



**On the Record: Central American Civil Society After Mitch (1999)**

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**From the AP Editorial Desk**

When we asked leaders of the nongovernmental community in Honduras about the history of civil society in Honduras, they looked puzzled. Asked the same question, their foreign friends talked of "a lack of self-confidence." Everyone agreed that this contrasted strongly with Nicaragua, El Salvador, and even Guatemala. There seemed to be a contradiction here. All three of Honduras's close neighbors had suffered from terrible civil wars in the 1970s and 1980s. Honduras had been the only one spared the madness. Yet it somehow lacked a civic history. It has taken the immense disaster of Mitch for civil society to finally emerge and fulfill its potential. This is examined in the following issue.

**Civil Society Emerges from the Cold War**

**The Cold War and the Militarization of Honduras**

Honduras may have been spared the ravages of civil war, but it is no stranger to militarization. Within two years of the national army being created in 1954, the country suffered a military coup. Two more were to follow in the next 16 years.

The military rulers of Honduras lacked the savagery and corruption of their counterparts in El Salvador and Nicaragua, and during this period some sectors of society flexed their muscles. Labor unions were strong, particularly in the banana industry. A major strike in 1954 prompted sweeping reforms in working conditions and levels of pay. It also sent membership in the unions soaring. The land reforms of the 1970s also fortified peasant organizations.

Ironically, the militarization intensified after Hondurans elected their first civilian president, Dr. Roberto Suazo Cordova, in 1982. This was largely due to the country's pivotal role in the Cold War. General Gustavo Alvarez Martinez, the Army Commander, was an ardent believer in the

doctrine of national security and a fierce foe of communism. Martinez had learned his trade under the Argentinians, and 184 prominent Hondurans disappeared during the decade. In terms of numbers, this hardly compared to Argentina or El Salvador. But its impact on Honduran life was shattering because the victims were mainly leaders. Hundreds more fled into exile.

Some courageous individuals kept the dream alive during this grim period, none more so than Ramon Custodio, a pathologist who founded the Committee for the Defense of Human Rights (CODEH). (Custodio's patients included General Martinez, and he tells the story of how the General came to the clinic one day for treatment, accompanied by soldiers who blocked off both ends of the street. Custodio was convinced they had come to kidnap him.) By and large, however, civil society in the traditional sense emerged at the end of the 1980s leaderless and cowed.

Other factors inhibited any civic action. Honduras was not openly at war in the 1980s, but it was a Cold War battleground. Five armies armed, trained, rested, and occasionally fought on Honduran soil (Honduran, American, Nicaraguan contras, Salvadoran guerrillas, and Salvadoran). Honduras served as the arsenal for America's military build-up in the region and the transit point for massive arms shipments. To this day, many Hondurans feel that the dominating military US presence dwarfed and distorted their country's development.

Honduras also gave refuge to three vulnerable and highly politicized refugee populations (Salvadorans, Guatemalans, and Nicaraguans.) Though small in number compared to its neighbors, the Honduran army acquired immense power and money, taking over many key civilian functions (including disaster emergency relief).

During the 1980s, the presidents were civilian, but there was no effective political opposition. Two political parties (Liberal and National) controlled Congress and chose the president, who in turn doled out patronage and made the key judicial appointments. There was no division of power, and no transparency of government.

There was one final, crucial difference between Honduras and its neighbors. Although Hondurans suffered greatly from the Cold War, they did not benefit from the burning, all-out support from foreigners that was enjoyed by emerging civic associations in El Salvador and Nicaragua. Committed Americans were drawn to the struggle in El Salvador, and the efforts of the Sandinistas to rebuild Nicaragua, which both presented a clear and often shocking moral choice between social justice and militarism. More important, they offered a place where Americans could take a stand against the foreign policy of their own government.

The struggle in Honduras was more ambiguous, not least because Hondurans was providing refuge to the detested Nicaraguan contras. The one exception was to be found in the camps for Salvadoran refugees at Mesa Grande and Colomoncagua. These unfortunates had been hounded from their home by massacres, and were kept isolated by the Honduran military. They attracted the same kind of outrage and sympathy from foreigners that was lavished on the guerrillas in El Salvador, and the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. But this was not the same as supporting Honduran civil society.

