

An Introduction to Honduras

The basics

Located in the middle of Central America, Honduras occupies 112,000 square kilometers-the same area as Louisiana. Bordered by Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua, Honduras has a long Caribbean coastline. The country has access to the Pacific through the Gulf of Fonseca. Flat coastal plains in the north and south are separated by a mountainous interior.

The country's population of 6.5 million people is young; 42 percent are age 14 or younger. Most Hondurans are mestizos-a mixture of European and native blood. About half a million Hondurans belong to an ethnic group, the largest being the Afro-Caribbean Garifuna, who live along the north coast, and the indigenous Lenca, most of whom live in the mountainous province of Intibucá. Smaller indigenous groups include the Miskitos, Tawakha, Pech, and the Maya Chorti.

Honduras is often referred to as a "poor country," yet that characterization is not really accurate. Honduras possesses abundant natural resources, yet they have long been controlled by foreign corporations and a small wealthy elite. The country's richest ten percent of the population has an annual income that is 119 times the income of the poorest ten percent. By contrast, the ratio is 49 in Brazil, 26 in Mexico, 17 in the United States, and five in Finland.

According to government figures, 48.9 percent of the population lives on less than one dollar a day-what the United Nations characterizes as "extreme poverty." Another 17.3 percent survives on between one and two dollars a day.

Poverty is worse in rural areas, where 61 percent of the population lives on less than a dollar a day. Almost 48 percent of rural school children are malnourished, compared to 28.5 percent of urban school children. The numbers would be even worse if all kids enrolled; 6 percent never enroll in first grade, and only 67 percent make it through sixth grade. The average Honduran has only 4.6 years of schooling.

Some history

Soon after the arrival of the Europeans, the exploitation of people and natural resources began. As many as 150,000 indigenous people in Honduras were enslaved by the Spanish and shipped off to sugar plantations and mines. Hundreds of ships full of mahogany sailed from Honduras to help rebuild London after the Great Fire of 1666. Mining companies from the U.S. showed up in the 19th Century, yet in addition to extracting silver and gold from under the ground, these companies also undermined the development of responsible governments by bribing authorities to keep taxes at a minimum. In the 20th Century, U.S. banana companies took over, controlling Honduran economic and political life for decades and defining a pattern of land use that left peasant farmers with little access to the country's most productive farmland. Honduras became known as the quintessential banana republic.

Worried about growing insurgency in the region, the government launched a timid

land reform in the 1960s, but it didn't touch the fertile farmland controlled by foreign companies. Instead, it pushed landless peasant families onto steep forested areas where they practiced slash and burn agriculture, provoking deforestation, erosion, and the steady disappearance of water sources.

From 1963-1982, Honduras was ruled by a series of military officials who converted the country into a base of operations for the U.S. government's militarization of the region. During the same period, the U.S. trained a battalion of the Honduran military that began disappearing student leaders, peasant organizers, and church activists-- anyone in Honduras who dared to speak out against government repression.

During the 1980s, Honduras began a slow process of demilitarization and democratization. This continued in the 1990s, as Honduras put the police under civilian control and did away with forced military recruitment. It wasn't until 1999, however, that Honduras got its first civilian defense minister. One element of this modernization has been an investigation into human rights abuses in the recent past. Unfortunately, the CIA and several other U.S. agencies refused to release secret files that would have helped civilian officials in Honduras learn more about the operations of military-run death squads in the 1970s and 1980s.

A huge foreign debt run up by the generals in preceding decades left Honduras crippled by interest payments in the 1990s. To pay northern banks, the government was forced to cut back services and support for rural farmers. With less agricultural credit and fewer seeds, as well as fewer teachers and doctors in the countryside, and with coffee prices falling to a historic low, migration to urban centers accelerated, encouraged by the installation of hundreds of maquilas during the last decade. Located mostly along the north coast near San Pedro Sula, these assembly plants-- many owned by Korean corporations--today employ some 120,000 Hondurans. The maquilas often serve as a trampoline, luring young women and men from rural villages to the city, where they work long enough to save what they need to pay a migrant smuggler to take them north to the U.S. While the maquilas provide much needed employment for poor Hondurans, the rights of maquila workers are regularly and systematically violated.

Hondurans living abroad will send home between \$600-800 million this year, making family remittances the largest single source of hard currency. In other words, people have become the primary export product of Honduras. Yet these remittances, while a more democratic source of income than traditional products like bananas, tend to be used in consumption and not invested. A challenge facing churches and development agencies today is how to help channel remittances in a more just way, without the huge fees imposed by Western Union and other companies, while at the same time helping families in Honduras to use the money productively.

Churches

The arrival in Honduras in 1521 of Franciscan missionaries provided an ideological base for economic conquest. For centuries the Catholic Church was dominated by foreign clergy who often aligned themselves with the economic elite

and seldom addressed the sinfulness of social injustice. In the 1960s, Catholic clergy and lay leaders slowly began criticizing the oppression of the poor, though the assassination of two priests in 1975 by large landowners in Olancho chilled the zeal for justice of many. In recent years, the church's social ministry-Caritas-has taken a leading role in organizing civil society to address issues such as migrant rights, land reform, and government transparency. Cardinal Oscar Andres Rodriguez, the archbishop of Tegucigalpa, has become the Vatican's eloquent point man for reducing the debt burden on poor countries.

Protestant missionaries, including Anglicans and Methodists from Britain, came to the country's Caribbean coast in the 19th Century to establish churches among English-speaking residents. The arrival of U.S. banana companies in the early 20th Century also meant the beginning of evangelization by U.S. Protestant and Evangelical missionaries, who often hitched rides on the banana boats.

Evangelical missions from the U.S. stepped up their presence in Honduras in the 1950s, beginning to challenge Catholics for religious hegemony (a development that encouraged Catholics to rethink their pastoral styles and develop new lay pastors and celebrants). Pentecostal churches found particularly fertile ground in the burgeoning marginal barrios of newly arrived urban migrants. Major disasters, such as Hurricane Fifi in 1974 and Hurricane Mitch in 1998, occasioned new waves of Evangelical presence. Neopentecostal churches blossomed in the 1990s as the wealthy grew increasingly uncomfortable with the Catholic Church's newfound interest in social justice.

While competition between denominations was the norm, some Protestants and Evangelicals worked ecumenically. Notable among these efforts was the Christian Commission for Development, a rural development and human rights group formed in 1982, and the Honduran Theological Community, an ecumenical seminary in Tegucigalpa launched in 1998. As Honduras entered the new millennium, more and more Evangelical and Protestant denominations were thinking and acting independently of their northern "mother churches," developing national leadership and autochthonous theologies.

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