

Over the past decade, Honduras has become one of the most dangerous places in the world. In 2013 the country recorded the highest global murder rate, with 79 homicides per 100,000 residents.¹ Honduras has one of the most unequal income distributions and some of the highest under-employment and dropout rates in Latin America, all contributing factors to the rise of street gangs and the recent surge in emigration to the United States. The violence, concentrated in cities and along its border with Guatemala, can largely be attributed to three factors: the international drug trade, gangs and weak security and justice institutions.

In 2009, a military coup that toppled elected leftist President Manuel Zelaya exacerbated existing instability and caused security and human rights to deteriorate further.

The country is now a haven for organized crime while killings and other violent crimes largely go unpunished. Security forces are notorious for their involvement in death squads, extortion and the drug trade, while journalists and human rights advocates are routinely targeted. Nearly all of Honduras' political, judicial and security institutions have been compromised by crime, which has allowed the country to become a key trafficking hub for drugs destined for the United States.

From 2008 to 2014, the United States provided well over \$114 million in security assistance to Honduras to fight drug trafficking and improve citizen security. However, the U.S. Congress has withheld assistance several times and been reticent to increase security funding due to the abounding corruption and lack of political will to reform institutions.

The State Department's 2013 Human Rights Report highlighted the "unlawful and arbitrary killings by security forces, organized criminal elements, and others" and the "corruption, intimidation, and institutional weakness of the justice system leading to widespread impunity," in the country.²

QUICK FACTS



POPULATION (2014): 8,598,561
PER CAPITA GDP (2013): \$4,800
MEDIAN AGE (2014): 21.9 years
SIZE OF ARMED FORCES (2013): 12,000
DEFENSE EXPENDITURE (2013): \$230 million
CORRUPTION PERCEPTIONS INDEX (2013): 140 out of 177



Main Security Challenges

DRUG TRAFFICKING ORGANIZATIONS (DTOS): By the mid-2000s, as U.S. counternarcotics efforts made it difficult for drug traffickers to move product directly from the Andes to the Caribbean or Mexico, major Mexican crime syndicates spread operations into ungoverned spaces in Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador. Traffickers began to move contraband by plane or boat to the isthmus and then overland through Guatemala and Mexico. In 2012, the U.S. State Department estimated at least 40 percent of cocaine that reached the United States passed through Honduras.³ Illegal firearms flow as readily through the country as drugs, with guns from the United States moving south and arms from local military and police arsenals circulating in the domestic black market. Colombian and Mexican criminal organizations maintain relationships with powerful Honduran criminal groups, like the Valle Valle clan and Los Cachiros, who manage most of the underworld activities in the country. These groups operate relatively freely, particularly near the porous, sparsely populated northern border with Guatemala where there is little state presence. DTOs have penetrated Honduran security and political institutions and rely on their weakness and corruption to enable operations.

GANGS: While larger drug trafficking organizations share a role in the bloodshed, it is rivalries between urban street gangs, primarily the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Barrio 18, that underlie the astronomical spike in violence. These gangs have little connection with the international drug trade but engage in kidnapping, bribery, theft, local drug trafficking, murder for hire, extortion and retributive killings. They violently battle to maintain control of urban neighborhoods, smuggling networks and prisons, where jailed leaders continue to control outside operations. Gang violence has been one of the primary drivers behind the surge in migration to the United States from Honduras, the country of origin for over 18,000 unaccompanied minors apprehended at the border in FY2014.⁴ The U.S. government practice of deporting thousands of Hondurans with criminal records, which began in the 1990s, has only fueled the growth of these gangs.

MILITARIZATION OF DOMESTIC SECURITY: Since the early 2000s Honduras has increasingly militarized domestic security, upped drug interdiction operations and overpopulated an already overwhelmed, underfunded and violent prison system with alleged gang members.⁵ After the 2009 coup, Honduras' military took an even more prominent role in internal politics and policing. In 2011, despite the Honduran military's long history of human rights violations, Honduras' Congress reformed the constitution to allow the military to carry out

policing duties, such as arrests and searches. In 2013, it merged the ministries of Defense and Security and soon thereafter created an elite military police unit, the Military Police of Public Order (PMOP or *Policía Militar del Orden Público*). During his campaign, President Juan Orlando Hernández pledged to "put a soldier on every street corner," and since taking office in January 2014 has presided over several deployments of soldiers and expanded the PMOP.⁶ This militarization has threatened human rights and diverted resources away from civilian police operations and reforms while crime and violence levels have remained high.

