



## Peace Brigades International-USA

Human Rights News

HONDURAS

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### **Honduran President Linked to Drug Trafficking as New York Court Convicts his Brother**

On October 18, former Honduran Congressman Tony Hernández, the brother of Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernandez, was convicted by a Manhattan federal court of helping to import more than 200,000 kilos of cocaine into the United States. He was also found to have used heavily armed security, including members of the Honduran National Police, and of coordinating two drug-related murders. He was found guilty on four counts, which included making false statements to federal officials and possessing machine guns in furtherance of the cocaine-importation conspiracy. He is scheduled to be sentenced on January 17, 2020, and faces a sentence of at least forty years. [According to](#) the United States Department of Justice, Hernandez funneled the millions of dollars he made through his cocaine trafficking to National Party campaigns to impact Honduran presidential elections in 2009, 2013, and 2017. “Between 2010 and at least 2013,” according to the Department of Justice, “one of Hernandez’ principal co-conspirators was former Sinaloa Cartel leader Joaquín Archivaldo Guzmán Loera, a/k/a ‘Chapo.’ During that period, Hernandez helped Guzmán Loera with numerous large cocaine shipments and delivered a \$1 million bribe from Guzmán Loera to Hernandez’ brother,” Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernandez, “in connection with the 2013 national elections in Honduras.”

Recently unsealed court documents indicate that President Juan Orlando Hernández was the target of a DEA investigation in 2015. United States authorities have not brought any charges against him, however. As [Univision points out](#), the revelations “paint an increasingly shocking picture of Honduras as a narco-state, further complicating relations with the US government, which has called President Hernandez an ally in the war on drugs. It also appears to provide evidence of the Honduran government’s own complicity in the rise of violence that made Honduras one of the world’s most dangerous countries and forced countless migrants to flee north.”

**Security Minister Julian Pacheco Took Bribes, Witness Tells Court** During the trial of Tony Hernandez, top-level drug trafficker Devis Leonel Rodriguez Maradiaga testified that his organization had bribed Honduras’ current Minister of Security, Julian Pacheco Tinoco. Pacheco Tinoco had twice before been named in US federal court as providing cover for drug cartels. According to analyst Annie Bird, director of the Guatemala Human Rights Commission, “This is particularly disturbing given that Pacheco Tinoco has been placed in the most sensitive positions in efforts to advance security reform in Honduras. In May 2012, Pacheco was named as the first director of the newly created National Directorate for Investigation and Intelligence (DNI), the operational arm of the newly created National Council for Defense and Security (CNDS). In this position he was charged with interagency vetting, including of prosecutors, National Jurisdiction

judges, and security forces. In January 2015 he became Minister of Security, a position whose jurisdiction was vastly expanded in 2013 to include operational direction of the CNDS. Thus Pacheco Tinoco not only assumed oversight of all of the Honduran civilian police forces and police reform initiatives, but also the operational oversight of the Military Police for Public order via his role in the CNDS.” In addition, Bird points out, “Pacheco Tinoco directly oversaw the execution of two \$60 million loans from the Inter-American Development Bank to finance the creation of a new investigative police force. In October 2016, Pacheco flew to New York City as part of a contract with Giuliani Security & Safety to train Honduran police, in a project sponsored by the Inter-American Development Bank.”

**US Embassy Congratulates Armed Forces and Touts Close Bi-Lateral Relationship** The day after the verdict against Tony Hernandez, in an October 19 [tweet](#), the US Embassy in Honduras wrote, “Celebrating Honduran Armed Forces Day, the US Embassy recognizes the valiant contributions and achievements of all members of the armed forces. We value the close relationship and collaboration between our governments which facilitates the fight against shared threats.”

### **Members of US Congress Call for End to Military and Police Funding to Honduras**

Leaders of the Congressional Progressive Caucus—Representatives Jan Schakowsky, Hank Johnson, Pramila Jayapal and Mark Pocan—issued a [joint statement](#) on October 18 in response to the revelations. As they noted, “A prominent drug trafficker testified that Tony Hernández bribed the current Minister of Security, Julian Pacheco Tinoco, who oversees the police. Another testified that he paid bribes to make sure that an alleged death squad member, Juan Carlos ‘El Tigre’ Bonilla, was placed in a high position under presidents Lobo and Hernández at Hernández’s behest and described a murder Bonilla committed at their request. Bonilla became National Director of the Police, and yet despite evidence that he was a documented death squad leader, the US Embassy worked closely with Bonilla throughout his term. The Trump Administration must immediately stop funding the corrupt Honduran police and military and stop celebrating President Hernández as a friendly ally and partner in the drug war. We need to condemn the Honduran government’s continued use of live bullets and poisonous tear gas to disrupt opposition protests and call for an end of its criminalization of dissent by grassroots environmental defenders—such as those from Guapinol. That is why 74 Members of Congress and counting support H.R. 1945, the Berta Cáceres Human Rights in Honduras Act, which calls for an immediate suspension of US funding for Honduran security forces until their government investigates, and brings to justice, perpetrators of violence and unrest in Honduras.”

