



New Dawn or Old Habits? Resolving Honduras' Security Dilemmas

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Principal Findings

What's new? In 2022, President Xiomara Castro's left-leaning government took power in Honduras. She promised to craft a community-oriented approach to public safety, reduce the army's role and fight corruption. Public frustration with rampant crime, however, prodded her to pursue tough emergency measures ahead of reform.

Why does it matter? Despite a slight fall in homicides, Honduras remains the second most violent country and the most dangerous for women in Latin America. Widespread violence, economic stagnation and dire humanitarian conditions in parts of the country are fuelling an exodus of Hondurans, mostly to the U.S., Mexico and Spain.

What should be done? Rather than allowing law enforcement needs to crowd out reform, the government should address both issues. It should focus on strengthening police, combating impunity and investing in gang-affected communities – and not rely on the present emergency measures. Donors should work with the government where possible, notwithstanding frustration with Castro's foreign policy.

Executive Summary

After more than a year in power, the democratically elected left-leaning government headed by the first woman to rule Honduras is struggling to check the violent crime that has long vexed the country. President Xiomara Castro promised a fresh start after the scandal-plagued administration of Juan Orlando Hernández, who is now awaiting trial in the U.S. on drug trafficking and firearms charges. She pledged in her campaign to empower the civilian police in assuring public safety, reinvigorate anti-corruption efforts and promote respect for human rights. But her government's push for reform has proven half-hearted. Moreover, in late 2022, Castro adopted emergency security measures that on paper mimic El Salvador's gang crackdown. While bringing violent crime to heel has to be a priority, Tegucigalpa should neither copy San Salvador's ham-fisted methods nor take its eye off reform. Castro should redouble efforts to strengthen the police, curb corruption and back violence prevention initiatives in gang-affected communities. Despite their frustrations with Castro's foreign policy, donors should support these efforts.

President Castro's election victory in 2021 appeared to mark a historic change for a country saddled with insecurity, poverty and graft. Honduras' sole previous left-leaning leader, Manuel Zelaya – Castro's husband – had been ousted in a coup twelve years earlier. The series of elected conservative governments that ruled the country following the 2009 putsch made headway in reducing record-high murder rates. But, year after year, widespread violent crime, extreme inequality and economic stagnation drove emigrants north to the U.S. border at some of the highest rates in Central America. Honduras' main foreign partners hailed Castro's landslide win both for its peaceful nature and for her commitments to instigate reform within a democratic framework. U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris attended her inauguration, alongside some of Washington's biggest regional adversaries, including representatives of the Venezuelan government.

The new government, however, has found it difficult to make progress toward its goals. Castro's party, Libre, did not win a majority of congressional seats or of city halls. It has been plagued by internal divisions. The new security policy's initial results were also disappointing. Although overall murders decreased in 2022, they went up in at least six of the country's eighteen departments, while the number of mass killings matched the previous year's record. On the basis of its homicide rate, Honduras remained the second most violent country in Latin America after Venezuela, and it has the highest rate of femicides in the region.

Under pressure to respond to high-profile crimes and a reported surge in extortion – and with an eye on approval ratings – Castro has throttled back security policy reform. These efforts have not petered out completely. For example, plans to create a UN commission to fight corruption and impunity are still advancing, albeit slowly. But in other areas – eg, making good on a commitment to end the military role in policing – the government appears to be moving backward. By the end of 2022, Castro even appeared to have taken a leaf out of neighbouring El Salvador's anti-gang playbook, declaring a state of emergency in various regions – since renewed five times – and beefing up police powers of arrest. Thus far, Honduras' tougher measures are nothing like

El Salvador's in practice, but observers worry that Castro is toying with the idea of following that example.

At the same time, President Castro's moves on the diplomatic front have irked her foreign partners. Her decision to abstain from condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine at the UN displeased the country's main donors, particularly the U.S., as did her later abstention from a measure at the Organization of American States denouncing repression in Nicaragua. Her refusal to attend the 2022 Summit of the Americas, held in Los Angeles, went over badly in Washington. Castro also recently cut Honduras' ties with Taiwan and established diplomatic relations with China, which she visited in June for six days. Castro's foreign policy positions, together with slow movement on domestic reforms and a shift away from her promised security policies, could give pause to Western donors.

Castro would benefit from steering her government back toward the campaign commitments that seem to have been put to one side, even as authorities work to bring crime under control. Establishing trustworthy and professional security forces is a long-term project. Rekindling reforms that could strengthen civilian policing, prosecuting serious crimes more vigorously and steering resources toward gang-affected communities will be crucial to building a safer country. The government should also revive its campaign proposals to bolster the chronically underfunded and ill-equipped police force. It should craft community violence prevention programs that draw on local knowledge. Finally, Castro should strive to enforce order and security in the nation's jails, particularly after the 20 June riot in a women's prison that led to the violent death of 46 people. But in doing so, Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele's brutal methods should not be her template.

Additionally, the government should follow through on setting up a UN-backed anti-impunity commission to combat corruption. This entity could allow investigators to look into serious crimes involving collusion between perpetrators and state institutions. To make a thorough enquiry possible, Castro will need to push through a series of legal reforms that the UN has identified as crucial prerequisites; up to this point, she has not lined up enough votes to approve these measures in Congress. Regardless of whether this commission comes into being, officials should press for reforms that allow Honduran prosecutors to pursue powerful illicit networks. Curtailing the long-standing practice of concentrating power in the hands of allies, friends and family of the governing party would mark a major step toward thwarting these networks.

Despite their misgivings about Castro's loyalties abroad and questions about her commitment to pursuing the reform agenda she ran on, donors should not give up on her government. They should remind her of her reform commitments and offer to support her in fulfilling them. With democracy deteriorating in El Salvador and Nicaragua, and under threat in Guatemala, Castro's government remains one of the most promising partners in Latin America for donors. It deserves a chance to succeed.

Guatemala City/Bogotá/Washington/Brussels, 10 July 2023

New Dawn or Old Habits? Resolving Honduras' Security Dilemmas

I. Introduction

Thanks partly to unexpectedly high turnout and advantageous political alliances, left-leaning Xiomara Castro won the Honduran presidency by a large margin in November 2021. Her victory raised hopes for change in a country that, since a coup in 2009, has suffered soaring rates of violent crime and poverty, along with flare-ups of political unrest, all of which have helped drive an exodus of migrants and asylum seekers.¹

Disaffection with the National Party played a big part in Castro's win. The right-wing party had run the country for three straight terms – the last two under President Juan Orlando Hernández, who now faces drug trafficking charges in the U.S. – since the 2009 coup, which ousted President Manuel Zelaya, Castro's husband.² These governments used heavy-handed tactics to fight crime, expanding the military's role in public safety and working to break up drug trafficking organisations. The murder rate fell from a peak of 93 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2011 to 38 per 100,000 in 2021. But even this lower rate makes Honduras one of the world's most violent countries, and hundreds of city neighbourhoods remain under the control of criminal gangs.

The National Party governments' collective record when it came to the economy and internal accountability were also a source of frustration among many Hondurans. The country was already in a vulnerable spot when COVID-19 hit, doing great damage to livelihoods. In 2021, 75 per cent of the population was reportedly living in poverty.³ Hondurans fleeing the country's high crime rates and weak economy were apprehended more than a million times at the U.S. southern border between 2010 and 2021, while over 107,000 filed for asylum in Mexico.⁴ At the same time, a string of corruption scandals tainted politicians and high-level officials, including during the pandemic.⁵ Of these, the case that most tarnished the National Party's image, and that of Hernán-

¹ Crisis Group Latin America Report N°77, *Fight and Flight: Tackling the Roots of Honduras' Emergency*, 25 October 2019.

² "Ex-president of Honduras extradited to US on drugs charges", *The Guardian*, 21 April 2022.

³ Brett Heinz and Kevin Cashman, "Honduras: Social and Economic Indicators after 12 Years of National Party Rule", Center for Economic and Policy Research, February 2022.

⁴ Data on homicides from the National Police website. "FOSDEH: Hasta un 78% habría aumentado la pobreza hacia final del año", HCH, 28 July 2022. Crisis Group Latin America Briefing N°45, *Handling the Risks of Honduras' High-stakes Poll*, 23 November 2021. Figures compiled by Crisis Group with data from U.S. Customs and Border Protection and Mexico's Commission of Help to Refugees.

⁵ Hundreds of thousands protested in 2015 amid a scandal involving the embezzlement of \$300 million from the Honduran Social Security Institute. Public pressure spurred the government to create an anti-graft commission, known as MACCIH, backed by the Organization of American States. During the pandemic, other officials came under scrutiny for purchasing seven overpriced mobile hospitals, some of which never arrived. "Protesters across Honduras take on alleged social security embezzlement", *The Guardian*, 1 June 2015. "Honduras holds 2 ex-officials on pandemic-tied fraud charges", AP, 9 April 2021.

dez, was the former president's brother Tony's conviction in U.S. courts on drug trafficking charges.⁶

Despite the National Party's difficulties, many had believed that the race would be close, perhaps close enough to prompt a tense post-election dispute.⁷ But Castro won by fourteen points over her main opponent, National Party candidate Nasry Asfura, who quickly acknowledged defeat. The surprise landslide owed much to Castro's last-minute alliance with another presidential hopeful, Salvador Nasralla (who went on to become vice president), and his Honduras' Saviour Party (HSP). Turnout also surpassed expectations.⁸ Many were heartened by Castro's victory, as she seemed to represent a break from the past, in no small part because she is Honduras' first woman president. The presence of U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris at her inauguration, alongside emissaries of President Nicolás Maduro's government in Venezuela, showed the breadth of her initial international support.

