



DR JUAN ALMENDARES,
the director and founder of the
Center for the Prevention,
Treatment and Rehabilitation
of Torture Victims and Their
Families (Honduras) (CPTRT),
spoke to **ROSIE WONG.**

DR ALMENDARES seems to wear many hats. Apart from being the director and founder of the CPTRT, he leads the Movimiento Madre Tierra (Friends of the Earth Honduras), the Honduran Committee for Peace Action, and also runs a medical clinic for the poor. He studied medicine in both Honduras and the US, and had been the dean of the medical school and the director of the National University when he was discharged for political reasons. It was at that point that he decided to join the popular movement. Many of his friends and students were killed in the 1980s political repression. He was persecuted by death squads and was captured, interrogated and subjected to torture. The military prohibited him from practising medicine for four years and he used this time to link with communities. Almendares is part of the resistance.

Tell us about CPTRT, what do you do?

JA: The centre was founded in 1996 and we have been working against torture and also working with campesinos and Indigenous people on human rights issues. We have been working in prisons too. However, the worst situation we have seen in all these years has been during and since the coup.

We worked with other groups at the beginning of the coup releasing political prisoners. There were around 50 prisoners who were being detained by authorities, including leaders like Rafael Alegria of the Resistance and Via Campesino, who was in Paraiso. We have seen some of the people who have been tortured by the coup regime. We are worried about the situation faced by the campesinos in Aguan, and also by the current situation nationally, because it is not only in the Aguan where there are land conflicts, but also in Zacate Grande, Comayagua, Siguatepeque and the southern and eastern parts of the country. Many members of these communities have been killed by the military and police forces.

US militarisation appears to be increasing. Honduras had one US military base before the 2009 coup – Palmerola – but now there are three.

JA: We are worried the military is trying to develop conflicts among our communities as a strategy to increase militarization in our area. We are witnessing a re-militarisation of Latin America. In particular, Honduras, Colombia and Costa Rica are now pressing for more militarisation.

Costa Rica had been one of the peace leaders, but they now have military troops from the US. Honduras has more military bases and so does Colombia, which has seven military bases. On the other hand, the media is trying to create conflict between Nicaragua and neighbouring countries, creating issues that were not there before. So, we are encouraging people to join the struggle for peace and avoid these maneuvers that try to put brothers and sisters against one another and which tend to interfere with the democratic processes within Nicaragua.

We are against war. We don't want war between Nicaragua and Costa Rica, or between Nicaragua and Honduras. We want peace. We are very poor countries, and we don't want to spend money on arms and or be militarily occupied by the United States.

After the coup what we are seeing is more violence, more human rights abuses, particularly against the campesinos, against indigenous people, against the Miskito people and against the Garifuna people. These people are going to be displaced by biofuels. In Honduras there are vast plantations of palm oil, instead of having the land dedicated to growing beans, rice and corn to feed the population. The campesinos

are displaced by the large landholders and are living in miserable conditions. We are also denouncing the human rights abuses by the Honduran military troops and police and also, by paramilitary and military groups from Colombia, who are participating in the torture and the killings of Honduran campesino leaders.

Do you think the military coup was part of an international operation to undermine Hondurans struggle for their rights?

JA: The military coup was part of a strategy. A military coup was an international operation. This operation was undertaken to interfere with the Honduran democratic process. As Honduran people become more aware of their rights, they want to have a different nation. They want to enjoy freedom and have justice. Another reason is because Honduras is the major military base of the US in Central America. One of the reasons for the coup was to stop any change to the constitution because the current one discriminates against campesinos, against Indigenous peoples, against Afrodescendent people. Also this constitution does not mention women; it is not concerned about gender issues, about women's rights.

In that sense, we are a non-democratic country. We are a country which is occupied by US military troops, and we are a country that has been used as a force against the rights of the people in Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua and Cuba.

Hondurans are resisting and there has been an increase in people tortured, assassinated and exiled since the coup.

JA: Before the coup, it was, mainly like three people tortured, and immediately after the coup there were 19 people tortured in just one night. So we have had a tremendous increase in torture immediately after the coup.

I will say that more than 100 people who were members of the resistance movement against the coup have been killed by the military and police forces. There have also been massive increases in the killing of women; Honduras is part of the violence triangle in Central America with high levels of feminicides. Also, nine journalists have been killed. Very recently, more than 17 campesinos were also killed, and sexually diverse people have been abused, persecuted, tortured and killed.

Some of those killed are leaders of the Resistance. Some will be leaders of political parties from the Liberal Party, or the Unified Democratic Party. So the government of Honduras has no respect for human rights. It has been like this ever since the coup.

Under Lobo, is it the military forces, the oligarchy, or international forces with business interests who are in power in Honduras?

JA: We say that the force determining the actions of the government is not the ruling government, it is those behind the government. We have the military forces, the oligarchy, in alliance with international forces who have business interests in Honduras. The business interests include mining, agriculture and also water resources, and they are building dams that will affect communities, so it is mostly economic interests who prevail over human rights.

What are the main challenges for CPTRT and do its members face persecution?

JA: We have several problems: we are experiencing persecution, the destruction of our structures, interference with our emails, and at certain times some of our members have been affected by persecution even in their homes, so we have a very high-risk situation in our centre.

We continue working despite the persecution because we have international solidarity which is very important, and also national solidarity. Of course, we are facing tremendous difficulties, even our water system was cut off for one month. Our telephone was cut off for two months. Our electronic systems were destroyed; our email and internet systems were interfered with for two months, through which we lost all our contacts. So, yes we are experiencing some difficulties. We have had to move office several times. Our humanitarian clinic we also face tremendous problems.

So what could be done internationally to assist you?

JA: We believe international solidarity is essential. Particularly, visiting Honduras is very important, as well as sending messages overseas about the political situation is critical, and also, being in contact with the communities. Any action towards peace and justice in Honduras is most welcomed by our people. **R**