required by the IMF as one of the conditions for signing a letter of intent.

In 2003, in the midst of rebellion by some of its Members of Parliament and a breakdown in the alliance with the Christian Democrats, the Government initiated a National Dialogue which many sectors considered inopportune or overdue, and

which the majority of civil society organisations called a "monologue". One of the main weaknesses of the dialogue was that it did not consider short or medium term solutions to the nation's problems. Several civil society organisations and opposition political parties withdrew from the talks.

Just as the National Dialogue has been classed a failure, so other instances of participation created by the current and previous governments, like the Consultative Council for the Poverty Reduction Strategy and the Liaison Commission between civil society and the National Congress, have also had a poor record. Up until now these have not fulfilled their assigned functions since the government representatives on these commissions are always in a majority, preventing the representatives of civil society sectors from taking effective action. Civil society organisations must establish clear mechanisms for social monitoring and auditing to provide follow-up on these spaces. ■

6 Transparency International. "Corruption Perceptions Index". www.transparency.org