

HONDURAS 2018 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Honduras is a constitutional, multiparty republic. The country last held national and local elections in November 2017. Voters elected Juan Orlando Hernandez of the National Party as president for a four-year term beginning January 2018. International observers generally recognized the elections as free but disputed the fairness and transparency of the results.

Civilian authorities at times did not maintain effective control over the security forces.

Human rights issues included reports of arbitrary and unlawful killings; complaints of torture; harsh and life-threatening prison conditions; arbitrary arrest or detention; killings of and threats to media members by criminal elements; criminalization of libel, although no cases were reported; widespread government corruption; and threats and violence against indigenous, Afro-descendent communities and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) persons.

The government took steps to prosecute and punish officials who committed abuses. Impunity existed in many cases, however, as evidenced by lengthy judicial processes, few convictions of perpetrators, and failures to prosecute intellectual authors of crimes.

Organized criminal elements, including local and transnational gangs and narcotics traffickers, were significant perpetrators of violent crimes and committed acts of homicide, extortion, kidnapping, torture, human trafficking, intimidation, and other threats and violence directed against human rights defenders, judicial authorities, lawyers, the business community, journalists, bloggers, women, and members of vulnerable populations.

Section 1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom from:

a. Arbitrary Deprivation of Life and Other Unlawful or Politically Motivated Killings

There were several reports that the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings. In general the killings took place during law enforcement

operations or were linked to other criminal activity by government agents. Civilian authorities investigated and arrested members of the security forces accused of human rights abuses. Impunity, however, remained a serious problem, with significant delays in some prosecutions and sources alleging corruption in judicial proceedings. The Violence Observatory of the Autonomous University of Honduras (UNAH) reported 16 deaths involving security forces during the first six months of the year. These included eight deaths involving the Honduran National Police (HNP) and eight involving the military.

On September 6, 2nd Lieutenant Chemis Xavier Paz Cruz, assigned to the 5th Battalion of the Military Police for Public Order (PMOP), was convicted of the 2016 murder of Elias Jireh Elver during a patrol in Tegucigalpa. Paz's sentencing was pending at year's end.

Following months of investigations into postelection violence, the HNP and the Public Ministry's Technical Agency for Criminal Investigations (ATIC) concluded 22 investigations into alleged human rights violations by members of both the HNP and PMOP and passed the cases to the Public Ministry for possible prosecution. The Public Ministry launched 17 cases related to abuse of authority in August, noting that more cases would be forthcoming. On September 18, the Public Ministry announced the first case against an HNP officer for the death of a protester.

The government continued to investigate the 2016 killing of environmental and indigenous activist Berta Caceres. On March 2, the Public Ministry's ATIC arrested a ninth suspect, Roberto David Castillo Mejia, the former president of the company building the Agua Zarca dam, which Caceres had long opposed. Throughout the year both the Caceres family private attorneys and the defense team complained the Public Ministry restricted access to evidence. Both legal parties asserted their right to review additional evidence that investigators had collected but not analyzed, including electronics such as laptops, cell phones, memory sticks, and tablets. On August 24, the three-judge tribunal ordered the Public Ministry to grant the prosecution and defense access to the requested evidence. The oral hearings for the first eight individuals accused of planning and executing the murder of Berta Caceres, scheduled to begin on September 17, were delayed due to legal motions filed by the Caceres family's attorneys that called for removal of the three presiding judges. An appellate court denied the motion to dismiss the judges, and oral hearings began on October 20. On November 29, the court convicted seven of the eight defendants of murder and fully acquitted the eighth. The defendants were expected to appeal the verdict.

There continued to be reports of violence related to land conflicts and criminal activity in the Bajo Aguan region, but the overall level of violence in the area was far below its 2012 peak. On September 7, collaboration among the government's Bajo Aguan Task Force, INTERPOL, and Mexican law enforcement authorities resulted in the arrest and extradition from Mexico to Honduras of Osvin Naun Caballero Santamaria. Caballero was a suspect in several crimes, including the 2016 killings of Jose Angel Flores and Silmer Dionisio George, two leaders of the Unified Peasant Movement of the Bajo Aguan (known as MUCA).

Organized criminal elements, including drug traffickers and local and transnational gangs such as MS-13 and the 18th Street gang, committed killings, extortion, kidnappings, human trafficking, and intimidation of police, prosecutors, journalists, women, and human rights defenders. Major urban centers and drug trafficking routes experienced disproportionate rates of violence. The UNAH Violence Observatory reported that as of June, 82 individuals working in the transportation sector had been killed, including 49 taxi, bus, and motorcycle taxi drivers and 33 private company drivers.

On September 5, the HNP reported a national homicide rate of 39.6 per 100,000 inhabitants for the months of January to August. The UNAH Violence Observatory projected a final homicide rate of approximately 40 per 100,000 inhabitants through year's end. Reports linked many of these homicides to organized crime and gangs.

b. Disappearance

There were no reports of disappearances by or on behalf of government authorities.

The government continued to make significant advances in combatting kidnappings by criminals. In July the HNP rescued a nine-year-old child within 72 hours of his abduction in El Negrito, Yoro Department. The HNP reported 15 kidnappings through August, a 35 percent decrease from the same period in 2017. The HNP reported it rescued 11 of the 15 kidnap victims. The HNP recovered an additional person through negotiations, one victim remained captive, and two victims were killed while in captivity. The HNP estimated that it prevented more than 58.6 million lempiras (\$2.44 million) in ransom payments to kidnappers between January and August.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

Although the law prohibits such practices, government officials received complaints and investigated alleged abuse by members of the security forces on the streets and in detention centers. The quasi-governmental National Committee for the Prevention of Torture, Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment (CONAPREV) reported two complaints of torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Prison conditions were harsh and sometimes life threatening due to pervasive gang-related violence and the government's failure to control criminal activity within the prisons. Prisoners suffered from overcrowding, insufficient access to food and water, violence, and alleged abuse by prison officials.

Physical Conditions: Prisoners suffered from severe overcrowding, malnutrition, lack of adequate sanitation and medical care, and, in some prisons, lack of adequate ventilation and lighting. The Ministry of Human Rights reported that, as of September 20, the total prison population was 20,506 in 27 prisons. According to the ministry, the system had designed capacity for approximately 10,600 inmates.

The National Prison Institute (INP) reported that as of September, 23 inmates had died in prison (16 from natural causes, four from violence, two from accidents, and one from suicide). The INP reported no deaths involving prison officials. CONAPREV registered 25 deaths through September and confirmed four inmates died from violence within the prison.

As of September the Ministry of Human Rights reported that the country's three pretrial detention centers held 62 individuals. These three centers were on military installations and received some support services from the military, but the INP administered them. The government used pretrial detention centers to hold high-profile suspects and those in need of additional security. Pretrial detainees were often held with convicted prisoners.

There was pervasive gang-related violence, and the government failed to control criminal activity effectively within the prisons. Some prisons lacked sufficient security personnel. Many prisoners had access to weapons and other contraband, inmates attacked other inmates with impunity, escapes were frequent, and inmates

and their associates outside prison threatened prison officials and their families. These conditions contributed to an unstable, dangerous environment in the penitentiary system. Media reported prison riots and violent confrontations between gang members in prisons throughout the year.

Through October 2018 the national prisons had approximately 1,160 female prisoners, 810 of whom the government detained at the National Women's Social Adjustment penitentiary. Others were held in separate areas of men's prisons. Children younger than age three could stay with their mothers in prison.

Authorities did not segregate those with tuberculosis or other infectious diseases from the general prison population; there was only limited support for persons with mental illnesses or disabilities. As of September officials reported that 151 prisoners were being treated for tuberculosis. Officials also stated that all penitentiary centers had an antiretroviral treatment program. CONAPREV reported that every prison had a functioning health clinic with at least one medical professional. Basic medical supplies and medicines, particularly antibiotics, were in short supply throughout the prison system. In most prisons only inmates who purchased bottled water or had water filters in their cells had access to potable water.

Administration: As of September the INP reported no formal complaints for mistreatment of detainees, although CONAPREV alleged 39 possible cases of torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment. Authorities conducted no official investigations of mistreatment because they received no formal complaints. Media reports noted that family members often face long delays or are unable to visit detainees.

Independent Monitoring: The government generally permitted prison visits by independent local and international human rights observers, including the International Committee of the Red Cross. CONAPREV conducted seven visits to juvenile detention facilities as of the end of August. The judicial system was legally responsible for monitoring prison conditions and providing for the rights of prisoners.

Improvements: Through September the INP trained 435 technical, administrative, and security personnel working in 13 prisons on topics such as first aid and appropriate use of force.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The law prohibits arbitrary arrest and detention and provides for the right of any person to challenge the lawfulness of his or her arrest or detention in court. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) reported that authorities at times failed to enforce these requirements effectively.

Role of the Police and Security Apparatus

The HNP maintains internal security and reports to the Secretariat of Security. ATIC has legal authority to investigate 21 types of crimes and make arrests. The armed forces, which report to the Secretariat of Defense, are responsible for external security but also exercise some domestic security responsibilities. Some larger cities have independent police forces that supplement the HNP and report to municipal authorities. The PMOP reports to military authorities but conducts operations sanctioned by civilian security officials as well as by military leaders. As of September the PMOP had approximately 4,500 personnel organized into eight of 10 planned battalions and was present in all 18 departments. The National Interinstitutional Security Force (FUSINA) coordinates the overlapping responsibilities of the HNP, PMOP, National Intelligence Directorate, Public Ministry, and national court system. FUSINA reports to the National Security and Defense Council. The president chairs the council, which includes representatives of the Supreme Court, National Congress, Public Ministry, and Secretariats of Security and Defense.

Civilian authorities at times did not maintain effective control over the security forces. The government took steps to investigate and punish abuses, but corruption and inefficiency resulted in impunity in many cases. The armed forces surrendered members accused of human rights violations to civilian authorities. The armed forces sometimes dishonorably discharged such individuals, even before a criminal trial. The Public Ministry, primarily through the Office of the Special Prosecutor for Crimes against Life, is responsible for investigating cases in which a government agent is allegedly responsible for killing a civilian. Prosecutors try such cases in civilian courts. Prosecutors and judges attached to FUSINA prosecute and hear cases related to FUSINA operations. A unit within the Office of the Special Prosecutor for Crimes against Life manages some cases of homicides committed by members of the security forces and government officials. The human rights office of the joint staff of the armed forces investigates allegations of human rights abuses by members of the armed forces.

The human rights office of the joint staff of the armed forces reported that in 2017 more than 6,200 members of the armed forces, including the army, navy, air force, PMOP, and others, received training on human rights. Through June more than 5,800 members of the armed forces received human rights training from military and nongovernmental organization (NGO) instructors.

Corruption and impunity remained serious problems within the security forces. Some members of security forces allegedly committed crimes, including crimes linked to local and international criminal organizations. The Public Ministry's ATIC investigated some criminal cases involving HNP officers.

As of November the Police Purge Commission reported that, since its creation in 2016, it had referred for removal or provisional suspension more than 5,600 police officers on various grounds including corruption, criminal activity, and poor performance.

Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees

The law provides that police may make arrests only with a warrant, unless they make the arrest during the commission of a crime, there is strong suspicion that a person has committed a crime and might otherwise evade criminal prosecution, they catch a person in possession of evidence related to a crime, or a prosecutor has ordered the arrest. The law requires police to inform persons of the grounds for their arrest and bring detainees before a competent judicial authority within 24 hours. It stipulates that a prosecutor has 24 additional hours to decide if there is probable cause for indictment, whereupon a judge has 24 more hours to decide whether to issue a temporary detention order. Such an order may be effective for up to six days, after which the judge must hold a pretrial hearing to examine whether there is probable cause to continue pretrial detention. The law allows persons charged with some felonies to avail themselves of bail and gives prisoners a right of prompt access to family members. The law allows the release of other suspects pending formal charges, on the condition that they periodically report to authorities. The government generally respected these provisions. Persons suspected of any of 22 specific felonies must remain in custody, pending the conclusion of judicial proceedings against them. Some judges, however, ruled that such suspects may be released on the condition that they continue to report periodically to authorities. The law grants prisoners the right to prompt access to a lawyer of their choice and, if indigent, to government-provided counsel, although authorities did not always abide by these requirements.

Arbitrary Arrest: The Public Ministry reported 49 cases of illegal detention or arbitrary arrest as of October. As of September the National Human Rights Commission of Honduras (CONADEH) reported 16 cases of arbitrary arrest by the HNP, two by the DPI, and six by the armed forces.

Pretrial Detention: Judicial inefficiency, corruption, and insufficient resources delayed proceedings in the criminal justice system, and lengthy pretrial detention was a serious problem. For crimes with minimum sentences of six years' imprisonment, the law authorizes pretrial detention of up to two years. The prosecution may request an additional six-month extension, but many detainees remained in pretrial detention much longer, including for more time than the maximum period of incarceration for their alleged crime. The law does not authorize pretrial detention for crimes with a maximum sentence of five years or less. The law mandates that authorities release detainees whose cases have not yet come to trial and whose time in pretrial detention already exceeds the maximum prison sentence for their alleged crime. Even so, many prisoners remained in custody after completing their full sentences, and sometimes even after an acquittal, because officials failed to process their releases expeditiously.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The law provides for an independent judiciary, but the justice system was poorly funded and staffed, inadequately equipped, often ineffective, and subject to intimidation, corruption, politicization, and patronage. Low salaries and a lack of internal controls rendered judicial officials susceptible to bribery. Powerful special interests, including organized criminal groups, exercised influence on the outcomes of some court proceedings.

On September 13, the Supreme Court accepted an appeal by the defense attorneys of six former members of the court, including its former president Jorge Rivera Aviles, to grant the accused freedom from pretrial detention after one month in jail. Charges against the six former court officials included several counts of misappropriation of funds and abuse of authority. The legal proceedings against the six were ongoing as of October.