Even so, Castro got off to a rocky start. Despite the scale of her 2021 victory, the fragility of her political base soon became apparent. Her party, Libre, had been unable to secure a majority in Congress, where it won 50 of 128 seats, or in municipal government, where it won 49 of 298 mayoralities.⁹ A spat over who would head Congress at the start of her presidency revealed the simmering tensions within her coalition.¹⁰ Castro's ability to get legislation through Congress has been further threatened by a rupture between Libre and Nasralla's HSP. Tensions between Nasralla, on one hand, and Castro and Zelaya, on the other, emerged immediately after the election, with the vice president complaining he was not being consulted over important decisions and that pre-electoral agreements were not being honoured.¹¹ In October 2022, Nasralla voiced public doubts as to whether Castro was able to run the country; soon thereafter, Zelaya

⁶ Crisis Group telephone interview, journalist, 23 November 2022. "Ex-president of Honduras extradited to US on drugs charges", op. cit.

⁷ For details on the 2021 election, see Crisis Group Latin America Briefing N°45, *Handling the Risks of Honduras' High-stakes Poll*, 23 November 2021. Fears of an electoral dispute were fuelled by the 2017 presidential election, when Hernández claimed victory though early counts showed Nasralla in the lead. See Sofía Martínez Fernández, "Do the Numbers Lie? Mistrust and Military Lockdown after Honduras' Disputed Poll", Crisis Group Commentary, 4 December 2017.

⁸ "Honduras: Nasry Asfura reconoce triunfo de Xiomara Castro", Deutsche Welle, 1 December 2021. "Honduran opposition unites behind candidate for president, in major shift", Reuters, 13 October 2021.

⁹ See the results at the National Electoral Council's website.

¹⁰ Deputies held two competing sessions on 23 January 2022 to name a head of Congress. Twenty renegades from the Libre party attended one at a private club, along with colleagues from the National Party and the Liberal Party. They chose Libre deputy Jorge Cálix. The other 30 Libre deputies as well as the HSP lawmakers attended a session in Congress itself, where they appointed HSP deputy Luis Redondo (as Libre had promised as part of its coalition deal). Castro had named twenty substitutes to vote in the rebels' stead, giving Redondo the required majority. Though seemingly resolved, the dispute has spurred legal challenges concerning the legitimacy of Congress and the bills it has since passed. "Rival Honduran lawmakers back different congressional heads in dispute with next president", Reuters, 24 January 2022. "Brawl in Honduras congress ahead of new president's inauguration", VOA, 22 January 2022. "Presidente de CSJ revela que hay dos recursos admitidos sobre ilegalidad de la Junta Directiva del CN", *Proceso Digital*, 23 October 2022.

¹¹ Crisis Group interview, member of Congress, Tegucigalpa, 24 October 2022.

accused him of fracturing the government coalition by insulting the president.¹² Since then, Nasralla has regularly spoken out against the government and its policies.¹³

This report explores the Castro government's ambitious security reform plans in the wake of her election victory, the progress made and hurdles encountered in pursuing them, and her government's shift toward tougher (and less reform-oriented) policies from late 2022. It also offers recommendations for how to balance the immediate need to protect Hondurans from violent crime with a continuing commitment to reform. It is based on over 50 interviews conducted in Honduras' main cities and gang-controlled neighbourhoods, as well as online, from September 2022 to June 2023, with government officials, security officers, legislators, experts, religious leaders, employees of non-governmental organisations, community leaders, humanitarian workers, diplomats and academics.

¹² "Alianza entre PSH y LIBRE parece haber llegado a su fin", *Criterio*, 17 October 2022.

¹³ "Vicepresidente de Honduras critica a Xiomara Castro", *La Jornada*, 7 June 2022.

II. A New Security Doctrine?

Castro vowed in her electoral manifesto to reduce the army's role in public safety, give greater powers to the national police, and encourage dialogue between police officers and the people they are charged to protect.¹⁴ But a quarrelsome start with Congress, high-profile violent crimes, an apparent surge in extortion and a desire to maintain public support have diverted her attention.

A. *The Security Legacy of Juan Orlando Hernández*

Honduras is plagued by violent crime. Street gangs, such as MS-13 and the 18th Street gang, at times partner with or work for drug trafficking groups that have penetrated the highest echelons of state. U.S. prosecutors believe that former President Hernández maintained mutually beneficial relations with various drug traffickers, even while supposedly leading an unstinting assault against them. The country's most widespread criminal activities are drug trafficking and extortion; others include illegal logging, human trafficking and people smuggling.¹⁵

MS-13 and the 18th Street gang are prevalent mostly in suburbs of the capital Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula, the country's second largest city, but they are reportedly expanding into coastal regions and along the borders with Guatemala and El Salvador.¹⁶ Competition between these gangs and other minor groups is fierce.¹⁷ Many of the smaller organisations are composed of just a handful of criminals, united by family ties, who alternately work for, ally with and fight the main outfits.¹⁸

A peculiarity of Honduran gangs compared to those in other Central American countries is their apparent prominence, particularly the MS-13, in drug smuggling.¹⁹ Once controlled by a few cartels, drug trafficking in Honduras is now run by myriad groups, including gangs.²⁰ Some of these groups reportedly hold a tight grip over remote parts of the country, particularly La Mosquitia, a stretch of land along the eastern coast, and are responsible for some 30 per cent of the country's violent deaths, according to the

¹⁴ "Plan de gobierno para refundar Honduras 2022-2026", Partido Libertad y Refundación (Libre), September 2021, p. 20.

¹⁵ See Honduras' country profile at the Global Organized Crime Index website.

¹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, security experts, San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa, October and November 2022. Crisis Group Report, *Fight and Flight: Tackling the Roots of Honduras' Emergency*, op. cit.

¹⁷ The other gangs include the Vatos Locos, Los Tercereños, Los Olanchanos, El Combo Que No Se Deja and Los Aguacates. As an illustration of the competition, residents of the Rivera Hernández neighbourhood in San Pedro Sula report that at least eight different criminal groups are battling for turf there. Crisis Group interviews, November 2022. Crisis Group Report, *Fight and Flight: Tackling the Roots of Honduras' Emergency*, op. cit.

¹⁸ Crisis Group interview, security expert, Tegucigalpa, October 2022.

¹⁹ In February 2023, the U.S. Treasury Department imposed sanctions on a prominent Honduran MS-13 member, accusing him of involvement in drug trafficking, among other crimes. Elsewhere in Central America, notably El Salvador and Guatemala, gangs play a marginal role in transnational drug trafficking, although they are frequently involved in domestic drug markets. "Treasury Sanctions MS-13-Affiliates for Drug Trafficking and Contract Killings in Central America and the United States", U.S. Treasury Department, 8 February 2023. "Is the MS13 in Honduras expanding its role in the regional drug trade?", Insight Crime, 5 November 2021.

²⁰ Óscar Estrada, *Tierra de narcos: cómo las mafias se apropiaron de Honduras* (Tegucigalpa, 2021).

UN Office on Drugs and Crime.²¹ They also seem to be trying hard to turn Honduras from a transit country into a cocaine producer. In 2022, authorities eradicated approximately 140 hectares of coca, more than thirteen times the previous year's total. This area is but a fraction of that under cultivation in Colombia, but the rise suggests an effort to concentrate both production and trafficking in Honduras.²² Extraditions of police and military officers as well as politicians on drug trafficking charges point to the influence of criminal interests inside the state, including at its commanding heights.²³

Former President Hernández, who as discussed further below is himself contesting similar charges in the U.S., mounted a high-profile law enforcement offensive relying on the army.²⁴ As the then head of Congress, he pushed for the creation of the military police in 2013.²⁵ Two years later, he appointed a military commander, Julián Pacheco Tinoco, as security minister.²⁶ In 2018, he turned the anti-extortion police into the National Anti-Gang Force, comprising both military and police officers and supervised by a military-led unit, FUSINA. Finally, he put the army in charge of the prison system in late 2019, in response to rising violence in jails.²⁷

Hernández's legacy is mixed at best. Honduras' high homicide rate fell, an achievement that authorities attributed to the dismantling of the largest drug trafficking groups, police reforms (described below) and improvements to the penal system, among other things.²⁸ According to a filing by New York prosecutors, however, Hernández himself conspired with national and international crime rings to enable the smuggling of cocaine north to the U.S.²⁹ He insists that he is innocent, the victim of unfounded accusations by the crime bosses who lost out during his tenure.³⁰

The Hernández administration also oversaw a decline in transparency that was partly a continuation of past trends. When Hernández was head of Congress, the National Party had passed a new tax with the aim of channelling additional funds to the security forces to fight crime. The tax reportedly generated revenues of \$1 billion, but the exact use of this money was shielded from oversight under the terms of the Law of

²¹ Crisis Group interviews, security experts and journalists, San Pedro Sula, November 2022. "Global Report on Cocaine 2023 – Local Dynamics, Global Challenges", UN Office on Drugs and Crime, March 2023.

²² "Coca may have permanently taken root in Central America", Insight Crime, 15 March 2023.

²³ A U.S. prosecutor has dubbed Honduras a "narco-state". Jon Lee Anderson, "Is the president of Honduras a narco-trafficker?", *The New Yorker*, 8 November 2021. "Has Honduras become a 'narco-state'?", BBC, 22 April 2022.

²⁴ "Ex-president of Honduras extradited to US on drugs charges", *The Guardian*, 21 April 2023.

²⁵ "Militarización de Honduras aplaca homicidios, pero amenaza derechos humanos", Reuters, 1 July 2015. Hernández was a presidential candidate at the time.

²⁶ The security ministry supervises the national police and prison authorities.

²⁷ "Creación de la PMOP disparó los ingresos en las Fuerzas Armadas", *El Herald*, 26 March 2022.

²⁸ Hernández built two new maximum-security jails during his time in office. "7 Keys to Understanding Honduras' Declining Homicide Rate", Insight Crime, 15 November 2017.

²⁹ "Juan Orlando Hernandez, Former President of Honduras, Extradited to the United States on Drug-Trafficking and Firearms Charges", U.S. Department of Justice, U.S. Attorney's Office, Southern District of New York, 21 April 2022.

³⁰ Hernández devoted the bulk of his speech before the 2021 UN General Assembly to denying the charges against him. "If criminals have impunity to use false testimony in the federal court of the United States, that puts dangerous weapons in the hands of a mortal enemy", he said. "Honduras' president at U.N. denies ties to drug trafficking", AP, 23 September 2021.

