



Fight and Flight: Tackling the Roots of Honduras' Emergency

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Principal Findings

What happened? Months of street protests and a mass northward exodus, despite a sustained U.S. campaign to deter Central American migrants, illustrate the depth of despair in Honduras at political leaders, gang violence, extortion, poverty and inequality.

Why does it matter? State security crackdowns against a backdrop of extreme political polarisation dating back to the 2009 coup, fuelled by scandals over alleged links between the ruling party and criminal networks, could further fuel violent unrest. Washington's fixation on bottling up migrant flows in the region risks making a bad situation worse.

What should be done? With support from the U.S. and other donors, the Honduran government should enact electoral and anti-corruption reforms and grant stronger investigative powers to the judiciary and police, avoid heavy-handed responses to civil unrest, and fund programs that address urgent humanitarian needs while also reducing violence, a key driver of migration.

Executive Summary

In a troubled region, Honduras stands out for its political convulsions, deadly gang presence, and the desperate flight of its people. A key U.S. ally in Central America despite recent strains on that relationship, President Juan Orlando Hernández's government confronts profound public malaise. Discontent runs high with political leaders accused of exercising one-party rule since the 2009 coup and of colluding with organised crime. Six out of ten Hondurans live in poverty, while violent crime thrives, generating some of Latin America's worst murder rates. Political, economic and security grievances have fuelled mass protests in recent years, and account for the huge rise in Honduran migrants and refugees heading north. But the government's crackdown on protests and the draconian treatment of Central American migrants spearheaded by U.S. President Donald Trump risk aggravating instability and deepening the region's humanitarian and security crisis. Backed by the U.S. and donors, Tegucigalpa should focus on reforms and programs that could eventually make flight a less compelling option.

Ruled since 2014 by President Hernández, Honduras has witnessed a steady concentration of power in the ruling National Party's hands and increasingly heavy-handed law enforcement. The Nationalists have taken some promising steps in their time in power. Moves to purge corrupt police forces, implement tough law enforcement measures and extradite drug traffickers have broken up cartels and reportedly halved the homicide rate after it reached a historic high eight years ago.

But these changes have not brought stability. Waves of post-election protests shook the country in late 2017, and were followed by other surges of unrest in 2019 when the government announced plans for controversial health and education reforms. Public discontent has propelled a surge in emigration. From October 2018 to end-August 2019, U.S. border patrols apprehended more than 240,000 Hondurans trying to cross into the U.S. from Mexico (approximately 2.5 per cent of Honduras' population).

Several reasons account for this disaffection. For one, Honduras still suffers the toxic political and public legacy of the June 2009 coup, in which the left-leaning Manuel Zelaya was deposed and exiled abroad for allegedly seeking re-election and straying too close to Hugo Chávez's Venezuela. The conservative National Party has since ruled the country, appointed supporters to state and judicial institutions, and reportedly abused its power through corruption and criminal collusion. Zelaya, who returned to Honduras in 2011, has emerged as the main opposition figure, exploiting dissatisfaction with public institutions and inequality in a society where only 20 per cent of people earn the paltry minimum wage. He has encouraged Hondurans to take to the streets, including after the contested November 2017 elections, when mass public unrest was met with police repression and left at least 23 dead, chiefly on the protesters' side. After a U.S. court convicted the president's brother on drug trafficking charges in October 2019, Zelaya and other opposition leaders called for mass protest until the president resigns.

A second cause lies in Honduras' criminal underworld. Notwithstanding the reduction in homicide (which has tailed off in 2019) and the break-up of drug cartels – especially in trafficking hubs like the country's second city San Pedro Sula and along the

Atlantic coast – the grip of street gangs and extortion rackets on Honduran communities remains strong. The murder rate is still stubbornly high – Honduras was third in Latin America in terms of lethal violence last year, behind only Venezuela and El Salvador – while the flight from violence explains between 20 and 40 per cent of the country's emigration. Reported abuses by the security forces, their alleged collusion with criminal organisations and high impunity rates for serious crimes help drive public frustration with state institutions and allow gangs and other criminal organisations to use violence to tighten their grip on communities, with pernicious effects on women and children in particular.

Honduras faces higher risks of turbulence and emigration in the years ahead unless its government and international partners find a way to start addressing the problems that push so many Hondurans to flee the country. Short-term fixes that focus on symptoms rather than drivers of unrest – such as Tegucigalpa's crackdown on protesters or Washington's arm-twisting to force regional governments to host migrants under asylum cooperation agreements, the so-called "Safe Third Country Agreements" – will leave the causes of instability to fester. In this vein, the U.S. suspension of assistance that might have helped Honduras address the conditions driving migration, which has been only partly reversed to allow for the continuation of security and law enforcement aid, is both callous and counter-productive.

Though the many challenges Honduras confronts have no easy fixes, the government and its partners can certainly take steps toward security and better government. With U.S. and other donor support, Tegucigalpa can build on the agreements reached under UN auspices to reduce political tensions, focusing in particular on enacting political and electoral reforms thrashed out in a UN-sponsored dialogue last year. The same parties should back a fresh mandate for the Mission to Support the Fight against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (MACCIH), created in conjunction with the Organization of American States to prosecute high-level graft. For its part, the government should shift away from militarised policing toward strengthening judicial and police investigations. And the U.S. government should resume assistance with a particular focus on programs that can address the conditions, like hunger, that drive Hondurans to flee, recognising that if Washington wants a future in which migrants do not throng to its borders every year then it will have to make more of an investment in it.

Bogotá/Brussels/Tegucigalpa, 25 October 2019

Fight and Flight: Tackling the Roots of Honduras' Emergency

I. Introduction

Honduras is one of the poorest and most violent nations in Latin America. Even after years of declining murder rates, it ranked among the three deadliest countries in the region in 2018, with an annual murder rate of 40 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants.¹ It is plagued with extremely high levels of inequality, and more than 60 per cent of its 9.1 million inhabitants live in poverty.²

The country also has a spotty experience with democratic governance. After nearly two decades of military rule and a brief war with neighbouring El Salvador in 1969, Honduras returned to democracy in 1981 under a two-party system, although the armed forces continued to exert considerable influence over policymaking.³ With the backing of the government and military, Honduras became the centre for U.S. counter-insurgency operations in neighbouring Nicaragua in the 1980s.⁴

In 2009, a constitutional crisis followed by a coup upended the political order that had prevailed in Honduras for nearly three decades. Then-president Manuel Zelaya's ouster and exile in June 2009 followed his attempt to retain power for an unconstitutional second term, and also reflected alarm in the mostly conservative political establishment about his alignment with Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez. Tensions escalated between Zelaya and his own centre-left Liberal Party, which worked with the Supreme Court, the military and the opposition National Party to remove him from power and establish an interim government that called a new election.⁵ An agreement between former president Porfirio Lobo from the National Party, which has ruled uninterruptedly since the coup, and the Organization of American States (OAS) allowed Zelaya to return to Honduras two years later.⁶ Zelaya went on to found the left-wing party "Libertad y Refundación", known as Libre, displacing the internally divided Liberals as the main opposition group.⁷

¹ In 2018, only Venezuela and El Salvador had higher rates of lethal violence in Latin America, according to figures gathered by Insight Crime. As discussed below in Section III, the figure of 40 murders per 100,000 is reportedly down from a rate of 86.5 per 100,000 in 2011, although the rate reduction appears to have slowed – and even reversed itself – in 2019. "Insight Crime's 2018 Homicide Round-Up", Insight Crime, 22 January 2019.

² In 2017, Honduras' Gini coefficient was around 0.5, second only to Brazil in Latin America. "The World Bank in Honduras", World Bank. The Gini coefficient measures income dispersion on a scale from 0, representing a completely equal income distribution, to 1, in which one person earns all income.

³ Mario Posas, *Honduras: Una democracia en proceso*, Colección Visión de País, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2003, pp. 9–10.

⁴ Malcolm Byrne and Peter Kornbluh, *The Iran-Contra Affair: The Making of a Scandal, 1983–1988*, (Ann Arbor, 1990).

⁵ "Para que los hechos no se repitan: Informe de la Comisión de la Verdad y la Reconciliación", Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, July 2011.

⁶ The agreement also allowed Honduras to rejoin the OAS after being expelled in the wake of the 2009 coup. "Para que los hechos no se repitan", op. cit.

⁷ Crisis Group interview, Liberal party political adviser, Tegucigalpa, 20 April 2018.

Honduran politics since the coup have been dominated by two trends. On the one hand, the National Party, led since 2014 by President Juan Orlando Hernández, has practically erased checks and balances on state power by exerting growing influence over the judiciary and electoral institutions, and appointing intimate allies as high-level state officials. On the other, Zelaya's Libre party and some Liberals have played a double game – intensifying their criticism of the moves by the ruling party that they describe as authoritarian, while simultaneously pursuing back room deals that afford them more power and posts in key state institutions.⁸

The net effect has been to heighten polarisation, increase public distrust of political elites and fuel recurrent tides of unrest. This became fully visible in the wake of the 2017 elections, when concerns about foul play at the polls, among other issues, sparked a public outcry and a month of protests that left 23 dead and 1,351 detained.⁹ Protesters also took to the streets between April and June 2019, as trade unions mobilised in response to fears that health and education reforms enacted by the Honduran Congress would lead to mass privatisation and lay-offs in those sectors.¹⁰ These demonstrations have often become vehicles for expressing anti-government sentiments and demanding President Hernández resign, a call that has gathered steam after the president's brother was convicted for drug trafficking in a U.S. court.¹¹

Criminal networks have exploited Honduras' weak governing institutions and gaps in its security architecture. Drug cartels and gangs such as the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and the 18th Street Gang run extortion rackets in the country's impoverished urban areas and have turned the rural areas of the Caribbean coast into a regional transit hub for drug trafficking.¹² Although economic desperation remains the leading reason why Hondurans flee the country, and notwithstanding the government's highly-touted achievements in bringing down the murder rate and making inroads against organised crime, insecurity remains an important driver of emigration. A lack of faith in national institutions helps drive flight as well.¹³

Ten years after the 2009 coup, this report describes Honduras' most pressing political and security challenges, how they drive migration, how the response of the country's most powerful foreign partner – the U.S. – threatens to lead the country and region further into crisis, and discusses steps that could start reversing negative trends. It is based on over 100 interviews in Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula over the past two years with high-level politicians, security experts, magistrates, NGOs, asylum-seekers, humanitarian workers, diplomats and academics, among others.

⁸ Crisis Group interviews, politicians, political analysts and civil society, Tegucigalpa, 4-8 March 2019.

⁹ Crisis Group Commentary, "Do the Numbers Lie? Mistrust and Military Lockdown after Honduras' Disputed Poll", 4 December 2017.

¹⁰ Crisis Group Q&A, "Crackdown Raises Stakes as Honduran Protesters March On", 2 July 2019.

¹¹ "Hondureños exigen renuncia del presidente por supuestos vínculos con el narco", Reuters, 9 October 2019. "Honduras President's Brother Convicted in Drug-Conspiracy Case", *The Wall Street Journal*, 18 October 2019.

¹² For more on these issues, see Crisis Group Latin America Report N°52, *Corridor of Violence: The Guatemala-Honduras Border*, 4 June 2014; and Crisis Group Latin America Report N°62, *Mafia of the Poor: Gang Violence and Extortion in Central America*, 6 April 2017.

¹³ Crisis Group interviews, asylum seekers and humanitarian workers, Tegucigalpa, 20-23 February 2018. "Atlas of Migration in Northern Central America", Food and Agriculture, 12 December 2018. "Sondeo de opinión pública 2018", ERIC-SJ, April 2019.

II. Honduras' Enduring Political Crisis

A. *The Political Legacy of the 2009 Coup*

1. Two camps, three parties

Ten years on, the June 2009 coup still overshadows day-to-day political life in Honduras. “Since 2009, there are two camps in Honduras: one that supports the coup and one that sees in the government of [President] Hernández a soft dictatorship”, said one civil society leader.¹⁴

The pro-coup bloc is represented in the Honduran Congress by the National and Liberal parties, which engineered Zelaya's ouster and continue to defend it. Their justifications include, among other things, Zelaya's alignment with Venezuela, which the traditionally conservative political elites feared could be a first step toward socialism in Honduras, and his apparent manoeuvring to seek a second term in office, then prohibited by the constitution.¹⁵ This faction has been buoyed both internationally and domestically by support from the U.S., which, despite the Obama administration's disapproval of the coup, recognised the results of the subsequent election that in November 2009 installed the National Party in power and has proved crucial to the gradual restoration of Honduras' global standing.¹⁶ Until President Trump recently turned on Tegucigalpa for its purported failure to curb migration flows, Washington has given firm backing to post-coup administrations.¹⁷

On the other side of the political divide is the left-wing Libertad y Refundación (Libre) Party headed by former President Zelaya.¹⁸ Libre supporters led by Zelaya continue to see the National Party's rule as the product of an illegitimate transfer of power,

¹⁴ Crisis Group interview, civil society leader, Tegucigalpa, 21 June 2017.

¹⁵ Crisis Group interviews, political analyst, Tegucigalpa, March 2018. To create a legal opening to seek re-election, Zelaya proposed a referendum on the creation of a Constituent Assembly that would have the power to amend the constitution, and remove its prohibition on presidential re-election in Article 239. As discussed below, the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court opposed the initiative at that time, but then struck down the prohibition on re-election in 2015.

¹⁶ Initially, the U.S. cut financial support to the country (as did the EU) and revoked coup leaders' visas. Over time, however, it recognised the result of the November elections but said the Honduran Congress should nevertheless vote on the restoration of deposed President Manuel Zelaya and form a government of national unity. These steps were never taken. “EU to warn Honduras of further sanctions over coup”, Reuters, 10 September 2009. “US Prepares Further Sanctions Against Honduras Coup Leaders”, Voice of America, 2 November 2009. “La OEA suspende la pertenencia de Honduras a la institución”, OAS statement, 5 July 2009. “U.S. recognizes Honduras vote with caveats”, Reuters, 29 November 2009.

¹⁷ In a 16 July interview 2019, President Trump stated that the U.S. would not send any more money to Guatemala and Honduras because “they weren't doing anything for us [the U.S.], they were forming caravans and they were sending them up”. He partly reversed the decision in October after signing asylum cooperation agreements with these countries. “Trump claims Honduras and Guatemala are sending ‘hardened criminals’ in caravans”, *Washington Examiner*, 16 July 2019. “U.S. restores aid to Central America after reaching migration deals”, Reuters, 16 October 2019.