Trial Procedures

The law provides for the right to a fair and public trial; however, the judiciary did not always enforce this right.

The law presumes an accused person is innocent. The accused has the right to an initial hearing before a judge, to ask for bail, consult with legal counsel in a timely manner, have a lawyer provided by the state if necessary, and request an appeal. Defendants may receive free assistance of an interpreter. The law permits defendants to confront witnesses against them and offer witnesses and evidence in their defense. Defendants may not be compelled to testify or confess guilt. Authorities generally respected these rights.

Credible observers noted problems in trial procedures such as a lack of admissible evidence, judicial corruption, widespread public distrust of the legal system, witness intimidation, and an ineffective witness protection program.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

There were no reports of political prisoners or detainees.

Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies

The law establishes an independent and impartial judiciary in civil matters, including access to a court to seek damages for human rights violations. Litigants may sue a criminal defendant for damages if authorized by a criminal court. Individuals and organizations may appeal adverse domestic decisions to the Inter-American Human Rights System.

f. Arbitrary or Unlawful Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

Although the law generally prohibits such actions, a legal exception allows government authorities to enter a private residence to prevent a crime or in case of another emergency. There were credible complaints that police occasionally failed to obtain the required authorization before entering private homes. As of September CONAPREV registered two alleged cases of illegal entry by government officials.

Ethnic minority rights leaders, international NGOs, and farmworker organizations continued to claim that the government failed to redress actions taken by security forces, government agencies, and private individuals and businesses to dislodge farmers and indigenous persons from lands over which they claimed ownership based on land reform law or ancestral land titles (see section 6, Indigenous People).

Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Expression, Including for the Press

The law provides for freedom of expression, including for the press, with some restrictions, and the government generally respected this right. A small number of powerful business magnates with intersecting commercial, political, and family ties owned most of the major news media.

Freedom of Expression: The law includes a provision to punish persons who directly, or through public media, incite discrimination, hate, contempt, repression, or violence against a person, group, or organization for reasons of gender, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, political opinion or affiliation, marital status, race or national origin, language, nationality, religion, family affiliation, family or economic situation, disability, health, physical appearance, or any other characteristic that would offend the victim's human dignity.

In September congress repealed Article 335-B of the law, which criminalized hate speech and language inciting terrorism, due to concern that this article could be used to target journalists and members of civil society for expressing views critical of the government. Media associations and NGOs praised the congressional action.

Violence and Harassment: There were continued reports of harassment and threats against journalists, media figures, and bloggers. NGO Peace Brigades International registered a significant increase in reports of harassment against journalists and social communicators since 2017. They registered 41 security incidents involving journalists and social commentators between January and August, nearly twice the number of complaints registered during the same period in 2017. Reports linked most of these instances of harassment and threats to organized criminal elements and gangs.

Government officials at all levels publicly denounced violence and threats of violence against media members and social communicators. UNAH's Violence Observatory reported no killings of journalists and social communicators during the first six months of the year, as compared with two such killings in 2017. There were many reports of intimidation and threats against media members and their families, including from members of the security forces and organized crime. It was usually unclear whether violence and threats against journalists were linked to their work or were products of generalized violence.

Human rights defenders, including indigenous and environmental rights activists, political activists, labor activists, and representatives of civil society working to combat corruption, reported threats and acts of violence. Civil society organizations, including students, agricultural workers groups, and indigenous rights groups, criticized the government and its officials for allegedly criminalizing and stigmatizing social protest. Members of the Police Purge Commission, National Anticorruption Council (CNA), and Public Ministry's anticorruption unit (UFECIC) all reported receiving threats. The Agroindustrial Worker's Federation, a labor syndicate, reported two cases of threats against union leaders (see section 7.a.).

The government allocated a budget of nearly 25 million lempiras (\$1.04 million) for the operation of its protection mechanism. By August it had 34 permanent and contract staff. The mechanism approved 219 protection cases, including 131 human rights defenders, 39 journalists, 30 social commentators, and 19 justice-sector workers. As of August 31, the mechanism had received 122 new requests for protection, of which 104 met legal requirements and were accepted. Of the 104 accepted cases, eight were closed during the year. The remaining 96 cases included 52 human rights defenders, 14 journalists, 21 social commentators, and 9 justice-sector workers. Some NGOs continued to express concern about weak implementation of the law and limited resources available to operate the government's protection mechanism for human rights defenders. Civil society organizations continued to criticize the government's failure to investigate threats against activists and journalists adequately.

The HNP's Violent Crimes Task Force investigated crimes against high-profile and particularly vulnerable victims, including judges, journalists, human rights activists, and members of the LGBTI community. As of November the task force had submitted 19 cases to the Public Ministry, arrested 42 persons, and obtained six convictions.

Censorship or Content Restrictions: Media members and NGOs stated the press self-censored due to fear of retaliation from organized crime or corrupt government officials.

Libel/Slander Laws: Citizens, including public officials, may initiate criminal proceedings for libel and slander.

National Security: The Organization of American States (OAS) Mission to Support the Fight against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (MACCIH) continued to raise concerns regarding the law for the classification of public documents related to defense and national security (the Secrets Law). MACCIH called on the government either to amend the law or pass a new one. According to MACCIH representatives, the law prohibits authorities from fully investigating government contracts and funds, enabling government institutions to misuse an overly broad classification system under the guise of “national security” to hide potential illicit activity in such areas as the security tax fund, water authority, and social security administration. Civil society organizations supported MACCIH’s calls to reform the law.

Nongovernmental Impact: Some journalists and other members of civil society reported threats from members of organized crime. It was unclear how many of these threats were related to the victims’ professions or activism. Several anonymous social media sites, possibly linked to political parties, criticized activists, civil society organizations, and journalists who were critical of the government or opposition party policies.

Internet Freedom

The government did not restrict or disrupt access to the internet or censor online content, but there were credible reports that the government monitored private online communications. According to the International Telecommunication Union, in 2017 approximately 32 percent of the population used the internet.

Academic Freedom and Cultural Events

There were no government restrictions on academic freedom or cultural events.

b. Freedoms of Peaceful Assembly and Association

Freedom of Peaceful Assembly

The law provides for freedom of peaceful assembly, and the government generally respected this right. The law requires a judge to issue an eviction order for individuals occupying public and private property if security forces had not evicted the individuals within a specified period of the occupation. Some local and international civil society organizations, including students, agricultural workers groups, political parties, and indigenous rights groups, alleged that members of the

security forces used excessive force to break up demonstrations. The IACHR reported that the government at times used a policy of arbitrary detentions or arrests to inhibit protest.

Law enforcement evictions of protesters, land rights activists, and others were generally conducted peacefully, although injuries to both protesters and law enforcement officers were occasionally reported. The NGO Peace Brigades International reported several instances of threats and intimidation by security forces, including a heavy military presence in disputed areas. Conversely, media sources reported in October that two soldiers were ambushed and killed near Tocoa, Colon, as they sought peacefully to remove protesters from blocking a road. No suspects were arrested, and it is unclear if the shooters were related to the protesters or linked with illicit groups.

Freedom of Association

The law provides for freedom of association, and the government generally respected this right. The law prohibits illicit association, defined as gatherings by persons bearing arms, explosive devices, or dangerous objects with the purpose of committing a crime, and prescribes prison terms of two to four years and a fine of 30,000 to 60,000 lempiras (\$1,250 to \$2,500) for anyone who convokes or directs an illicit meeting or demonstration. There were no reports of such cases during the year, although authorities charged some protesters with sedition. Public-sector unions expressed concern over some officials refusing to honor bargaining agreements and firing union leaders. The law prohibits police from unionizing (see section 7.a.).

c. Freedom of Religion

See the Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report* at www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/.

d. Freedom of Movement

The law provides for freedom of internal movement, foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation, and the government generally respected these rights.

The government cooperated with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian organizations to provide protection

and assistance to internally displaced persons, refugees, returning refugees, asylum seekers, stateless persons, and other persons of concern.

Abuse of Migrants, Refugees, and Stateless Persons: Transiting migrants were vulnerable to abuse by criminal organizations.

In-country Movement: There were areas where authorities could not assure freedom of movement because of criminal activity and a lack of significant government presence.

Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)

In 2017 the Internal Displacement Monitoring Center estimated there were approximately 190,000 IDPs in the country. In 2017 the National Human Rights Commission identified 339 cases of forced displacement and 349 cases of individuals at risk of forced displacement. Internal displacement was generally caused by violence, national and transnational gang activity, and human trafficking. Official data on forced internal displacement was limited in part because gangs controlled many of the neighborhoods that were sources of internal displacement (see section 6, Displaced Children).

The government maintained the Interinstitutional Commission for the Protection of People Displaced by Violence, and within the newly created Ministry of Human Rights, the government created the Directorate for the Protection of Persons Internally Displaced by Violence. Both the ministry and the commission focused on developing policies to address IDPs. Following up on the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework conference that the government hosted in October 2017, the participants, including governments from across the region, agreed to the Regional Integral Framework for Protection and Solutions. Under the framework the government pledged to strengthen its capacity to provide services to key population groups, including refugees and returned migrants, through 14 commitments and 28 specific actions between 2018 and 2020.

Protection of Refugees

The government cooperated with UNHCR and other humanitarian organizations to provide protection and assistance to refugees and other persons of concern.

Access to Asylum: The law allows for the granting of asylum or refugee status. The government has established a system to provide protection to refugees, but at

times there were significant delays in processing provisional permits for asylum applicants.

Section 3. Freedom to Participate in the Political Process

The law provides citizens the right to choose their government in free and fair periodic elections held by secret ballot and based on nearly universal and equal suffrage. The law does not permit active members of the military or civilian security forces to vote. The constitution prohibits practicing clergy from running for office or participating in political campaigns.

Elections and Political Participation

Recent Elections: In December 2017 Juan Orlando Hernandez of the National Party was declared the winner in the November 26 elections. International observers generally agreed the elections were free but disputed the fairness and transparency of the results. The OAS and EU both fielded observer teams for the elections and agreed that the margin of victory separating incumbent President Hernandez from challenger Salvador Nasralla was extremely close. The OAS mission found that this small margin, combined with numerous irregularities in vote processing, left it unable to state with certainty who won the presidential election. The EU mission agreed that there were serious irregularities in the process but concluded that safeguards built into the system, including posting of voting results forms on a public website, helped promote transparency. NGOs reported irregularities, including problems with voter rolls, buying and selling of electoral workers' credentials, and lack of transparency in campaign financing.

Political Parties and Political Participation: Civil society and opposition parties accused officials of using government resources to attract voters.

Participation of Women and Minorities: No laws limit the participation of women or members of minorities in the political process, and they did participate. Women, however, suffered political violence, which ranged from harassment for voting against party lines to receiving death threats for their political participation.

Section 4. Corruption and Lack of Transparency in Government

The law provides for criminal penalties for corruption by officials, but authorities did not implement the law effectively, and officials continued to engage in corrupt practices with impunity. There were numerous reports of government corruption

during the year. The government took steps to address corruption at high levels in government agencies, including arresting and charging members of congress, judges, prosecutors, sitting and former senior officials, mayors and other local authorities, and police officers. Anticorruption efforts continued to lag and remained an area of concern, as well as the government's ability to protect justice operators, such as prosecutors and judges.

Corruption: The Public Ministry's anticorruption unit (UFECIC) made several announcements of case investigations, including against former first lady Rosa Elena Bonilla de Lobo, spouse of former president Porfirio Lobo; the "fe de erratas" case against two members of congress accused of altering legislation; and the "Network of Congresspersons" case, in which five officials were accused of diverting public funds. UFECIC announced a fourth case in June, named "Pandora," in which 38 individuals, including a former secretary of agriculture and several members of congress, were accused of fraud, abuse of authority, misuse of public funds, and other corruption-related crimes.

On February 22, the CNA presented five of its highest-profile cases to the public, citing several public administration and elected officials, including a Supreme Court judge, a congressman, and former first lady Bonilla de Lobo. Following the announcement the CNA reported harassment campaigns and threats.

MACCIH, the CNA, and civil society organizations continued to press for the passage of legislation to combat corruption, but most legislative efforts stalled in congress.

Financial Disclosure: Public officials are subject to financial disclosure law but did not always comply. The law mandates that the Supreme Auditing Tribunal monitor and verify disclosures. The tribunal published its reports on its website and cited the names of public officials who did not comply with disclosure law. The Public Ministry's Campaign Financing Unit, created in June 2017, conducted audits of 397 candidates, focusing on those who won their bids for election. The unit reported that 76 percent of candidates for public office reported on all campaign expenditures and that four cases were referred to the Public Ministry for investigation.

Section 5. Governmental Attitude Regarding International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Abuses of Human Rights

A wide variety of domestic and international human rights groups generally operated without government restriction, investigating and publishing their findings on human rights cases. Government officials were somewhat cooperative and responsive to their views. Human rights organizations criticized government officials for lack of access and responsiveness.

The United Nations or Other International Bodies: Some civil society organizations criticized the government for failing to comply with, or inadequately complying with, rulings by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights and protection measures ordered by the court and the IACHR.

Government Human Rights Bodies: A semiautonomous commissioner for human rights served as an ombudsman and investigated complaints of human rights abuses. With offices throughout the country, the ombudsman received cases that otherwise may not have risen to national attention. An independent Ministry of Human Rights was established in January and, despite operational challenges from its recent inception, has served as an effective advocate for human rights within the government. The Public Ministry's Office of the Special Prosecutor for Human Rights handled cases involving charges of human rights abuses by government officials. In March the Public Ministry also created the Special Prosecutor's Office for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, Journalists, Social Communicators, and Justice Officials. The Human Rights Committee is in the congress. The Ministries of Security and Defense both have human rights offices that investigated alleged human rights abuses and coordinated human rights-related activities with the Ministry of Human Rights.

