

## HONDURAS

**Issue:** The human rights situation in Honduras.

**Background:**

Honduras shares with much of Central America a history of violations of human rights, and a military which plays a dominating role in national political life. In recent years, there has been progress in consolidating democratic institutions and practises. Although the frequency and seriousness of human rights abuses in Honduras continue to provoke great concern, the scale of the problem is considerably smaller than in certain neighbouring countries.

The Honduran military formally ceded power to a civilian government in 1981. Power was duly transferred following peaceful elections in 1985 and 1989. However, the military remains a powerful institution, and exerts strong influence in social and political spheres. The present government is only beginning to take the difficult measures necessary to reduce the military's power and size.

The worst period of gross human rights violations was 1981-1984, when security forces are alleged to have systematically tortured, abducted and killed leftist activists. In a precedent setting case in 1988, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights found the Government of Honduras responsible for the disappearances in 1981 of four people at the hands of military death squads. The Court also found that approximately 100-150 "desaparecidos" were victims of a policy directed by the armed forces and tolerated by the government.

Following the removal of the armed forces Head of State, General Alvarez, in 1984, the situation improved significantly; systematic killings and disappearances virtually ceased. However, human rights observers maintain that Honduran security forces routinely torture detainees, and that a number of people are killed for political reasons every year. The most notorious recent cases include the murder in 1988 of human rights activist Miguel Angel Pavon and an associate (Pavon had been trained by the Inter-American Human Rights Institute and was a witness for the prosecution in the Inter-American Court case), and the slayings in 1990 of labour activists Francisco Javier Bonilla and Ramon Antonio Briceno. According to the non-governmental Honduran Human Rights Commission (CODEH), there have been several killings of labour leaders and students active in the labour movement in 1990.