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COI QUERY RESPONSE

HONDURAS - INFORMATION ON THE PERVASIVE NATURE OF GANG VIOLENCE IN - HOW GANGS HAVE INFILTRATED THE POLICE

The *UK Foreign Office* in November 2024 notes that: "There has been an increase in armed attacks by local gangs on bus drivers and conductors, often resulting in serious injury or death." [...]¹

In September 2024 the *Norwegian Refugee Council* states that: "Extortion, forced recruitment, sexual violence, threats and abuse are some of the reasons that force many Hondurans to leave their communities or seek refuge outside their country. Maras, gangs and organised crime are a permanent threat to a large part of the population and are a real obstacle for leading a normal life and even moving freely through the territory"²

The *Associated Press* in September 2024 reported that: "...Honduras...has long been plagued by gang violence..."³

Agence France Presse in August 2024 states that: "Honduras, like some other Latin American nations, has also seen high levels of forced displacement due to gangs taking over families' homes. People flee because of "threats, extortion, the murder of a family member, the dispossession of goods and properties and the recruitment of children," said Elsy Reyes, head of human mobility at the National Commissioner for Human Rights...Gangs and drug traffickers maintain "a mini-government" in the territories they control, according to the national ombudsman's office, which has a unit dedicated to "internal forced displacement..."⁴

¹ UK Foreign Office (15 November 2024) Honduras travel advice (November 2024)

² Norwegian Refugee Council (20 September 2024) What is happening in Honduras?).

³ Associated Press (19 September 2024) Attempted prison escape in Honduras leaves 2 inmates dead and 3 injured

⁴ Agence France Presse (8 August 2024) Honduras gang violence forces thousands from their homes

InSight Crime in June 2024 points out that: “An official with knowledge of the judiciary, who wished to remain anonymous because the person was not authorized to speak to the press, told InSight Crime that the state's ability to create long-term security policies was jeopardized because key institutions, including the judiciary and the police, remained “captured and weakened” by organized criminal groups. “Elements within the police play an important role in criminal groups and not just gangs,” the official said. “The main impact of the state of emergency has been the violation of society's fundamental rights.” In Rivera Hernández, a community in San Pedro Sula where several gangs are locked in an ongoing territorial conflict driven by extortion revenues, community leader Daniel Pacheco told InSight Crime that the state of emergency had “no impact” on the way criminal groups – including the fearsome gangs, the Mara Salvatrucha (MS13) and the Barrio 18 – operated inside the neighborhood.”⁵

In April 2024 *Impact News Service* notes that: “Honduras had the second highest homicide rate in the region, and people were being displaced from their homes by gangs. The situation had improved through the state of emergency - over 400 gangs had been broken up and the homicide rate had dropped by 10 per cent since 2021. The State party hoped to be able to end the state of emergency soon.”⁶

The *US Department of State* Trafficking in Persons Report in June 2024 mentioned that: “Children experiencing homelessness are at risk of sex and labor trafficking. Criminal organizations, including gangs, exploit girls in sex trafficking, force children into street begging, and coerce and threaten children and young adults to transport weapons, sell drugs, commit extortion, or serve as lookouts; these acts occur primarily in urban areas, but one NGO reported an increase in gang activity in rural areas.”⁷

Business Monitor in June 2024 states that: “The security situation in Honduras is overshadowed by one of the highest homicide rates in Central America (35.8 per 100,000 in 2022 according to InSight Crime), with the government struggling to contain gang violence from groups like MS13 and Barrio 18”⁸

In June 2024 the *Voice of America* points out that in: “...Honduras...gangs remain powerful and corruption entrenched...”⁹

The *US Overseas Security Advisory Council (OSAC)* in January 2024 mentioned that: “Hondurans continue to be affected by MS-13 (*Mara Salvatrucha*) and Barrio 18 gang activity in cities such as Tegucigalpa, Choloma, La Ceiba, Tela, and San Pedro Sula. Most crime victims are members of rival gangs, small business owners who resist gang extortion, passengers on public transportation, or those involved in land disputes. The MS-13 and Barrio 18 gangs are the most active and powerful gangs present in Honduras. Gangs are not reluctant to use violence, and specialize in murder-for-hire, carjacking, extortion, and other violent street crime. Gangs control some of the taxi services, primarily

⁵ InSight Crime (25 June 2024) Honduras Doubles Down on Flawed Mano Dura Strategy

⁶ Impact News Service (18 April 2024) In Dialogue with Honduras, Experts of the Committee against Torture Praise Bill on Reparation for Victims of Human Rights Violations, Ask about Recurrent Use of the State of Emergency and Reported Acts of Torture in Police Stations

⁷ US Department of State (24 June 2024) Trafficking in Persons Report 2024: Honduras, p.7

⁸ Business Monitor Online (21 June 2024) Financial Stability Masks Underlying Structural Risks In Honduras, p.2