Section 6. Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking in Persons

Women

Rape and Domestic Violence: The law criminalizes all forms of rape of men or women, including spousal rape. The government considers rape a crime of public concern, and the state prosecutes rapists even if victims do not press charges. The penalties for rape range from three to nine years' imprisonment, and the courts enforced these penalties.

The law provides penalties of up to four years in prison for domestic violence; however, if a victim's physical injuries do not reach the severity required to categorize the violence as a criminal act, the only legal penalty for a first offense is a sentence of one to three months of community service. Female victims of

domestic violence are entitled to certain protective measures. Abusers caught in the act may be detained for up to 24 hours as a preventive measure. The law provides a maximum sentence of three years in prison for disobeying a restraining order connected with the crime of intrafamilial violence.

In cooperation with the UN Development Program, the government operated consolidated reporting centers in Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula where women could report crimes, seek medical and psychological attention, and receive other services. These reporting centers were in addition to the 298 government-operated women's offices--one in each municipality--that provided a wide array of services to women, focusing on education, personal finance, health, social and political participation, environmental stewardship, and prevention of gender-based violence.

Sexual Harassment: The law criminalizes various forms of sexual harassment. Violators face penalties of one to three years in prison and possible suspension of their professional licenses, but the government did not effectively enforce the law.

Coercion in Population Control: There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization.

Discrimination: Although the law accords women and men the same legal rights and status, including property rights in divorce cases, many women did not fully enjoy such rights. Most women in the workforce engaged in lower-status and lower-paying informal occupations, such as domestic service, without the benefit of legal protections. By law women have equal access to educational opportunities.

Children

Birth Registration: Children derive citizenship by birth in the country, from the citizenship of their parents, or by naturalization.

Child Abuse: Child abuse remained a serious problem. The law establishes prison sentences of up to three years for child abuse. The Violence Observatory reported the homicides of 119 children as of July 1.

Early and Forced Marriage: The minimum legal age of marriage for both boys and girls is 18 with parental consent. According to UNICEF, 8 percent of children were married before age 15 and 34 percent before age 18.

Sexual Exploitation of Children: The commercial sexual exploitation of children, especially in sex trafficking, continued to be a problem. The country was a destination for child sex tourism. The legal age of consent is 18. There is no statutory rape law, but the penalty for rape of a minor younger than age 12 is 15 to 20 years in prison, or nine to 13 years in prison if the victim is age 13 or older. Penalties for facilitating child sex trafficking are 10 to 15 years in prison, with fines ranging from one million to 2.5 million lempiras (\$41,700 to \$104,000). The law prohibits the use of children younger than age 18 for exhibitions or performances of a sexual nature or in the production of pornography.

Displaced Children: Many children lived on the streets. Casa Alianza estimated 15,000 children were homeless and living on the streets, primarily in major cities. Civil society organizations reported that common causes of forced displacement for youth included death threats for failure to pay extortion, attempted recruitment by gangs, witnessing criminal activity by gangs or organized crime, domestic violence, attempted kidnappings, family members' involvement in drug dealing, victimization by traffickers, discrimination based on sexual orientation, sexual harassment, and discrimination for having a chronic illness.

International Child Abductions: The country is a party to the 1980 Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction. See the Department of State's *Annual Report on International Parental Child Abduction* at <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/International-Parental-Child-Abduction/for-providers/legal-reports-and-data.html>.

Anti-Semitism

The Jewish community numbered more than 250 members. There were no reports of anti-Semitic acts.

Trafficking in Persons

See the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/.

Persons with Disabilities

The law prohibits discrimination against persons with physical, sensory, intellectual, and mental disabilities. The Public Ministry is responsible for prosecuting violations. The law requires that persons with disabilities have access

to buildings, but few buildings were accessible, and the national government did not effectively implement laws or programs to provide such access.

The government has an Office for People with Disabilities located within the Ministry of Development and Social Inclusion, but its ability to provide services to persons with disabilities was limited.

Indigenous People

In the 2013 census, approximately 8.5 percent of the population identified themselves as members of indigenous communities, but other estimates were higher. Indigenous groups included the Miskito, Tawahkas, Pech, Tolupans, Lencas, Maya-Chortis, Nahuatl, Bay Islanders, and Garifunas. They had limited representation in the national government and consequently little direct input into decisions affecting their lands, cultures, traditions, and the allocation of natural resources.

Indigenous communities continued to report threats and acts of violence against them and against community and environmental activists. Violence was often rooted in a broader context of conflict over land and natural resources, extensive corruption, lack of transparency and community consultation, other criminal activity, and limited state ability to protect the rights of vulnerable communities.

Persons from indigenous and Afro-descendent communities continued to experience discrimination in employment, education, housing, and health services. An IACHR report noted that there were insufficient hospital beds and inadequate supplies at the only hospital that services the Gracias a Dios Department, home to the majority of the Miskito community.

Acts of Violence, Discrimination, and Other Abuses Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

The law states that sexual orientation and gender identity characteristics merit special protection from discrimination and includes these characteristics in a hate crimes amendment to the penal code. Nevertheless, social discrimination against LGBTI persons persisted. LGBTI human rights NGOs alleged that the PMOP and other elements of the security forces harassed and abused LGBTI persons. One international NGO reported that five members of the PMOP in uniform allegedly assaulted and raped a gay man on July 16 in Tegucigalpa. The victim submitted to a medical examination with the Public Ministry's Forensic Medicine Unit, filed a

complaint with the HNP's Criminal Investigation Unit, and temporarily left the country.

LGBTI rights groups asserted that government agencies and private employers engaged in discriminatory hiring practices. The Association for a Better Life, an NGO that works with LGBTI persons, reported an incident of discrimination at San Felipe Hospital in Tegucigalpa where a physician asserted that the victim's sexual orientation caused him to contract the human papillomavirus and colon cancer. LGBTI groups continued working with the Violent Crimes Task Force, Ministry of Security, and Office of the Special Prosecutor for Human Rights to address concerns about intimidation, fear of reprisals, and police corruption.

Transgender women were particularly vulnerable to employment and education discrimination; many could find employment only as sex workers, substantially increasing their risk of violence. Transgender individuals noted their inability to update identity documents to reflect their gender identity.

HIV and AIDS Social Stigma

Access to employment, educational opportunities, and health services continued to be major challenges for persons with HIV/AIDS. The law provides persons with HIV the right to have access to, and remain in, employment and the education system. The law also defines administrative, civil, and criminal liability and penalties for any violation of the law, which includes denial or delay in care for persons with HIV.

Section 7. Worker Rights

a. Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective Bargaining

The law grants workers the right to form and join unions of their choice, bargain collectively, and strike. It prohibits employer retribution against employees for engaging in trade union activities. The law places a number of restrictions on these rights, such as requiring that a recognized trade union represent at least 30 workers, prohibiting foreign nationals from holding union offices, and requiring that union officials work in the same substantive area of the business as the workers they represent. In 2016 the Ministry of Labor and Social Security (STSS) administratively ruled that seasonal workers could not form a union. The law prohibits members of the armed forces and police, as well as certain other public employees, from forming labor unions.

The law requires an employer to begin collective bargaining once workers establish a union, and it specifies that if more than one union exists at a company the employer must negotiate with the largest.

The law allows only local unions to call strikes, prohibits labor federations and confederations from calling strikes, and requires that a two-thirds majority of both union and nonunion employees at an enterprise approve a strike. The law prohibits workers from legally striking until after they have attempted and failed to come to agreement with their employer, and it requires workers and employers to participate in a mediation and conciliation process. Additionally, the law prohibits strikes in a wide range of economic activities that the government has designated as essential services or that it considers would affect the rights of individuals in the larger community to security, health, education, and economic and social well-being.

The law prohibits certain public service employees from striking. The law permits workers in public health care, social security, staple food production, and public utilities (municipal sanitation, water, electricity, and telecommunications) to strike as long as they continue to provide basic services. The law also requires that public-sector workers involved in the refining, transportation, and distribution of petroleum products submit their grievances to the STSS before striking. The law permits strikes by workers in export processing zones and free zones for companies that provide services to industrial parks, but it requires that strikes not impede the operations of other factories in such parks. The STSS has the power to declare a work stoppage illegal, and employers may discipline employees consistent with their internal regulations, including firing strikers, if the STSS rules that a work stoppage is illegal.

The government did not effectively enforce the law. Although the STSS passed a comprehensive labor inspection law in 2017 that substantially increased fines for violations and updated labor inspector authorities, the STSS had not released implementing regulations despite months of consultation and work with the private sector and unions. By law the STSS may fine companies that violate the right to freedom of association. The law permits a fine of 300,000 lempiras (\$12,500) per violation. If a company unlawfully dismisses founding union members or union leaders, the law stipulates that employers must also pay a fine equivalent to six months of the dismissed leaders' salaries to the union itself. Through August the STSS administered fines of more than 25.3 million lempiras (\$1.05 million), including more than 6.1 million lempiras (\$254,000) for violations of freedom of

association and more than 13.2 million lempiras (\$550,000) for obstruction of labor inspectors. Both the STSS and the courts may order a company to reinstate workers, but the STSS lacked the means to verify compliance. While there were cases where a worker was reinstated, such as the reinstatement of a union leader in Tegucigalpa following his unlawful dismissal, the reinstatement process in the courts was unduly long, lasting from six months to more than five years.

Workers had difficulty exercising the rights to form and join unions and to engage in collective bargaining, and the government failed to enforce applicable laws effectively. Public-sector trade unionists raised concerns about government interference in trade union activities, including its suspension or ignoring of collective agreements and its dismissals of union members and leaders.

Although there is no legal requirement that they do so, STSS inspectors generally accompanied workers when they notified their employer of their intent to form a union. In some cases STSS inspectors, rather than workers, directly notified employers of workers' intent to organize. Workers reported that the presence and participation of the STSS reduced the risk that employers would dismiss the union's founders and later claim they were unaware of efforts to unionize.

Some employers either refused to engage in collective bargaining or made it very difficult to do so. Some companies also delayed appointing or failed to appoint representatives for required STSS-led mediation, a practice that prolonged the mediation process and impeded the right to strike. There were allegations that companies used collective pacts, which are collective contracts with nonunionized workers, to prevent unionization and collective bargaining because only one collective contract can exist in each workplace. Unions also raised concerns about the use of temporary contracts and part-time employment, suggesting that employers used these mechanisms to prevent unionization and avoid providing full benefits. A Supreme Court ruling requires that both unions and employers notify the STSS of new collective agreements before they go into effect.

Antiunion discrimination continued to be a serious problem. The three major union federations and several civil society groups noted that many companies paid the fines that government authorities imposed but continued to violate the law. Some failed to remedy violations despite multiple visits by STSS inspectors. Local unions, the AFL-CIO's Solidarity Center, and other organizations reported that some employers harassed union leaders in attempts to undermine union operations. Civil society organizations regularly raised concerns about practices by agricultural companies, particularly in the south. Through September the STSS conducted 308

hygiene and social security inspections and levied fines totaling approximately 5.68 million lempiras (\$237,000).

The Solidarity Center reported threats against several labor leaders, including a public-sector labor union leader. Through November, the Solidarity Center documented 11 cases of threats against union leaders.

Labor activists alleged that automotive component producer Honduras Electrical Distribution Systems (Kyungshin Lear) refused to engage in collective bargaining. Some companies in other sectors, including the melon industry, established employer-controlled unions that prevented the formation of independent unions because of legal restrictions on the number of unions and collective bargaining agreements allowed per company.

Several companies in export processing zones had solidarity associations that functioned similarly to company unions for the purposes of setting wages and negotiating working conditions.

b. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The law prohibits all forms of forced labor, but the government did not effectively implement or enforce these laws. Administrative penalties were insufficient to deter violations and were rarely enforced. Penalties for forced labor under antitrafficking law range from 10 to 15 years' imprisonment, but authorities often did not enforce them. The government investigated several cases of labor trafficking, including forced begging and domestic service.

Forced labor occurred in street vending, domestic service, the transport of drugs and other illicit goods, and other criminal activity. Victims were primarily impoverished individuals in both rural and urban areas (see section 7.c.). The law requiring prisoners to work at least five hours a day, six days a week took effect in 2016. Regulations for implementing the law were still under development as of September. The Ministry of Human Rights stated it was taking every precaution to protect prisoners' rights and assure that the work provided opportunities for prisoners to develop skills they could use in legal economic activities after their release.

Also see the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/.

c. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

The law regulates child labor, sets the minimum age for employment at 14, and regulates the hours and types of work that minors younger than age 18 may perform. By law all minors between ages 14 and 18 must receive special permission from the STSS to work, and the STSS must perform a home study to verify that there is an economic need for the child to work and that the child not work outside the country or in hazardous conditions, including in offshore fishing. The STSS approved 91 such authorizations through September. The vast majority of children who worked did so without STSS permits. If the STSS grants permission, children between 14 and 16 may work a maximum of four hours a day, and those between 16 and 18 may work up to six hours a day. The law prohibits night work and overtime for minors younger than age 18, but the STSS may grant special permission for minors ages 16 to 18 to work in the evening if such employment does not adversely affect their education.

The law requires that individuals and companies that employ more than 20 school-age children at their facilities provide a location for a school.

In 2017 the government took steps to address child labor, including the development of a new protocol for labor inspections to identify child labor, but inadequate resources impeded inspections and enforcement outside of major cities in rural areas where hazardous child labor was concentrated. Fines for child labor are 100,000 lempiras (\$4,170) for a first violation and as high as 228,000 lempiras (\$9,500) for repeat violations. The law also imposes prison sentences of three to five years for child labor violations that endanger the life or morality of a child. The STSS completed 74 inspections and 19 verification inspections as of September and sanctioned two companies for not correcting noncompliant child labor practices.

