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HONDURAS UPDATE

Security Forces Respond to Protests with Live Fire Honduran police have used live fire on demonstrators on a number of occasions during the recent protests. On May 30, in Siguatepeque, Comayagua, [Carlos Sánchez Alfonso Gonzales Sánchez](#), a middle school teacher at the Marco Aurelio Martínez Basic Center in the municipality of San Francisco de Opalaca, department of Intibucá, was shot in the abdomen as police opened fire on protesters. He underwent surgery but lost a kidney as a result of the gunshot wound and suffered lung and liver damage. [Jesus Ariel Sánchez Osorio](#), from Pimienta, Cortés, was [reportedly](#) killed by a [shot](#) to the head as police fired on protesters in the municipality of Villanueva, Cortes. Twenty others there were reported wounded.

According to a June [report](#) by the human rights organization Relatives of the Detained and Disappeared of Honduras (COFADEH), from mid-May to June 9, four people died in relation to the protests—one shot to death, as described above; two from teargas inhalation; and one baby en route to the hospital who died because the road was blocked. Forty-eight people in that period were illegally detained, according to the report, and sixty-nine were injured.

Those injured include three people who were shot during a violent dispersal of protesters [carried out](#) by National Police and the Honduran armed forces in the community of Guadalupe Carney, in the municipality of Trujillo, in the Aguan valley. The wounded were identified as twenty-four-year-old Jairo Leonel Hernández Ramírez; nineteen-year-old Nerlin Ignacio Hernández; fifty-eight-year-old Ezequiel Urrea; fifteen-year-old Jorge Soto Portillo. Eight-year-old William Aron Ruiz Sánchez suffered a fractured wrist. Alejandro Méndez and Edwin Hernández were also injured. The home of campesino leader Adolfo Cruz was raided and searched and death threats were made against him and his family. The community on June 1 made an [urgent call](#) to national and international human rights organizations to raise the alarm for the immediate reactivation of the protective measures issued by the Inter-American Human Rights Commission in 2003 for the community of Guadalupe Carney, Trujillo, Colón.

Gunshot wound victims in the city of Villanueva, Cortés, in the time period COFADEH examined included Edgard Díaz and Rigoberto Hernández. Both were seriously injured when Military Police opened fire while dispersing protesters on May 31.

As the security forces have continued to use live fire in the weeks that have followed, the UN High Commissioners Office on Human Rights in Honduras on June 14 [announced](#) via tweet that it would be examining evidence of the use of live ammunition against demonstrators and reminded the government that the use of lethal force is legal only in situations where it is employed unavoidably in order to protect other lives.

Amnesty International and UN Decry Use of Live Fire Against Protesters Regarding the brutal repression of the demonstrations on May 30, Erika Guevara Rosas, Amnesty International Director for the Americas, [said](#), “It’s disgraceful that instead of guaranteeing the rights of its people the Honduran government continues to opt to repress demonstrations

with the indiscriminate use of tear gas and lethal arms, in violation of international norms. Guevara Rosas said the government should guarantee the right to peaceful protest and free expression and limit the use of force to the minimum necessary, in order to avoid injuries and deaths. The illegal actions of some, she pointed out, are not sufficient for a protest to lose its characterization as peaceful. Amnesty International called for a prompt, impartial, independent and effective investigation into all the cases of excessive use of force. The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR) in Honduras published a [press release](#) reminding the State of Honduras about the right to peaceful assembly and said protesters “should not be held responsible for the violent behavior of other people or acts of violence that occur in parallel.” On Twitter, the UNHCHR on May 30 [emphasized](#) that “fire arms should never be used to dissolve protests” and “the indiscriminate use of live fire on crowds is illegal.”