Official Secrets (colloquially known as the “secrets law”).³¹ But the government dealt a bigger blow to transparency in 2020, when it shut down an international commission aimed at fighting corruption and impunity, known as the Mission to Support the Fight Against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (MACCIH).³² Less than two years year later, Congress passed penal code reforms that reduced sentences for drug trafficking and hindered prosecutors’ ability to obtain financial information of suspects in money laundering cases.³³

B. *The Push for Reform*

Castro entered office vowing reform. She aimed to cut back the armed forces’ role in crimefighting and, in tandem, to enhance the powers of the civilian police.³⁴ She also wanted to bolster community policing by training the police in gaining residents’ trust, an approach that had been successful in the past.³⁵ To these ends, she quickly dissolved the anti-gang task force Hernández had created, replacing it with a police unit, and handed authority over jails back to the national police.³⁶ In July 2022, her government launched a proposal to create what it called “citizens’ participation tables”, meeting spaces where police representatives could discuss public safety concerns with community members and design strategies in response. A government official said the rationale was simple: “We have to take the police and military closer to the community”.³⁷ The project was tabled before Congress in September 2022, but the National Party whipped up enough votes to block it. After rounds of consultations with civil society, Libre is hoping to bring the proposal back for a vote.³⁸

Castro’s government also highlighted its commitment to making Honduras safer for women. She promised to reduce femicides and to give greater state support to shelters for women and their children to escape violence. Supporters also note that the

³¹ The Law of Official Secrets, approved in January 2014, allowed the president and the heads of state institutions to classify official information as “reserved” for five years, “classified” for ten years, “secret” for fifteen years or “top secret” for 25 years. “El Parlamento de Honduras deroga Ley de Secretos para combatir la corrupción”, *Swissinfo*, 2 March 2022. “Tasa de seguridad poblacional: la nueva década perdida en Honduras”, National Anti-Corruption Council, November 2022.

³² The commission had faced legal challenges on the grounds that it violated the Honduran constitution. But the government shut it down for another reason, namely because the president’s circles perceived that it was singling out National Party members for investigation. Crisis Group interview, National Party representative, January 2020. “A Death Foretold: MACCIH Shuts Down in Honduras”, *Insight Crime*, 22 January 2020.

³³ “Reformas aprobadas por Parlamento de Honduras limitan lucha contra corrupción”, *EFE*, 8 October 2021.

³⁴ Among other measures, Castro promised to turn the military police from a permanent to a temporary force. “Plan de gobierno para refundar Honduras 2022-2026”, Partido Libertad y Refundación (Libre), September 2021, p. 20.

³⁵ Crisis Group interviews, high-level police and corrections officers; government official, Tegucigalpa and by telephone, October and November 2022. “What USAID Impacts Study Says about CentAm Community Crime Prevention”, *Insight Crime*, 3 December 2014.

³⁶ “Gobierno lanza Dipampco para ir detrás de pandilleros, sus cuentas y bienes”, *Proceso*, 13 July 2022. “FFAA entrega la administración de las cárceles a la Policía Nacional”, *La Prensa*, 10 March 2022.

³⁷ Crisis Group interview, government official, Tegucigalpa, 27 October 2022.

³⁸ “Comisión del dictamen del CN continúa socialización del proyecto de Mesas de Participación Ciudadana”, *Criterio*, 11 April 2023.

president has pledged to strengthen reproductive rights, including emergency contraception and access to abortion.³⁹ Her presidency, however, has not brought an immediate change for women in Honduras: the country continues to have the highest rate of femicide in Latin America; plans to build a first publicly funded women's shelter in the capital were not announced until June.⁴⁰

The new president also promised to root complicity with criminals out of the Honduran state. "We are committed ... to lay the groundwork of a frontal assault against corruption", she said in her inaugural speech.⁴¹ At the heart of this campaign is the planned creation of a UN-backed Commission against Impunity in Honduras (CICIH), which is intended to help the government revive anti-corruption efforts and reduce impunity for serious crimes, which stands at well over 90 per cent.⁴² Ideally, the commission would play a role similar to that of the defunct International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG). From 2006 to 2019, when its mission was terminated, this UN-sponsored body dismantled over 70 criminal organisations; prosecuted hundreds of corrupt officials; helped create new tribunals and prosecutor's offices; and supported legal reforms and the use of modern investigative techniques.⁴³

A year and a half into Castro's presidency, members of her administration hail her policies as successful, while foreign partners have also recognised progress.⁴⁴ Reformers note that the onset of reforms has helped drive Honduras' murder rate down further: in 2022, the police reported 3,439 homicides, 453 fewer than in 2021.⁴⁵ Government decrees have lauded the results of recent emergency security measures (discussed in

³⁹ "Honduras: Can first female president usher in a new era for women?", *The Guardian*, 27 January 2022. In her inauguration address, Castro declared: "Honduran women, I will not fail you! I will defend your rights, all of your rights! You can count on me!"

⁴⁰ On femicide, see the graph prepared by the Gender Equality Observatory for Latin America and the Caribbean. In 2022, there were eight shelters for women elsewhere in Honduras, but all of them depended on support from foreign donors and local civil society. "Honduras tendrá su primer refugio público para mujeres que sufren maltrato en la capital", *El Espectador*, 6 June 2023. "Honduras continúa con la deuda de la creación de casas refugio para mujeres víctimas de la violencia", *Criterio*, 17 October 2022. Femicide is a hate crime, in which a girl or woman is killed because of her gender.

⁴¹ "Discurso de toma de posesión de la Presidenta Xiomara Castro", Social Development Secretariat, Government of Honduras, 7 March 2022.

⁴² "La impunidad impera en Honduras, más de 83 mil crímenes continúan sin castigo", *Criterio*, 12 August 2022.

⁴³ Crisis Group research indicates that the Guatemalan commission helped cut homicide rates at a faster pace than in similar Latin American countries. Crisis Group Latin America Report N°70, *Saving Guatemala's Fight Against Crime and Impunity*, 24 October 2018. See also Guillermo Trejo and Camilo Nieto-Matiz, "Containing Large-Scale Criminal Violence Through Internationalized Prosecution: How the Collaboration Between the CICIG and Guatemala's Law Enforcement Contributed to a Sustained Reduction in the Murder Rate", *Comparative Political Studies*, 14 November 2022.

⁴⁴ The UN Peacebuilding Commission discussed Honduras for the first time on 26 June at the Castro administration's request. The concept note provided for the meeting said the "national strategies to address the challenges faced by the country in terms of peace and development, including on dialogue and conflict prevention, citizen security, strengthening of the rule of law, human rights, as well as dimensions associated with social cohesion, demonstrate how peace is being consolidated in Honduras". In the press statement released after the meeting, the Commission welcomed Honduras' engagement and its "dedication" to creating the CICIH. See "Peacebuilding Commission ambassadorial-level meeting on peacebuilding in Honduras", press release, UN, 26 June 2023.

⁴⁵ Crisis Group interview, police commissioner, Tegucigalpa, 25 October 2022.

detail later) as “very good”.⁴⁶ “Under Juan Orlando Hernández, security was a business”, a police commissioner argued. But “there is no protection from above to collude with crime anymore”.⁴⁷

Indeed, Hernández himself was flown to New York in April 2022 to face the charges against him. His trial is expected to begin in September, after he pleaded not guilty in the initial hearing. In May 2022, authorities also extradited former police chief Juan Carlos “Tigre” Bonilla (2012-2013) to the U.S. on drug trafficking charges.⁴⁸ He is accused of exploiting his position “to facilitate cocaine trafficking” and using “violence, including murder, to protect the particular cell of politically connected drug traffickers he aligned with”, including Hernández.⁴⁹ Like Hernández, he has pleaded not guilty and awaits a trial that should start in September.⁵⁰

Congress has also started debating a raft of laws that, in principle, could help authorities address the country’s complex security crisis more effectively. These include a law that enables the state to strengthen prevention of gender-based violence and establishes protection mechanisms for women victims of violence, and another rewarding “effective collaboration”, which would reduce sentences for offenders who provide evidence enabling police to dismantle the groups to which they belonged.⁵¹ It also repealed the “secrets law” in March 2022, and in December passed a bill recognising the existence of mass displacement by crime and mandating the state to attend to its victims.⁵²

But many observers are sceptical of Castro’s record to date. An early source of consternation was the amnesty law passed in February 2022, ostensibly meant to free political prisoners punished for protesting the 2009 coup or others who had been targeted because of their roles during the Zelaya government. The amnesty, however, also

⁴⁶ Quoted in *La Gaceta, Diario Oficial de la República de Honduras*, 20 February 2023.

⁴⁷ Crisis Group interview, police commissioner, Tegucigalpa, 25 October 2022. “Ex-Honduras president bribed by prominent family, U.S. prosecutors say”, Reuters, 10 February 2023.

⁴⁸ “Honduras tiene pendiente unas 28 extradiciones, según ministro de Seguridad”, EFE, 3 November 2022. “Honduran ex-police chief extradited to US to face drug charges”, France 24, 10 May 2022.

⁴⁹ “Former chief of Honduran National Police extradited to the United States on drug trafficking and weapons offenses”, press release, U.S. Department of Justice, U.S. Attorney’s Office, Southern District of New York, 11 May 2022.

⁵⁰ “Juan Carlos ‘El Tigre’ Bonilla ya tiene fecha para su juicio por narcotráfico en Nueva York”, *El Heraldo*, 10 January 2023.

⁵¹ Crisis Group interviews, politicians, civil society and UN representatives, Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula, October and November 2022. “Ley Integral Contra las Violencias hacia las Mujeres está lista, pero reniegan aprobarla”, *Criterio*, 27 November 2022. “Honduras, a las puertas de finalmente tener una Ley de Colaboración Eficaz”, *Criterio*, 16 November 2022. Civil society groups and the MACCIH backed – and sometimes helped draft – these initiatives several years ago. Crisis Group interviews, civil society and MACCIH representatives; prosecutor, Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula, October 2021 and 2022. Crisis Group Report, *Fight and Flight: Tackling the Roots of Honduras’ Emergency*, op. cit.