The upshot was that Honduras emerged from the 1980s without the strong base for civic action enjoyed by Nicaragua and El Salvador. Civil society in those two countries had been stiffened by repression and conflict, and would take nothing for granted, but in Honduras it was subdued, cowed, and quiescent. The military controlled the police, owned banks, overshadowed the presidency, and rejected any calls for an investigation into the 184 disappearances. It was not a promising note on which to usher in a new decade.

### **After the Cold War**

With the end of the Cold War, Honduras lost its strategic importance. This opened the way for a major push to rid Honduras of the militarization that had stifled civil society.

In 1992, an amendment to the constitution created the post of human rights Commissioner (ombudsman). The first ombudsman was Leo Valladares, a respected professor of constitutional law who had a reputation for being politically neutral. Valladares' first move was to issue a report on the 184 cases of disappearances, which were still unsettling the country. In a subsequent change to the law, it was decided that the ombudsman would be chosen by Congress instead of the president, and that his term would run for six years – thus cushioning him from the influence of the president (elected for four years). He was also given the power to investigate official corruption.

Another major reform to take place in 1992 created a new "Public" ministry with a new civilian agency modeled on the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), which also took control of the police from the military.

1992 was also the year that would introduce Honduran civil society to the Internet and email. The 1992 Rio Conference on the environment produced an ambitious workplan (Agenda 21). In an effort to get the word out, the UN Development Programme (UNDP) decided to fund the creation of electronic networks in the world's poorest countries. Honduras was one of 45 countries that received \$200,000 in start-up capital.

In 1994, a new group was formed with the name of "RED de Desarrollo Sostenible" (the Sustainable Development Network) also known as SDN-HON. SDN-HON was the first Internet service provider in Honduras. By the time Hurricane Mitch struck, it had 449 paying clients and was well on the way to being self sustainable. SDN-HON was helping to bring Honduras into the information age, with some judicious help from friends abroad. There was just one problem, says Raquel Isaula, the SDN-HON coordinator. Hondurans were not used to this form of communication. "They had a terrible fear of technology!" This prevented SDN-HON from fulfilling its potential as an information hub for civil society.

The process of democratization in Honduras accelerated in 1994, with the election of Carlos Roberto Reina as president. Reina had been president of the Interamerican Court of Human Rights, and with his support civil society began to flex its muscles. Leticia Salomon, a noted writer, led a campaign by the Foro Nacional De Convergencia, a network of powerful academics, to get compulsory military service abolished. This became one of the highlights of Reina's term.

The country's indigenous people also began to mobilize. Honduras has nine indigenous groups, and the most active in the 1990s have been the Lenca – the country's only Mayan people. In 1987, they had won concessions from the government, but these were not implemented and in 1994 the Lenca formed an association (COPIN) to help put pressure on the government. The Lenca organized a march on Tegucigalpa, and the government agreed to provide electrification, build roads, and also to redraft municipal boundaries to favor the indigenous population in the departments where the Lenca live.

Having tasted success, the Lenca were not about to give up, and they mounted protests every Columbus Day. On October 12, 1997, they toppled the statue of Columbus. The following year, they occupied the famous Mayan ruins of Copan, one of the country's foremost tourist attractions. After two weeks, the government eventually agreed to more autonomy for the Lenca, before Mitch struck.

Another major issue that mobilized and radicalized Honduran civil society was migration. In 1996, the passage of a new US immigration law suddenly rendered tens of thousands of Hondurans in the US "illegal" and liable for instant deportation. Many of those expelled had lived and worked in the States for years, and had nothing to return to in Honduras. In desperation, many of them simply turned around and made preparations to return illegally to the US. Down in Honduras, relief agencies and churches began to meet regularly to plan a concerted response. Out of this came a new network, the National Forum for Migrants in Honduras (FONAMIH).