Demonstrations in Honduras Broaden Across Honduras, members of civil society have been demonstrating for weeks, undertaking a national strike for two days at the end of May and pressuring for fundamental change. According to the [Center for the Study of Democracy](#) (CESPAD), the current conflict is rooted in social policies implemented since 2010, which have involved deep cuts to the budgets of the public education and health sectors. Spending on education by the central government was 32.9 percent of the total in 2010 and in the approved budget of 2019 it is 19.9 percent of what it was in 2010. Spending on health has also been vastly reduced. In late April, the Honduran Congress approved decrees that could further imperil public health and education, and which included the possibility of mass dismissals. Analysts such as economist Hugo Noé Pino, a former economic minister and ex-governor of the Central Bank, [place](#) this action on the part of Congress in the context of a [loan](#) that was being negotiated between the Honduran government and the International Monetary Fund. The decrees threaten to deepen the privatization of institutions of the public health and education systems. The approval of the decrees sparked a wave of protests by teachers and health workers. Faced with the protests, Congress did not ratify the decrees. The protests of the health and education sectors have continued, however, because while the decrees were not ratified they also were not abolished.

What began as a protest against particular decrees in late April had become by early June a generalized protest against the presidency of Juan Orlando Hernandez, whose legitimacy has been in [question](#) since he claimed the right to a second term, which the constitution [forbids](#), and won after a series of irregularities pointed out by international observers. The protests intensified after [reports](#) that the US Drug Enforcement Agency is investigating Hernández and his associates in a major cocaine-trafficking and money-laundering case. The protests are continuing into the third week of June, with truckers beginning a work stoppage on June 17. Heavy militarization has been reported in San Pedro Sula and in Guadalupe Carney, in Trujillo, Guapinol.

Police Threaten and Beat Journalists Covering Protests [Various](#) journalists were injured by members of the security forces as they covered protests. Leonidas Maradiaga and Víctor Rodríguez, both journalists with UNE TV, were threatened by members of the Military Police, who then beat them while they were attempting to cover the arbitrary arrest of a young man. Cameraman Gerson Maldonado, with the television channel Azteca Honduras, was struck in the head on May 27 by a teargas canister thrown by police. He was injured in the left side of the head as he filmed the arrival of the demonstration by health workers and teachers and

was hospitalized. Journalist Alex Martínez, with UNE TV, was also hit in the head with a teargas canister as he covered the protests in Choluteca. He also was beaten by police. A recent [report](#) by the organization C-Libre details the violence against journalists.

Leader of Teachers' Movement Assassinated in his Home On May 29, just a few hours after the education sector called a national strike, [Jhony Alexander Lopez](#), a local leader of teacher's movement, was assassinated in his home in central department of Yoro by unidentified men who reportedly broke down the door and without a word opened fire. Lopez was an engineer and gave classes in the Santa Cruz del Oro Institute in Yoro, Yoro. He died on his way to the hospital.

Rights Organizations in Choluteca Denounce Attacks on Defenders by National Police

The Council of Human Rights Defenders Organizations in Choluteca in a press conference [denounced](#) attacks by National Police on human rights defenders. The abuses the organizations cited included excessive use of force and physical attacks, as well as arbitrary and illegal detentions. They named as victims of these attacks Deninson Javier Escalante, employed by the Human Rights Center (CDH) and a volunteer with AJUDH and REDHSUR COFADEH; Leslie Mariela Andino, employed by CDH and a volunteer with the Association for Citizen Participation (ACI-Participa); Yesenia Waleska Beltrano, a member of Ecumenical Action for the Defense of Human Rights (AEDH); Martha Maradiago, a member of AEDH; and Ely Portillo, of AEDH. The groups condemned and called for an end to the persecution, harassment, excessive use of force, and torture by representatives of the state. While details of all the attacks were not readily available, a photo and [video](#) of National Police kicking nineteen-year-old human rights defender Deninson Escalante in the chest as he attempted to carry out his work was posted online. Organizations represented in the press conference were ACI-Participa, CDH, AEDH, and the Regional Network of Women of the South. On its Facebook page, AJUDH posted a [message](#) denouncing “the brutal physical, verbal, and psychological aggression and robbery of Deninson Escalante” carried out by Special Operations Command (COBRA) agents of the National Police and the UDEP #6 of Choluteca under the command of deputy commissioner Roberth Nuñez. Escalante suffered blows, insults and attacks and was prevented from carrying out his work as a human rights defender.