¹⁸ In 2017 congressional elections, Nationalists won with 61 seats (out of 128), Libre obtained 30 seats, while the Liberals suffered a historic defeat with only 26 seats.

arguing that Zelaya (in his own words) “was taken away violently from the presidential chair”, and claim that they are working to restore democratic governance.¹⁹

The roots of political division in Honduras go deeper than the coup, however, and also are bound up with competing ideologies, values and support bases. The ruling National Party claims to champion conservative and Christian values.²⁰ Its support network is mainly located in the capital Tegucigalpa, a traditionally conservative bastion, as well as in the impoverished farmlands of the country’s south and south east, where the party relies on extensive patronage to maintain voter loyalty.²¹

Economic policies favouring trade with the U.S. and state-sponsored infrastructure projects have secured the Nationalists strong support from the private sector and extensive coverage in the largest media outlets, owned by Honduras’ most prominent businessmen.²² Steady GDP growth in recent years has earned President Hernández the support of the business community; the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) estimated in July that the economy will grow by 3.5 per cent this year, one of the highest rates in Latin America. But this positive news has been undercut by recurrent protests and corruption scandals that have caused economic losses and the stagnation of foreign investment.²³ Critics also argue that the fastest growing economic sectors (eg, banking, financial and energy sectors, and information technology) have very little impact on the country’s unemployment and sky-high poverty rate.²⁴

Standing in ideological opposition to the Nationalists, the Libre party is young, committed to issues of social justice, and has close ties to popular movements and their champions among student and feminist associations, some grassroots human

¹⁹ Crisis Group interview, Manuel Zelaya, former president of Honduras, Tegucigalpa, 14 December 2017.

²⁰ President Hernández is an active member of a Christian evangelical church and makes frequent references to the Bible in public speeches. “International Religious Freedom Report for 2017”, U.S. State Department, 29 May 2018. Crisis Group interviews, political analysts, Tegucigalpa, March-April 2018.

²¹ The 2017 EU Election Observation Mission report noted the intensely partisan use of government social programs in an effort to rally National Party support. EU Election Observation Mission Honduras 2017, final report, 6 March 2018, p. 10. Crisis Group interviews, opposition members and political analysts, Tegucigalpa, 9-10 November 2017. For a geographical distribution of Nationalist support, see the map of the 26 November 2017 general election results. Supreme Electoral Tribunal of Honduras official results.

²² The EU Election Observation Mission for the 2017 elections noted “a significant imbalance [in media coverage] between the different candidates, and in favour of Juan Orlando Hernández” in the months prior to the election. Crisis Group interview, civil society leader, 21 June 2018. EU Election Observation Mission Honduras 2017, final report, 6 March 2018, p. 27.

²³ Jorge Faraj, president of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Cortés, a leading private sector association based in the country’s most industrialised region, stated on 1 June that corruption and mismanagement have damaged the Honduran economy more than recent protests. Crisis Group telephone interview, political analyst, 12 June 2019. “Honduras pierde más con la conducción errónea del país: CCIC”, *Criterio*, 1 June 2019. For figures on direct foreign investment in Honduras, see Trading Economics’ website.

²⁴ See more on unemployment, inequality and poverty in Section IV. “Informe de Cepal reafirma crecimiento económico, control de inflación y reducción de pobreza en Honduras”, Gobierno de la República de Honduras, 31 July 2019. “Fosdeh: informe de crecimiento económico de Cepal no es más que una trampa”, *Tiempo Digital*, 1 August 2019.

rights NGOs, and environmental activists.²⁵ The party has often aligned itself with the region's left-wing governments in Nicaragua, Venezuela and Cuba, although its recent support for these allies has been more guarded in light of political turmoil in the first two countries.²⁶ Libre's support base is located in central and northern Honduras, especially around the Cortés department.²⁷

Less prominent than either the National Party or Libre is the once-powerful Liberal Party to which Zelaya belonged before the 2009 coup. Ravaged by internal divisions that weakened and displaced it from its historic role as the main competitor to the National Party, the Liberal Party remains a centre-left force that depends increasingly for its support on the popularity of its local representatives.²⁸

2. The consolidation of nationalist power

Nearly a decade in government and a solid majority in Congress have allowed the National Party to strengthen its control of the country's main institutions. In 2012, when Hernández was president of Congress, he led a successful effort to expel four of the five magistrates of the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court after they quashed a security initiative launched by former president Lobo.²⁹ In 2015, the same court, by then stacked with judges close to the ruling party, struck down a constitutional article limiting presidents to one term in office, arguing that it violated the candidate's human rights. This allowed President Hernández to run for a second term in the 2017 elections.³⁰

The Nationalists have installed an influential cadre of political allies across the government and judiciary while cultivating cosy relations with the media. Mauricio Oliva, chair of Congress, Rolando Argueta, president of the Supreme Court, and David Matamoros, until recently head of the now disbanded Supreme Electoral Tribunal, are all reportedly close to the president.³¹ The net effect has been an erosion of checks and balances on the executive branch. "There are no counterweights in Honduras. Control [by the executive] over the country's institutions is very clear", said an observer in the diplomatic community.³²

²⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Libre members and sociologist, Tegucigalpa, April 2018. "Crisis post electoral en Honduras", *Perspectivas* No. 1/2018, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung report, January 2018.

²⁶ Crisis Group interview, Libre adviser, Tegucigalpa, 5 March 2019.

²⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Libre members, Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula, April 2018.

²⁸ The party's divisions arose over support or opposition to the 2009 coup. More recent frictions between party chief Luis Zelaya and its leader in Congress Carlos Flores have weakened the Liberals. Zelaya has been criticised for the party's poor performance in recent elections and for allegedly authoritarian handling of party affairs. Crisis Group interviews, Liberal party members and advisers, and political analyst, Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula, April 2018 and 4 March 2019.

²⁹ "Honduras: en riesgo de crisis institucional", AFP, 12 December 2012.

³⁰ The ruling was highly controversial given that former president Zelaya was ousted in 2009 for seeking a referendum on more or less the same issue (ie, eligibility for a second presidential term). Joaquín Mejía Rivera and Rafael Jerez Moreno, "La reelección presidencial en Honduras", *Equipo de Reflexión, Investigación y Comunicación de la Compañía de Jesús en Honduras (ERIC-SJ)*, November 2018, pp. 83-84.

³¹ Crisis Group interview, political analyst, Tegucigalpa, 5 April 2017.

³² Crisis Group interview, diplomat, March 2017.

With less access to public funds and limited representation in the country's leading institutions, opposition parties have responded in two ways. In public, they have decried the ruling party's power-consolidating moves as authoritarian, organising rallies to protest the "dictatorship" of President Hernández. Behind closed doors, however, most disputes among parties have focused on obtaining larger shares for the opposition across the government and in judicial bodies, while all parties appear to share a lack of enthusiasm for stronger anti-corruption legislation, perhaps reflecting a concern that all have something to lose from stricter scrutiny in this domain.³³

B. *Corruption and Collusion*

The erosion of checks and balances on executive power over the past decade – and particularly the weakening of judicial oversight – has created fertile ground in Honduras for corruption and state collusion with actors engaged in illicit activities.³⁴

Corruption scandals have implicated politicians of every rank up to the president. As one MACCIH magistrate told Crisis Group: "Corruption in Honduras has been normalised, socialised, and institutionalised".³⁵ The most prominent case dates to 2015, when high-ranking government officials were implicated in allegedly looting \$300 million from the Honduran Institute of Social Security between 2010 and 2014 to fund their lavish lifestyles.³⁶ During the course of an investigation it emerged that part of the embezzled funds allegedly supported Hernández's presidential campaign in 2013.³⁷ News of these allegations sparked mass protests – which became known as a movement of the "outraged" (in Spanish *indignados*) – that became a forum for demanding Hernández's resignation. Hernández admitted receiving three million lempiras (\$150,000), said he was not aware of its origins, and sought to defuse popular anger by working with the OAS to establish the MACCIH – a mechanism that, among other things, supports state prosecutors investigating graft.³⁸

³³ An example of these pragmatic alliances was the pact in May 2017 by the three main parties, which held up approval of the Law on Clean Politics proposed by the MACCIH to control campaign funding. Another can be found in the election of the Attorney General Óscar Chinchilla in August 2013, as well as his re-election in 2018. Civil society representatives allege that Chinchilla is not really interested in prosecuting corruption due to his intimacy with the ruling elite. Crisis Group interviews, analysts and civil society leaders, Tegucigalpa, March-April 2018. "Ley de política limpia, cuando se ignora la política en el combate anti-corrupción", *El Pulso*, 30 May 2017. "Honduras AG Re-election: A Pyrrhic Victory for the Status Quo?", *Insight Crime*, 3 July 2018.

³⁴ Sarah Chayes, "When Corruption is the Operating System. The Case of Honduras", Carnegie Endowment, 2017. On the character of political power, see Marvin Barahona, "Elites, redes de poder y régimen político en Honduras", ERIC-SJ, July 2018.

³⁵ Crisis group interview, MACCIH magistrate, Tegucigalpa, 5 March 2019.

³⁶ Some civil society organisations have connected the diversion of resources away from the health system to an erosion in the quality of services and medicines that it provides. *Movimiento Amplio por la Dignidad y la Justicia* did so when it claimed in May 2015 that around 2,800 people had died in In-Home Supportive Services (IHSS) facilities between 2010 and 2014 due to lack of medical attention. For more information, see www.saqueoihss.com. A recent epidemic of dengue fever in the country, which has caused around 150 deaths, has reignited public concern over the misuse of health service funds. "Sube a 144 la cifra de muertes por dengue grave en Honduras", EFE, 30 September 2019.

³⁷ "Presidente hondureño acepta que su campaña recibió dinero de corrupción", EFE, 4 June 2015.

³⁸ "Convenio entre la República de Honduras y la Secretaría General de la OEA", 19 January 2016.

Politicians also reportedly work with organised crime at every level of government, starting at the grassroots. Criminal gangs are so territorially widespread that local politicking requires interaction between elected officials (or would-be elected officials) and gang members. “Logistically, it is impossible not to talk to them [gangs] if you want to campaign in their neighbourhoods”, said a member of the Liberal party in San Pedro Sula, although publicly the major parties tend to deny such conversations.³⁹

As to whether and how much the gangs influence elections, accounts vary wildly. On the one hand, National Party representatives alleged to Crisis Group that in the 2017 presidential elections gangs co-opted at least “150,000 people living in National Party strongholds in Tegucigalpa [to vote for their opponents]”.⁴⁰ Security experts, meanwhile, maintain that certain gangs have worked on behalf of the National Party.⁴¹ By contrast, researchers from the Autonomous University of Honduras found “no evidence” of gang involvement in the 2017 electoral process.⁴²

Over the last decade the country’s most senior leaders have been credibly accused of working with drug trafficking groups.⁴³ According to documents filed by U.S. prosecutors in the trial of drug trafficker Hector Emilio Fernández (alias Don H), in 2005 then President-elect Zelaya allegedly received \$2 million from the drug lord, although he denies the accusations.⁴⁴ In 2017, drug lord Devis Leonel Rivera Maradiaga, one of the leaders of the *Cachiros* cartel who turned themselves in to U.S. authorities in 2015, testified that the group had business dealings with the ruling National Party, which included financing recent presidential campaigns.⁴⁵ Former Nationalist president Porfirio Lobo has always denied these accusations.⁴⁶

The most recent and inflammatory scandal concerns allegations that President Hernández received drug money to consolidate his political power. In November 2018, his brother Juan Antonio was detained in the U.S. on drug-trafficking charges.⁴⁷ On 18 October 2019, he was convicted on four charges, including drug trafficking, and will face sentencing in early 2020, although his lawyers claim he is innocent and have announced they will appeal against the ruling.⁴⁸ In court documents, U.S. pros-

³⁹ Crisis Group interview, Liberal Party member, San Pedro Sula, March 2018.

⁴⁰ Crisis Group interview, National Party representatives, Tegucigalpa, 7 March 2019.

⁴¹ Crisis Group phone interviews, security experts, April-June 2019.

⁴² Crisis Group interview, academic, Tegucigalpa, 6 December 2018.

⁴³ “When Corruption is the Operating System”, op. cit. “Un pato llamado Honduras”, *El País*, 13 July 2019.

⁴⁴ “Expresidente Manuel Zelaya niega haber recibido dinero de Don H”, *La Prensa*, 29 July 2019.

⁴⁵ Fears of being killed by rival traffickers or being detained by Honduran authorities prompted the Maradiaga brothers, Devis Leonel and Javier Eriberto, to make a deal with the DEA and hand themselves in. Thanks also to Devis Leonel’s testimony, Fabio Lobo, son of former president Porfirio Lobo, was convicted in September 2017 for participating in drug operations alongside this cartel. For the full testimony of Rivera Maradiaga, see bit.ly/2nnrOK3. “Fabio Lobo condenado a 24 años de cárcel”, VOA, 5 September 2017.

⁴⁶ “Pepe Lobo niega vínculos con Los Cachiros: “Un asesino, un sicario, quiere poner en duda mi testimonio de vida”, *El Herald*, 24 May 2019.

⁴⁷ “US charges Honduran president’s brother with drug conspiracy”, AP News, 26 November 2018.

⁴⁸ Juan Antonio Hernández was found guilty of smuggling around 200,000 kilos of cocaine into the U.S. between 2004 and 2018. The other charges involved weapons offences and lying to U.S. officials. He could spend the rest of his life in prison. “Honduran president’s brother guilty of drug smuggling”, BBC, 18 October 2019.

ecutors alleged Hernández's 2013 campaign received \$1.5 million of funding from drug proceeds. Prosecutors and trial witnesses, who were mostly convicted drug traffickers collaborating with U.S. authorities, even alleged that at the height of the 2013 presidential elections convicted Mexican drug lord "El Chapo" gave \$1 million to Juan Antonio as a payoff intended for the president in order to protect his business partners – including the Valle brothers and Alexander Ardón, mayor of the town of El Paraíso.⁴⁹ Hernández has vigorously denied these allegations, questioned the integrity of the prosecution case, and argued that they are the work of drug cartels striking back at him for tough law enforcement policies, in collaboration with opposition parties seeking political advantage.⁵⁰

Against this backdrop, Honduran prosecutors and the MACCIH have worked closely together. They have brought some thirteen investigations against high-level criminal targets, and secured the conviction of former first lady Rosa Elena Bonilla, wife of former president Porfirio Lobo, on fraud and embezzlement charges. (Bonilla pleaded innocent and her lawyers filed an appeal to the Supreme Court on 8 October.)⁵¹ In May 2019, MACCIH filed charges against twelve people in a money-laundering case involving drug proceeds.⁵² Although not formally included in the list, Lobo was mentioned in the case because he appointed some of the accused as directors of public infrastructure institutions and granted them multimillion-dollar contracts. He later accused the mission's head of defamation and filed a complaint with the National Commissioner for Human Rights.⁵³

The mission has helped spearhead the selection of a group of anti-corruption judges within the Honduran judiciary, the creation of a dedicated unit in the Attorney General's Office to investigate high-impact cases, and the establishment of a civic observatory on penal justice.⁵⁴ Moreover, the MACCIH has proposed legislation that would beef up the judiciary's investigative powers. An example is the Law of Effective Collaboration, which encourages alleged criminals to cooperate with investigations and prosecutions in exchange for lighter sentences. The MACCIH presented the first draft in 2017 and the latest in February 2019, but Congress has repeatedly found ways to slow passage of the bill and shows little interest in its enactment.⁵⁵ On the other hand, Congress recently approved a law restoring immunity from prosecution for all parliamentarians in relation to their legislative activities.⁵⁶

⁴⁹ "El Chapo' gave \$1 million to Honduras leader's brother, prosecutor says", *Los Angeles Times*, 2 October 2019.