As in so many other countries, the 1990s have focused attention on the pressures facing women, and also recognized their formidable organizing abilities. Women's groups began to campaign for a new law on domestic violence, soliciting help from the wives of Congressmen, and the Organization of American States. A new law was passed in 1997.

### **Promoting Accountability**

Another issue that began to attract attention in the mid-1990s was the country's debt. The Association of Honduran Nongovernmental Organizations (ASONOG) had been created in the west during the 1980s to help refugees and provide aid to the camps. When the refugees returned to El Salvador, ASONOG began to move from relief to development. In so doing it began to understand the drain imposed on the country's resources by debt. In 1996, a new organization was formed solely to campaign on debt (the Social Forum on External Debt and Development of Honduras – FOSDEH). By the time of Mitch, FOSDEH comprised more than 120 organizations itself and was larger even than ASONOG, and it was being taken more seriously by the government than almost any other civic association.

The Global Village Project (Proyecto Aldea Global – PAG) set itself the goal of political accountability. The project began in the early 1990s in the department of Comayagua, central Honduras, with support from the American organization Mercy Corps. Initially, it funded conventional rural development programs. But by the mid 1990s, it was becoming clear that these programs were suffering from a lack of engagement on the part of civil society, and laziness and arrogance on the part of local government.

Comayagua has some of the country's richest natural reserves, and this fact alone turned local disputes into affairs of state and even outright violence. In 1997, PAG signed an agreement with the government forestry commission (COHDEFOR) and several local mayors to monitor the protection of the new national park of Cerro Azul Meambar. When park rangers and PAG tried to protest against the activities of lumber companies in the park, they found that one of the companies was owned by the president of the Honduran Supreme Court.

Another hotspot was the El Cajon dam, which produces 90% of the country's electricity. Local residents were offered compensation when the dam was built, but many were unable to find alternative homes and returned to the area to squat. They then began to burn trees for firewood and dwellings. COHDEFOR hired security guards, but rarely paid them. There were frequent confrontations, and even deaths.

With this kind of experience behind them, PAG officials began to feel that they needed conflict resolution more than rural development. Partly as a result, Mercy Corps and its local counterparts agreed on a special project that would promote participation, accountability, and peaceful change in seven strategic municipalities.

The first step was to create four sub-regions. On paper, each village had its own communal committee, but many were weak or even non-existent. So a new structure of 180 local committees (patronatos) was established – drawing where possible on those already existing. Each elected a director for a period of a year, although inefficient directors could be dismissed and replaced sooner. In addition, PAG conducted an inventory of local government, in an effort to assess strengths and weakness.

At this point, the community leaders came to PAG in the town of Siguatepeque and asked if PAG could arrange for the mayors to come and talk to them. This was impractical. But why not arrange for political candidates to present themselves before community leaders – in front of the television cameras?

The invitation was issued, and PAG paid for 160 committee leaders to meet with mayoral candidates on the basketball court of Siguatepeque. Officials were on hand to write down the pledges of the candidates and get them signed in front of the cameras. Candidates in the department of Las Hajas promised to provide electricity for villagers who had been living in the shadow of the Cajon dam without electricity.

200 candidates from all the parties, except for the National Party, showed up for the event. Those from the Liberal party were ahead in the polls and had the most to lose. They came last, with some reluctance. After the event, PAG officials worked with the community leaders to prepare posters, and publish the pledges as widely as possible.

PAG agrees that the jury is still out on this experiment. The purpose was to show voters and their representatives how elections can be used to hold politicians accountable. Two mayoralties went to the small Democratic Union party in the November 1997 elections, and this was unexpected. But no one was surprised when the Liberals won by a large majority. The villagers around El

Cajon have enjoyed some longer-term benefits. According to PAG, 40% had electricity when Mitch struck.

## **New Challenges**

Not everything that has happened to civil society in the 1990s could be called an improvement. The labor movement – traditionally one of the strongest in Central America – has suffered a precipitous loss of support. Some of this has been due to globalization of the international economy, which has allowed companies to shop around for cheap, compliant workers.