⁵² Honduras acknowledged in 2013 that it was facing a crisis of forced internal displacement, becoming the first country in Central America to do so. But it did not pass a law protecting displaced people until 2022. El Salvador was the first country in the region to adopt such a law in January 2020, following a 2017 Supreme Court ruling. The Salvadoran law requires the state to build capacity to care for people driven from their homes by gang violence. It remains a dead letter, however. “Honduras deroga la ley de secretos para combatir la corrupción”, France 24, 2 March 2022. “Parlamento hondureño aprueba ley para proteger a desplazados por violencia”, EFE, 22 December 2022. “2,237 casos de desplazamiento forzado en El Salvador, pese a que existe Ley”, *La Prensa Gráfica*, 16 February 2023.

pardons crimes such as money laundering and certain types of corruption, and the first two people to benefit from the new legislation were the president's nephew and a former minister in the Zelaya government.⁵³ Critics are concerned that the Castro administration is perpetuating the longstanding practice of concentrating power in the hands of friends and family, with one report recently affirming there are high levels of nepotism.⁵⁴

Another concern is that plans for CICIH have progressed slowly. Following intensive negotiations, the government signed a memorandum of understanding with the UN in December 2022, and in May finally agreed to the terms of a first phase of activities in which a UN delegation will start supporting the Honduran government in assessing existing institutional capabilities and identifying the reforms required to establish the commission.⁵⁵ Even so, differences of opinion between the UN and the government about the body's workings remain to be resolved, particularly regarding the commissioner's selection and the commission's real independence. The UN insists that the commission have full autonomy in fulfilling its mission, while the Honduran government has continued to ask for a larger say regarding its composition.⁵⁶

Critics of the plans point to several other problems. The memorandum of understanding requires repealing a decree known as the "department fund" that has previously shielded deputies suspected of corruption from embezzlement charges. Congress has yet to pass this reform, and sceptics worry that other changes the commission may request will move sluggishly as well.⁵⁷ Rolling out new legal procedures for the workings of the anti-impunity commission may take even longer. Critics also decry the government's apparent preference that the commission focus on corruption, which would prevent it from addressing much of the nexus between the state and criminal

⁵³ "Nueva ley de amnistía en Honduras genera críticas a Castro", AP, 6 February 2022.

⁵⁴ "Concentración de Poder 2022-2026", Anti-Corruption National Council, May 2023, p. 22. Castro's husband, the ex-president Manuel Zelaya, serves as a presidential adviser; her son Hector Manuel is Castro's private secretary; her youngest son José Manuel is also a presidential adviser; her daughter Xiomara Zelaya is a member of Congress; José Manuel Zelaya Rosales, Castro's nephew, is the defence minister; and his father Carlos Armando Zelaya Rosales (Castro's brother-in-law) sits in Congress. Castro defended her administration by accusing Gabriela Castellanos, president of the organisation which authored the report, of defamation, and some of her supporters suggested that Castellanos has ulterior motives. "Gabriela Castellanos nos ataca por resentimiento, porque no la apoyamos para ser Fiscal: Flores Lanza", *Proceso Digital*, 25 May 2023. Castellanos left Honduras on 18 June because of security concerns. "Por amenazas a su seguridad abandona el país Gabriela Castellanos, directora del CAN", *Proceso Digital*, 18 June 2023. Furthermore, there is widespread speculation that former President Zelaya holds more power than what his position entails: a May poll showed that 65.1 per cent of citizens think that Castro is being manipulated by her advisers, particularly her husband. "El 65.1% de la población percibe que la presidenta Castro está siendo manipulada: ERIC", *Hondudiario*, 9 May 2023.

⁵⁵ "Honduras, U.N. to sign pact establishing anti-corruption commission", Reuters, 14 December 2022. "Note to correspondents: On an international, independent, impartial and autonomous mechanism against corruption and impunity in Honduras", UN, 4 May 2023.

⁵⁶ These two issues have been the main points of divergence since the first exchange of proposals. Crisis Group Special Briefing N°8, *Ten Challenges for the UN in 2022-2023*, 14 September 2022.

⁵⁷ Crisis Group interviews, civil society representatives, Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula, October, November and December 2022.

organisations.⁵⁸ “What would happen if there’s an assassination, or there are extra-judicial killings? With the current framework, CICIH could not help”, a former Guatemalan top prosecutor observed.⁵⁹

C. *The Extortion Threat*

But the biggest problem Castro’s government faces by far is that crime rates remain stubbornly high, despite the dip in homicides nationwide. One crime in particular, extortion, appears to be on the rise.⁶⁰ As discussed later, the reasons may lie partly in Castro’s policy changes.

The main gangs, along with an apparently growing number of imitators, have been ratcheting up extortion demands, particularly from private and public transport services, and expanding their rackets to more places.⁶¹ Early in 2022, new groups emerged in the San Pedro Sula transport terminal.⁶² Humanitarian workers say Salvadoran gang members, fleeing President Nayib Bukele’s crackdown, have settled in Honduran cities, particularly those along the border but also the industrial centre of Choloma outside San Pedro Sula.⁶³ It also appears that the MS-13 has intensified its shakedowns of residents in some areas after briefly suspending this practice when COVID-19 broke out in 2020 (although this extortion could be the work of impostors).⁶⁴ Extortion has started to occur more often in border departments like Ocotepeque, Copán and Santa Bárbara, as well as in the central region of Colón, all places where it was once quite rare.⁶⁵ Most of the extortion calls originate in prisons, where inmates exercise a sort of “self-government” in the words of one high-level prison official.⁶⁶

⁵⁸ In November 2022, Xiomara Zelaya, a Libre deputy and Castro’s daughter, proposed a constitutional reform that would allow the CICIH to bring cases to the courts independently of national prosecution authorities, but her draft measure places emphasis on intelligence and financial investigations rather than on links with violent groups. “Presentan iniciativa para reformar artículo de la Constitución y dar facultades a la Cícih”, *El Heraldo*, 1 November 2022.

⁵⁹ Crisis Group telephone interview, 23 November 2022.

⁶⁰ Figures obtained by Crisis Group through the Attorney General office’s access to public information unit show that this office received 175 criminal complaints concerning extortion in 2022, compared to 153 in 2021. Although this increase is not huge, many cases of extortion are not reported to authorities.

⁶¹ A San Pedro Sula taxi driver said the 18th Street gang has raised its extortion rate from 100 to 150 lempiras (\$4 to \$6) per taxi per week. Crisis Group interviews, taxi driver, San Pedro Sula, October 2022; humanitarian worker, Tegucigalpa, November 2022.

⁶² Groups like Illuminati and M1 have started shaking down drivers on bus routes in San Pedro Sula. “San Pedro Sula inmersa en una nueva ola de amenazas por extorsión”, *ContraCorriente*, 16 March 2022.

⁶³ Crisis Group interviews, residents and humanitarian workers, Choloma, Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula, October and November 2022.

⁶⁴ Crisis Group interviews, security experts, former anti-gang officer and humanitarian workers, Tegucigalpa, San Pedro Sula and by telephone, October and November 2022. “MS-13 ratifica: No más extorsión, ‘solo pedimos una oportunidad’”, *Tiempo*, 21 August 2020.

⁶⁵ Crisis Group interviews, residents, journalists, security experts, business representative, prison official and former anti-gang force official, Tegucigalpa, San Pedro Sula, Guatemala and by telephone, October and November 2022.

⁶⁶ “Reos tienen ‘call center’ para extorsión en la cárcel”, *La Prensa*, 4 December 2022. Crisis Group interviews, prison official and former anti-gang force official, Tegucigalpa and by telephone, October and November 2022.

Precise numbers are difficult to pin down. A study by Global Financial Integrity says the overall value of payments in Honduras is between \$52 and \$72 million.⁶⁷ But whatever the estimates, payments – and the spectre thereof – are doubtless a major source of hardship and anxiety for hundreds of thousands of people.

Meanwhile, the growth of extortion may have intensified violence in at least some places, as rival gangs battle for turf.⁶⁸ Though authorities report a reduction in homicides nationwide, murder rates increased in six of the country's eighteen departments.⁶⁹ Mass killings – often involving attacks by one gang on another – have continued unabated, with 50 recorded in 2022, taking 185 lives altogether.⁷⁰ One recent massacre in a pool hall in Choloma claimed the lives of thirteen people.⁷¹ Gang threats have reportedly displaced dozens of families in Tegucigalpa, Chamelecón and Tocoa, among other places.⁷² Authorities have also noted an increase in the participation of women in crime.⁷³ Meanwhile, gender-based violence – a deep-rooted problem in Honduras' *machista* society – has also risen over the years, with 306 femicides among the 3,459 murders reported by the police in 2022.⁷⁴

D. *Police Shortfalls*

Arguably, President Castro may inadvertently have created an opportunity for gangs and their imitators to expand the extortion rackets when she handed the police a far bigger role in taking on gangs and running the prisons. For one thing, the police appear to have been ill prepared for these mandates. The army officers formerly in charge of the anti-gang task force reportedly took with them intelligence collected over years, and it was almost four months before the police assumed management of jails.⁷⁵ All

⁶⁷ Julia Yansura, "Extortion in the Northern Triangle of Central America: Following the Money", Global Financial Integrity, September 2022.

⁶⁸ The lack of reliable data on extortion in Honduras makes it difficult to say with certainty that this criminal activity leads to higher levels of violence, but interviews throughout the country indicate there is a likely correlation between extortion and murder rates. Crisis Group interviews, 2022-2023.

⁶⁹ The departments are Colón, Choluteca, Islas de la Bahía, La Paz, El Paraíso and Valle, with the last two standing out for reporting 30 and 60 per cent surges, respectively, compared to 2021.

⁷⁰ Authorities reported 168 victims in 53 mass killings in 2021. "Tasa de homicidios en 2022 cerró en 37.4, según OV-UNAH", *El Heraldo*, 2 January 2023. "Unas 168 personas murieron en 53 masacres que se registraron en Honduras en 2021", *El Heraldo*, 31 December 2021.