⁵⁰ "Presidente Hernández: 'Mel, Nasralla y Luis Zelaya deben renunciar a ser voceros del narcotráfico'", *Televisión Nacional de Honduras*, 6 August 2019. "Honduran president hobbled after being implicated in brother's bribery conviction", *Reuters*, 19 October 2019.

⁵¹ "Honduras ex-first lady bought jewellery with public funds", *BBC News*, 5 September 2019.

⁵² "UFECIC-MP/MACCIH-OAS Team Presents Twelfth Case of Integrated Criminal Investigation, entitled: 'Narco-politics'", *OAS Press Release*, 24 May 2019.

⁵³ "Pepe Lobo denuncia al vocero de la MACCIH ante el CONADEH", *Criterio*, 4 June 2019.

⁵⁴ The Anti-Corruption Unit of the Attorney General's office (UFECIC) is MACCIH's main partner in the Honduran judicial system. For more on MACCIH achievements and challenges, see "Avances y Desafíos: Informe sobre los primeros dos años de la Misión de Apoyo contra la Corrupción y la Impunidad en Honduras (MACCIH)", *CLALS Working Paper n. 18*, June 2018.

⁵⁵ Crisis Group telephone interview, Pro Honduras Network, 17 July 2019.

⁵⁶ "Diputados hondureños aprueban la inmunidad parlamentaria", *La Prensa*, 16 October 2019.

Notwithstanding some success, Honduran prosecution units fighting crime and corruption still face significant challenges. One is that they lack sufficient staff and resources, with some prosecutors juggling backlogs of 200 to 300 cases.⁵⁷ Another is that tensions between OAS headquarters and MACCIH officials in Tegucigalpa over the management of the mission hampered its operations in its early days, though this is less of a problem of late.⁵⁸ Yet another challenge is that the mission's efforts have predictably generated hostility from certain quarters. Congress reacted indignantly after the mission started an investigation probing whether more than 60 lawmakers repeatedly misused public funds allocated for local NGOs.⁵⁹ A group of lawmakers also sought a ruling from the Supreme Court that the MACCIH was unconstitutional. The court ruled in May 2018 that the mission was legal, but questioned the constitutionality of the dedicated anti-corruption prosecution unit formed under its auspices.⁶⁰

With its mandate due to end in early 2020, the MACCIH faces an uncertain future. The Honduran government has asked the OAS to provide an assessment of MACCIH's performance before taking any decision, while in parallel proposing the creation of an Anti-Corruption National Observatory. Some civil society representatives fear this initiative could be aimed at dismantling the MACCIH and replacing it with a weaker body.⁶¹ Ongoing investigations of National Party members could make President Hernández reluctant to extend its mandate, or lead him to propose a bill to Congress to reform the mission's objectives (diminishing its investigatory capacity and making it less threatening to political elites) as a condition for a mandate extension.⁶²

Despite their reservations, Honduran lawmakers should redouble efforts to fight corruption, recognising that an outraged public is demanding progress, and that failure to respond could have implications for the country's stability (see below). They should pass the Law of Effective Collaboration and assign more resources to national anti-corruption judicial units, as well as ensuring a fresh mandate to the MACCIH without weakening its powers. Making the most of its significant leverage with the Honduran government, the U.S. – which has in recent years been a strong supporter of the MACCIH – should urge the Honduran government to take these steps.

⁵⁷ Crisis Group interview, civil society leader, Tegucigalpa, 7 March 2019. Crisis Group telephone interview, Pro Honduras Network, 17 July 2019.

⁵⁸ Tensions within the commission and between its spokesperson, former Peruvian prime minister Juan Jiménez Mayor, and the OAS Secretary General Luis Almagro, reportedly led to the resignation of the former in February 2018. Since then, the mission has taken on a lower profile and carried out numerous investigations under the leadership of Brazilian attorney Luiz Antonio Guimarães, in charge until June 2019. Crisis Group interviews, diplomats, Tegucigalpa, February–March 2018; MACCIH representatives, Tegucigalpa, 5 March 2019.

⁵⁹ In response, the Congress passed a bill in February 2018 to limit the Attorney General's Office investigative powers. "La red de diputados corruptos en Honduras podría ser de 140 y no 60", *El País*, 5 February 2018.

⁶⁰ "Fallo de corte en Honduras puede minar organismo anticorrupción", *Insight Crime*, 4 June 2018.

⁶¹ The observatory is supposed to become active in 2020, coinciding with the end of MACCIH's mandate. Crisis Group telephone interview, Pro Honduras Network, 17 July 2019. "Honduras allana camino para crear Observatorio Nacional Anticorrupción", *La Tribuna*, 11 July 2019.

⁶² "Canciller hondureño solicita evaluar funcionamiento de la MACCIH", *La Prensa*, 23 July 2019.

C. *Public Unrest and Political Weakness*

Against the backdrop of intense political polarisation, corruption and other criminal scandals involving senior Honduran officials and public institutions have fuelled widespread discontent with authorities that has flared into mass demonstrations and violence. An April 2019 survey by a Honduran media group registered extremely low approval rates for politicians and public officials: the National, Liberal and Libre parties had approval rates of between 15 and 17.6 per cent among those surveyed, and more than 80 per cent of respondents distrust the Supreme Court, the Supreme Electoral Tribunal or Congress.⁶³ President Hernández's approval rate has fallen to 38 per cent, down from 61 per cent in 2017.⁶⁴ The slogan "Fuera JOH" ("Get Out Juan Orlando Hernández") is a common battle cry among his administration's opponents, but also represents a deeper frustration with Honduran politics. It is, in the words of one academic, "a scream against corruption, impunity, insecurity and everything that [Honduran] politics represents".⁶⁵

The 2017 post-electoral crisis showcased the extent of public dissatisfaction and may have marked a turning point. The sense among many Hondurans that the election had been rigged arose partly out of the way election results emerged. The Supreme Electoral Tribunal delayed the announcement of the first count – in which the ruling National Party was losing by a small margin – for several hours. But the candidates' fortunes reversed during a weeklong vote count, and electoral authorities declared Hernández the winner.⁶⁶ The opposition cried foul and called for roadblocks and protests to contest the results.⁶⁷ Most marches were peaceful, but some ended in clashes between protesters and military police, as well as looting and other criminal acts. The government, shaken by the upheaval, declared a ten-day curfew.⁶⁸ By mid-January 2018, violence had left 23 dead and 1,351 in jail. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights subsequently reported on numerous human rights violations allegedly committed by security forces.⁶⁹

These episodes of unrest have become more frequent since 2017. As noted, turmoil erupted in April 2019 after Congress passed controversial reforms to the health and education systems, which workers in those sectors worried could lead to privati-

⁶³ "Sondeo de opinión pública 2018", ERIC-SJ, April 2019.

⁶⁴ "CID-Gallup: paz social es lo que más desean los hondureños", *La Prensa*, 24 September 2019.

⁶⁵ Crisis Group interview, academic, 21 February 2018.

⁶⁶ Concerns about National Party influence in the Supreme Electoral Tribunal as well as the 2015 Supreme Court ruling on re-election fuelled the controversy. The report by the OAS electoral observation mission was very critical, and Secretary General Luis Almagro sent a tweet on 17 December calling for fresh polls. Nevertheless, neither the EU, the OAS nor the UN found evidence of fraud, although the OAS did question the integrity of the electoral process. Crisis Group interviews, diplomats and Nationalist lawmaker, December 2017–April 2018. "Honduras Final Report General Elections 2017", EU-EOM, 6 March 2018. "Preliminary Report of the OAS Electoral Observation Mission in Honduras", 4 December 2017. "TSE declara a Juan Orlando Hernández ganador de las elecciones en Honduras", *La Prensa*, 18 December 2017.

⁶⁷ Crisis Group interviews, electoral observer and Libre members, Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula, December 2017–April 2018.

⁶⁸ "Do the Numbers Lie?", op. cit.

⁶⁹ Crisis Group interviews, OHCHR consultant, April 2018. "Violations of human rights in the context of the 2017 elections in Honduras", op. cit. pp. 2–4.

sation and mass layoffs.⁷⁰ President Hernández's effort to lower tensions proved ineffective. Despite the president's call for a national dialogue with the trade unions in those sectors and the ultimate withdrawal of the bills in early June, protests and strikes went on for months, with some demonstrations so large they paralysed major transportation arteries.⁷¹ The protest movement got another boost in May when the government published a new criminal code penalising public criticism of officials, feeding worries that the authorities would use the law to suppress political expression and association.⁷² As a result, demands for Hernández's resignation intensified. With protests growing violent, Hernández deployed the army across the country on 20 June. Between April and June, clashes between protesters and security forces left at least six dead and 80 injured.⁷³

Allegations of Hernández's ties to drug-trafficking networks are another driver of current unrest. The allegations in August 2019 that Hernández's 2013 presidential campaign had benefited from drug-trafficking proceeds spurred another wave of protests, with more demands for his resignation.⁷⁴ Even before Hernández's brother was convicted, opposition leaders such as Manuel Zelaya, Luis Zelaya and Salvador Nasralla, stepped up their calls for the president to resign and for early polls. The latter two jointly asked for a popular "insurrection" starting 9 October, while the former – who has greater mobilisation capacity – suggested waiting until the trial's culmination.⁷⁵ After the U.S. jury found the president's brother guilty, Manuel Zelaya joined forces with Nasralla and Luis Zelaya, and called on his supporters to protest until the president resigned.⁷⁶ Before urging protests, Libre's deputies announced on 9 October they would seek Hernández's impeachment, but that would require the support of three quarters of the Nationalist-controlled Congress votes to start investigations, support that Libre does not have.⁷⁷

The growing tumult has cost President Hernández both domestically and internationally, calling into question his earlier reputation among diplomats and others as a "man in control". Hernández has faced growing criticism by some traditional allies within the Catholic Church, private sector, security forces and, to a limited extent, the U.S. government.⁷⁸ Although Nationalists in Congress have mostly remained supportive of the president, frictions with his own political party have also surfaced: Vice

⁷⁰ "Honduras Congress stalls reforms after violent protests", Reuters, 30 April 2019.

⁷¹ "Crackdown Raises Stakes", op. cit.

⁷² The code is scheduled to come into effect in November and is still controversial in the country. The government has since agreed in principle to amend it, but has not made significant progress yet. "Estancada ha quedado la socialización de Código Penal de Honduras", *El Heraldo*, 19 July 2019.

⁷³ "Honduras: Exercising the right to protest has a high cost for those who dare take to the streets", Amnesty International, 5 July 2019.

⁷⁴ "Thousands protest against Honduran president after drug link surfaces", Reuters, 6 August 2019.

⁷⁵ "Salvador Nasralla y Luis Zelaya llaman a la 'insurrección' para sacar a JOH", *El Heraldo*, 7 October 2019. "Hay que sacar a JOH y adelantar elecciones: Mel Zelaya", *Criterio*, 7 October 2019.

⁷⁶ "Manuel Zelaya, Salvador Nasralla y Luis Zelaya acuerdan crear una coalición", *La Prensa*, 19 October 2019. "Hondureños salen a las calles para pedir la renuncia de su presidente", *El Periódico*, 10 October 2019.

⁷⁷ "Libre buscará juicio político contra Juan Orlando Hernández", *El Heraldo*, 9 October 2019. "Tomás Zambrano a Libre: 'Propuesta de Juicio Político nunca pasará'", *Proceso Digital*, 9 October 2019.

⁷⁸ "Crackdown Raises Stakes", op. cit.

President Ricardo Álvarez suggested on 16 July that the next round of presidential elections, due to be held in 2021, be brought forward to 2020.⁷⁹ The proposal has yet to gain traction within the National Party, which has so far maintained support for the president even after the verdict in his brother's trial.

The U.S. government remains enormously influential with the Hernández administration. "If the U.S. ambassador simply posts a critical tweet, that has ten times more impact than all [other] ambassadors publicly condemning [the government]", explained one diplomat.⁸⁰ But Washington has sent mixed signals about the extent of its support in recent years. On the one hand, in late 2017, while Honduran security forces were confronting anti-government marches, the U.S. State Department certified Honduras' human rights efforts and fight against corruption, thereby releasing aid to the country.⁸¹ But in 2019, Washington veered between a generally supportive tone, sharp criticism that Tegucigalpa was not doing enough to curb migration and – after clashes between protesters and police forces turned deadly in spring 2019 – exhortations to convene a dialogue and hold accountable those responsible for the violence.⁸²

In Washington, congressional staffers worry the U.S. is less than optimally positioned to support stability in Honduras because the State Department tends to treat Tegucigalpa – where the ambassadorial post is currently empty – as a "backwater". As one staffer said: "We need our most senior, accomplished people to go there [...] because these relationships are among the most important in terms of day-to-day impact on the United States. We treat them like they don't matter, but they do".⁸³

D. *Dialogue and Electoral Reforms*

Amid the 2017 post-electoral turmoil, national bodies and foreign powers sought to calm Honduras' tensions. With its leader weakened and its international standing tainted, the National Party announced in December 2017 its willingness to engage in a "national dialogue" with its opponents, and in early 2018 asked the UN Secretary-General for technical support.⁸⁴ Local UN Coordinator Igor Garafulic led the initiative and decided to press ahead despite the conclusion of an exploratory UN mission in February 2018 that "there were no conditions nor incentives" for dialogue.⁸⁵

⁷⁹ "Ricardo Álvarez: 'Recomiendo adelantar las elecciones para noviembre de 2020'", *Tiempo Digital*, 16 July 2019.

⁸⁰ Crisis Group interview, diplomat, Tegucigalpa, 22 February 2017.

