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## **FEATURE ARTICLE**

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### **United States Military Group - Honduras: Supporting Democracy in Central America**

By

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Honduras, too long associated in the public mind with bananas, endemic poverty and military dictatorships, is embarked upon a historic transition process. Since the Central American crises of the 1980s, four successive democratically-elected governments have struggled with the immense problems of democratic reform, adapting to worldwide free market forces, reacting to overwhelming poverty and social stratification, and restructuring the civil-military relationship. The United States Military Group (USMILGP) in Honduras is actively engaged in supporting U.S. policy goals oriented on reinforcing progress in these key areas.



Map of Honduras

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Occupying the strategic heartland of Central America, Honduras enjoys a tropical climate, access to both oceans, and significant potential in renewable natural resources—principally timber and marine products. Unfortunately, its rugged, mountainous terrain, less than optimal weather patterns, and poor soil and environmental controls tend to severely restrict agriculture—the largest sector of the economy in terms of employment—and internal communications. Until recently, very little foreign investment outside of the fruit sector has resulted in limited industrial development. Traditionally one of the poorest countries in the Americas, Honduras' per capita GDP in 1994 was just \$600. With literacy rates averaging only 60 percent and unemployment/underemployment peaking at over 50 percent during the early 1990s, the social and economic problems of the country have been overwhelming.

Given these conditions, Honduras was surprisingly resistant to organized subversion in the wake of revolutions in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala during the 1980s. A major reason for this, which is not often recognized by Hondurans, is the significant amount of aid and advice provided by the United States from 1981 to 1992. During that period, over \$1.5 billion was provided in direct assistance, with approximately one third of the total going to military programs. Additionally, the U.S. military provided a forward military presence via its standing Joint Task Force-Bravo, stationed at Honduran Soto Cano Air Base (formerly known as Palmerola) in central Honduras, and the frequent deployment of U.S. forces to participate in combined exercises with the Honduran Armed Forces (HOAF). These deployments served to demonstrate U.S. resolve to assist Honduras in the event of external aggression—a significant deterrent to potential aggressors—and provided excellent training opportunities to both U.S. and Honduran participants.



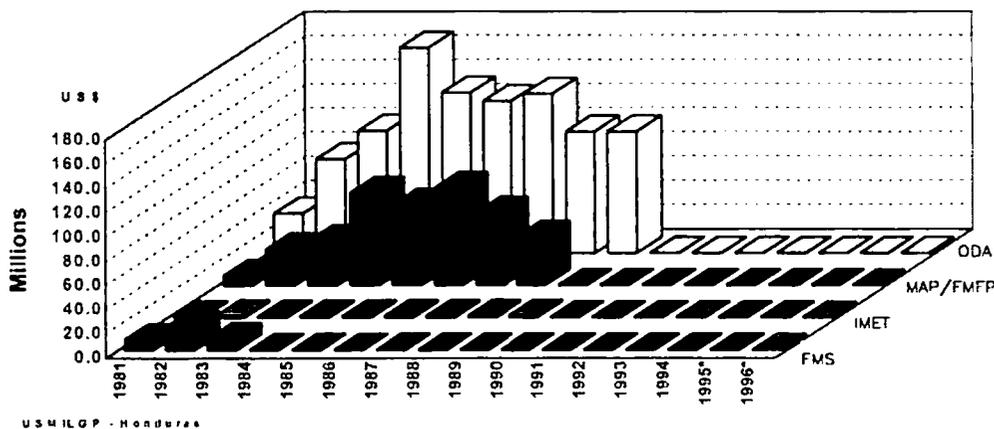
**Colonel Weidner, Commander, USMILGP Honduras, at initial meeting with Major General Discoa, former CINC, HOAF, 7 July 1994.**

The USMILGP, whose existence dates back to the establishment of Army and Air Force Missions in 1950, advised and assisted in the expansion and re-equipping of the HOAF to

permit it to accomplish its constitutionally-mandated missions in the context of the threats perceived from the 1980s—in the main, externally-supported subversive activity, and the potential of an invasion by Marxist-inspired forces from Nicaragua or, in the event of a guerrilla victory, from El Salvador. During the 1980s the HOAF expanded to over 20 battalions, while acquiring modern artillery and communications systems, F-5E/F and OA-37 fighters, C-130 transports, and UH-1H helicopters.

Although the price for this assistance was acceptance by the military of democratically-elected civilian governments, the long power monopoly enjoyed by the HOAF gave the officer corps a practically unlimited degree of influence over the politicians, in both defense and domestic policy. Additionally, the military and national security police (FUSEP) have been accused of numerous human rights abuses during the 1980s, including the “disappearances” of 184 alleged subversives or sympathizers.

