

HONDURAS

A mission to assist a Honduran human rights organization in planning exhumations and creating a database for information about disappeared persons

From July 31st to August 2nd, 1998 EAAF member Patricia Bernardi conducted a mission to Honduras at the request of the Committee for the Defense of Human Rights of Honduras (CODEH), a local non-governmental human rights organization. During the mission Bernardi assisted CODEH with planning exhumations and creating a database of information concerning disappeared persons. She and a CODEH representative also met with the Honduran Human Rights Prosecutor's Office, currently under the direction of Dr. Juan Carlos Díaz. The Prosecutor's Office is interested in carrying out exhumations of clandestine grave sites in the near future.

Background

In 1992 the Honduran government began investigating the cases of persons who were disappeared during the 1980s and 1990s. In August 1993, the president of Honduras, Lic. Rafael Leonardo Callejas, created a new office, the National Commissioner for the Protection of Human Rights, and appointed Dr. Leo Valladares Lanza to the post. This was the first time that the Honduran government had assumed responsibility for the political assassinations and disappearances that took place in the country over the last two decades.

In December 1993 Dr. Valladares presented a preliminary report on disappearances in Honduras, entitled "The Facts Speak for Themselves," to President-elect Dr. Carlos Roberto Reina. This report, which was subsequently made public, evaluated all the information gathered by the Commissioner, the government, and non-governmental organizations (both national and international),

as well as the United Nations and the Organization of American States (OAS). The document is one of the most complete and reliable sources concerning the human rights violations that occurred in Honduras over the past two decades.

"The Facts Speak for Themselves" lists 179 disappearances that allegedly occurred in Honduras between 1980 and 1993. Paradoxically, the vast majority of these disappearances occurred between 1980 and 1984, during the rule of the democratically elected civilian governments headed by Presidents Policarpo Paz García and Robert Suazo Cordova. The disappearances were part of a deliberate strategy of abductions, forced disappearances, arbitrary detentions, and torture carried out by the Honduran Armed Forces against persons suspected of having links to the Nicaraguan Sandinista government or to left-wing guerrilla forces in El Salvador. During this period the Honduran Army killed many persons considered "dangerous" – political leaders, trade union activists, and peasant leaders. In July 1988, the OAS Inter-American Human Rights Court handed down a decision confirming that forced disappearances had been a systematic and indiscriminate practice directed by the Honduran government.

CODEH, which represents some of the families of victims, is gathering evidence concerning the actions of the alleged perpetrators in order to bring them to trial. During its investigations, CODEH has gathered information on the fate of certain disappeared persons and possible burial places.

EAAF has worked with CODEH previously. At CODEH's request, over a 30-day period in November 1995 EAAF conducted forensic

investigations in several areas of Honduras, and held a seminar on forensic anthropology for professors and students of medicine and law.

in Honduras this year.

The 1998 Mission

In July 1998, while conducting a mission to Guatemala, EAAF member Patricia Bernardi was invited to go to Tegucigalpa, Honduras in order to assist CODEH with planning exhumations. Bernardi and CODEH members analyzed documents concerning possible clandestine graves, and selected several potential sites for exhumation. Each of these locations has been linked to a particular case involving disappeared persons. (In several other cases the existence of a clandestine grave is suspected, but there is no information available about who might be buried there.) From these selected cases, EAAF and CODEH decided to focus on those for which there is likely to be enough physical evidence to establish personal identifications of the disappeared persons.

EAAF and CODEH also concurred on the need for a database that could bring together physical or pre-mortem information for each disappeared person and historical information concerning specific events. Bernardi agreed to send CODEH the model for the database developed by EAAF in Argentina, which CODEH will modify for the Honduran cases.

During her visit Bernardi and CODEH member Ernesto Custodio met with Lorena Soto, the assistant to the director of the Honduran Human Rights Prosecutor's Office, Dr. Juan Carlos Díaz. The Prosecutor's Office and CODEH plan to jointly conduct a series of exhumations in 1999. During the meeting Bernardi gave a presentation on forensic anthropological methods. Bernardi and Custodio also reviewed the information on disappearance cases compiled by the Prosecutor's Office.

Due to the devastating effects of Hurricane Mitch in October 1998, it has not yet been possible to set up a precise calendar of activities for 1999. However, EAAF remains in contact with CODEH and anticipates continuing work