SECURITY FORCE CAPACITY, CORRUPTION AND ABUSE:

Corruption in Honduras' military and police forces runs deep with near-complete impunity. Members from both institutions have been linked to organized crime, acts of bribery, extortion, robbery, kidnapping, torture, drug and arms trafficking, death squads and other criminal operations. One study found police officers committed 149 homicides in 2011 and 2012,⁷ while a 2013 investigation found evidence of police involvement in the disappearance or murder of at least five suspected gang members.⁸ The National Police also have weak criminal investigation skills and receive scant resources, low pay and inadequate equipment, rendering the institution largely ineffective. Despite having one of the largest security budgets in Central America, Honduras still has the lowest police per capita ratios in the region at 142 officers per 100,000 (the regional average is 268 per 100,000).⁹ The police complete only about 20 percent of investigations requested by the Public Ministry.¹⁰

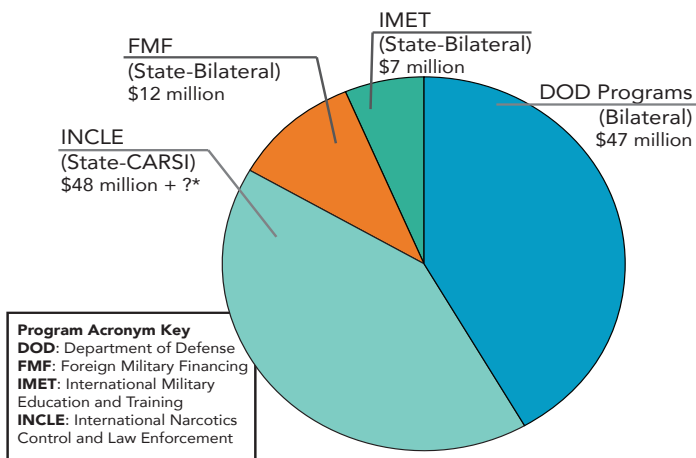
U.S. Security Assistance

U.S. security assistance to Honduras has focused on reducing drug trafficking and violence. Bilateral security assistance to Honduras significantly increased from \$3.5 million to \$11.8 million between FY 2006 and FY 2007. Since 2007, this number has remained high, with over \$65 million in bilateral military and police aid allocated to Honduras from FY 2008 to FY 2014. Of this amount, approximately \$47 million, or 72 percent, flowed through the Defense Department (DOD), the majority for counternarcotics efforts. DOD assistance has also been used to construct military bases along the Caribbean Coast and other key trafficking corridors.¹¹ This aid is bolstered by assistance from the Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI), the State Department's main security package to the region.

CENTRAL AMERICA REGIONAL SECURITY INITIATIVE

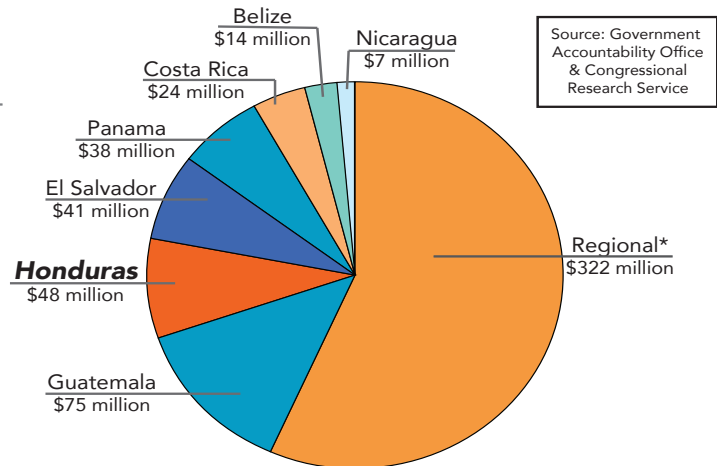
(CARSI): Regional security assistance to Central America began in 2008 as part of a large aid package to Mexico known as the Mérida Initiative. In 2010, due to mounting levels of violence in Central America, the Obama

U.S. Security Assistance to Honduras by Program, FY 2008 to FY 2014



*CARSI funding allocated to Honduras through INCLE from FY2013-FY2014 has not yet been reported.