**Figure 1**  
**Military/Development Aid 1981 - 1996**



With the end of the Cold War, and the collapse of the Central American communist threat, Foreign Military Financing Program (FMFP) credits were abruptly terminated. While recognizing the need to adjust to new realities, the HOAF avoided significant cuts in its structure, choosing to selectively reduce authorized Manning levels instead. When the administration of Rafael Callejas allowed the Lempira—the nation’s currency—to float according to its true value, devaluation caused the national defense budget of over \$120 million in 1989 to decline to only \$33 million for 1996. U.S. MAP/FMFP levels had reached \$60-80 million per year at their peak, but after 1993 no further U.S. credits were granted. Additionally, the Government of Honduras is still responsible for over \$30 million in FMFP loans granted late in the 80s. In short, the current financial situation of the HOAF is acute.

On top of the budgetary pressures on the military, the Government of President Carlos Roberto Reina has encouraged investigations into past human rights abuses, and is requiring the high command to force active and retired suspects in these cases to submit to civilian prosecution. He has also succeeded in abolishing conscription—and the “human roundups” that characterized the draft over the years—and has secured an agreement to abolish the position of Commander in Chief, formerly selected by the military and rubber-stamped by the Congress, in favor of a presidentially-appointed Minister of Defense. A constitutional amendment passed in 1996 provides for the transfer of the national police force (FUSEP) from the Armed Forces to a civilian ministry during the next calendar year.

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## MILGP Goals and Objectives

The overriding goals of the U.S. Mission in Honduras are to support the consolidation of democracy, economic development along free market principles, and respect for the rule of law and human rights. The MILGP supports the Ambassador's broad program goals principally by promoting the development of an appropriately sized, resourced, and trained military establishment, duly subordinated to the democratically-elected government.

The Honduran Constitution assigns the following missions to the HOAF:

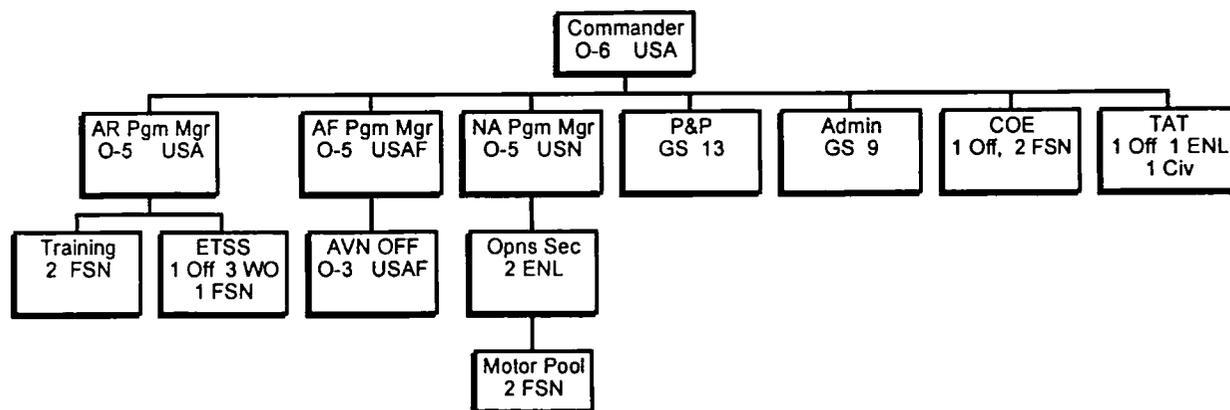
- Territorial Defense
- Internal peace and security
- Assist the Government in national development and protection of the environment

To accomplish these missions, the 15,000-man end strength of the fighting forces and 6000 police are not necessarily excessive. However, they are not supportable under the current limitations on defense/security spending. Key objectives of the MILGP are therefore to carefully manage residual FMFP credits to provide basic logistics sustainment while cooperating in the transition to self-sufficiency via the development of a viable budget process, and the restructuring of the HOAF.

## MILGP Organization

To perform its mission, the MILGP is functionally organized as shown in Figure 2.

**Figure 2**  
**USMILGP Honduras Organization Chart**



The Extended Training Support Specialist (ETSS) Team, Corps of Engineers Area Office (COE), and Tactical Analysis Team (TAT) are attached to the MILGP but not organic under the Joint Table of Authorization (JTA). This organization reflects a 60 percent reduction in assigned and attached/augmented personnel since 1992, and will continue to downsize as FMFP residuals are expended.

