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Honduras failing to tackle coup rights abuses

Amnesty International has accused the Honduran authorities of failing to address serious human rights violations that followed the coup d'état of 28 June 2009, when ex-President Manuel Zelaya was forced from power.

Since new president Porfirio Lobo took office in January, police and military officers responsible for mass arrests, beatings and torture in the wake of the coup have not been brought to justice. Meanwhile, concerns about freedom of expression increased, as seven journalists have been killed in the past three months.

"President Lobo has publicly committed to human rights but has failed to take action to protect them, which is unacceptable. He needs to show he is serious about ending the climate of repression and insecurity in Honduras - otherwise the future stability of the country will remain in jeopardy," said Guadalupe Marengo, Amnesty International's Americas deputy director.

President Lobo was elected in November last year amid a political crisis that saw President Zelaya ousted by military-backed politicians.

Hundreds of people opposed to the coup were beaten and detained by the security forces as protests erupted during the following months. More than 10 people were reportedly killed during the unrest. The police and military also widely misused tear gas and other crowd control equipment.

Human rights activists, opposition leaders and judges suffered threats and intimidation, media outlets closed and journalists were censored. There were also reports of security force personnel committing acts of sexual violence against women and girls.

Judges viewed as critical of the coup suffered a series of arbitrary transferrals and unfair disciplinary proceedings. Members of the organization Judges for Democracy, which promotes principles of fairness and transparency, formed the vast majority of those targeted.

No one has yet been held to account for these abuses and few investigations have been opened. Victims continue to wait for justice and reparation for the abuses they endured.

"It is a sad fact that no redress has been provided to the numerous victims who suffered serious abuses at the hands of the police and military during the de facto government's time in power," said Guadalupe Marengo.

"These grave human rights violations must not be forgotten or go unpunished. Victims have the right to truth, justice and reparation."

Amnesty International is also seriously concerned that the number of attacks on journalists has actually risen since the new government came into power. Seven journalists have been killed since March 2010 and many more have suffered threats and harassment.

Meanwhile, four judges were removed from their posts on 1 June 2010, apparently for criticising the coup d'état - a move that seriously undermines the justice system.

The Honduran government established a Truth and Reconciliation Commission in April but Amnesty International is seriously concerned that its mandate is limited only to establishing the contributing factors to the crisis. Truth commissions should be one part of a comprehensive national plan devised to protect the rights of victims of human rights violations. In addition to this, the government must ensure investigation, justice and reparation for victims.

"Honduras' coup d'état left the country in need of a programme of human rights reconstruction with clear objectives and a timeline for completion - but the commission lacks a proper mandate or capacity to investigate abuses," said Guadalupe Marengo.

"Our past research shows that when insufficient steps are taken to ensure justice and truth, the wounds do not heal and the cycle of violence and unrest continues."

Background

Honduran President Manuel Zelaya Rosales was forced from power on 28 June 2009 and expelled from the country by a military-backed group of politicians led by Roberto Micheletti, former president of the national Congress.

According to dozens of testimonies collected by Amnesty International's researchers in Honduras during two visits to the country, human rights abuses spiralled after the coup.

The de facto government headed by Micheletti remained in power until the end of 2009. A new government led by Porfirio Lobo took office on 27 January 2010 on the same day Amnesty International released a report titled "Honduras: Recommendations to the new Honduran government following the coup of June 2009" which documented violations during the coup d'état

Amnesty International has continued to urge the authorities to address human rights violations committed after the coup since it came to power, as has the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.