

Honduras Overview

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Environment

Honduras is the second largest country in Central America. It is bounded on the north by the Caribbean Sea and on the south-west by the Pacific Ocean. Honduras shares frontiers with Guatemala on the west, Nicaragua on the east and south, and El Salvador on the south-west.

Over 80 per cent of the land is mountainous, with ranges extending from east to west. Most of the Afro-Honduran population is concentrated on the Atlantic Coast along with Miskitu who live in areas that border Nicaragua. The majority of the other indigenous groups are located in the central departments and on the borders with Guatemala and El Salvador.

Peoples

Main languages: Spanish, Garífuna, English Creole, indigenous languages

Main religions: Christianity (Roman Catholic, Evangelical)

The indigenous/minority population of Honduras is estimated to be 8 per cent of the total population^[1]

Main minority groups: Afro-Hondurans (2%),^[2] Lenca, Miskitu, Xicaque (Tolupan), Maya Chorti (or Chortí), Pech (Paya), Tawahka (Sumu)

The Lenca, Pech, Tawahka, Xicaque, Maya Chorti, Misquito, and Garífuna are classified as indigenous. The Garífuna are of mixed, Afro-Carib origin and were moved to the area during the colonial period. There is also an Afro-Honduran Creole English-speaking minority group of around 20,000 who live mainly in the Honduran Bay Islands.

History

The current territory of Honduras cuts across what was a pre-Columbian boundary between Mesoamerica and the more dispersed indigenous communities to the south. In the north and west of the country, Mayan and Lenca groups based their well-organized communities around agriculture and trade and were joined by Nahuat-speaking migrants moving south from Mexico. The Lenca and Maya Chortí are descendants of these populations. The rest of the territory was made up of groups that migrated from

the south, including the Mayagna (Sumu), Tolupan (Xicaque) and Pech (Paya) who lived by fishing and shifting agriculture.

The division was largely maintained following the arrival of Spanish gold-seeking colonizers. Honduras turned out to be much richer in silver and, in the west, tens of thousands died and as many as 150,000 were enslaved and exported to mines and estates in other countries. The less accessible jungle areas were not as affected, while on the Atlantic Coast the Miskitu population formed as a consequence of British trading activity (see [Nicaragua](#)).

The first Africans initially came to Honduras under conditions of forced labour with the Spanish beginning in 1540, and mostly became part of the mainstream *mestizo* population.

The Afro-Honduran Garífuna society developed following the 1797 exile by Britain of Afro-Caribs from the island of St Vincent to the Honduran Bay Islands. Later, a majority migrated to the mainland and established villages on the Atlantic coast extending from Belize to Nicaragua. They continued to speak their own language and preserve distinctive cultural practices.

In the 1840s a group of English-speaking black free persons from the Cayman Islands also migrated to the Bay Islands and settled there. They formed self-sufficient farming and fishing communities, had little to do with the mainland and retained their Creole language and Afro-Caribbean culture.

Additional Afro-Caribbean groups came in the early twentieth century as migrant workers to build the railroad and work in the banana enclaves of the mainland. Those who could not get jobs in the banana plantations began leaving during the global depression of 1930s and the descendants of those who remained largely became part of the *mestizo* mainstream.

Governance

Modern Honduran history has been dominated by the struggle to forge a national identity from two disparate halves. US companies operating with generous tax incentives developed fruit plantations on the Atlantic coast on large tracts of land provided by the Honduran government and created a complete infrastructure of railways and roads primarily to service these holdings. The rest of the country remained a rural agrarian Spanish colonial influenced society consisting largely of mestizo ranchers and subsistence farmers.

For most of its post-independence history the culture of national unity forged by the state has been on the basis of a mestizo ideal formulated largely in the urban centres of the country; most especially in Tegucigalpa (the political capital) and San Pedro Sula (the industrial capital). As a consequence traditional indigenous and minority populations have historically been marginalized, ignored or discriminated against.

Indigenous organizations, most especially Garífuna began working at a national level in the late 1970s and in the 1980s there emerged a rising consciousness of minority rights, which has focused on struggles against the expulsion from traditional lands. Land conflicts sharpened with the Law on the Modernization of the Agricultural Sector, which brought indigenous groups into conflict with investors in agro-industry and tourism. At a more immediate level, it put them into direct conflict with local landowners, municipal governments, as well as with agencies of the Honduran state, such as the National Agrarian Institute (INA) and the Honduran forestry service (COHDEFOR).