## The MILGP "Tool Kit"

MILGPs in the U.S. Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM) use a variety of tools to advance U.S. goals throughout Latin America. While each will be discussed in more detail in

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succeeding sections of this article dealing with our respective service programs, the following summary places them in overall perspective:

***Foreign Military Financing Program:*** Approximately \$20 million in FMFP credits remains from past year programs. These funds are primarily committed in spare parts cases and Corps of Engineers construction projects. Due to case closure, up to \$5 million is available for reprogramming, and the MILGP meets monthly with the logistics representatives of the Joint Staff and all services to coordinate priorities and to determine the best application of available funds. Unfortunately, this process has been difficult since Honduran arrears in the repayments of prior year U.S. assistance loans has placed Honduras under Brooke sanctions almost continuously during the past three years; typically, the GOH will make payments on arrears only after a successful appeal to Paris Club creditors for debt forgiveness or rescheduling. As a result, the MILGP must have LORs lined up for the implementing agencies in case a window of eligibility opens. Current priority for reprogramming is centered on completion of the Army Technical School, a training facility which will play a key role in attracting volunteers to military service.

***International Military Education and Training (IMET):*** Honduras will receive \$400,000 in IMET funds for 1996, and hopefully, a similar amount in 1997. We have given priority to Expanded IMET courses (over 33 percent of the '96 program in dollar terms, and 50 percent of the total student load) designed to incorporate civilians into national defense management, and to promote respect for human rights. However, professional military education (PME) and limited technical training are also emphasized in order to assist the HOAF in meeting its critical operational needs.

***Major Combined Exercises:*** Joint Task Force - Bravo serves as the staging base and support organization for three to four JCS-directed combined exercises each year. These exercises have recently taken on a multilateral rather than bilateral nature, as Guatemala, El Salvador, Belize, and Nicaragua have sent participants to Soto Cano Air Base to join the Honduran and U.S. elements in Command Post Exercises focused on peacekeeping, disaster relief, counternarcotics, and humanitarian assistance scenarios.

***Component Training Deployments:*** An extremely important contribution to achieving our bilateral goals is made by small unit deployments from the service components. Averaging over 30 deployments per year, the services provide teams of engineers, medical, dental and veterinary personnel, civil affairs specialists, and Special Forces elements which conduct training with their Honduran counterparts. In addition to the valuable deployment training received by U.S. forces, the Honduran people benefit from the construction of roads, clinics, schools, and water wells, along with the opportunity to receive medical treatment in extremely isolated areas.

***Military-to-Military Contacts:*** The Army and Air Force have provided limited funding over the years for professional exchanges, visits, orientations, and other initiatives to foster communication and cooperation between the armed forces of the hemisphere. In Honduras, we have used SECARMY and SEC Air Force Latin American Cooperation funds to send an average of 20 Honduran officers to U.S. bases and schools each year to receive information on how the U.S. Armed Forces work together and how we maintain the support of the American people. The Defense Attaché Office and the MILGP share these scarce funds, and therefore prepare a complementary program each year. The DAO concentrates on high-level orientation visits, while the MILGP generally targets mid-grade officers and technical/operational subject matter.

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The implementation of the Traditional CINC Activities (TCA) Program in FY 1996 has broadened our opportunities for this type of contact. Honduras is scheduled to participate in over 70 initiatives managed on a theater level by the USSOUTHCOM J-5, and executed by staff directorates and components. A recent example was the participation by the ex-Commander in Chief of the HOAF and the chief government human rights commissioner in the SOUTHCOM Human Rights Conference in Miami in February, 1996. Similar delegations from each of the countries of Central and South America exchanged views on the human rights situation in the hemisphere, and they examined various means for enhancing civil-military cooperation in the prevention of abuses.

An important additional program is the Personnel Exchange Program (PEP), which has enabled U.S. Army and Navy Officers to make key contributions to the professional development of their Honduran counterparts. A Honduran PEP officer also serves on the faculty of the School of the Americas located at Ft. Benning GA, along with two other Honduran guest instructors.

### The Future

In view of budgetary and reform pressures, the Honduran Armed Forces face daunting challenges in adapting to new realities. However, they still represent a powerful influence in the daily life of the country. As traditional Security Assistance resources and MILGP staffing continue to decline, we must find ways to remain engaged with the Honduran military. IMET will constitute the primary Security Assistance tool available to the MILGP in coming years, as the Hondurans are unlikely to invest significantly in cash FMS cases using national funds. Exercises and military-to-military contact programs will increase in importance, as will the personal diplomacy exercised by U.S. military personnel assigned to the MILGP in their everyday contacts with Honduran counterparts.



**USMILGP Compound Outside Tegucigalpa, Honduras**