

Report

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The US Shouldn't Export Colombia's Drug War 'Success'

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Ed. Note: The article was excerpted and
edited for length

The United States is paying Colombia to train security forces in Central America, without tracking whether this is doing good or causing harm. It's time for authorities to start asking hard questions about what lessons Colombia's military is exporting abroad.

By the Colombian government's count, its security forces may have killed at least 4,475 civilians in recent years. More than 5,000 state agents have been implicated. According to the US government, the Colombian military continued to kill civilians through 2014.

Yet, documents from the US Department of State and Department of Defense show the US expanded funding this year for a program that pays the Andean nation to export its drug war and human rights "know-how" to new territories, despite the grave human rights concerns this fairly invisible strategy presents.

Since 2007—and more intensively since 2011—the US has paid for Colombian security forces to train military and police in Central America, the Caribbean, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru—and even West Africa—in counternarcotics tactics.

According to documents obtained through Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests, the US supported the country's training of 6,526 police and soldiers from 10 Western Hemisphere countries, including Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Panama in 2014, more than five times the number trained in 2013. In 2015, the Colombian Defence Ministry reports that this program expanded to several Caribbean countries. The courses cover topics related to narco-trafficking—ranging from a six-month special forces training in Honduras and three weeks of riverine combat



Armed Forces Lancers marching at a celebration parade in Bogota. The soldier to the far right is the son of President Santos.
Photo: Demotix

exercises in Panama, to instruction on police intelligence in El Salvador and Guatemala.

Although the existence of such training is no secret—the participating governments promote it publicly—key details remain hidden from the public. Since 2009, Colombia's military and police have trained 30,000 security force personnel from over 60 countries. The US has helped fund some of this training, especially in the Western Hemisphere. However, there is little information about exactly who has been trained and how many US dollars have gone to these programs.

The US government has justified this approach based on the widely held notion that the US-backed drug war succeeded in Colombia. Of the nearly 10 billion dollars the US allocated through Plan Colombia between FY 2000 and FY 2015, almost \$7 billion went to train, assist, advise and heavily equip the country's military and police, according to data from Security Assistance Monitor. During this time, security forces tallied wins against the

FARC guerrillas, kidnappings subsided, and thousands of paramilitaries demobilized. But other security problems persisted, mutated, or even deepened in the country, while citizens, particularly Colombia's most vulnerable populations, incurred the high costs of war.

Many of the issues addressed by Plan Colombia—drug trafficking and drug production, organized crime, and violent competition over local markets and international trafficking corri-

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dors—simply migrated. The same problems intensified: first in Mexico and then throughout Central America, which has become one of the most violent regions in the world. In Colombia, other forms of violence, such as forced displacement and extrajudicial executions committed by army troops, escalated at the highest mark of US military aid.

The main reason the US strongly supports this strategy is the price tag. It is far less expensive for the US to pay for a trainee’s room, board and military accoutrements than to fund a cadre of US trainers to travel overseas. It also allows the US to maintain a “light footprint” influence in several countries without the negative optics of a large military presence.

US officials also see the strategy as a return on investment. William Brownfield, assistant secretary of state for the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, noted in a 2013 congressional hearing, “It’s a dividend that we get for investing over \$9 billion in support for Plan Colombia.”

It is also an attractive option for Colombia’s military. Should the government reach a peace agreement with FARC rebels, ending the country’s 51-year armed conflict, the armed forces will need new missions to maintain their budget and ranks.

Despite the lack of information on the actual impacts of this program, the US increases its Colombian-led security training each year. In 2013, the US supported 39 training events. In 2014, that number jumped to 152, and in 2015 it is planned to reach 205.

Since 2013, the number of soldiers who received training from Colombia’s military with US support has increased 720%. Defense Department documents show support for 179 trainees in 2013, 696 in 2014 and estimate some 1,470 will be trained in 2015. This year

Guatemala, the Dominican Republic and El Salvador will be the top recipients.

Police trainees taking courses coordinated by the State Department have increased by almost 600%, with numbers shooting up from 848 trainees in 2013 to 5,830 in 2015. Honduran police are far and away the top beneficiary, with 3,068 national police slated to participate in the program this year alone.

Mexico has been the largest recipient of Colombian military and police training, but this is largely an agreement between Colombia and Mexico. According to the Colombian government, the country’s national police trained 10,310 Mexican police between 2009 and 2013.

Many training courses are hosted in Colombia, but trainers also travel to recipient countries for short-term instruction or for extended periods to teach in war schools or policing academies. US government officials have confirmed that while Colombia funds the instructors’ salaries, the US pays for trainers’ and trainees’ travel, lodging and meals. Equipment and supplies such as ammunition and fuel are also provided by the United States.

On top of funding and coordinating Colombian-taught training exercises, the US also provides substantial infrastructure. The US government supported the construction of a policing school with Colombian trainers in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, and has invested almost \$98.7 million of Defense Department funding since 2009 in a US Regional Helicopter Training Center in Melgar, Colombia, which hosts aviation courses, particularly for Mexican federal police.

A central concern with the US using Colombia’s security forces as its training proxy is the military’s staggering record of human rights violations. Colombian army officers are under investigation for murdering more than 4,475 civilians. These killings, known as “false positives,” typically involved execution of young men whom soldiers then dressed in guerrilla uniforms and claimed as enemy combatants killed in battle. As a recently published Human Rights Watch report on extrajudicial executions in Colombia lays out, there is strong evidence that several generals and colonels “knew or should have known” about these killings.

To date, convictions have been handed down to mostly lower-ranking officers, a few colonels and not one general. In fact, many have risen in the ranks and are now senior-ranking officials. The current head of the

armed forces, Juan Pablo Rodriguez Barragan, is alleged to have been involved in at least 28 extrajudicial executions.

General Jaime Lasprilla Villamizar received extensive US military training and served as an instructor of Latin American soldiers in 2002-03 at the US Army’s Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC/SOA). He led a brigade that allegedly killed at least 75 civilians. He was the commander of the Colombian army until July 7, when he was replaced by an officer not publicly implicated in the scandal. One of Lasprilla’s students at WHINSEC, Honduran Major Mauricio Alemán Quiroz, was the chief of naval intelligence during the military-led coup in Honduras in 2009.

The military has dragged its heels in its cooperation with civilian investigations, often refusing to hand over crucial documentation. The Colombian government has tried to change legislation in order to send some of these alleged perpetrators back to military courts, which almost always dismiss the cases. For victims seeking justice for abuses committed by those trained by Colombians with US funds, the message is not encouraging.

There is clear evidence that paramilitary commanders, responsible for more atrocities than any other actor in Colombia’s civil war, received institutional support from many Colombian police and military officers. More recent controversies include attempts by some military personnel to sabotage peace negotiations between the Colombian government and FARC guerrillas, through illegally wiretapping communications between negotiators.