Estimates of the number of children younger than age 18 in the country's workforce ranged from 370,000 to 510,000. Children often worked on melon, coffee, okra, and sugarcane plantations as well as in other agricultural production; scavenged at garbage dumps; worked in the forestry, hunting, and fishing sectors; worked as domestic servants; peddled goods such as fruit; begged; washed cars; hauled goods; and labored in limestone quarrying and lime production. Most child labor occurred in rural areas. Children often worked alongside family members in agriculture and other work, such as fishing, construction, transportation, and small businesses. Some of the worst forms of child labor occurred, including

commercial sexual exploitation of children, and NGOs reported that gangs often forced children to commit crimes, including homicide (see section 6, Children).

Also see the Department of Labor's *Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor* at www.dol.gov/ilab/reports/child-labor/findings/.

d. Discrimination with Respect to Employment and Occupation

The law prohibits discrimination based on gender, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, political opinion or affiliation, marital status, race or national origin, language, nationality, religion, family affiliation, family or economic situation, disability, health, physical appearance, or any other characteristic that would offend the victim's human dignity. Penalties include prison sentences of up to five years and monetary fines. The law prohibits employers from requiring pregnancy tests as a prerequisite for employment; violators are subject to a 5,000 lempira (\$208) fine. The government did not effectively enforce these laws and regulations.

Many employers discriminated against women. Persons with disabilities, indigenous and Afro-Honduran persons, LGBTI persons, and persons with HIV/AIDS also faced discrimination in employment and occupation (see section 6, Children).

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

There are 42 categories of monthly minimum wages, based on the industry and the size of a company's workforce; the minimum average salary was 8,910 lempira (\$370). The law does not cover domestic workers.

The law applies equally to citizens and foreigners, regardless of gender, and prescribes a maximum eight-hour shift per day for most workers, a 44-hour workweek, and at least one 24-hour rest period for every six days of work. It also provides for paid national holidays and annual leave. The law requires overtime pay, bans excessive compulsory overtime, limits overtime to four hours a day for a maximum workday of 12 hours, and prohibits the practice of requiring workers to complete work quotas before leaving their place of employment. The law does not protect domestic workers effectively.

Occupational safety and health standards were current but not enforced. By law workers may remove themselves from situations that endanger their health or

safety without jeopardizing continued employment. Under the new inspection law, the STSS has the authority temporarily to shut down workplaces where there is an imminent danger of fatalities. There were not enough trained inspectors, however, to deter violations sufficiently.

The STSS is responsible for enforcing the national minimum wage, hours of work, and occupational health and safety laws, but it did so inconsistently and ineffectively. Civil society continued to raise issues of minimum wage violations, highlighting agricultural companies in the south as frequent violators. The 2017 inspection law permits fines of up to 25 percent of the economic damage suffered by workers, 1,000 lempiras (\$42) for failing to pay the minimum wage or other economic violations, and 100,000 lempiras (\$4,170) for violating occupational safety or health regulations and other law violations. As part of the United States-Honduras Monitoring and Action Plan, the government increased the STSS budget to approximately 79.4 million lempiras (\$3.31 million). As of September inspectors conducted 1,435 unannounced inspections. As of November the STSS had 169 labor inspectors.

The STSS reported a significant reduction in company obstruction of labor inspectors, with 226 cases through September. Because labor inspectors continued to be concentrated in Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula, full labor inspections and follow-up visits to confirm compliance were far less frequent in other parts of the country. Many inspectors asked workers to provide them with transportation so that they could conduct inspections, since the STSS did not have sufficient resources to pay for travel to worksites. Credible allegations of corruption among labor inspectors continued. Inspectors reportedly failed to respond to requests for inspections to address alleged violations of law, conduct adequate investigations, impose or collect fines when they discovered violations, or otherwise abide by legal requirements.

Authorities did not effectively enforce worker safety standards, particularly in the construction, garment assembly, and agricultural sectors, as well as in the informal economy. Employers rarely paid the minimum wage in the agricultural sector and paid it inconsistently in other sectors. Employers frequently penalized agricultural workers for taking legally authorized days off.

There were reports that both public- and private-sector employers failed to pay into the social security system. The STSS may levy a fine of 100,000 lempiras (\$4,170) per infraction against companies that fail to pay social security obligations.

There continued to be reports of violations of occupational health and safety law affecting the approximately 5,000 persons who made a living by diving for seafood such as lobster, conch, and sea cucumber, most from the Miskito indigenous community and other ethnic minority groups in Gracias a Dios Department. These violations included lack of access to appropriate safety equipment. Civil society groups reported that most dive boats held more than twice the craft's capacity for divers and that many boat captains sold their divers marijuana and crack cocaine to help them complete an average of 12 dives a day, to depths of more than 100 feet. During the year the STSS inspected 27 fishing boats including in La Ceiba, Atlantida Department, and Puerto Lempira, Gracias a Dios Department. Civil society reported an average of 15 deaths per year attributable to unsafe diving practices.



San Pedro Sula otra vez la ciudad más violenta del mundo; Acapulco, la segunda (/sala-de-prensa/759-san-pedro-sula-otra-vez-la-ciudad-mas-violenta-del-mundo-acapulco-la-segunda)

CCSPJP · SALA DE PRENSA (/SALA-DE-PRENSA) · 07 FEBRERO 2013



Por segundo año consecutivo, San Pedro Sula (Honduras) ocupa el primer lugar mundial en el ranking de las 50 ciudades más violentas del mundo, con una tasa de 169 homicidios dolosos por cada 100 mil habitantes. A la ciudad mexicana de Acapulco correspondió el segundo sitio con una tasa de 143 en 2012 y a Caracas el tercer sitio, con una tasa de 119.

Del ranking de 2012 salieron las siguientes ciudades que figuraron en el de 2011: Durango, Mazatlán, Tepic, Veracruz de México; Mosul de Irak; Panamá de Panamá y Johannesburgo de Sudáfrica.

Al ranking de 2012 ingresaron las ciudades de Valencia y Maracaibo (Venezuela); Santa Marta (Colombia); Puerto Príncipe (Haití); Victoria (México); Oakland (Estados Unidos) y Brasilia (Brasil).

Respecto a las ciudades hondureñas de **San Pedro Sula y Distrito Central** encontramos, a diferencia de anteriores ocasiones, una gran dificultad para obtener información para realizar los cálculos necesarios. No nos sorprendería que esta falta de información de fuentes oficiales respondiera al propósito de intentar de ocultar la realidad de las ciudades del país que es, hoy por hoy, el más violento del mundo (aunque seguido muy de cerca por Venezuela).

En tal sentido llama la atención que se haya dado a conocer el número de mujeres asesinadas en Honduras, por departamento y por ciudad, y en cambio no se haya hecho lo mismo con los totales de homicidio. Si las autoridades hondureñas saben cuántas mujeres fueron asesinadas, también sabe cuántos homicidios de hombres hubo.

Por tanto, tomamos una decisión: repetimos las cifras oficiales de 2011 (que son, por cierto, superiores a las que calculamos para el ranking de ese año), pues resulta obvio que si hubiera habido una disminución -por pequeña que fuera- las autoridades hondureñas se habrían apresurado a dar a conocer ese logro. Pero por la información que puede leerse todos los días, en las ciudades hondureñas la situación no mejora, sino que empeora.

Autoridades de San Pedro Sula nos han reclamado que el haber colocado a esa ciudad en el primer lugar en el ranking perjudica su imagen. También han argüido que nuestras cifras son erróneas. Pero nos basamos en cifras oficiales y respecto al efecto del ranking, que no hace sino reconocer la realidad, no es éste el que daña la imagen de la ciudad, sino su violencia y la incapacidad de los gobernantes para contenerla y reducirla. Ocultar los problemas jamás los resuelve.

Si se comparan los rankings de 2011 y 2012 **hay evidentes mejoras y retrocesos en el control de la violencia en varias ciudades de diferentes países.** El mayor deterioro de la seguridad pública y el escalamiento de la violencia se ha producido en los últimos años en Honduras, Venezuela y México.

Respecto a las mejoras están ahí los casos de las ciudades que salieron del ranking y la disminución de las tasas en varias urbes aunque hayan permanecido en esta lista. En México durante 2012 hubo reducciones importantes de los homicidios en ciudades de los estados de **Chihuahua, Sinaloa, Durango, Veracruz y Nayarit**, pero ha empeorado en los estados de Guerrero, Coahuila y Tamaulipas.

El caso más relevante de reducción de los homicidios es el de ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, urbe que durante tres años consecutivos (2008, 2009 y 2010) ocupó el primer lugar mundial entre las urbes más violentas del mundo y que en 2011 pasó al segundo lugar y en 2012 a la posición 19. Mientras que en 2010 Juárez alcanzó una tasa de 229 homicidios dolosos por cada 100 mil habitantes, en 2012 fue de 56: una baja de casi el 76%.

En 2011 la ciudad mexicana de Tijuana, que en 2010 ocupó el lugar 22, salió del ranking.

Descarga **ESTUDIO COMPLETO** (/biblioteca/view.download/5/163)

Otro caso notable de reducción es el de San Salvador y en general de El Salvador. La razón de la baja es la tregua pactada por las pandillas rivales con los auspicios del gobierno salvadoreño. La capital de ese país pasó de una tasa de 59 homicidios dolosos en 2011 a una de 32 en 2012, lo cual es una muy buena noticia.

En principio estamos a favor de todo aquello que permita una reducción de la violencia e impida la pérdida de vidas humanas, todas valiosas. Pero en este caso compartimos el fundado temor de muchos salvadoreños de que la tregua no se mantenga. Pero además, el punto no es la tregua entre grupos criminales, sino la existencia misma de estos.

La escalada de violencia, sobre todo en América Latina, ha servido para que **diferentes actores culpen del fenómeno a la posesión y portación de las mismas y promuevan prohibiciones y campañas de desarme**. Nosotros no compartimos ni el diagnóstico ni el supuesto remedio propuesto.

La posesión y portación de armas y su uso, que es parte del derecho fundamental de todo individuo a la autodefensa (cuando en un momento y lugar concretos no esté la policía para protegerlo), no es la causa de la violencia. En México la portación de armas está prohibida y la posesión muy restringida, sin ello haya impedido la escalada de violencia de los últimos años. **En países con menos restricciones a las armas hay mucha menor violencia que en otros donde prevalecen las prohibiciones y las restricciones.**

Las prohibiciones y el “desarme” no detienen a los delincuentes violentos que siempre tienen forma de obtener armas. Las prohibiciones sólo desarman a las personas inocentes y las dejan más inermes ante los criminales.

El siguiente paso en la política de desarme, una vez establecidas las prohibiciones, son las requisas masivas de hogares, centros de trabajos y vehículos, propias de los Estados totalitarios y genocidas.

La solución a la violencia consiste en dos tipos de acciones principales: el creciente y sistemático abatimiento de la impunidad y el hacer que la policía cumpla con sus tareas de prevenir y perseguir los delitos, con escrupuloso respecto de los derechos fundamentales de los individuos. Eso es lo que demuestra la larga experiencia universal y lo que ha seguido comprobando eficaz en recientemente lo mismo en Colombia y que Brasil.

Finalmente aprovechamos la oportunidad para reiterar que el propósito del ranking que realizamos no es eminentemente académico. Lo que perseguimos es contribuir al reclamo que los diferentes pueblos del mundo hacen a sus gobernantes para que cumplan con su obligación de proteger los derechos de los individuos a la vida, la propiedad y la libertad.

Listado de las 50 ciudades más violentas del mundo en 2012

Posición	Ciudad	País	Homicidios	Habitantes	Tasa
1	San Pedro Sula	Honduras	1,218	719,447	169.30
2	Acapulco	México	1,170	818,853	142.88

3	Caracas	Venezuela	3,862	3,247,971	118.89
4	Distrito Central	Honduras	1,149	1,126,534	101.99
5	Torreón	México	1,087	1,147,647	94.72
6	Maceió	Brasil	801	932,748	85.88
7	Cali	Colombia	1,819	2,294,653	79.27
8	Nuevo Laredo	México	288	395,315	72.85
9	Barquisimeto	Venezuela	804	1,120,718	71.74
10	João Pessoa	Brasil	518	723,515	71.59
11	Manaus	Brasil	945	1,342,846	70.37
12	Guatemala	Guatemala	2,063	3,062,519	67.36
13	Fortaleza	Brasil	1,628	2,452,185	66.39
14	Salvador (y RMS)	Brasil	2,391	3,642,682	65.64
15	Culiacán	México	549	884,601	62.06
16	Vitoria	Brasil	1,018	1,685,384	60.40
17	New Orleans	Estados Unidos	193	343,829	56.13
18	Cuernavaca	México	359	640,188	56.08
19	Juárez	México	749	1,339,648	55.91
20	Ciudad Guayana	Venezuela	578	1,050,283	55.03
21	Detroit	Estados Unidos	386	706,585	54.63
22	Cúcuta	Colombia	346	637,302	54.29
23	São Luís	Brasil	509	1,014,837	50.16
24	Medellín	Colombia	1,175	2,393,011	49.10
25	Kingston	Jamaica	568	1,171,686	48.48
26	Belém	Brasil	1,033	2,141,618	48.23
27	Cape Town	Sudáfrica	1,722	3,740,026	46.04
28	Cuiabá	Brasil	380	839,130	45.28
29	Santa Marta	Colombia	209	461,810	45.26
30	Recife	Brasil	1,656	3,717,640	44.54
31	Valencia	Venezuela	977	2,227,165	43.87
32	Chihuahua	México	367	843,844	43.49

33	San Juan	Puerto Rico	185	427,789	43.25
34	Goiânia	Brasil	547	1,302,001	42.01
35	Puerto Príncipe	Haití	495	1,234,414	40.10
36	Victoria	México	126	333,517	37.78
37	Pereira	Colombia	167	462,230	36.13
38	Nelson Mandela Bay	Sudáfrica	415	1,152,115	36.02
39	Maracaibo	Venezuela	784	2,212,040	35.44
40	ST. Louis	Estados Unidos	113	319,294	35.39
41	Baltimore	Estados Unidos	217	619,493	35.03
42	Curitiba	Brasil	597	1,751,907	34.08
43	Oakland	Estados Unidos	131	395,817	33.10
44	San Salvador	El Salvador	744	2,290,790	32.48
45	Macapá	Brasil	160	499,116	32.06
46	Durban	Sudáfrica	1,065	3,442,361	30.94
47	Monterrey	México	1,305	4,230,716	30.85
48	Belo Horizonte	Brasil	1,452	4,882,977	29.74
49	Brasília	Brasil	764	2,570,160	29.73
50	Barranquilla	Colombia	349	1,186,640	29.41

◀ ANTERIOR (/SALA-DE-PRENSA/762-CON-MENTIRAS-EL-GOBIERNO-DE-GUERRERO-TRATA-DE-OCULTAR-LA-REALIDAD-DE-LA-VIOLENCIA-EN-ACAPULCO-Y-EN-EL-ESTADO-Y-SU-COMPLETA-INEPTITUD-PARA-CONTROLARLA)

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LO MÁS LEÍDO

SEMANA MES TODO



MENÚ

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50 MÁS VIOLENTAS

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San Pedro Sula once again the most violent city in the world; Acapulco the second

For the second consecutive year, San Pedro Sula (Honduras) ranks first in the ranking of the 50 most violent cities in the world, with a rate of 169 intentional homicides per 100 thousand inhabitants. The Mexican city of Acapulco ranked second with a rate of 143 in 2012, and Caracas ranked third, with a rate of 119.