Breakdown of CARSI funding allocated through INCLE, FY 2008 to FY 2014



Source: Government Accountability Office & Congressional Research Service

*Includes all regional programs from FY2008-FY2014 & all CARSI INCLE funding from FY2013-FY2014 for which a country-by-country breakdown has not yet been provided.

Administration split the package and created CARSI. Funding now comes from two State Department programs: International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INCLE), which funds military and police forces, civilian justice systems and other security programs, and the Economic Support Fund (ESF), which provides economic development assistance.¹²

In Honduras, CARSI programs primarily focus on drug trafficking, citizen security and institution building. Funding provides equipment, training and technical assistance. While there is virtually no reporting on how much funding different security initiatives in Honduras receive through INCLE, support has gone to initiatives such as an elite military-trained police force, community policing, increased border patrols, drugs and arms interdiction, and drug demand reduction. It has also supported training for military and police carried out by Colombian security forces in topics like drug interdiction, intelligence and asset forfeiture.

Of the \$316.3 million allocated through INCLE for all of CARSI from FY 2008 to FY 2012, Honduras received about \$47.4 million.¹³ This estimate is likely to be low, as 18 percent (\$57.8 million) of total INCLE funding was allocated to various regional initiatives throughout Central America, for which a country-by-country breakdown is not available.¹⁴ During this time about \$35.7 million was allocated to Honduras for ESF initiatives. While the amount of CARSI funding allocated to Honduras for FY2013 and FY2014 has not been reported, \$95 million in INCLE funding was allocated to the region through CARSI in FY 2013 and an estimated \$100 million in FY 2014.¹⁵ Without a clear breakdown of how much CARSI aid has been allocated to Honduras, however, it is hard

to evaluate the effectiveness of U.S. security assistance there.

AID SUSPENSIONS: In FY2012 and FY2013, Congress withheld 20 percent of State Department security assistance until the Secretary of State certified Honduras had taken steps towards improving human rights. These human rights conditions do not apply to Defense Department security assistance. In both years the aid was later released, a move questioned by some lawmakers given the criminality within the security forces. In FY 2014, Congress increased the amount withheld to 35 percent but exempted border security funding from the requirement. Congress has also cut off State Department-managed aid following the military coup in 2009 and in 2012, after U.S.-backed counternarcotics operations resulted in the deaths of several civilians. In 2013, funding for a failing police reform was cut while aid was greatly reduced for much of that year after reports linked the country's police chief to death squads. In March 2014, Congress suspended cooperation on aerial radar assistance after the passage of a law permitting the Honduran air force to shoot down suspected drug-trafficking aircraft.

Key Challenges to U.S. Security Assistance

HUMAN RIGHTS AND CORRUPTION: Honduras is a deadly place for human rights defenders, members of the LGBTI community, trade unionists, women, prosecutors, and social and environmental activists, among others. Security forces and other armed actors that threaten, attack and murder human rights advocates are rarely brought to justice and the government has rou-

tinely failed to protect those at risk. One example can be seen in the Bajo Aguán region, where over 90 people, the vast majority of which are peasants, have been killed since 2009 in ongoing land disputes with no convictions.¹⁶

POLICE REFORM: The Honduran government initiated police reform in 2011. With U.S. assistance, the government administered drug tests and polygraphs in an effort to purge the force of corrupt elements. In 2013, the United States stopped funding the effort after reports that hundreds of officers who had failed the “confidence tests” had remained on the force while individuals vetted by the U.S. Embassy had been purged. To date, the reform process has yielded few results due to a lack of political will and the police force remains ineffective. However, the DEA and FBI recently resumed assisting reform efforts.

VETTED UNITS These specialized units are vetted and polygraphed by U.S. officials and work with U.S. law enforcement officers on cases separately from the rest of their forces. In Honduras the State Department, Justice Department and Department of Homeland Security all support units that mainly focus on drug interdiction and organized crime. Vetted units are meant to improve investigations

in the short term, and stimulate reform in the long term by passing on training to other members of their larger institutions.¹⁷ However, they have not brought greater institutional reform, in part because members rarely return to the ranks of their larger institutions. A lack of coordination and information sharing between these units and local police has reportedly hampered investigations and created divisions between law enforcement officers. As urgent institutional reform needs are neglected, reliance on vetted units and the lack of political will to reform the police call into question the sustainability of CARSİ assistance.¹⁸

U.S. LAW ENFORCEMENT INVOLVEMENT: During a May 2012 counternarcotics operation involving elite DEA units called Foreign-deployed Advisory Support Teams (FAST units), originally developed for the war in Afghanistan, members of Honduran security forces opened fire on a boat, killing four civilians with no known connection to the drug trade.¹⁹ Between May and July of 2012, three out of five such joint interdiction operations carried out by DEA agents or Honduran officers trained, equipped and vetted by the United States resulted in the deaths of trafficking suspects and innocent civilians. As of November 2014, there had still been no justice for the families of victims in these cases.