Although Colombian police do not have the same systematic abuse problems as the country’s military, corruption in the civilian force remains an issue. This corruption has been key to criminal groups maintaining territorial control over entire neighbourhoods in urban centers like Medellin and Cali.

Issues of corruption have already arisen in this new US-Colombia strategy in Honduras. Since December, 71 agents and officers backed by the United States and trained by Colombian officers have been suspended for stealing \$1.3 million seized in a raid against narco-traffickers. Of those implicated, 51 were members of the TIGRES, a SWAT-like, elite, militarized police force trained by Colombia’s Comando Jungle Special Forces and the US Army’s 7th Special Forces Group. The remaining 20 were mem-

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MEXICO: One Year Since the Crime of Ayotzinapa

By Laura Carlson journalist and analyst, Americas Program

In January, Attorney General Jesus Murillo Karam came out with the government's version of events in Ayotzinapa, Iguala Guerrero on the terrible night of Sept. 26, 2014 when six people were murdered and 43 students disappeared. In a Jan. 27 report, Murillo Karam declared his conclusions to be "the historic truth."

Karam's narrative went like this: The students on the buses were taken by corrupt local police in Iguala, delivered to the criminal group *Guerreros Unidos*, executed and burned to ashes at the town dump of Cocula nearby. The motive given was a little less clear, but had to do with feuding drug cartels, a case of mistaken

identity, and a despotic mayor in cahoots with organized crime.

This version is based almost entirely on testimony from members of *Guerreros Unidos*. Following the announcement of his conclusions, Murillo Karam effectively called off the search for the missing students, rhetorically buried the 43 and closed one of the most egregious and embarrassing cases in the history of Mexico.

But history has a way of coming back to bite. A group of five prestigious experts named by the Inter-American Human Rights Commission to investigate the assassinations and disappearances of the students delivered a report Sept. 6 that shattered the government's version.

The 560 page report, presented to a packed audience of families, reporters and supporters, cited numerous flaws, contradictions and omissions in the government's investigation and conclusions.

With the experts' report, the "historic truth" presented by the Peña Nieto administration will be remembered as the "historic lie." The government's central thesis that the bodies were burned has gone down in flames. Forensic experts found that a fire capable of destroying 43 human bodies beyond recognition would be so huge it would have required massive amounts of fuel and burned a far larger area, among other anomalies.

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bers of a Sensitive Investigations Unit, a US-sponsored vetted team that works in conjunction with US law enforcement.

Beyond human rights concerns, advocates worry about the message being sent to security and justices systems throughout the region. Despite impunity for atrocities, scandals, corruption, ongoing human and labor rights violations, and the existing severe security problems, Washington continues to peddle Colombia globally as the shining example of success in the drug war.

Although US officials state that they vet trainers and students for US-funded training, lack of oversight and the failures of the Colombian justice system give cause for doubt. And history is telling. "It's crystal clear that the United States has failed to conduct a serious vetting and scrutiny of the actions conducted by Colombian security forces with training, intelligence and equipment provided by the US government during all of these years," José Miguel Vivanco, Americas director of Human Rights Watch said following the release of the organization's report.

The State Department designs the vetting process to screen students, not instructors. In fact, vetted Colombian trainers have taught at the US Army's WHINSEC and subsequently found guilty of murder. The Center for Public Integrity found a Colombian general teaching at the Defense Department's National Defence University, vetted by the Pentagon, had led a brigade whose members allowed a militia to carry out a massacre. Given these cases, strong oversight of vetting Colombian military and po-

lice instructors should be required.

There also appears to be little oversight of the trainings themselves. Documents from both the Defense and State Departments claim staff "oversees, manages and observes" the training events. However, a government official close to the issue said that while personnel sometimes would go to trainings, there "isn't enough bandwidth" to monitor all trainings. US agencies do not review course content, but let the Colombians "tropicalize" US curriculum, according to a government source. In other words, they are allowed, unchecked, to put their own spin on existing content.

In addition to the lack of information about what units are being trained, who is carrying out the trainings, and the content of the curriculum, there are concerns about with whom the US is coordinating these courses.

Honduras' police attaché in Bogotá, General Juan Carlos Bonilla, facilitates Colombian training of his country's forces, which raises serious questions. Bonilla is alleged to have participated directly in several extrajudicial killings as a regional police commander and was likely forced to resign his post as national police commander in December 2013 over claims of dozens of death squad killings by police under his command.

This is not the first time that the US has funded South American forces to train Central American security forces. In the 1980s, US-backed Argentine trainers—veterans of Argentina's "Dirty War" and Operation Condor—worked with the CIA to train Honduran soldiers who went on to fill the upper ranks of the infamous Battalion 316, which tortured, killed, and disappeared hundreds of Hondu-

rans. Egregious abuses did not come to light until key US documents were declassified many years later.

Promoting Colombian military training of other countries' security forces is not a wise move, given the unresolved human rights problems within the Colombian armed forces. This training should at an absolute minimum be included in the annual Foreign Military Training Report, which documents all US foreign military and police training worldwide. US officials say that as the law is currently written, public documentation is not required because Colombians, and not US officers, are conducting the trainings. This law should be clarified to require reporting on US-supported military training by non-US personnel and all police trainings. This would offer some critically needed transparency. It is also essential to establish a monitoring and evaluation system to determine the quality, utility, effectiveness, or unintended consequences of these programs.

Despite the myriad concerns and risks, US-supported Colombian foreign security force training remains effectively invisible. The dollar costs, the programs supporting the training, and required reporting are to date either secret or not compiled.

As this type of training becomes the new normal for US and Colombian security strategy in the hemisphere, Congress and the public should be asking tough questions now instead of writing a check, hoping for the best, and dealing with any mess or wasted dollars later.

Source: www.insightcrime.org/...July 9, 2015

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The report states: "...we have arrived at the conviction that the 43 students were not incinerated in the Cocula town dump. The confessions of the alleged perpetrators on this point do not correspond to the reality of the evidence presented in this study." That statement, alone, is serious. Several of the criminals who confessed have claimed that they were tortured in custody; this is common practice in Mexico to close cases.

Then add to the debunked account of the human bonfire: ballistics tests that were never performed, destroyed and "lost" evidence including surveillance videos and police recordings of the moment of the attacks, bungled autopsies, witnesses who can't get their stories straight, armed forces who consider themselves above the law and refuse to be questioned, inexplicable cruelty in letting victims bleed out without medical attention, and a host of other acts so systematically inept that incompetency is no longer a viable excuse and a clear pattern of suppression of truth emerges.

Why was the government in such a hurry to close the case by shunting the blame off to organized crime? Why insist on a "historic truth" that was not only untrue, but also demonstrably lacking in coherency and common sense?

