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In the wrong place at the wrong time?

Re-evaluating the 2012 Ahuas Massacre

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Word Count: 13,095

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Acknowledgements

I extend all my gratitude to Dr Rodrigo Véliz Estrada for his consistent advice and guidance across the year.

I must also thank my wonderful partner, Ruby, for all her help and support, and for always being on my team; my parents, for their unconditional backing; and my flatmates for putting up with my scrawling on the kitchen wall.

Abbreviations

ALBA – *Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América*

AUC – *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia*

CARSI – Central American Regional Security Initiative

CIA – Central Intelligence Agency

DEA – US Drug Enforcement Administration

DEVGRU – US Naval Special Warfare Development Group

DLCN – Honduras *Dirección de Lucha Contra Narcotráfico*

DNSA – Digital National Security Archive

DoD – US Department of Defense

DoJ – US Department of Justice

ELN – *Ejército de Liberación Nacional*

FARC – *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*

FAST – Foreign-deployed Advisory and Support Team

IED – Improvised Explosive Device

JTF-Bravo – US Joint Task Force-Bravo

LIBRE – Honduras *Partido de Libertad y Refundación*

OAS – Organization of American States

SL – *Sendero Luminoso*

SO/LIC – Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict

SOUTHCOM – US Army Southern Command

TRT – Tactical Response Team

UN – United Nations

US – United States

Introduction

In the early hours of 11th of May 2012, 16 indigenous Miskitu people were travelling in a water taxi on the Patuca River; as they turned a bend near the small town of Ahuas the sound of helicopters and glaring floodlights burst out of the night. The driver swerved and collided with another boat on the river. Gunfire erupted: troops from the struck boat and helicopters fired at the taxi's passengers as they tried to escape into the water, critically injuring three and killing four.[1] Those killed were Hasked Brooks Wood (14), Juana Jackson Ambrosio (28), Candelaria Trapp Nelson (28) and Emerson Martinez (21).[2] Travelling the same rivers they and their ancestors had always used these people and their community became victims of the militarised drug war occupying their shores.

The shooters were US DEA 'Foreign-deployed Advisory and Support Team' and Honduran 'Tactical Response Team' agents – chosen and vetted by the DEA.[3] In the Muskitia, Honduran drug trafficking groups such as the *Cachiros*, *Valles* and *Atlántico* cartels fought alongside and against Colombian and Mexican groups like *Sinaloa*, *los Zetas* and *Buda* for control.[4] In 2012,

[1] Office of the Inspectors General, U.S. Department of Justice, U.S. Department of State, *A Special Joint Review of Post-Incident Responses by the Department of State and the Drug Enforcement Administration to Three Deadly Force Incidents in Honduras*, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of The Inspector General, 2017) <https://oig.justice.gov/reports/2017/o1702.pdf> [accessed 11 March 2023] pp. i-ii; Mattathias Schwartz, 'D.E.A. Says Hondurans Opened Fire During a Drug Raid. A Video Suggests Otherwise.', *New York Times*, 23 October 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/23/world/americas/drug-enforcement-agency-dea-honduras.html> [accessed 23 March 2023].

[2] Nina Lakhani, 'US admits DEA lied about Honduras "massacre" that killed four villagers', *The Guardian*, 25 May 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/25/us-honduras-drug-enforcement-administration-shooting> [accessed 11 March 2023].

[3] Office of the Inspectors General, *A Special Joint Review of Post-Incident Responses*, p. i.

[4] Note: throughout the text, you may notice a variety of spellings for Muskitia including 'Mosquitia' and 'Moskitia'. I have decided to use 'Muskitia', as it is the spelling used by the region's indigenous population and best reflects its original name and their unconceded sovereignty. See: UPINMH, 'Posicionamiento de la Unidad de los pueblos indígenas y negros de la Muskitia hondureña UPINMH', *Unidad de los pueblos indígenas y negros de la Muskitia hondureña UPINMH*, <https://www.eda.admin.ch/dam/countries/countries-content/honduras/es/Posicionamiento-UPINMH.PDF> [accessed 28 April 2023]; Insight Crime, 'Honduras Profile: Criminal Groups', *Insight Crime*, <https://insightcrime.org/honduras-organized-crime-news/honduras/#criminal-groups> [accessed 11 March 2023]; Redacción La Prensa, 'Capturan en Colombia a

FAST was in the Muskitia for Operation Anvil to intercept a cocaine shipment as part of CARSI, in collaboration with Honduran forces under Honduran president Porfirio Lobo Sosa.[5] Alongside corporate interests looking to exploit the region's natural resources, these groups alternately competed and collaborated in a deadly game of cat and mouse among the isolated communities of the Muskitia.[6]

Although newspapers in Honduras and the US reported on the killings, both the DEA and Honduran forces both publicly denied their responsibility, even alleging that the victims had been traffickers and shot first at the agents.[7] It took five years and investigations by *The New Yorker* and the DoJ before the DEA admitted to lying to the world about Ahuas and two other "deadly force incidents" that had taken place in Honduras.[8] However, none of the victims received reparations, nor did those responsible face justice.[9] *The New Yorker*'s investigation addressed the facts of the shooting and the DoJ explored institutional and individual failings

Miguel Ángel Villela', *La Prensa*, <https://www.laprensa.hn/sucesos/capturan-en-colombia-a-miguel-angel-villela-JGLP478515#image-1> [accessed 24 April 2023]; Redacción La Prensa, 'La sangrienta Guerra por controlar a Honduras', *La Prensa*, 05 February 2010, <https://www.laprensa.hn/honduras/la-sangrienta-guerra-por-controlar-a-honduras-CALP505016#image-1> [accessed 27 March 2023].

[5] Office of the Inspectors General, *A Special Joint Review of Post-Incident Responses*, p. i, p.7.

[6] La Prensa Redacción, 'BG Group buscará petróleo en La Mosquitia hondureña', *La Prensa,* 17 December 2012 <https://www.laprensa.hn/honduras/bg-group-buscara-petroleo-en-la-mosquitia-hondurena-DDLP330892> [accessed 11 March 2023].

[7] Redacción El Heraldo, 'Dos Muertos en operación antidrogas en La Mosquitia', *El Heraldo*, 12 May 2012, <https://www.elheraldo.hn/sucesos/dos-muertos-en-operacion-antidrogas-en-la-mosquitia-JKEH619099> [accessed 11 March 2023]; William Booth, 'Probe underway in remote area of Honduras after gunfight involving U.S. drug agents', *The Washington Post*, 17 May 2012, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/probe-underway-in-remote-area-of-honduras-after-gunfight-involving-us-drug-agents/2012/05/17/gIQA9jzWWU_story.html> [accessed 11 March 2023]; Redacción El Heraldo, 'Agentes de la DEA no disparon contra civiles en Honduras', *El Heraldo*, 18 May 2012 <https://www.elheraldo.hn/sucesos/agentes-de-la-dea-no-dispararon-contra-civiles-en-honduras-JKEH619167> [accessed 11 March 2023]; Redacción El Heraldo, 'Descartan violación de DD HH en La Mosquitia', *El Heraldo*, 15 June 2012, <https://www.elheraldo.hn/sucesos/descartan-violacion-de-dd-hh-en-la-mosquitia-IKEH619427> [accessed 11 March 2023].

[8] Mattathias Schwartz, 'A Mission Gone Wrong: Why are we still fighting the drug war?', *The New Yorker*, 29 December 2013, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/01/06/a-mission-gone-wrong> [accessed 11 March 2023]; Office of the Inspectors General, *A Special Joint Review of Post-Incident Responses*, p.i.

[9] Dan Beeton, 'Ten Years After Honduran Villagers Were Killed in a DEA-Led Operation, Survivors and Families Languish, and There's Been No Accountability', *The Centre for Economic and Policy Research*, 2022, <https://cepr.net/press-release/ten-years-after-honduran-villagers-were-killed-in-a-dea-led-operation-survivors-and-families-languish-and-theres-been-no-accountability/> [accessed 11 March 2023].

that led to the shooting and its cover up. This dissertation takes a broader scope, investigating the historic and structural elements behind the 2012 Ahuas Massacre from a broader scope.[10]

Context

The Ahuas Massacre must be understood in the context of the region's history and geopolitics. In Central America's 'Northern Triangle' alongside Guatemala and El Salvador, Honduras is the second largest state in Central America by both area and population.[11] Although dwarfed by larger neighbours such as Colombia, Mexico, Venezuela, and the US it has historically been and remains a key player in Circum-Caribbean politics.

Figure 0.1 The Circum-Caribbean Region and the Northern Triangle.[12]

[10] Mattathias Schwartz, 'D.E.A. Says Hondurans Opened Fire During a Drug Raid. A Video Suggests Otherwise.'; Office of the Inspectors General, *A Special Joint Review of Post-Incident Responses*.
[11] World Bank Data, 'Population, total – Latin America and Caribbean', *World Bank Group* <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=ZJ> [accessed 18 March 2023]; World Bank Data, 'Surface area (sq. km) – Latin America and Caribbean', *World Bank Group*, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/AG.SRF.TOTL.K2?locations=ZJ> [accessed 18 March 2023].
[12] Marieke Reithof, 'Gender Violence in the Northern Triangle of Central America, 1980-2016', *University of Liverpool*, <https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/events/event/?eventid=85124> [accessed 27 March 2023].

During the 20th century Honduras underwent a period of US domination, especially by private actors: the quintessential 'banana republic', its Caribbean coast was dominated by US-owned banana plantations. These corporations cooperated closely with dictators such as Carías to establish industrial scale plantations and railways to ship the product back to the US.[13] Honduras' 20th century developed under foreign domination: US corporations maintained independent control of huge swaths of land through coercion – such as the 1911 Cuyamel Fruit-backed coup – and state repression of domestic labour movements.[14] The US also overshadowed regional politics – to the extent that the Circum-Caribbean was described as its "*Mare Nostrum"* – intervening militarily in Honduras seven times in the first 25 years of the 20th century to protect its interests.[15]

Explicit US and private domination waned in the second half of the century, but Honduras' relative stability compared to its neighbours, central position in the isthmus, and vocal anti-communism made it an attractive security partner for the US as General Gustavo Alvarez Martínez "mortgaged Honduras' soul" for military support.[16] Following the 1979 Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua and the wave of revolutionary violence that swept the region, Honduras became critical to US strategy. Neighbours' guerrilla wars alongside perceived Cuban-Soviet

[13] Marcelo Bucheli, 'Multinational corporations, totalitarian regimes and economic nationalism: United Fruit Company in Central America, 1899-1975', *Business History*, 50.4 (2008), 433-454 (p.434) <https://doi.org/10.1080/00076790802106315>; Kevin Coleman, *A Camera in The Garden of Eden: The Self-Forging of A Banana Republic*, (New York City, NY: University of Texas Press, 2016) p.62, 69.
[14] Bucheli, 'Multinational corporations, totalitarian regimes and economic nationalism', p.440.
[15] Ibid p.437; Kirby Thomas, 'America's "Mare Nostrum"', *International Relations*, 11.3 (1921), 406-423 <https://doi.org/10.2307/29738413>; Barbara Torreon and Sofia Plagakis, 'Instances of Use of United States Armed Forces Abroad, 1798-2022', *Congressional Research Service*, pp. 7-10 <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R42738> [accessed 23 March 2023].
[16] Central Intelligence Agency, *Special National Intelligence Estimate: The Danger of Subversion in Honduras*, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000013603.pdf> [accessed 23 March 2023]; New York Times, 'Withdrawal of American Aid After Revolt Ended Trend By Better Trade Balance', *New York Times*, 17 January 1964, p.57; Samuel Greene and Landon Hankins, 'Will the real security partner please stand up? Rhetoric and policy support for U.S. security goals in Daniel Ortega's Nicaragua and Porfirio Lobo's Honduras', *Comparative Strategy*, 36.3 (2017), 257-270 (p. 258) <https://doi.org/10.1080/01495933.2017.1338482>; Philip Shepherd, 'The Tragic Course and Consequences of U.S. Policy in Honduras', *World Policy Journal*, 2.1 (1984), 109-154 (p.109), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40208976> [accessed 24 April 2023].

influence on the Sandinistas gave Honduras a key role. Throughout the 1980s, Honduras hosted the Nicaraguan Contras along its eastern border and aligned with the reactionary governments of Guatemala and El Salvador to repress leftist insurgencies.[17] US military aid to Honduras skyrocketed from $4 million to $78.5 million between 1980-1984.[18] Hereafter, Honduras has settled into a role of historic and reliable US security partner.[19]

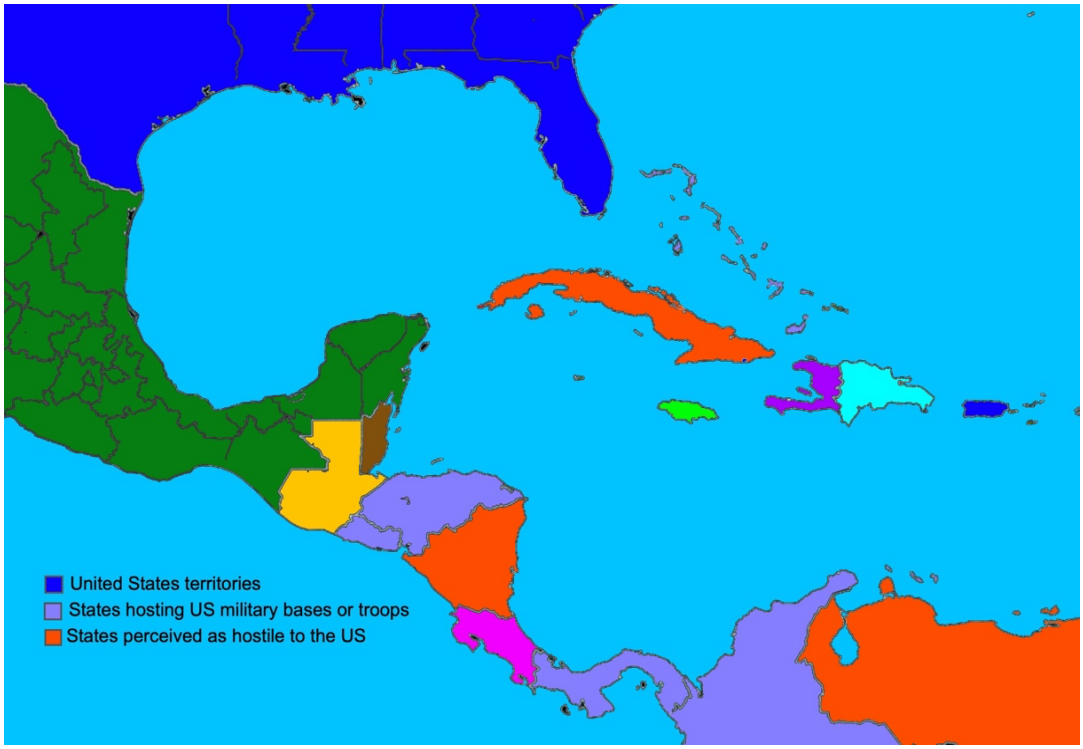

Figure 0.2 US Security Partners and Perceived Threats in the Circum-Caribbean.[20]

The map above offers a US perspective on the Caribbean, highlighting why maintaining Honduran security is critical to its strategy. Honduras is ideally positioned to exert pressure on Nicaragua and Cuba – on Cuba alongside the US from the north, and on Nicaragua alongside Colombia to the Southeast. Since 1988, one of US Southern Command (SOUTHCOM)'s three

[17] Julieta Carla Rostica, 'The Collaboration of the Argentine Military Dictatorship with the Governments of Guatemala and Honduras in their 'Fight against Subversion' (1980-3)', *Latin American Studies*, 54.3 (2022), 431-456 (pp.449-450) <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022216X22000475>.
[18] Donald Schulz and Deborah Schulz, 'The United States, Honduras, and the Crisis in Central America (Boulder and Oxford: Westview Press, 1994), pp. xv+368, £44.50, £12.95 pb', *Latin American Studies*, 27.3 (1995), 741-742 (p. 742) <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022216X00011913>.
[19] Samuel Greene and Landon Hankins, 'Will the real security partner please stand up?' p. 258.
[20] COHA, 'The U.S. Military's Presence in the Greater Caribbean Basin: More a Matter of Trade Strategy and Ideology than Drugs', *Council on Hemispheric Affairs*, 2009, <https://www.coha.org/the-u-s-militarys-presence-in-the-greater-caribbean-basin-more-a-matter-of-trade-strategy-and-ideology-than-drugs/> [accessed 20 March 2023].

task forces – Joint Task Force-Bravo (JTF-Bravo) – has been based near Tegucigalpa, exerting force across the region.[21]

The local context of the Honduran Muskitia is key to understanding the Ahuas Massacre. The Miskitu inhabit a territory across both Honduras and Nicaragua on the Caribbean coast. Shared with other indigenous groups including Sumu, Mayanga and Garífuna, the Muskitia is isolated, yet holds a wealth of culture, biodiversity and coveted mineral resources.[22] The Muskitia was severely underdeveloped, without adequate economic support or transport infrastructure; the region and its peoples were reduced to exoticizing narratives of forests and "*indios*"; the violence of narcotrafficking; and colonially perceived economic potential.[23]

Indigenous communities relied heavily on rivers such as the Patuca and traditional dugout canoes to transport goods and people.[24] In addition, the Miskitu's transnationality (see below)