The Honduran government decided to move against some of its strongest unions. One of those affected was the electrical energy union STENEE, which was infiltrated, pressured, and then recreated in 1991 as a "paralelo" (alternative). Other unions were undermined by market forces. As Honduras's share of the banana market fell, so did the power of its unions. Of the 100,000 or so workers in bananas, only 12,000 are said to be union members.

With the 1992 modernization of agriculture law, small farmers and peasant organizations also found themselves on the defensive. In 1993, the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) brought together several peasant organizations that it had supported in the 1980s. Instead of holding more meetings, they decided to establish a cooperative system for marketing their products, which would enable them to cut transport and other costs. Known as COMAL (Comercializacion Comunitaria Alternativa), it now takes products from a network of 10,200 peasant farmers which it sells throughout the country, depending on what is most profitable and where. It also sells basic materials to the farmers at 10% less than the market price.

The human rights challenge has changed with the post Cold War, presenting campaigners with difficult new challenges. More than any other sector of civil society, human rights groups had come of age during the Cold War and become adept at exposing cases of disappearance and torture. They have faced a different type of violation in the 1990s, in the form of violence against unions or indigenous representatives, sometimes perpetrated by private security firms.

Violence in the jails was particularly alarming. In fact, there was so much tension in the jails that the army had to be brought in to keep discipline, thus reversing one of the gains of demilitarization in the early 1990s. Situated in its perilous position by the banks of the Choluteca in Tegucigalpa, the National Jail had become overcrowded and dangerous. In 1994, Dr. Juan Almandares, a one-time rector of Tegucigalpa University and presidential candidate, formed a new center to help victims of torture from the 1980s (CPTRT – the Center for the Prevention of Torture and Rehabilitation of Torture Victims). But he soon found that the center's skills were also needed to deal with new challenges, like overcrowding and violence in the prisons. Many of the prisoners waited years before even appearing before a magistrate. The National Jail was a tinderbox, waiting to alight.

Contacts: Email addresses for groups referred to in this issue will be included at the end of the next issue.

**Urgent – Roberto Arias, Guatemalan Democratic Leader, Is Assassinated**

Roberto Belarimino Gonzalez Arias was assassinated at 9:00 am on May 13, 1999. He had held the position of Joint Secretary General of the Metropolitan Executive Committee of the New Guatemalan Democratic Front (FDNG) since December of 1998, and had been working on organizing squatters in various areas of Guatemala City, particularly in zone 7.

According to the Mutual Support Group (GAM), the Guatemala-based human rights group, Gonzalez Arias was leaving his home, accompanied by more than ten people, when four heavily armed men driving a white pick-up truck got out and shot him at least seven times. Belgica Contreras, one of the individuals accompanying Gonzalez Arias, was also injured and remains in critical condition in the general hospital in zone 1.

The assassination of this high ranking left-wing political leader follows a series of death threats against other FDNG leaders in the port of San Jose and in Iztapa, as well as the recent disappearance on April 21 of Carlos Coc Rax, a leader in El Estor, Izabal.

Threats, the disappearance of a leader, and the assassination of another are all part of attacks that the FDNG have been the targets of throughout the year. The Mutual Support Group (GAM) demands that authorities begin investigations into the case as soon as possible so that those responsible can be brought to justice swiftly. Otherwise other social and left-wing leaders may become the targets of intimidation or other such crimes.

It is necessary for there to be justice.

Please contact US and Guatemalan authorities to express your concern and the need for Guatemalan authorities to take appropriate and effective action to guarantee the safety of other leaders, conduct a search for Carlos Coc Rax, and conduct an investigation into the assassination of Roberto Belarimino Gonzalez Arias.

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- Elise Kleinwaks: phone: 202-647-3559; Fax: 647-2597; Debra Hevia: 202-647-3727; Guatemala Desk; Department of State
- Ambassador Donald Planty; US Embassy in Guatemala; Phone: 011-502-331-1541; Fax: 011-502-331-0564

**In the Next Issue: Civil Society Flexes its Muscles**