The experts' report doesn't explain this haste, but it confirms it. It throws out the motives that Murillo Karam had presented to the public. The first claim that the mayor thought the students were planning to disrupt his wife's political event, fails when the team of experts shows that the event was well over by the time the students arrived. The second, that *Guerreros Unidos* thought the buses held members of a rival gang, is also rejected: "This possible motive is based solely on declarations of suspects and does not consider that the different authorities were informed hours before of the presence of students asking for money, who were not carrying arms and who planned, after taking the buses, to leave the city." In other words, the Iguala police who carried out the crime "knew they were students."

The inescapable conclusion is that the authorities at the highest levels have something to hide and reasons not to uncover the truth. Moreover, from the outset they viewed the entire case as a problem of damage control rather than truth-seeking.

Just days after the report came out, the Peña Nieto government announced that a second victim had been identified. It looked like a move to bolster its ruined theory. A group of Argentine

forensic experts that has participated in investigations immediately questioned the finding, and claimed that the DNA match for the second student, Jhosivani Guerrero, is low, and like the first remains identified, the remains were not found at the dump but, supposedly, in a bag in a nearby river. Since the forensic experts were not invited to accompany government investigators as agreed upon, they will not vouch for the origin of the remains.

What none of the reports consider is the tens of thousands of Mexicans that have taken to the streets, carrying photographs of the missing students and making their cause their own. The government wanted Ayotzinapa wiped off the map: the school, its rabble-rousing youth and, later, the movement and its calls for justice.

Recall that the Peña Nieto administration faces a critical moment in its reform plan, the historic moment when it auctions off Mexico's natural resources to transnational bidders. These investors need to see stability and rule of law, not teaching college students with their faces ripped off.

Ayotzinapa revealed the underbelly of the Mexican political system right when it needed to put forth its best face. The reforms are a critical backdrop for the crime. As Vidulfo Rosales, human rights activist and lawyer for the Ayotzinapa families explains: "It's a student sector that protests, that goes out in the streets and that also trains critical teachers... And today they're seriously questioning the structural reforms, seriously questioning the unjust state of affairs. They'll be professors who go out and establish relationships with the communities, and contribute to the awakening among the people so that later they can defend themselves from injustice. And obviously this makes the state uncomfortable, and that's why there is a systematic attack against them."

The experts' report recognizes that: "Forced disappearance of persons is a strategy to erase the footprints of the crime, sowing confusion and ambiguity as a form of avoiding investigation, the knowledge of facts, and to eliminate legal protections for the victims. Whether carried out by agents of the state or by other individuals with their support or acquiescence, it extends the terror of suffering the same fate to all those who identify with the victims."

The marches and demonstrations in Mexico and worldwide are the only barrier to getting away with what student survivor and spokesperson Omar Garcia calls "the perfect crime." "Forced disappearance is the commission of the perfect crime, one in which the

families are left in suspense, like on pause, with their pain and their aspirations and frustrations. But they never lose hope..."

The experts' report will give new impetus to the organizing for truth. Throughout Mexico and in countries all over the world, groups have formed to demand justice in the Ayotzinapa case with the cry of "It Was the State!"

The mass forced disappearance has also spawned groups of family members who have begun to search for their missing loved ones among the official count of 25,230 disappeared within the country. After receiving only disdain and indifference from government offices, they've taken matters into their own hands.

The families won't give up. These men and women uncover clandestine graves every week in Sinaloa, in Veracruz, in Chihuahua and, of course, in Guerrero, where the group "The Other Disappeared" sets out every Sunday with shovels in hopes of finding sons, daughters, brothers and husbands.

They have recovered more than a hundred bodies so far in the hills around the teaching college, a deceptively tranquil-looking landscape sown with corpses. Many risk coming face to face with the criminals or the corrupt officials who murdered their relatives. Some have been assassinated, like Miguel Jimenez Blanco, who helped found the group of citizen searchers in Iguala and was shot to death on August 8 of this year.

These groups will mobilize on Sept. 26 to remember the crime and demand the return of the students. They will again cry "It Was The State" and call for justice. The Peña Nieto government will make a statement about resolving the case. Thousands will yell, "They were taken alive; We want them back alive."

Their demand strikes a universal chord heard by mothers whose worst fear in life is the loss of a child, activists who work for justice, Mexicans living in the country or outside its borders.

And it is not a remote issue for US citizens. Besides Mexico's proximity and shared history, the US government props up the Peña Nieto presidency even as his administration lies to hide the truth about the students. The Merida Initiative has provided \$3 billion dollars to train and equip the same security forces that murder, traffic, extort and rape. Not always, not everyone and not everywhere, but often enough to reveal a structural problem.

Source: *Americas Program/CIP, Sept. 23, 2015*

Guatemala's Election: Oligarchy in Retreat



People demonstrate in demand of Guatemalan President Otto Pérez's resignation over the La Línea corruption scandal, outside the National Palace in Guatemala City on August 27, 2015.

Photo: Orlando Sierra

By Robie Mitchel and Mark Cameron,
*research associates, Council on
Hemispheric Affairs*

Ed. Note: On October 25, Jimmy Morales, the former TV comedian with no government experience who belongs to a party with strong ties to the military, won the presidency in Guatemala. He received more than double the vote in an election in which, in contrast to September 6, less than half the eligible voters cast their ballots. This article was excerpted from a much longer version.

The ongoing corruption investigation in Guatemala saw its peak when the Guatemalan National Congress voted to strip former President Otto Pérez Molina of his political immunity. Molina is now facing trial for his suspected involvement in the custom-house bribery scandal known as “La Línea.” Some 28 officials within the national customs group called SAT collaborated to collect bribes in exchange for lowering the tariffs that were legally required to be levied on corporations. They included importers, lawyers, and even a former intelligence agent. The ranks of the guilty swelled to 64. To keep the scam from becoming too blatant, importers paid 40% of what sum was expected, 30% to the corrupt

officials, and pocketed the other 30% as savings. The Guatemalan people were defrauded \$328,000 weekly in this scheme, or the equivalent of the minimum daily wage for 1,682 industrial laborers. In Guatemala nearly 53% of the population lives in poverty.

Today, Molina sits in a military detention facility facing charges of customs fraud, conspiracy, and bribery. Former Head of Customs Claudia Azucena Méndez Ascencio testified on September 21 about a meeting that took place among Molina, Carlos Enrique Muñoz, the then Chief of Tax Administration, and Salvador Estuardo González, one of the principle leaders of La Línea. The arrests of such high-ranking officials represent an impressive feat for the country’s popular sectors and social movements.