[21] Lorena Baires, 'Soto Cano Air Base, 34 Years of Helping Honduras', *Diálogo Américas*, 10 November 2022, <https://dialogo-americas.com/articles/soto-cano-air-base-34-years-of-helping-honduras/#.ZB2OGy2l2gQ> [accessed 24 March 2023].
[22] Laura Herlihy, 'Miskitu Identity in the Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve, Honduras', *Indigenous Nations Studies Journal*, 3.2 (2002), 3-20 (p.4) <http://hdl.handle.net/1808/5789> [accessed 11 March 2023]; Kendra McSweeney and Zoe Pearson, 'Prying Native People from Native Lands: Narco Business in Honduras', *NACLA Report on the Americas*, 46.4 (2013), 7-12 (p.8) <https://doi.org/10.1080/10714839.2013.11721883>.
[23] MA, 'Retoman patrullajes para preserver patrimonio forestall de La Mosquitia', *La* Tribuna, 04 December 2022, <https://www.latribuna.hn/2022/12/04/retoman-patrullajes-para-preservar-patrimonio-forestal-de-la-mosquitia/> [accessed 27 March 2023]; Redacción El Heraldo, 'La Mosquitia y sus multiples riquezas', *El Heraldo*, 22 July 2012, <elheraldo.hn/opinion/la-mosquitia-y-sus-multiples-riquezas-LJEH624924> [accessed 27 March 2023]; Xiomara Danelia Orellana, 'Étnias de la Biosfera del Río Plátano en olvido', *La Prensa*, 15 March 2011, <https://www.laprensa.hn/espectaculos/etnias-de-la-biosfera-del-rio-platano-en-olvido-CDLP551300#image-1> [accessed 27 March 2023]; Agencia AFP, 'La Mosquitia, zona capturada por narcos', *La Prensa*, 06 January 2010, <https://www.laprensa.hn/mundo/la-mosquitia-zona-capturada-por-narcos-CCLP520013> [accessed 27 March 2023]; Redacción El Heraldo, 'Nuevo golpe al narcotráfico en La Mosquitia', *El Heraldo*, 06 July 2012, <https://www.elheraldo.hn/sucesos/nuevo-golpe-al-narcotrafico-en-la-mosquitia-HKEH619619#image-1> [accessed 27 March 2023]; Redacción La Prensa, 'La sangrienta Guerra por controlar a Honduras'; Redacción La Prensa, 'BG Group buscará petróleo en La Mosquitia hondureña', *La Prensa*, 11 December 2012, <https://www.laprensa.hn/honduras/bg-group-buscara-petroleo-en-la-mosquitia-hondurena-DDLP330892> [accessed 27 March 2023]; Redacción La Prensa, '"Queremos hacer un Cancún en Gracias a Dios": diputado Óscar Nájera', *La Prensa*, 25 June 2021, <https://www.laprensa.hn/honduras/queremos-hacer-cancun-gracias-diosdiputado-oscar-najera-KXLP1473449> [accessed 27 March 2023].
[24] Kendra McSweeney, 'The Dugout Canoe Trade in Central America's Mosquitia: Approaching Rural Livelihoods Through Systems of Exchange', *Cultural Geographies*, 94.3 (2004) 638-661 (p. 641) <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8306.2004.00418.x>.

alongside the region's isolation made the Honduran-Nicaraguan border extremely porous, to drug traffickers' advantage.[25] Furthermore, Honduras had played a key role in the trans-American drug trade since the 1980s when the US empowered local traffickers, mobilising them in support of the Contras and leaving long-lasting connections between narco and military institutions.[26]

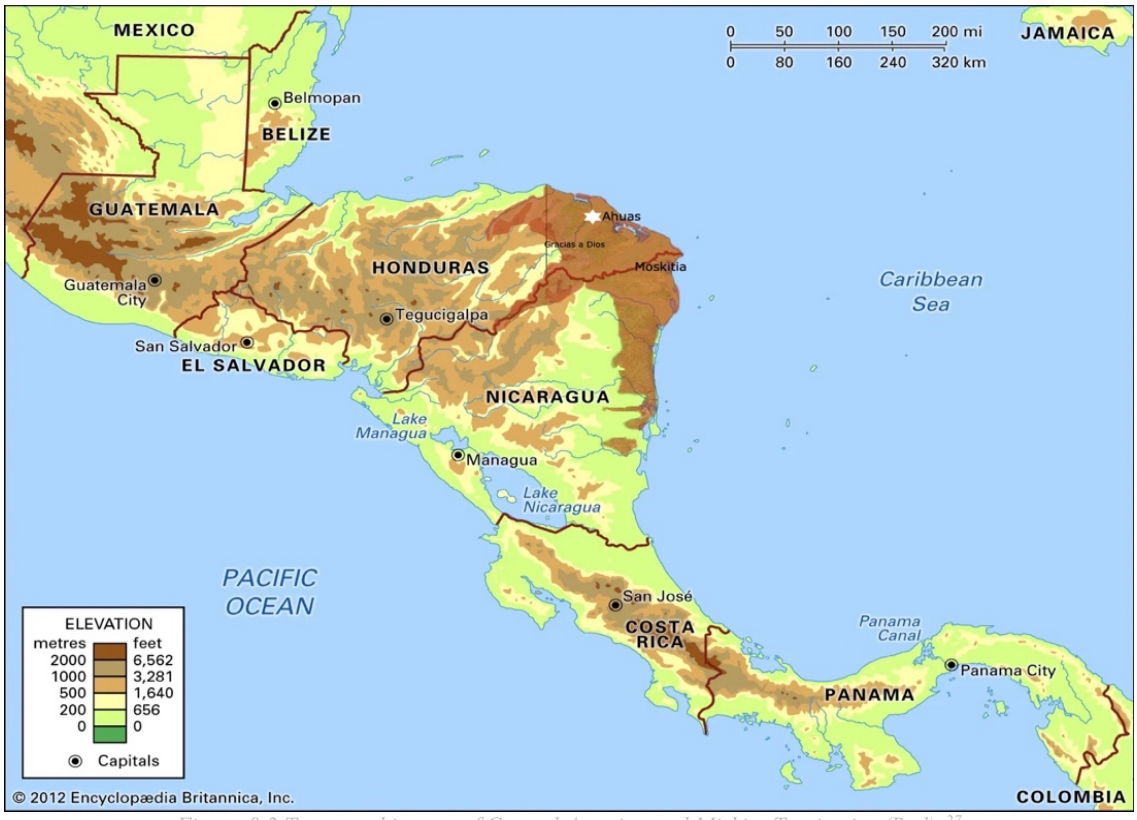

Figure 0.3 Topographic map of Central America and Miskitu Territories (Red). [27]

[25] U.S. Department of State, 'Integrated Country Strategy: Honduras., *Department of State*, p.17 <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/ICS_WHA_Honduras_Public.pdf> [accessed 27 March 2023].

[26] Sarah Chayes, *When Corruption is the Operating System: The Case of Honduras*, p.11 (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2017); U.S. Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *Drugs, Law Enforcement and Foreign Policy*, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1988), p.36, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu//NSAEBB/NSAEBB113/north06.pdf> [accessed 24 April 2023].

[27] Ralf Lee Woodward and David Bushnell, 'Central America', *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Central-America> [accessed 20 March 2023]; Native Land Digital, 'Miskito', *Native Land Digital*, <https://native-land.ca/maps/territories/miskito/> [accessed 20 March 2023].

Sources, Historiography and Considerations

This dissertation is a history, but the recency of events discussed means that existing historiography is limited and some potential primary sources available have been impossible to acquire. The historiography of the War on Drugs has predominantly focussed on US-centric interstate relations and conflict with criminal organisations, while the indigenous peoples of the Americas have traditionally been neglected.[28] There is a growing scholarship on the relationship between this conflict and some of the region's most vulnerable groups – particularly by Kendra McSweeney and Sharlene Mollett – but considerable gaps in knowledge remain.[29] This dissertation engages with a range of secondary literature from social and political scientists, geographers and anthropologists to develop an interdisciplinary historical framework.

The short time that has passed since the events of the Ahuas Massacre means that many relevant internal US and Honduran government documents remain classified and inaccessible. Freedom of Information requests were submitted to the DEA and SOUTHCOM in February 2023 but neither responded. Yet, other documents such as court transcripts are freely accessible, and older documents were acquired through online archives (e.g., *DNSA*, *WikiLeaks*). Given the inaccessibility of contemporary internal documents, much of the primary research has been drawn from Honduran newspapers, which provide a far closer insight into day-by-day changes

[28] Edward Hunt, 'Staying the course in Mexico: the role of the US in the drug war, 2006-present', *Third World Quarterly*, 40.6 (2019), 1184-1205, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2019.1574562>; Bruce Bagley, 'The New Hundred Years War? US National Security and the war on Drugs in Latin America', *Interamerican Studies and World Affairs*, 30.1 (1988), 161-182, <https://doi.org/10.2307/165793>; William Avilés, 'US Intervention in Colombia: The Role of Transnational Relations', *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 27.3 (2008), 410-429 <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1470-9856.2008.00277.x>.

[29] Kendra McSweeney et al. 'Grounding traffic: The cocaine commodity chain and land grabbing in eastern Honduras', *Geoforum*, 95 (2018), 122-132 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2018.07.008>; Kendra McSweeney and Zoe Pearson, 'Prying Native People from Native Lands: Narco Business in Honduras'; Sharlene Mollett, 'Racial narratives: Miskito and *colono* land struggles in the Honduran Mosquitia', *Cultural Geographies*, 18.1 (2010), 43-62 <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474474010384928>; Sharlene Mollett, 'Race and Natural Resource Conflicts in Honduras: The Miskito and Garifuna Struggle for Lasa Pulan', *Latin American Research Review*, 41.1 (2006), 76-101 <https://doi.org/10.1353/lar.2006.0012>.

than would otherwise be available. Yet, they have limitations: most of the national papers do not maintain web archives back to 2009-2012; and the two with the fullest archives (*La Prensa* and *El Heraldo*) reflect political biases, owned by the same parent company and having given support to the coup government.[30] Nevertheless, newspapers are valuable sources in conjunction with other perspectives, reflecting state and popular conceptions of events as they progressed. Despite these challenges, this dissertation's new historical research into the Ahuas Massacre hopefully marks an opening up of historiography that will continue.

Content

The dissertation is organised into three chapters evaluating the key factors that escalated violence in the Muskitia and led to the Ahuas killings: the consequences of Honduras' 2009 coup d'état; regional drug trafficking; and US counternarcotics strategy. These factors intersected and compounded within the Muskitia's geopolitical and historical context, leading directly to the Ahuas Massacre.

Chapter One evaluates the consequences of the coup d'état for Honduran politics and the Muskitia, including the subsequent shift towards militarisation of the Honduran state. Distinctive features of state militarisation in the isolated Muskitia, in contrast to urban settings, meant violence and human rights violations grew asymmetrically. In tandem, the coup spawned an aggressive neoliberalism which encouraged investment in Honduras' mineral wealth and industry, directly impacting the Muskitia. The coup also massively increased corruption, with links to drug trafficking across the Honduran state at all levels – from local government and

[30] The Dialogue, 'Jorge Canahuati Larach', *The Dialogue*, <https://www.thedialogue.org/experts/jorge-canahuati-larach-2/> [accessed 29 April 2023]; OFRANEH, 'Pueblo hondureño bajo un golpe de estado permanente', *SERVINDI*, <https://www.servindi.org/actualidad/79033> [accessed 29 April 2023].

policing to the presidency. Corruption strengthened drug traffickers, intensified violence, and granted impunity to its perpetrators. These consequences of the 2009 coup were fundamental to the conditions of the Ahuas Massacre.

Regional drug trafficking's complexities are considered in Chapter Two. Following anti-narcotics initiatives Plan Colombia and Mexico's Plan Mérida, Honduran trafficking skyrocketed.[31] The US State Department estimated that 80% of cocaine travelling north in 2012 passed through Honduras, mainly through the Muskitia.[32] As well as the violence of narcotraffickers – or *transportistas* – this shift brought greater state intervention and victimised indigenous residents. *Transportistas*' illegal land seizures drove communities from traditional lands and economic activities, as government also moved to ban dangerous traditional dive-fishing practices. Cooperation with narco-trafficking was often the only option for deprived communities, while the extent of local authority corruption made involvement appear safe. This blurring line between 'civilian' and 'trafficker' made indigenous communities more vulnerable to violence while its perpetrators were more likely to receive impunity: this was a key factor in the Ahuas Massacre.

Chapter Three analyses US counternarcotics strategy, considering how its militarisation created the conditions for the Ahuas Massacre. Beginning with the DEA's first forays into foreign intervention, US counternarcotics strategy's roots in counterinsurgency against leftist guerrillas has conflated the Wars on Terror and Drugs. This further blurred the lines between

[31] William Marcy, 'The End of Civil War, the Rise of Narcotrafficking and the Implementation of the Merida Initiative in Central America', *International Social Science Review*, 89.1 (2013) 1-36 (p. 24) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/intesociscierevi.89.1.01> [accessed 27 March 2023]; Charles Parkinson, 'Mexico Crime Tactics Migrating to Honduras', *InSight Crime*, <https://insightcrime.org/news/brief/mexico-crime-tactics-migrating-to-honduras/> [accessed 27 March 2023].
[32] Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, 'International Narcotics Control Strategy Report: Volume I: Drug and Chemical Control, *United States Department of State*, (2013) p.189 <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/204265.pdf> [accessed 12 March 2023].

civilian, trafficker and ‘terrorist’, putting innocents in the crosshairs. Inherited personnel, tactics and strategy from Iraq and Afghanistan used in civilian settings by both US and Honduran forces demonstrably contributed to the killings in 2012.

Drawing these strands together, the dissertation evaluates the 2012 Ahuas Massacre, seeking to understand its historical origins. The Muskitia’s indigenous peoples deserve to be more than historical footnotes and to be placed at the centre of their own narratives.

Chapter One: The Coup and its Consequences

Introduction

On the 28th of June 2009, José Manuel Zelaya Rosales was ousted from the presidency of Honduras. He had introduced a series of leftist reforms such as universal education and increased minimum wage, as well as bringing Honduras in line with anti-US regional initiatives such as ALBA, led by Venezuela.[33] His referendum to introduce a fourth ballot voting on constitutional reform at the upcoming November elections was construed by political opponents to be a move to extend his presidency beyond the legal maximum term, even though he had not been running for re-election.[34] On the morning of the 28th of June soldiers entered his home and forced Zelaya into exile, leaving head of Congress Roberto Micheletti as interim president.[35]

In the aftermath of the coup, public freedoms were limited and the processes and results of the November election – which installed National Party candidate Porfirio Lobo Sosa as president – were highly disputed by local and international actors.[36] The National Party ruled

[33] Redacción La Prensa, 'Gobierno decretal salario mínimo en 5,500 lempiras', *La Prensa*, 24 December 2008, <https://www.laprensa.hn/honduras/gobierno-decreta-salario-minimo-en-5500-lempiras-PRLP580348> [accessed 04 April 2023]; Redacción La Prensa, 'A medias cumplirán promesa de matricula gratis', *La Prensa*, 27 January 2007, <https://www.laprensa.hn/honduras/a-medias-cumpliran-promesa-de-matricula-gratis-CALP634251> [accessed 04 April 2023]; Reuters Staff, 'Honduras se suma al ALBA y Chávez aumenta su influencia', *Reuters*, 25 August 2008, <https://www.reuters.com/article/oesbs-latinoamerica-honduras-alba-idESLAR56453320080825> [accessed 04 April 2023].
[34] Redacción La Prensa, 'Mel propone plebiscite para instalar Constituyente', *La Prensa*, 22 November 2008, <https://www.laprensa.hn/honduras/mel-propone-plebiscito-para-instalar-constituyente-CFLP577511> [accessed 04 April 2023].
[35] Associated Press, 'Honduras president arrested in military coup', *The Guardian*, 28 June 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/jun/28/honduras-coup-president-zelaya> [accessed 04 April 2023].
[36] Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, 'Honduras: Human Rights and the Coup d'État', *Organization of American States*, 30 December 2009, pp.53-59 <http://www.cidh.org/pdf%20files/HONDURAS2009ENG.pdf> [accessed 24 April 2023]; Dan Beeton,

uninterrupted over Honduras for the next 12 years in what opponents of the regime dubbed a *narco-dictatura*: a narco-dictatorship.[37]

The first section of this chapter will chart the growth of state militarisation and violence that took place in Honduras in the aftermath of the coup. Violence by state security forces, organised crime, and death squads exploded in the aftermath of 2009, leading to Honduras becoming the most dangerous country in the world outside of a warzone in 2012, with a murder rate of 85 for every 100,000 inhabitants.[38] National Party policies were dominated by a swing to the right: their aggressive pursuit of neoliberal reform and economic growth comprises a second key dimension of the coup's consequences. Thus, the second section of this chapter explores the colonial dimensions of Honduras' neoliberalisation under post-coup governments, considering how private and state interests coalesced in the Muskitia to exacerbate violence and draw militarisation. Projects like the Patuca Dam threatened indigenous autonomy and lands while corporations eyed the Muskitia for its wealth of natural resources. The chapter ends by addressing the institutionalisation of corruption and organised crime that developed under National Party leadership. Corruption skyrocketed and in the past few years several high-ranking figures from the ruling party and their families have been extradited to the US to face

'Honduras' Most Prominent Human Rights Expert Calls on Obama Administration to Denounce "Grave Human Rights Violations"', *CEPR*, 05 November 2009, <https://web.archive.org/web/20091120190638/http://www.cepr.net/index.php/press-releases/press-releases/honduras-human-rights-expert/> [accessed 24 April 2023]; Peter Meyer, 'Honduran Political Crisis, June 2009-January 2010', *Congressional Research Service*, (2010) p.10 <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/R41064.pdf> [accessed 24 April 2023]; Isabel Sánchez, 'Intenso debate sobre Honduras en la Cumbre Iberoamericana tras las elecciones', *Yahoo España Noticias*, 30 November 2009, <https://web.archive.org/web/20091205023853/http://es.noticias.yahoo.com/12/20091130/twl-intenso-debate-sobre-honduras-en-la-bc4ee44.html> [accessed 24 April 2023].

[37] Jorge Burgos, 'Honduras: ¿hacia el fin de la narcodictatura?', *Critero*, 23 November 2021, <https://criterio.hn/honduras-hacia-el-fin-de-la-narcodictadura/> [accessed 24 April 2023].

[38] Philip Sherwell, 'Welcome to Honduras, the most dangerous country on the planet', *Telegraph*, 16 November 2013, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/centralamericaandthecaribbean/honduras/10454018/Welcome-to-Honduras-the-most-dangerous-country-on-the-planet.html> [accessed 05 April 2023].

drug trafficking charges. Institutionalised corruption encouraged drug trafficking through the Muskitia, attracting further military presence which led directly to the 2012 Ahuas Massacre.

Violence and Militarisation

Immediately after the coup, interim president Micheletti declared a state of exception in Honduras. The decree suspended constitutional rights including 'personal liberty', freedom of assembly, and freedom of movement, and expanded security forces' powers to arrest and detain individuals.[39] The OAS' Inter-American Commission on Human Rights reported spiking human rights violations in following days: excessive force by state security targeted women, indigenous peoples, and other marginalised groups.[40] The 2009 state of exception lasted only a few days, but the violence the coup spawned continued to grow in the years leading up to 2012.