Doors of US Embassy Scorched after Tires Are Burned in the Entrance During the protests on May 31, tires were leaned up against the door of the US embassy in Tegucigalpa and set [on fire](#). The guards that normally would have been at the door apparently were not there, and the tires burned freely for a while before any authorities responded. As a result of the damage to the doors, non-emergency visa and consular services have been suspended. One youth, Rommel Valdemar Herrera Portillo, who is a teacher, was arrested in connection with the fire. He has recently been transferred—[reportedly illegally](#)—to the maximum security prison known as La Tolva. The judge hearing his case had ruled that he be sent to the penal institution called Marco Aurelio Soto, but the National Penitentiary Institute decided to transfer him. The human rights organization Committee for Relatives of the Detained/Disappeared in Honduras (COFADEH) has filed a habeas corpus on his behalf because of this decision. Latest information suggests that he will remain in La Tolva until his public and oral trial, a date for which has not been set.

Referring to the fire, Chargé d'Affaires Heidi Fulton in a May 31 statement [called](#) the violence unacceptable. Later, in a [speech](#) to American Airlines employees, she said the embassy appreciated the increase in security for their installations and personnel, provided by the Honduran

government. She said the US government firmly supports freedom of expression and the right to protest—people should have the right to express their concerns and complaints to their government—but the mechanisms of these complaints should be focused on dialogue, democracy, and the rule of law. “The Honduran people,” she warned, “know very well the tragic costs of conflict and the lack of democracy and don’t want to leave that legacy for their children.”

She stressed that Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernandez had been democratically elected. She said the US valued its strong collaboration with Honduras, and the two countries would continue working together on issues of security, economic development, institution strengthening, and the fight against corruption. Honduras, she emphasized, is open for business.

Chargé d’Affaires Congratulates Police On June 7, Chargé d’Affaires Heidi Fulton in a [tweet](#) congratulated the Honduran police on their 137th anniversary. “We recognize the work of each officer who has dedicated their life to serve and protect,” she wrote. “We will continue extending our ties of friendship and cooperating to bring about a safe and prosperous Honduras for all.”

Protester Shot by Police During Renewed Demonstrations On June 13, as demonstrations picked up again across Honduras, police again [reportedly fired on](#) demonstrators. At least one man was injured. The man, identified as José Ramón Salinas, is a teacher at the Rafael Cantarero Márquez school in Villanueva, Cortés. He was [shot in the back](#) while demonstrating in Villanueva, Cortés. The protests were sparked by the refusal of the Honduran government to comply with what the education and health sectors considered [minimum guarantees](#) for a productive dialogue. The government, instead, went ahead with a dialogue with discredited individuals from the education and health sectors whom the government itself had picked.

On June 10 at a press conference, the Honduran government had warned of tougher measures against protesters. President Juan Orlando Hernandez said the state security forces would protect the citizenry from “criminal bands attacking their fundamental rights.” Security Minister [Julían Pachecho](#) warned that the government had already become tired of being tolerant because every day that passed brought greater economic losses. Therefore, he said, the police would proceed to “maintain order,” clearing road blocks set up by protesters and guarding businesses. Defense Minister Fredy Santiago Díaz Zelaya [said](#) the Armed Forces were willing to support the National Police with the Inter-Institutional Security Force (FUSINA) and the Military Police.

Teacher Severely Beaten by Police National Police and Riot Police [reportedly](#) engaged in intense repression of demonstrators in Mazuelizo, Santa Barbara on June 13. A number of protesters were reported injured or arrested, and Bayron Rodriguez, a twenty-eight year old teacher at the José Cecilio del Valle Basic Education Center, in the community of El Ciruelo, was [severely beaten](#) by police, who also sprayed pepper spray in his face and then threw him into a river. He was rescued by nurses who had been demonstrating and was hospitalized.