Credit for the removal of Molina’s impunity and his arrest has been most markedly handed to the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) and its financial and logistical backing through the UN. While due credit is owed to the CICIG for its work beginning in 2007 to root out corruption and impunity among Guatemalan officials, who for the previous half-century had been considered “untouchable,” the role of popular mobilization should not be understated. The protests that have emerged in recent months represent one of the most signifi-

cant inroads for the left in Guatemala since the US-backed coup of the democratically elected President Jacobo Arbenz in 1954. The question that remains in the wake of the excitement that filled the streets of Guatemala following the resignation of Molina is whether or not this mobilization—dubbed by some the “Central American Spring”—will continue to press for further reforms.

It is important to acknowledge how the historic memory of civil war informs the current dynamics sprouting from the social and political landscape. The reassertion of civilian control in Guatemala was not realized for more than 40 years following the usurpation of Arbenz. After his ousting, the state fell under the control of a series of oppressive military regimes, during which a violent and bloody civil war erupted between the ruling armed forces and a leftist guerilla insurgency. After three decades the war finally came to an end with the signing of the “Agreement on Firm and Lasting Peace” during the Presidency of Alvaro Arzú in 1996, but more than 45,000 people had been disappeared and more than 200,000 killed in the conflict. The military regime had enjoyed the support of US aid, with which they crushed the rural peasant resistance movement and continuously si-

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lenced opposition in an authoritarian state. The repression of rural and indigenous peoples grew to such an extreme, however, that the US government denounced the Guatemalan military in the late 1970s.

As the civil war wound down, Guatemala's economic elites, represented by oligarchic groups such as the Coordinating Committee of Agricultural, Commercial, Industrial, and Financial Associations (CACIF), looked to redefine their relationship with the military as they no longer needed its protection from leftist revolutionaries. Business leaders did not stop supporting the military rule out of any sense of ethical obligation. Rather, they accurately predicted a change in the political winds. They limited the scope of democratization by jumping to the front of the anti-military populist movement and directing it in an economically favorable path. Their primary goal was to distance themselves from the military's waning reputation and stabilize internal affairs so they would be able to attract foreign investment and end Guatemala's international isolation.

This cooperation with the Guatemalan civil society and the international community against the military was most apparent after the CACIF refused to back the military's right-wing puppet, President Jorge Serrano Elias, who tried to disband Congress and suspend the constitution in 1993. It is important to reiterate that the economic elites' decision to cooperate, or to *co-opt*, was made with their own interests in mind. They ostensibly withdrew their support from the military and endorsed the democratic process while at the same time undermining democratic institutions through patrimonial influence in order to maintain their entrenched system of privileges.

While the formal relationship between the military and economic elites had been undone, a new and more sinister system had begun to emerge. The open and systematic corruption, political exclusion, and violent repression during the years of military rule had begun to shift to one more akin to a clandestine subversion rather than outright disregard for the rule of law. This transition allowed those in power to maintain legitimacy in a "democratic" state, while in reality continuing to exclude the vast majority of Guatemalans from the political and economic realms.

Along with the co-opting of the country's democratic transition by the economic elite

was the emergence of various clandestine groups, known as Illegal Clandestine Security Apparatuses (CIACS). These groups consisted of former high-ranking military personnel, many of whom were trained at the US' School of the Americas. Guatemalan analyst Arturo Matute of the International Crisis Group explains the role of CIACS following the civil-war: "some CIACS mutated into profit-oriented criminal groups, using their ability to influence or infiltrate state criminal justice institutions to commit illegal activities with impunity." These groups "drew from their past connections to become a type of parallel government." Among the most well-known of these groups were *Cofradía*, *La Montaña*, and the *Sindicato* with which Perez Molina was associated.

At the heart of the organization of the CIACS was the *Estado Mayor Presidencial* (EMP), the Presidential High Command. Originally created in the 1970s to protect the president and his family, the EMP gradually turned into an intelligence gathering service and a tool for silencing opposition within the country. In 2003 the EMP was formally dissolved. However, Amnesty International (AI) gave only its cautious approbation: "We welcome the abolition of the EMP, as called for by the 1996 Peace Accords, but we are very concerned at signs that the military may continue to have influence over the new intelligence structure." AI identified that more than 30% of former EMP officers would be absorbed into new agencies created to fill the role of the EMP. Ultimately, little change was realized, and in 2006 the international community was asked to provide help in undoing the entrenched corruption within the state. Since the return to civilian rule in 1996, the highest levels of government in every administration have been characterized by venality. The removal of Perez Molina's political immunity, and his subsequent arrest is only one battle won in a long-fought war against corruption and impunity.

The long, winding development of a politically conscious civil society in Guatemala has its origins in the results of The Commission for Historical Clarification. The aim of this truth commission was twofold—to prevent future human rights abuses and allow for social healing through truth. Victims of heinous crimes perpetrated during the civil war provided over 9,000 testimonials from September 1997 to February 1998; 35 civilian organizations also contributed testimony. In

working towards these goals, the truth commission inadvertently inspired confidence in the Guatemalan people's ability to push back against the yoke placed upon them by the country's military and oligarchic forces. Legal consequences of the truth commission's reports include its use as evidence against military officials accused of assassinating anthropologist Myrna Mack in 1990. There were also setbacks. General Ríos Montt's deputy, Antonio Portillo, not only escaped prosecution, but went on to become the President of Guatemala, hardly justice for his victims. In 2013 a huge victory was realized with the conviction of General Ríos Montt for genocide but was quickly annulled with the reversal of the results of the trial ten days later.

The growing political consciousness of the Guatemalan people over the last two decades has manifested itself in the enormous mobilizations—as high as 100,000 for protests in August—that have been activated in recent months. These demonstrations were not organized by any specific political party but by grassroots movements and universities, making use of social media. The only congressperson that gave this movement voice in the National Assembly was Amilcar Pop of the *Winaq* party. Pop has often stood alone in his fight against corruption. He was the first to call for the resignation of Perez Molina in the National Assembly, for which he received constant death threats.

Now the elections could be the beginning of a real democratization process, instead of a continuation of a false democratization that has ignored the economic suffering of most Guatemalans. However, it's doubtful that any of the present candidates would lead the change voluntarily. It will take much more than just merely electing a new president.

The two run-off contenders for the presidency are Jimmy Morales and Sandra Torres. Morales, a comedian and entertainer, is running for president with the backing of the *Frente de Convergencia Nacional* (FCN), which is made up of ex-military personnel from the *Asociación de Veteranos Militares de Guatemala* (AVEMILGUA). Its members are some of the very actors that have contributed to the weakening and corrupting of institutions in the country. Torres is running under the banner of the social democratic *Unidad Nacional de la Esperanza* (UNE), which is further to the political left. But she also has

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HONDURAS: Political Prisoner Chavelo Morales is Free!