Senator Ben Cardin, in an October 25 tweet, also expressed concern: “Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernandez’s alleged connections to narco-trafficking are extremely concerning given the outcome of this trial. Hondurans are demanding accountability. To preserve the rule of law & regional stability, they must be heard.”

**Opposition Leaders and Others Call for the President’s Resignation** Political [opposition leaders](#) Manuel Zelaya, Salvador Nasralla, and Luis Zelaya met after the guilty verdict was

pronounced and formed a coalition to call for Juan Orlando Hernandez' resignation and, in the meantime, for protests, including a national strike, the date of which has not been set. They were joined in their call by the Platform for the Defense of Education and Healthcare. Even more traditionally supportive sectors have called for the president's resignation. As the Associated Press [points out](#), "Honduras' Channel 5, an outlet that has traditionally backed the government line, saw one of its most recognized personalities, Renato Álvarez, say on air that 'the path to social peace passes through the president's resignation.'"

**Witness Implicating President Juan Orlando Hernandez Murdered in Jail** Magdalena Meza Fúnez [was murdered](#) on October 26 in the maximum security prison known as El Pozo. Fúnez's lawyer, Carlos Chajtur, says his client was [killed](#) to stop him from talking about the information on drug deals he had in several notebooks, in case he was called to testify in the United States. The notebooks were entered as evidence during the trial of Tony Hernández. A detective with the Honduran Attorney General's office, Miguel Reynoso, had stated when Meza was arrested in 2018 that eleven notebooks were found in his car containing detailed information about drug shipments received by Tony Hernández and then distributed among his collaborators. The [notebooks](#) detail payments to someone identified as JOH, the initials by which Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernandez is widely known. Reynoso traveled to New York and presented the notebooks as evidence during the second day of Tony Hernandez' trial.

The office of the UN High Commissioner on Human Rights [lamented](#) the murder of Meza Fúnez and another prisoner, Marco Tulio Amador, in a different penitentiary a day earlier, the maximum security prison known as La Tolva. A judicial order for the transfer of Marco Tulio Amador had been issued on September 25 but was ignored. In both cases, the National Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Cruel and Unusual Punishment had alerted the authorities to the risks to the men's lives.

### **Punishment for Corruption, Drug Trafficking, and Crimes Against Humanity Lessened**

Reforms to the country's penal code increase the likelihood of repression for protesters and human rights defenders and shorten the sentences for high impact crimes like corruption, money laundering, and drug trafficking. The new penal code also lessens by a third the penalties for crimes against humanity. The new penal code was [approved months ago](#) and was ratified by the Honduran Congress in late October. The new regulations were set to go into effect on November 10, according to [El Herald](#), but they are now scheduled to go into effect in a several months.

**Garifuna Community Suffers Spate of Assassinations** In the past two months, two Garifuna leaders in the community of Masca have been killed, and another leader in Omoa, Cortes has been murdered. Oscar Francisco Guerrero Centeno was murdered on October 21 by unidentified assailants as he was traveling in a mototaxi. He had been providing security and support to the family of Garífuna leader Mirna Suazo, who was killed on September 8.

Mirna Teresa Suazo Martínez was shot to death by two men who got off their motorcycles, approached her in the restaurant that she owned, and without a word opened fire. She was the

President of the Board in the Masca community in Omoa. According to the Black Fraternal Organization of Honduras (OFRANEH), Masca is inside the zone of influence of the “[model cities](#)”— financially and administratively [autonomous](#) zones aimed at attracting foreign investment. On several different occasions the community also has rejected the construction of hydroelectric power plants on the Masca River. In a [2017 letter](#) to the Inter-American Development Bank, OFRANEH called the imposition of model cities a severe threat to the Garifuna people, who are faced with the premediated expulsion from their ancestral lands. According to the records of the National Network of Women Human Rights Defenders in Honduras, Mirna Teresa Suazo is the fourth Garifuna woman murdered in the month of September. This year alone, 17 indigenous Garifuna were murdered, six of them women community leaders.

OFRANEH member Maria Digna Montero was murdered in the Garifuna community of Cuzuna on October 12. As she was on the patio of her house, unidentified gunmen arrived on a motorcycle and opened fire. She was a teacher and a member of OFRANEH’s intercultural bilingual program. Her murder took place on Indigenous Resistance Day and was construed as a warning to those who dare to question the system, as well as an expression of racism. OFRANEH reports that between September and October, six Garifuna women were murdered by assailants from outside of their communities. None of the murders has been investigated.