⁸¹ "Exclusive: U.S. document certifies Honduras as supporting rights amid vote crisis", Reuters, 4 December 2017.

⁸² "Statement from the U.S. Embassy in Honduras", U.S. Embassy in Honduras, 25 June 2019. However, in a 5 August tweet, interim Chargé d'Affaires Lawrence J. Gumbiner reiterated its support to Hernández even after U.S. prosecutors' filings against him were made public. See tweet at bit.ly/2ZJBabo.

⁸³ Crisis Group interview, U.S. congressional staffer, Washington, DC, September 2019. See also "Rubio Blocks Trump's Honduras Envoy", *Foreign Policy*, 6 February 2019. "The United States needs a career ambassador in Honduras", *The Hill*, 19 February 2019.

⁸⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Tegucigalpa, February-March 2018.

⁸⁵ Garafulic justified this due to the "need to lower tensions". Crisis Group interviews, UN officials and diplomat, Tegucigalpa, 6 December 2018 and 6 March 2019. "ONU recomienda a Honduras una serie de medidas para establecer un diálogo nacional", UN News, 23 February 2018.

With support from the Spanish embassy, the UN launched the dialogue in August 2018 after six months of “pre-dialogue” aimed at reaching agreements among the country’s three main parties.⁸⁶ The process ended in December 2018 with no agreement, but 169 nonbinding points of understanding on accountability, electoral reform and human rights, which it referred to the Congress for discussion and approval.⁸⁷

Even with these points of consensus, the dialogue was at best a mixed success with incomplete participation. The opposition was represented by Luis Zelaya, leading one faction of the divided Liberals, and Salvador Nasralla, a political independent without negotiating experience.⁸⁸ Libre, the main opposition, did not attend a single discussion and refused to participate despite several invitations from the UN, arguing the dialogue was a “trick” by Hernández to buy time as he consolidated power.⁸⁹ The National Party participated, but criticised the process and insisted that any efforts to increase transparency and accountability would remain under its control.⁹⁰ The Nationalist head of Congress, Mauricio Oliva, allegedly sought to undermine the dialogue by inviting the OAS to initiate a parallel study on electoral reforms in September 2018.⁹¹ Participants were also either unwilling or unable to reach consensus on certain key issues, such as whether presidents can run for multiple terms and whether presidential elections should include two rounds of voting.⁹²

Notwithstanding its failings, the dialogue has been a bright spot in a charged political atmosphere. In the words of one civil society leader, it functioned to some extent as a political “decompression mechanism”, though it has not been able to reverse the polarisation that divides the country.⁹³ It showed that political parties can reach agreement on at least some sensitive issues, and stoked political interest in reform efforts.⁹⁴

⁸⁶ Discussions focused on the 2017 electoral crisis and presidential re-election; human rights; constitutional reform and state strengthening; and electoral reforms. Crisis Group interviews, diplomats and UN officials, February-December 2018 and March 2019. “Se inicia el Diálogo Político Nacional en Honduras con la colaboración de la ONU”, UN News, 28 August 2018.

⁸⁷ “Diálogo político: 169 acuerdos serán enviados al Congreso Nacional”, *La Prensa*, 12 December 2018.

⁸⁸ Crisis Group interview, diplomat, Tegucigalpa, 5 December 2018.

⁸⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Libre members and UN officials, February 2018.

⁹⁰ On 19 March 2018, the government’s representative in the dialogue Ebal Díaz tweeted: “[O]ur position is that the dialogue table can’t give orders to the National Congress, the Judiciary, the Public Prosecutor’s Office or any state institution”. Crisis Group interviews, diplomats, Tegucigalpa, February-December 2018.

⁹¹ In July 2019, the OAS presented its reform proposals to the parties, except Libre, which did not take part in the meeting as part of its “legislative insurrection”. The “insurrection” dates to May 2019, when Libre deputies in Congress gave symbolic support to street protests taking place at that time through acts such as burning the constitution and throwing firecrackers during votes. Crisis Group interviews, diplomats and analysts, Tegucigalpa, 5-7 December 2018. “OEA dará asesoría al Congreso para la reforma electoral en Honduras”, *El Herald*, 24 September 2018. “Bancadas, a excepción de Libre, reciben documento entregado por OEA sobre reformas electorales”, *Proceso Digital*, 16 July 2019.

⁹² Crisis Group interviews, National Party representatives and diplomat, Tegucigalpa, 7 March 2019.

⁹³ Crisis Group interview, civil society leader, Tegucigalpa, 7 March 2019.

⁹⁴ Some analysts have argued that a weakened President Hernández has in effect transferred power to the head of Congress Mauricio Oliva, who, despite initial misgivings, led Nationalist efforts to build accords in Congress with the Liberals and the Libre party. Crisis Group interview, political analysts, Tegucigalpa, 4-7 March 2019.

It also produced some potentially significant results on electoral reform. By early 2019, lawmakers from the Liberal, National and Libre parties had agreed – consistent with the dialogue’s recommendations – to reform the Supreme Electoral Tribunal by replacing it with two new bodies and (with support from the EU) digitalise the personal identification system, both measures intended to improve the electoral system’s integrity.⁹⁵ In mid-September, Congress appointed the members of the new bodies, evenly distributing the posts between representatives of the country’s main parties.⁹⁶

Honduran lawmakers should now work to approve the electoral reforms agreed in the national dialogue process. Although Hernández is reaching the midpoint of his term, political parties are already starting to focus on primary elections. These soon will begin to absorb legislators’ attention and paralyse the already faltering legislative process.⁹⁷ The opposition for its part should also strengthen efforts to enact electoral reforms, instead of insisting Hernández resign immediately, which would force early elections. Early polls carried out without clear regulatory legislation of new electoral bodies and an incomplete reform process are not likely to pre-empt the kind of electoral disputes that spurred the 2017 post-electoral turmoil. International partners should also insist on the importance of implementing crucial electoral reforms – especially digitalising the voter registry – to avoid further upheaval after future polls.

More broadly, the government and opposition should build on last year’s dialogue to ease current tensions and prevent further violent clashes between protesters and security forces. The government should engage in substantive dialogue with health and education professionals on improving working conditions. It should also delay the entry into force of the new penal code, continue to discuss its contents with interested parties, including press associations, media outlets, the private sector, human rights defenders and anti-corruption activists, and show itself willing to rescind those parts of the code that risk criminalising dissent and enabling corruption and impunity.⁹⁸ For its part, the opposition should refrain from inciting the population to stage an “insurrection” and strive to keep protests peaceful.

⁹⁵ The rationale behind the reform is to restore credibility to electoral institutions and prevent future post-electoral turmoil. The Supreme Electoral Tribunal will be substituted by two new bodies: the National Electoral Council and the Tribunal of Electoral Justice. These two bodies will, respectively, oversee the administration of electoral cycles and settle election-related disputes. Crisis Group interview, diplomat and political analyst, Tegucigalpa, 4-6 March 2019.

⁹⁶ “Juramentos en el legislativo: asumen funcionarios del CNE, TJE y RNP”, *La Prensa*, 10 September 2019.

⁹⁷ Crisis Group interview, member of Libre, Tegucigalpa, 5 March 2019.

⁹⁸ These include the creation of the “crime against honour” for those who express critical opinions, or the reduction of sentences for certain crimes such as drug trafficking. “Nuevo Código Penal de Honduras: violación de libertades e impunidad, según organizaciones”, *El Nuevo Herald*, 3 August 2019.

III. Crime and Violence

Honduras has relied on a combination of *mano dura* (iron fist) law enforcement and extraditions to dismantle drug cartels and reduce murder rates, but the sustainability of this approach is doubtful. The downward trend in the homicide rate has recently reversed, while the population's perception of insecurity has worsened, prompting large numbers of civilians – many of whom feel that they are living under the de facto rule of criminal groups – to flee.

A. Organised Crime in Honduras

Honduras' thriving illicit economy is rooted, among other things, in the country's geographic position on drug trafficking routes from South to North America, weak institutions and security half-measures. These longstanding problems became worse in the aftermath of the 2009 coup.

Drug trafficking groups, present in Honduras since the heyday of Colombian kingpin Pablo Escobar in the 1980s, exploited the instability created by the coup to consolidate their territorial presence.⁹⁹ With the support of the Mexican cartels, the country's major smuggling clans – the *Valle* and the *Cachiros* – established control over the Honduran border with Guatemala and the northern Caribbean coast respectively, having already cultivated political influence and popular support in those regions.¹⁰⁰ The breakdown of the democratic system, its corrosive effects on political and judicial institutions, and the massive deployment of security forces to contain social unrest that followed the coup – which diverted those forces' attention from policing illicit activities – fostered the cartels' expansion.¹⁰¹ A U.S. government annual assessment of drug-related activities reported that 75 air flights believed to have transported cocaine from Venezuela into Honduras in 2010, compared to 54 in 2009 and 31 in 2008.¹⁰²

Disputes over drug routes soon turned violent. In 2012, the main groups entered a period of bloody turf wars. Cities San Pedro Sula and La Ceiba that were considered strategic because of their proximity to trafficking routes recorded homicide rates of 173 and 157 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants in 2012 respectively (up 41 per cent from 2009 in San Pedro Sula and up 35 per cent in La Ceiba).¹⁰³ Even now, some

⁹⁹ Crisis Group telephone interview, Pro Honduras Network, 17 July 2019. "Honduras and Venezuela: coup and cocaine air bridge", *Insight Crime*, 23 May 2018.

¹⁰⁰ These groups became one of the main sources of employment in many rural areas of Honduras and allegedly negotiated drug trafficking operations with local and national authorities. Crisis Group telephone interview, criminologist, May 2018. "The rise and fall of Los Cachiros cartel", *Revista Envío*, March 2015.

¹⁰¹ Other minor cartels benefited from the situation and expanded their activities, including the Atlantic Cartel, the Sula Valley Cartel, the Southern Cartel and the Olancho Cartel. "Transnational Organized Crime in Central America and the Caribbean", UNODC, September 2012, p. 44.

¹⁰² "2011 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report", U.S. State Department Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, Vol. I: Drug and Chemical Control, March 2011.

¹⁰³ "Boletín Nacional Enero a Diciembre 2012 – Ed. No. 28", Violence Observatory of the Autonomous University of Honduras, January 2013.

of the most violent Honduran municipalities are located along the country's main drug corridors.¹⁰⁴

Since 2012, authorities have made a pronounced effort to break up the main Honduran drug cartels. They captured and extradited many of the cartels' leaders to the U.S. for prosecution, prompting others to turn themselves in to U.S. authorities. But while this has broken up the cartels to a great extent, drug-related criminal activity has not fallen significantly and has (according to U.S. authorities) even been "revitalised" in recent years.¹⁰⁵ According to Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) estimates, in 2017 as much as 84 per cent of cocaine reaching its territory passed through the "Eastern Pacific" region, which includes Honduras as one of the main Central American hubs; this figure is up from 76 per cent in 2015.¹⁰⁶ U.S. authorities maintain that drug trafficking organisations have "begun moving drug shipments in smaller amounts to avoid detection and interdiction by Honduran authorities".¹⁰⁷

Beyond cooperation on extradition, the U.S. has provided counter-narcotics assistance in the form of training, technology and equipment to Honduran security forces. At times it has gone further. A series of interdiction missions the DEA conducted in partnership with Honduran authorities in 2012 resulted in deaths and injuries to innocent civilians. Most prominently, a May 2012 operation conducted by DEA and Honduran police officers in eastern Honduras left four people dead, including two women and a 14-year-old boy.¹⁰⁸

Criminal gangs have also thrived in Honduras – the number of gang members was once estimated to be the highest in the region, although El Salvador appears to have since surpassed it.¹⁰⁹ While gangs have been reported in Honduras since the 1970s, the largest groups took root in the early 2000s following mass deportations of convicted criminals from the U.S. to Central America.¹¹⁰ High urban poverty rates,

¹⁰⁴ "Crimen en Honduras: un producto de la geografía", *El Pulso*, 20 June 2019.

¹⁰⁵ Crisis Group telephone interview, Pro Honduras Network, 17 July 2019. "Carteles de Honduras reacomodan mando", *Proceso Digital*, 31 March 2019.

¹⁰⁶ "2018 National Drug Threat Assessment", U.S. Department of Justice – Drug Enforcement Administration, October 2018, p. 51.

¹⁰⁷ "2019 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report", U.S. State Department Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, Vol. I: Drug and Chemical Control, March 2019.

¹⁰⁸ "A Special Joint Review of Post-Incident Responses by the Department of State and DEA", May 2017.

¹⁰⁹ Estimates for Honduras' gang population vary considerably and are generally based on dated information. The UN Office on Drugs and Crime estimated that in 2012 there were approximately 12,000 gang members in Honduras, compared to 36,000 in 2007, but Honduran police authorities lowered the figure to around 5,000 in late 2018. El Salvador has now around 60,000 gang members according to police authorities. See "Transnational Organized Crime in Central America and the Caribbean", op. cit., p. 29. "The Problem with Counting Gang Members in Honduras", Insight Crime, 17 February 2016. See also Joana Mateo, "Street Gangs of Honduras", in Thomas Bruneau, Lucía Dammert y Elizabeth Skinner (eds.), *Maras. Gang Violence and Security in Central America* (Austin, 2011). Crisis Group Latin America Report N°64, *El Salvador's Politics of Perpetual Violence*, 19 December 2017. "Miembros de maras y pandillas se reducen de 25,000 a 5,000", *El Heraldo*, 24 December 2018.

¹¹⁰ See, eg, "Street Gangs of Honduras", op. cit.; "Gangs in Honduras", Insight Crime and the Asociación Para una Sociedad Más Justa, 21 April 2016; and "Maras y violencia. Estado del arte de las maras y pandillas en Honduras", Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 1 November 2016.

the disruption of family units caused by mass migration to the U.S., and weak and corrupt law enforcement all made Honduras fertile territory for gang expansion.¹¹¹ Groups such as the *Mara Salvatrucha* (MS-13) and the 18th Street Gang have proliferated over the past two decades and are considered largely responsible for Honduras' sky-high murder rate.¹¹²

Among the differences between the two largest gangs, the 18th Street Gang is often linked with extortion rackets, while the MS-13 is allegedly more involved in local drug peddling.¹¹³ Both activities drive high levels of violence in the fight for territorial control.¹¹⁴ Interviews with local authorities in San Pedro Sula indicate that from their perspective the MS-13 seems to use armed violence more sparingly and selectively, mainly to maintain its grip on illicit activities and expand its territorial reach. "With these guys [MS-13 members], at least you can talk", said a veteran politician.¹¹⁵ For its part, the 18th Street Gang seems more prone to violence to intimidate the communities under its sway, whether in Honduras or elsewhere in Central America.¹¹⁶ However, a 2016 study did not find any statistical difference in the number of homicides between areas controlled by the MS-13 and 18th Street gangs.¹¹⁷

The two larger outfits have managed to absorb many local groups over the past few decades, but others have also emerged to challenge them. Such is the case of the *Chirizos*, which got its start by taking on MS-13 in downtown Tegucigalpa.¹¹⁸ Many other gangs have emerged in the poorest neighbourhoods of San Pedro Sula, such as *Los Vatos Locos*, *Los Tercereños*, *La Ponce* and *Los Olanchanos*, which are in constant territorial dispute with one another, and rely heavily on the extortion of local businesses.¹¹⁹ These groups are often confused with extortion racketeers – ie, more traditional criminal cells that manipulate fear of gangs to coerce small and medium-size businesses. "[Y]ou do not even know who is extorting you", said one security expert.¹²⁰ According to a 2017 survey by the Honduran Council of Private Enterprise, more than 32,000 businesses had to cease their activities because of extortion in the last six years.¹²¹

¹¹¹ "Street Gangs of Honduras", op. cit.