By Greg McCain human rights defender, Honduras Solidarity Network

Ed.Note: Jose Isabel Morales, also known as Chabelo, spent almost seven years in prison without any concrete evidence that he had committed a crime. Omar Menjivar, Chabelo's defense attorney emphasized this period throughout his opening arguments on July 24, 2015 in the initial hearing of the retrial. It was the second retrial for Chabelo having the two previous convictions annulled by the Supreme Court of Justice of Honduras due to prosecutorial irregularities. The next phase of the hearing was setting the date of the retrial. They scheduled it for September 28 through Oct.9, 2015.

The Supreme Court had intense pressure from national and international human rights groups who demanded Chabelo's freedom. He had become a symbol of criminalization of peasant farmers who struggle for their right to land. Throughout the world, Chabelo is known as, a political prisoner, a victim of neoliberal land grabbing by the ruling elites of Honduras who have usurped land for monoculture crops in order to profit from US driven trade policies that enrich corporations while further impoverishing those who struggle to feed their families.

Attorney Menjivar said that his client's constitutional rights were violated because he was imprisoned without due process. The Penal Code of Honduras, states that a person charged with a crime cannot be imprisoned for more than two years without a sentence. Menjivar said that this was the seventh appeal for the freedom of Mister Morales based on this Penal Code violation. Source: the author

At 8:30 am on Day 8 of the retrial of Jose Isabel Morales, the members of the community of Guadalupe Carney prepared themselves to make the short trip to Trujillo. Several pickup trucks were loaded with Chabelo's supporters. Cautious optimism was in the words of everyone. There was still a chance that Henry Osorto would show up at the last moment as



Banner: "I am not a murderer, I am a worker of the land." Greg McCain, Chabelo Morales & companioner from Argentina. Photo: Vicki Cevantes

he did at the trial in 2014. There were still doubts about the integrity of the judges although they had been expressing impartiality and not allowing the prosecutor nor his witnesses to manipulate the proceedings.

As the caravan approached the court house and pulled into the gravel parking space, it was apparent that Osorto wasn't going to be there. The lack of increased police or military personnel assured us of this. There would have been extra guards if he was to show up. But the lack of extra security also meant something else; that it was unlikely that Chabelo would be going back to prison.

There were news crews and supporters from Tegucigalpa, El Progreso, La Ceiba, Tocoa and places in between. The hearing began almost promptly at 9:30am. The judges asked the Prosecutor if Henry Osorto or Protected Witness #2 (PW2) had come to testify. The Prosecutor said they were not going to testify and he asked that their testimony be removed from the case. The judge asked if there was any objection from the Defense and they said no. Henry Osorto's testimony was expunged from the record along with PW2's. The judges then asked if there was anyone from the victim's family (from the family of Manrique Osorto who Chabelo had been accused of murdering) that would like to make a statement. There was no one.

The judge then asked if Chabelo would like to make a statement. He stood and stated

that he was a campesino not a murderer. He just wanted to work so that he could provide for his family. He thanked the national and international organizations that had accompanied him through out the long ordeal. He then thanked the judges for taking the time to listen fully to his case. Chabelo sat down and the President of the Tribunal stated that it was the opinion of the court that there was a lack of evidence pointing to Chabelo's involvement in the death of Manrique Osorto. Due to this they made the decision to declare him innocent of the charges and that he could leave the court room a free man.

As Chabelo left the court house he was stopped by news reporters and photographers. They asked him for a statement. He thanked everyone and expressed his gratitude to all those who stuck by him. The emotion of what had just occurred began to rise up and he became emotional weeping as he talked about his father who died while he was in prison and that he was not able to attend his funeral. He talked about missing his daughter who had drowned a year and a half after his incarceration. He was glad to be surrounded by his family and friends and to have so much support from people all over the world.

People wanted to hear more from Chabelo. He climbed onto the back of a pickup and as if giving a political stump speech he began talking

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El Salvador's Supreme Court Is Undermining Democracy with Washington's Help

By Hilary Goodfriend researcher living in El Salvador

On July 20, 2015, the government of El Salvador issued an official warning that right-wing forces are orchestrating “a movement for a coup d’état” against the “government of the people, a legal government, a legitimate government that fights every day for the interests of the population.”

It’s not the first time allegations of coup-plotting have arisen in the small Central American republic. Two months after the March 1 mid-term elections, El Salvador found itself without a legislature. In an unprecedented move, the Supreme Court’s constitutional chamber had suspended the swearing-in of the newly elected representatives pending a recount, effectively shutting down an entire branch of government. The current president of the National Legislative Assembly called the action a “technical coup d’état.” The US Embassy called it “institutionality.”

The early weeks of July in El Salvador saw the escalation of a series of tactics that state officials and activists have deemed part of a “soft coup” strategy against the country’s democratically elected progressive government. Since the 2014 inauguration of leftist President Salvador Sánchez Cerén, a spike in gang-related homicides has strained state resources in what Police Chief Mauricio Landaverde has called a deliberate campaign ordered by gang leaders to increase murder rates with possible political motives. Earlier in July, a group of armed soldiers in uniform rallied to demand greater compensation; military leadership disavowed their actions and charged fourteen of them with sedition. Gang threats against bus drivers caused the suspension of dozens of mass-transit routes throughout the San Salvador metropolitan area, which officials deemed an act of “sabotage” against the population. Right-wing groups have circulated calls on social media for the president’s resignation, and the country’s conservative mass media’s onslaught against the governing party contributes daily to a climate of insecurity.

After President Obama’s January proposal to provide \$1 billion in aid to Central America to purportedly help stem the tide of irregular migration to the United States, the debate in Congress has pivoted around concerns about

the “rule of law,” “institutionality,” and “good governance” in what is called the Northern Triangle of the Central American isthmus: Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. US foreign policy in the region, however, suggests that those terms mean something very different to the State Department. US support for repressive, anti-democratic governments in Honduras and Guatemala provides the most explicit examples. But in El Salvador, US advocacy for “institutionality” has taken a truly Orwellian turn, where escalating Supreme Court attacks against both the executive and legislative branches are actively undermining governance, with full US support.

El Salvador’s nascent democracy has only just emerged from decades, even centuries, of repressive military and oligarchic rule. The 1992 Peace Accords, which brought an end to a brutal 12-year civil war, were followed by twenty years of US-backed administrations by the right-wing ARENA party, governments marked by devastating economic liberalization and rampant corruption. But in 2009, a progressive journalist, Mauricio Funes, was elected president on a ticket with the leftist FMLN marking the nation’s first ever progressive administration. In 2014, the left again secured the presidency, this time with FMLN former guerrilla commander Sánchez Cerén as its candidate.

The ousting of the oligarchic right from power constituted an extraordinary step forward for democracy in El Salvador. In addition to groundbreaking social programs that have expanded the poor majority’s access to quality healthcare and education services, sweeping institutional reforms have also been implemented. The nation’s electoral process has become more transparent and accessible.