**Indigenous Human Rights Defender Killed** On September 28 the body of Milgen Idán Soto Ávila, an indigenous human rights defender and member of the Broad Movement for Dignity and Justice (MADJ), was found in a clandestine grave in Locompapa, Yoro. He had reportedly received threats from the Inmare lumber company. Soto had organized local tribes to defend their land and resources from Inmare’s operations, which over the years have led to the deforestation of the mountains of Yoro. [According to](#) the Business and Human Rights Resource Centre, “Milgen was a twenty-nine-year-old who was a constant presence in the Dignified Camp in Defense of Ancestral Territory, established by community members. . . . The camp’s purpose is to stop the company from logging in the pine forest that has belonged to the Tolupán tribe since they were resettled to this area.” Milgen was the third person murdered in the same small community this year alone. He was the ninth murdered in this conflict over logging since 2013.

### **Human Rights Activist in the Aguán Tortured and Killed by Men in Military Uniforms**

The campesino activist [Marcos Tulio Cruz Cruz](#) was found murdered with signs of torture in Sonaguera, Colón, on October 9. As Daniel Langmeier summarizes the news in his comprehensive October [review](#), two heavily armed men in military uniform stormed his house the previous night, October 8, threatening his mother and daughter and hitting his brother before abducting him. Another brother of his, Rigoberto Durán Cruz, was an active member of the Human Rights Observatory of the Aguán and COPA, but had to withdraw after persecution and death threats. He continued, however, to support victims of violence on an individual level. As a possible act of repercussion, they murdered his brother.

**Opposition Leader, Wife Shot to Death** On October 31, a journalist and his wife were assassinated in Puerto Lempira, in the department of Gracias a Dios. Ventura Calderón and Maribel de Calderón were returning home around 7:00 PM when armed men who had been waiting in a vehicle opened fire, killing them both. Ventura Calderón had a local radio program, and his wife was a teacher. Ventura Calderón was an active member of the Libre political party, was head of the Puerto Lempira Citizens' Association, and was a well-known social leader in the region. He had reported death threats prior to the murder and had requested protection, without success.

**Student Leaders Murdered; Teacher Attacked** High school student [Óscar Daniel Mencía Cantarero](#) was abducted from his school by men wearing hoods on October 28. He was later found dead. He was a student leader at the Luis Bográn Technical Institute. His body was found in the Villa Cristina neighborhood of Comayagüela. He had been active in organizing student protests calling for the resignation of President Juan Orlando Hernández.

On the night of November 1, [Leonardo Daniel Castillo Lagos](#), a twenty-five year old student and member of the Broad Movement for Dignity and Justice in Trujillo, Colon, was assassinated. He was a psychology student. Unidentified assailants shot him several times and left his body near the beach. [Jaime Rodriguez](#), a teacher and a well-known leader of protests against the actions of President Juan Orlando Hernández, was found on October 30 on the banks of the Choluteca River in Tegucigalpa. He had signs of torture and various wounds to his head, along with a deep wound to his neck. He is the director of the Middle School Teachers Guild in Honduras (COPEMH). He said he was abducted and later thrown into the river and left for dead. Human rights analysts in Honduras point to these incidents as evidence that the type of death squad activity Honduras experienced in the 1980s is re-emerging. The [Human Rights Board](#), a national network of more than forty Honduran organizations, in an October 29 [press conference](#) placed these recent assassinations in the context of the trial and sentencing of the president's brother and the protests that followed and suggested the killings were part of a campaign to eliminate political opponents.

**United States Obtains a Safe Third Country Agreement with Honduras** The Trump Administration has reached an agreement with Honduras that will allow the US to refuse to hear the asylum claims of anyone who has transited through Honduras on their journey to the US border. Such individuals will be returned to Honduras to seek asylum there. The [agreement, signed](#) on September 25, is based on the presumption that Honduras is a safe third country in which any asylum seeker could have first reasonably sought asylum. Many Venezuelan, Cuban, Nicaraguan, and African refugees cross through Honduras as they flee their own countries. As the Washington Office on Latin America [points out](#), Honduras' homicide rate is eight times that of the United States. Businesses suffer extortion threats so regularly that the Honduran Chamber of Commerce no longer publishes an official registry of its members. The US State Department warns travelers to avoid all public transportation in the country because gang members are



known to kill drivers for falling behind on extortion payments. The US has reached similar agreements with El Salvador and with [Guatemala](#), where for nearly two months constitutional rights [have been suspended](#) in six of the country's departments and where, as in Honduras, the country's president [has been credibly accused](#) of receiving funds from drug traffickers. (More on expanded collaboration between the US and Guatemala on immigration is [here](#).)