Honduran security forces underwent a significant period of growth and militarisation in the years following the coup, resulting in increased human rights abuses by government forces and growing violence from interconnected trafficking and paramilitary groups. From the beginning, police and military sources in government-aligned media emphasised the perceived power imbalance between security forces and traffickers. *La Prensa* highlighted *transportistas*' armaments and material resources to argue for greater funding and militarisation of policing. A February 2010 article entitled 'Estúpido poner a policías a luchar contra multimillonarios' [It is stupid to make police fight multimillionaires] featured an interview with the former

[39] Roberto Micheletti Bain, 'Executive Decree No.011-2009', *Office of the President of the Republic*, 30 June 2009 <https://www.wola.org/sites/default/files/downloadable/Central%20America/Honduras/past/Decreto%20Estado%20de%20Excepcion.pdf> [accessed 05 April 2023].
[40] Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, 'Honduras: Human Rights and the Coup d'État', pp. 50-52, p.22.

deputy head of Honduras' DLCN arguing that the lack of police resources made the struggle against trafficking all but impossible. The solution, he contended, was increased military-policing presence in trafficking hotspots like the Muskitia: "Apuntó que una de las formas de combater el tráfico de droga por las vías area y marítima es enfrentar la organización criminal en tierra" [He pointed out that one way of combatting drug trafficking by air and sea is to tackle the criminal organisation on the ground].[41] Another *La Prensa* article on a narco-plane in the Muskitia made a similar case, arguing that traffickers operate with impunity due to lack of equipment and including a call from a police source to be supplied with helicopters.[42] *La Prensa*'s position as a leading Honduran national newspaper aligned with the government makes this series of articles appear to be a concerted campaign to drum up support for increased militarisation of policing, particularly in the Muskitia.[43]

Security forces and the media leaned into international fears of terrorism to justify militarisation in the rural Northeast, including the Muskitia.[44] *La Prensa* claimed that FARC was training and arming peasants in the neighbouring Colón department, according to an unreleased intelligence report.[45] Even more dissociated from local realities, articles circulated in the Honduran press claiming that Hezbollah was operating out of Nicaragua near the

[41] Redacción La Prensa, 'Estúpido poner a policías a luchar contra multimillonarios', *La Prensa*, 08 February 2010, <https://www.laprensa.hn/honduras/estupido-poner-a-policias-a-luchar-contra-multimillonarios-DALP505042> [accessed 05 April 2023].
[42] Redacción La Prensa, 'Cae narcoavioneta en el sector La Mosquitia', *La Prensa*, 19 March 2010, <https://www.laprensa.hn/sucesos/cae-narcoavioneta-en-el-sector-la-mosquitia-DALP503189> [accessed 05 April 2023].
[43] Redacción La Prensa, 'Honduras: Dejó de 'llover" cocaína', *La Prensa*, 13 July 2009, <https://www.laprensa.hn/sucesos/honduras-dejo-de-llover-cocaina-FALP507354#image-1> [accessed 05 April 2023]; Redacción La Prensa, 'Honduras aún no está a salvo de Hugo Chávez', *La Prensa*, 20 March 2010, <https://www.laprensa.hn/honduras/honduras-aun-no-esta-a-salvo-de-hugo-chavez-BALP501154> [accessed 05 April 2023].
[44] Redacción La Prensa, ''Honduras sigue bajo ataque, estén alertas"', 16 March 2010, *La Prensa*, <https://www.laprensa.hn/honduras/honduras-sigue-bajo-ataque-esten-alertas-DALP503761> [accessed 24 April 2023].
[45] Redacción La Prensa, 'Célula guerillera se arma en el Bajo Aguán', *La Prensa*, 01 March 2010, <https://www.laprensa.hn/honduras/celula-guerrillera-se-arma-en-el-bajo-aguan-FALP502250 > [accessed 24 April 2023].

Honduran border.[46] This story came only from an unsubstantiated *Times of Israel* report.[47] Such claims of links to terrorist groups in the Northeast drummed up internal support for militarisation, activating historic fears of Nicaraguan and Venezuelan influence, but also reflected a concerted appeal for international support. US concerns with terrorist groups in the Middle East and South America were thus leveraged to support domestic militarisation efforts.

Enabled by this media campaign, the Lobo government consistently pushed militarisation of policing and expanded police presence in the Muskitia. The armed forces increasingly took on policing roles; in April 2010 they were deployed to "*zonas calientes*" of criminal activity in cities.[48] Entrenching the military's growing role in policing, an emergency decree declared in November 2011 which gave the military full police powers was extended in March 2012; simultaneously, President Lobo introduced a constitutional reform that would institutionalise a permanent role for the military in policing.[49] The dangers of militarising policing are well established, documented in growing scholarship on increasing US militarisation of internal security. Jonathan Mummolo highlights that militarised US policing disproportionately targets Black communities, while work in *The Lancet* documents direct links to an increase in people killed by police since the early 2000s – when federal programs began providing military equipment to local law enforcement – who have disproportionately been Black and Hispanic.[50]

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[46] Redacción El Heraldo, 'Hezbolá entrena en frontera Honduras-Nicaragua', *El Heraldo*, 10 September 2012, <https://www.elheraldo.hn/sucesos/hezbola-entrena-en-frontera-honduras-nicaragua-CJEH620277> accessed 24 April 2023]; Redacción La Prensa, 'Nicaragua entrenaría célula de Hezbolá en frontera con Honduras', *La Prensa*, 10 September 2012, <https://www.elheraldo.hn/sucesos/hezbola-entrena-en-frontera-honduras-nicaragua-CJEH620277> [accessed 24 April 2023].

[47] Philip Podolsky, 'Iran, Hezbollah establish training base in Nicaragua', *Times of Israel*, 06 September 2012 <https://www.timesofisrael.com/iran-hezbollah-establish-training-base-in-nicaragua/ > [accessed 24 April 2023].

[48] Redacción La Prensa, 'A "zonas calientes" mandarán a militares', *La Prensa*, 15 April 2010, <https://www.laprensa.hn/honduras/a-zonas-calientes-mandaran-a-militares-BALP500809> [accessed 05 April 2023].

[49] Tatiana Faramarzi, 'Desperate Measures? Honduras Considers Blurring Military-Police Role', *Insight Crime*, 28 March 2012, <https://insightcrime.org/news/analysis/desperate-measures-honduras-considers-blurring-military-police-role/> [accessed 06 April 2023].

[50] Jonathan Mummolo, 'Militarization fails to enhance police safety or reduce crime but may harm police reputation', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 115.37 (2018), 9181-9186 (p.9185),

Latin America tells the same story: Gustavo Flores-Macías and Jessica Zarkin demonstrate that involvement of the armed forces in policing has resulted in increased levels of violence in the states they surveyed as well as sharp increases in human rights abuses.[51] In Colombia – the inspiration for Plan Mérida in Mexico and CARSI across Central America, over $7 billion in US military aid led to the victimisation of 6.424 million people and over 4,300 civilian deaths.[52] Paralleling US violence, Sarah Radcliffe illuminates Plan Colombia's disproportionate effects on Afro-Colombian and indigenous groups, who made up the majority of people displaced by the conflict and in whose territories most fighting took place.[53] Historically and contemporarily, militarisation of police escalates violence and disproportionately affects marginalised groups. Honduras was no different.

Lobo's reforms brought unprecedented levels of military presence into the historically isolated Muskitia under the guise of combatting drug trafficking. Government and media quickly identified the region as a hotbed of trafficking, leveraging its isolation and public perception as an untamed colonial frontier to develop new military infrastructure in the region.[54] New installations such as the Caratasca naval base and regional Forward Operating Bases developed with US support brought the ability to exert force over the region and its crucial waterways.[55] Traditional modes of transport such as the dugout canoe, combined with the lack of other

<https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1805161115>; GBD 2019 Police Violence US Subnational Collaborators, 'Fatal police violence by race and state in the US, 1980-2019: a network meta-regression', *The Lancet*, 398.10307 (2021), 1239-1255 (p.1250, p. 1246), <https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(21)01609-3>.

[51] Gustavo Flores Macías and Jessica Zarkin, 'The Militarization of Law Enforcement: Evidence from Latin America', *Perspectives on Politics*, 19.2 (2021), 519-538 (p. 529), <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/W1YYEV>.

[52] Latin America Working Group, 'The Human Rights Costs During Plan Colombia', *LAWG*, <https://www.lawg.org/the-human-rights-costs-during-plan-colombia/> [accessed 25 April 2023].

[53] Sarah Radcliffe, 'Latin American Indigenous Geographies of Fear: Living in the Shadow of Racism, Lack of Development and Antiterror Measures', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 97.2 (2007), 385-397 (p. 387), <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8306.2007.00544.x>.

[54] Redacción La Prensa, 'Biosfera del Río Plátano en la mira por narcotráfico', *La Prensa*, 20 March 2009 <https://www.laprensa.hn/honduras/biosfera-del-rio-platano-en-la-mira-por-narcotrafico-EYLP515760> [accessed 06 April 2023].

[55] Redacción La Prensa, 'Inauguran base contra los narcos en La Mosquitia', *La Prensa*, 09 April 2010, <https://www.laprensa.hn/honduras/inauguran-base-contra-los-narcos-en-la-mosquitia-AALP500473> [accessed 08 April 2023].

transport infrastructure, made control of the rivers crucial to controlling the region.[56] The consequences of militarisation of the rivers are no clearer than in the Ahuas Massacre itself: its victims were on the Patuca River when they were attacked by a militarised occupation force blockading their waterways. The escalation of militarised policing – while ostensibly designed to tackle rising levels of violence – saw an increase in killings across Honduras.[57] In the isolated Muskitia, lines of transport and communication were dominated by militarised forces and violence could be carried out with impunity.

Figure 1.1 Honduran Soldiers deployed to tackle drug trafficking.[58]

[56] Kendra McSweeney, 'The Dugout Canoe Trade in Central America's Mosquitia', p.641.
[57] Comisionado Nacional de los Derechos Humanos, *Informe Anual 2015*, (Tegucigalpa, Honduras: CONADEH, 2016), p.31, <https://www.conadeh.hn/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/CONADEH_2015.pdf>.
[58] Redacción La Prensa, 'Intensifican seguridad para evitar a Los Zetas', *La Prensa*, 21 December 2010, <https://www.laprensa.hn/honduras/intensifican-seguridad-para-evitar-a-los-zetas-DQLP484171> [accessed 05 April 2023].

In 2012, militarisation had led to consistently growing rates of human rights abuses, including arbitrary arrests, torture, and killings.[59] 149 people were recorded killed by police in Honduras between January 2011 and November 2012; the real number was likely significantly higher due to corruption and underreporting within the security forces.[60] Nonetheless, the reported figure alone is incredibly high – proportionally by population, this was equivalent to almost 5,000 police killings in the US. In 2016, Honduran security forces were allegedly given death-squad hitlists targeting activists including indigenous leader Berta Cáceres, who was assassinated in March that year.[61] Police violence was not new to Honduras' recent history: over 300 'street children' had been murdered by police between 1998-2000 as part of a social "cleansing" campaign.[62] This precedent of extrajudicial violence towards vulnerable groups heightened the dangers of empowering and militarising internal security, such that post-coup Honduras was characterised by both continuity and escalation in historic and contemporary violence.

A large private security sector also played a key part in Honduran violence, with close links to police and the military and often operating as death squads.[63] In 2013, the UN's Working Group

[59] CONADEH, *Informe Anual 2015*, pp. 34-35.
[60] Observatorio Nacional de la Violencia, 'Boletín Especial sobre Criminalidad Policial Enero 2011-Noviembre 2012', *Observatorio Nacional de La Violencia*, (2012), p.5, <https://iudpas.unah.edu.hn/dmsdocument/2394-boletin-especial-sobre-criminalidad-policial-enero-2011-noviembre-2012> [accessed 06 April 2023]; United Nations Human Rights: Office of the High Commissioner, 'Preliminary Observations on the official visit to Honduras by the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, 23 to 27 May 2016', *United Nations Human Rights: Office of the High Commissioner*, 30 May 2016, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2016/05/preliminary-observations-official-visit-honduras-special-rapporteur> [accessed 20 April 2023].
[61] Nina Lakhani, 'Berta Cáceres's name was on Honduran military hitlist, says former soldier', *The Guardian*, 21 June 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/21/berta-caceres-name-honduran-military-hitlist-former-soldier> [accessed 25 April 2023].
[62] Duncan Cambell, 'Police "dispose" of Honduran street kids', *The Guardian*, 30 June 2000, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2000/jun/30/duncancampbell> [accessed 06 April 2023].
[63] Associated Press, 'Honduras police accused of death squad killings', *The Mercury News*, 17 March 2013, <https://www.mercurynews.com/2013/03/17/honduras-police-accused-of-death-squad-killings/> [accessed 08 April 2023]; United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 'Observations on the State of Indigenous Human Rights in Light of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples: Honduras', *United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner*, p.4 <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/lib-docs/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session9/HN/CS_Cultural_Survival.pdf> [accessed 08 April 2023]; Dana

on the use of mercenaries recorded 706 private security companies legally employing 14,787 private security guards. Including unregistered employees that number rose to approximately 60,000 private security guards across Honduras – over five times higher than the number of police officers.[64] The escalation is dramatic: in 2001 there were only 43 registered companies employing 3,965 guards.[65] The UN found post-coup Honduran legal and institutional frameworks completely inadequate for the regulation of private security, characterised by dangerous impunity in which armed and unregistered private actors acted without oversight.[66] In September 2009, Colombian paper *El Tiempo* reported that at least 40 ex-AUC members (a far right paramilitary group responsible for the deaths of thousands) had been hired in Honduras to serve as private security.[67] The 2013 UN report highlighted tight links between private and state security forces, often sharing membership; soldiers were seen changing into private security uniforms and private guards carried illegal weapons.[68] The overlap between armed actors and institutional impunity led to dangerous levels of violence. In 2012, more than 300 rights defenders had been murdered by death squads and civilians consistently bore the brunt

Frank, 'WikiLeaks Honduras: US Linked to Brutal Businessman', *The Nation*, 21 October 2011, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/wikileaks-honduras-us-linked-brutal-businessman/#axzz2eKthsmtT> accessed 21 April 2023]; Larry Palmer, 'Drug Plane Burned on Prominent Honduran's Property. Cable no. 04TEGUCIGALPA672. Tegucigalpa, March 19', *Wikileaks*, 04 March 2004, <https://wikileaks.org/cable/2004/03/04TEGUCIGALPA672.html> [accessed 27 April 2023].

[64] United Nations General Assembly, Human Rights Council, *Report of the Working Group on the use of mercenaries as a means of violating human rights and impeding the exercise of the right of peoples to self-determination*, A/HRC/24/45/Add.1, (05 August 2013), pp.6-7, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G13/160/95/PDF/G1316095.pdf?OpenElement> [accessed 25 April 2023].

[65] Ana Yancy Espinoza, *La seguridad privada en Centro América*, (San José, Costa Rica: Fundación Arias para la Paz y el Progreso Humano, 2003) p.136, <https://biblioteca.cejamericas.org/bitstream/handle/2015/2607/La_seguridad_privada_en_Centroamerica.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y> [accessed 25 April 2023].

[66] UN Human Rights Council, *Report of the Working Group on the use of mercenaries*, p.8, pp. 13-16.

[67] Redacción El Tiempo, 'Les Ofrecen ser Mercenarios al Servicio de Supuestos Empresarios Enlistan ex Auc para ir a Honduras', *El Tiempo*, 13 September 2009, <https://www.eltiempo.com/archivo/documento/MAM-3621653> [accessed 25 April 2023].

[68] UN Human Rights Council, *Report of the Working Group on the use of mercenaries*, p. 7, pp. 11-13.

of Honduras' incredibly high murder rate.[69] Eighty percent of murders went unsolved despite increased levels of policing and military involvement.[70]

In sum, the 2009 coup d'état and the Lobo government caused a huge escalation of militarisation in both public and private security that led to increased violence against marginalised groups and impunity for the perpetrators. This consequence was a key reason for the Ahuas Massacre, creating conditions for excessive use of force by militarised Honduran forces deployed in the Muskitia as well as impunity for their actions.

Natural Resources and Neoliberalism

The intensification of violence in the Muskitia was also motivated by economic and ideological factors. While the Muskitia was important due to its position in the narcotics trade and the value of the contraband that passed through, it was also perceived as being key to the post-coup government's neoliberal project. A permanent colonial frontier that had been historically excluded from Honduras' 'modernising' project, the Muskitia was viewed as a source of immense potential wealth and a testing ground for economic change. Valuable mineral resources, the beautiful Caribbean coast, and the internationally recognised Biosfera del Río Plátano nature reserve were all sources of valuable foreign investment for Honduras if state 'security' could be extended over the isolated and autonomous region.

[69] Stephen Sackur, 'Honduras counts the human rights cost of America's war on drugs', *The Guardian*, 15 July 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jul/15/honduras-human-rights-war-drugs> [accessed 06 July 2023].
[70] Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, 'Situation of human rights in Honduras', *Organization of American States*, p.12 <https://www.oas.org/en/iachr/reports/pdfs/Honduras-en-2015.pdf> [accessed 06 April 2023].

Neo-colonialism was not a new idea to Honduras. Ghana's first president Kwame Nkrumah first coined the term in his 1965 book, warning of "neo-colonialism" as a way for former imperial powers to maintain power over and resources from former colonies post-independence. He highlights the influence of the US as "foremost among the neo-colonialists", especially in Latin America, reflecting historic trends of domination pertinent in Honduras.[71] Nkrumah's ideas have been applied across the globe, inspiring a whole field of study. Robert Young's book, *Empire, Colony, Postcolony*, details the neo-colonial relationship as an "informal imperialism", dominated by market forces and private capital rather than foreign occupation. This system of dominance mirrors Honduras' own historical experience with corporations like United Fruit. Young cites globalised neoliberalism as the inheritor of modern neo-colonialism, with tenets of economic growth and free markets.[72] In Honduras, the shift to aggressively neoliberal policy under post-coup governments reflects this power dynamic: an ideological drive favouring private interests and free exchange of resources overrides the interests of indigenous populations. Honduras underwent economic restructuring in the 1980s and 1990s along neoliberal lines, but the coup marked an ideological and economic doubling down after slight rollback under the Zelaya government.[73] Within this historical context and framework, the shift towards neoliberalism under post-coup governments marginalised indigenous communities in the "wild" colonial frontier of the Muskitia, contributing to greater violence from private, state, and criminal actors.[74]

[71] Kwame Nkrumah, *Neo-colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*, (London: Heinemann, 1968) p. 239.
[72] Robert Young, *Empire, Colony, Postcolony*, (Chichester, UK: Wiley, 2015), p.121.
[73] James Phillips, 'The Misery Financing Development: Subsidized Neoliberalism and Privatized Dependency in Honduras', *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development*, 46.1/2 (2017), 1-59 (p.3) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45172860> [accessed 25 April 2023]; Todd Gordon and Jeffery Webber, 'Canada and the Honduran Coup', *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 30.3 (2011), 328-343 (p.333), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41238223> [accessed 25 April 2023].
[74] Benjamin Hopkins, *Ruling the Savage Periphery: Frontier Governance and the Making of the Modern State*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020), p.3 <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674246164>.

