

Honduras and the U.S. Military

Honduras has increasingly become a hub for U.S. military operations in Central America, centered on the Soto Cano air base (also known locally as Palmerola), which has received an infusion of up to \$45 million in construction funds since 2009.¹ Besides the U.S. military's own presence and operations in the country, it also assists the Honduran military. After some – but not all – military assistance was suspended during the *de facto* government of Roberto Micheletti from July 2009 to January 2010, the U.S. military appears to have made up for lost time in the last year.

U.S. military and police aid to Honduras, 2009-2012

Program source	FY2009 (Oct 2008- Sept 2009)	FY2010	FY2011	FY2012 (proposed)
DOD Counternarcotics	3,824,000	2,357,000	4,221,000	2,753,000
FMF			1,300,000	1,000,000
IMET	329,346	777,000	700,000	700,000
Unified Command (non-security)	3,266,812	3,266,812 (est.)	3,266,812 (est.)	3,266,812 (est.)
Other: Service academies, Ctr for Hemispheric Defense Studies, Counter-Terrorism Fellowship	419,715	319,867	319,867	319,867
Total	7,839,873	6,720,679	9,807,679	8,039,679

Source: Just the Facts (justf.org)

In 2009, the United States financed the construction of new military bases from Pentagon “Counter Narco-Terrorism” funds. These are located in Caratasca (US\$1.95 million), on Honduras’ Atlantic coast, and Guanaja, in the Bay Islands, (\$1.3 million).² Days after he acknowledged that the coup in Honduras was “illegal and unconstitutional,” U.S. Ambassador Hugo Llorens recommended continuing these projects, because if they were cancelled “Congress must re-appropriate the money” the following year, and it “can have a negative impact on U.S. efforts against drug trafficking.”³

The U.S. Army’s Tropic Regions Test Center (TRTC) also conducts tropic tests on the Honduran Army’s Fifth Battalion base in eastern Mocorón, 25 miles north of the Nicaraguan border. In 2008 former TRTC director Lance vander Zyl described the area as “ideal” for testing sensitive communication systems and sensors.⁴ The Fifth Battalion’s commander, Colonel Francisco Galvez Granados, told Fellowship of Reconciliation that he doesn’t know what the test team does, and that his troops just provide security.

U.S. Training of the Honduran Military

The United States during the last ten years has provided military training to nearly 5,000 Honduran soldiers in many army units, which operate throughout the country. These include courses in joint operations, ground defense skills, counter narco-terrorism information analysis, troop leadership, counter-drug operations, military assistance and purchases, technical courses for equipment maintenance, English, flight safety, human rights, intelligence, combating terrorism, resource management, first aid, maritime operations, civil-military relations, international legal studies, port security, national security planning, ordnance, and other topics.⁵

U.S. legislation known as the Leahy Law prohibits assistance to foreign military and police units for which there is credible evidence that members have committed gross human rights violations, unless effective measures are taken to bring them to justice. On August 14, 2010, more than 100 soldiers of the Honduran Army's 15th Infantry Battalion, together with Dinant Corporation guards, reportedly attacked a peasant land protest in the Aguan Valley, killing a 17-year-old boy and five security guards.⁶ 15th Battalion officers received U.S. training in early 2009 for joint operations and "counter narco-terrorism analysis."

In the 1980s, the Pentagon used military training exercises in Honduras as a pretext to leave behind extensive equipment, including radar facilities.⁷ It appears that this covert form of assistance may be occurring again, according to David Vine of American University, who is researching the U.S. presence in Honduras.

Soto Cano: Legal and Ethical?

Several scholars state that any foreign military base violates Honduras' constitution, as acknowledged by the U.S. General Accounting Office.⁸ Article 205 of the constitution requires congressional approval of just the transit of foreign troops on Honduran territory.⁹ The use of 'hooches' instead of permanent barracks on Soto Cano attempted to paper over this prohibition by making the U.S. base "temporary," which will be definitively changed by \$25 million FY2011 funds in construction for upgrading Soto Cano facilities.