¹ Gustavo Palencia, “Honduras murder rate falls in 2013, but remains world’s highest,” Reuters, February 2014 <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/02/17/us-honduras-homicides-idUSBREA1G1E520140217>

² U.S. Department of State, “Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2013,” <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/index.htm?year=2013&dliid=220453#wrapper>

³ U.S. Department of State, “Report on the Government of Honduras’ Protection of Human Rights and the Investigation and Prosecution of Security Services Personnel Credibly Alleged to Have Violated Human Rights,” August 8, 2012 <http://www.securityassistance.org/sites/default/files/120808hn.pdf>

⁴ U.S. Customs and Border Protection, “Southwest Border Unaccompanied Alien Children,” <http://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/southwest-border-unaccompanied-children>

⁵ Peter J. Meyer, “Honduras-U.S. Relations,” Congressional Research Service, May 2014 <http://www.securityassistance.org/content/honduras-us-relations-0>

⁶ Associated Press, “Hernández asume la presidencia en Honduras,” January 2014 <http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/el-mundo/2014/hernandez-asume-la-presidencia-en-honduras-982860.html>

⁷ La Prensa, “Policías de Honduras, Responsables de 149 Muertes Violentas,” December 2012, <http://www.laprensa.hn/csp/mediapool/sites/LaPrensa/Honduras/Tegucigalpa/story.csp?cid=330802&sid=275&fid=98>

⁸ Alberto Arce, Katherine Corcoran, “US aids Honduran police despite death squad fears” Associated Press, March 2014 <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/us-aids-honduran-police-despite-death-squad-fears>

⁹ Aaron Korthuis, working paper, “CARSİ in Honduras,” Wilson Center, September 2014 <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/the-central-america-regional-security-initiative->

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¹⁰ La Prensa, “Ministerio Público solo tiene capacidad para investigar 20% de homicidios: Rubi,” August 2013 <http://www.laprensa.hn/csp/mediapool/sites/LaPrensa/Honduras/Tegucigalpa/story.csp?cid=332220&sid=275&fid=98#panel1-2>

¹¹ Thom Shanker, “Lessons of Iraq Help U.S. Fight a Drug War in Honduras,” New York Times, May 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/06/world/americas/us-turns-its-focus-on-drug-smuggling-in-honduras.html?pagewanted=all&r=1&>

¹² For the purposes of tracking security assistance, we do not include ESF funding in this analysis.

¹³ The State Department reports on CARSİ assistance as a regional package, making it difficult to know how much funding has been allocated to each country.

¹⁴ GAO, “Central America: U.S. Agencies Considered Various Factors in Funding Security Activities, but Need to Assess Progress in Achieving Interagency Objectives,” GAO-13-771,” September 25, 2013 <http://gao.gov/assets/660/658145.pdf>.

¹⁵ Claire Ribando Seelke and Peter J. Meyer, “Central America Regional Security Initiative: Background and Policy Issues for Congress,” Congressional Research Service, May 2014 <http://www.securityassistance.org/content/central-america-regional-security-initiative-background-and-policy-issues-congress>

¹⁶ Human Rights Watch, “World Report 2014: Honduras,” <http://www.hrw.org/world-report/2014/country-chapters/honduras>

¹⁷ Aaron Korthuis, September 2014, op. cit.

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Mattathias Schwartz, “A Mission Gone Wrong,” New Yorker, January 6, 2014, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/01/06/a-mission-gone-wrong>

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Security Assistance Monitor

is a program of the Center for International Policy, in collaboration with the Friends Committee on National Legislation, Latin America Working Group Education Fund, Project on Middle East Democracy and Washington Office on Latin America. We document all publicly accessible information on U.S. security and defense assistance programs throughout the world, including arms sales, military and police aid, and training programs.