### **UN Lists Honduras as a Country that Retaliates Against Those Making Reports to UN**

In a [report](#) presented September 19 to the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva, Honduras is listed as a country where people suffer reprisals for having collaborated with the United Nations. Guatemala is also among the forty-eight countries included in the report.

**Human Rights Defenders Testify to Use of Live Fire Against Protesters in 2019** At a September 25 [hearing](#) before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, Honduran human rights defenders gave an account of the continuing use of excessive force by Honduran security forces against protesters. Defenders with the Coalition Against Impunity, composed of fifty-eight organizations, said the use of excessive force in Honduras is reiterated and intentional, and the Honduran government has shown no will to comply with recommendations and demands made at past hearings. The National Defense and Security Council (CNDS), said Karina Sanchez, continues to issue decisions directed at repressing social protest. For example, on June 20, 2019, within the framework of the CNDS, the government decided to put soldiers on the streets. According to human rights defender Carlos Paz, the excessive use of force by the police and armed forces in 2019 has left nine people dead during protests; eighty-eight wounded; and four with permanent disabilities. Seventy-one were arbitrarily detained during protests, including three children, and fourteen suffered torture or ill-treatment.

The use of live fire has become the norm in Honduras, Paz said, in spite of international standards prohibiting lethal force except as a last resort to in order to protect against threats to life. International standards prohibit the use of live fire to disperse crowds. Human rights defender Carlos Paz noted that on May 31, two people youths were pursued by Preventive Police in Villanueva and beaten. One young man, Jesuar Sanchez, was shot and killed by a police officer. His companion was seriously injured. On June 20, Edwin Noel Correa Mazariago, a seventeen-year-old protester in La Paz was shot in the chest and killed by a Military Police officer. On August 15, in Yorito, Yoro, police officers and members of the armed forces wounded four people who were opposing a mine. On September 17, two people were wounded with live ammunition as they protested against the construction of a housing development in La Tigre National Park, near Tegucigalpa; National Police opened fire on the protesters. As one of the wounded was being operated on in the hospital, National Police officers stood at the door to the room where he was undergoing surgery. Carlos Paz stated that this sort of monitoring during surgery on injured protesters has become the norm since the post-electoral crisis of 2017.

### **UNHCHR and Inter-American Commission Express Concern about Killings in Honduras**

In a joint statement, the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights expressed concern about human rights conditions in several Latin American countries, including Honduras, where, as they noted, four protesters, including a minor, were shot and killed as security forces used excessive force in protests earlier this year. In the [statement](#) they also mentioned ten other killings of human rights defenders this year in Honduras.

### **Crops Attacked and Damaged, Solidarity Mission and COPINH Leaders Threatened**

Daniel Langmeier, in his publication Honduras daily (available from daniellm@bluewin.ch) catalogues a series of attacks against the Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (COPINH) and the community of Rio Blanco, Intibucá. Saturday October 26, a solidarity mission to Rio Blanco visited in the wake of recent burning and poisoning of the crops, apparently by the Madrid family. (The Madrid family is a landowning family in the area which reportedly stole ancestral land belonging to the Río Blanco community to illegally sell it to Desarrollos Energético, Inc. known by the initials DESA, for the construction of the Agua Zarca dam. In 2016, as an [article](#) in Peoples Dispatch makes clear, following the assassination of Berta Cáceres, these same ancestral territories of La Vega del Achotal and El Culatón which lie on the banks of the Gualcarque river were recovered by the Lenca people in Río Blanco.)

On October 26, when the solidarity mission got near Vega del Culatón where the community works the land, vandals blocked the public road and threatened the mission with guns and machetes. José Madrid reportedly directed violent, machista insults and slanderous jibes at COPINH's Coordinator, Berta Zúniga, and death threats were made against Darwin Sánchez Domingues. Drivers for COPINH were harassed and threatened, and the brake lines of the mission's bus were reportedly cut by the Madrid family on the night of October 26.

Rio Blanco Rosalina Dominguez' son Fredy Leonal Sanchez was reportedly attacked with a machete but was able to defend himself and wasn't harmed. Both Fredy and his mother have in the past been attacked with machetes and seriously injured. On October 27, a COPINH vehicle was intercepted by Madrid family members. The driver was threatened and photos were taken of his face and of the car's license plate.

For more information on Honduras and PBI's work there, see the [website](#) of PBI Honduras *Peace Brigades International* is a nongovernmental organization with consultative status before the United Nations. 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. Founded in 1981, PBI has worked in fourteen countries on four continents. PBI's international office in Brussels and advocacy staff around the world support efforts in the field to open space for peace and for the defense of human rights.