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Honduras: No return to “business as usual”

(Tegucigalpa) At the end of a 10-day visit to Honduras during the country’s presidential elections, Amnesty International today called for an independent investigation to ensure all those responsible for human rights abuses are brought to justice and the victims given reparations.

“The crisis in Honduras does not end with the election results, the authorities cannot return to business as usual without ensuring human rights safeguards,” said Javier Zúñiga, head of the Amnesty International delegation in Honduras.

“There are dozens of people in Honduras still suffering the effects of the abuses carried out in the past five months. Failure to punish those responsible and to fix the malfunctioning system would open the door for more abuses in the future.”

During its visit to Honduras, Amnesty International’s delegation documented numerous cases of human rights abuses carried out since last June, when President Manuel Zelaya was forced into exile.

These included killings following excessive use of force, arbitrary arrests of demonstrators by police and military, indiscriminate and unnecessary use of tear gas, ill treatment of detainees in custody, violence against women, harassment of activists, journalists, lawyers and judges.

The organization found that members of the military assigned to law enforcement duties were involved in committing serious human rights violations such as killings following excessive use of force, arbitrary arrests and illegal raids.

Amnesty International also found that the civilian de facto authorities failed to do anything to prevent the indiscriminate use of tear gas against protesters. In some cases gas canisters were thrown inside offices.

Most people interviewed said that after being injured or made ill by the gas, they were too scared to seek medical assistance as police and military entered hospitals in order to intimidate them.

On 23 September, Marta (not her real name) was attacked by police while she was taking part in a demonstration. She was hit with a tear gas can, which burned her leg and caused her to have breathing problems. While she was hiding from the gases in a church, police caught up with her and hit her so badly they broke her arm. She didn’t go to the hospital until several days later because she was scared the police would harass her there. Her arm still hasn’t recovered and the burn to her leg is still visible.

“We spoke to people who still had eye irritation and burns to the skin several weeks after having been affected by tear gas,” said Javier Zúñiga. “Not only did police use gas against peaceful protesters and in

enclosed buildings, doctors were not given information about the chemical substances used in the cans to enable them to treat victims properly.”

“The security forces’ use of tear gas raises questions about the level of training received that could have minimized the risks of serious injury or death,” said Javier Zúñiga.

Representatives of human rights organizations, journalists, lawyers and judges told Amnesty International about the threats and harassment they received for being seen as opposed to the de facto authorities.

Members of a national judges association were called to a hearing to account for their participation in peaceful demonstrations.

“During the crisis, institutions in Honduras have blatantly failed to protect basic human rights,” said Javier Zúñiga. “It is particularly worrying that in Honduras the conditions which enable human rights abusers to go unpunished exist.”

Amnesty International urged the future Honduran government to:

- Repeal all legislation, decrees and executive orders issued by the de facto authorities.
- Ensure the military return to their barracks and that their law enforcement function is withdrawn.
- Ensure that all members of the security forces are held accountable for human rights abuses committed between 28th June and end of November.
- Develop a National Plan for the protection of human rights.

“It is essential that the international community does not forget people in Honduras by giving a blank cheque to the new authorities over-looking the abuses of the past five months,” said Javier Zúñiga.