From the 2012 ranking came the following cities that also appeared in the 2011 ranking: Durango, Mazatlan, Tepic, Veracruz de México; Mosul of Iraq; Panama of Panama and Johannesburg of South Africa.

The cities of Valencia and Maracaibo (Venezuela), Santa Marta (Colombia); Port-au-Prince (Haiti); Victoria (Mexico); Oakland (United States) and Brasilia (Brazil) entered the 2012 ranking.

Regarding the Honduran cities of San Pedro Sula and Central District we found, unlike previous occasions, great difficulty in obtaining information to perform the necessary calculations. We would not be surprised if this lack of information from official sources is due to the purpose of trying to hide the reality of the cities of the country that is, today, the most violent in the world (closely followed by Venezuela).

In this regard, it is striking that the number of women murdered in Honduras, by department and by city, has been made known, but that the same has not been done with homicide totals. If the Honduran authorities know how many women were murdered, they also know how many homicides of men there were.

Therefore, we made a decision: we repeated the official figures for 2011 (which, incidentally, are higher than those we calculated for the ranking of that year), as it is obvious that if there had been a decrease - however small - the Honduran authorities would have rushed to announce this achievement. But according to the information that can be read every day, the situation in Honduran cities is not improving, but getting worse.

Authorities of San Pedro Sula have claimed that placing that city in first place of the ranking harms its image. They have also argued that our figures are wrong. But we rely on official figures and, regarding the effect of the ranking which only recognizes the reality, it is not the city's ranking that damages its image but rather its violence and the inability of the rulers to contain it and reduce it. Hiding problems never solve them.

If the rankings of 2011 and 2012 are compared, there are evident improvements and setbacks in the control of violence in several cities of different countries. The greatest deterioration of public security and escalation of violence has occurred in recent years in Honduras, Venezuela and Mexico.

Regarding the improvements, there are cases of cities that left the ranking, and of several cities where the rate decreased even if the cities have remained on this list. In Mexico during 2012, there were significant reductions in homicides in cities in the states of Chihuahua, Sinaloa,

Durango, Veracruz and Nayarit, but it has worsened in the states of Guerrero, Coahuila and Tamaulipas.

The most relevant case of reduction of homicides is that of Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, a city that for three consecutive years (2008, 2009 and 2010) ranked first in the world among the most violent cities in the world, that in 2011 moved to second place, and in 2012 moved to position 19. While in 2010 Juárez reached a rate of 229 intentional homicides per 100 thousand inhabitants, in 2012 it was 56: a decrease of almost 76%.

In 2011, the Mexican city of Tijuana, which ranked 22nd in 2010, came out of the ranking.

Another notable case of reduction is that of San Salvador and in general of El Salvador. The reason for the decline is the truce agreed by the rival gangs with the auspices of the Salvadoran government. The capital of that country went from a rate of 59 intentional homicides in 2011 to a rate of 32 in 2012, which is very good news.

In principle we are in favor of everything that allows a reduction of violence and prevents the loss of human lives, all of which are valuable. But in this case we share the well-founded fear of many Salvadorans that the truce will not continue. Additionally, the point is not the truce between criminal groups, but the very existence of these.

The escalation of violence, especially in Latin America, has allowed different actors to blame the phenomenon on the possession of arms and to promote prohibitions and disarmament campaigns. We do not share the diagnosis or the supposed remedy proposed.

The possession of weapons and their use, which is part of the fundamental right of every individual to self-defense (when at a specific time and place the police are not there to protect him), is not the cause of the violence. In Mexico the carrying of weapons is prohibited and the possession is very restricted, without which has prevented the escalation of violence in recent years. In countries with less restrictions on weapons there is much less violence than in others where prohibitions and restrictions prevail.

Prohibitions and "disarmament" do not stop violent offenders who always have a way to obtain weapons. The prohibitions only disarm innocent people and leave them more helpless before criminals.

The next step in the disarmament policy, once the prohibitions are established, is the massive requisitioning of homes, work centers and vehicles, typical of totalitarian and genocidal states.

The solution to violence consists of two main types of actions: the growing and systematic reduction of impunity and making the police comply with their tasks of preventing and prosecuting crimes, with scrupulous respect for the fundamental rights of individuals. That is what experience shows and what has continued to prove effective, as it did recently in Colombia and Brazil.

Finally, we take the opportunity to reiterate that the purpose of the ranking we perform is not eminently academic. We seek to contribute to the claims that different peoples of the world make to their rulers so that they fulfill their obligation to protect the rights of individuals to life, property and freedom.

List of the 50 most violent cities in the world in 2012

Ranking	City	Country	Homicides	Habitants	Rate
1	San Pedro Sula	Honduras	1,218	719,447	169.30
2	Acapulco	Mexico	1,170	818,853	142.88
3	Caracas	Venezuela	3,862	3,247,971	118.89
4	Distrito Central	Honduras	1,149	1,126,534	101.99
5	Torreón	Mexico	1,087	1,147,647	94.72
6	Maceió	Brazil	801	932,748	85.88
7	Cali	Colombia	1,819	2,294,653	79.27
8	Nuevo Laredo	Mexico	288	395,315	72.85
9	Barquisimeto	Venezuela	804	1,120,718	71.74
10	João Pessoa	Brazil	518	723,515	71.59
11	Manaus	Brazil	945	1,342,846	70.37
12	Guatemala	Guatemala	2,063	3,062,519	67.36
13	Fortaleza	Brazil	1,628	2,452,185	66.39
14	Salvador (y RMS)	Brazil	2,391	3,642,682	65.64
15	Culiacán	México	549	884,601	62.06
16	Vitoria	Brazil	1,018	1,685,384	60.40
17	New Orleans	United States	193	343,829	56.13
18	Cuernavaca	Mexico	359	640,188	56.08
19	Juárez	Mexico	749	1,339,648	55.91
20	Ciudad Guayana	Venezuela	578	1,050,283	55.03
21	Detroit	United States	386	706,585	54.63
22	Cúcuta	Colombia	346	637,302	54.29
23	São Luís	Brazil	509	1,014,837	50.16
24	Medellín	Colombia	1,175	2,393,011	49.10
25	Kingston	Jamaica	568	1,171,686	48.48

26	Belém	Brazil	1,033	2,141,618	48.23
27	Cape Town	South Africa	1,722	3,740,026	46.04
28	Cuiabá	Brazil	380	839,130	45.28
29	Santa Marta	Colombia	209	461,810	45.26
30	Recife	Brazil	1,656	3,717,640	44.54
31	Valencia	Venezuela	977	2,227,165	43.87
32	Chihuahua	Mexico	367	843,844	43.49
33	San Juan	Puerto Rico	185	427,789	43.25
34	Goiânia	Brazil	547	1,302,001	42.01
35	Puerto Príncipe	Haiti	495	1,234,414	40.10
36	Victoria	Mexico	126	333,517	37.78
37	Pereira	Colombia	167	462,230	36.13
38	Nelson Mandela Bay	South Africa	415	1,152,115	36.02
39	Maracaibo	Venezuela	784	2,212,040	35.44
40	St. Louis	United States	113	319,294	35.39
41	Baltimore	United States	217	619,493	35.03
42	Curitiba	Brazil	597	1,751,907	34.08
43	Oakland	United States	131	395,817	33.10
44	San Salvador	El Salvador	744	2,290,790	32.48
45	Macapá	Brazil	160	499,116	32.06
46	Durban	South Africa	1,065	3,442,361	30.94
47	Monterrey	Mexico	1,305	4,230,716	30.85
48	Belo Horizonte	Brazil	1,452	4,882,977	29.74
49	Brasilia	Brazil	764	2,570,160	29.73
50	Barranquilla	Colombia	349	1,186,640	29.41

Good news for Honduras' murder capital?

By Katy Watson

BBC News, San Pedro Sula

28 October 2016



The first person I meet when I land in San Pedro Sula, in north-western Honduras, is local journalist Ingrid Cruz who gives me a tour of her city.

Fewer international journalists come here now days, she tells me. There is less interest now that the city is no longer murder capital of the world.

Back in 2011, Honduras had a murder rate of 86.5 per 100,000 people, according to the National University's Violence Observatory.



The country's industrial capital, San Pedro Sula, was the worst-hit.

- **Honduras beauty queen found dead**
- **Honduras activist's killing sparks condemnation**

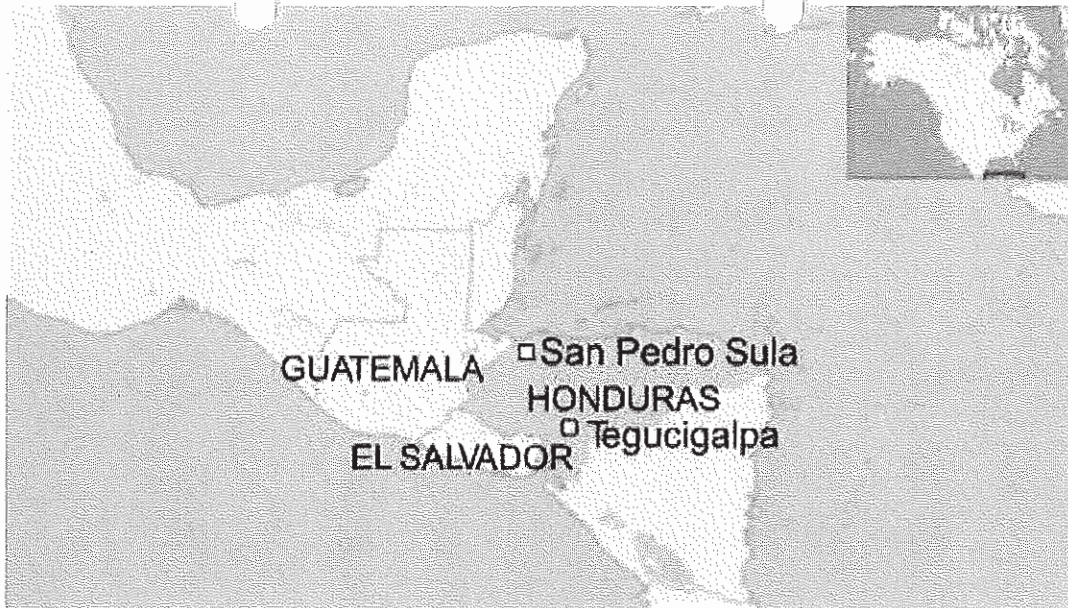
But by 2015, the national murder rate had decreased to 60 per 100,000. Still not low, but quite a drop.

At the same time, neighbouring El Salvador has been climbing the ladder of violence.

Its national murder rate last year was closer to 100 per 100,000 people. El Salvador is currently the most deadly country outside a war zone.

Spending on security

Ms Cruz points out how much has changed in the past couple of years. Security cameras have been installed on street corners across San Pedro Sula.



More than 2,000 in the past few months.

"The Honduran government has real political will to clean up," she tells me.

"To heal the wounds of the violence, the statistics and deaths through drug trafficking and organised crime."

Ms Cruz says funding from the United States has helped too; programmes that have helped bring the violence down.

Latin America makes up just 8% of the world's population but accounts for nearly a third of all murders.

How did Central America in particular get so bad?

A combination of organised crime and weak institutions has played a huge part, as well as regional instability.

"We've practically got two generations who've grown up in an environment of ideological warfare," says Ramon Renaud, a political analyst who explains that even though Honduras - unlike many of its neighbours - escaped civil war, violence has made its mark.

"The violence in Honduras doesn't have its roots in social issues or a class war. It's more about the bridge that drug-trafficking has formed in Honduras and the Northern Triangle of Guatemala and El Salvador.

"Previous governments have not taken the right decisions to tackle this problem head on. So what happens? It's infiltrated and rooted itself in all the state institutions," Mr Renaud adds.

New technology equals lower crime?

But state institutions are, it seems, trying to change.

I pay a visit to the 911 National Emergency System which has installed all the cameras around the city and has been in operation since late September.



Luis Estrada is the director for San Pedro Sula. He shows me around the fancy new operations room linking up all the emergency and justice systems.