Moreover, the current expansion of the U.S. military presence increased during the de facto government of Roberto Micheletti in 2009. A large percentage of Hondurans view the current government as illegitimate, as it resulted from the November 2009 presidential elections, which were widely boycotted. The United Nations, Organization of American States, and European Union refused to send observers to the elections, because conditions did not exist to conduct a fair election.¹⁰ In fact, the Soto Cano base was used as a way station for the plane that illegally and forcibly took President Manuel Zelaya out of Honduras.¹¹

Yet the Honduran army is responsible not only for its participation in the 2009 coup, for which it has not been held accountable, but for ongoing violence against Honduran opponents of the current regime. Human Rights Watch documented the killing of 18 journalists, coup opponents and human rights defenders in 2010.¹² Repression resulting in human rights violations is practiced by all state security forces (all branches of the Armed Forces, National Police and all Command Structures, Municipal Police, and private security guards), according to a study by the Humanist Institute of Development Cooperation.¹³ The Inter-American Commission for Human Rights of the Organization of American States cites "generalized impunity for human rights violations" and the return of death squads operating in Honduras with the aim of political persecution.¹⁴ Of many hundreds of cases of violations, "no one has been held criminally responsible for the human rights violations and abuses of power committed after the coup," Human Rights Watch said in December, 2010.¹⁵

The Pentagon has made Soto Cano into a regional hub for its activities, with a range of action beyond Honduras, designating Joint Task Force Bravo as "the central coordinating authority for U.S. military operating in the [Central American] region." The task force "maintains pre-positioned stocks for theater-wide military operations." JTF-Bravo operates in other Central American countries besides Honduras, for example with helicopters and

troops deployed to the Kaibiles (Guatemalan special forces) base in Poptun, Peten and on counter-narco operations in Guatemala.¹⁶

In FY2010, more than a third of all Army Corps of Engineers projects throughout Latin America took place in Honduras. Defense Department spending in Honduras on contracts has more than doubled since 2007,¹⁷ and violence and drug trafficking in the country also spiraled during the same period.¹⁸ Following the coup, as a result of growing insecurity, including killings carried out by the military and military-trained police forces, Honduras has among the highest murder rates in the world (more than five times the Iraq rate).¹⁹ Whether or not the U.S. military presence is contributing to the violence, it certainly is not reducing it.

U.S. forces in Honduras also have been used to respond to emergencies produced by seasonal hurricanes. Yet no act of good will changes the essential mission of military forces to wage war and to use or threaten to use violent force. Responses to hurricane disasters do not require a U.S. military presence in Honduras, as the U.S. General Accounting Office has reported.²⁰

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¹ Presentations by Col. Byron Jorns, July 1, 2009, and Col. Carwn Redell, November 18, 2010, US Army Corps of Engineers (for 2009-10 data); U.S. Army Corps solicitation for proposals W91278-11-R-0023, April 22, 2011, for up to \$25 million for Soto Cano barracks construction.

² See State Department cable 09TEGUCIGALPA741, at www.cablegatesearch.net

³ State Department cables 09TEGUCIGALPA645 and 09TEGUCIGALPA741, at www.wikileaks.org.

⁴ Lance VanderZyl, "Tropic Regions Test Center," *ITEA Journal* (29), 2008, p. 242.

⁵ www.justf.org, based on annual State Department Foreign Military Training reports.

⁶ Report by Honduras Solidarity Network, August 19, 2010.

⁷ U.S. Comptroller General letter to Rep. Bill Alexander, June 22, 1984.

⁸ U.S. General Accounting Office, "Honduras: Continuing U.S. Military Presence at Soto Cano Base is Not Critical," GAO-NSIAD-95-39, p. 10.

⁹ Constitution of Honduras, Article 205, Section 26, at www.honduras.net/honduras_constitution2.html

¹⁰ Congressional Research Service, *Honduran Political Crisis, June 2009-January 2010*, p. 10;

<http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2009/sgsm12482.doc.htm>

¹¹ State Department cable, 09STATE67105, at www.wikileaks.org.

¹² Human Rights Watch, *After the Coup: Ongoing Violence, Intimidation, and Impunity in Honduras*, December 2010, p. 47.

¹³ HIVOS, Instituto Humanista de Cooperación al Desarrollo, "Impunidad en Honduras (Post Golpe de Estado de 28 de junio de 2009)," October 2010, pp. 28-29.

¹⁴ IACHR, June 2010, <http://www.cidh.oas.org/Comunicados/English/2010/59-10eng.htm> and IACHR, June 2010, "Preliminary Observations of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights on its Visit to Honduras, May 15 to 18, 2010," para. 65.

¹⁵ Human Rights Watch, *After the Coup*, p. 19.

¹⁶ See cables 09GUATEMALA732; 09GUATEMALA289 at <http://www.wikileaks.org>.

¹⁷ Fellowship of Reconciliation compilation, based on contract data available at www.usaspending.gov

¹⁸ "American officials say the 2009 coup in Honduras kicked open the door to cartels," the *New York Times* reported in March, 2011. See <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/24/world/americas/24drugs.html>

¹⁹ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_intentional_homicide_rate and <http://www.southcom.mil/AppsSC/news.php?storyId=2604>

²⁰ U.S. General Accounting Office, *op. cit.*