⁷¹ "Ellos son los 13 muertos de la masacre en billar de Choloma", *La Prensa*, 25 June 2023.

⁷² "Veinte familias de la Villa Nueva son desalojadas por pandilleros", *La Prensa*, 25 October 2022. Crisis Group interviews, residents and humanitarian workers, San Pedro Sula, December 2022.

⁷³ Civil society observers note that women began participating in more killings after authorities forbade two men from riding on the same motorbike. Most hits are drive-by shootings, with the person wielding the gun in the back seat. To get around the restriction, women started either driving the motorbike or firing the gun. As a result, women have been increasingly exposed to vendettas. Crisis Group interviews, academics and residents, San Pedro Sula and by telephone, March and November 2022. According to the deputy head of the police anti-gang unit, one of three people arrested for extortion is a woman. "35% de capturas vinculadas a maras son mujeres, revela subdirector de la DIPAM-PCO", *Proceso Digital*, 11 December 2022. "Prohíben en Honduras que dos adultos varones circulen juntos en una moto", *El Mundo*, 12 April 2010. For homicide data, visit the police website.

⁷⁴ For homicide data, visit the police website.

⁷⁵ Crisis Group interviews, former anti-gang force officer, police commissioner, high-level prison official and security expert, Tegucigalpa and by telephone, October and November 2022.

the while, the police were operating with the previously allocated budget, with which they had to do old and new jobs alike. “You gave the police a whole lot of tasks, and there are no police officers”, a civil society representative observed of the new policy.⁷⁶ A community leader reckons that the police were left with only three patrol cars for the whole Rivera Hernández neighbourhood in San Pedro Sula, home to around 200,000 people: “I can’t blame the police for not acting if they don’t have the means”.⁷⁷

Staffing has also been a problem. Police ranks were depleted when Castro took office, after Hernández had moved to rid the force of corrupt officers and others who did not meet age, physical fitness and education requirements. Eventually, the Hernández administration let a third of the force go. While those involved in the process defend the standards used, observers argue the government also used the purge to get rid of officers who did not align with the National Party’s views. Of more than 6,500 officers dismissed, only 2,100 faced formal investigation by prosecutors for alleged criminal collusion. Some 1,300 of those purged sued the state for arbitrary dismissal.⁷⁸ While acknowledging the scarcity of qualified personnel, a high-level police commissioner said the force aims to recruit 2,000 new officers per year to reach a total of 25,000 by 2025, including by reintegrating some of those unjustly fired – a move criticised by some experts as undoing a valuable effort to cleanse the force.⁷⁹

Besides being short on personnel, the police are often under-equipped to attend to crime victims. Crisis Group heard testimonies of people who had suffered extortion and could not file a police report due to “lack of paper” at the station.⁸⁰ Jails, now under police command, have too little money for routine repairs. “Of 500 cameras [we have installed], 300 are out of service”, a high-level prison commissioner observed.⁸¹ The government also faces disputes with contractors handling security cameras in the streets and emergency telephone lines serving the general public, apparently related to its attempt to renegotiate the licences. As a result, these services have not been operating for months, seriously affecting the police’s ability to receive complaints from the public and act on them.⁸²

⁷⁶ Crisis Group interview, civil society representative, Tegucigalpa, 25 October 2022.

⁷⁷ Just 110 police officers are assigned to the area of San Pedro Sula comprising not only Rivera Hernández, but also Lomas del Carmen, Aldea El Carmen and Aldea El Ocotillo y Colonia Planeta, which are home to around 300,000 people in total. Crisis Group interview, community leader, San Pedro Sula, 30 November 2022. “Sector Rivera Hernández en San Pedro Sula reporta baja de homicidios ¿a qué se debe?”, *ContraCorriente*, 4 May 2023.

⁷⁸ Crisis Group interviews, member of the purge commission, civil society representatives and high-level police commissioner, Tegucigalpa, August 2019 and October 2022. Crisis Group Report, *Fight and Flight: Tackling the Roots of Honduras’ Emergency*, op. cit. “Alrededor de dos mil millones tendría que pagar el Estado de Honduras a Policías depurados”, *Tu Nota*, 27 August 2022.

⁷⁹ Crisis Group interview, high-level police commissioner, Tegucigalpa, 25 October 2022. Crisis Group telephone interviews, security experts, 5 June 2023.

⁸⁰ Crisis Group interviews, security expert, journalists, locals, Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula, October and November 2022.

⁸¹ Crisis Group telephone interview, high-level prison official, 22 November 2022.

⁸² “Las cámaras del Sistema de Emergencias 911 de Honduras continúan apagadas en medio de crisis por muertes violentas”, *ContraCorriente*, 20 March 2023.

E. *Emergency Measures*

Castro has faced mounting pressure to take action to reel in persistent violent crime and has pivoted back to more coercive policing measures, including greater reliance on the military. The trigger for her first move in this direction was the brutal killing of Said Lobo, son of Pepe Lobo, Honduran president from 2010 to 2014. Heavily armed assailants killed Said execution-style, together with three other people, as he was leaving a well-known nightclub in Tegucigalpa on 14 July 2022.⁸³ Security camera footage showed the gunmen in bulletproof vests regularly worn by security forces and carrying assault rifles as they intercepted Lobo and the other three, lining them up against a wall and shooting them in an evidently premeditated assassination. Police chief Gustavo Sánchez immediately accused the MS-13 of the killings, and at least six people were arrested within days, but the motive for the crime remains unclear.⁸⁴ Amid a public outcry, Castro called on the military police, which she had intended to gradually disband, to coordinate with the national police in deploying several patrols on the capital's streets.⁸⁵

Sharper criticism came with a growing popular perception that crime kept worsening. In late 2022, both the president of the country's business federation and the head of the Supreme Court voiced concern about rising extortion, while the media began paying more attention to it as well.⁸⁶ In late November, bus drivers' unions brought the capital to a halt when they went on strike, claiming extortion demands had become unbearable, with 60 bus drivers killed in 2022 to date and vehicles set ablaze in retribution for unpaid payments.⁸⁷

Castro responded with an even more notable shift in policy. In December 2022, she imposed a state of exception in 162 districts of the country's most populous cities, Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula, as part of what she dubbed a "war on extortion".⁸⁸ The state of exception restricts freedom of movement and assembly and allows authorities to search homes and make arrests without a warrant. Castro also called on banks and telecommunications companies to place stricter controls on accounts and sim cards that could be used for extortion payments, as part of a more comprehensive plan the police launched in parallel to the temporary measures.⁸⁹

⁸³ "Honduras ex-president's son murdered in professional hit", Insight Crime, 15 July 2022.

⁸⁴ "Enjuician a dos implicados en masacre de Said Lobo, hijo del expresidente 'Pepe' Lobo", *El Heraldo*, 22 September 2022.

⁸⁵ Crisis Group interview, security expert, Tegucigalpa, 24 October 2022. "Policía Militar y Policía Nacional se reúnen para implementar estrategias de seguridad en Honduras", *El Heraldo*, 19 July 2022.

⁸⁶ Crisis Group interviews, journalists, business representatives, former anti-gang officer, police commissioner and security experts, Tegucigalpa, San Pedro Sula and Guatemala City, October and November 2022.

⁸⁷ "Transportistas se llevan ataúdes a las calles para recordar que la extorsión los está matando", *Criterio*, 24 November 2022.

⁸⁸ "Honduras partially suspends constitutional rights to tackle gangs", *The Guardian*, 6 December 2022. For more details on the constitutional articles suspended under the emergency rules, see Pamela Ruiz, "Security at the Expense of Constitutional Guarantees: The Case of Honduras", *Small Wars Journal*, 6 February 2023.

⁸⁹ "Más de 1,000 millones de lempiras solicitará la Secretaría de Seguridad para plan antiextorsión", *El Heraldo*, 22 November 2022. "Ejecutivo busca controlar venta de chips para frenar extorsión en Honduras", *El Heraldo*, 29 November 2022.

Since its introduction, Congress has renewed the state of exception five times. Law-makers extended it to 123 of the country's 298 municipalities in February. In late March, the government launched a parallel Solution against Crime Plan, dividing the country into civilian and military police areas of operation and mobilising over 3,000 military officers in seven rural departments where drug trafficking is prevalent.⁹⁰ On 22 June, the presidency announced that the state of exception would be broadened to encompass still more areas and that the military would be assuming security responsibilities alongside the police throughout the country.⁹¹

Despite similarities in rhetoric and legal provisions, Honduras' emergency measures have not brought the same kind of crackdown or yielded the same results as those reported in neighbouring El Salvador, where President Bukele introduced his anti-gang "state of exception" in March 2022 and says he has reduced murders nearly to zero.⁹² Honduran authorities reported 263 homicides in December 2022 and 241 in January 2023, fewer than the 292 registered in November 2022 but hardly a startling drop.⁹³ Meanwhile, the number of Salvadorans jailed under Bukele's crackdown, estimated at 70,000, far surpasses the equivalent in Honduras. The Honduran police claim to have captured 4,000 people in the first six months of the state of exception, but 81 per cent had to be released due to lack of evidence.⁹⁴ But the National Human Rights Commissioner's office found that only 25 of the 1,348 arrests it could verify during the first month were related to extortion, the main crime targeted by Castro's campaign. The online media outlet *ContraCorriente*, meanwhile, reported that the country's two anti-extortion courts had handled just 49 cases by early February.⁹⁵

Although the Castro administration has deployed rhetoric that closely resembles that of Bukele and has imitated some of the Salvadoran's communication strategies, such as showing pictures of shirtless gang members huddled in prison yards under the watch of military police, there is little evidence that conditions in jails or daily life in low-

⁹⁰ "Honduras aprueba Plan de Solución Contra el Crimen y amplía estado de excepción", *Swissinfo*, 31 March 2023.

⁹¹ See tweet by Xiomara Zelaya, Honduran MP, @pichuzelaya, 4:04pm, 22 June 2023. "3 claves para entender el toque de queda impuesto en Honduras tras el brutal asesinato de 21 personas en un día", BBC Mundo, 26 June 2023. "Honduras extends, expands state of emergency for second time", Reuters, 22 February 2023.