¹¹² "2018 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report", U.S. State Department Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, Vol. I: Drug and Chemical Control, 17 March 2018, p. 184.

¹¹³ "Gangs in Honduras", op. cit.

¹¹⁴ Crisis Group telephone interview, security expert, 30 April 2019.

¹¹⁵ Crisis Group interviews, San Pedro Sula, 22-23 March 2018.

¹¹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian worker and security expert, Tegucigalpa, 6-7 March 2019. Crisis Group interview, senior Guatemalan government official, 5 December 2017.

¹¹⁷ "Gangs in Honduras", op. cit.

¹¹⁸ "Honduras: Los Chirizos, banda heredera del 'gato negro'", *La Prensa*, 22 April 2015.

¹¹⁹ "Barrio pobre, barrio bravo: la violenta historia de Rivera Hernández, Honduras", Insight Crime, 9 December 2015. Alberto Arce, *Novato en nota roja. Corresponsal en Tegucigalpa* (Madrid, 2015).

¹²⁰ Crisis Group interview, security expert, Tegucigalpa, 8 March 2019.

¹²¹ "La extorsión continúa atacando a comerciantes", *El Pulso*, 26 November 2018.

B. *Flawed Security Policies*

Honduras was a regional pioneer in iron fist security policies, which have become the norm in Central America over the past two decades.¹²² Its militarised approach to law enforcement reflects, among other things, the influence the armed forces have historically had in shaping public policies, the focus of foreign donors (especially the U.S.) on security assistance, and the weakness of civilian policing due to endemic corruption.¹²³ The same considerations that inflated the role of the military have generally undermined cultivating stronger prosecutorial and judicial capacity.¹²⁴

The Honduran strategy for managing gangs has been fairly consistent over the past two decades. Under Ricardo Maduro's administration (2002-2006), the country responded to the rise of organised gangs with an increased police presence in affected neighbourhoods, mass detentions of young people and heavy-handed law enforcement, including reported extrajudicial executions of young people.¹²⁵ Manuel Zelaya (2006-2009) promised to focus on economic opportunities and violence prevention. But little of what he pledged materialised, and efforts in this direction evaporated after the 2009 coup.¹²⁶ The subsequent Nationalist president Porfirio Lobo (2010-2013), an advocate of capital punishment, resumed the tough line of Zelaya's predecessor, but nevertheless saw a spike in homicides during his mandate.¹²⁷ Since 2014, under President Hernández's guidance, the Congress has strengthened anti-gang legislation and increased the security and defence budgets, to the detriment of social spending.¹²⁸

Hernández has a long record of looking to military measures to fight crime.¹²⁹ In his previous post as head of Congress, he was strongly supportive of the Public Order Military Police, under the aegis of the Defence Ministry, and Troop and Special Security Response Groups (TIGRES, a military unit inside the National Police trained with U.S. financial support.¹³⁰ In 2014, he created the Inter-institutional Security Force (FUSINA), an interagency task force of military, police and judicial person-

¹²² Crisis Group telephone interview, security expert, 30 April 2019.

¹²³ "Street Gangs of Honduras", op. cit. For context on the first responses to gang violence in Central America during the 1990s, see "Mafia of the Poor", op. cit.

¹²⁴ Crisis Group telephone interview, security expert, 30 April 2019.

¹²⁵ "Honduras: Zero Tolerance ... For Impunity: Extrajudicial Executions of Children and Youths since 1998", Amnesty International, 2003. Crisis Group interviews, security experts and criminologists, Tegucigalpa, June 2017.

¹²⁶ Crisis Group interview, security expert, Tegucigalpa, June 2017.

¹²⁷ In 2011, under Lobo's presidency, Honduras was the most violent country in the world not at war, with 86.47 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants. "Porfirio Lobo, el hombre del cambio", *El País*, 1 December 2009. See National Police data on murder rates at bit.ly/2NSBxic.

¹²⁸ The defence budget has constantly increased across Nationalist governments, doubling in value in ten years, now at around 8.5 billion lempiras (\$348 million). "En 4 mil millones de lempiras se aumentó gasto militar de Honduras en casi nueve años", *Tiempo Digital*, 17 December 2018.

¹²⁹ During his 2013 campaign, Hernández promised he would put "a soldier on every corner" to combat crime. Crisis Group interviews, diplomats and academics, Tegucigalpa, 2017-2018. "Honduras' Post-Coup Militarization", Council on Hemispheric Affairs, 5 April 2017.

¹³⁰ "Juan Orlando Hernández promete crear Policía Militar", *El Heraldo*, 18 July 2013.

nel.¹³¹ He also pushed in 2018 for the transformation of the National Anti-Extortion Force into a joint police, military and judicial force dedicated to combating gangs.¹³²

Setting aside whether the militarisation of anti-gang efforts has been effective, which is discussed below, it has had several drawbacks. For one thing, military units involved in public security have been implicated in the use of excessive or unlawful force to manage civil society activism and political dissent.¹³³ The Military Police allegedly killed at least thirteen protesters in post-electoral clashes in 2017.¹³⁴ A Military Police training officer was convicted in 2018 of recruiting the hitmen responsible for the notorious 2016 killing of environmental activist Berta Cáceres.¹³⁵ In gang-controlled communities, humanitarian workers report the alleged involvement of security forces, ostensibly there to fight organised crime, in committing abuses against local residents.¹³⁶ Moreover, relying on security forces may propel gangs' expansion in what experts call a "cockroach effect": while their area is occupied by these forces, some gang members seek refuge and settle elsewhere, installing local "cliques" before returning to their former territories once the occupation has ended.¹³⁷

Growing reliance on the military to perform law enforcement functions has also run parallel to a deep crisis in the Honduran National Police. Before Hernández took office, the Honduran government had made at least three attempts to reform the National Police to tackle widespread corruption and ineffectiveness – usually in response to scandals over criminal infiltration, corruption and abuse.¹³⁸ The latest attempt was prompted by a *New York Times* report in April 2016, which alleged that officers killed the head of anti-drug operations for the National Police, Arístides

¹³¹ Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, Tegucigalpa, March 2018.

¹³² "Fuerza Nacional Antimaras y Pandillas", Honduran Presidency, Secretariat of National Defence, 28 June 2018.

¹³³ "Piden disolver la Policía Militar hondureña y denuncian el peligro de los presos políticos", EFE, 27 June 2019.

¹³⁴ Crisis Group interviews, human rights advocates, Tegucigalpa, December 2017. "Violations of human rights in the context of the 2017 elections in Honduras", op. cit.

¹³⁵ According to independent investigators, the killing of Cáceres involved a much broader network of culprits, including state officials and business figures. On 4 July 2019, a hitman allegedly involved in a first attempt to kill Cáceres in 2015 was found dead in San Bartolo, Intibucá. "Represa de violencia. El plan que asesinó a Berta Cáceres", Grupo Asesor Internacional de Personas Expertas, November 2017. "Sicario contratado para asesinar a Berta Cáceres aparece muerto", *Criterio*, 6 July 2019. "La hija de Bertha Cáceres denuncia 'colusión entre militares y empresarios' para asesinar a su madre", *El País*, 10 September 2019.

¹³⁶ Crisis Group interview, humanitarian workers, Tegucigalpa, 6 March 2019.

¹³⁷ Crisis Group interview, security expert, Tegucigalpa, 8 March 2019. "Maras' y pandillas expanden células en 30 municipios", *La Tribuna*, 17 June 2019.

¹³⁸ "Purging and Transformation of the Honduran National Police Force", Asociación para una Sociedad más Justa, November 2016, p. 3. In October 2011, two university students, one of them the son of National University rector Julieta Castellanos, were murdered by on-duty police officers attempting to steal their car. The scandal pushed then-President Lobo to create the Directorate for the Investigation and Evaluation of the Police Career (DIECP in Spanish) to investigate police officers' conduct, in November 2011, and a special Commission for the Reform of Public Security (CRSP in Spanish) in February 2012. The CRSP was dissolved in 2014, while the DIECP evaluated 8,546 police officer over four years but removed only 227. David Dye, "Police Reform in Honduras: The Role of the Special Purge and Transformation Commission", Wilson Center, 21 June 2019. "Honduras student murders highlight crime concerns", BBC News, 23 November 2011.

González, on his morning commute in 2009, days after the arrest of twelve officers on drug trafficking charges.¹³⁹ The scandal led Hernández to create a special commission for police reform, which itself triggered a surge of dismissals for corruption and other wrongdoing.¹⁴⁰

These reform efforts have yielded mixed results. On the one hand, over three years, the special commission has dismissed 5,775 officers for corruption and other misdeeds, and pushed through new legislation to ensure better working conditions, including improved training and greater internal oversight for police officers.¹⁴¹ On the other hand, only 2,100 of those dismissed officials were denounced by the commission and investigated by public prosecutors for alleged collusion with illicit activities, and only one has been sentenced so far.¹⁴² Moreover, critics of the reform worry that the process has been insufficiently transparent and may in part be driven by political motivations – namely the desire to purge government detractors from the force.¹⁴³ They add that the failure to take prosecutorial action against or provide alternative employment for sacked personnel is particularly worrying given that many were dismissed for alleged links to criminal networks.¹⁴⁴ President Hernández in July launched the creation of a police unit tasked with investigating the alleged involvement of purged officials in illicit activities.¹⁴⁵

Honduras has also struggled to manage a dangerously overcrowded prison system. The prison population boomed in the late 1990s as a result of iron fist policies, which led to mass incarceration of gang members.¹⁴⁶ As happened elsewhere in the region, gangs took advantage of overcrowding, lax security and corrupt officials to turn prisons into their headquarters, from where they oversaw illicit activities on the outside.¹⁴⁷ Penitentiaries such as the one in San Pedro Sula became a symbol of the deterioration of the prison system as they fell under the rule of inmates.¹⁴⁸ A fire that swept through Comayagua prison in 2012, killing 382, drew attention to the extreme

¹³⁹ “Tres generales y un cartel: violencia policial e impunidad en Honduras”, *The New York Times*, 15 April 2016.

¹⁴⁰ The three senior police officers accused of González’s assassination deny the accusations and have been suspended from the police. “Purging and Transformation of the Honduran National Police Force”, Asociación para una Sociedad Más Justa, November 2016, p. 4. Crisis Group interview, civil society leader, Tegucigalpa, 7 March 2019.

¹⁴¹ Crisis Group telephone interview, member of the Special Commission for the Purging and Transformation of the National Police, 12 August 2019.

¹⁴² Of them, 100 were reportedly members or affiliates of the MS-13. Crisis Group interview, member of the Special Commission for the Purging and Transformation of the National Police, 7 March 2019. Nazario S., “Pagar o morir”, *The New York Times*, 31 July 2019.

¹⁴³ Crisis Group interviews, civil society members, Tegucigalpa, December 2017 and March 2019.

¹⁴⁴ Crisis Group interviews, civil society members, Tegucigalpa, December 2017 and March 2019.

¹⁴⁵ Hernández stated on 20 June that dismissed officials were behind the strike staged by police special forces in recent protests, although the strike was also motivated by demands for better working conditions. “Honduran police end strike as protests demand president quit”, AP News, 21 June 2019. “Crearán fuerza de élite para seguimiento a expolicías”, *La Prensa*, 19 July 2019.

¹⁴⁶ The prison population rate jumped from 109 inmates per 100,000 inhabitants in 1992 to 184 per 100,000 in 2000. See World Prison Brief Honduras page.

¹⁴⁷ “Mafia of the poor”, op. cit.

¹⁴⁸ “Where Chaos Reigns: Inside the San Pedro Sula Prison”, Insight Crime, 2 February 2017.

squalor and prisoner neglect in many jails.¹⁴⁹ In recent years, the government has tried to address both overcrowding and security issues, building two new maximum-security jails. Even so, prisoner numbers under Hernández have outstripped the capacity of these new facilities. In 2018 there were 229 inmates per 100,000 inhabitants, and jail conditions are still “deplorable” according to human rights groups, especially for minors.¹⁵⁰

Another chronic failing of the Honduran prison system is the lack of rehabilitation and reintegration policies.¹⁵¹ The Hernández administration has endeavoured to implement initiatives aimed at steering youth away from criminal activity – generally referred to as “violence prevention” programs – with limited success.¹⁵² It has created a dedicated (though underfunded) ministerial office to oversee the construction of infrastructure for these initiatives (for example new parks and “outreach centres” that are essentially recreational centres located in crime hotspots) as well as sports and cultural events.¹⁵³ USAID officials tend to tout the outreach centres as successful, and there is some evidence linking them to homicide reduction in some neighbourhoods of San Pedro Sula.¹⁵⁴

Still, the security gains resulting from these new public spaces appear somewhat superficial: critics maintain they have to be guarded by military units all day long, while gangs take back control at night. Residents have complained that the initiatives do not match communities’ needs, while consultants familiar with these projects suggest that their reliance on foreign government funding imperils their sustainability and prospects for long-term impact.¹⁵⁵

C. *Results and Areas for Improvement*

President Hernández has both claimed and received credit for his role in bringing down Honduras’ homicide rate over the past eight years.¹⁵⁶ “We are the ones who made this [model of homicide reduction] possible, something that is now being studied as a success in the world”, Hernández said in a March 2018 speech in the north-

¹⁴⁹ “Annual report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the human rights situation in Honduras”, OHCHR, 19 March 2018. “Comayagua, la peor catástrofe penitenciaria en Latinoamérica”, *El País*, 15 February 2012.

¹⁵⁰ See World Prison Brief Honduras page. Crisis Group interview, security expert, Tegucigalpa, 8 March 2019. Crisis Group telephone interview, human rights advocate, March 2017.