Honduran Bishops Cite Problems Facing the Country In a message to the Honduran people following the Honduran Conference of Bishops’ Plenary Assembly, the Honduran Conference of Bishops [listed](#) a series of problems, including weaknesses in the health and education systems, that led them to worry about the future of Honduras. Some of their concerns are as follows: “The Constitution violated every time it is needed, powers that are not independent at all, Congress that has become a theater of false reprehensible actors, turning its back on the people. The need for an

electoral power that guarantees the transparency of votes and outlaws electoral crimes once and for all. State institutions destroyed by corruption, the paralysis of economy, especially in agriculture, the shameful sale of the natural resources of our land. A false reform of the penal code that simply becomes a tool for the protection of the corrupt, which punishes the most ‘dangerous,’ who are then the marginalized and the poor young people in a desperate search for survival.”

President of Honduran College of Journalists Raises Concerns About New Penal Code

Dagoberto Rodríguez, president of the Honduran College of Journalists, has announced that he will travel to the United States to speak about the risks inherent in the new penal code, which is set to go into effect in November. The journalists’ guild has reached out to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights regarding the dangers of the new code for journalists, and Rodríguez plans to meet in Washington with the Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression. He noted that the articles that violate freedom of expression are articles 28, 229, 230, 231 and 234, all related to crimes having to do with slander and libel. With these articles, Rodríguez told Honduran news [sources](#), journalists will practically not be able to work, unless they devote themselves to celebrity coverage or public relations. The new penal code, he said, criminalizes investigative journalism and violates the constitutional guarantee of freedom of expression. “Crimes against honor,” as slander and libel are called in Honduras, should be removed from criminal jurisdiction, he said, and placed under civil law, as is the case in most countries. For more information on the new penal code, and on events in general during May, see the Honduras Forum Switzerland’s [Monthly Human Rights Monitor](#).

Court Neglects to Sentence Those Convicted in Berta Caceres Case Last November, a court found seven men guilty of the murder of Berta Caceres, leader of the Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (COPINH). In spite of the passage of nearly seven months since the verdict, the court has not issued sentences for those convicted. United States Congressman Hank Johnson tweeted: "I join the family of Berta Caceres and COPINH in sounding the alarm: 6 months after the conviction of 7 material authors in the murder of #BertaCaceres, still no sentences. The state of Honduras must bring to justice the intellectual authors of her murder.” Meanwhile, members of COPINH in Río Blanco have faced recent attacks attributed to the Madrid family, and Rosalina Domínguez has received death threats. Both the Center for Justice and International Law (CEJIL) and Amnesty International issued [calls](#) demanding the protection of Rosalina Domínguez.

Women’s Rights Defender Murdered On May 25, human rights defender and member of the Mutual Help Among Women Association Honduras (APOMUH) [Maricruz Tolvez](#) was assassinated in Choloma, Cortés. Since 2003, APOMUCH has worked toward the comprehensive development of women in order to improve their life conditions.

Human Rights Defender in Syrian Valley Tortured and Shot to Death Human rights defender and environmental leader [Santos Isidro Cruz](#) was found seriously injured on June 13 in El Guante, in the municipality of Cedros, Francisco Morazán, with signs of torture and three bullet wounds. He was taken to the University Hospital in Tegucigalpa, but en route to the hospital he died. Cruz was the spokesman for the Environmental Committee of the Syrian Valley.

Nine Indigenous Tolupan Authorities Face Charges Related to Defending the Forest Nine indigenous human rights defenders, including three women, have been accused by the timber company INMARE and the Public Ministry in Yoro of interfering with a management plan for the

forest. Members of the community have protective measures from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, but in February two Tolupan members of the San Francisco Locomapa tribe were nonetheless [murdered](#). For more information on the charges against the nine authorities and the struggle they face, access the Guatemala Human Rights Commission's [webinar](#) on the subject, June 19 at 12:00 PM Eastern time.

Peace Brigades International is an international NGO that supports human rights and promotes nonviolence. Founded in 1981, PBI sends teams of international observers to areas of conflict and repression to provide protective accompaniment to human rights defenders whose lives and work are under threat. For further details, contact advocacy@pbi-usa.org.