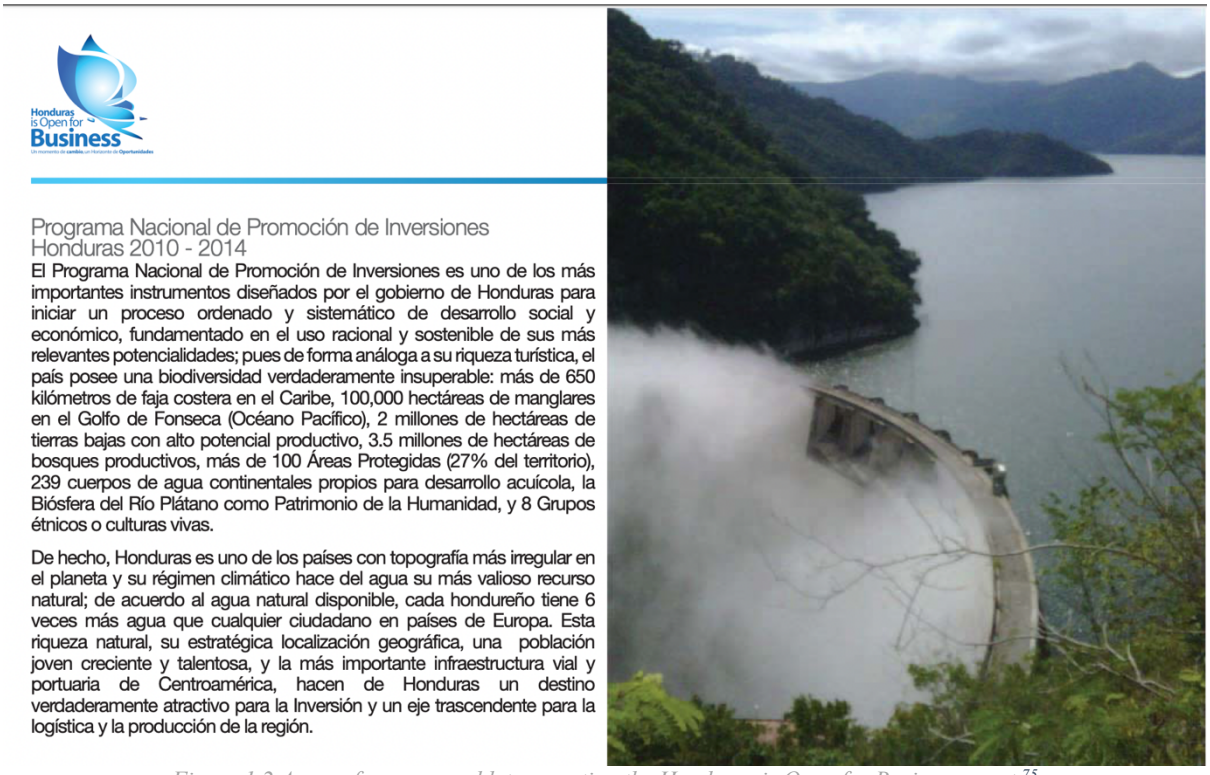

Figure 1.2 A page from a pamphlet promoting the Honduras is Open for Business event.[75]

The shift to an aggressively neoliberal stance was marked by the Honduran National Investment Programme in May 2011 and the 'Honduras is Open for Business' event. The event sought to publicise Honduras for foreign investors by drawing attention to its recent legislature, profitable natural resources, and human capital. A government publication for the event specifically drew attention to the economic potential of the Muskitia while presenting Honduran laws as "the most competitive investment incentives in Central America and the Caribbean,", advertising its lack of restrictions for foreign investors and support for massive private investment.[76] Indeed, the *Ley para la Promoción y Protección de Inversiones* [LPPI: Investment Promotion and Protection Act], provided attractive benefits for *foreign* capital, with tax breaks for high-value investors and guaranteed equal treatment for corporations seeking to

[75] Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 'Honduras is Open for Business', *Gobierno de Unidad Nacional*, p. 6, <http://www.consuladohonduras.ca/open.pdf> [accessed 05 April 2023].
[76] Ibid p.7, p. 11.

develop projects in Honduras.[77] This neoliberal shift after the left-leaning policies of the Zelaya period drew the attention of numerous large multinational corporations, such as British Gas and Aura Minerals, seeking to exploit Honduras' resources.[78] However, attractive investment did not just require legal protections and unrestricted market access, but a façade of stability to guarantee the safety of foreign capital.

As part of the need for security LPPI afforded strong protections for private property guaranteeing that valuable investments would be protected from land redistribution and others' land claims.[79] The guarantee to protect land investments had particular significance for the Muskitia, as it implicitly ruled against indigenous land titling in favour of private investors. Military operations evicting peasants in the Bajo Aguán demonstrated the government's dedication to providing those protections.[80] Corruption and coercion in the Muskitia in the post-coup period led to prolific rates of illegal land sales from protected indigenous territory; while most of this land went to *transportistas* who used it to construct landing strips for drug planes and cattle ranches for money-laundering, its legal transfer out of indigenous common ownership marked a critical step in the enclosure of the Muskitia into private hands.[81] Between 2010-2011 Kendra McSweeney and colleagues conducted research and interviews with communities in the Muskitia, finding that powerful private actors were "contracting" local middlemen to secure land and expand large-scale plantations into the Muskitia. They quote a local resident: "Miguel Facussé [Honduran palm oil magnate] has it all mapped out! He's using

[77] *Ley para La Promoción y Protección de Inversiones 2011*, [Online] <https://faolex.fao.org/docs/pdf/hon137904.pdf> [accessed 06 April 2023].
[78] Laleh Larijani and Christina Guindo, 'Aura Minerals scales up gold, copper production', *South China Morning Post*, 04 October 2012, <https://www.scmp.com/article/1053811/aura-minerals-scales-gold-copper-production> [accessed 08 April 2023]; Redacción La Prensa, 'BG Group buscará petróleo en La Mosquitia, hondureña'.
[79] *Ley para La Promoción y Protección de Inversiones 2011*.
[80] Redacción La Prensa, 'Operación Xatruch II busca liberar más fincas en el Bajo Aguan', *La Prensa*, 06 September 2011, <https://www.laprensa.hn/honduras/operacion-xatruch-ii-busca-liberar-mas-fincas-en-el-bajo-aguan-ODLP335964#image-1> [accessed 23 April 2023].
[81] Kendra McSweeney, 'Grounding traffic' (p.127).

certain local families… to corner the land market with money from narco-trafficking. He wants to plant African [oil] palm. And there are other powerful people doing the same thing. (transl.)"[82]

Ongoing privatisation and deforestation of the region not only disrupted traditional ways of life, but crucially made indigenous groups more vulnerable to violence. Destruction of and expulsion from ancestral territories pushed residents into closer contact with the drug war as traditional economic practices were undermined and the lucrative narcotics trade became increasingly ingrained in the local economy.[83] Neoliberalising initiatives thus created regional conditions that served to make indigenous populations more vulnerable to violence, coercion, and exploitation, conditions that culminated in the Ahuas Massacre.

Critically important to the survival of indigenous populations, the waterways of the Muskitia were not exempt from militarisation, neither were they spared the hands of private interests. Late in 2012, the Honduran government went into talks with British Gas Group, conceding over 35,000km^2 in the Miskitu Kays.[84] While this contract was agreed after the Ahuas Massacre, it still holds considerable significance in its development. The oil reserves off the Muskitian coast had been known about for some time, yet only began development *after* the Kays' militarisation with the Caratasca naval base in 2010.[85] Indigenous communities, subjugated to occupation for the *prospect* of economic gain, were promised consultation on

[82] Ibid p.128.
[83] Ibid.
[84] La Prensa, 'BG Group buscara petroléo en La Mosquitia'; María Celeste Maradiaga, 'Concesión petrolera en La Mosquitia avanza sin transperencia ni consulta', *Contra Corriente*, 07 December 2022, <https://contracorriente.red/2022/12/07/concesion-petrolera-en-la-mosquitia-de-honduras-avanza-sin-transparencia-ni-consulta/> [accessed 20 April 2023]; United Nations General Assembly, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples on her visit to Honduras*, A/HRC/33/42/Add.2, 21 July 2016, p. 12 <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/847080/files/A_HRC_33_42_Add-2-EN.pdf> [accessed 20 April 2023].
[85] Julio Escoto, 'El Golpe del Oro Negro', *Centro de Documentación de Honduras*, 14 August 2009, <https://www.cedoh.org/Documentacion/Articulos%20Golpe%20de%20Estado/files/Oronegro.pdf> [accessed 20 April 2023]; La Prensa, 'Inauguran base contra los narcos en La Mosquitia'.

projects such as oil exploration under Article 32 of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, but were denied input.[86] The Patuca Dam project further exemplifies private 'development' on Muskitian waterways. While the dam was not within the region, its position at the head of the Patuca river had devastating effects downstream. The UN's Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples reported in 2016 that, since the approval of the Patuca Dam in 2011, the creation of its reservoir had displaced settlers into indigenous lands and damaged ancestral forests, all without consultation.[87]

These two examples demonstrate consistent lack of consultation when developing private projects on ancestral indigenous lands, reflecting the core power dynamic behind coup government policy towards the Muskitia: local communities were side-lined in favour of profit and control. Seeking an expansion of private interests into the region, the Honduran state created the conditions to override indigenous land titling through legal reforms and extensive military presence to back up private interests. These practices combined to lead to the massacre, as indigenous communities were further marginalised and underwent militarisation justified by private expansion.

[86] United Nations General Assembly, *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, A/RES/61/295 02 October 2007 <https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP_E_web.pdf> [accessed 25 April 2023]; María Celeste Maradiaga, 'Concesión petrolera en La Mosquitia avanza sin transperencia ni consulta'; UN General Assembly, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples*, p.12.

[87] UN General Assembly, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples*, pp.11-12; Cultural Survival, 'Honduras: Don't Dam the Patuca River!', *Cultural Survival*, 02 May 2011, <https://www.culturalsurvival.org/take-action/honduras-dont-dam-patuca-river/honduras-dont-dam-patuca-river> [accessed 25 April 2023].

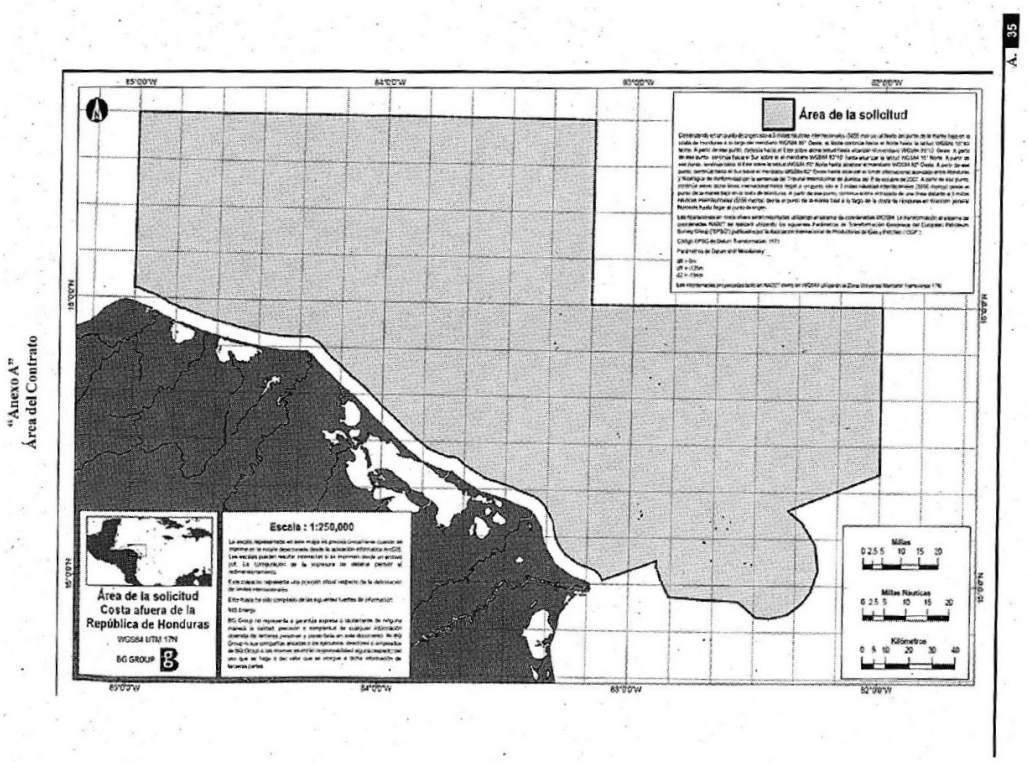

Figure 1.3 BG Group territorial concession, 2013.[88]

The militarised expansion of private interests mirrored the effects of Plan Colombia in the 1990s and early 2000s; military forces supported by the US for antinarcotics operations were deployed to protect oil pipelines in Colombia alongside private security, spiking human rights abuses.[89] In Honduras too, private security was responsible for a plethora of abuses. For example, land disputes between agribusinesses and farming cooperatives in the Aguán Valley in the neighbouring Colón department dated back to land reforms of the 1990s, but violence spiked following the coup. Armed forces were deployed several times to the Aguán Valley to quell violence and death squads responsible for the killings of hundreds of land defenders were

[88] María Celeste Maradiaga, 'Concesión petrolera en La Mosquitia'.
[89] Doug Stokes, *America's Other War: Terrorising Colombia*, (London, UK: Zed Books, 2005), p. 107; Mary Carson et al., 'Gilberto Torres survived Colombia's death squads. Now he wants justice', *The Guardian*, 22 May 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/22/gilberto-torres-survived-colombias-death-squads-now-he-wants-justice> [accessed 25 April 2023]; Dawn Paley, *Drug War Capitalism*, p.76 (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2014).

closely linked to private corporations' security forces.[90] The same forces certainly exist in the Muskitia, although they are less well documented due to the region's isolation, the lower comparative intensity of violence, and the dangers of speaking out. Growing corporate interests fuelled the militarisation of the Muskitia and brought aggressive armed presences that served to secure new private investments, protecting them from *transportistas*' operations and the indigenous peoples upon whose territories they were built.

Figure 1.4 Cartoon from La Honda Depicting Security Forces in the Bajo Aguán, Colón.[91]

[90] United Nations Human Rights: Office of the High Commissioner, 'Preliminary Observations on the official visit to Honduras by the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, 23 to 27 May 2016'; James Bargent, 'Private Security Companies a Cover for Criminals in Honduras', *InSight Crime*, 25 March 2013, <https://insightcrime.org/news/brief/honduras-private-security-organized-crime/> [accessed 21 April 2023].

[91] La Honda, 'Operación militar "Xatruch II" ataca al Aguán', *La Honda*, 23 September 2011, <https://honduraslaboral.org/la-honda-85-operacion-militar-xatruch-ii-ataca-a> [accessed 24 April 2023].

The Narco-dictatura: Corruption and State Links to Drug Trafficking

Lobo's government claimed to be a staunch ally of the US in its war against the drug trade, but lucrative narco-business seeped its way into every aspect of government.[92] Low-level corruption was not uncommon, but the coup marked the beginning of over a decade of *narcodictatura*. In recent years, a swathe of high-ranking officials from the Honduran government have been extradited to the US on drug trafficking charges, including: Juan Orlando Hernández, 2014-2022 president; his brother Antonio; Juan Carlos 'El Tigre' Bonilla, appointed Chief of Police in 2012; and Fabio Porfirio Lobo, President Lobo's own son.[93] While traffickers had initially been attracted to Honduras and the Muskitia after the coup because of state weakness, local and national government proved itself more than willing to engage in their trade. The Muskitia became an international hotbed for the narcotics trade. Simultaneously, the region was progressively militarised under the guise of tackling the very issue in which state actors were deeply involved. It is therefore evident that the Muskitia was deemed an acceptable sacrifice to the lucrative drug trade, resulting in the violent conditions of the Ahuas Massacre.

[92] Samuel Greene and Landon Hankins, 'Will the real security partner please stand up?' p. 258.
[93] U.S. Attorney's Office Southern District of New York, 'Former Chief Of Honduran National Police Extradited To The United States On Drug Trafficking And Weapons Offenses', *Department of Justice*, 11 May 2022, <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/pr/former-chief-honduran-national-police-extradited-united-states-drug-trafficking-and> [accessed 21 April 2023]; Office of Public Affairs, 'Juan Orlando Hernández, Former President of Honduras, Indicted on Drug-Trafficking and Firearms Charges, Extradited to the United States from Honduras', *Department of Justice*, 21 April 2022, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/juan-orlando-hernández-former-president-honduras-indicted-drug-trafficking> [accessed 21 April 2023]; U.S. Attorney's Office Southern District of New York, 'Son Of The Former President Of Honduras Sentenced To 24 Years In Prison For Conspiring To Import Cocaine Into The United States', *Department of Justice*, <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/pr/son-former-president-honduras-sentenced-24-years-prison-conspiring-import-cocaine> [accessed 21 April 2023]; U.S. Attorney's Office Southern District of New York, 'Former Honduran Congressman Tony Hernández Sentenced To Life In Prison And Ordered To Forfeit $138.5 Million For Distributing 185 Tons Of Cocaine And Related Firearms And False Statements Offenses', *Department of Justice*, 30 March 2021, <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/pr/former-honduran-congressman-tony-hern-ndez-sentenced-life-prison-and-ordered-forfeit> [accessed 24 April 2023].

The recent trials of key Honduran government officials have revealed a wealth of evidence, detailing the depth of connections to trafficking throughout the highest echelons of government. The trial of ex-president Hernández is delayed until November 2023 and most information on his involvement will remain undisclosed until then. Nonetheless, previous trials demonstrate the depth of the connection between the Honduran government and the drugs trade. Testimony given at the trial of Fabio Lobo in March 2017 documents extensive connections between the presidency, members of Honduran congress, and traffickers in the *Cachiros* cartel. This group operated mainly out of the Colón department rather than in the Muskitia, but the evidence is damning just the same. Devis Leonel Rivera Maradiaga – co-leader of the *Cachiros* – testified at the trial that he had first bribed President Lobo with a sum of $250-300,000 in 2009 before he was elected President, marking the beginning of a long relationship.[94] Upon election to the presidency, Lobo met the *Cachiros* again:

> "Myself, Juan Gomez [a businessman and former governor of Colón], Oscar Najera [Congressman representing Colón], we went to the president's residence […]. When we got to his house, we went inside where the president was in. We started shaking his hands. We gave each other a hug. He was happy because had won the elections."[95]

At the new president's house, Rivera was promised government contracts for money-laundering fronts in return for bribes from the election campaign, and "The president said to me [Rivera] to tell my brother [co-leader of the *Cachiros*] not to worry because during his four-year term nobody would get extradited."[96] Evidence such as this demonstrates that President Lobo was at the heart of what the prosecuting attorney described as "nothing short than state-

[94] *United States of America V. Fabio Porfirio Lobo* (2017) 15 CR 0174 Document 169, p. 16, <https://ecf.nysd.uscourts.gov/doc1/127120116417> [accessed 08 April 2023].
[95] Ibid p.28.
[96] Ibid p.29.

sponsored drug trafficking."[97] Drug traffickers such as the *Cachiros* were protected by the government and integrated into the above-ground economy in return for a cut of the profits.