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about how important community solidarity was for the campesino movements. He was hopeful that the movements would regroup and return to focusing on building this solidarity from within. There had been too much pressure from outside and conflicts from within that had taken the focus off of the original idea that this wasn’t just about families getting their individual properties, but about everyone working as a movement that grows stronger and more self-sustaining. He talked about the movement

Measures include a residential voting system, which opened thousands of new community voting centers, and an absentee voting system for Salvadorans abroad. A new law has established the Access to Public Information Institute, charged with facilitating citizen requests for government information. In addition, massive multimillion-dollar corruption scandals from previous administrations were uncovered and dozens of former officials, including an ex-president, have faced prosecution for misuse of public funds.

Unsurprisingly, the merit of these democratic achievements was largely lost on El Salvador’s notoriously recalcitrant elite and its US allies, accustomed to using state coffers as a personal piggy bank and auctioning off the country’s natural resources and workforce for transnational exploitation with impunity.

For years, El Salvador’s reactionary mass media had trumpeted US threats that the election of a leftist government would mean catastrophe for diplomatic relations. In previous elections, State Department officials and members of Congress threatened to cut off crucial remittances from Salvadoran immigrants to their families and even to deport Salvadorans from the US should the FMLN triumph at the ballot box. But unlike in neighboring Honduras, where Washington openly supported a military coup against democratically elected President Manuel Zelaya in 2009, the US has chosen a softer strategy in El Salvador. While maintaining amicable diplomatic relations with the FMLN administrations, Washington worked with its allies in El Salvador to impose institutional and economic policy reforms that would tie the hands of current and future Salvadoran

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in Guadalupe Carney, and about all the movements in the Aguán working as one big movement. He talked for a good hour and a half and everyone stayed and listened. It quickly became apparent that it was not only Chabelo whose life was sidetracked for close to seven years, but the campesino movement lost a natural leader during that time.

Source: www.crowdrise.com/humanrightsobservationhonduras/
October 21, 2015

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administrations, limiting the government's ability to implement structural changes that could challenge a neoliberal, pro-corporate agenda. Through USAID funding and public encouragement, Washington has fomented destabilizing local forces seeking to impede successful leftist governance.

Enter the Supreme Court. The Salvadoran right wing, terrified of losing the power it had abused for so long, turned to a new strategy, one that Washington was keenly aware of.

In 2008, on the eve of the 2009 presidential elections, then, US ambassador to El Salvador Charles Glazer sent a cable (later released by WikiLeaks) to the US State Department, relaying information shared with him by Salvador Samayoa, a former FMLN leader who had become a right-wing analyst. Ambassador Glazer wrote: "Samayoa told us of a 'Plan B' in the works to insulate El Salvador from FMLN mischief should Mauricio Funes win the March 2009 election. The draft plan is reportedly focused on preventing a catastrophic ARENA loss in the Legislative Assembly, early selection of Supreme Court magistrates by the current Assembly, and legislative strengthening of existing Salvadoran institutions before the 2009 elections." The cable continues: "a significant component of the plan would focus on control of key institutions, including the Supreme Court and Armed Forces. Concerning the Court, Samayoa noted that five justices must be replaced by July 1, 2009, four of whom sit in the constitutional chamber of the Court... they believe electing the new magistrates is achievable." The ambassador closes by noting, "The fact that they are taking a long view and attempting to fireproof El Salvador from feared FMLN mischief is reassuring."

The State Department's worst fears were realized: the FMLN won the historic 2009 elections. As promised, the Salvadoran right commenced Plan B, and as recent Supreme Court interventions have shown, the strategy is working quite well. The Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court, whose magistrates were elected in 2009 by an ARENA-dominated Legislative Assembly, has constituted one of the strongest challenges to the implementation of the government's platform and to the FMLN's rising political power.

Since their election, four of the chamber's five magistrates—known popularly as the "Fantastic Four" for their unprecedented interventions into national politics—have fer-

ciously defended the financial interests of the wealthy elite. In February 2014, the magistrates deemed unconstitutional a motor-vehicle tax that was used to aid victims of traffic accidents; in November 2014, they suspended an initiative proposed by President Sánchez Cerén incentivizing the payment of hundreds of millions in back taxes owed to the state; in April 2015, the Fantastic Four ruled against a one percent minimum income tax passed under the FMLN. Most recently, in June the chamber delivered a shattering blow to the Sánchez Cerén administration by freezing \$900 million in government bonds that had been approved by the Legislative Assembly to fund social programs and provide crucial security support in the face of rising gang violence. "It appears that the Constitutional Chamber wants to tie the government's hands economically," warned President Sánchez Cerén following the chamber's decision to suspend access to the bonds. "Their actions are more ideological, and they respond to the country's dominant groups and to the interests of the ARENA party."

These actions, which undermine the FMLN administration's success by defunding it, starkly demonstrate the magistrates' political allegiances. But their politics were also laid bare over the course of the 2015 mid-term elections, in which they brazenly overstepped their jurisdiction. With complete disregard for the Supreme Electoral Tribunal, by law the

country's maximum electoral authority, the chamber imposed a series of drastic, last-minute changes to the country's voting system in the months and even days before polling. The changes were aimed at eroding the strength of political parties in the wake of consecutive FMLN electoral victories that have consolidated the left while weakening the right-wing opposition. But they also sowed confusion among voters and fomented mistrust of the Electoral Tribunal, and by extension, the FMLN government, which was blamed by the country's conservative media for the inevitable delays and other difficulties in the electoral process generated by the chamber's decisions. This destabilizing dynamic became especially clear when the chamber ordered a ballot recount and prohibited the incoming legislature from assuming office, pending the results. It was in the midst of this post-electoral turmoil that the Legislative Assembly president accused the magistrates of enacting a technical coup against the government.

The US Embassy, however, strongly supports the Supreme Court. This is no surprise, given WikiLeaks revelations of the embassy's knowledge of right-wing plans to take back the executive from the FMLN. In 2013, the Fantastic Four ousted the presiding magistrate of the Constitutional Chamber and the court's lone

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some questionable affiliations.

Morales is a political outsider, an attribute that has played a large role in his success as a candidate. Morales' campaign catchphrase is "not corrupt, nor a thief." Throughout his campaign, Morales reiterates that corruption will be dealt with harshly. He wants to institute external audits on government programs, spend more on the judiciary, convene a National Constituent Assembly to amend Guatemalan electoral laws, and make governmental procurements open to both the media and the public. Economically, Morales is focused on developing small businesses by better access to credit, improved business education, and more autonomy to farmers within social programs.