⁹² Tiziano Breda, "Latin America likes Bukele's 'war on gangs.' That's a problem", *World Politics Review*, 15 December 2022. Independent analysts and journalists have noted that it is impossible to examine the veracity of these claims as El Salvador has blocked all access to public information. The Bukele administration has also changed the parameters used to quantify homicides: for instance, it no longer includes deaths of suspected gang members killed in combat with security forces. Héctor Silva, "States of exception: the new security model in Central America?", WOLA, 22 February 2023.

⁹³ National police data.

⁹⁴ "El verdadero estado de excepción en Honduras: capturas arbitrarias, abusos y 49 casos judicializados", *ContraCorriente*, 24 February 2023. "Ocho de cada diez capturados han sido liberados en Honduras durante estado de excepción", *Criterio*, 22 June 2023.

⁹⁵ "El CONADEH expresa su preocupación por la nueva ampliación del Estado de excepción en Honduras", National Human Rights Commissioner, 23 February 2023. "El verdadero estado de excepción en Honduras: capturas arbitrarias, abusos y 49 casos judicializados", *ContraCorriente*, 24 February 2023.

income communities have undergone major change so far.⁹⁶ Even in gang-controlled neighbourhoods the government identified as priorities for its clampdown, religious and community leaders said they had witnessed no increase in police operations following imposition of the emergency measures.⁹⁷ That said, in June the government further hardened its stance toward violent crime in some respects, responding to a spate of killings in the country's north by declaring a curfew in the affected areas, ordering police sweeps and announcing it would back legislation to classify gang members as terrorists.⁹⁸

Meanwhile, mutinies and shootouts among inmates rocked four prisons simultaneously in early April, leaving one dead and several wounded. The mayhem forced Castro to announce special measures to restore order in jails.⁹⁹ Even worse was to follow, however. A fight between MS-13 and 18th Street gang members broke out in a women's prison in Tamara on 20 June, resulting in the brutal killing of at least 46 inmates. Castro subsequently dismissed Security Minister Ramón Sabillón and replaced him with the head of the police, Sánchez.¹⁰⁰ She also ordered the military to assume control of the country's jails once again.¹⁰¹

Until now, Honduras' "state of exception" has proven tamer than El Salvador's. Aside from their lack of resources and personnel, the country's security forces, operating under a progressive, democratic government, do not have the free rein from state and judicial institutions that has enabled their Salvadoran counterparts to imprison so many gang suspects without due process.¹⁰² Castro owes her election victory partly to Honduran civil society organisations and human rights defenders, making her wary of greenlighting a sweeping campaign of arrests.¹⁰³ Unlike Bukele, she has also been keen to maintain good relations with foreign partners that pay attention to

⁹⁶ See tweet by José Manuel Zelaya Rosales, national defence secretary, @JoseMZelayaR, 5:32pm, 26 June 2023. The tweet showing images of jailed gang members.

⁹⁷ Crisis Group telephone interviews, December and February 2023. "Sector Rivera Hernández en San Pedro Sula reporta baja de homicidios ¿a qué se debe?", *ContraCorriente*, 4 May 2023.

⁹⁸ "Miembros de maras y pandillas serán tipificados por la ley como terroristas", *El Heraldo*, 25 June 2023.

⁹⁹ On 18 April, Deputy Security Minister Julissa Villanueva announced a series of measures, including seizing firearms hidden by prisoners, blocking cell phone coverage, reassigning guards and transferring inmates. "Crisis en cárceles de Honduras pone en entredicho estrategia de seguridad del gobierno de Xiomara Castro", *ContraCorriente*, 13 April 2023.

¹⁰⁰ Villanueva said the riot was a reprisal by "organised crime" against measures imposed by the government. A high-level prison official had previously expressed his fear that intervening in jails would trigger a reaction from criminal groups. But Delma Ordoñez, spokesperson of the inmates' relatives association, declared that the government had failed to comply with requests her association made months ago, including putting members of the two gangs in separate jails. Crisis Group telephone interview, high-level prison official, 22 November 2022. "Gang slaughtered 46 women at Honduras prison with machetes, guns and flammable liquid, an official says", ABC News, 21 June 2023.

¹⁰¹ "Honduras busca pacificar cárceles y decomisa armas a reos", *Deutsche Welle*, 27 June 2023.

¹⁰² Under the "state of exception" in El Salvador, judges summarily decide on pre-trial detention of suspects in mass hearings of up to 500 people, sending them to overcrowded jails, where conditions are reportedly dire and abuses common. Crisis Group Latin America Report N°96, *Remedying El Salvador's Prison Fever*, 5 October 2022; "El Salvador: Widespread Abuses Under State of Emergency", Human Rights Watch, 7 December 2022.

¹⁰³ Crisis Group telephone interviews, civil society representatives and diplomats, February and March 2023.

human rights complaints. “I keep being assured that there haven’t been any human rights violations so far”, stated a U.S. official.¹⁰⁴ That said, the Castro government’s apparent interest in making security reform a flagship policy has waned, while its recent moves indicate a willingness to adopt harsher measures to curb violent crime.

¹⁰⁴ Crisis Group telephone interview, U.S. official, 24 March 2023.

III. Foreign Policy

As the Castro government has struggled to balance different demands and needs in forming security policy, it has also taken several important and (for some of its interlocutors) controversial steps in the area of foreign policy.

Castro starts with certain advantages. In a region where authoritarian drift has strained several governments' relations with foreign partners, such as the U.S. and the European Union, Castro's Honduras seems to stand out as an exception. Relations between Honduras and its main donors were in fact largely cordial during Castro's first year in office. "There has been a very significant overture [from the U.S.] toward the transition [under Castro]", a veteran Honduran official said, noting that various high-level U.S. officials visited the country in 2022. "Before", she added, "there was a freeze, not only with the U.S. government but also the Washington-based NGO community".¹⁰⁵ Diplomats and UN officials likewise reported eagerness to engage with Castro's government, praising her plans to revive the anti-corruption fight, reform security policy and better protect women's rights.¹⁰⁶

Some of Castro's foreign policy stances have raised eyebrows among Western partners, however. She refused to attend the June 2022 Summit of the Americas, a hemispheric forum held on this occasion in Los Angeles, because the U.S. hosts had pointedly not invited Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela. This choice started to "cool down relations", said the Honduran official cited above.¹⁰⁷ Honduras also announced it would drop recognition of Taiwan and open diplomatic relations with China, riling U.S. officials – and some members of Congress – though the State Department did not officially criticise the decision.¹⁰⁸ Honduras' abstentions in votes at the Organization of American States and the UN to condemn repression in Nicaragua and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, respectively, irritated the West even more. "The abstention in the UN only destroyed trust", a European diplomat said. "The government does not realise how catastrophic that vote was".¹⁰⁹

The Castro government defends these last two decisions, citing every country's right to decide with whom to establish ties. A government official also argued that Russia had helped Libre when its members were persecuted after the 2009 coup. As for the Nicaragua issue, the official went on to say, "It's hard to vote against your neighbour. We don't want a war with Nicaragua".¹¹⁰ Nonetheless, these moves have left the government's relations with key Western partners lukewarm.

¹⁰⁵ Crisis Group telephone interview, Honduran diplomat, 18 November 2022.

¹⁰⁶ Crisis Group interviews, diplomats and UN officials, Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula, October–November 2022.

¹⁰⁷ Crisis Group telephone interview, Honduran diplomat, 18 November 2022. A group of Latin American presidents, including Mexico's Andrés Manuel López Obrador and Bolivia's Luis Arce as well as Castro, declined to attend the meeting for this reason. See also "Honduras rejects exclusion of countries in Americas summit", Telesur English, 12 May 2022.

¹⁰⁸ "Honduran official: US 'respects' decision on China relations", Reuters, 21 March 2023. Castro embarked on a six-day visit of China in June. "Honduras president begins first visit to China since breaking ties with Taiwan", AP, 9 June 2023.

¹⁰⁹ Crisis Group interview, diplomat, Tegucigalpa, 25 October 2022.

¹¹⁰ Crisis Group interview, Honduran official, 27 October 2022.

IV. Addressing the Challenges Ahead

Despite the attention-grabbing emergency measures, and the earlier freshet of legislation, Castro's government's focus on security reform has been intermittent. A more sustained effort will be required to address the core problems that undermine trust in authorities and contribute to the proliferation of violent crime. Despite the chill created by differences over foreign policy, donors should support her in these efforts.

A. *Tackling Security Forces' Weaknesses*

At the heart of Castro's security policy dilemma is the question of how to enhance the effectiveness of the security forces, particularly the police, while rooting out corruption. As noted, the police are hampered by a grave lack of resources and personnel. Furthermore, and in spite of the purge under former President Hernández, the perception that police ranks are riddled with crooks remains widespread.¹¹¹

Distrust of the civilian police is pervasive.¹¹² "The military police is more abusive, but less corrupt", an evangelical pastor in a gang-controlled community said, an opinion echoed in surveys and by numerous others living in similar areas, who concur that the army and military police have a slightly better reputation for probity.¹¹³ There are also deep divisions regarding the Hernández-era efforts to clean up the police: while the government argues that many were expelled purely because of their political sympathies, security experts fear that officers dismissed for links to organised crime have managed to get their jobs back.¹¹⁴

High-level police and prison officials insist that change benefiting the force and public safety is afoot. They say the priorities are to improve the working conditions of officers and combat corruption in the ranks.¹¹⁵ At the same time, they say they are intent on strengthening crime prevention initiatives, including through rehabilitation and reintegration programs in a new prison that "will be a model jail".¹¹⁶ But the fruits of these reported efforts are not yet visible.

¹¹¹ Crisis Group interviews, residents, humanitarian workers, security experts, journalists and pastor, Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula, October and November 2022. According to Latinobarómetro, slightly more than a quarter of Hondurans trust the police, while 32 per cent trust the military. "Informe 2021", Corporación Latinobarómetro, 7 October 2021.

¹¹² According to an evangelical pastor in an area under gang control, residents are unlikely to come to the Castro government's "citizens' participation tables" to talk to officers if they get implemented. Crisis Group interview, pastor, San Pedro Sula, 2 December 2022.