"We're becoming the eyes and the ears of the city and we have to use technology to the benefit of the people," he tells me.

"People complain a lot about violence and that the authorities don't react, so this project makes it easier for us to be able to react and try to combat crime in an organised and directed manner."

But speak to people in poorer neighbourhoods and they don't believe a word of it.

I visited Lopez Arellano, a poor neighbourhood on the outskirts of San Pedro Sula that has heavy gang presence and high levels of violence.

We drove in with our car windows down so people could see our faces.

We stopped at the bus depot which last year was the scene of a shooting that left at least eight people dead when drivers refused to pay what's known as "war tax" - basically extortion.



There, I met a driver whose brother was killed in that shooting. He did not want to be named.

"It's worse than before," he told me. "They came to get their money and nobody wanted to pay so there was a massacre. I carry on working here but I'm scared. The authorities don't do anything."

And that is part of the problem - impunity.



"This country doesn't really have a functioning justice system so we have a situation where impunity rates are 90% to 95%. Almost nobody gets convicted," says Salil Shetty, the Secretary-General of Amnesty International.

"People are in many cases more scared of the police than they are of the gangs. For ordinary people who are living in poverty and fleeing from violence, it's definitely got worse."

Marta, a mother of five, agrees. Her three sons have been killed in the past 14 years - two of them in gang-related violence.

"The president says violence has fallen X% but that's a lie. Violence continues," she tells me, adding that she fears for her daughters' lives.

On guard

On the other side of town, I visit the city's main public hospital, Mario Catarino Rivas.

Armed soldiers at the door are checking people's ID.

Hospital director Ledy Brizzio explains that the military has been in charge of hospital security for the past two years.



"The conditions, especially in terms of personal security, have improved greatly," she says.

"Before, there was lots of violence and insecurity within the hospital. There were assaults, robberies towards the staff. Now we don't see that anymore because security is under the control of the military."

While authorities are no doubt celebrating that Honduras is no longer in the headlines, the fact that the military is even needed in hospitals is worrying.

The country's president Juan Orlando Hernandez has got tough on organised crime - murder statistics certainly paint Honduras in a better light - but how do you accurately count the incidences of violence such as extortion or rape, in a country where impunity is high and most crimes go unreported?

It seems the reality, for many, is still no better than it was.

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By Rafael Romo and Nick Thompson, CNN

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Living in the world's murder capital 02:32

Story highlights

San Pedro Sula, Honduras, named murder capital of world for second straight year

Acapulco and Caracas come second and third, respectively, in Mexican think tank report

Residents say "murder capital of the world" label is hurting business and is undeserved

Honduras university says murder rate in San Pedro Sula actually higher than reported

It is nighttime as a pack of masked soldiers silently moves toward the front line of a deadly shootout between law enforcement officials and unknown men in a dimly lit Honduras neighborhood.

But the soldiers are too late to prevent the grisly scene that awaits them. One of their own is on the ground, seriously wounded. One of the attackers is dead, and three others have been shot.

"They didn't even say a word. They just pulled out their weapons and started shooting at our soldiers," army commander Carlos Rolando Discua said of the scene, which has become all too familiar in Honduras' second-largest city.

Discua oversees a unit of soldiers, often masked to protect their identities, who patrol the streets of San Pedro Sula, the so-called murder capital of the world.

Photos: Deadly violence grips Honduras

For the second straight year, San Pedro Sula, in northwest Honduras, has topped a list of the world's 50 most violent cities, with a rate of 169 intentional homicides per 100,000 inhabitants -- an average of more than three people every day.

The report, compiled by the Mexican think tank Citizen Council for Public Security, Justice and Peace, compared intentional homicide statistics around the world in 2012. The report does not include cities in the Middle East.

The sunny beach resort of Acapulco in Mexico ranked second on the group's list, followed by the Venezuelan capital of Caracas.

...gangs are pushing the problem south. Some of this criminal element has ended up in Honduras, where, like most Central American countries, law enforcement has few resources to fight it.

But city residents say that "murder capital of the world" is an undeserved label that is hurting local businesses.

There are only three morgues in Honduras, and one of them is in San Pedro Sula. Residents say that people who are murdered elsewhere and then taken to the city's morgue are being grouped into the city's crime statistics.

"All of the crimes that happen in northern Honduras are registered as happening here," businessman Luis Larach said. "So what we businessmen are doing is an accurate count to determine where crime or violent deaths originate so that the information is truthful."

The National Autonomous University of Honduras said that only people murdered in San Pedro Sula were tallied in the group's report - and that in fact the actual murder rate in the city is even higher.

The authors of the report defended their research on the group's website, writing: It "is not the ranking that damages the image of the city but the violence and the government's inability to contain and reduce it. To hide the problems never solves them."

Honduras is far from the only country in the region with a murder problem. The top 10 -- and 39 of 50 overall -- most violent cities on the list are Latin American.

Authorities have launched Operation Lightning in San Pedro Sula, saturating violence hotspots with police and soldiers, and some residents believe the beefed-up security is working.

"There's more security now," said local resident Nicolle Valladares. "And that gives us peace."

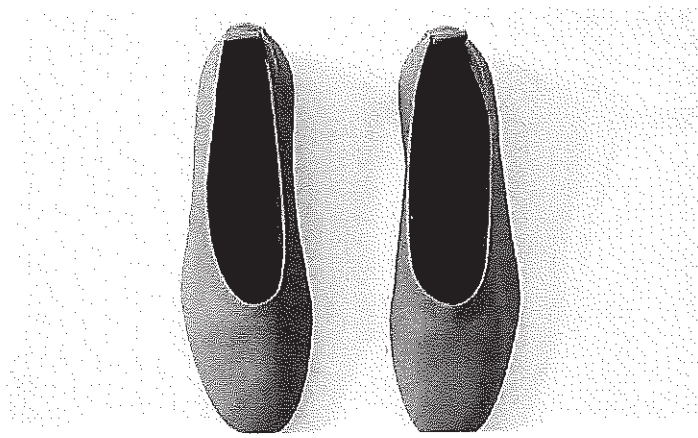
Unfortunately, at least so far, the measures seem to have had little impact on the murder rate.

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‘Someone Is Always Trying to Kill You’

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/04/05/opinion/honduras-women-murders.html>

CHOLOMA, HONDURAS APRIL 5, 2019

THE MURDER OF SHERILL YUBISSA HERNÁNDEZ MANCÍA explains why Central American women are fleeing north.

Ms. Hernández was a 28-year-old agent for the Agencia Técnica de Investigación Criminal, or ATIC, Honduras’s F.B.I., the agency charged with investigating the killings of women. She was having an affair with Wilfredo Garcia, who was the head of the agency’s office in San Pedro Sula, Honduras’s second-largest city. According to people involved in the case, at some point Ms. Hernández seems to have come to believe that instead of working to take down MS-13, the nation’s largest gang, her lover was married to the sister of an MS-13 leader, and was aiding the criminals.

On June 11, 2018, Ms. Hernández was found dead in her bed. Karla Beltrán, who works at the San Pedro Sula morgue, told me that in an unprecedented move, ATIC barred Forensic Medicine officials, along with the police and the prosecutor, from the crime scene. ATIC officials went alone and pronounced the death a suicide.

But when Ms. Hernández’s body arrived at the morgue, Ms. Beltrán and her colleague, América Gómez, saw the obvious. Yes, a bullet had shattered her cranium. Yes, photos taken by ATIC showed her lying on her bed, holding a pistol to her temple. But there was no gun residue on her hand. Her tongue was sticking out, and there was froth around her mouth, signs of asphyxiation. There were two marks under her chin, suggesting she had been strangled by someone expert in cutting off oxygen without leaving bruises. Blood had defied gravity; instead of flowing toward the back of her head, it had poured over the front of her pink pajama top and down shorts emblazoned with the word “love.” The crime scene photos showed that Ms. Hernández’s cellphone had changed location three times while the scene was being “investigated,” finally landing in a jar of water.

The morgue leaders announced that month that Ms. Hernández had been murdered. Soon after, they realized they were being followed and got multiple warnings that ATIC had a team of “sicarios” — assassins. In August, along with the director of Forensic Medicine, Semma Julissa Villanueva, and another colleague, they petitioned the Honduran government for protection and were assigned police officers to take them to and from work. But they still feel like sitting ducks. Dr. Villanueva has been granted a visa to travel to the United States, and Dr. Gómez and Ms. Beltrán have applied for asylum.

Mr. Garcia, who did not respond to a request for comment, has been reassigned to an administrative post pending an investigation into the death, said a spokesman for the Public Ministry in San Pedro Sula. Nearly 10 months later, no one has been charged. “We want to be emphatic and forceful that no one in ATIC belongs to a criminal group nor are they tied to the criminal acts you refer to,” the spokesman said.

‘Someone Is Always Trying to Kill You’

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/04/05/opinion/honduras-women-murders.html>

But Dr. Villanueva says she is afraid, adding that she is certain that Ms. Hernández “was executed and they are trying to cover it up.”



Police and soldiers investigating a crime scene on the outskirts of the López Arellano neighborhood of Choloma.

“It’s so rotten,” said Karol Bobadilla, the head of investigations for the nonprofit group Women’s Forum for Life in Honduras, when I met her at her office. How, she asked, can the leaders of an agency entrusted with investigating women’s deaths be killing women themselves?

“She was executed and they
are trying to cover it up.”

PRESIDENT TRUMP CALLS IMMIGRANTS “CRIMINALS” — drug dealers and rapists intent on plundering America. But the truth, as I saw so clearly over a month long reporting trip in Honduras, is that migrants are fleeing a society controlled by criminals.

President Trump keeps threatening to shut off the southern border to prevent Central Americans from crossing. On March 29 he announced he was halting aid to Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador — about \$450 million a year that we now spend on strengthening civil society and chipping away at the power of gangs and drug cartels.

‘Someone Is Always Trying to Kill You’

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Mick Mulvaney, the acting White House chief of staff, defended the decision by arguing that the money made little difference: “If it’s working so well, why are the people still coming?”

Well, some of them are coming because they don’t want to die. This is particularly true of women, who make up a greater proportion of border crossers every year.

This latest announcement comes on top of moves by the Trump administration to bar victims of domestic violence from applying for asylum. In June, Jeff Sessions, the attorney general at the time, sought to reverse a Board of Immigration Appeals decision from 2014 that added domestic violence to the list of horrors that could qualify someone for asylum. In December, a federal court ruled that he didn’t have the authority to do that. But the Trump administration has persisted and is appealing the decision.

It’s wrong to turn our backs on vulnerable women under any circumstances, but especially when they are coming from countries like Honduras, where the government is doing virtually nothing to protect them and is sometimes itself the predator.

Honduras is one of the world’s deadliest places to be a woman — a 2015 survey ranked it in the top five countries, with El Salvador and Syria. According to official statistics, 380 Honduran women were murdered last year (slightly fewer than in recent years), in a country with roughly the population of New York City. But no one believes the government’s numbers. The number of women who have “disappeared” continues to rise.

Unlike in much of the world, where most murdered women are killed by their husbands, partners or family members, half in Honduras are killed by drug cartels and gangs. And the ways they are being killed — shot in the vagina, cut to bits with their parts distributed among various public places, strangled in front of their children, skinned alive — have women running for the border.

Understanding what is going on in Honduras is crucial to understanding, and solving, what is going on at the United States border, where 268,044 migrants were stopped in the first five months of fiscal 2019, nearly twice as many as in the same period last year. A growing proportion — half — were families with children.

“They cut off everything. They strip them down, like they are a chicken.”

THE STATE OF CORTÉS is by far the worst.

Nearly one in three women murdered in Honduras in 2017 were killed here. And this city, Choloma, is probably the deadliest.

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At least 262,000 people live in Choloma, which sprawls across hills and rutted roads on both sides of Honduras’s main north-south freeway, a half-hour from Central America’s largest port. Starting in the 1980s it became a hub for tax-free industrial parks where American, Canadian and Korean textile factories produced products for Hanes, Fruit of the Loom, Nike and Adidas. Women streamed into Choloma for a rare commodity in Honduras — jobs.

It is also a hub for the drug trade; product moves through here on its way from Colombia to the United States. Most neighborhoods are controlled by gangs or criminal organizations — 18th Street, MS-13 or La Rumba, named after a disco in Choloma’s most troubled area, López Arellano. La Rumba has paid for trash pickup there, paved the main street (in part to enable faster getaways) and bribed the police. It also kills women. One night, a woman at La Rumba’s disco said it was nice but another club was nicer. She was found dead the next morning, shot in the mouth.

Last year, 23 women were murdered in Choloma; some say the toll is a third more. But it’s the growing cruelty with which women are killed that has most frightened women here.

It’s about machismo — the culture of which goes back to colonial times, when conquering Spaniards came without wives and treated the indigenous like slaves. Today, in a world ruled by gangs and narco groups, it’s about engendering maximum terror in your enemies, and you do that by showing how macabre you can be in the way you torture or kill. Honduras is locked in a war of grisly one-upmanship, and women’s bodies are the battlefield.

Melania Reyes, a leader of a women’s aid group called the Women’s Movement of the Neighborhood of López Arellano and Surroundings, has spent decades fighting against domestic violence but feels stunned by the new brutality. “They cut off everything,” she said. “They strip them down, like they are a chicken.”

Maria Luisa Regalado, the director of the Honduran Women’s Collective, another local group, told me, “What we are seeing in Choloma has never been seen before.”

“She didn’t let them. So they killed her.”

MEN, OF COURSE, STILL MAKE UP A VAST MAJORITY of murder victims, largely because they are more likely to be involved in gang conflicts or targeted for recruitment. But torture and mutilation aren’t as routine an aspect of these killings as they are for women.

