

# The National University “penitentiary” in Honduras

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The institution of higher learning in Honduras, the National Autonomous University, resembles a battlefield laboratory of torture and persecution. It is here that the National Police or military enters when the academic officials so decide. They intimidate, repress and persecute students that study there as though it were a prison.

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\* Honduran journalist, correspondent for various national and international agencies.



Photo: Ronnie Huete

Tyranny is present in the National Autonomous University of Honduras (UNAH). Among other repressive measures, the state security bodies issue arrest warrants for university students. There is a total of 30 students accused of the crimes of usurpation, kidnapping and damage who are waiting for a legal hearing.

Despite the intervention of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in Honduras, Alta Soledad Pazo, who, with her international work team, condemned all of this, university authorities are not willing to dialogue with this international body.

Among the accused is the international journalist and correspondent, Ronnie Huete. As a journalist, Huete covered the events of May 24, 2017 as students were protesting in the University's administrative office against the prosecution of three university students. These three students had been going through this legal process for three years and had by that time received a sentence.<sup>1</sup>

1. Cesario Padilla, Sergio Ulloa and Moisés Cáceres. In addition, hearings have been initiated against students Génesis Aracely Andino Vásquez, Karen Giselle Reyes Pineda,

The May 24th episode unleashed a wave of repressive and violent actions against the student movement. It started with an arrest warrant for 19 students, and was followed by abuses by the UNAH's private security company towards the journalist and the university students.

In the face of these events, various international organizations have condemned this excessive use of power by university authorities; however, there has been no lessening of the legal persecution faced by these students.

There have been various mechanisms of power that academic authorities of this house of higher learning use against those who oppose their tyranny. These include: persecution using unknown and threatening vehicles, harrassment by the Bajo Aguan Private Security Company (ESPA), illegal detention using the state apparatus in order to persecute them, and death threats.

Since 2003 university students have had neither a

Tiffani Nicolle Zúniga Reyes, Gloria Sarahí Mejía Pacheco, Any Raquel Blanco Navarro and Tony Jossel Barahona Cruz, which is added to the list of students that have been expelled from the UNAH for 5 years.

voice nor a vote in the UNAH's decisions. It is quite alarming that in a university with a student population of 80,000 that students are excluded from being represented on university government bodies. Hence, students have decided to call this a dictatorship.

This is the reason why UNAH students, organized in the University Student Movement (MEU), continue an unstoppable protest, which has lasted over a month.

On June 27, 2017 a hungerstrike started at the UNAH's main entrance where five university students risked their lives in order to have their demands heard. The administration has ignored the strike.

The MEU organizes informational assemblies daily in each of the UNAH's faculty and degree programs. They stop classes to protest the deaf ears of the authorities.

The ESPA private security guards conduct their patrols as though it were a prison and not a house of higher learning. Students that oppose this regime are treated in some media, where the defense of hate is very present, as though they are delinquents. The university authorities refer to the university students as vandals and delinquents. In short, authorities use adjectives in defense of hate and a communications mechanism that was used by the fascist governments of the 20th century.

During the dawn of June 23, 2017 Roberto Gómez, a father of one of the students facing a hearing by the UNAH university authorities, was assassinated. Mr. Gomez made strong declarations against the UNAH's tyranny. This parent wanted the best for his son and the university community and asked for quality public education. Although the Honduran Minister of Security issued a communique committing itself to an investigation in this case, the impunity continues regarding his murder. The state of Honduras assigns 6% of its budget to this university body. Hence, the UNAH started its functions for 2017 with a budget of 5.5 million lempiras (230 million dollars). According to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL), Honduras is the second poorest country in Latin American. However, this economic fact doesn't influence the juicy salaries of the UNAH's

authorities who are paid as though they were in Paris or London.

This is the case of the UNAH's president, Julieta Castellanos. She receives a monthly salary of more than 106,000 lempiras (4,500 dollars) in a country where, according to the CEPAL, most people are unemployed, live in poverty and survive on a dollar a day. This is one of the great differences that unites those living in misery in this Latin American country.

A large part of the university student population is poor. They subsist with some type of activity that allows them to feed and transport themselves, and with luck obtain study books and notebooks. The UNAH administration does not designate any budget for the needs of the majority of their students.

With a budget of approximately 550 million lempiras (22 million dollars), university authorities constructed an administrative building to house the large number of employees that make up the apparatus for the UNAH's bureaucracy. However, despite these massive investments, there is a notorious absence of teachers. Students start each period without anyone to teach their university courses. There is often no physical classroom in which to receive this teaching, much less a desk to sit on.

Similarly, as the MEU highlights in its demands, the quality of education in the academy cannot be compared with the rest of the universities of the world since they still use study plans written in the 70s.

For this reason, the university students propose a University Constituent Student Assembly, a draft bill that would allow the participation of students in all of the UNAH's government bodies, as well as the creation and organization of all degree programs through student associations.<sup>2</sup>

Since the universal declaration of human rights

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2. Bill of the Law of Mechanisms of Citizenship Participation. Presented at the National Congress of the Republic July 19, 2017. They propose the installation of a Provisional Government and the suspension of the UNAH president Julieta Castellanos from her role.



Photo: María Trejos

establishes protest as a universal right, the goal of this draft bill is to eliminate all legal accusations against the university students as well as to stop the student persecution. University students, as well as the defenders of life, social, human and environmental rights face repression and danger, and confront a disturbing future. They need the world to focus its gaze on Honduras now.

Prison or death are the options that the tyranny has wanted to impose for those who dare to defy it. For example, in July when Armando Velásquez, a university student who was facing a hearing, was intercepted by National Police members while he was on public transit. He was forced off the bus and detained like a common criminal for not carrying his papers. Two hours later, thanks to the intervention of non-governmental human rights organizations, he was released.

Meanwhile the state of Honduras will face the UN Human Rights Committee in Geneva on July 6, 2017 to account for all these actions.

However, these events of international significance don't seem to matter to the university authorities who have answered the correspondence from accredited

international organizations in Honduras in an aggressive manner.

The UNAH crisis continues in the midst of physical and legal repression and various elements that mold a dictatorship in the style of 20th century South America.

August 25, 2017 will be the hearing against 19 university students and one journalist who will appear before a tribunal judge for the final verdict and sentencing. All of these acts have made the UNAH an epicentre of continuous violations of human rights where death squads are ready and willing to attack upon the order of the highest in command.

It is essential that international human rights organizations remain vigilant of this crisis in the UNAH since the lives of those that denounce these acts are in constant danger.

Human life should be cared for under any circumstance and at any moment because social interaction depends on this in healthy human civilization and harmony. In a similar manner, the defense of the Public University is vital, and from Honduras, university students will continue to take on this fight.