



Honduras Forum Switzerland

Seat: Zürich Switzerland

Press statement by the members of a Honduras Forum Switzerland delegation following a visit to Honduras between September 30, 2013 and October 7, 2013.

The Honduras Forum Switzerland is concerned about the state of democracy and the respect for human rights in Honduras.

Ten Swiss citizens, we stayed for eight days in Honduras as human rights observers representing the Honduras Forum Switzerland, in the pre-election period at the invitation of local human rights organizations. We spoke with representatives of civil society, and of international and state agencies, we visited Zacate Grande in the south and La Esperanza in the west of Honduras and we heard the testimonies of victims of human rights violations and their relatives. This allowed us to obtain an informed view of the situation in Honduras.

At every meeting, the participants emphasized the importance of an international presence, such as our delegation and the work of human rights accompaniers such as PROAH (Honduras Accompaniment Project), of which the Swiss NGO Peace Watch Switzerland is a partner organization.

The information received included:

a) Reports of severe shortcomings in the public health and education sectors:

Teachers on the peninsula of Zacate Grande told us that schoolbooks are not delivered to the village schools at all or are delivered too late; that teachers have to work with improvised learning materials and that they buy these with their own money, and that their already low wages are paid only irregularly. A lot of families cannot afford school for their children and medical treatment is almost non-existent.

b) Reports of daily threats and acts of violence

With 83 homicides per 100,000 population – according to the Observatorio de la Violencia (Violence Observatory) – Honduras is still one of the most violent countries in the world. With 8.4 million inhabitants this means a daily murder rate of about 20. Every day we were confronted with this harsh reality passing newspaper stands.

We were affected ourselves by the consequences of the high level of insecurity in the country, for example having to take a cab going to places within walking distance. Locals often prefer to take detours due to a police presence on their regular way home. The fear of their own security forces and their arbitrariness is ubiquitous.

c) Reports of impunity

At a meeting with victims of human rights violations and their relatives we heard tragic stories of death threats and murders. We were shocked that the culprits are almost never taken into custody and often there is not even an investigation. It seems that for the masterminds of crime there is total impunity in Honduras. This was a constant theme throughout our stay there.

Furthermore we met people who had been forced out of homes where they had lived for generations, simply because some powerful third party showed an interest in it. The justice system failed – deliberately – to protect these families.

We conclude:

- that in Honduras the separation of powers (legislative, executive and judiciary) and, thus, the rule of law, are not guaranteed.
- that the criminalization and even assassination of opposition members in the run-up to the election seems to be increasing dramatically.
- that the criminalization and persecution of human rights defenders and their lawyers appears to be the order of the day. They are increasingly branded as terrorists and the state and its officials have widened the definition of terrorism to cover activities that should be guaranteed under any rule of law. With great concern we learned about the cases of Bertha Cáceres, Aureliano Molina and Tomás Membreño of COPINH, their lawyer Víctor Fernández of MADJ and Magdalena Morales of CNTC.
- that in the case of Orlane Vidal (French) and Daniel Langmeier (Swiss) for the first time international observers have been severely threatened and three months after they were temporarily abducted the culprits are still free.

We expect from those responsible in politics and the justice system in Honduras, and from the economic circles which dominate these two fields:

- the implementation of a genuine separation of powers in order to achieve the rule of law.
- the adherence to human rights obligations signed by Honduras itself and an immediate halt to the criminalization and persecution of human rights defenders.
- that the Honduran authorities make every possible effort to guarantee free and fair elections, that the international observers are granted unrestricted access for supervision and that their work is supported.

- a halt to the unlawful expropriation of land and assurance of transparency and due process in the allocation and transfer of property titles as well as a non-violent solution to land conflicts.
- due process while allocating concessions regarding natural resources and in particular respect for the rights of indigenous people, as stipulated in international instruments.
- that the security forces guarantee the security of the whole population and that a shift from a military to a civilian-based concept of security is accepted and promoted.

We demand from the international community and specifically Switzerland:

- that they work towards establishing guarantees that foreign investors will respect human rights and the rights of indigenous people.
- that they take great care that there is a good political balance among the elections observers and that their impartiality is ensured.
- that the situation before and after the elections is subject to rigorous scrutiny and that any violation is documented and published.

Switzerland will assume the presidency of the G16 for the first time in the first half of 2014. We demand that Switzerland takes this opportunity to put the democratization process and the human rights' situation on the top of the agenda, and that it works towards ensuring that, for example the "Mesa de Seguridad" (Security Committee) resumes work as a matter of priority.

We expect COSUDE to diligently and consistently support the paradigm shift from military to civil security through their existing and planned programs. We welcome the schemes for suitable training of new police officers and the nationwide establishment of facilities for victims of acts of violence. We expect functioning control mechanisms and transparency regarding financial flows, thereby guaranteeing the long-term acceptance and participation of Honduran civil society.

Throughout our stay the visited organizations emphasized the great importance of an international presence for the respect of human rights. We thank them for welcoming us openly, for their helpfulness and for their skillful introduction to the national context. We will continue to stay in contact with them and with Honduras. The Honduras Forum Switzerland will, once it has returned, provide more detailed information based on the insights gained on this visit.

Sincerely,

on behalf of the Honduras Forum Switzerland

Bernardo Erni, coordinator of the delegation

Aebischer Bernard, Chaves Verena, Grogg Susanne, Hotz Margaretha, Schneider Peter, Spirig Franz, Teuber Cornelia, Thaler Irene, Wenk Rudolf

Contact: bernardo.suiza@gmail.com ; <http://www.honduras-forum.ch/>