Women and girls are also increasingly being recruited by gangs and criminal organizations to sell drugs in Honduras. An estimated two in 10 gang members in the San Pedro Sula area are now female, something unheard-of not long ago. The gangs

‘Someone Is Always Trying to Kill You’

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believe that men are more likely to buy drugs from a flirting woman and that the police are less likely to target her.

Some join willingly; since 2012 many of Choloma’s factories have left for lower labor costs in Nicaragua, and people are desperate for work. There’s such a glut of workers that factories advertise they won’t hire anyone over 35.



Buses ferry workers to and from their jobs at a clothing factory in Choloma.

Others are forced into it. Girls tell Ms. Reyes they are warned, “If you don’t get into it, we will break you.”

But they are broken anyway. They are killed for not meeting drug sales quotas, for not paying back money they owe to the cartel, for spurning the advances of a criminal or because they are the girlfriends of criminals who tire of them. “They see women as property,” Ms. Regalado said.

Of the 115 women killed in Choloma between 2013 and Oct. 2018, half were 20 or younger, according to the Violence Observatory.

Ms. Reyes ticked off some of the girls murdered in López Arellano last year: a 14-year-old who sold lottery tickets and was abducted by a drug seller who raped her and shot her in the head five times; two 15-year-olds killed by MS-13 gangsters when they resisted an order to sell drugs; two 17-year-old cousins whose breasts and buttocks were cut off before 18th Street gangsters shot them in the head.

‘Someone Is Always Trying to Kill You’

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Katherine Nicolle Bonilla Carranza, just 14 years old, was another victim. She is buried under an almond tree in a cemetery near the apartment of her mother, Norma Adelí Carranza. Ms. Carranza sobbed as she described what happened on Dec. 19, 2017. Nicolle had been helping her mother wash clothes. She said she would be back in 10 minutes; she just wanted to chat with her friends at the corner. “Be careful,” Ms. Carranza told her. She was shot five times in the head right next to the Catholic church down the street, probably by gangsters. “They wanted to take her,” she told me, her face contorted by grief. “She didn’t let them. So they killed her.”



Denis Daniel Flores Carranza, 9, at the grave of his sister, Katherine Nicolle Bonilla Carranza, who was murdered in 2017.

**“Do I have to bring you a corpse
for you to actually do your job?”**

SOMETIMES THE DEATHS HAVE NOTHING TO DO with the gangs. But the impunity for violent men is the same.

Heidy Hernandez’s husband, Marcio Amilcar Mateo, was an alcoholic and a control freak. She says she needed his permission to even step outside their home. After he slashed her lip with a broken rum bottle, she says, her sister insisted she report the abuse to the Choloma police, but they did nothing. “Do I have to bring you a corpse for you to actually do your job?” her sister said to them.

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According to Ms. Hernandez’s account, Mr. Amilcar made \$81 a week and brought home less than that. One night, the cupboards bare, she slipped out to get food at her aunt’s a few blocks away. She ran into her husband, drunk. “You dog!,” he said. “Begging food from strangers!” He locked his wife inside and ordered her, their 3-year-old son, and their 6- and 7-year-old daughters to their knees.

He grasped Ms. Hernandez’s hair, yanked her head back and put his machete to her throat. “I’m going to kill you and your children,” he said. “If you aren’t with me, you won’t be with anyone.” He finally put the blade away with a warning: Don’t go to the police.

One day she got home half an hour late from her father’s house. “Who were you with?” he demanded. He pulled the machete out from under their bed and swung the blade into the back of her legs. One of their daughters, Nadia Mabel, then 8, started screaming: “Papa! Don’t kill her!”

At 28, Ms. Hernandez awoke from surgery with her right leg amputated below the knee. Most of her left foot was gone. Her heart had stopped twice.



Heidy Hernandez lost her feet and part of her right leg after her husband attacked her with a machete.

Mr. Amilcar, who had swung his machete into his wife’s legs 10 times, was charged with inflicting “light lesions,” carrying a sentence of 15 years. Only after their oldest daughter visited him in jail, and heard him vow, “When I get out I’m going to kill her,” did a judge add attempted femicide charges and tack on 20 more years.

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“My dad took off her feet,” Nadia Mabel told me, nervously. “I thought he was going to kill her.”

“You like getting hit, don’t you?”

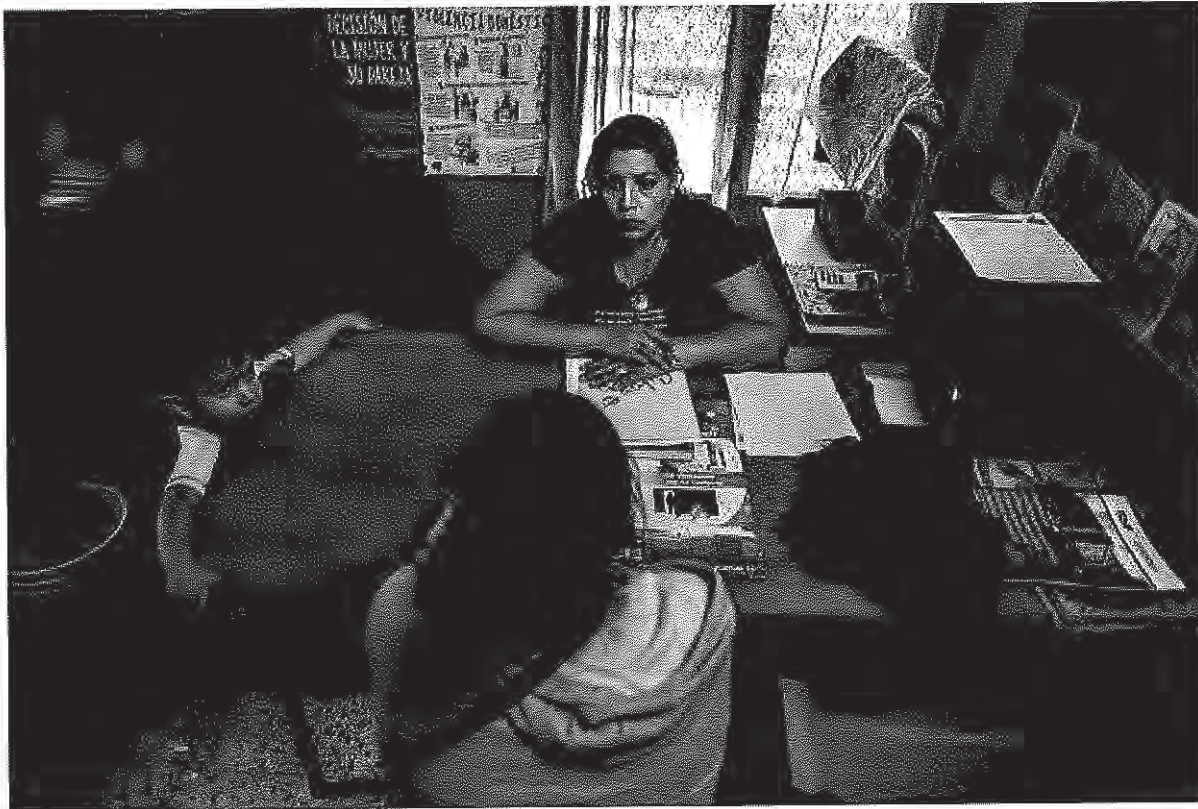
IN 2013 THE HONDURAN GOVERNMENT PASSED A LAW imposing harsher sentences for femicides — gender-motivated killings in which the perpetrator was a partner, a family member, an ex, or had committed domestic violence; in which sex preceded the death; or in which the victim’s body was degraded or mutilated. The label can increase a homicide sentence to 30 or 40 years. But almost no one is actually charged with femicide. The Violence Observatory says that more than 60 percent of women’s murders are femicides, but the charge has been used only 33 times — during a period when 1,569 women and girls died violently.

Domestic violence laws, which didn’t exist here until 1997, also remain weak. Beating someone the first time is a “fault,” not a crime. A court or prosecutor’s office can issue restraining orders for up to six months, but the police largely don’t enforce them. Sometimes the police are so afraid to even go to a violent neighborhood that they tell the woman she has to serve her abuser the restraining order on her own. If you put a machete to your wife’s throat, all the police can do is lock you up for 24 hours, and they often don’t even do that on weekends, said Saida Martinez, a leader of the López Arellano women’s group.

Choloma women are asking for help: Each year, about 1,400 seek out the Choloma Women’s Office, a city agency that helps women with their domestic violence cases, and another 500 go directly to Choloma’s courts. Some 5,000 went to San Pedro Sula’s four judges last year for domestic violence issues.

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Melania Reyes speaking with a woman seeking help at the Women's Movement of the Neighborhood of López Arellano and Surroundings.

But their first recourse, the police, are often less than helpful. Women tell me some of their responses: You like getting hit, don't you? Why don't you resolve it between your bedsheets? Maybe you didn't give him what he needed last night? "They mock them," Ms. Reyes said.

Elena García, who is 38, asked me not to use her full name. She told me what happened to one of her friends three years ago, after she went to the police, covered in bruises. She got a restraining order against her partner and was told to deliver it herself. She disappeared that day and was later found burned, inside a bag, on the banks of the Chamelecón River.

Last Jan. 27, Norma Lilian Ávila Hernández, a 29-year-old hair and makeup stylist, had an argument with her husband, Hugo Daniel Cruz Cabrera, 38, over her wearing makeup. According to Ms. Beltrán at the morgue, who also worked on this case, he grabbed a machete and started to cut grass around their home, looking at her menacingly. Ms. Ávila went to her local police station. Two officers were dispatched to look into her case, but they ignored their orders. When she returned to her house, her husband strangled her to death, police officials said. There is a warrant out for his arrest.

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Women like her have no place to hide: There are no domestic violence shelters in Choloma or nearby San Pedro Sula. The nearest is a six-hour bus ride away.

**“That man is free, he will kill us all,
and the authorities will do nothing.”**

EVEN AFTER THEY ARE KILLED, most women don’t get any justice. Nine in 10 murders of women never go to court or result in a sentence. Nearly half of these murders happened in public.

Glenis Vanessa Ramirez Hercules was 17 when she met Jairo Mauricio Claro Burgos, and 26 when he killed her, her family says. He was with 18th Street, and though he beat her, she didn’t trust the police to help. Mr. Claro had a cousin on the Choloma police force, and most of the officers were too afraid to even enter the neighborhood, Ms. Ramirez’s aunt, Danelia Hercules, told me. When they drive here, they’re always blaring their sirens or honking their horns, she said. “It’s like they are announcing to the gangs: We’re coming!”

Eventually Ms. Ramirez moved out and rented her own room nearby, but one night, on Oct. 30, 2016, she returned to find her husband waiting.

A local drug addict later told Ms. Hercules that Mr. Claro had strangled Ms. Ramirez in front of their three young sons. He broke her legs so that he could stuff her into a nylon bag used to sell dried corn. Two neighbors heard her cry for help, but the owner of the house said he thought it was just another fight, and all were afraid to call the authorities.

Ms. Ramirez’s family noticed she was missing the next day. They believe Mr. Claro hauled the sack out Sunday night and left it, covered in grass and trash, on the side of the road a few blocks away. On Monday, their boys told their father that some were accusing him of killing their mother. Mr. Claro bolted. That’s when the eldest, who was 9, dared to tell another aunt that he had been warned by his father that if he told anyone what he had witnessed, he would “do to me what he did to my mom.”

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Irma Rosa Hercules's daughter Glenis was 26 when she was murdered by her husband.

When Ms. Ramirez's mother went to file a missing-person report, she said she learned that Mr. Claro's father had already gone to the police, to report that his son had confessed the murder to him.

Tuesday morning a young man collecting firewood found the 110-pound sack with Ms. Ramirez's decomposing body.

At a family wake that night, someone spotted Mr. Claro lurking nearby, and two dozen men gathered their guns and machetes to kill him, because they were sure the police would not pursue him. But he escaped.

Denis Ávila Maradiaga, head of the homicide unit at the Directorate for Police Investigations in San Pedro Sula, told me the police had put out an order to arrest Mr. Claro. But Ms. Ramirez's mother said "they did nothing to find him."

Mr. Claro has been spotted over the past two years in the nearby 18th Street strongholds of Japón and Kilómetro. Ms. Hercules shook with anger when she told me "that man is free, he will kill us all, and the authorities will do nothing." When I spoke with her this week, she said she saw him again in February. She is so frightened, she is thinking of leaving for the United States.

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Jose Daniel Sandivar Rios near the place where the discovery of Glenis Hercules was made. He was there when she was found.

“There’s a lack of interest in doing the work.”

WOMEN’S MURDERS AREN’T INVESTIGATED OR PROSECUTED because of a toxic stew of corruption, incompetence, and a lack of both resources and interest.

A 2018 study of cases in San Pedro Sula found that more than 96 percent of women’s murders go unpunished. The prosecutor’s office blamed this largely on family members being afraid to testify — in a place where you can buy a hit on a person for \$50 and no one believes the police can or will protect them. Of 783 killings of women in Cortés between 2013 and 2018, prosecutors here say that just 17 percent have begun a court process and an estimated 12 percent will get a verdict — statistics they trot out as an improvement.

“Government entities work with police and narcos and gangs to hide cases sometimes,” said Belinda Domínguez, the coordinator of Choloma’s Women’s Office. She described prosecutors purposefully losing files or slow-walking cases, and corrupt cops tipping off accused criminals as soon as a complaint is filed. Prosecutors who actually did their jobs have ended up dead.

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A worker at the San Pedro Sula morgue said he was offered \$16,300 to change an autopsy report. Criminal organizations pay the police to look the other way, to help them get out of jail when they are arrested and to even kill for them.

Two years ago, a Choloma police officer who was also working as a sicario killed a 20-year-old woman who had refused a narco’s advances. Four months later, the narcos paid to have the officer murdered, to cover their tracks, Virginia Marta Velásquez, the founder of the López Arellano women’s group, told me.