The trial of Antonio Hernández – the brother of former President Juan Orlando Hernández – highlighted the same issues. Involved in drug trafficking since before the coup, his operations were expanded from 2009 thanks to his connections to the ruling government. Hernández' drug money was used to support Lobo's presidential campaign and to bribe members of congress to support his brother's bid for president of congress, a key step on the way to his presidency.[98] National Party politicians systematically enriched themselves from drug trafficking and extended protection to favoured organisations, inviting them to operate in the country's isolated regions. The extent of corruption led *Insight Crime* to describe the National Party as a criminal "federation".[99] The coup and its changes to the political structure of Honduras attracted unprecedented levels of trafficking to the country, concentrating in the Muskitia.

At a local level, governments, police, and courts in the Muskitia cooperated with drug traffickers under coercion and bribes to turn a blind eye to drug shipments and facilitate the sale of parcels of indigenous and environmentally protected land.[100] This low-level corruption helped embed *transportistas* into the local economy and ensured their lasting presence in the region. Some state actors acted under coercion: judges, local police, and politicians were

[97] *United States of America V. Fabio Porfirio Lobo* (2017) 15 CR 0174 Document 252, p. 8 <https://ecf.nysd.uscourts.gov/doc1/127120959351> [accessed 08 April 2023].
[98] U.S. Attorney's Office, Southern District of New York, 'Former Honduran Congressman Tony Hernández Sentenced to Life in Prison'.
[99] Héctor Silva Ávalos and Victoria Dittmar, 'One Party, Many Crimes: The Case of Honduras' National Party', *InSight Crime*, 16 February 2021, <https://insightcrime.org/investigations/one-party-many-crimes-honduras-national-party/> [accessed 26 April 2023].
[100] Sarah Chayes, 'A hidden cost of corruption: environmental devastation', *Washington Post*, 16 June 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/a-hidden-cost-of-corruption-environmental-devastation/2017/06/16/03f93c1e-52b8-11e7-b064-828ba60fbb98_story.html> [accessed 21 April 2023]; Redacción La Prensa, 'Cae narcoavioneta en el sector La Mosquitia'.

significantly less well protected and armed than *transportistas*.[101] Indeed, the 2010-2014 deputy for Gracias a Dios, Maylo Wood Granwell, was assassinated in 2019 in a hit presumably connected to narcotrafficking.[102] His murder highlights the depth of local narco-politics as well as its dangers. Others yet were drawn into the business by the vast sums of money it offered: *El Heraldo* reported that traffickers promised officials up to $100,000 per plane passing under the radar and more for letting contraband leave.[103] Testimony from the Fabio Lobo trial details how members of the National Police were paid up to $300,000 to assassinate anti-drug General Julian Arístides Gonzalez in 2009, highlighting security forces' systemic involvement in trafficking, acting as private armies for powerful cartels.[104] A 2014 raid in the Muskitia turned up military uniforms among firearms seized from traffickers, reflecting shared membership between state and criminal forces.[105] Drug trafficking organisations were heavily armed and supported by security forces, acting as an occupying force in the Muskitia: anti-drug operations regularly turned up significant caches of weapons and ammunition.[106] As well as defending shipments from security forces and other criminal groups, weaponry was used to intimidate, coerce, and murder local residents with impunity. Thus, the admittance of traffickers through endemic local corruption drew a large contingent of armed groups into a region which had historically been isolated from organised crime. Links between corrupt officials from the

[101] Kendra McSweeney, 'Grounding Traffic', p.127.
[102] Héctor Silva Avalos et al., 'Capítulo 3: Narcodiputados', *Reporteros de Investigación*, 18 November 2021, <https://ecf.flsd.uscourts.gov/doc1/051118337896> [accessed 26 April 2023].
[103] Redacción El Heraldo, 'Honduras: El narco infiltró a los militares en La Mosquitia', *El Heraldo*, 24 October 2016, <https://www.elheraldo.hn/honduras/honduras-el-narco-infiltro-a-los-militares-en-la-mosquitia-JUEH1011459#image-1> [accessed 23 April 2023].
[104] *USA v. Fabio Lobo* Document 169 p. 19.
[105] Redacción El Heraldo, 'Golpe al crimen organizado tras operación en La Mosquitia', *EL Heraldo*, 27 January 2014, <https://www.elheraldo.hn/sucesos/golpe-al-crimen-organizado-tras-operacion-en-la-mosquitia-AJEH624334> [accessed 26 April 2023].
[106] Redacción La Prensa, 'Más pistas clandestinas hallan en La Mosquitia, *La Prensa*, 07 October 2010, <https://www.laprensa.hn/honduras/mas-pistas-clandestinas-hallan-en-la-mosquitia-MGLP478127> [accessed 21 April 2023]; Redacción La Prensa, 'Destruyen otras dos pistas en La Mosquitia', *La Prensa*, 13 October 2010, <https://www.laprensa.hn/sucesos/destruyen-otras-dos-pistas-en-la-mosquitia-IGLP478606> [accessed 21 April 2023]; Redacción La Prensa, 'La Mosquitia: avioneta llevaba 550 kilos de coca', *La Prensa*, 04 noviembre 2010, <https://www.laprensa.hn/honduras/la-mosquitia-avioneta-llevaba-550-kilos-de-coca-OQLP480428#image-1> [accessed 21 April 2023]; Redacción El Heraldo, 'Golpe al crimen organizado'.

bottom to the very top of government ensured impunity for traffickers and condemned residents of the Muskitia to violent occupation.

Conclusion

This chapter has detailed the multiple ways Honduras was 'Open for Business' in the years of the Lobo presidency after the 2009 coup d'état. With President Lobo at its head, the Honduran state encouraged overlapping private and criminal elements into the Muskitia alongside a dramatic militarisation of internal security. The country's outward facing role as a key ally of the US in the War on Drugs, combined with active encouragement and support for trafficking through the national territory, exported killings and rights abuses by private, criminal, and state actors into the Muskitia alongside impunity for its perpetrators. The armed conflict created by this toxic mix spilled over into the region's civilian population in Ahuas in 2012.

Chapter Two: The Role of Regional Narco-Trafficking

Introduction

The *transportistas* and drug cartels discussed in the previous chapter were not merely drawn in and pushed away by more traditional state actors, but independent actors in their own rights. Criminal organisations are responsible for their effects on communities, and this is the focus of Chapter Two. As traffickers linked to large, violent organisations moved into the Muskitia, they inevitably drew military intervention. The shift pushed the region to the centre of a complex and violent Circum-Caribbean network. Equally, traffickers' methods for securing landholdings in the region undermined traditional livelihoods by buying up parcels of indigenous land, destroying the region's internationally renowned environment, which created further precarity for an already isolated and impoverished population. This chapter concludes by examining how the entry of narco-traffickers into the region in force presented unprecedented economic opportunities with little apparent risk for indigenous groups. This in turn blurred of lines between civilian and *transportista* and made locals more vulnerable to extrajudicial violence – ultimately, a key reason for the Ahuas Massacre.

Drug Trafficking Routes and Entry into the Muskitia

Following crackdowns on the Caribbean drugs trade in the 1980s and early 1990s trafficking routes were forced through the Central American isthmus to reach North America.[107] Yet, flights could not safely travel between major cocaine-producing countries – like Colombia and Venezuela – and Mexico from where they could be transported to the US. Threat of interception

[107] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 'Caribbean Drug Trends 2001-2002', *United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime*, p.4, <https://www.unodc.org/pdf/barbados/caribbean_drug-trends_2001-2002.pdf> [accessed 21 April 2023].

by local militaries or US forces made the long flight in the cheap, old planes traffickers used all but impossible. A stop-off point was required, and the Muskitia satisfied the conditions. Isolated from urban centres, military, and policing installations and without adequate infrastructure to facilitate interception on the ground or disturb landings, the region was ideal for the trans-American narcotics trade.

Mexico's Calderón government launched a crackdown on cartels beginning in 2006, later supported by the US-sponsored Plan Mérida.[108] The result was a massive escalation of violence in Mexico as dominant criminal organisations fractured into competing groups, and in the case of Honduras, a migration of trafficking groups to easier routes.[109] Highly militarised Colombian airspace also pushed traffickers to fly westwards from the Venezuelan coast towards Honduras.[110] The explosion of narco-trafficking through Honduras was primarily pushed by what has been described as the balloon or *cucaracha* (cockroach) effect: crackdowns on trafficking organisations do not reduce violence in the long term, but simply push activity to safer and easier trafficking routes.[111] Historically, most cocaine travelling to the US travelled through the Caribbean islands and countries like the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and the Bahamas before entering through Florida.[112] Only after crackdowns in those transitory states did cocaine begin to travel through the Central American isthmus.[113]

[108] Dawn Paley, *Drug War Capitalism*, p.3.
[109] Ibid p. 114; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Transnational Organized Crime in Central America and the Caribbean*, (Vienna, Austria: UNODC, 2012), pp.18-19 <https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Studies/TOC_Central_America_and_the_Caribbean_english.pdf> [accessed 26 April 2023].
[110] Emilia Zilosi, 'Enablers of Cocaine Trafficking: Evidence of the State-Crime Nexus from Contemporary Honduras', *Illicit Economies and Development*, 4.2 (2022), 144-159 (p. 149) <https://doi.org/10.31389/jied.96>; U.S. Embassy Bogotá, 'Interdiction', *U.S. Embassy in Colombia*, 16 February 2018, <https://co.usembassy.gov/interdiction/> [accessed 22 April 2023].
[111] Ibid p.71.
[112] Ibid p. 31.
[113] Douglas Farah, 'Caribbean is Key to U.S. Drug Trade', *Washington Post*, 23 September 1996, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/inatl/longterm/drugs/oct/caribb.htm> [accessed 22 April 2023].

Figure 2.1 Historic Cocaine Trafficking Routes in the Circum-Caribbean.[114]

Figure 2.2 Transport of Cocaine in Central America, 2012.[115]

[114] PBS, 'Map: Colombia, Cocaine and Cash: East Coast Routes', *PBS*, 10 June 2008, <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/wideangle/uncategorized/map-colombia-cocaine-and-cash-east-coast-routes/538/> [accessed 26 April 2023].
[115] Office of National Drug Control Policy, 'Cocaine Smuggling in 2012', *Office of National Drug Control Policy*, p.4

The above 2012 illustration highlights the scale of trafficking coming into Honduras and the Muskitia. Apart from Panama, affected by its proximity to the 'source zone', Honduras attracted the largest weight of cocaine travelling directly from South America. Of the 69 tons of cocaine arriving on Honduras' shores that year the bulk arrived through the Muskitia.[116] The map below illustrates the extent and complexity of cocaine trafficking through the region. Traffickers swamped the Muskitia with armed groups that profoundly endangered indigenous communities, occupying their skies, lands, and – as discussed in Chapter One – critically important waterways.

Figure 2.3 Trafficking Routes in the Muskitia.[117]

<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/cocaine_smuggling_in_2012_unclassified_approved_web.pdf> [accessed 09 April 2023].

[116] Ibid.

[117] Helen Montoya, 'Cocaine and Narco-Politics in the Mosquitia Region of Honduras', *InSight Crime*, <https://insightcrime.org/news/cocaine-narco-politics-honduras-mosquitia/> [accessed 10 April 2023].

As in Mexico, Colombia, and other parts of Central America, the sudden arrival of drug trafficking organisations into the Muskitia brought violence. Between 2009 and 2012, the recorded homicide rate in the Gracias a Dios department jumped from 4.7 per 100,000 inhabitants to 17.1.[118] While this pales in comparison with the most violent departments, such as Cortés and Atlántida, with rates of approximately 129 murders per 100,000 inhabitants, no other department saw a comparable growth in violence to scale.[119] The murder rate in Gracias a Dios grew by 3.6 times in three years, while the second largest departmental growth was under 2.4 times.[120] This near quadrupling of murder was matched with death threats, non-lethal violence, and coercion in the region disproportionately affecting indigenous communities.[121] These statistics reflect the scale and intensity of narco-incursion into the Muskitia and the importance for the cartels of securing land, even by force.

Violence, Marginalisation and Deforestation in the Muskitia

In the media, the violence of *transportistas*' incursion into the Muskitia was presented as beatings, torture and murder against the region's inhabitants.[122] While these all certainly took place, the emergence and escalation of traffickers' presence in the Muskitia also took the form

[118] Observatorio Nacional de la Violencia, 'Boletín Especial Enero a Deciembre 2009 – Ed. No. 17', *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Honduras*, p. 4 <https://iudpas.unah.edu.hn/dmsdocument/2229-boletin-nacional-enero-a-diciembre-2009-ed-no-17> [accessed 13 April 2023]; Observatorio Nacional de la Violencia, 'Boletín Especial Enero a Deciembre 2012 – Ed. No. 28', *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Honduras*, p. 4 <https://iudpas.unah.edu.hn/dmsdocument/2222-boletin-nacional-enero-a-diciembre-2012-ed-no-28> [accessed 13 April 2023].
[119] Ibid.
[120] Ibid.
[121] World Heritage, 'Mission Report: Rio Plátano Biospehere [sic.] Reserve (Honduras) (N 196)', *United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization*, 29 June 2011, p.6 <https://whc.unesco.org/document/106647> [accessed 21 April 2023].
[122] Gustavo Palencia, 'Al menos ocho Muertos en enfrentamiento entre narcos en Honduras', *Reuters*, 06 August 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/latinoamerica-delito-honduras-idLTASIE97500G20130806> [accessed 30 April 2023]; Redacción El Heraldo, 'Baño de sangre dejó fallido trasiego de droga en La Mosquitia hondureña', *El Heraldo*, 07 April 2014, <https://www.elheraldo.hn/honduras/bano-de-sangre-dejo-fallido-trasiego-de-droga-en-la-mosquitia-hondurena-GOEH565003#image-1> [accessed 30 April 2023].

of structural violence: environmental destruction, territorial displacement, and the creation of an atmosphere of fear. Scholars such as Ezenwa Olumba et al., in their studies on resource conflict in the Sahel, have detailed "eco-violence" as structural violence against both environment and people. Their work, highlights the self-fulfilling loop of environmental degradation and conflict that led to marginalisation and further vulnerability.[123] The violence of displacement also separated groups and individuals from their social and physical support structures as detailed by Justin Schon.[124] In Mexico, Acharya and Clark discussed how forced displacement linked to narco-violence in Mexico increased the vulnerability of families to further violence in the form of sex trafficking.[125] Similarly, in the Muskitia as detailed below, the structures of violence created by drug traffickers in the Muskitia detailed below victimised the region's indigenous communities and brought their members closer to the frontlines of armed conflict in Ahuas.

Critical to traffickers' operations, the growing jeopardization of the Muskitia's indigenous population, and the context that led to the Ahuas Massacre was the destruction of the local environment. Primarily, *transportistas* used two modes of transport to get into the Muskitia. Most frequently, 'go-fast' boats would deliver contraband along the coast from Nicaragua and Costa Rica, travelling short distances to avoid detection.[126] Secondly, small light planes dubbed *narco-avionetas* were used to deliver drugs into Honduras. Cheap and low flying, these planes

[123] Ezenwa Olumba et al., 'Conceptualizing eco-violence: moving beyond the multiple labelling of water and agricultural resource conflicts in the Sahel', *Third World Quarterly*, 43.9 (2022), 2075-2090 (p.2081), <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2022.2083601>.
[124] Justin Schon, 'Focus on the Forest, Not the Trees: A Changepoint Model of Forced Displacement', *Refugee Studies*, 28.4 (2015), 437-467 (p.438) <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/feu037>.
[125] Arun Acharya and Jennifer Clark, 'Narco-violence, forced displacement and sex trafficking: a qualitative study in Mexico', *Global Crime*, 22.3 (2021), 205-221 (p.205), <https://doi.org/10.1080/17440572.2021.1915142>.
[126]Joint Task Force-Bravo Public Affairs, 'Joint Task Force-Bravo supports drug interdiction in Honduras', *Joint Task-Force Bravo*, 30 July 2010, <https://www.jtfb.southcom.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/434822/joint-task-force-bravo-supports-drug-interdiction-in-honduras/> [accessed 22 April 2023]; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 'Transnational Organised Crime in Central America and the Caribbean'.

were effectively disposable and would frequently be burned after landing to destroy evidence.[127] Yet, the Muskitia was heavily forested, unsuitable for landing aircraft. While traffickers used civilian airstrips to smuggle contraband in and out of the country, taking advantage of corrupt local officials, they were insufficiently secluded and too few, thus unable to keep up with the scale of trafficking.[128] There was a need for more landing strips, thus *transportistas* began to cut down swathes of forest. Clearing land in isolated areas in the already remote Muskitia meant these airstrips were difficult to find and could be used almost perpetually with little chance of interception. State corruption compounded with lack of resources for finding illegal landing strips, so they sprang up rapidly and could be replaced easily (See map below).[129]

[127] Redacción La Prensa, 'Incinerada encuentran narcoavioneta', *La Prensa*, 19 May 2009, <https://www.laprensa.hn/sucesos/honduras-incinerada-encuentran-narcoavioneta-ECLP529490> [accessed 22 April 2023]; Redacción La Prensa, 'Continúa 'lluvia" de narcoavionetas', *La Prensa*, 06 June 2009, <https://www.laprensa.hn/sucesos/continua-lluvia-de-narcoavionetas-LBLP530812> [accessed 22 April 2023]; Redacción La Prensa, 'Ocupantes de narcoavioneta también dejaron vehículos', *La Prensa*, 08 June 2009, <https://www.laprensa.hn/sucesos/ocupantes-de-narcoavioneta-tambien-dejaron-vehiculos-NBLP530973#image-1> [accessed 22 April 2023]; Redacción La Prensa, 'Incinerada hallan una avioneta en Olancho', *La Prensa*, 02 August 2010, <https://www.laprensa.hn/sucesos/incinerada-hallan-una-avioneta-en-olancho-AQLP487447> [accessed 22 April 2023].

[128] Mark Stevenson, 'Honduras becomes western hemisphere cocaine hub', *San Diego Union Tribune*, 30 October 2011, <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/sdut-honduras-becomes-western-hemisphere-cocaine-hub-2011oct30-story.html> [accessed 22 April 2023]; Marguerite Cawley, 'Honduas Arrests Point to Drug Traffickers' Use of Commercial Airports', *InSight Crime*, 09 July 2014, <https://insightcrime.org/news/brief/honduras-arrests-drug-traffickers-commercial-airports/> [accessed 22 April 2023].

[129] Redacción La Prensa, 'Cae narcoavioneta en el sector La Mosquitia'; Redacción El Heraldo, 'El narcotráfico cambia sur uta para introducer drogas a Honduras', *El Heraldo*, 07 April 2014, <https://www.elheraldo.hn/honduras/el-narcotrafico-cambia-su-ruta-para-introducir-drogas-a-honduras-POEH566018#image-1> [accessed 22 April 2023].

