

## EXCERPT

# In Honduras, the U.S. War on Drugs Is Empowering Corrupt Elites

The Central American country has become a transit zone for drug traffickers and the center of a biofuel boom. Dispossessed indigenous groups are paying the price.

BY ANTONY LOEWENSTEIN | DECEMBER 11, 2019, 8:19 AM

**H**onduras is a key transit country for drugs being trafficked to the United States from South America, especially for “cocaine-laden aircraft departing from South America,” the U.S. State Department noted in its [2018 International Narcotics Control Strategy report](#).

As a result, Honduras is one of the [most violent](#) countries in the world. Huge numbers of Hondurans and other Central American citizens are [fleeing](#) due to drug- and gang-related activities. Many have headed for the United States, desperate to escape [instability](#) often caused by Washington’s support for the so-called war on drugs. Roughly [425,000 unauthorized migrants of Honduran origin](#) were recorded in the United States in 2016.

Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández is mired in controversy, accused of fraudulently [rigging](#) the 2017 election in his favor. And yet the Trump administration remains a [strong supporter](#) of his government due to its backing for Washington’s immigration and drug policies.

Traveling through the Honduran interior reveals the extent of the country’s descent into chaos. It isn’t a war zone in the traditional sense; insurgents aren’t targeting foreigners or engaging in attacks that kill indiscriminately. But the countryside is home to rampaging soldiers and gangs, along with police who routinely harass locals.

*Pills, Powder, and Smoke: Inside the Bloody War on Drugs.* Antony Loewenstein, Scribe, 352 pp., \$19, November 2019.

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Virtually everybody I met on a visit in 2016 was scared or cautious when talking about the government and security forces. Relative calm was deceptive even in a pretty city such as La Esperanza, located in the southwest of the country. At its center were bustling fruit and vegetable markets, and children played soccer on a green field. The name “Berta” was spray-painted everywhere —a reference to the environmental activist Berta Cáceres, who was **murdered** in the city in 2016. Even on the outside walls of the local prison, there were two massive color murals of her face. Next to one was a message about police death squads that read, “Police dickface.” Elsewhere it read, “Police hit man.” The authorities hadn’t removed them.

The Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (Copinh), the local organization founded by Cáceres, operates a network of community services in the area, including the House of Healing for domestic violence victims. Its manager, Lilian Esperanza López, explained that its purpose was to “fight machismo,” support assaulted women in a society that rarely did so, and back families who had been displaced by deforestation.

“Berta taught us to resist,” she said. After the 2009 coup—which overthrew democratically elected President Manuel Zelaya, replaced him with Roberto Micheletti, and was **supported** by U.S. President Barack Obama’s administration—emergency contraception for women was outlawed, and abortion is now **banned** in all circumstances, despite the country having one of the highest rates of sexual violence in the world outside an official war zone.

The Copinh headquarters, which was called Utopia, was in a luscious green field. It had the feel of a community center with training facilities, dorm rooms, and large meeting spaces. One Copinh leader was José Asunción Martínez, a kind-looking man wearing a cap, colorful scarf, denim jacket, and jeans. He lived in Santa Elena, a community near the border with El Salvador. We sat around a sheltered wooden table as the rain began to pour. A dog started chasing a nearby bull, causing the chickens to revolt and squawk. Like so many Copinh members, Asunción Martínez offered political analysis that wasn’t theoretical but gained from living with the daily threat of state assassination.

“The role of Washington is to work with the Honduran government to repress indigenous communities in the country,” he said. “Thirty-five percent of Honduras has concessions for oil, gas, and hydro-electric projects on indigenous lands. ... It’s illegal.” He called the concessions, often given without consulting local communities, “projects of death,” mainly mining and hydropower projects.

Martínez opposes the presence of the United States and European Union in his country, because their agenda has never been publicly admitted. “They say they’re here to back the Honduran government and strengthen the military, but it’s really just a way to grow **U.S. bases**,” he said. “The Honduran government allows more U.S. bases even though it claims it’s fighting the war on drugs. It’s militarizing indigenous land.”

Although Asunción Martínez believed that the murder of Cáceres had strengthened the Copinh struggle, he recognized that Honduras was infected with drug money. “Our country is a narco-state with narco-mayors and narco-MPs,” he said. “They get funded by drug traffickers, and when they get into power they have to pay traffickers back.”