Residents of Choloma making their way past the headquarters of the Women’s Movement of the Neighborhood of López Arellano and Surroundings.

In 2017, in Choloma’s Cerro Verde neighborhood, a bus company was refusing to pay an extortion “tax” to the 18th Street gang. The bus stop was always guarded by the police. One night, several people told me, the police abandoned the stop and eight bus riders were gunned down. The bus company now pays the tax.

“There’s a lack of interest in doing the work,” said Ms. Domínguez, who has an image of the North Star on the wall of her cramped office. The morgue does an autopsy and an investigation, but four out of five times, according to employees at the San Pedro Sula morgue, their report isn’t even picked up by prosecutors. Forensic Medicine has the

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ability to lift fingerprints from the nylon bags in which women are so often disposed, but the person who would do the test cannot recall police investigators ever requesting one. Last November, when Choloma’s Women’s Office held a training, funded partly by U.S.A.I.D., about how to better handle domestic violence, the police were invited but didn’t come, Ms. Domínguez said.

“I saw a demon in his eyes.”

AS A RESULT, MOST ADVANCES FOR ABUSED WOMEN in Choloma have come through nonprofit groups whose leaders risk their lives to teach women their rights and find workarounds to government inaction.

At the offices of the Women’s Movement of the Neighborhood of López Arellano and Surroundings, a steady stream of women arrive each day to ask for help with domestic violence claims or child support.

Ms. Velásquez, a regal mother of nine with short black hair, founded the group in 1992. She got into organizing after a Belgian labor rights organizer she washed clothes for suggested she attend a women’s meeting in the capitol. She and a friend ended up training for a year in women’s legal rights. Then they began training other women — about self-esteem, sex education and the cycle of domestic violence (he hits you, he brings roses, he hits you).

Long before there were any domestic violence laws, Ms. Velásquez and her friend would knock on the doors of abusers. “We are the authorities to stop domestic violence! If you don’t cut it out, we will put you in jail!” they would shout. It often worked. Ms. Velásquez marched through the streets with a bullhorn: “We want to notify women that if your husband is hitting you, come put in a report.”

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Virginia Marta Velásquez, one of the founders of the López Arellano's women's group, doing needlework at the office.

Men called them sick and crazy. They said a foreigner had brainwashed them. They barred their wives from coming to meetings. And worse. In 1996, the wife of a police officer was stabbed to death in front of her 4-year-old daughter after she put in a domestic violence complaint at the group's office. In 2002, another abusive husband poured gasoline on his own house and lit a match with his wife and three children sleeping inside (they woke up and escaped in time).

Nonetheless, the women kept coming. The group helped provide 50,000 signatures to prod Honduras's congress to pass the 1997 domestic violence law. It helps women fill out forms to take to the police or courts asking for an arrest or temporary restraining order. It lobbied for funding for a walking bridge over the freeway, potable water, a kindergarten. It has provided documents to women applying for asylum in the United States. Today it has 680 members.

The group reels nervous women in by teaching them how to make things they can sell, like crocheted tablecloths. Ms. Martinez, one of the leaders, talks to women about looking at themselves naked, loving their bodies, while they crochet. Almost every surface of her house, including the toilet and the stove, is covered in doilies.

“Women were afraid to talk, to express themselves,” Ms. Martinez said. “Now they talk.”

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She also says that domestic abuse has declined. In the early 1990s, an estimated seven in 10 men beat their wives in the area; now it's two or three of 10, she said. But the murders — they keep happening.



Virginia Marta Velásquez, a mother of nine, founded the women's group in 1992.

Zoila Lagos, one of the group's founders, now runs another women's organization in a nearby neighborhood. The night I visited her, she was trying to keep Rosa Concepción Castellano Coello alive.

Ms. Castellano's husband, a 230-pound private security guard, had been beating her for 19 years, Ms. Castellano told us. The night before, he had squeezed her throat and lifted her off the ground. He was on crack, Ms. Castellano said, which always makes him more aggressive, and he was angry that she wouldn't let his lover move in.

When the youngest of their three children, 4-year-old José Daniel, ran into the street for help, Ms. Castellano ran after him. Her husband followed, put the muzzle of his gun against her forehead and said, "I'm going to kill you, bitch," before firing four shots next to her and their son's feet. "I saw a demon in his eyes," she told us. For the first time, she felt he might finish her off.

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Ms. Lagos had helped her get a restraining order, but the authorities wouldn't deliver it until the next day. Ms. Lagos urged her not to go home. "I'm afraid he will kill you," she said. "We will follow your case and help you." But Ms. Castellano doesn't trust the authorities to do anything. She wondered whether her only real chance at safety was to leave in the next caravan north.

**“Just because you are a woman,
you feel hatred. Like someone
is always trying to kill you.”**

EVERYONE IN CHOLOMA KNOWS ABOUT THE WOMAN who was skinned alive here in June 2017.

Edelsa Muñoz Nuñez, 47, lives in an apartment near the two murder victims, Irma Quintero López, 21, and Dunia Xiomara Murillo Reyes, 34. They were tortured and killed in their home, most likely by gang members. They peeled the skin from Ms. Murillo's legs. "Like you skin a pig," Ms. Muñoz told me, shaking.

The women's body parts were found strewn around — the feet in one place, the heads in another. One torso was missing. Although four MS-13 members were arrested, the suspected ringleader of the crime remains at large.

Now Ms. Muñoz leaves her home only to buy food or go to work. On her \$285-a-month salary, she can afford to take public transportation only one way, in the morning, when the mototaxi fares are half-price. At night she has to walk through a neighborhood where MS-13 and La Rumba are battling for control.

Ms. Muñoz says the police blame murder victims for going out to drink a beer, or wearing short skirts. "Why don't they do their work and actually investigate?" she demanded. "The government has to care."

"When we go out, we don't know if we will come home," said Ms. Regalado of the Honduran Women's Collective. Even as an outsider visiting Choloma for two weeks, I came to understand that deeply. One night, a teenager was shot dead on the street a block away from me. One of seven colleagues at my driver's taxi stop was murdered while I was in town.

Ms. Garcia, the woman whose friend was killed, has been gang-raped not once but twice in her 38 years. When she was 13, someone drugged her drink at a wedding and she was discovered a dozen hours later in a garbage dump, naked, unconscious, bound at the feet and hands, teeth marks and bruises all over her body. She became pregnant with her

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now 23-year-old daughter. She says the police never investigated anyone at the wedding to determine who kidnapped her.

Then, on July 16, 2013, she was walking home at 4 p.m. from a meeting at her children’s school in Choloma when two men with black masks materialized in the drizzle. “Too bad you passed by the wrong place at the wrong time,” one of them said, throwing her to the ground. They dragged her into tall grass and, with one holding a machete to her throat, took turns raping her from behind.

For six months, she washed her body with bleach to try to remove the stain of the trauma. She later heard that the same thing had happened to another woman in the same spot. Last year, she went to the police to ask about her case, but she says she was told they were closing it without charging anyone. “I am in constant fear,” Ms. Garcia said. “I leave my house, but I never know if I will return. Just because you are a woman, you feel hatred. Like someone is always trying to kill you.”

“I don’t want that to happen to me.”

SO WHAT CAN BE DONE?

The United States cannot erect a wall and expect women to resign themselves to stay put in Honduras and be slaughtered.

President Trump’s plan to cut off foreign aid is exactly the wrong thing to do. We could use that money to fund programs like sex education in schools, which can help break the cycle of domestic abuse, in which children who witness abuse grow up to become abusers. We could use it as a bargaining chip to force reforms. Some Honduran women’s groups have suggested that the United States, as a condition for its aid, require that Honduras commit a percentage of its budget to holding abusers and killers accountable.

Government workers who don’t do their jobs should be fired; those on the take should be fired. The rot starts at the top, with Honduras’s president, Juan Orlando Hernández. The Organization of American States questioned the validity of his 2017 election and his brother, Tony, was arrested last year by the United States for “large-scale” drug trafficking. Instead of accepting him, the United States should push for a change in leadership.

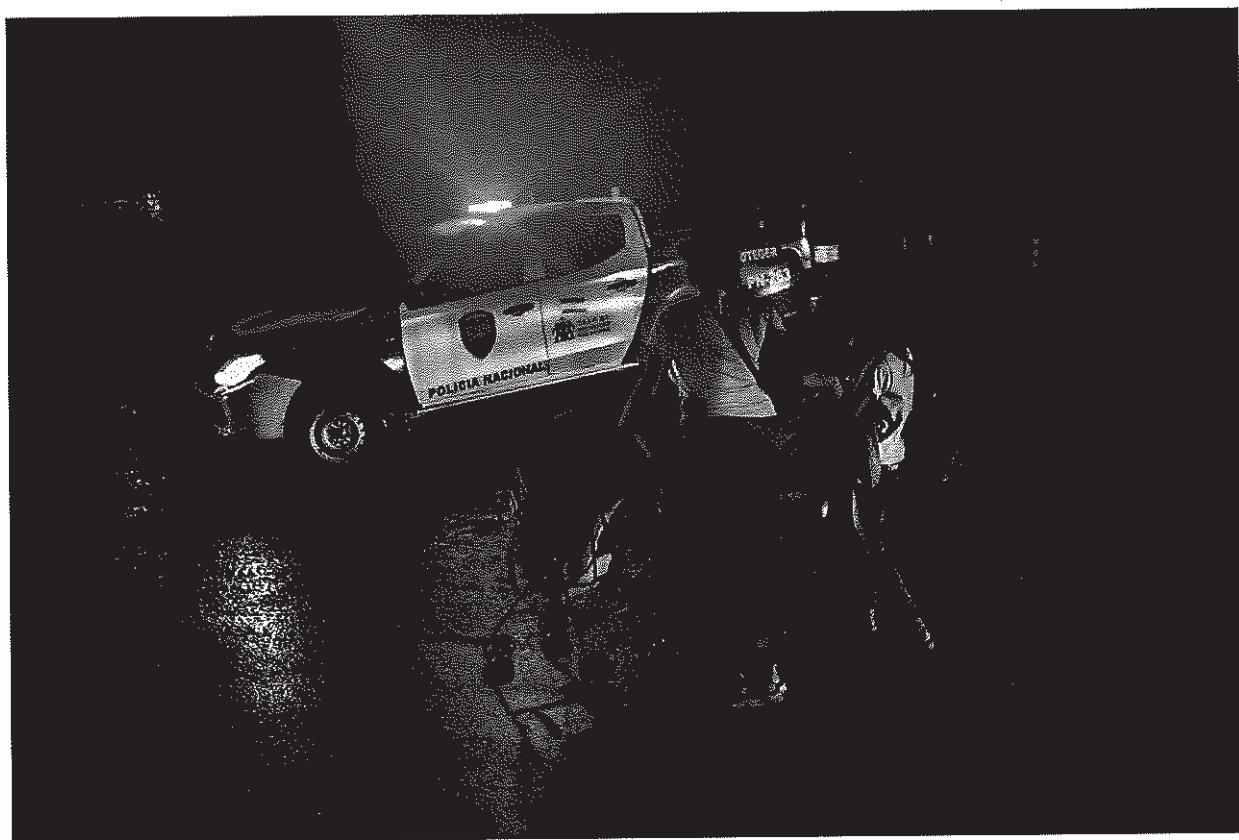
Cutting off the border and trying to stop victims of domestic violence from applying for asylum are even greater mistakes. During World War II, the United States blocked a ship with hundreds of Jewish refugees from docking at our shores, sending many back to their deaths. After the war, the United States declared “never again” and became a leader in the modern-day refugee movement. This is at the core of who we are: We don’t send people who arrive at our borders back to die. We incorporated that ideal into international treaties and our own immigration laws.

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If we turn our backs now on Central American women who are running for their lives, we will be failing to meet the lowest possible bar for human rights. These women are being targeted just for being women. They are fleeing countries where the government does little to protect them and is sometimes even complicit in the killings.

Whatever the Trump administration says, the women are not criminals; they are victims. And we are perfectly capable of saving their lives. In the last fiscal year, 97,728 migrants had a credible-fear interview, the first step in the asylum process for people who fear being returned to their own country. Only a small percentage will ultimately be approved. There is no public breakdown on asylum applications by gender, but if even half of those were domestic violence cases, it would be an entirely manageable number of people for one of the richest countries in the world to take in.



Honduran migrants joined a caravan for a journey to the United States in January.

For now, women keep running.

At 9 p.m. on Jan. 14, at a bus terminal in San Pedro Sula, I watched one of the latest caravans leave for the United States. It was pouring rain but they couldn't afford to wait for morning; police officers were arriving, and the migrants were afraid of being detained.

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They went on foot down the dark road north, about 1,500 people, pushing carry-on luggage, strollers, a shopping cart, carrying babies in their arms.

Lilian Johann Mercado Sorian, who is 26, stopped to let her 7-year-old daughter, Andrea Johana Bardales Mercado, sleep for a bit under an empty food stand along the road. There was much pressing her and her husband to leave Honduras, she said: no stable jobs, the rising cost of food, corruption, the fact they lived in a shack.

But at the top of her list was a neighbor who once sold Ms. Mercado sandals. That neighbor was raped and murdered three weeks earlier. She had been kidnapped and cut up with a machete. The police had laughed at her husband when he reported his wife missing. They told him she had probably run off with another man.

“I am afraid,” Ms. Mercado said, pressing forward into the night. “I don’t want that to happen to me.”

Sonia Nazario is the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of “Enrique’s Journey: The Story of a Boy’s Dangerous Odyssey to Reunite With His Mother” and a board member of Kids in Need of Defense.

Victor J. Blue is a freelance photographer based in New York City. His panoramic photographs of the destroyed cities of Raqqa, Syria, and Mosul, Iraq, are currently on view at the Bronx Documentary Center.