Many of the political class are unenthused by their choices. Andrés Quezada, one of the young leaders of the JusticiaYa (justice now) campaign, criticized the elections stating, "[t]here are no genuine or worthy candidates

to vote for. If I vote, I will be legitimizing a corrupt system. This isn't democracy; it's a vicious cycle we have to break..." "There's been no plans for government, no debate about how to create jobs or control corruption," warned Phillip Chicola, political analyst for the Chamber of Commerce. On the other hand, the mere fact that elections are happening is indicative of positive and gradual change in Guatemala's political system since the end of its bloody civil war.

The CICIG is set to finish off its investigations in 2017 and with this pressure taken off of the state, it will be up to the left parties and the grassroots mobilizations to carry on a vociferous fight against corruption. Going by the high percentage of Guatemalans that voted in the September 6th election this growth of political participation, while not guaranteed, seems to be occurring.

Source: *www.coha.org, September 29, 2015*

HONDURAS: “Porn King” Charged for Illegal Possession of Garifuna Lands

By Karen Spring, Honduras Solidarity Network

Ed. Note: *Along the Atlantic coast, Afro-Caribbean Garifuna communities are being forced from their land as proposals abound for the creation of mega-tourism projects and corporate-run cities commonly known as “Model Cities.” In the early 1800s, the Honduran government gave communities the legal titles to 2,500 acres of land. Since then, they have held the land collectively, sustaining themselves with fishing and agriculture.*

Under the guise of improving security and combating the root causes of migration, US investment plans like the Alliance for Prosperity are helping to finance neoliberal development projects and the expansion of African palm oil plantations. The Garifuna communities are resisting by reclaiming land and founding new communities on territory they consider to be their ancestral land. They hold peaceful demonstrations in major cities against the violations of their rights. They have appealed to the UN International Labor Organization claiming their right under ILO Convention 169 as indigenous communities to participate in decisions over the use of their territories.

Randy Jorgensen, also known as the Canadian Porn King, will soon appear in Honduran courts under charges of usurpation related to the illegal possession of Afro-indigenous Garifuna lands in Trujillo, Honduras. Jorgensen is a major investor in various tourist projects in the Trujillo Bay area along Honduras’ northern Caribbean coast, including the ‘Banana Coast’ cruise ship terminal, and various gated-community projects. Charges against Jorgensen involve the illegal purchase and on-going use of land within a community land title belonging to the Garifuna communities of Cristales and Rio Negro, located in Trujillo Bay.

The legal hearing will take place on November 13 and the charges come after years of investigation of the illegal land sales. In June of this year, an arrest warrant for Jorgensen was issued by the Honduran Attorney General’s office. The majority of the alleged “land sales” in Rio Negro were made under threat of expropria-

tion and repression, given the tense political environment following the June 2009 military coup in Honduras.

The Garifuna are an Afro-indigenous people that have lived for over 200 years along the Caribbean coast of Honduras on lands now threatened by the foreign and national tourism industry. In the Trujillo region, Garifuna communities are also being evicted from their ancestral lands amid the possible construction of an Economic Development and Employment Zone (ZEDE) or Model City. Jorgensen’s investments are seen as the seed of a future ZEDE, or parts of what could grow into a free-trade/special-development zone, in the region.

The Black Fraternal Organization of Honduras (OFRANEH by its Spanish acronym) has been publicly condemning tourism-related repression and illegal land sales for years. In December 2011, Rio Negro and Cristales, accompanied by OFRANEH, filed a lawsuit demanding absolute nullity of several fraudulent land sales made in favor of Randy Roy Jorgensen. ... Jorgensen, in the midst of the Honduran political tragedy in 2009, managed to suddenly obtain environmental licenses to build in an area declared a buffer zone of the Capiro and Calentura National Park.

The piece of land that Jorgensen is illegally occupying consists of over 76 manzanas (approximately 132 acres) within the Rio Negro land title dating back to 1901. Upon obtaining the land, Jorgensen has since built the ‘Banana Coast’ cruise ship terminal that received over 50 international cruise ships last season. The Garifuna community of Rio Negro has largely been ‘disappeared’ by the project and the few houses remaining are regularly affected by severe flooding caused by the design and construction of the cruise ship terminal adjacent to their houses. Residents of Rio Negro and surrounding Garifuna communities have also lost access to the beach, a lifeline for the Garifuna that rely on fishing for local consumption.

The nickname “Porn King” is a play on how Jorgensen earned his fortune by distributing and selling pornographic films in ‘Adults Only Video’ stores across Canada and online. Upon moving to Honduras in 2007, the Porn King has since become the major promoter and investor of a Cancun-style tourism economy in Trujillo Bay. Besides Banana Coast, Jorgensen owns another company, Life Vision Developments. Life Vision sells small

lots of land to North Americans through various Canadian real estate firms in conjunction with a money-making scheme known as Fast Track Group, based in Alberta, Canada. These lots—many of which were illegally purchased by Life Vision Developments and are inside Garifuna titled lands—are located within gated communities: Campa Vista, Coroz Alta, Alta Vista, and New Palm Beach.

In the last few years, other North American projects have begun construction and land sales. Canadians Gino and Cristina Santarossa, as well as, Paul and Lucio Todos have real estate and resort-style projects for sale in Trujillo and Santa Fe.

It is likely that many, if not all, of these tourism-related investments are at risk. The tenuousness arises from recent tourism investment projects (preceding the 2009 military coup and particularly since the coup) being constructed on Garifuna lands and territories that have been illegally acquired in one fashion or another. Garifuna community and human rights defenders believe, and hope, that the usurpation charges against Randy Jorgensen are only the first of many legal challenges to come.

The current charges against the Porn King are not Jorgensen’s first run-in with the Honduran legal system. In 2001, Jorgensen and his father, Roy Jorgensen, fought charges of *proxenetismo de menores* (prostitution of minors) all the way to the Honduran Supreme Court. There are concerns of corruption related to how the charges were ultimately dropped. Then, in 2011, Jorgensen reported to the Honduran press that Honduran banks had closed his accounts for “unknown reasons”. Locals in Trujillo Bay also report that Jorgensen has strong ties to the Lobo family that have been accused of drug trafficking. Fabio Lobo, the son of former Honduran President Porfirio Lobo, was arrested in May of this year by the US Drug Enforcement Agency on drug trafficking charges in connection to the drug cartel operating in the Trujillo area known as “Los Cachiros.” Lobo was extradited to stand trial in the US.

The most recent usurpation charges against Randy Jorgensen come as a surprise given the high levels of corruption and impunity in the Honduran judicial system. Although the recent charges seem hopeful, many are skeptical that the charges will proceed

Source: [KarenSpring.com/2015/Oct. 23](http://KarenSpring.com/2015/Oct.23)

Venezuela: Lopez Guilty

On September 11, Venezuelan judge Susana Barreiros found opposition leader Leopoldo Lopez guilty of public incitement to violence and association to commit crimes for his role in leading last year's violent anti-government protests. She sentenced him to 13 years and nine months in prison.