In the north of the country, citizens face similar threats. In the city of La Ceiba, gangs increasingly control the streets. Public buses have been attacked, with drivers threatened and killed. I was shown a shocking video on a cell phone, in black and white with no audio, of a female gang member pulling a gun on a bus driver while he was driving. She shot him dead. The passengers were terrified, and the bus crashed. The woman was eventually caught after being identified on Facebook.

In nearby Tocoa, it was indigenous leaders and peasants who felt the wrath of the state. Vitalino Álvarez, 53 years old with seven children, was a high-profile member of the United Peasant Movement and a *campesino* leader. His name appeared on a **military hit list**, alongside that of Berta Cáceres and dozens of other environmental and social activists, used by United States-trained special forces to eliminate enemies. Having survived at least four assassination attempts since 2010, Álvarez was named by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in 2014 as needing urgent protection. He never received it.

“When Berta was killed, I became top of the list,” Álvarez said. “Seventeen days after Berta’s murder, they tried to kill me. I had participated in protests and supported her. Men on motorcycles came to my landlord and wanted to know where I was, but I wasn’t

home. They were angry. I left the area with my two kids immediately by taxi. I gave them money in case I was killed or injured.”

Additionally, much of Honduran media reinforced the religious nature of the country and rarely reported honestly about the endemic political corruption. As we spoke, a poll appeared on Honduran state TV: “How believable for you is the fact that the Virgin Mary is seen crying today?” Seventy-seven per cent said it was very believable. Such polls were a convenient distraction for a general public that knew the dysfunctional reality all too well.

Another campesino leader was Johnny Rivas, a member of the United Peasant Movement in the Bajo Aguán region. He was also placed on the military hit list. During a meeting of farmers in Tocoa, he told me that much of his people’s farmland in this agricultural heartland had been turned into palm oil plantations owned by the multimillionaire Miguel Facussé Barjum’s company, Dinant. Ten oligarch families dominate the industry and most the country, with some estimates asserting they **own 90 percent of the country’s wealth**. The West’s obsession with reducing its carbon footprint is **directly connected** to the dirty war in Honduras and the mass expansion of palm oil production.

The World Bank backed these programs two decades ago, which forcibly took land from local farmers and gave them to agribusinesses to develop African palms. These plants were then sent around the world for biofuel and often exchanged in a lucrative carbon credit market.

Despite the huge profits that biofuel brought, the same farming land has also been used by traffickers to smuggle drugs. Honduras is a convenient midpoint on a flight path from Colombia to the United States, and a **huge amount of cocaine** is now flowing from Colombia, through Honduras, and into the U.S. market.

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“Drug traffickers buy land and have cattle here, but this is cover for building landing strips,” to facilitate the transportation of drugs from South America to the United States, Rivas said. “Drugs are not produced here, just delivered,” although there’s evidence that cartels are increasingly **farming** coca in Honduras.

Drug trafficking has affected the Bajo Aguán region. It has reduced the campesinos' land holdings, but their conflict isn't with the traffickers. "We have no friction with drug traffickers, but private security companies, protecting the landowners, work with police, military, and traffickers. The traffickers keep to themselves and don't bother us," Rivas said.

WikiLeaks' state department cables **confirmed** what I had heard in the Bajo Aguán region. Since the 2009 coup, the government had worked with landowners in the area to secure territory for biofuel production through intimidation, coercion, and bribery. One of the leading businessmen was Facussé Barjum, who died in 2015, and his private security guards stood accused of killing dozens of peasant activists who resisted their moves. His guards worked with the Honduran police and military, both of whom received huge amounts of funding from the U.S. government to fight its drug war.

The cables **showed** that the United States government had been aware of Facussé's role as a cocaine importer since 2004 but had done nothing to stop its money going to fund, train, and maintain Honduran forces working alongside his team. One cable from 2004, titled, "Drug Plane Burned on Prominent Honduran's Property, stated that, "a known drug trafficking flight with a 1,000 kilo cocaine shipment from Colombia ... successfully landed March 14 on the private property of Miguel Facusse." Facussé controlled at least one-fifth of the land in the Bajo Aguán region—22,000 acres with African palms covering the territory for his burgeoning biofuel business.