¹¹³ Crisis Group interviews, locals, humanitarian workers, security experts, journalists and pastor, Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula, October and November 2022. The survey found that 29 per cent of interviewees trusted the national police, 37.1 per cent the army and 35.4 per cent the military police. "Sondeo de opinión pública 2022", Equipo de Reflexión, Investigación y Comunicación (ERIC-SJ), July 2022.

¹¹⁴ Crisis Group interviews, security experts, civil society representative and extortion victims, Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula, October and November 2022. See also Tiziano Breda, "Crackdown Raises Stakes as Honduran Protesters March On", Crisis Group Commentary, 2 July 2019.

¹¹⁵ Crisis Group interviews, high-level police and prison commissioners, Tegucigalpa and by telephone, October and November 2022.

¹¹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, high-level police and prison commissioners, Tegucigalpa and by telephone, October and November 2022. A few weeks after these interviews, the head of the police an-

The challenge for Castro is to balance public demands for tough law enforcement to curb immediate criminal threats, which will inevitably mould government policy, with the longer-term project of reform. Working in a deliberate manner toward gradual change could be one way to do it. For example, Castro can keep faith with her commitment to reduce the role of the army in civilian policing by fostering more of a phased transition than she had planned at first. While the changeover is in progress, the military police and the new police unit in charge of combating gangs should coordinate better, including through joint operations led by civilian authorities. Meanwhile, the government, with donor support, should provide civilian police with better equipment and improve officers' working conditions, as has been promised. Authorities should also shift some of their focus from the main cities to less densely populated areas, where violence is on the rise.¹¹⁷

The government will also need to find a way to impose stricter controls upon prisons without relying on prolonged military rule. Before the horrific June prison riot, Castro had tasked her deputy security minister with oversight of reforms in the prison system that included blocking cell phone service inside penitentiaries, creating a database of inmates and incorporating more technology in running jails.¹¹⁸ The government should see those reforms through and undertake others, such as sanctioning security officers who have been found smuggling cell phones and weapons into jails. Donors should support efforts to improve state control of jails, while also demanding respect for the human rights of inmates and abstention from the kinds of abuses seen in El Salvador during Bukele's crackdown.

B. Reducing Impunity

At the same time, more effective policing will depend on the success of efforts to curb corruption in the state and security forces and reduce the country's sky-high impunity rates. The projected UN commission for Honduras, CICIH, could certainly play a pivotal role in this regard, but domestic reforms might prove just as critical.

Great expectations for the anti-impunity commission have been tempered by slow progress in establishing the body and differences of opinion as to how it should work. The two main bones of contention are who will appoint the CICIH leader and how the commission can be protected from political pressures such as those that doomed MACCIH and the anti-impunity body in Guatemala. The Castro government seems adamant about the first issue in particular: while the UN insists that the Secretary-General choose the commissioner, the government continues to refer to making the selection itself in draft legislation.¹¹⁹ Critics fear the government is seeking a "custom-made" commission that will pose no threat to its political coalition.¹²⁰

nounced construction of two new jails, one in the Swan's Islands and another in Patuca, between the Olancho and Gracias a Dios departments, in eastern Honduras. "Honduras construirá 2 cárceles de alta seguridad para aislar reos peligrosos", *La Vanguardia*, 22 March 2023.

¹¹⁷ Crisis Group interviews, UN official and security expert, San Pedro Sula and by telephone, November 2022.

¹¹⁸ "Julissa Villanueva sobre intervención en cárceles: No nos va a temblar la mano para generar un cambio", *El Heraldo*, 24 May 2023.

¹¹⁹ The constitutional reform bill presented by Xiomara Zelaya, for example, says the members of the commission will be "chosen by the Honduran state from a proposal presented by the UN", a position

There are at least potential solutions on both counts. As Crisis Group has previously suggested, one way to accommodate the government's concerns would be to establish a consultative process to appoint the commissioner and a clear set of criteria for selection of cases to avoid political bias.¹²¹ A UN official observed of the now lapsed anti-impunity commission in Guatemala that "it was common practice [at the time] to have informal exchanges with the sitting government" regarding who should lead the commission, but that the government should not have formal veto power, as that would undermine the commission's independence.¹²² As for the commission's ability to withstand political pressure, a prominent Honduran lawyer argued that it would be better, if more laborious and ambitious, to seek a constitutional reform shielding the commission from changing political circumstances than to set up a CICIH that could be ruled unconstitutional or shut down at any time by the government.¹²³

In the meantime, there are concrete legal steps that could pave the way for the commission's arrival and would help reduce impunity regardless of whether it is established or not. In addition to the effective collaboration law described above, the UN and the government have identified the need for new laws on money laundering and embezzlement, quashing the decree protecting suspects accused of misusing public funds from prosecution and strengthening the attorney general's criminal investigation powers.¹²⁴ A high-level prosecutor singled out the need to repeal decrees that reduced sentences for drug trafficking and offered safeguards to suspects in corruption cases. He added to this list an edict classifying street protests as "usurpation" of public space, which authorities may abuse to squelch freedoms of speech and assembly.¹²⁵

For any eventual commission to be successful, cooperation from the Honduran judicial system will be vital. "CICIH is crucial to back prosecutors, but without a Supreme Court and attorney general willing to fight impunity it is going to drown", a government official pointed out.¹²⁶ Following intense negotiations, Congress has appointed a new Supreme Court that is seen as more balanced in composition, if still under the

that the UN firmly opposes. The government is likely hoping that by having a larger role in the election of the commissioner, it could prevent a probe that may threaten its power or members of its ruling coalition, as happened in Guatemala. Zelaya is a Libre deputy who is daughter of President Castro and her husband.

¹²⁰ The Liberal Party does not seem interested in the CICIH project, while the National Party has said its creation should be conditional on "legalisation" of the Congress' directors board and the repeal of an amnesty shielding officials accused of corruption during Zelaya's term (2006-2009) from prosecution. Crisis Group interviews, journalist; Liberal and National Party representatives, Tegucigalpa, 24-26 October 2022.

¹²¹ Crisis Group Briefing, *Ten Challenges for the UN in 2022-2023*, op. cit.

¹²² Crisis Group telephone interview, UN official, 23 January 2023.

¹²³ Constitutional reforms in Honduras become effective only upon ratification in the ensuing legislative period, which is annual. A reform approved in 2023 can thus take effect no sooner than 2024. Crisis Group telephone interview, lawyer, 6 April 2023.

¹²⁴ Crisis Group interview, high-level prosecutor, Tegucigalpa, 25 October 2022. Crisis Group Briefing, *Handling the Risks of Honduras' High-stakes Poll*, op. cit.

¹²⁵ Crisis Group interview, high-level prosecutor, Tegucigalpa, 25 October 2022.

¹²⁶ Crisis Group interview, government official, Tegucigalpa, 27 October 2022.

sway of various political forces.¹²⁷ The next crucial appointment will be of a new attorney general in September.¹²⁸ These new judicial authorities' commitment to the anti-corruption fight will show in how staunchly they support the special anti-corruption unit, UFERCO, in the attorney general's office.¹²⁹ Lawmakers approved a bill in May 2022 that in principle allowed this unit to investigate cases without waiting for the attorney general's approval.¹³⁰ But a senior prosecutor suggested that the attorney general might still discreetly hinder its work, including by transferring cases to other departments or reassigning personnel.¹³¹

Whether or not top judges and prosecutors are committed to the cause, if impunity is to decline it will be essential for judicial institutions to be properly funded and staffed. At present, they are not. In March, dozens of employees of the attorney general's office and forensic medicine institute staged a weeks-long strike in Tegucigalpa. They drew attention to particularly low salaries, a shortage of staff to respond to the workload and limited access to equipment needed to carry out forensic investigations.¹³²

C. Addressing Socio-economic Needs

The government is unlikely to reduce violent crime over the long term if it does not address the socio-economic conditions that push so many youngsters either to join gangs or to leave the country in search of a better life. Young people in gang-controlled areas lack job opportunities, as employers often will not hire them due to their place of origin. As a result, young people may feel excluded from mainstream society.¹³³ "Marginalisation locks you up in a world where only gangs open their doors to you", observed a civil society representative working with at-risk youth.¹³⁴

Local leaders have several ideas for remedying this problem. They propose, for instance, that authorities make houses seized from criminal gangs available as spaces for vocational and technical training.¹³⁵ There, the government could offer vocational training, with private firms providing more.¹³⁶ To overcome the stigma that often makes businesses hesitate to hire people from violent neighbourhoods, local civil society

¹²⁷ Six of the fifteen magistrates are believed to represent Libre's interests, five the National Party's and four the Liberal Party's. "Tripartidismo de Honduras elige nueva CSJ", *ContraCorriente*, 17 February 2023.

¹²⁸ "Próxima elección del fiscal general generará nueva lucha de poderes en Honduras", *Criterio*, 31 January 2023.

¹²⁹ The unit was formerly called UFECIC and was attached to MACCIH in the attorney general's office. The attorney general renamed it UFERCO to prevent it from being shut down along with MACCIH. "Ministerio Público cierra la UFECIC y crea la UFERCO", *Criterio*, 24 January 2020.

¹³⁰ "Uferco sigue limitada a pesar de estatus especial otorgado por el Congreso Nacional", *ContraCorriente*, 18 July 2022.

¹³¹ Crisis Group interview, high-level prosecutor, Tegucigalpa, 25 October 2022.

¹³² The forensic workers' strike highlighted the importance of their work, with the media reporting dead bodies left lying in public places for days. "Fiscales protestan por precariedad institucional mientras negociaciones inician para elegir nuevo fiscal general", *ContraCorriente*, 18 March 2023.

¹³³ Crisis Group interviews, residents, San Pedro Sula and Choloma, 30 November 2022.

¹³⁴ Crisis Group interview, civil society representative, San Pedro Sula, 2 December 2022.

¹³⁵ Crisis Group interviews, pastor and community leader, San Pedro Sula, 30 November and 2 December 2022.