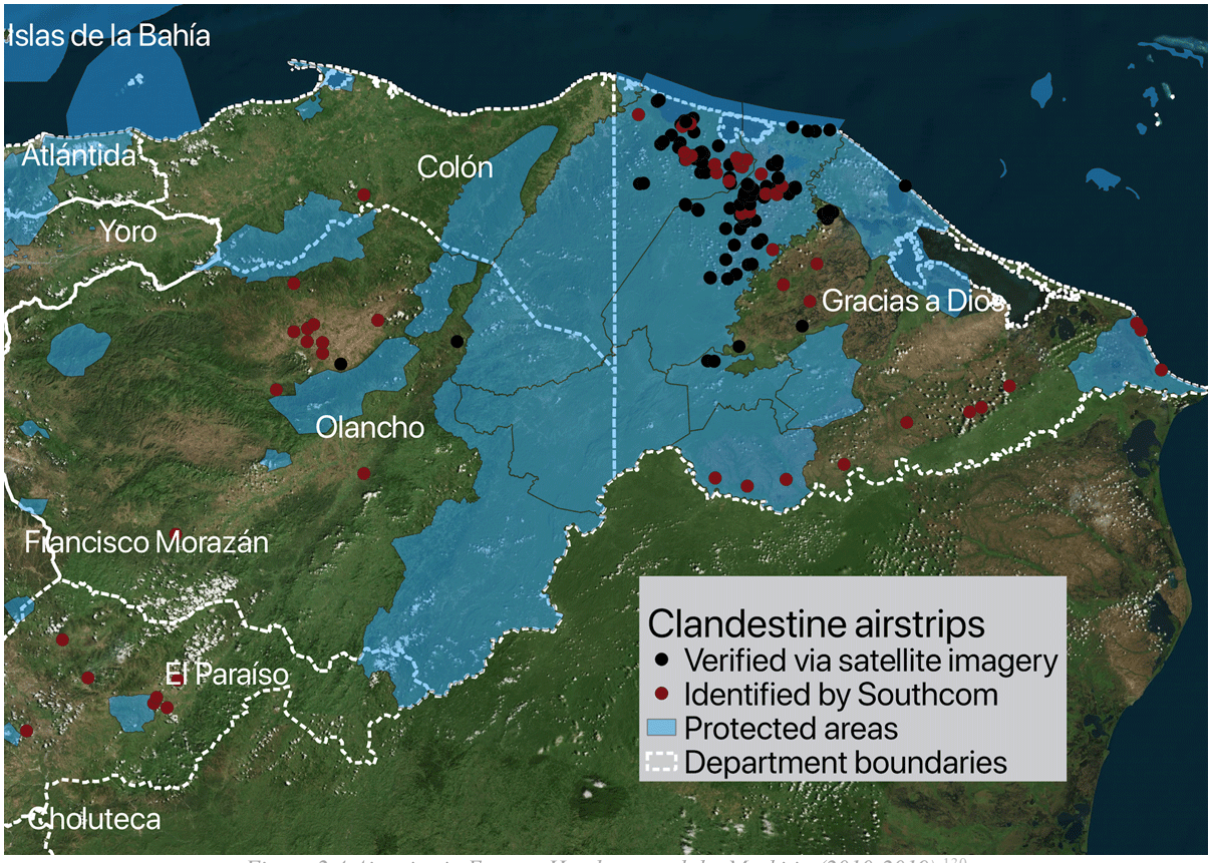

Figure 2.4 Airstrips in Eastern Honduras and the Muskitia (2010-2019).[130]

This method of trafficking was particularly effective in the post-coup period. The isolation and lack of infrastructure of the Muskitia combined with the corruption of state security forces, making it all but impossible for anti-narcotics units to catch traffickers before they had fled the landing site, destroying any traces. Between 2009-2012, Approximately 390 drug flights were recorded entering the Muskitia, although the real figure was likely much higher.[131] Each of these flights carried as much as ten million dollars' worth of cocaine, so the scale of profits from trafficking only a short distance was such that *transportistas* could afford the cost of a small plane for almost every journey undertaken.[132] Cleared land for landing strips was thus an

[130] Tellman, Beth, et al., 'Narcotrafficking and Land Control in Guatemala and Honduras', *Journal of Illicit Economies and Development*, 3.1 (2021), 132-159 (p.148) <https://doi.org/10.31389/jied.83>.
[131] Ibid; Redacción La Prensa, 'Narcotráfico daña la Biosfera del Río Plátano', *La Prensa*, <https://www.laprensa.hn/honduras/narcotrafico-dana-la-biosfera-del-rio-platano-CELP549748#image-1> [accessed 30 April 2023].
[132] Redacción La Prensa, 'Incautan 460 kilos de cocaína en La Mosquitia', *La Prensa*, <https://www.laprensa.hn/sucesos/incautan-460-kilos-de-cocaina-en-la-mosquitia-BGLP478191#image-1> [accessed 30 April 2023].

invaluable commodity for *transportistas*, driving deforestation in search of greater profits. Not only was the cost of transport relatively low, but the access to land relatively easy as corrupt local officials facilitated land sales or turned a blind eye to theft and occupation. State forces' tactics of destroying landing strips upon discovery also exacerbated the issue of territoriality.[133] Destroyed plots of rainforest could not be restored to their original use for indigenous communities, and the state's inability and unwillingness to capture and prosecute traffickers meant that they would simply move on and deforest another plot. Through these methods, as well as private actors buying up land, the Muskitia was losing on average up to 2,500 hectares of forest a year in the late 2000s and early 2010s.[134] Fundamentally, the combination of traffickers' and state forces' tactics resulted in a progressively accelerating deforestation of the Muskitia and a complete undercutting of indigenous communities' traditional livelihoods, driving precarity and greater vulnerability to violent forces in their territories.

An even greater driver of deforestation and marginalisation created by trafficking in the Muskitia was the development of "narco-cattle ranching". Primarily used for money-laundering, turning cocaine money into 'legitimate' forms of income from cattle production, this phenomenon exploded alongside trafficking.[135] The ranches it created destroyed huge swathes of forest in their creation – research by the Wildlife Conservation Society credits them with 90% of the deforestation in the region.[136] The impact of narco-ranching was threefold.

[133] Jelsson Flores, 'Dos hombres fuertemente armados fueron detenidos en La Mosquitia', *La Prensa*, <https://www.laprensa.hn/sucesos/dos-hombres-fuertemente-armados-fueron-detenidos-en-la-mosquitia-PWLP392278> [accessed 30 April 2023].
[134] Kendra McSweeney, 'Grounding Traffic', p.123; SIGMOF, 'Dinámica de la Cobertura y Uso del Suelo', *Instituto Nacional de Conservación Forestal*, <https://sigmof.icf.gob.hn/dinamica-de-la-cobertura-y-uso-del-suelo/> [accessed 23 April 2023].
[135] Helen Montoya, 'Narco-Cattle Ranching in La Mosquitia, Honduras', *InSight Crime*, 18 May 2022, <https://insightcrime.org/investigations/narco-cattle-ranching-honduras/> [accessed 26 April 2023].
[136] Wildlife Conservation Society, 'Breaking: Honduran Government Announces Unprecedented Commitment to Protect Ancient City and Surrounding Rainforest', *WCS Newsroom*, 09 November 2018, <https://newsroom.wcs.org/News-Releases/articleType/ArticleView/articleId/11704/Breaking-Honduran-Government-Announces-Unprecedented-Commitment-to-Protect-Ancient-City-and-Surrounding-Rainforest.aspx> [accessed 23 April 2023].

Firstly, it used considerably more land than individual airstrips which typically were only a few hundred metres long. Secondly, as the plots of land were privately owned by the traffickers, the development of the narco-ranch represented a spearhead of enclosure into the Muskitia's commons which threatened communal ways of life.[137] Finally, ranch-hands and traffickers migrated onto indigenous lands, creating a new wave of settler colonisation in the Muskitia.[138] These three factors dramatically accelerated the marginalisation of indigenous ways of life, combining into the "*frente de colonización agrícola-ganadera*" [rancher-agricultural colonisation front] described by Miskitu organisation MASTA.[139] Privatisation of land attracted greater interest in the region's economic potential, driving up the value of land and encouraging further expansion. Government corruption and legal protections of private property laid out in the LPPI (see Chapter One) made reclaiming communal lands exceptionally difficult for indigenous communities. Thus, narco-colonisation upended local economies and brought permanent criminal armed groups alongside state and private security forces. Traditional methods of sustenance farming and gathering practiced by the region's indigenous populations became all but impossible as the forests shrank.

[137] Kendra McSweeney, 'Grounding Traffic', p. 123; MASTA (Mosquitia Asla Takanka-Unidad de la Mosquitia), 'Protocolo Bio-cultural del Pueblo Indígena Miskitu', *MASTA*, p.24, <https://prmapping.ku.edu/Protocolo_Miskitu.pdf> [accessed 23 April 2023].
[138] Redacción La Prensa, 'Biosfera del Río Plátano en la mira por narcotráfico'; José Manuel Serén, 'Narcotráfico esta construyendo carretera en La Mosquitia y significará el golpe de gracia, denuncia pueblo indígena', *Reporteros de Investigación*, 24 June 2021, <https://reporterosdeinvestigacion.com/2021/06/24/narcotrafico-esta-construyendo-carretera-en-la-mosquitia-y-significara-el-golpe-de-gracia-denuncia-pueblo-indigena/> [accessed 23 April 2023]; Redacción El Heraldo, 'Narcos quieren 'colonizar" nuevas rotas para droga en Honduras', *El Heraldo*, 28 September 2014, <https://www.elheraldo.hn/honduras/narcos-quieren-colonizar-nuevas-rutas-para-droga-en-honduras-NPEH752528#image-1> [accessed 23 April 2023]; MASTA, 'Protocolo Bio-cultural del Pueblo Indígena Miskitu', p.24.
[139] MASTA, 'Protocolo Bio-cultural del Pueblo Indígena Miskitu', p.24.

Satellite imagery of forest loss within the protected Río Plátano reserve (see below) shows how drug trafficking in the Muskitia led to accelerating deforestation, destroying traditional ways of life and economic activities for indigenous communities. Narco-cattle deforestation in the Muskitia embodies the "settler-colonial logic of elimination" – systematic destruction of indigenous ways of life and eliminates local populations and *mestizaj*-ise survivors into colonial economic and social structures.[140] The key result of this was the integration of indigenous communities into the narco-economy and supposed criminality, blurring the perceived line between trafficker and civilian, which led to the Ahuas Massacre as security forces failed to make the distinction.

2009

2010

2011

2012

[140] Danilo Urzedo and Pratichi Chatterjee, 'The Colonial Reproduction of Deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon: Violence Against Indigenous Peoples for Land Development', *Journal of Genocide Research*, 23.2 (2021), 302-324 (p.303), <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2021.1905758>; Patrick Wolfe, 'Settler colonialism and the elimination of the native', *Journal of Genocide Research*, 8.4 (2006), 387-409 (p.388), <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623520601056240>; on *Mestizaje* and colonial construction, see: Lourdes Martinez-Echazabal, 'Mestizaje and the Discourse of National/Cultural Identity in Latin America, 1845-1959', *Latin American Perspectives*, 25.3 (1998), 21-42, (p. 24), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0094582X9802500302>.

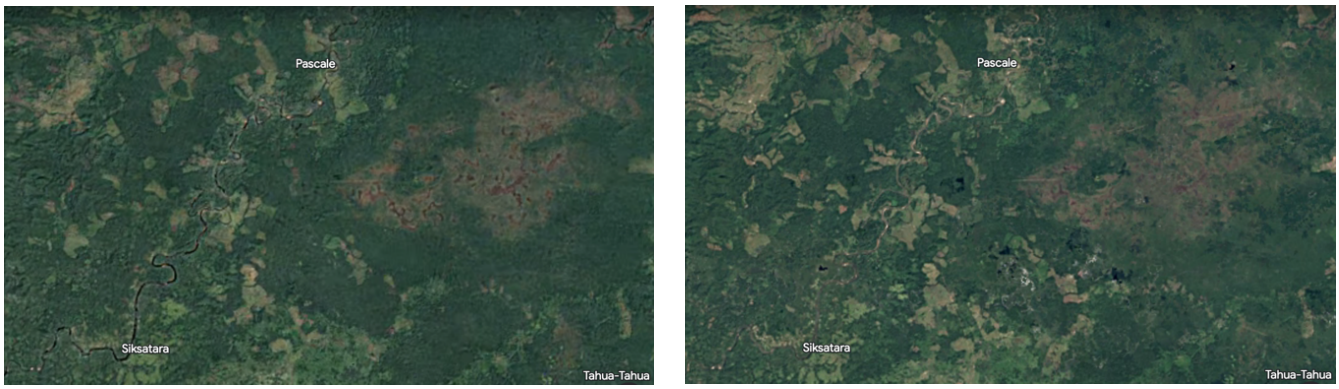

Figure 2.5 Satellite Imagery 2009-2014 of Deforestation in the Muskitia.[141]

Local Involvement: Risk and Reward

As noted earlier, the Muskitia has been isolated from the rest of Honduras and economic opportunities for its population were few and far between. Historically, most indigenous communities had historically continued to practice subsistence agriculture, hunting and gathering as well as fishing for lobster.[142] The traditional practice of free diving for lobster was one of the primary economic practices of indigenous residents of the Miskitu coast.[143] However, it was not an attractive option. Diving without proper equipment and descending and resurfacing rapidly, lobster fishers faced extreme risk of drowning, air embolism, excessive lung inflammation, decompression sickness, hypothermia, barotrauma, and carbon monoxide poisoning.[144] Lack of medical infrastructure like hyperbaric chambers (used to treat decompression sickness) meant that most divers never received adequate treatment. Consequently, thousands suffered and continue to suffer from permanent disabilities including paralysis, and many more have died.[145] Despite its dangers, diving was one of the only reliable

[141] Google Earth (2009-2014), *Reserva de la biosfera de Río Plátano, 15°42'00" N 84°46'00" W, Elevation 35m*. [Online] <https://earth.google.com/web/> [accessed 12 April 2023].
[142] MASTA, 'Protocolo Bio-cultural del Pueblo Indígena Miskitu', p.60.
[143] Ibid, p.20.
[144] Inter-American Court of Human Rights, 'Case of the Miskito Divers (Lemoth Morris et al.) V. Honduras', *Inter-American Court of Human Rights*, p. 11 <https://www.corteidh.or.cr/docs/casos/articulos/seriec_432_ing.pdf> [accessed 23 April 2023].
[145] Ibid p.11.

sources of income before the expansion of narco-trafficking and around 9,000 principally Miskitu divers took part in the lobster fishing season every year.[146] The Honduran state has been criticised and taken to court for failing to introduce adequate protections for divers, instead making successive attempts to ban lobster diving. Ostensibly, these moves aimed to protect the divers' health, yet they only served to undercut the limited economic opportunities of indigenous communities.[147]

Meanwhile, the narco-economy was blossoming. Although the *transportistas* largely came from Mexico and Colombia, their operations required a large support system on the ground, and they paid handsomely. Reports from *La Prensa* quoted bribes in the hundreds of US dollars to locals for as little as silence when cocaine landed in the community, with increasing amounts for further support.[148] Forest plots for airstrips and ranches were often cleared with the help of locals in exchange for large sums of money.[149] The low reliability of *transportistas*' planes and boats, alongside risk of interception by state forces and rival traffickers meant that parcels of cocaine were often lost across the Muskitia overland and at sea: searching for the "*langosta blanca"* [white lobster] gave locals a way into the profitability of the narcotics trade.[150] Indigenous communities became gradually more integrated into the narco-economy that grew in the space left behind by shrinking traditional ways of life. In the absence of other opportunities, the line between trafficker and civilian blurred.

[146] Ibid.
[147] Ibid; Yasmira Locandro, 'Promoverán que buzos ya no pesquen en La Mosquitia'.
[148] Redacción La Prensa, 'La Mosquitia: 'Aquí todos quieren hacerse ricos…'", *La Prensa*, 10 February 2010, <https://www.laprensa.hn/honduras/la-mosquitia-aqui-todos-quieren-hacerse-ricos-MALP504844#image-1 > [accessed 23 April 2023].
[149] Kendra McSweeney et al., 'Grounding Traffic', p.127.
[150] Mark Stevenson, 'Honduras, jaqueada por la tragedia narco', *El Dia*, 05 November 2011, <https://www.eldia.com/nota/2011-11-5-honduras-jaqueada-por-la-tragedia-narco> [accessed 23 April 2023].

The development of links between *transportistas* and indigenous communities was shaped by shifts in the perceived risks of involvement. Initially, community activist responses to the arrival of traffickers in the Muskitia were hostile, calling for support to protect their lands.[151] As corruption on local and national levels skyrocketed in the aftermath of the coup, popular attitudes shifted. Impunity granted to *transportistas* and police and military involvement in trafficking operations signalled that the drug trade was a safe economic option.[152] In comparison with perilous lobster-diving or increasingly unviable traditional land-based economic activities narcotrafficking was an attractive alternative. The low rate of indictments of traffickers guaranteed by the national and local governments, alongside the Muskitia's isolation from the rest of Honduras, meant that police action – if it did take place – was unlikely to threaten locals helping to unload planes or boats. The culture of impunity for drug traffickers and their associates was not missed on the anti-narcotics establishment. After the Ahuas Massacre, as part of the official denial of events, US Ambassador to Honduras Lisa Kubiske argued that the deaths would help show locals that trafficking was not a safe activity:

> "these are not innocent communities. These are communities in which a lot of people find it not dangerous […] to help the drug traffickers who live there. And afterwards I think we know that many more people began to think that it was dangerous. We've seen some changes in behaviour."[153]

The ease, safety, and prevalence of narco-trafficking in the Muskitia during the post-coup period weakened distinctions between *transportistas* and the local community. Security forces – particularly those from the US who were distant from the local context – struggled to

[151] Redacción La Prensa, 'Biosfera del Río Plátano en la mira por narcotráfico'; Kendra McSweeney, 'Grounding Traffic', p.127.
[152] Redacción La Prensa, 'La Mosquitia: 'Aquí todos quieren hacerse ricos…"'.
[153] Lisa Kubiske, *Talk at Institute of the Americas*, 2013, 00:04:35-00:05:00 <https://ia600408.us.archive.org/35/items/kubiske/121201_002.MP3>.

distinguish what appeared to be increasingly blended groups. Yet the reality of narco-local dynamics painted a different picture.