Heading further into the area controlled by traffickers revealed even greater desperation among civilians. The drive from Tocoa to Vallecito village was mostly on dirt tracks; there were 30 families in brick and concrete homes, with many new structures being built with tin and wood.

Upon my arrival, my guide, fixer, and I were fed a basic meal of fresh fish, rice, and beans by a local family. White-tipped fences stretching for miles indicated that, years ago, like in other parts of the country where such fences **signified** drug smuggling activity, the property behind them had belonged to the Los Cachiros drug cartel family. They used to control the land, but heads of the family were extradited to the United States on drug charges, and their property was transferred to the Honduran government.

**What happened** to the two brothers behind the Los Cachiros gang revealed a familiar tactic employed by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration in Honduras and

globally: Offer leniency to the Los Cachiros group, or other major cartels, in exchange for evidence of collaboration between traffickers and the elites (not the favored, drug-connected elites of the U.S. government but drug cartels that both Washington and the Los Cachiros wanted to take down). It was impossible to know what the victims' families in Honduras thought of the arrangement, as they were never asked about it.

Devis Leonel Rivera Maradiaga and Javier Eriberto Rivera Maradiaga ran a brutal enterprise while living lavishly, **killing at least 78 people** since 2003 and building an empire as middlemen by moving huge amounts of drugs from hidden airstrips in Honduras to Mexican cartels (who then sent it onto the United States). They bought off politicians, allegedly including former President **Porfirio Lobo** and his **son Fabio** (who was found guilty in a United States court in 2017 for importing cocaine) and allegedly president Juan Orlando Hernández—whose brother, Tony Hernández, was recently **found guilty** of cocaine trafficking.

The Rivera brothers approached the DEA and made an offer as early as 2013; they knew that the agency was investigating them, so this gave the DEA a unique opportunity to catch some senior figures in the drug trade.

Although both men had to confess to the crimes that they had committed, they avoided long jail sentences and were believed to have been offered admission into the witness protection program, while some members of their family were granted permission to move to the United States. The DEA accepted the deal and **implied that** it would decrease the use of Honduras as a drug-transit country. There is no evidence to support this claim, as the country remains a key smuggling nation for cocaine.

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As we continued to drive, surrounded by green, rolling hills with cows and sheep grazing the fields, we were constantly stopped at military checkpoints along the road. Armed men and police asked for our IDs and wanted to know where we were headed. Some of the roads had once been used by drug traffickers as landing strips.

Our driver said that years before he'd seen planes landing here at night, and roadblocks established to stop all traffic and allow the cartel time to unload the drugs. I saw alternative paths off the main road where landing strips still exist today. I was told by

my local guide that during President Zelaya's government before the 2009 coup, there was a "happy hour" in the area when radar was switched off by officials for an hour a day to allow drug traffickers to fly in and deliver drugs.

A small plane would land after 6 p.m. when it was getting dark. Traffickers used a generator to power lights along the landing strip. The drugs were removed—they usually came from Colombia—and the plane was burned and ditched in the Atlantic Ocean

. The drugs would then be taken to the United States by plane and boat. The municipal government regularly smoothed the road, which, my guide Guillermo said, was just one way that the state supported the drug trade.

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This was the home of the indigenous Garifuna people, numbering in the tens of thousands, who lived in many communities along the Caribbean coast. Nearly all of the neighboring areas face rising sea levels due to climate change.

Miriam Miranda, the head of Ofraneh, the Black Fraternal Organization of Honduras, is one of the country's most prominent advocates. She told me in the capital, Tegucigalpa, that the drug war directly impacted her people, and that she faced constant threats to her life. "The Garifuna people have had to organize not only because their land is where the drugs are being transported from and to, but also because authorities are involved in drug trafficking," she said.

This was the heart of drug-trafficking territory in Honduras. At a point along the red dirt road from Cusuna to Ciriboya, Guillermo said that the long, relatively straight path was used by drug traffickers as a landing strip as recently as five months ago. The Garifuna used to protest, but the traffickers were too powerful to be stopped. They have come to accept that their lands are now prime targets for a lucrative trade over which they had no say.

"The Garifuna fight against traffickers," Guillermo told me, "but it's hard when you're fighting a state that colludes with the traffickers."

*This article is adapted from the new book **Pills, Powder, and Smoke: Inside the Bloody War on Drugs** by Antony Loewenstein.*

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