¹⁵¹ “Falta de control y rehabilitación facilita reyertas en cárceles”, *La Tribuna*, 17 June 2019.

¹⁵² The security tax is a measure levied on companies to help fund the country’s security initiatives, introduced in 2011. In 2018, it collected around \$110 million. Crisis Group interviews, security experts, Tegucigalpa, 2017-2019.

¹⁵³ The office received little more than 0.5 per cent of the national budget in 2018, and barely 2.5 per cent of the revenues of the special security tax, or around \$2.5 million, was allocated to prevention initiatives. “Solo un 2.5% del ‘tasón’ se destinó a la prevención”, *La Prensa*, 10 February 2019.

¹⁵⁴ Crisis Group interview, USAID consultant, Tegucigalpa, March 2017. “How the Most Dangerous Place on Earth Got Safer”, *The New York Times*, 11 August 2016.

¹⁵⁵ Crisis Group interview, security expert, Tegucigalpa, 8 March 2019. Crisis Group interview, monitoring and evaluation expert, June 2017.

¹⁵⁶ “Amid corruption concerns, Gen. Kelly made allies in Honduras”, AP, 12 April 2018.

ern city of La Ceiba.¹⁵⁷ That model relied in part on aggressive extradition policies that dismantled all the main drug cartels, particularly in the coastal and border regions where these outfits mainly operated, combined with intensified law enforcement.¹⁵⁸ The government also gives substantial credit to the 2014 creation of 30 Citizen Security Municipal Observatories (OMCSC in Spanish) in providing reliable local information and enabling tailored security interventions, enhanced by police reform.¹⁵⁹

But although the lower murder rate is certainly an achievement, it needs to be considered in a broader security context where many trends are not as positive. Even the area of homicide statistics contains much sobering news. For one thing, the decline in murders has slowed since 2016, with homicides even starting to creep back up at the height of this year's protests. Honduras currently seems on track to reproduce its 2018 murder rate of 40 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants, which, as noted above, made it the third most dangerous country in Latin America, right behind Venezuela and El Salvador.¹⁶⁰ Furthermore, the annual number of multiple killings increased by 32.3 per cent in the year to August 2019, according to the Honduran Observatory of Violence.¹⁶¹

Changing extortion practices may have a role in the declining rate. Some studies hint at the possibility that the MS-13 is ceasing this practice, at least in communities under its control, which would explain a decrease in the violence used as part of this racket.¹⁶² According to this analysis, the decision to pull out of extortion is made possible by the gang's growing participation in the more lucrative drug trade, and is intended as a way to build a loyal support base in communities.¹⁶³ By contrast, other local observers contend that the extortion business is actually thriving and becoming a more formal business operation. If it is so, the decrease in homicides may stem from increasing public resignation in the face of extortion and widespread payment to the gang of a "war tax", sparing payers' lives.¹⁶⁴

¹⁵⁷ Since 2011, this city's annual murder rate dropped from 173 to 44.7 per 100,000 inhabitants. "Boletín Nacional Enero a Diciembre 2018 – Ed No 52", Violence Observatory of the Autonomous University of Honduras, March 2019. "Presidente Hernández: Reducción de violencia es logro de todos los hondureños", Honduran National TV, 7 March 2018.

¹⁵⁸ Murder rates in the departments with stronger cartel presence have experienced a larger drop than others, although they remain the most violent areas. Crisis Group interviews, academics and security experts, 2017-2019. See figures from Violence Observatory of the Autonomous University of Honduras at bit.ly/2xOSOWE. "Crimen en Honduras", op. cit.

¹⁵⁹ According to the U.S.- and UN-funded regional information platform Infosegura, between 2015 and 2018 homicides fell by 34.1 per cent in municipalities with OMCSC presence, compared with 13.3 per cent in the others. For more information visit Infosegura's website.

¹⁶⁰ See the monthly evolution of homicides in the online platform of the National Police: bit.ly/31Zu6Zk. "Insight Crime's 2018 Homicide Round-Up", op. cit.

¹⁶¹ "Honduras registra 41 masacres en lo que va de 2019", *La Prensa*, 8 August 2019.

¹⁶² Crisis Group telephone interview, security expert, 30 April 2019. Douglas Farah and Kathryn Babineau, "The Evolution of MS-13 in El Salvador and Honduras", Center for Complex Operations (CCO) at the National Defense University, PRISM Vol. 7, No. 1, 2017.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Crisis Group interview, sociologist, Tegucigalpa, 5 March 2019. "Mareros extorsionan a través de 'car wash'", *La Tribuna*, 16 July 2019. "Honduras Drop in Homicides One Part of Complex Security Situation", Insight Crime, 27 June 2019.

Meanwhile, despite the reported reduction in homicides, many of Honduras' security indicators still reflect worrying trends. Gender-based violence indicators remain very high, with Honduras reporting the second highest femicide rate in Latin America, with 5.8 killings per 100,000 inhabitants.¹⁶⁵ Hate crimes have not decreased: 332 members of the LGBTI community have been murdered since 2009, with 26 alone in the first nine months of 2019, up from 25 in the whole of 2018.¹⁶⁶ While improving, the rate of unsolved murder cases remains around 90 per cent.¹⁶⁷ The fact that police investigative units are only present in 16 out of 298 of the country's municipalities does not help.¹⁶⁸

Consequently, the fall in homicides has not led to improved public perceptions of security, at least when measured over the last several years. A recent study by the Autonomous University of Honduras suggested that 42.8 per cent of participants believe insecurity to be the most pressing issue in the country, and 87.6 per cent feel insecure – 16.8 per cent more than the previous survey in 2016.¹⁶⁹ Despite reform efforts, distrust of security forces remains high. The Latinobarómetro 2018 survey showed that only 33 per cent of interviewees trusted the National Police, while 80.3 per cent of those who participated in a 2019 poll by the Autonomous University believe security forces are involved in corruption.¹⁷⁰ “They [the police and gangs] are the same thing. If I go to the police, in minutes I would have a gang member in front of my house”, said an asylum seeker who decided to flee his hometown after being harassed by a local gang.¹⁷¹

Since causes of gang violence in Honduras tend to be found in extreme urban poverty, impunity and lack of economic opportunity, future security policies should shift toward violence prevention, stronger powers of criminal investigation and security force accountability.¹⁷² Higher levels of investment in those violence prevention initiatives that seem most promising, and in effective rehabilitation programs for prisoners, would be a good place to start. Police reform should focus on empowering investigative units so as to combat high impunity rates for serious crimes such as murder, strengthening internal accountability mechanisms to sanction abuses of authority, and providing reintegration programs for dismissed officers. Reforms supported by the MACCIH, such as the Law of Effective Collaboration – still paralysed in Congress – would also provide a boost to Honduras' public prosecutors in their efforts to reduce impunity.

¹⁶⁵ “El Continuum de la violencia contra las mujeres en la región centroamericana”, UNDP report, January 2017, p. 34. For data on femicides, see the website of the Observatorio de Igualdad de Género.

¹⁶⁶ For figures on crimes against the LGBTI community see Cattrachas, a national organisation focused on the issue.

¹⁶⁷ “Segundo informe de Impunidad en Homicidios: Período de estudio 2010-2017”, Alianza por la Paz y la Justicia, 4 June 2019.

¹⁶⁸ Crisis Group interview, security expert, Tegucigalpa, 7 March 2019.

¹⁶⁹ “Percepción ciudadana sobre inseguridad y victimización en Honduras”, op. cit.

¹⁷⁰ “Informe 2018”, Corporación Latinobarómetro, 9 November 2018. “Percepción ciudadana sobre inseguridad y victimización en Honduras”, IUDPAS-UNAH report, February 2019.

¹⁷¹ Crisis Group interview, asylum seeker, Tegucigalpa, 22 February 2018.

¹⁷² “Street Gangs of Honduras”, op. cit.

IV. Migration and the U.S. Response

A. A Worsening Crisis

Driven by poverty and insecurity, which have been compounded in recent months by political unrest, waves of Hondurans continue to flee northward in search of safer and more prosperous lives.¹⁷³ U.S. authorities reported that they apprehended more than 240,000 Hondurans – 2.5 per cent of the country's population – seeking entry into the U.S. between October 2018 and August 2019.¹⁷⁴ Of these, 19,696 were unaccompanied Honduran children, and 182,449 were in families.

The primary driver of emigration is economic need. A total of 69.5 per cent of Honduran interviewees in a 2018 ERIC-SJ survey indicated lack of income as the primary cause for leaving the country.¹⁷⁵ According to World Bank estimates, one out of five Hondurans in rural areas lives on less than \$1.90 per day. Only 20 per cent of the total population earns the minimum wage of \$369 a month, well below the \$540 that the World Bank estimates is the monthly price for a “basket” of essential food sufficient to feed a family.¹⁷⁶ Climate change has made a bad situation worse, contributing to droughts that wrack 40 per cent of the country's territory, and affecting the livelihoods of 170,000 families, according to the National Commissioner for Human Rights.¹⁷⁷

Layered atop these economic concerns are deep worries about personal security. Among Hondurans who flee the country, between 20 and 40 per cent reportedly do so in part to escape violence.¹⁷⁸ According to a recent survey, almost one in every three Hondurans has a relative or acquaintance who left the country for this reason.¹⁷⁹ The percentage of women among the migrant population is a potential indicator: Mexican authorities reported a ratio of one woman to every three deported Honduran men in the first half of 2019, while it was one for every five in 2017, possibly a reflection of high rates of gender-based abuse, including strict anti-abortion laws.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷³ Sofia Martínez, “Today's Migrant Flow Is Different”, *The Atlantic*, 26 June 2018. Crisis Group Latin America Report N°57, “*Easy Prey: Criminal Violence and Central American Migration*”, 28 July 2016.

¹⁷⁴ For figures on U.S. southern border apprehensions see U.S. Customs and Border Protection's website.

¹⁷⁵ “Sondeo de opinión pública 2018”, ERIC-SJ, April 2019, p. 9.

¹⁷⁶ “The World Bank in Honduras, Overview”, World Bank Website. “Canasta básica de Honduras entre las más caras del mundo”, *Criterio*, 14 July 2018.

¹⁷⁷ “Estudio de caracterización del Corredor Seco Centroamericano”, FAO, December 2012, p. 42. “Sequía afecta cada año más de 170,000 familias: CONADEH insta al gobierno ubicar crisis alimentaria como tema principal en su agenda”, *Comisionado Nacional de los Derechos Humanos*, 18 March 2019.

¹⁷⁸ 26.2 per cent of interviewees in a 2018 ERIC-SJ survey identified violence and insecurity, alone or together with the economic situation, as the main cause for emigrating. A 2017 survey by Médecins Sans Frontières found almost 40 per cent of Honduran interviewees “left the country after an assault, threat, extortion or a forced recruitment attempt”. “Sondeo de opinión pública 2018”, ERIC-SJ, April 2019, p. 16. “Forced to Flee Central America's Northern Triangle: A neglected humanitarian crisis”, Médecins Sans Frontières, May 2017, p. 11.

¹⁷⁹ “Sondeo de opinión pública 2018”, op. cit., p. 16.

¹⁸⁰ Deportation figures from Mexican Secretariat of the Interior's website. Articles 126-128 and 132 of the Honduran criminal code sanction abortion in all instances, including rape and incest, and establish sentences of up to six years for women who practise it and up to ten years for those who induce

Parents may also emigrate to protect their children from armed gangs: a 2014 UN-HCR survey found that 44 per cent of children migrating from Honduras “were threatened with or were victims of violence by organised armed criminal actors”.¹⁸¹ Another explanation for the growing number of families and children travelling north is that human smugglers reportedly mislead migrants by convincing them it is easier to obtain refugee status in the U.S. if they travel with children.¹⁸²

Migrants fleeing Honduras are of course not an isolated population.¹⁸³ They join flows from other countries in the region – notably Guatemala, El Salvador and Mexico – who are similarly fleeing poverty and violence. Of the 740,000 citizens of these countries apprehended by U.S. authorities in the eleven months beginning October 2018, Hondurans account for almost a third.¹⁸⁴

B. Tough U.S. Migration Policies

For the Trump administration, with restricting immigration at the core of its political agenda, reducing flows across the southern border has become the defining objective of its relationship with Central American countries. In the service of this objective it has been willing to deploy forms of pressure that more traditional administrations would have considered off limits – including humanitarian and development aid cuts and tariff threats – and proved either blind or indifferent to the possibility that its policies may well, over time, worsen the situation it is trying to address. While the U.S. embassy in Tegucigalpa has both been a source of political support for the Hernández government and an occasional voice of restraint during the recent civil unrest, Washington’s insistence on measures to curb emigration increasingly drowns out all other messages.

U.S. immigration policy toward Honduras has three overlapping strands. One relates to dismantling or limiting mechanisms by which Hondurans can gain legal entry or the right to stay in the U.S. In May 2018, the U.S. government gave nearly 81,000 Hondurans who benefit from temporary protected status in the U.S. until January 2020 to seek alternative lawful immigration status or leave the country (the order is currently on hold following a court ruling).¹⁸⁵ More recently, in July 2019, the Trump administration proposed changes to the asylum system that would impede access to refugees who travel to the U.S. via a third country.¹⁸⁶ On 12 August 2019, the

or help a woman abort. “Life or Death Choices for Women Living Under Honduras’ Abortion Ban”, Human Rights Watch, 6 June 2019.

¹⁸¹ The survey was based on a 98-child sample. “Children on the Run”, UNCHR, 3 March 2014, p. 10.

¹⁸² Crisis Group telephone interview, IOM official, 20 August 2019.

¹⁸³ “Forced to Flee Central America’s Northern Triangle: A neglected humanitarian crisis”, op. cit.

¹⁸⁴ See U.S. Customs and Border Protection’s website.

¹⁸⁵ The administration has appealed an October 2018 federal court injunction that halted attempts to end the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) designations for immigrants from El Salvador, Haiti, Nicaragua and Sudan. Although immigrants with TPS from Honduras and Nepal were not included in that litigation, the administration agreed in March 2019 to link the status of Honduran and Nepali TPS recipients to the outcome of the existing case. “Honduras: Background and U.S. Relations”, op. cit. “Trump administration puts end of TPS on hold for Hondurans and Nepalis”, Vox, 12 March 2019.

