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HONDURAN AGONY:

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Photo by Luke Hanson, S.J.

The Spiral of Violence and Corruption

In mid-September, JSRI Associate Mary Baudouin joined a U.S. Jesuit Conference delegation for a week traveling across Honduras to learn about the political and social problems confronting that Central American country of 8.3 million people. The delegation visited small *campesino* communities struggling to make a living after losing their land to multinational mining companies; a filthy, overcrowded prison farm where a prisoner explained he was not even present at the trial that convicted him of murder; a church parish where mothers prayed to hear from their sons who had left for the United States; and a Jesuit advocacy and research center valiantly exposing the corruption and abuse strangling the country.

"The rule of law basically does not exist," Baudouin said. "If someone is threatened by a gang, there is nobody to call to do anything about it. People fear the police almost as much as the narco-traffickers, with whom the police are widely believed to be complicit. The Bishop of La Ceibe told us of people forced at gunpoint to sell their land to mining companies. The level of violence is shocking, and the impunity enjoyed by criminal actors has led to an overwhelming sense of hopelessness. I am embarrassed to say that I knew almost nothing about how bad things have become there, even though I have known Hondurans my whole life growing up in New Orleans."

New Orleans' ties to Honduras began in the early 1900s with the importation of bananas from Honduras and other Central American countries through the Port of New Orleans. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, political instability in Honduras led to a large influx of Honduran immigrants who had known New Orleans largely through the banana trade.[1] Hondurans continued to settle in New Orleans during the Central American wars of the 1970s and 80s, and in response to the need for reconstruction workers after Hurricane Katrina. The 2010 Census of the New Orleans-Metairie-Kenner Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) revealed the sixth largest population of Hondurans in the United States: 25,112.

To better understand local Hondurans' views on the acute challenges facing the country of their birth, Sue Weishar interviewed Honduran members of her church parish. Everyone she spoke to had family members who were victims of violent crime.

Juan Molina, a building contractor, grew up in a poor neighborhood in Tegucigalpa, the Honduran capital, and came to New Orleans in 1994. In the past five years, five of his eight brothers and sisters in Honduras were robbed at gunpoint or had their lives threatened by extortionists. The ex-husbands of two of his sisters are journalists. Both have been threatened for exposing official

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corruption, and one fled for his life to the U.S. Juan's daughter was robbed at gunpoint. His sister-in-law was robbed and beaten after withdrawing cash at a bank to pay the employees of her small business. She suspects that a bank employee tipped off the perpetrators.

"No one trusts anyone there anymore," he explained. "There's no faith in the system."

Nora[2], who came to the United States in 2005, was robbed twice at gunpoint in 2002. She broke down crying when she recalled the attempted murder of her father four years ago for reasons the family still does not understand. Santos, a 27-year-old construction worker, related how in early October his sister was surrounded by five men with guns and knives who stole her cell phone. Miriam, a school maintenance worker, told of her uncle who was beaten and almost killed in his office last year—yet the police never showed up to investigate. Raul described how a gunman boarded a bus in Tegucigalpa in 2004 and sprayed bullets everywhere while Raul and the other passengers dove for cover.

Honduras, with a homicide rate at 91.6 victims per 100,000 inhabitants, is the world's most violent nation.[3] The Jesuit research and advocacy center, ERIC *(Equipo de Reflexion, Investigacion y Comunicacion),* estimates that every 12 hours a Honduran is extorted for money. A pervasive and well-substantiated fear of crime affects everyday life.[4]

When Molina was growing up in Tegucigalpa he thought nothing of returning home at 2 a.m. after a night out with friends. However, when he and his wife and children visited family there in 2012, they did not dare venture outside after sunset. When Miriam returns to visit family members, she does not wear jewelry or carry a purse for fear of being robbed. She recalls that during her childhood, her family never locked the doors and windows of their home in a small town 30 miles northeast of the capital. Recently she paid for security bars for her parents' home. Still, her parents feel they cannot leave the house unguarded—and have arranged their lives so that one of them is always at home. During Baudouin's recent visit, delegation members were not allowed on the streets by themselves or to go out at night—even a stroll to a corner store was too dangerous.

