

PRESS RELEASE:

WOMEN IN THE HONDURAN CRISIS

10 July 2009

Women are in the forefront of the protest against the military coup of 28 June in Honduras. In the last week of June, as the threat of a coup loomed, women's organisations sprang into action, organising marches, mobilising women, writing and distributing bulletins, and sending information and eyewitness images around the world by email, text and social networking media.

Honduran women's organisations and individual women from rural and urban areas have come together to resist and protest peacefully in response to the coup and the events that followed. On 29 June they released a public statement¹ calling for the return of the rule of law and respect for human rights by peaceful means, and they have not stopped their communications, despite frequent power cuts. The mainstream news channels are strictly controlled, so their reports provide crucial information by their immediacy and by giving a voice to ordinary people, especially women.

Women living in fear

Nearly two weeks after the coup, fear of detention and disappearance by the security forces, fear of violence in the demonstrations, fear that their houses will be raided and their families harmed, is currently a daily reality for women. Women in poverty-stricken country villages report that the army is forcing their young sons – many of them minors – into military service.

The lives of both women and men are being made difficult and dangerous by the daily curfew between the early hours of the evening and the early morning, and by the suspension of the rights of association and organisation, freedom of movement, of speech and to protest.

Mirta Kennedy, director of one women's organisation, the Honduran Women's Studies Centre (CEM-H), reports:

'Our office is under surveillance every day by police or civilian operatives in vehicles with tinted windows ... We are taking part in demonstrations hemmed in by heavily-armed soldiers and police with riot shields, there are tanks and cannon, and there are snipers on the roofs.'

The curfew is destroying many women's livelihoods. Women workers are afraid of being arrested or worse if they have to go home from work after the curfew, so they are forced to abandon their jobs. Street vendors, most of them women, cannot work at all. We have learned that workers in the many export processing factories, also mostly women, are being made to go on marches supporting the de facto government.

¹ Available from www.cawn.org.

Public servants who worked for the Zelaya government have lost their jobs and are being pursued by the de facto government. Even the national Minister for Women is in hiding from the de facto government's judiciary, guilty of nothing more than having been appointed by Zelaya.

Women's rights under threat

The coup also has particular implications for women because of the active involvement and support of the conservative Catholic Church and some evangelical Christian churches. Although Honduras has Latin America's highest annual birth rate and a very high incidence of HIV and AIDS, the disproportionate influence of these churches makes women's reproductive and health rights extremely limited and difficult and dangerous to access. In 2008 the National Congress, under pressure from the Church and conservative politicians, proposed a law prohibiting the emergency contraceptive pill (the 'morning-after' pill). It was vetoed by President Zelaya after lobbying from feminist organisations and discussions with the National Women's Institute (INAM) and the Minister for Women. However, there are now fears that Roberto Micheletti's de facto government – effectively the same people who put forward the bill – will resuscitate it and push it through.

Zelaya's achievements for women – modest but real

Zelaya's 'modest but real new domestic initiatives' (Washington Office on Latin America, 3 July 09) included raising the minimum wage, abolishing fees for primary education, introducing school meals (thus ensuring that poor kids in school got at least one square meal a day), expanding the government's programme of child immunisations, and bringing electricity to more rural and urban homes. While not directly aimed at promoting women's rights, such measures have clearly been good for women. But these advances are all put at risk by the coup.

Not for Zelaya, but for the rule of law

Honduran women's organisations do not deny that Zelaya's government leaves plenty of room for change. They emphasise that they oppose the coup and the de facto government not because they totally approve of President Zelaya, but because the coup is illegal and undemocratic and the de facto government illegitimate. In the analysis of the 'feminists in resistance', the president's abduction and deportation by the military represents a breakdown in the rule of law in which women are suffering as workers, family carers and victims of violence.

Says Gilda Rivera of the Honduran Centre for Women's Rights (CDM),

'We're not followers of Mel [Zelaya], but we are against military coups, and ... against the religious fundamentalists who have enthroned themselves in this de facto government and who have taken measures in the National Congress against the most fundamental rights of women.'

The Honduran constitution is weak on women's rights, the conservative church has an undue influence on national policy-making, and no Honduran government has ever done much for women or gender equality. What feminists are demanding is change within the boundaries of the rule of law, in which all citizens, men and women, can participate fully and on equal terms.



On 7 July, Honduras' first lady, Xiomara Castro de Zelaya, left the mountain hideout where she had been since the day of the coup to lead a large rally against the coup outside the Pedagogic University in Tegucigalpa. She demanded:

'How can there be peace where people cannot go about after a certain hour ... if buses are held up ... if the media are controlled ... if demonstrations are repressed? How can there be peace at bayonet point? ... For the people – not for those ladies swanning out of the beauty salons with security, with protection, but for the workers and peasants who struggle every day to make ends meet – this is not peace.'

Further Information

The information provided in the Press Release is largely based on news received from Honduran women's organisations by CAWN. Based in London, the Central America Women's Network (CAWN) works in partnership with women's organisations in Central America, including the Honduran Women's Studies Centre (CEM-H). For the past three years they have been working on a joint project aimed at ending violence against women (VAW), which is endemic throughout the country. VAW takes different forms in Honduras, from psychological and physical violence to the extremes of *femicide*. According to CEM-H research (2006), the number of *femicides* (violent killings of women) rose from 11 in 2003 to 138 in 2004 and 171 in 2005. CDM recorded (2007) that 155 women were killed in 2006. CEM-H will be launching a new research report in September this year with up to date figures.

Even before the coup, on 28 June, CAWN received news that a young girl had been killed and her body placed in a box, tied up with a ribbon in a parody of gift-wrapping, and sent to the police. Although the Honduran media presented this as a gang killing, its timing is suggestive: the coup was already in preparation, and this *femicide* illustrates the ways in which the murder of women becomes a weapon and a message to the killers' enemies.

In the light of these events CAWN, among other UK-based solidarity groups and non-governmental organisations, has sent a letter¹ to the UK government, requesting its intervention at the diplomatic level to ensure the peaceful withdrawal of the soldiers and the safety and protection of civilians from any reprisals, and the freezing of all trade and aid from the UK to the government of Honduras until the crisis is resolved, among other political requests.

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