While some locals may have been able to join in narcotics work, foreign forces dominated the relationship, with transport was exclusively carried out by criminal organisations from abroad or elsewhere in Honduras. The *Cachiros* were based out of Colón department and were subordinate to the Mexican *Sinaloa* federation, while the Gracias a Dios-based *Atlántico* cartel was reportedly closely linked to the Venezuelan *Soles* and international transport was overwhelmingly facilitated by foreigners.[154] The relationship between *transportistas* and locals tangentially or directly involved in the narco-economy was one of both economic and violent domination. Even when land was bought rather than outright seized from indigenous communities, it was overshadowed by death threats and killings in the face of resistance. In one community near Ahuas, an indigenous resident voiced opposition to a land sale and received death threats from narco-traffickers; a local leader from another nearby community had to flee Honduras when he was hunted by armed men allegedly sent to kill him.[155] The illusion of partnership between local communities and traffickers was shattered by such assertions of dominance and impunity.

[154] Giorleny Altamirano Rayo, 'State Building, Ethnic Land Titling and Transnational Organised Crime', p. 56; Redacción El Heraldo, 'Estados Unidos Cierra el cerco contra Wilter Blanco'; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 'Transnational Organised Crime in Central America and the Caribbean', p.42; Dudley Althaus, 'Drug gang violence: Very bad things are happening in Honduras', *The World*, 09 August 2013, <https://theworld.org/dispatch/news/regions/americas/130808/honduras-drug-gang-violence> [accessed 21 April 2023]; Giorleny Altamirano Rayo, 'State Building, Ethnic Land Titling, and Transnational Organised Crime: The Case of Honduras', *Latin American Research Review*, 56.1 (2021), 50-66 (p.56) <https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.450>; Redacción El Heraldo, 'Estados Unidos cierra el cerco contra Wilter Blanco y su cartel en Honduras', *El Heraldo*, 14 October 2016, <https://www.elheraldo.hn/honduras/estados-unidos-cierra-el-cerco-contra-wilter-blanco-y-su-cartel-en-IVEH1008356#image-1> [accessed 26 April 2023]; *United States of America V. Wilter Blanco-Ruiz*, (2017), Case No. 16-20602-CR-DMM, Document 40, p.4, <https://ecf.flsd.uscourts.gov/doc1/051118337896> [accessed 26 April 2023].
[155] Kendra McSweeney, 'Grounding Traffic', p. 129.

The apparent economic benefits of participation in the narco-economy were also misleading. Bribes and payments were made in US dollars, which – while more valuable at between 19 and 20 lempiras to a dollar in 2012 – were fundamentally unusable in the Muskitia's licit economy.[156] Too isolated for easy exchange between currencies and broadly without legally established shops in the region that would accept them, local communities use for narco-dollars was incredibly limited. Traffickers, now installed in larger numbers semi-permanently across the Muskitia, could use the dollars and sought to recuperate them for greater profits. Several instances were reported of traffickers establishing shops selling imported goods, food and other necessities and accepting US dollars as payment or exchanging them at a steep premium.[157] With alternate modes of sustenance from farming, forest gathering, and fishing rapidly shrinking because of criminal and private land encroachment, these shops provided essential goods. With payment in dollars consistently recouped through trafficker-owned shops, money paid out made its way back to the *transportistas*' pockets, engendering a growing dependency in indigenous communities. This practice distinctly blurred the line between trafficker and local, interlinked in the same illicit and semi-licit economies with *transportistas*' dominance consistently maintained. Drug traffickers were also largely protected from the bulk of interdiction and law enforcement by their links to the state, leaving indigenous communities to face the brunt of violence as narcos-by-proxy. As in Ahuas, locals were perceived by security forces – like the DEA – as legitimate targets, criminals, colluding with traffickers.

[156] Bureau of the Fiscal Service, 'Treasury Reporting Rates of Exchange As of June 30, 2012', 29 March 2015, p.2 <https://www.fiscal.treasury.gov/files/reports-statements/treasury-reporting-rates-exchange/0612.pdf> [accessed 23 April 2023].
[157] Kendra McSweeney, 'Grounding Traffic', p. 127.

Conclusion

Chapter Two has considered how the incursion of *transportistas* into the Muskitia in the inviting conditions following the 2009 coup contributed to the conditions for the Ahuas Massacre in two main ways. The escalation of violence, driven by narcotraffickers' arrival in the region, increased the vulnerability of the already marginalised indigenous population and drew the anti-narcotics forces which eventually killed the passengers of the water-taxi in May 2012. Environmental destruction in the Muskitia created by *transportista* airstrips and ranches decimated traditional ways of life and economic activities. This destruction escalated the marginalisation of indigenous communities, who were coerced into the narco-economy due to the collapse of sustainable alternatives and the demands put on them by criminal armed groups, often with state backing. These shifts blurred the line between trafficker and civilian – becoming a driver for state violence in the Muskitia and a key factor behind the Ahuas Massacre, exacerbated by the conduct and strategy of US forces, as discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter Three: Consequences of US Counternarcotics Strategy

Introduction

While the Honduran state took a broadly benevolent position towards drug traffickers in the national territory in the years following the 2009 coup, the US did not. Carrying forward counternarcotics strategy from the very beginning of the War on Drugs, US presence was a force for violence in the Muskitia. The agents commanding the operation on the night of the massacre gave the orders to fire on civilians due to a combination of historic experience, training, and operational structure; on strategic and tactical levels, factors conspired to escalate US use of force in the Muskitia. The inheritance of DEA counterinsurgencies abroad in South America directly influenced their development in the 21st century and in Honduras, pushing FAST to act as in a warzone. Moreover, counternarcotics forces directly inherited personnel and strategy from the US' two most recent conventional wars: Iraq and Afghanistan. These approaches were fomented by the dominant ideology in US security circles, which conflated 'terrorism' with enemies of US security interests. Thus, the wars on Drugs and on Terror were deliberately conflated to justify stronger military responses. Spokespeople from both military and civilian administrations throughout the 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s openly discussed combining military and policing roles for forces deployed abroad in the fight against "terrorism", ranging from leftist insurgents in Colombia to drug traffickers in Honduras. The implementation of wartime anti-terrorism tactics in peacetime Honduras had deadly consequences; this chapter of the dissertation examines how these structural factors led FAST to fire on innocents in May 2012.

FAST and the "Terrorism-Drug Trafficking Nexus"

The 9/11 attacks rocked US security circles, provoking the reorientation of its post-Cold War military complex to face the abstract enemy of terrorism. Since, the framework of the War on Terror has defined US security policies and strategy, shaping the ongoing War on Drugs. Across diplomacy, strategy and through organisational changes, the US made a concerted effort to blend these two global "wars". The militarisation of anti-narcotics operations was a direct result of initiatives to link the threat of terror with organised crime and drug trafficking. US Special Operations Commander Frankie Shroyer sums up this prevalent attitude:

> "When your job takes you into the swamp to hunt snakes, you'll have some opportunities to capture or kill some crocs as well – cause they live and multiply in the same, nasty surroundings".[158]

On the 18th of September 2001, President Bush signed into law his Joint Resolution on the Authorization for the Use of Military Force, officially beginning the "Global War on Terror" : its rationale would soon be deployed against other targets.[159] The idea of a "terrorism-drug trafficking nexus" began to appear in a variety of US government documents in the following months.[160] In March 2002, the Assistant Secretary for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs Rand Beers and the Ambassador-At-Large For Counterterrorism Francis Taylor gave testimony on the "symbiotic relationship" between drugs and terror before a Senate

[158] Richard Dobrich, 'Drug Enforcement Administration Foreign-deployed Advisory Support Team', *NDIA SO/LIC Symposium*, p. 10, <https://ndiastorage.blob.core.usgovcloudapi.net/ndia/2011/SOLIC/Tues2Dobrich.pdf> [accessed 14 April 2023].
[159] *Joint Resolution on the Authorisation for the use of Military Force*, 107th Congress Public Law 40, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PLAW-107publ40/html/PLAW-107publ40.htm> [accessed 14 April 2023].
[160] John Ashcroft, 'Prepared Remarks of Attorney General John Ashcroft', *US Department of Justice*, <https://www.justice.gov/archive/ag/speeches/2002/110602newsconferenceoperationwhiteterror.htm> [accessed 14 April 2023].

Committee.[161] Beers argued that drug traffickers and terrorists had developed tactics of cooperation, with terrorists protecting and arming drug traffickers in return for a cut of the profits as 'taxation', or engaging in trafficking themselves to secure funds for arms.[162] He drew explicit links between 9/11 and the possibility of a hostile "narco-terrorist state" in Latin America.[163] FARC and the ELN from Colombia, as well as the *Sendero Luminoso* from Peru were presented as terrorist organisations involved in the drugs trade and pressing threats to US security. Almost all were leftist insurgent groups that had held most of their influence in the previous two decades and had since fallen from real significance. Additionally, Beers highlighted the connections between Al-Qaida and the opium trade.[164] Academic studies of the nexus developed in the wake of growing policy emphasis but found more tenuous and informal links. Sean Maloney found that the Taliban did benefit from the opium trade but were "not the leaders" and that links were severely overstated, while Vanda Felbab-Brown reported that the connections were unclear and the government reports failed to distinguish differences between local actors.[165] Yet, government documents, hearings and testimonies continued to emphasise the link between terrorism and narco-trafficking across the globe and in the Americas. By 2012, countering the "terrorism-drug trafficking nexus" was a core part of the modern DEA.[166]

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[161] Rand Beers and Francis Taylor, 'Narco-Terror: The Worldwide Connection Between Drugs and Terror', *Bureau of Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs*, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/inl/rls/rm/8743.htm> [accessed 14 April 2023].
[162] Ibid.
[163] Ibid.
[164] Ibid.
[165] Sean Maloney, 'On a pale horse? Conceptualizing narcotics production in southern Afghanistan and its relationship to the Narcoterror Nexus', *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 20.1 (2009), 203-214 (p.212), <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592310802573640>; Vanda Felbab-Brown, 'Afghanistan: When counternarcotics undermines counterterrorism', *Washington Quarterly*, 28.4 (2005), 55-72 (pp.59-61), <https://doi.org/10.1162/0163660054798735>.
[166] Deborah McCarthy, 'Narco-Terrorism: International Drug Trafficking and Terrorism -- A Dangerous Mix', *Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs*, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/inl/rls/rm/21129.htm> [accessed 14 April 2023]; Steven McCraw, 'Testimony: International Drug Trafficking and Terrorism', *Federal Bureau of Investigation*, <https://archives.fbi.gov/archives/news/testimony/international-drug-trafficking-and-terrorism> [accessed 14 April 2023]; John Ashcroft, 'Prepared Remarks'; United States Department of Justice, 'Fighting Criminal Activity on the U.S. Southwest Border', *United States Department of Justice*, <https://www.justice.gov/archives/jmd/file/44431/download> [accessed 14 April 2023]; LaVerle Berry et al., 'A Global Overview of Narcotics-Funded Terrorist and Other Extremist Groups', *Library of Congress*, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA439621.pdf> [accessed 14 April 2023].

At the heart of this strategy were Foreign-deployed Advisory Support Teams. First deployed to Afghanistan in 2005, these were the units deployed in Honduras at the Ahuas Massacre.[167] FAST squads were envisaged as the DEA's primary fighting force abroad in its new role in the War on Terror, and developed a militarised structure that was carried over into Honduras. Speaking at the DEA Museum in 2010, Carson Ulrich – then Deputy Section Chief for FAST – detailed the workings of the squads deployed to Afghanistan.[168] Unlike their predecessors, FAST was designed to operate alongside the military in the active warzone of Afghanistan just four years after the initial invasion, carrying heavy armaments and military equipment.[169] Ulrich explicitly stated that FAST in Afghanistan was targeting organisations that were "one in [sic.] the same in a lot of ways with the terrorist organisations", deliberately armed, trained and equipped to operate in a warzone against terrorist forces. He drew attention to the unit's close integration with the military – describing the level of cooperation as one of a kind as the DEA took a more militarised response to drug interdiction with the backing and training of US Special Forces.[170] FAST units also used their law-enforcement position to extract information for the armed forces proper: Ulrich stated that only 20-30% of intelligence created by FAST's "intercept program" was actually related to drugs.[171] From a purely anti-narcotics perspective this could be considered a failure, but it was invaluable service to US counterinsurgency efforts in Afghanistan.

[167] Ross Eventon, 'Not so FAST; The Rise and Rise of the DEA's Commando Squads', *Global Drug Policy Observatory*, p. 1, <https://www.swansea.ac.uk/media/Not-so-FAST----The-Rise-and-Rise-of-the-DEA%27s-Commando-Squads.pdf> [accessed 15 April 2023].
[168] Carson Ulrich, 'DEA's FAST Units in Afghanistan', *DEA Museum Lecture Series*, <https://museum.dea.gov/sites/default/files/2021-09/DEA_s%20FAST%20Units%20in%20Afghanistan10132010--Accessible.pdf> [accessed 15 April 2023].
[169] Ibid p.8.
[170] Ibid p.16.
[171] Ibid p. 25.

FAST was designed to be a paramilitary force that could work with armed forces specifically to attack the drug networks of terrorist organisations. In a presentation given to the National Defense Industrial Association's 2011 SO/LIC Symposium, FAST Section Chief Richard Dobrich makes the relationship very clear: "Is it a law enforcement mission or is it a military mission? Both!!!"[172] As a result of its development in Afghanistan, FAST was created explicitly militarised to be integrated with Special Forces. Yet, Dobrich's presentation was not focussed on Afghanistan but on all FAST's deployments across the globe. He deliberately conflated terrorist and trafficking organisations to justify the unit's aggressive presence in regions unaffected by insurgency or terror. Ulrich puts it simply: "What DEA FAST is currently doing, its mission statement is, is to interdict the insurgency where there's a nexus to drugs."[173] The integration of the DEA's foreign operations into the framework of the global War on Drugs came with a dramatic escalation of its militarism and the unilateral use of force.

Figure 3.1 A FAST agent deployed in Afghanistan.[174]

[172] Richard Dobrich, 'Drug Enforcement Administration Foreign-deployed Advisory Support Team', p.10.
[173] Ibid p.18.
[174] Reddit user "Domonok", 'A member of the DEA's now disbanded Foreign-Deployed Advisory and Support Team mans a machine gun during a counter narcotics operation, Afghanistan, early 2010s. [1024x768]', *Reddit*, 2021, <https://i.redd.it/qevvvz83dkz71.jpg> [accessed 17 April 2023].

Ulrich's presentation emphasised FAST's position as a structure to advise and support local forces. He posited that the units were designed to support local policing so that they could one day conduct drug raids alone, but his language reveals power dynamics that put the FAST units in charge: "we have our own Afghan forces, our own Afghan police forces". [175] Ulrich's possessive language gives lie to the ostensible role as an 'Advisory Support Team', an imbalance in power that would continue to be an issue with FAST's deployment. The mission that led to the Ahuas shooting was unofficially commanded by FAST agents; the Honduran TRT unit who were supposedly leading did not even have radios to communicate, let alone issue orders to US forces.[176] Better equipped, trained and with a sense of superiority over "their" local forces, FAST transmitted the violent practices from Afghanistan into the peacetime setting of the Muskitia.

History of the DEA Abroad and Counterinsurgency

The Afghanistan war marked the integration of the DEA into the framework of the War on Terror with the creation of the FAST units, but it was not the first time that the DEA was deployed abroad in a counterinsurgency setting. In the history of US federal agencies, the DEA is fairly young: it was founded in 1973 to tackle what was seen as a rapidly growing threat to the US' population and its national security – drugs and their flow into the country.[177] Initially the DEA focussed its efforts internally, arresting drug users and suppliers within national borders, but it was soon deployed abroad to tackle the trans-American narcotics trade at its

[175]Ulrich, 'DEA's FAST Units in Afghanistan', pp. 9-10.
[176] Mattathias Schwartz, 'A Mission Gone Wrong: Why are we still fighting the drug war?'.
[177] DEA, 'History: The DEA Years', *United States Drug Enforcement Administration*, p. 34 <https://www.dea.gov/sites/default/files/2021-04/1970-1975_p_30-39_0.pdf> [accessed 16 April 2023]; James Markham, 'President Calls for "Total War" on U.S. Addiction', *New York Times*, 21 March 1972, <https://go.openathens.net/redirector/leeds.ac.uk?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/president-calls-total-war-on-u-s-addiction/docview/119584454/se-2> [accessed 16 April 2023].

source. Beginning in 1976, Operation Condor was an antidrug campaign focussed on heroin and marijuana production in Mexico.[178] The DEA supported the Mexican military operation, which focussed on destroying crop fields and discouraging production but also targeted guerrilla forces.[179] From the beginning, anti-narcotics policy was used as a tool to secure ideological objectives and target insurgents.