Much of the violence is attributed to the drug trade and gangs. When drug interdiction disrupted narco-trafficking routes in Mexico and the Caribbean, Honduras became the transit route of choice. It is estimated that a third of the cocaine destined for the United States from Colombia and Venezuela passes through Honduras.[5] Gang violence began taking root in Honduras when gang members deported from California re-established their criminal organizations upon return. Gangs are now believed to be closely cooperating with international drug cartels.[6]

The police have also been widely implicated in the drug trade as well as extrajudicial executions. The Honduran judicial system is weak and has been highly compromised by the arbitrary dismissal of judges after the 2009 coup. Many blame the June 28, 2009, coup for the marked increase in violence. Following the coup, civil liberties were suppressed by the de facto government as police and soldiers violently repressed protesters, forced the shutdown of radio stations and other media, and carried out widespread, arbitrary detentions. In U.S. Congressional hearings, human rights advocate Lisa Haugaard testified that the coup unleashed violence by creating a sense that "any authority or anyone who simply felt entitled could do what they wished without consequences."[7]

At times during her visit, Baudouin was understandably overcome with despair. Just before leaving Honduras, however, the delegation visited Radio Progreso, a project of ERIC, headed by Fr. Ismael ("Padre Melo") Moreno, S.J. Radio Progreso reaches 1.5 million listeners, providing an array of programming— including news, call-in talk shows, story-telling, music, and cutting-edge reporting on corruption and human rights abuses by governmental and criminal organizations. Almost everyone at Radio Progreso has received death threats, including Padre Melo—who has friends who were murdered because they refused to stop reporting on the injustices inflicted upon Honduran men and women. Baudouin requested that Padre Melo play on his radio show the anthem of the U.S. civil rights movement *We Shall Overcome.* As the record spun, Padre Melo closed his eyes and sang along. She then realized this man who knows the challenges facing his country more than anyone really does believe that the people of Honduras shall overcome. She left Honduras knowing that if he has that kind of hope, what right does she have not to hope?

ENDNOTES

1 One of the largest fruit importing companies, Standard Fruit, was founded in New Orleans and later set up its headquarters in the city of La Ceiba, on the northern coast of Honduras. Throughout the early to mid 20th century, a small but steady stream of Hondurans migrated to New Orleans, many to work on the docks unloading bananas. Wealthy Hondurans sent their children to boarding school in the city. From Samantha Euraque, *"Honduran Memories": Identity, Race, Place and Memory in New Orleans, Louisiana.* Master's Thesis, Louisiana State University, May, 2004. By 1970 Hondurans were the largest group of immigrants in the state of Louisiana, representing 12.9% of the state's foreign-born population, according to Census figures.

2 Except for Juan Molina, none of the Hondurans interviewed for this article wanted their real names used.

3 See United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Intentional homicide, count and rate per 100,000 population (1995-2011) www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/statistics/crome/Homicide_statistics2013.xls

4 See documentary by Radio Progreso, *No mas impunida,* at www.youtube.com/watch?v=9bQKMIDjXvk

5 Tom Shanker, "Lessons of Iraq help U.S. fight a drug war in Honduras", *New York Times,* May 5, 2012, at www.nytimes.com/2012/05/06/world/americas/us-turns-its-focus-on-drug-smuggling-in-honduras.html

6 Freddy Cuevas, "Gangs are in forty percent of Honduras, officials say," *Huffington Post,* July 31, 2013 at www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/08/01/gangs-honduras_n_3690118.html

7 Testimony of Lisa Haugaard, Executive Director, Latin America Working Group Education Fund before the United States Congress, Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, July 25, 2013, at www.friendshipamericas.org/sites/default/files/Human%20Rights%20in%20Honduras%20Transcript.pdf