The protests that began in early 2014 and lasted for several months saw opposition supporters set up violent street barricades that led to the deaths of 43 people, over half of whom were security personnel and passersby.

Born into one of Venezuela's wealthiest families, Lopez is also well known for playing an active role in the US-supported 2002 coup when the-president Hugo Chavez was briefly ousted from office. The arrest of the Harvard-educated lawyer has attracted widespread coverage from international news outlets, which have drawn comparisons between the rightwing politician and both Gandhi and Nelson Mandela.

The high profile trial, which took place over the span of a year and involved 70 hearings, was reportedly dragged out by delay tactics on the part of the Lopez team, including failing to show up for court on several occasions.

The ruling was applauded by Venezuelan social movements, including the Committee of Victims of the Guarimba (barricades), which fought against impunity in the cases of rightwing violence in 2014 and 2013. The decision was also upheld by the Union of South American Nations (UNISUR).

Source: Venezueanalysis.com/05/11/2015

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progressive in one of their most controversial—and illogical—rulings to date, in which they declared that magistrates could have no direct affiliations with political parties. When the ruling drew an outcry across various branches of government, US Ambassador Mari Carmen Aponte openly threatened millions of dollars in Millennium Challenge Corporation development aid, declaring publicly, “Certainly the rule of law and the strength of institutions are some of the criteria that the Millennium Challenge Corporation takes into account when making important decisions.... We have been clear that the Constitutional Chamber's decisions should be respected for the good of the country's institutionality.” Aponte routinely occupies national headlines with her defense of the Fantastic Four, with

US: TPP Text Revealed

On November 5 the long awaited text of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) was released. It reveals that the pact replicates many of the most controversial terms of past pacts. “Apparently, the TPP's proponents resorted to such extreme secrecy during negotiations because the text shows that the TPP would offshore more American jobs, lower our wages, flood us with unsafe imported food and expose our laws to attack in foreign tribunals,” said Lori Wallach, of Public Citizen's Global Trade Watch. “When the administration says it used the TPP to renegotiate NAFTA, few expected that meant doubling down on the worst job-killing, wage-suppressing NAFTA terms, expanding limits on food safety and rolling back past reforms on environmental standards and access to affordable drugs.”

“Many in Congress said they would support the TPP only if it included past reforms made to trade pact intellectual property rules affecting access to affordable medicines. But the TPP rolls back that past progress by requiring new marketing exclusives and patent term extensions, and provides pharmaceuticals firms with new monopoly rights for biotech drugs, including many new and forthcoming cancer treatments,” said Peter Maybarduk, of Public Citizen's Access to Medicines program.

ACTION: Contact your member of Congress, ask them to vote against the TPP. Congressional Switch board: 1-202/224-3121.

Source: *Press Release, Public Citizen, Nov. 5, 2015*

assertions such as “Respect for the rule of law is very important” and veiled threats like, “for now [the chamber's] rulings are being respected, and that is very important for us.” Of course, the embassy made no such appeals to the rule of law when the chamber overturned new tax reforms approved by the legislature, or when it trampled the Supreme Electoral Tribunal in order to undermine free and fair elections.

Despite the US discourse of institutionality and rule of law, the Salvadoran Supreme Court's dramatic transformation from defenders of the Constitution to active policy makers (and breakers) has endangered the country's system of checks and balances. The Fantastic Four's reckless incursions into the legislative and executive domain threaten the democratic institutions that Salvadorans sacrificed so

Nicaragua: Community Resistance Defeats Mining

Residents of Rancho Grande, a municipality in the department of Matagalpa, have been fighting to protect their lands and waterways from Vancouver-based company B2Gold's ‘El Pavón’ open pit gold mining project. Locals have organized marches, boycotts and other actions to demonstrate their overwhelming opposition to mining. After years of protests and local resistance, the Nicaraguan government nixed the project after having granted the concession in 2007.

On October 12, the Nicaraguan government announced that the mining project would not proceed. Environmental officials determined the project was non-viable, government communications coordinator and wife of President Daniel Ortega, Rosario Murillo told reporters at a press briefing.

“The conclusion of all the environmental experts is that the project is not viable due to the impacts it would have on the surroundings, on nature, on the environment, on people's way of life, [and] on water sources in general,” said Murillo. The local economy of Rancho Grande is based largely on agricultural production, with exports to other parts of Nicaragua and beyond national borders.

Source: *The Beacon, October 12, 2015*

much to build. Far from the rule of law, the chamber's actions are part of a well-planned destabilization strategy—designed with full US knowledge and support—to re-establish inequality, political repression and impunity in El Salvador.

Cynical embassy doublespeak must not be allowed to mask the State Department's true intentions in the region. As Obama and Congress talk institutions, we need to look beyond the rhetoric and recognize the priority that has always guided US foreign policy: locking down the perpetuation of systems that generate profit for an elite few, to the exclusion of a historically marginalized majority.

Source: [thenation.com/article/how-el-salvadors-supreme-court-is-undermining-democracy- / Aug 8, 2015](http://thenation.com/article/how-el-salvadors-supreme-court-is-undermining-democracy-/)



COMMUNITIES RESISTING LAND GRABS AND THE DRUG WAR IN NORTHERN HONDURAS

January 8-16, 2016

The US-led Drug War and tourist and palm oil industries are decimating traditional land rights and violating the collective and human rights of Afro-indigenous peoples and campesinos in Northern Honduras. Join us for a delegation to investigate the issues and accompany the people.

We begin in San Pedro Sula and travel to the Islands of Roatan and Cayos Cochinos, then to the port city of Trujillo and communities on the Honduran Coast and to the Bajo Aguan. Learn about the parallel struggles of Honduran campesinos and the Garifuna for land and fishing rights; see their land reclamation efforts; hear about resistance to land grabs by foreign tourist interests and palm oil plantations in both places. Visit the Garifuna community of Vallecito impacted by the drug war and talk with survivors of the DEA-led Ahuas

massacre while in Roatan. Gain a first-hand understanding of the web of US, Canadian, and Honduran interests and policies which are pillaging the environment and the communities of poor and indigenous Hondurans. We will also enjoy the beauty of the Caribbean Sea and coast with swimming and snorkeling and even a one night home-stay on Cayos Cochinos where the Garifuna are developing an alternative model of tourism. Most importantly we will get to know the courage and cultures of the peoples of northern Honduras.

Cost not including airfare from US is \$975. PLEASE SPREAD THE WORD AND JOIN US. To apply, contact Judy Ancel jancel@igc.org or Maria Robinson mariarobinson1@earthlink.net

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