¹⁸⁶ Despite widespread criticism, the U.S. Supreme Court allowed the administration to continue implementing the measure while related litigation proceeds. “Supreme Court Says Trump Can Bar Asylum Seekers While Legal Fight Continues”, *The New York Times*, 11 September 2019.

administration introduced a new rule that would weed out poorer immigrants by making applicants ineligible for temporary or permanent visas if they fail to meet income standards or receive public assistance such as welfare, food stamps, public housing or Medicaid.¹⁸⁷

A second strand of U.S. migration policy as it relates to Honduras concerns denial of entry and deportation. In order to seal the border to Central American and other migrants, the administration has deployed more than 6,000 soldiers to patrol the border with Mexico.¹⁸⁸ It has also strong-armed Mexico into tighter enforcement of its own southern border, as part of a deal struck by threatening a tariff hike.¹⁸⁹ In addition, both the U.S. and Mexico are deporting increasing numbers of Central Americans. Together they returned 75,279 Hondurans in 2018 and 90,109, as of 11 October 2019.¹⁹⁰ The flood of returnees – especially children – has placed enormous strain on the improved but still limited Honduran facilities tasked with providing assistance to them.¹⁹¹

Finally, the Trump administration has managed to pressure its southern neighbours to sign agreements committing to corral migrants seeking asylum in the U.S. It has sought asylum cooperation agreements with Mexico and the Northern Triangle countries (Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras) under which the counterparties promise to receive those who have applied for asylum in the U.S. and process their cases. Guatemalan President Jimmy Morales committed to such an agreement on 26 July after the U.S. threatened to impose travel restrictions on Guatemalans visiting the U.S. as well as tariffs and remittance fees.¹⁹² El Salvador and Honduras fol-

¹⁸⁷ The Trump administration finally issued the rule on 4 October, which would come into force on 3 November. “New Trump rule targets poor and could cut legal immigration in half, advocates say”, Reuters, 12 August 2019. “Trump’s order will deny visas to immigrants who lack health-care coverage”, *Washington Post*, 4 October 2019.

¹⁸⁸ “Pentagon to deploy additional 2,100 troops to U.S.-Mexico border”, op. cit.

¹⁸⁹ “Mexico’s Crackdown at Its Southern Border, Prompted by Trump, Scares Migrants from Crossing”, *The New York Times*, 24 June 2019.

¹⁹⁰ “Honduras: cifras oficiales de retornos”, IOM factsheet, December 2018. For 2019 and past years figures on returnees see Consular and Migratory Observatory of Honduras (CONMIGHO) website.

¹⁹¹ Recent improvements to the reception system include the creation of the Attention Centres which receive, orient and redirect returnees to their homes (only three of which exist to date), the General Directorate for the Protection of Honduran Migrants (a national registry system created in 2015 to administer reception and reintegration services) and a network of sixteen municipal units for the care of returnees created to expand reintegration services. Crisis Group telephone interview, IOM official, 20 August 2019. “Sustainable Reintegration: Strategies to Support Migrants Returning to Mexico and Central America”, Migration Policy Institute, January 2019, p. 20. Crisis Group interview, humanitarian worker, Bogotá, 13 June 2019.

¹⁹² On 12 August, President-elect Alejandro Giammattei stated that the agreement will need ratification by both U.S. and Guatemala legislative bodies. 40 per cent of Guatemalan exports go to the U.S., and remittances account for 12 per cent of GDP. “Trump’s Safe Third Country Agreement with Guatemala Is a Lie”, *Foreign Policy*, 30 July 2019. “Guatemala’s next president says ‘safe third country’ deal needs two congress ratifications”, Reuters, 12 August 2019.

lowed suit with similar agreements in September.¹⁹³ Mexico has so far declined to sign an agreement of this sort, but joined a protocol that entails similar measures.¹⁹⁴

Some observers note that the countries concerned are unsafe, lack the processing capacity to handle the influx of asylum seekers, and are likely to see the migrants settle in precisely the poor areas that their own people are already fleeing.¹⁹⁵ With respect to Mexico, media outlets report that waiting times for the more than 40,000 migrants under the protection protocol are extremely long, and they are exposed to rape, kidnapping and murder while they wait in dangerous border cities.¹⁹⁶

Even as U.S. policies place increasing strain on its southern neighbours and deny their most vulnerable citizens the release valve that a more generous migration policy would afford, the Trump administration has also cut aid to the region. President Trump announced in March 2019 that all aid to the three Northern Triangle countries, including much of the \$182 million in unspent funding destined for Honduras in 2017, would be frozen due to their alleged failure to halt emigration.¹⁹⁷ A total of \$432 million of previously approved projects and grants were restored in June, but on 16 July Trump announced the U.S. would not disburse any more aid to Honduras and Guatemala.¹⁹⁸ That same day his administration allegedly diverted \$41.9 million in humanitarian aid destined to those two countries to support the opposition in Venezuela.¹⁹⁹ Civil society organisations in Honduras supported by USAID, which have provided services to crime victims and returnees, as well as monitoring corruption and reform, fear they may lose all funding from the U.S.²⁰⁰

¹⁹³ "US signs asylum deal with Honduras, the latest in a string of agreements with Central America", CNN, 25 September 2019.

¹⁹⁴ "Mexico says no to safe third-country asylum discussion with U.S.", Reuters, 22 July 2019. The protocol (which advocates argue poses a security threat to asylum seekers obliged to wait in extremely dangerous border cities, such as Ciudad Juárez) was announced in January 2019 by then-Secretary of Homeland Security Kirstjen M. Nielsen.

¹⁹⁵ 90,000 Hondurans and Salvadorans filed asylum requests worldwide in 2018 alone. In 2018, Guatemalan authorities attended 262 requests. Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian worker, Bogotá, 13 June 2019; and IOM official, 20 August 2019. Crisis Group Latin America Report, *Mexico's Southern Border*, op. cit. "La exorbitante cifra de solicitudes de asilo que tendría que soportar Guatemala de convertirse en tercer país seguro", *Prensa Libre*, 26 July 2019.

¹⁹⁶ "Trump's 'Migrant Protection Protocols' hurt the people they're supposed to help", *Washington Post*, 18 July 2019. "How the U.S. Asylum System Is Keeping Migrants at Risk in Mexico", *The New Yorker*, 1 October 2019. "Number of Migrants Waiting at the U.S. Border Rises to 40,000", *Time*, 8 August 2019.

¹⁹⁷ Elisabeth Malkin, "Trump Turns U.S. Policy in Central America on Its Head", *The New York Times*, 30 March 2019. For a detailed breakdown of U.S. support to Honduras, see the "Monitoring U.S. Assistance to Central America" program page of the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA).

¹⁹⁸ The Democrat-led House of Representatives voted on 15 July to halt Trump's cuts, but the Republican-led Senate has yet to agree. Should the Senate approve it, the deal could become law even if Trump vetoed it so long as both chambers reject the veto with a two-thirds majority. "Trump: We're not sending money to Guatemala, Honduras", Fox 8 News, 17 July 2019. "United States-Northern Triangle Enhanced Engagement Act; Congressional Record Vol. 165, No. 118", U.S. House of Representatives, 15 July 2019.

¹⁹⁹ "Trump administration plans to divert \$40 million in aid to Venezuela's opposition", Reuters, 16 July 2019.

²⁰⁰ "USAID suspende ayuda económica de ONGs en Honduras", *Criterio*, 2 July 2019.

Washington has shown willingness to at least partly reconsider its decision after Central American governments signed the migration deals. On 16 October, President Trump praised Central American governments' commitment and promised to reinstate some aid, focused on security and law enforcement. He did not provide further information, but an anonymous source consulted by the *Washington Post* claims the amount of restored aid will be around \$143 million.²⁰¹

C. *Prospects for Reviving U.S. Assistance*

U.S. policy toward Honduras during the Trump administration has been increasingly driven by the administration's hostility to immigration, but it has also been shaped by a tight-fisted approach to foreign assistance that is linked to the president's inward-looking political agenda.²⁰² While Congress has generally served as a brake on the administration's efforts to slash foreign assistance, it is not clear whether it can resuscitate U.S. funding for Honduras. This may depend on whether a Republican champion emerges to push the White House on the kinds of development and institution-building programs that the government has traditionally viewed as both an investment in Central American peace and prosperity and a damper on the forces that drive migration.

Technical and political challenges will hamper any congressional effort to force the administration's hand and require it to restore funding. At a technical level, funding legislation for countries in the region has in recent years authorised the executive branch to spend "up to" a designated amount, leaving the White House and State Department discretion to spend at levels that fall short of the cap without technically running afoul of rules against "impoundment".²⁰³ While there has been some conversation among congressional staff about including more "directive" language that requires the administration to spend a definitive amount in the next funding bill, this is unlikely to clear the Senate, which is controlled by the president's Republican allies.²⁰⁴

The better route to restoring some assistance would be for a member of Congress with political sway in the White House to press for it. To date, however, Republicans who carry such weight have not sent clear signals about whether they are willing to do so. Without dismissing the possibility that Florida Senator Marco Rubio (who has traditionally shown interest in regional policy) or someone like him could push to restore some programs, staffers sounded a note of caution, pointing out that while congressional Republicans have in the past "gone along" with long-term institutional investments, they are sceptical about their effectiveness.²⁰⁵

Indeed members of both parties in the U.S. worry it has too little to show for earlier investments in Honduras and the other Northern Triangle countries, but there appears to be more support for restoring assistance among Congressional Demo-

²⁰¹ "U.S. restores aid to Central America after reaching migration deals", Reuters, 16 October 2019.

²⁰² "What 'America First' means for US foreign aid", Brookings, 27 July 2017.

²⁰³ Crisis Group interviews, congressional staffers, Washington, September 2019. Impoundment occurs when the U.S. government fails to spend money that has been appropriated by the U.S. Congress.

²⁰⁴ Crisis Group interviews, congressional staffers, Washington, September 2019.

²⁰⁵ Crisis Group interview, congressional staffers, Washington, September 2019 (noting that Republicans tend to associate programming of this nature with "nation-building").

crats.²⁰⁶ Some are of the view that for the U.S. to shut down foreign assistance in the face of the enormous hardships facing the Honduran people is both cruel and counterproductive, particularly where the curtailed programs seek directly to address specific drivers of migration.²⁰⁷ They also suggested that programs clearly addressing the latter – for example, through support for hunger alleviation – might be the most promising for attracting bipartisan congressional support.²⁰⁸

Organisations and governments that have traditionally worked with the U.S. in providing support to Honduras should encourage Washington to resume its assistance beyond the security realm. Until then, they should help fill funding gaps generated by the U.S. suspension. In particular, the EU and OAS should continue to offer support for institutional reforms and humanitarian aid, with the OAS focusing on capacity-building in the area of electoral reform and pushing for a renewed mandate for MAC-CIH. The EU should also continue to prioritise support for electoral reform, particularly digitising the voter registry, and press for accountability for alleged human rights violations in the state response to public protests. However, suspending the EU Association Agreement with Honduras, as some members of the European Parliament have proposed, would not be a constructive response to the government's crackdown on protesters earlier this year as it would merely worsen the country's economic predicament.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Crisis Group interviews, congressional staffers, Washington, September 2019.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ The EU is the second-largest Honduran trade partner. Around 16 per cent of Honduras' exports, valued at almost \$1.5 billion, head to EU countries. "Eurodiputados piden cancelar ayuda a Honduras e investigar acusaciones contra JOH", *Criterio*, 7 August 2019. For trade figures see the Observatory of Economic Complexity's website.

V. Conclusion

The June 2009 events solidified Honduras' status as one of the region's most unstable countries. An unresolved political crisis has bequeathed a divided, ever more belligerent opposition and a ruling party that has accumulated largely unchecked power across the breadth of the state and judiciary over the past decade. The country's judicial and electoral bodies have lost much of their legitimacy; corruption has burrowed deeper into many public institutions; and criminal groups have flourished. Poverty remains high, while the benefits of economic growth are spread unevenly.

Political unrest, violent crime and a surge in emigration are the price Honduras is paying. The post-electoral protests of late 2017 and the wave of unrest over health and education reforms earlier this year marked the most visible displays of political disaffection in recent years, while fresh turmoil could well follow the conviction of the president's brother for drug trafficking. But it is the relentless emigration of Hondurans northward that shows the depth of public despair. The exodus of close to 3 per cent of the nation's population since late last year and their journey to the Mexican border in the face of intimidating rhetoric from the White House should serve as a warning that increasing border and asylum controls may displace migration, but will not stop it.

Even though it may be difficult to change migration patterns dramatically any time soon, the country could begin to resolve its principal institutional and security dilemmas and improving the way it is governed, thereby setting itself up for greater stability over the longer term. Fledgling reform efforts nurtured in UN-led talks offer a start. The OAS-backed MACCIH anti-graft mission has done some good work and, if renewed, stands to do more. But donor support and encouragement will be important if this strained, poorly governed, and under-resourced country is to make meaningful progress in addressing the deep-seated challenges it faces. The U.S. – traditionally the country's biggest donor and most powerful partner – has a particularly important role to play.

The question is whether it will do so or instead mistakenly continue to turn bilateral relations into a transaction over migration control. Honduras urgently needs help in addressing some of the roots of its public discontent, as well as providing more security and economic opportunities for its potential migrants and refugees. A fixation on short-term results will only exacerbate the conditions that make Honduras an inhospitable home.

Bogotá/Brussels/Tegucigalpa, 25 October 2019

Appendix A: Map of Honduras



Appendix B: Fleeing the Grip of Gangs

Crisis Group interviews with Hondurans who have fled their homes show that gangs have become the de facto authority in many neighbourhoods. These testimonies illustrate how gangs exercise control over people living in their areas of influence through physical and sexual abuse, forcing affected residents to flee.

Rosa, 32 years old: *One day, my 14-year old daughter did not come back to school. I looked for her everywhere I could think of, desperate to find her. Finally, I went to a place where gang members usually “make people disappear”, and there she was. Thankfully, I knew one of the guys because I sell tortillas in the market, so he let my daughter go. We immediately ran away, who knows if that could happen again!*

Luisa, 51 years old: *I saw my son and my mother killed by the gangs in the same week. My son was killed because he refused to pay renta [extortion payment]. He was 21. My mother was killed because the marero came to my house and thought she was me. When I close my eyes, I can still see my son's entrails spread all over the floor. I want to leave Honduras no matter what. What can be worse than this?”*

Rodolfo, 34 years old: *I am a father of five, I used to live in a community controlled by the MS-13. These guys [gang members] are very noisy, and were partying all the time by our house. My mum is sick and she could not sleep well, so one day I went and talked to them, telling them to be respectful in the neighbourhood. They hit me until I was bleeding, and the next day a group of them came on their motorcycles making circles and firing their guns outside my house. When I saw that, I knew it was a sign for us to leave.*

Source: Crisis Group interviews, asylum seekers, Tegucigalpa, 2018. Names have been changed.