¹³⁶ Crisis Group interview, civil society representatives, San Pedro Sula, 3 December 2022.

organisations and community leaders could partner with the firms to provide character references for potential employees. Local leaders also call on civil society organisations or private firms that foster entrepreneurship and social investment to give residents seed capital or low-interest loans to start their own business ventures. They cite these small credits as particularly important for helping women, especially single mothers and survivors of gender-based violence.¹³⁷

Life under gang rule can also be costly, due to extortion and its ripple effects. Bus ticket prices across the country rose sharply in 2022, as the Ukraine war drove up fuel prices. Compounding the problem, transport companies have cut back their hours of operation and changed their routes, in particular skirting gang-controlled communities, to avoid falling victim to shakedowns or attacks for missed payments.¹³⁸ People living in these areas subsequently had difficulty travelling to work and school. State authorities should work closely with private transport companies to ensure that low-income neighbourhoods are not denied bus service. They can, for example, subsidise fixed ticket prices where necessary and respond to the most serious extortion threats through police and judicial investigations.

Still another by-product of insecurity in gang-controlled areas is that young people lack public spaces for recreation. The state has neglected parks, for example, which often end up being little more than barriers separating rival gang territories.¹³⁹ The private sector, particularly banks, makes contributions to park maintenance through philanthropic foundations, but many of these spaces remain dilapidated and dangerous.¹⁴⁰ Proper upkeep requires the state's attention and funding.¹⁴¹

D. *Working with Foreign Partners*

Neither the Castro government nor its foreign partners should let divergent geopolitical perspectives impede cooperation on issues where interests overlap. As their relations with Honduras' neighbours deteriorate – particularly El Salvador and Nicaragua – the U.S. and other donors should seize the opportunity to make as much progress as they can with an at least partly reform-minded partner.¹⁴² In working with Tegucigalpa,

¹³⁷ Around one third of Honduran households are headed by women, about half of whom are single mothers. Such action would help reduce gender inequality, which is high in Honduras, particularly in the economic sphere. Honduras scored 0.43 in the UN Development Programme's Gender Inequality Index 2021, a 0 to 1 index whereby 1 is total inequality, double the average score of Europe and Central Asia. Crisis Group interviews, civil society representatives, San Pedro Sula, 2 December 2022. "Las madres solteras representan el 46% de la población de mujeres en Honduras", Radio HRN, 10 May 2020. "Human Development Report 2021/2022", UN Development Programme, 2022.

¹³⁸ Crisis Group interviews, security expert, residents and civil society representatives, San Pedro Sula and Choloma, November-December 2022.

¹³⁹ Crisis Group interviews, residents, San Pedro Sula's city hall official and civil society representatives, San Pedro Sula and Choloma, November-December 2022.

¹⁴⁰ Many residents believe the private sector makes these donations to whitewash its image and avoid paying taxes. Crisis Group interviews, San Pedro Sula, November 2022.

¹⁴¹ Crisis Group interviews, community leaders and NGO workers, San Pedro Sula and Choloma, November 2022.

¹⁴² "The Biden administration's plan to stem migration by building the rule of law in Central America has thus far failed to stop authoritarians or persuade people to stay", *The New York Times*, 17 September 2022.

foreign partners should focus above all on violence prevention and seek to tailor projects to local needs.

International cooperation agencies carry out essential work in gang-controlled communities, offering safe spaces and services that central or local authorities have failed to provide. But they have been affected by donors' failure to sustain funding. USAID has financed dozens of outreach centres with the aim of providing at-risk young people vocational training, education and sport in order to dull the gangs' appeal and promote a sense of communal belonging, thus lessening the urge to migrate.¹⁴³ Some evidence suggests that these centres helped reduce violence in gang-affected neighbourhoods, particularly in the early 2010s.¹⁴⁴ But aid budget cuts have hurt these centres. "Half of them [outreach centres] have been shut down or just function as gyms", noted a community leader in Rivera Hernández.¹⁴⁵

For its part, the Honduran government should lay out more clearly and in greater detail the priorities it wishes to pursue. A high-level U.S. official, for example, was unaware of the plan to build new jails until it was announced, despite Washington's willingness to chip in with training and equipment.¹⁴⁶

The government should also make clear that it does not plan to make the state of exception a long-term crutch. The above-referenced U.S. official expressed concern about the state's reliance on emergency security measures. "It's easy to ... play to the people [and tell them] what they want to hear", she argued, referring to the appeal of Bukele's policies and suggesting that Castro may be tempted to replicate them.¹⁴⁷ To allay such misgivings, Castro's government should look for opportunities to signal its commitment to a security policy based on human rights, violence prevention and transparency. One confidence-building measure might be to establish an oversight board comprising the human rights commissioner and civil society representatives to monitor the state of exception, challenge the government to justify it periodically and press for it to be lifted as soon as possible.

Finally, the Honduran Congress will need to do its part, passing laws that would pave the way for creating CICIH, as well as others that would help the state reduce gender-based violence and offer protection to the victims of forced internal displacement.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴³ "How the most dangerous place on earth got safer", *The New York Times*, 11 August 2016.

¹⁴⁴ Susan Berk-Seligson, Diana Orcés, Georgina Pizzolitto, Mitchell A. Seligson and Carole J. Wilson, "Impact Evaluation of USAID's Community-Based Crime and Violence Prevention Approach in Central America", The Latin American Public Opinion Project, Vanderbilt University, January 2014.

¹⁴⁵ A renowned NGO had to cut its seventeen-person team in San Pedro Sula down to one person. Crisis Group interviews, community leader and NGO representative, San Pedro Sula, 30 November and 1 December 2022. The reduced operations probably correspond to cuts made by former President Donald Trump, which affected 80 per cent of USAID programs in Central America, according to the Government Accountability Office. "Northern Triangle of Central America: The 2019 Suspension and Reprogramming of U.S. Funding Adversely Affected Assistance Projects", U.S. Government Accountability Office, 24 September 2021.

¹⁴⁶ Crisis Group telephone interview, U.S. official, 24 March 2023.

¹⁴⁷ Around 60 per cent of the respondents to a May survey favoured imposing Bukele-like measures in Honduras. "Sondeo de opinión pública, Boletín n. 12", ERIC-SJ, 9 May 2023.

¹⁴⁸ Crisis Group interviews, UN officials and civil society representatives, San Pedro Sula, 30 November and 1 December 2022. "ACNUR expresa la importancia de aprobar Ley de Protección para Desplazados en Honduras", *Proceso*, 15 December 2022.

V. Conclusion

The discontent festering throughout Honduras after over a decade of National Party rule, marked by recurrent political turmoil, spiking violent crime, corruption scandals and modest economic growth whose benefits barely reached the poorer parts of society, helped catapult Xiomara Castro to power in 2021. Her unexpectedly large margin of victory raised expectations among citizens and foreign observers that a new, reformist administration would finally address the drivers of the country's longstanding predicaments of violence and injustice, along with their most conspicuous international symptom – mass migration to the U.S.

A year and half on, however, a degree of disillusionment has crept into perceptions of the Castro government, both at home and abroad. Despite a modest overall decrease, levels of violent crime remain high, even rising in parts of the country in 2022. High-visibility murders and an apparent surge in extortion spurred the government to change tack – turning to the military for help and declaring a state of exception that has been repeatedly extended, even if its effects so far appear more symbolic than practical. Mass killings inside and outside jails have nevertheless reinforced this switch. Tougher rhetoric and more security personnel in the streets may offer a temporary respite to citizens, above all in areas troubled by gangs. But going further down the trail blazed by Salvadoran President Bukele, which some worry could happen, would be a mistake. So, too, would turning away from reform commitments. Castro still has much to do in terms of preparing the ground for lasting improvements in security.

Strengthening the police force and addressing the flaws of the security and judicial systems – particularly by tackling corruption – will be essential to progress. Whether or not Honduras and the UN can agree on how to set up CICIH, there is much the government could do to crack open the legal carapace protecting corruption suspects. The authorities, the private sector and foreign donors should also direct more funds and attention to the areas where gangs rule and recruit personnel. Although Honduran stances on Ukraine, Taiwan and Nicaragua have irked Western donors, Castro is still one of the more promising partners in a region fast slipping into authoritarianism and more coercive policing. Honduras' international partners should encourage her to do far more to chart a clear route toward clean government and public security that prizes people's rights.

Guatemala City/Bogotá/Washington/Brussels, 10 July 2023

Appendix A: Map of Honduras



Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

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 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former Foreign Minister of Argentina and Chef de Cabinet to the United Nations Secretary-General, Susana Malcorra.

Comfort Ero was appointed Crisis Group's President & CEO in December 2021. She first joined Crisis Group as West Africa Project Director in 2001 and later rose to become Africa Program Director in 2011 and then Interim Vice President. In between her two tenures at Crisis Group, she worked for the International Centre for Transitional Justice and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Liberia.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kiev, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

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July 2023

Appendix C: Reports and Briefings on Latin America and the Caribbean since 2020

Special Reports and Briefings

COVID-19 and Conflict: Seven Trends to Watch, Special Briefing N°4, 24 March 2020 (also available in French and Spanish).

A Course Correction for the Women, Peace and Security Agenda, Special Briefing N°5, 9 December 2020.

Ten Challenges for the UN in 2021-2022, Special Briefing N°6, 13 September 2021.

7 Priorities for the G7: Managing the Global Fallout of Russia's War on Ukraine, Special Briefing N°7, 22 June 2022.

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Seven Priorities for the G7 in 2023, Special Briefing N°10, 15 May 2023.

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A Broken Canopy: Preventing Deforestation and Conflict in Colombia, Latin America Report N°91, 4 November 2021 (also available in Spanish).

Handling the Risks of Honduras' High-stakes Poll, Latin America Briefing N°45, 23 November 2021 (also available in Spanish).

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Overcoming the Global Rift on Venezuela, Latin America Report N°93, 17 February 2022 (also available in Spanish).

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Brazil's True Believers: Bolsonaro and the Risks of an Election Year, Latin America Briefing N°47, 16 June 2022 (also available in Portuguese and Spanish).

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