⁹ Voice of America (15 June 2024) Honduras plans to build a 20,000-capacity 'megaprison'

in the large cities. Transnational criminal organizations are also involved in narcotics trafficking and other illicit commerce. In December 2022 the government of Honduras declared a State of Exception as a response to gang violence and high homicide rates in the country. The State of Exception extends the powers of law enforcement to crack down on criminal gangs, and it only applies to certain areas like Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula. However, the State of Exception does not seem to have had a large impact on crime as in the streets, new groups have emerged, and extortion of the transport industry has expanded.”¹⁰ This report further states that: “President Xiomara Castro came into office on a platform of anticorruption and transparency. Some steps have been taken to demonstrate commitment, including the extradition of former President Juan Orlando Hernandez to the U.S. In June, the Castro government announced they would begin a process of constitutional reform, another campaign promise. It is too early to assess the extent to which this government will be able to address corruption, which remains a pervasive problem, especially at a local level given the strong presence of armed gangs who often target local officials for corruption.”¹¹

The ACLED (*Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project*) in December 2023 notes that: “Armed clashes and violence targeting civilians have continued unabated throughout 2023 due to persisting competition among gangs, especially in the country's overcrowded prisons where violence has surged. Gangs continue to extort transportation workers in order to generate revenues, albeit the rate of these events has slowed down in 2023 compared to 2022. The geography of the violence points to gang violence moderately increasing and spreading beyond the crime hotspots of Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula.”¹² This same document notes that: “Armed violence in Honduras has begun spreading beyond its traditional hotbeds, despite efforts to strengthen the capacity and presence of state forces across the country. Criminal organizations have notably operated across the state with known operations in the coastal city of La Ceiba, Atlántida, in the Mosquitia forest area in Gracias a Dios department, in the coca-growing departments of Colón and Olancho, and also departments bordering Guatemala along strategic drug trafficking routes. Recognizing criminal groups' wider reach, the government has announced military police operations in Atlántida, Copán, and Yoro, and the deployment of additional military forces in Colón, Olancho, El Paraíso, and Gracias a Dios in April 2023. However, the effort is contrasted by reports that residents have not felt increased state forces' presence in targeted areas, and that law enforcement's lack of resources and personnel, especially in rural areas, have likely limited the efficiency of security measures.”¹³

The *US Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime* in September 2023 mentioned that: “Honduras has various law enforcement agencies, including the national police and specialized units tasked with combating organized crime. However, these agencies suffer from inadequate resources, such as staff, equipment, and fuel, and are plagued by corruption. Law enforcement officials often face allegations of colluding with criminal organizations and committing human rights abuses. To address these issues, the country has implemented some reforms, such as a training programme for new recruits and cooperating with the US to apprehend and extradite people wanted for various

¹⁰ US Overseas Security Advisory Council (OSAC) (2 January 2024) Honduras Country Security Report 2024

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² ACLED (Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project) (1 December 2023) Fighting Gangs Under the State of Exception in Honduras

¹³ *ibid*

criminal charges. Despite some improvements, the country's law enforcement capacity remains limited, and previous administrations' legacies pose significant challenges.”¹⁴

The *Austrian Centre for Country of Origin & Asylum Research and Documentation (ACCORD)* in December 2022 reported that: “At the same time, there are reports on corruption within the National Police and allegations of security forces collaborating with criminal groups, including by HRW (13 January 2022), the Borgen Project (26 July 2019) and researcher Pamela Ruiz in the context of a study on gangs, violence and extortion, that includes interviews with stakeholders:

"Most disturbing in the case of Honduras, was the common theme of corrupt National Police officers involved in extortions. Participants described officers acting as delinquent groups committing extortion, involved with gangs committing extortion, and/or not arresting gang members in exchange for a portion of extortion funds. An NGO participant shared local vendors perspective: '*Si la policía es ineficiente, mejor le pago a los pandilleros. Además, no me van a matar y me va a cuidar.*' (If the police are inefficient, it's better to pay gang members. Besides, they won't kill me and will take care of me.) (Personal Interview with NGO #2, March 2018). Academic and NGO participants described extortion to function as an informal form of security. In conclusion, violence is not exclusive to gangs in Honduras, but aggravated with domestic narcotrafficking groups, imitators, and corrupt police officers. While gangs are prevalent in urban centers, narcotrafficking groups are prevalent in trafficking corridors. It should be noted that territory control is exclusive for these groups. Extortions were also committed by imitators and more concerning is the involvement of corrupt police officers." Ruiz, January 2022, pp. 19-20)." ¹⁵

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¹⁴ US Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime (26 September 2023) 2023 Global Organized Crime Index – Honduras

¹⁵ (Austrian Centre for Country of Origin & Asylum Research and Documentation (ACCORD) (12 December 2022) Honduras: Gang-based violence, criminality and human rights violations against specific groups

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