Government recognition

Unlike other countries of the region, in the 1980s Honduras officially recognized the multicultural composition of its society and the need to protect the economic, cultural and human rights of its ethnic peoples. This helped to create an official space for indigenous and minority populations to work towards having their rights recognized and their needs addressed.

President Callejas (1989-93) pledged to demarcate territory and issue land titles. In the case of the Xicaque, a presidential order to follow this up was issued. However the promises and signed agreements to title the lands were not delivered to the agreed-upon extent which led groups to further protest against government failure to fulfil its agreements. Hopes for change were crushed when one of their leaders, Vicente Matute, was assassinated in May 1992.

In July 1994, in an unprecedented demonstration by Honduran indigenous groups, 3,000 indigenous activists camped outside the legislative assembly in Tegucigalpa for five days. Their demands included indigenous rights, protection of the environment and the release of indigenous leaders jailed in land disputes. In response, the government of President Carlos Reina set up an emergency commission to attend to the demands. Some logging concessions in indigenous areas were cancelled and, in 1995, ILO Convention 169 on indigenous rights was implemented.

In 1997 the Honduran government, under President Reina, promised 14,700 hectares of land to Maya Chorti following the murder of Candido Amador Recinos and the mass protest which occurred in Tegucigalpa and at the Mayan ruins of Copan afterwards. Since then, only a fraction of this land has been titled to Maya Chorti communities. This is partly a consequence of the difficulties surrounding negotiations to purchase the land from local landowners, changes in presidential administrations every four years as well as unexplained disappearance of funds.

All along critics have questioned the degree of government commitment, pointing out that the agreements are just standard delaying tactics traditionally used by the Honduran state, which involves tolerating the existence of social movements rather than rejecting them outright and attempting to manage or channel dissent through strategies like promises and accords.

The 30 November 1998 amendment to Article 107 of the Honduran Constitution removed the prohibition against non-Hondurans purchasing land - provided the land is used for tourism projects. This created great concern especially among Garífuna groups because it opened up the possibility for foreign individuals or companies to purchase land in areas where ethnic minorities have traditionally lived and for which they had not yet been formally given agreed upon communal titles.

The chances of indigenous and minority groups being able to have their concerns adequately addressed is especially complicated by the fact that, although each new Honduran administration inherits previously agreed upon accords and promises, it shows different degrees of commitment to indigenous issues, and towards honouring past promises and accords, or making new ones.

In November 2005 Manuel Zelaya Rosales of the center-left Liberal Party was elected president. Zelaya who took office in 2006, was a vocal proponent of the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) and since then various indigenous and campesino organizations have kept a wary eye on the administration to determine its degree of commitment to their issues.

In August 2008 Honduras joined the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA) amid strong criticism from business and right-wing political sectors. According to the 2005 founding document ALBA was established as an alternative to US sponsored trade agreements like CAFTA with the aim of promoting Latin American cooperation, solidarity and integration while simultaneously fighting regional poverty, inequality and unequal terms of trade. Honduras joined Bolivia, Cuba, Dominica, Nicaragua

and Venezuela to become the sixth member state.

Current state of minorities and indigenous peoples

As part of the national Poverty Reduction Strategy beginning in the year 2000, the Legal Office for Ethnic Groups and Cultural Heritage, which was formed in 1994/5, initiated vocational training at the Intibucá Indigenous Handcraft Centre and in the Our Roots Program. This has enabled indigenous and minority groups involved in tourism and artisan production to expand their activities.

Agreements have also been reached between the government and indigenous groups on matters such as the provision of land, the issuing of deeds to property, respect for their human rights and investigation into the killing of indigenous leaders. However, the issue of landownership has not yet been fully resolved. Moreover, although at least 25 members of different indigenous groups have been murdered in the last decade, investigations into these cases have not made much progress and no one has been brought to justice.

Some Garífuna and other indigenous groups have now obtained titles to their lands although this has not been the case with Maya Chorti. In March 2002, the Honduran National Agrarian Institute, which is the government body responsible for allocating indigenous lands, awarded the Vertientes community of Gracias its communal land title. However, the neighbouring Xicaque community of Planes, which was also seeking title, has encountered obstacles.

