

Hillary's Link to Honduran Violence

Little mentioned in the Democratic campaign is Hillary Clinton's role in supporting a 2009 coup in Honduras that contributed to a human rights crisis, including the recent murder of a renowned environmental activist, writes Marjorie Cohn.

By Marjorie Cohn

A critical difference between Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton is their position on whether children who fled violence in Central American countries, particularly Honduras, two years ago should be allowed to stay in the United States or be returned.

Sen. Sanders states unequivocally that they should be able to remain in the U.S. Former Secretary of State Clinton disagrees. She would guarantee them "due process," but nothing more. In 2014, Clinton told CNN's Christiane Amanpour, "It may be safer [for the children to remain in the U.S.]," but "they should be sent back."

By supporting the June 28, 2009 coup d'état in Honduras when she was secretary of state, Clinton helped create the dire conditions that caused many of these children to flee. And the assassination of legendary Honduran human rights leader Berta Cáceres earlier this month can be traced indirectly to Clinton's policies.

During the Feb. 11 Democratic debate in Milwaukee, Clinton said that sending the children back would "send a message." In answer to a question by debate moderator Judy Woodruff of PBS, she said, "Those children needed to be processed appropriately, but we also had to send a message to families and communities in Central America not to send their children on this dangerous journey in the hands of smugglers."

Sanders retorted, "Who are you sending a message to? These are children who are leaving countries and neighborhoods where their lives are at stake. That was the fact. I don't think we use them to send a message. I think we welcome them into this country and do the best we can to help them get their lives together."

In the March 9 debate in Miami between the two Democratic candidates, Sanders accurately told moderator Jorge Ramos of Univision, "Honduras and that region of the world may be the most violent region in our hemisphere. Gang lords, vicious people torturing people, doing horrible things to families."

He added, "Children fled that part of the world to try, try, try, try, maybe, to

meet up with their family members in this country, taking a route that was horrific, trying to start a new life.”

The violence in Honduras can be traced to a history of U.S. economic and political meddling, including Clinton’s support of the coup, according to American University professor Adrienne Pine, author of *Working Hard, Drinking Hard: On Violence and Survival in Honduras*.

Pine, who has worked for many years in Honduras, told Dennis Bernstein of KPFA radio in 2014 that the military forces that carried out the coup were trained at the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (formerly called the U.S. Army School of the Americas) in Fort Benning, Georgia. Although the coup was supported by the United States, it was opposed by the United Nations and the Organization of American States (OAS). The U.N. and the OAS labeled President Manuel Zelaya’s ouster a military coup.

“Hillary Clinton was probably the most important actor in supporting the coup [against the democratically elected Zelaya] in Honduras,” Pine noted. It took the United States two months to even admit that Honduras had suffered a coup, and it never did admit it was a military coup. That is, most likely, because the Foreign Assistance Act prohibits the U.S. from aiding a country “whose duly elected head of government is deposed by military coup or decree.”

Although the U.S. government eventually cut nonhumanitarian aid to Honduras, the State Department under Clinton took pains to clarify that this was not an admission that a military coup had occurred.

“Hillary Clinton played a huge role in propping up the coup administration,” Pine said. “The State Department ensured the coup administration would remain in place through negotiations that they imposed, against the OAS’ wish, and through continuing to provide aid and continuing to recognize the coup administration.”

“And so if it weren’t for Hillary Clinton,” Pine added, “basically there wouldn’t be this refugee crisis from Honduras at the level that it is today. And Hondurans would be living a very different reality from the tragic one they are living right now.”

In her book *Hard Choices*, Clinton admitted she helped ensure that Zelaya would not be returned to the presidency. She wrote, “In the subsequent days [following the coup] I spoke with my counterparts around the hemisphere, including Secretary [Patricia] Espinosa in Mexico. We strategized on a plan to restore order in Honduras and ensure that free and fair elections could be held quickly and legitimately, which would render the question of Zelaya moot.”

When he was deposed, Zelaya was attempting to get a nonbinding resolution on the

ballot asking voters whether they wished to reform the constitution. He supported a 60 percent hike in the minimum wage, “and this infuriated two U.S. companies, Chiquita Brands International (formerly United Fruit) and Dole Food Company,” said John Perkins, author of *The New Confessions of an Economic Hit Man*, in an interview with the website Truthout. The big corporations feared that a rise in Honduras’ minimum wage could spread to other countries in Latin America.

Zelaya put in place several liberal policies, including free education and meals for children, subsidies to small farmers, lower interest rates and free electricity.

“These policies paid off,” Perkins said. “Honduras enjoyed a nearly 10 percent decline in the poverty level. But these same policies were seen as a dire threat to the hegemony and bottom lines of global corporations and as a precedent that would alter policies throughout Latin America and much of the rest of the world. Corporate leaders demanded that the CIA take out this democratically elected president. It did.”

Less than a month after the coup, Hugo Llorens, former U.S. ambassador to Honduras, sent a cable to Clinton and other top U.S. officials. The subject line read: “Open and Shut: The Case of the Honduran Coup.” The cable said, “There is no doubt” that the coup was “illegal and unconstitutional.” Nevertheless, as noted above, Clinton’s objective was to “render the question of Zelaya moot.”

After the coup, there was a fraudulent election financed by the National Endowment for Democracy – notorious for meddling in Latin America – and the State Department. The election ushered in a repressive, militarized regime. Conditions deteriorated, leading to the exodus of thousands of Honduran children.

Since the coup, the Honduran government has carried out systematic repression against most sectors of society, including teachers, farmers, union leaders, gays, peasant organizers, journalists and anyone who opposed the coup. Many were assassinated. Honduras’ homicide rate was already the highest in the world at the time of coup, and it soared between then and 2011. There is rampant corruption and drug-related gang violence.

Amid all this, the United States has added two military bases in Honduras – bringing the total to 14 – and increased its financing of the Honduran police and military.

Before the coup, Cáceres, a prize-winning activist, worked with indigenous groups on human rights and education issues with Zelaya’s support. In a 2014

interview, she cited Clinton's role in the coup, saying, "The same Hillary Clinton, in her book 'Hard Choices,' practically said what was going to happen in Honduras. This demonstrates the bad legacy of North American influence in our country."

Cáceres added, "The return of Mel Zelaya to the presidency (that is, to his constitutionally elected position) was turned into a secondary concern. There were going to be elections. ... We warned that this would be very dangerous. ... The elections took place under intense militarism, and enormous fraud."

Cáceres criticized the coup government for passing terrorist and intelligence laws that criminalized protest, labeling the actions "counterinsurgency" conducted in the interests of "international capital."

Cáceres was killed March 3 by armed men who broke into her home. Her friend and compatriot, journalist Gustavo Castro Soto, wounded in the assault, is being held incommunicado by the government.

On Thursday, more than 200 human rights, faith-based, indigenous rights, environmental, labor and nongovernmental groups sent an open letter to U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, expressing "shock and deep sorrow regarding the murder of Honduran human rights and environmental defender Berta Cáceres ... winner of the prestigious 2015 Goldman Environmental Prize."

The groups urged Kerry to support an independent international investigation into her murder led by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. They also urged the State Department "to suspend all assistance and training to Honduran security forces, with the exception of investigatory and forensic assistance to the police, so long as the murders of Berta Cáceres and scores of other Honduran activists remain in impunity."

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