Appendix C: Migration

Table 1: Apprehensions in U.S. Southwest border by country and type

Single adults/Unaccompanied alien children/Family unit (2019 = TD AUG)

Single adults by country

Country	FY16	FY17	FY18	FY19
El Salvador	27,222	16,495	12,751	19,804
Guatemala	32,621	26,387	42,994	46,566
Honduras	22,258	17,110	26,161	42,783
Mexico	175,353	11,679	139,860	136,658

Unaccompanied alien children by country

Country	FY16	FY17	FY18	FY19
El Salvador	17,512	9,143	4,949	11,593
Guatemala	18,913	14,827	22,327	29,602
Honduras	10,468	7,784	10,913	19,696
Mexico	11,926	8,877	10,136	9,542

Family unit* by country

Country	FY16	FY17	FY18	FY19
El Salvador	27,114	24,122	13,669	54,915
Guatemala	23,067	24,657	50,401	182,467
Honduras	20,226	22,366	39,439	182,449
Mexico	3,481	2,271	2,261	4,312

* Family unit represents the number of individuals (either a child under 18 years old, parent or legal guardian) apprehended with a family member by the U.S. border patrol).

Source: U.S. Border and Customs Protection bit.ly/2Yx2cli.

Table 2: Hondurans returned from any country, January 2015 to 11 October 2019

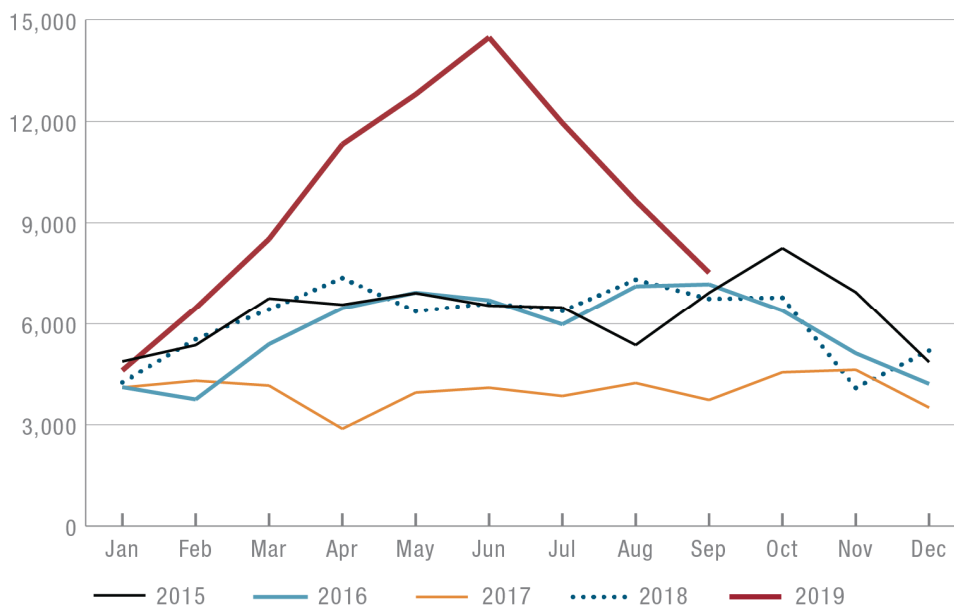
Month	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
January	4,875	4,114	4,104	4,255	4,610
February	5,362	3,750	4,306	5,537	6,472
March	6,759	5,392	4,161	6,432	8,523
April	6,573	6,465	2,879	7,367	11,320
May	6,920	6,934	3,955	6,377	12,797
June	6,545	6,705	4,098	6,612	14,480
July	6,490	5,981	3,852	6,389	11,951
August	5,364	7,120	4,238	7,319	9,655
September	6,930	7,180	3,734	6,750	7,529
October	8,251	6,396	4,557	6,782	2,772*
November	6,948	5,121	4,630	4,093	**
December	4,858	4,212	3,508	5,197	**
Total	75,875	69,370	48,022	75,279	90,109

* Until 11 October 2019.

** No data.

Source: Consular and Migratory Observatory of Honduras (CONMIGHO).

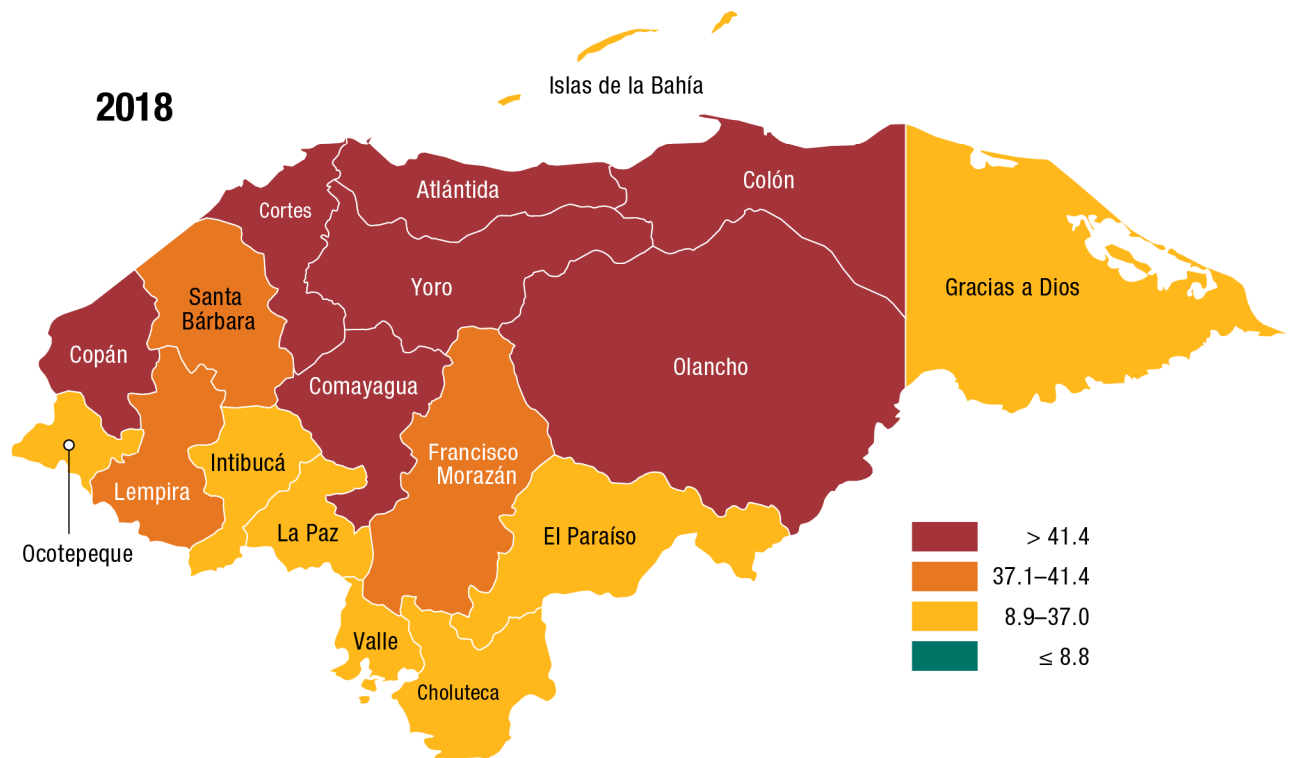
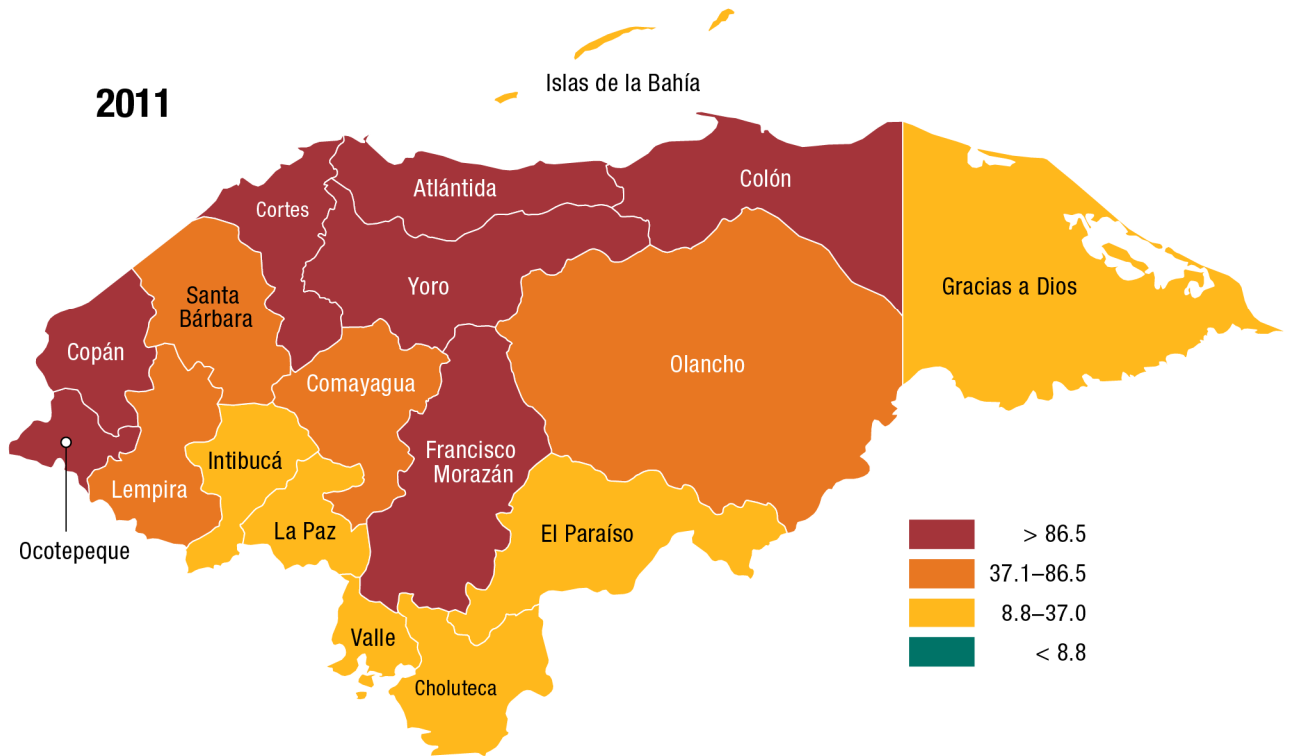
Graph 1: Hondurans returned from any country by month, January 2015 to September 2019



Source: Consular and Migratory Observatory of Honduras (CONMIGHO).

Appendix D: Homicides

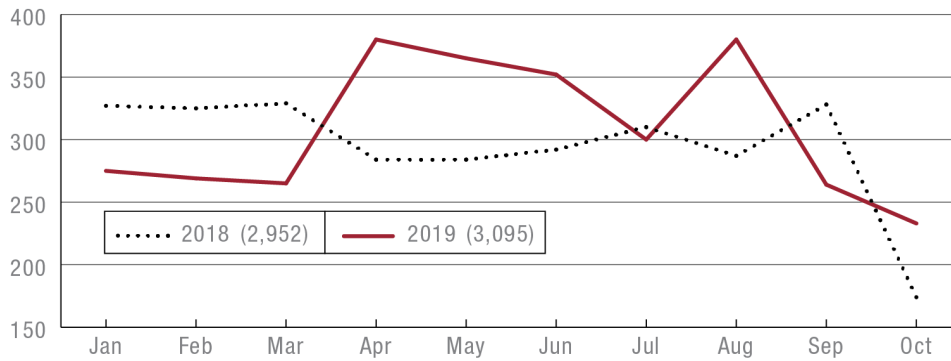
Comparative maps of homicide rates by department 2011 and 2018



Crisis Group / KO / 2019 (base map from © Vemaps.com).

Source: Violence Observatory of the Autonomous University of Honduras, 2011 and 2018.

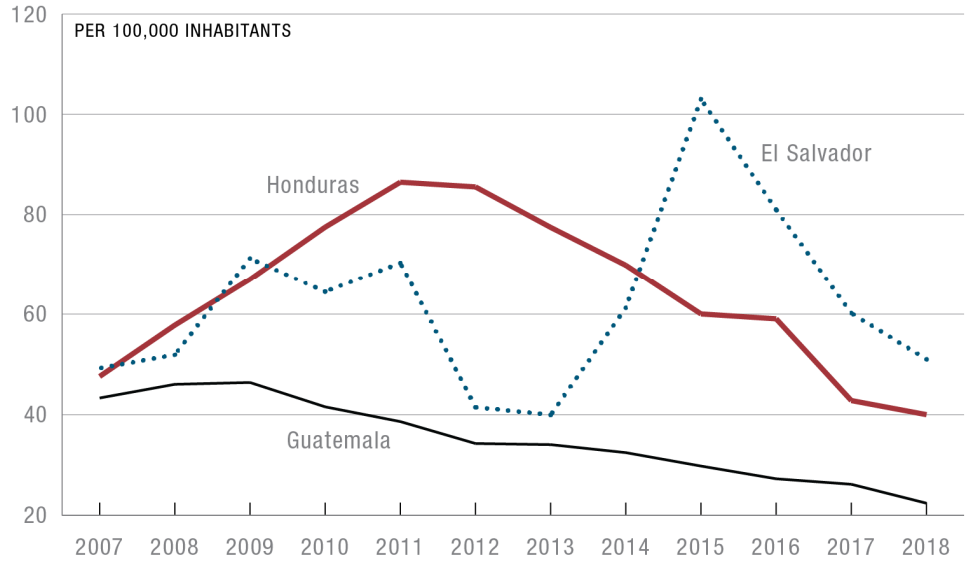
Graph 2: Comparative number of homicides in Honduras by month, January to 21 October 2018 and 2019



Month	2018	2019
January	327	275
February	325	269
March	329	265
April	284	380
May	284	365
June	292	352
July	310	300
August	287	380
September	328	264
October (until 21)	186	245
Total	2,952	3,095

Source: Security Secretariat, Honduras National Police.

Graph 3: Homicide Rates 2007 to 2018 in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras



Source 2007-2017: National Police of Nicaragua, Annual statistics, 2007-2017 (per year); Ministry of Justice and Public Security of El Salvador, Directorate for Information and Analysis, Total amount of homicides 2007-2017 (per year); Secretary of Security of the National Police of Honduras, Department of statistics – Directorate for planning, operational proceedings and continuous improvement, December 2018; Tweet from Ministry of Interior of Guatemala, "Historic comparison of homicides per 100,000 inhabitants", 31 August 2018; Vice Ministry of Peace of Costa Rica, Observatory of violence, Tables and charts.

Source 2018: Insight Crime 2019.

Appendix E: About the International Crisis Group

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Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 70 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

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