Numerous Xicaque community leaders have allegedly been threatened and intimidated by individuals connected to landowners in Gracias. Since 2000, they have filed legal complaints and activists claim this has resulted in fabricated criminal charges being levied against community leaders ranging from seizure of land to murder.

The Honduran Black People's Fraternal Organization (OFRANEH) continues to express serious concern that, despite civil society opposition, the government is determined to proceed with mega-projects which will have deeply negative environmental consequences for ethnic groups such as the Miskitus and Tawahkas who live on the coastal wetlands and in the lower and central parts of the Patuca region. Plans for the construction of the Patuca hydroelectric dam have been met with strong opposition from indigenous and environmental groups which has resulted in the deaths of two activists of the Olancho Environmental Movement in December 2006. The two were allegedly killed by national police agents.

Environmental consequences of the planned mega-projects include large-scale felling of forests, endangering the country's water supply, and the flooding of entire areas where indigenous and Afro-Honduran communities live by the Guayape and Guayambre rivers.

Prisoners of conscience in Honduras are still recognized by international human rights monitors as being at risk. Prisoner of conscience indigenous community leader Feliciano Pineda was released early in 2006.

Statistical issues

On a more general level, indigenous and minority community leaders consider it important that measures be taken to address the lack of official statistics according to ethnic group, gender and differing populations. The absence of properly disaggregated data makes it difficult to engage in an adequate evaluation of the health and other living conditions of these groups, which is a vital step towards properly addressing their overall concerns.

However, while better statistics are needed there is still the issue of who collects the data and how it will be used. The Maya Chorti in western Honduras have taken the initiative to address this problem of adequate documentation, coordinated by their cultural-political organization Consejo Nacional Indígena Maya Chorti de Honduras (CONIMCHH). The Honduran Institute of Anthropology and History (IAHAH), which is responsible for the management of cultural heritage sites (e.g. the Mayan ruins of Copan), historical archives and other projects involving the indigenous communities, has also been working for the past few years on a massive ethnographic survey of indigenous communities in Honduras. This project aims to officially count the number of indigenous people, as well as collect other types of information of a much broader nature than the statistics collected in the national census.

CONIMCHH leaders are particularly concerned about this initiative, fearing that the 'official' nature of the project will result in an 'undercount' of the number of Maya Chorti in Honduras, thereby negating their own census efforts and denying their organization the right to state how many self-identified Maya Chorti are in the country. This is of special concern to activists given the tendency to view 'real' Maya Chorti as being mainly a Guatemala-based population with a negligible presence in Honduras.

In 1994, in addition to its own legislation regarding the protection of indigenous lands, Honduras signed the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention adopted on 27 June 1989 by the International Labour Organization (ILO). Honduras is one of the few countries of the Inter-American system in which Convention 169 is in force and this was a key factor in the pursuit of rights by Garífuna and other indigenous groups.

Economic Issues

During the 2007-2008 period Indigenous groups were particularly affected by the country's ongoing economic difficulties. Inflation rose and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) froze new loans claiming that Honduras had not complied with the financial restraints linked to earlier IMF disbursements. Critics also argue that the Free Trade Agreement with the United States has weakened the Honduran currency, and stepped-up imports of U.S. agricultural goods thereby increasing the threat to Indigenous farmers from genetically modified corn and other crops. Honduran indigenous groups are therefore likely to look favourably on the country's participation in ALBA. Among the benefits of membership are projects to improve health, nutrition, education and culture.

Indigenous Miskitu and Garífuna representatives were among the 30,000 people mobilised by the governing Liberal Party to attend the August 2008 ALBA membership signing ceremony which was witnessed by the Presidents of Venezuela, Bolivia and Nicaragua, as well as the Cuban Vice President. Some [ALBA](#)-supported projects are already being implemented in energy, health, education and agriculture. Low-income Hondurans have received medical treatment, hospital infrastructure in indigenous areas as well as scholarships to study in Venezuela: the country spearheading the regional initiative.

Honduras has also joined Petrocaribe, which is the preferential tariff Caribbean oil alliance with Venezuela, and can therefore also count on nearly 15 million dollars in social investment funding from that body.

[1] CIA (2007).

[2] CIA (2007).