



Honduran human rights leader to visit Ottawa and urge MPs to put human rights first

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Prominent Honduran human rights activist Bertha Oliva, general coordinator of the Committee of Relatives of the Disappeared and Detained in Honduras (COFADEH), will visit Ottawa on April 8, 2014 to urge that Canadian trade and investment not trump human rights.

Ms. Oliva will provide first hand testimony to the Parliamentary Subcommittee on International Human Rights (SDIR) and the Standing Committee on International Trade (CIIT) about serious, systematic, increasing human rights abuses in Honduras, as well as concerns that they will be exacerbated by the Canada-Honduras Free Trade Agreement (CHFTA).

Recent reports by [Human Rights Watch](#) and [Amnesty International](#) echo the concerns of Ms Oliva, painting a highly disturbing panorama of police corruption, militarization, lack of judicial and prosecutorial independence, as well as targeted violence against human rights defenders, women and girls, Indigenous, Afro-descendant and *campesino* (peasant) communities, and LGBTI people. These violations take place in a context where impunity for human rights violations is endemic and where organized as well as common crimes are high. The homicide rate in Honduras remains the highest in the world.

“Ms. Oliva has enormous experience, respect and credibility when it comes to assessing the human rights situation in Honduras and for this reason it is imperative that MPs listen carefully to her assessment,” said Tara Ward, Co-Chair of the Americas Policy Group (APG). “It is crucial that MPs take seriously their responsibility to ensure that Canadian policy does not make a bad situation worse.”

Ms. Oliva and human rights organizations in Honduras, together with a broad range of civil society organizations in Canada, are deeply worried about the impact that the trade deal will have on human rights in Honduras. Investors’ rights enshrined in the trade deal enable corporations to sue the Honduran state in international tribunals, undermining the state’s capacity to uphold human rights that may come into conflict with corporate interests. Meanwhile, labour and environmental side agreements lack enforcement mechanisms, providing little protection for Hondurans.

Concern regarding the impact of Canadian investments on human rights is substantiated by several cases. For example, Goldcorp's San Martin mine in Siria Valley, which operated from 1995-2008, led to severe water depletion and health impacts related to contamination, in addition to repression of the local population, as documented in studies by the [Institute for Environmental Rights in Honduras \(IDAMHO\)](#), as well as in [tests carried out by the Honduran government with Caritas Tegucigalpa](#).

On the northern coast of Honduras, Afro-Indigenous Garifuna communities are resisting the incursion of tourism investors, among these, Canadian pornography mogul and CEO of Life Visions Properties Randy Jorgensen. Garifuna communities allege that the creation of Jorgensen's “Banana Coast” mega-tourism project has involved the illegal purchasing of their communal land, leading to their forced eviction.

Ms. Oliva will visit Toronto, Six Nations, and Montreal from April 7 to 11, 2014, as part of the “Building Solidarity with Honduras: Peoples' Rights over Corporate Rights” tour organized by 25 organizations across Canada and Quebec. Ms. Oliva’s visit to Ottawa is sponsored by the APG and its members,

including the Canadian Union of Public Employees and the PSAC Social Justice Fund. For more details, click [here](#).

-30-

Background

In 2009, a military coup in Honduras deposed democratically elected left-of-centre President Manuel Zelaya. Elections after the coup, which brought Porfirio Lobo Sosa of the conservative National Party to power, were deeply flawed and seen as a mere continuation of the de facto government. Canada was quick to recognize Lobo's victory, stating that elections “appear to have been run freely and fairly.” Despite the procedural irregularities, as well as violence and intimidation, which marked elections in November 2013, Canadian officials attended the inauguration of Lobo's successor, Juan Orlando Hernandez, also of the National Party, legitimizing his government.

Despite the democratic deficit, as well as an alarming climate of violence and repression in Honduras, the Canadian government has only deepened its political support for, as well as economic ties with, the Central American country, most notably through the Canada-Honduras Free Trade Agreement (CHFTA).

The Canada-Honduras Free Trade Agreement (CHFTA)

The CHFTA was signed in November 2013, without regard for troubling testimony given during hearings of the Parliamentary Subcommittee on International Human Rights regarding grave human rights concerns in Honduras. The bill to implement the trade deal (C-20) passed its Second Reading on March 31, 2014.

Concerns have been further fuelled by experience under the Canada-Colombia Free Trade Agreement and the failure of the Canadian government to take seriously a requirement to annually assess and report on human rights effects of the trade deal.

The Committee of Relatives of the Disappeared and Detained in Honduras (COFADEH)

COFADEH is a leading Honduran human rights organization, which seeks justice for current human rights abuses and for “disappearances” by state security forces in the 1980s, and trains local human rights activists. Ms. Oliva has become an emblematic presence in the Central American human rights movement and is one of the leading voices of resistance to state repression.

The Americas Policy Group (APG)

The Americas Policy Group (APG) is a working group of the Canadian Council for International Co-operation. APG brings together dozens of international development and humanitarian NGOs, human rights groups, labour unions, research institutions, church and solidarity groups in Canada to work on policy issues related to development and social justice. The socio-political situation in Honduras has been a focus of APG's work for the past few years, since many members of APG are involved on the ground and have close links with local organizations.

APG calls upon parliamentarians to bear in mind Berta's testimony when asked to vote upon the bill to implement the trade deal, when it enters its Third Reading. We also urge the Canadian government to use all means at its disposal to firmly and consistently press for effective action to protect human rights, including, amongst others, the right to freedom of expression, the right to organize, and the right to free, prior and informed consent regarding projects that will affect Indigenous peoples.

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