After a limited inter-agency intervention in Bolivia in 1986, the DEA's first major foreign deployment was to be the precursor to FAST: Operation Snowcap.[180] From 1987 to 1995, Snowcap deployed armed DEA agents – primarily into Peru, Bolivia, and Ecuador among other Latin American countries – directly to challenge drug production in the 'source zone'.[181] Unlike previous deployments, Snowcap squads used military equipment – such as Huey helicopters loaned by the DoD and local government Hind gunships in Peru – to target insurgent groups that threatened the stability of cooperating states.[182] An article in the *Los Angeles Times* from 1990 carried the headline: "Prowling Bolivia's Jungle With The DEA: They aren't military, but they wear camouflage, carry guns and look for trouble."[183] And trouble they found: DEA units were regularly deployed into regions facing violent

[178] Note: not to be confused with the CIA-backed state terror campaign waged against political opponents in the Southern Cone of South America; Richard Craig, 'Operation Condor: Mexico's Antidrug Campaign Enters a New Era', *Interamerican Studies and World Affairs*, 22.3 (1980) 345-363 (p.346) <https://doi.org/10.2307/165493> [accessed 16 April 2023].
[179] DNSA, Mexico-United States Counternarcotics Policy, 1969-2013 Collection, 'Mexico: Increases in military antinarcotics units', *Central Intelligence Agency*, 2 December 1983, <https://go.openathens.net/redirector/leeds.ac.uk?url=https://www.proquest.com/government-official-publications/mexico-increases-military-antinarcotics-units/docview/1679101219/se-2> [accessed 16 April 2023].
[180] Juan de Onis, 'U.S. Agents See Bolivia Success Despite Errors, *Los Angeles Times*, 23 July 1986, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1986-07-23-mn-21516-story.html> [accessed 16 April 2023]; Ulrich, 'DEA's FAST Units in Afghanistan', pp.12-13.
[181] DEA, 'History:1985-1990', *United States Drug Enforcement Administration*, p.63, <https://www.dea.gov/sites/default/files/2021-04/1985-1990_p_58-67.pdf> [accessed 16 April 2023].
[182] Ibid.
[183] William Long, 'Documentary Cocaine Patrol: Prowling Bolivia's Jungle With the DEA They aren't military, but they wear camouflage, carry guns and look for trouble. Come along on an operation with the Americans who man the front line of the drug war', *Los Angeles Times*, 22 May 1990, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1990-05-22-wr-333-story.html> [accessed 27 April 2023].

insurgencies. In Peru, *Sendero Luminoso* (Shining Path, SL), a Maoist guerrilla force that began operating in the 1980s, was the primary target. The SL did engage in cocaine production and trafficking to fund its operations, yet organised crime played a greater role in its journey north.[184] Despite this, the Peruvian government succeeded in encouraging Snowcap operatives to focus heavily on SL, bringing them into conflict and even cooperating with traffickers to attack SL forces.[185] In August 1988 a hammer and sickle were burned into the hillside near Tingo Maria in Central Peru and agents received the message: "Death to the six from DEA. They'll find their graves in the jungle."[186]

Operation Snowcap marked the beginning of an active role for the DEA in counterinsurgency, developing a proto- "terrorism-drug trafficking nexus" around the operations of the SL and FARC in Colombia. Snowcap saw some success in its target areas, yet the balloon effect meant production and trafficking routes shifted into less militarised regions.[187] The operation was

[184] Bruce Kay, 'Violent Opportunities, The Rise and Fall of "King Coca" and Shining Path', *Interamerican Studies and World Affairs*, 41.3 (1999), 97-127 (p.103) <https://doi.org/10.2307/166160>.
[185] DNSA, Peru: Human Rights, Drugs and Democracy, 1980-2000 Collection, 'Intelligence Update for Upper Huallaga Valley, Peru; Operation Snowcap, GFAN-87-8003', *United States Embassy Peru*, 26 September 1989, p.2 <https://go.openathens.net/redirector/leeds.ac.uk?url=https://www.proquest.com/government-official-publications/intelligence-update-upper-huallaga-valley-peru/docview/1679155051/se-2> [accessed 16 April 2023]; DNSA, Peru: Human Rights, Drugs and Democracy, 1980-2000 Collection, 'Situation Update of Operation Condor, GFZH-87-8001 [Excised] CCX: Operation Snowcap, GFAN-87-8003, [Excised]', *United States Embassy Peru*, p.1 <https://www.proquest.com/dnsa/docview/1679155456/64FD55A849594A98PQ/1?accountid=14664> [accessed 16 April 2023]; DNSA, Peru: Human Rights, Drugs and Democracy, 1980-2000 Collection, 'After Action Report [Cooperation between Civil Guard and Major Narcotics Trafficker in Fighting Shining Path], *United States Department of Justice, Drug Enforcement Administration*, 10 October 1987, <https://go.openathens.net/redirector/leeds.ac.uk?url=https://www.proquest.com/government-official-publications/after-action-report-cooperation-between-civil/docview/1679154935/se-2> [accessed 16 April 2023].
[186] DNSA, Peru: Human Rights, Drugs and Democracy, 1980-2000 Collection, 'Current Situation Assessment of DEA/INM Operation in the Upper Huallaga Valley; CCX: GFZH-88-9020 Threats against DEA; CCX: GFZH-88-9073 Extremist/Terrorist Activities; CCX: GFZH-87-8001 Operation Condor; CCX: GFZH-87-8003 Operation Snowcap', *United States Embassy Peru*, pp.2-3 <https://go.openathens.net/redirector/leeds.ac.uk?url=https://www.proquest.com/government-official-publications/current-situation-assessment-dea-inm-operation/docview/1679155267/se-2> [accessed 16 April 2023].
[187] Cornelius Friesendorf, 'Squeezing the balloon? United States Air Interdiction and the Restructuring of the South American Drug Industry in the 1990s', *Crime, Law & Social Change*, 44 (2005), 35-78 (p.50), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10611-006-9005-9>.

discontinued because of the unpreparedness of non-military DEA agents in insurgency settings.[188] Their deployments into the Andes were certainly militarised – they were backed up by US Special Forces and local militaries – but agents found themselves too often in dangerous situations.[189] This experience drove the development of FAST as a heavily armed, independent operating force: rather than withdrawing DEA agents from their informal role as counterinsurgent troops, the lessons taken by the US from Snowcap were that counterinsurgency was a key part of the modern fight against drugs and a stronger militarised role was needed for the DEA.

Organisational Inheritance from Iraq and Afghanistan

US counternarcotics efforts in Honduras in 2012 also developed out of a direct inheritance of personnel and tactics from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.[190] As advisory teams, FAST held a key role in training elements of Honduran security forces in ideas of militarised counternarcotics and counterinsurgency. The Army and Special Forces were also used to train Honduran security forces, imparting the lessons of recent wars. In pursuit of counternarcotics objectives, US forces in Honduras supported and guided the militarisation of the state.

This was not a new role for the US military, especially in Latin America. The US-based School of the Americas – which counts numerous dictators, torturers, and mass-murderers among its alumni – was so notorious for its lessons in human rights abuses that it was dubbed a "School

[188] U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs, *U.S. Narcotics Control Programs in Peru, Bolivia, Colombia, and Mexico: An Update*, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1989), p.1, p.23 <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/pur1.32754076917545> [accessed 23 April 2023].
[189] Ibid p.21, p.27, p.9, p.25.
[190] Charlie Savage, 'D.E.A. Squads Extend Reach of Drug War', *New York Times*, 6 November 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/07/world/americas/united-states-drug-enforcement-agency-squads-extend-reach-of-drug-war.html> [accessed 17 April 2023].

of Assassins".[191] The Joint-Command Exchange Programme in 1990s Colombia ran Special Forces training to support Colombian counternarcotics efforts; a former trainer confirmed that it was sharing "updated Vietnam-style counterinsurgency doctrine" –reproducing the notorious Phoenix Program which killed over 26,000 people, disproportionately civilians, and included numerous instances of torture.[192] The practice of sharing the "lessons" of war was maintained in the aftermath of Iraq and Afghanistan. In 2012, SOUTHCOM's deputy commander was Vice Admiral Joseph Kernan. A former Navy SEAL, he served as commander of DEVGRU (SEAL Team 6) during its deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan between 1999 and 2003.[193] As commander, he had played a key role in special operations during the post-9/11 wars leading forces throughout the invasion of Afghanistan and developing strategies that would eventually be brought to his leadership at SOUTHCOM.[194] Chief of Staff Major General Juan Ayala also served in the global War on Terror, deployed with the Marines in Iraq and Afghanistan.[195] In the aftermath of the US military's early 2000s offensives, the inclusion of its veterans in other command structures reflects a broader trend of exporting counterterrorism into US military deployments in other parts of the world. Based in Honduras, JTF-Bravo was no exception. Its own commander in 2012, Colonel Ross Brown, was deployed to Iraq in the 'Sunni Triangle of Death'; he subsequently taught counterinsurgency in Fort Leavenworth, a major centre of

[191] Ruth Blakeley, 'Still Training to Torture? US training of military forces in Latin America', *Third World Quarterly*, 27.8 (2006), 1439-1461 (p.1439), <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436590601027289>; SOA Watch, 'Most Notorious SOA Graduates', *School of the Americas Watch*, (2019), <https://soaw.org/notorious-soa-graduates> [accessed 27 April 2023].
[192] Doug Stokes, *America's Other War*, p.90; Ruth Blakely, 'Still Training to Torture?', p. 1440; Dale Andrade and James Willbanks, 'CORDS/Phoenix: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Vietnam for the Future', *Military Review*, (2006), 77-91 (p.80) <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/PDF-UA-docs/Andrade-Willbanks-UA.pdf> [accessed 27 April 2023].
[193] Sean Naylor, *Not a Good Day to Die: The Untold Story of Operation Anaconda* (New York, NY: Berkeley Books, 2005) p.24.
[194] Ibid p. 313.
[195] United States Southern Command, 'Chief of Staff, SOUTHCOM', *United States Southern Command*, 2012 <https://web.archive.org/web/20120317213314/http://www.southcom.mil/aboutus/Pages/Major-General-Juan-G.-Ayala.aspx> [accessed 17 April 2023].

armed forces education.[196] As a teacher to export the perilous lessons of the War on Terror to the Honduran military through his position in JTF-Bravo, there was hardly a better choice.

With these structures in place, US forces in Honduras imparted their experience to the Honduran forces that would be deployed against drug traffickers in the Muskitia. The US spent roughly $89 million yearly on JTF-Bravo in the early 2010s and had spent $2 million on training Honduran forces in 2011.[197] Additionally, SOUTHCOM was importing the framework for counterterror directly into Honduras. Forward Operating Bases – which had been "perfected" in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars as small-scale bases capable of supporting forces inside remote hostile territory – were built in and around the Muskitia to support drug interdiction and facilitate training of local forces to fit the new US model.[198] The construction of these bases resolved some of the issues that Honduran security forces had been experiencing, in being unable to effectively deploy into the remote Muskitia to interdict traffickers, but also effectively enabled security forces to act as more violent counterinsurgency troops in the region.[199]

[196] Joint Task Force – Bravo, 'Colonel Ross A. Brown', *JTF-Bravo*, 2012, <https://web.archive.org/web/20120510071929/http://www.jtfb.southcom.mil/library/biographies/bio.asp?id=14489> [accessed 17 April 2023].
[197] Associated Press, 'U.S. military expands its drug war in Latin America', *USA Today News*, 03 February 2013, <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2013/02/03/us-expands-drug-war-latin-america/1887481/> [accessed 17 April 2023].
[198] Donna Miles, 'Concept Perfected in Iraq, Afghanistan Used Along U.S. Border', *National Guard*, 04 December 2006, <https://www.nationalguard.mil/News/Article/572837/concept-perfected-in-iraq-afghanistan-used-along-us-border/> [accessed 17 April 2023]; Thom Shanker, 'A U.S. Drug War Inside Honduras, Waged Iraq-Style', *New York Times*, 06 May 2012, p.1 p.14.
[199] Christopher Looft, 'US Military Supporting Honduras Drug War with New Forward Bases', *Insight Crime*, 07 May 2012, <https://insightcrime.org/news/brief/us-military-supporting-honduras-drug-war-with-new-forward-bases/> [accessed 17 April 2023]; Redacción La Prensa, 'Operación Xatruch II busca liberar más fincas en el Bajo Aguan'; Annie Bird, 'Human Rights Violations Attributed to Military Forces in the Bajo Aguan Valley in Honduras', *Rights Action*, 1 February 2013 <https://rightsaction.org/articles/human-rights-violations-attributed-to-military-forces-in-the-bajo-aguan-valley-in-honduras> [accessed 23 April 2023].

Figure 3.2 Forward Operating Bases in Honduras.[200]

SOUTHCOM's inheritance from the War on Terror created local and US forces in Honduras that mirrored FAST's original operational partners in Afghanistan. Simultaneously, the introduction of Forward Operating Bases made the region feel far more familiar to FAST agents. In effect, SOUTHCOM's support and guidance converted the Muskitia into an Afghanistan in miniature, allowing FAST to operate counternarcotics raids using methods as close as possible to their original function. The dangers are obvious: FAST was explicitly created as a counterterrorism force to tackle the "terrorism-drug trafficking nexus" and acted as a tool of US counterinsurgency in wartime. In the war in Afghanistan 46,319 civilians were killed in the fighting, and the rate of civilian death was criticised by observers such as Human Rights Watch as early as October 2001.[201] The dangers of the tactics used in Afghanistan and

[200] Looft, 'US Military Supporting Honduras Drug War'.
[201] Costs of War Project, 'Human and Budgetary Costs to Date of the U.S. War in Afghanistan 2001-2022', *Watson Institute*, 2023, <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/figures/2021/human-and-budgetary-costs-date-us-war-afghanistan-2001-2022> [accessed 17 April 2023]; Human Rights Watch, 'Afghanistan: New Civilian Deaths Due to U.S. Bombing', *Human Rights Watch*, 30 October 2001, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2001/10/30/afghanistan-new-civilian-deaths-due-us-bombing> [accessed 17 April 2023].

the repercussions of the War on Terror were more than clear by 2012, yet perceived security needs dictated strategy for the War on Drugs.

Conclusion

When Operation Anvil was deployed in 2012, FAST was operating in a region that had been progressively militarised over recent years, working alongside local forces that had undergone a similar process of militarisation under US guidance. There was no insurgency or terrorist threat in the Muskitia, yet FAST agents and their local counterparts had been trained by Special Forces to respond to IEDs and use heavy weapons to fight heavily armed insurgents.[202] Many FAST agents had previously been deployed into warzones.[203] Despite requirements not to use force except in self-defence, FAST agents operated within structures and with experience that made them far more likely to deploy lethal force against perceived threats. As well as the Ahuas Massacre, the FAST unit was responsible for two more extrajudicial killings during their 90-day deployment in Honduras in 2012.[204] Structured to be deployed in a warzone and placed into a setting framed as a facsimile of the deadly environment of Afghanistan, FAST's insertion into the Muskitia laid the perfect conditions for a massacre. The export of the War on Terror and its integration with the War on Drugs created conditions and organisations that were exceptionally dangerous to civilians.

[202] Richard Dobrich, 'Drug Enforcement Administration Foreign-deployed Advisory Support Team', p.7.
[203] Ross Eventon, 'Justifying Militarisation; "Counter-Narcotics" and "Counter Narco-Terrorism"', *Global Drug Policy Observatory*, 2015, p. 4, <https://idpc.net/publications/2015/04/justifying-militarisation-counter-narcotics-and-counter-narco-terrorism> [accessed 23 April 2023].
[204] Office of the Inspectors General, *A Special Joint Review of Post-Incident Responses*, p. i.

Conclusion

In the early hours of the 11th of May 2012, four Miskitu – two pregnant women, a child, and a young man – lay dead in the Patuca River. Ahuas' inhabitants and homes had been raided and brutalised by foreign forces speaking a language they could not understand.[205] This was not the first time members of this indigenous community had been murdered by outsiders, nor would it be the last. Colonialism in the Muskitia took new forms but continued to take its toll. A very specific set of conditions created the Ahuas Massacre, as the ramifications of the 2009 coup d'état, traffickers' regional presence, and US counternarcotics policy all directly impacted the development of the events that morning.

The shifts in the Honduran national sphere created by the 2009 coup d'état created conflict in the Muskitia. The corruption that exploded at all levels of government invited traffickers into the Muskitia: the perfect location for transporting cocaine north. The simultaneous neoliberal project that the Lobo government undertook to secure profits for national elites demanded "security" for potential investors; the attractive natural resources of the Muskitia drew private actors with notoriously violent private security forces. In tandem, the state sought to guarantee its economic and property reforms by enforcing a *mano duro* in internal security. Increasingly militarised security forces were deployed into the historically isolated Muskitia to tame the colonial frontier. The post-coup Honduran state pushed heavily armed forces into the region; their conflicting interests led to intense violence which nearly quadrupled the recorded homicide rate in just three years. The 2009 coup created the violent foundations for the Ahuas Massacre three years later.

[205] Annie Bird and Alexander Main, 'Collateral Damage of a Drug War: The May 11 Killings in Ahuas and the Impact of the U.S. War on Drugs in La Moskitia, Honduras', *CEPR*, pp.27-31 <https://cepr.net/documents/publications/honduras-2012-08.pdf> [accessed 24 April 2023].

With organised crime, the *transportistas* transformed the Muskitia. They acted as an increased force for violence in the region, while corruption meant they acted with impunity against locals and members of rival criminal organisations. Increased military forces, ostensibly deployed against drug trafficking, intensified violence, making the use of deadly force against civilians far more likely in the Muskitia. Deforestation, as traffickers sought to land more planes and launder more profits, simultaneously enclosed collective lands and destroyed traditional ways of life for indigenous communities, driving their members into the narco-economy. As alternate economic opportunities ceased to exist, indigenous communities were forced into cooperation with drug traffickers to survive, blurring the perceived line between 'narco' and civilian for security forces in the region. As Mỹ Lai in Vietnam in 1968 and in Haditha in Iraq in 2005, in Ahuas in 2012 the proximity of civilians to 'legitimate targets' led to them being victims of US forces.

The DEA has progressively militarised its deployments abroad into more of a counterinsurgent role. Originally prompted by finding itself unprepared for conflict with insurgents in in Peru and Colombia in the 1980s and 1990s, a turning point came with the 9/11 attacks. The declaration of the War on Terror and theoretical framing of the "terrorism-drug trafficking nexus" formalised the DEA's role in counterinsurgency, represented by the FAST units whose official status as law enforcement belied their creation as paramilitary special forces for deployment in warzones. Their conceptualisation, training, and previous experience all made them more likely to deploy lethal force. Simultaneously, US armed forces in Honduras inherited personnel and tactics from Iraq and Afghanistan that were deployed in antinarcotics operations and training for local forces. Conditions in the Muskitia simulated familiar warzones, using of strategies such as Forward Operating Bases and incorporating the

"terrorism-drug trafficking nexus". FAST's war footing led its heavily armed agents to act with excessive force and impunity during the 90-day Operation Anvil leading to two other "deadly force incidents" as well as the Ahuas Massacre. [206]

Today, FAST has been disbanded for four years and the *narco-dictatura* in Honduras ended with the election of LIBRE candidate Xiomara Castro de Zelaya in 2021.[207] Honduras still lives with the coup's legacy: corruption, drug trafficking, and violence. The police remains highly militarised; reform is slow. Authoritarian habits have been hard to kick. Following a regional trend promoted by Salvadorean president Nayib Bukele, Honduran President Castro declared a state of constitutional exception late last year, suspending certain civil rights as the police went on a massive arrest campaign against urban gangs.[208] In the Muskitia, drug trafficking and deforestation continues. The families of the victims of the Ahuas Massacre and its survivors have yet to receive justice from US or Honduran governments.[209]

The coup government, drug traffickers, and US forces created the conditions for the Ahuas Massacre, condemning the passengers on that boat death. An email from FAST head Richard Dobrich released in the DoJ report described the killing as "the perfect storm of wrong place/wrong time"; the analysis presented here demonstrates that this is not true.[210] The Miskitu and the other indigenous peoples of the Muskitia have lived in the region's forests, on its rivers,

[206] Office of the Inspectors General, *A Special Joint Review of Post-Incident Responses*, p. i.
[207] Jim Mustian and Joshua Goodman, 'APNewsBreak: DEA's Colombia post jarred by misconduct probes', *Associated Press*, 04 October 2018, <https://apnews.com/article/drug-cartels-caribbean-ap-top-news-bogota-south-america-2f1efb591fb54d519c706792f0629763> [accessed 24 April 2023]; Jeff Ernst, 'Xiomara Castro poised to become first female president of Honduras', *The Guardian*, 29 November 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/nov/29/xiomara-castro-declares-victory-in-honduras-presidential-election> [accessed 24 April 2023].
[208] Héctor Silva Avalos, 'States of Exception: The New Security Model in Central America', *WOLA*, 22 February 2023, <https://www.wola.org/analysis/states-of-exception-new-security-model-central-america/> [accessed 24 April 2023].
[209] CEPR, 'Ten Years After Honduran Villagers Were Killed in a DEA-Led Operation, Survivors and Families Languish, and There's Been No Accountability'.
[210] Office of the Inspectors General, *A Special Joint Review of Post-Incident Responses*, p. 105.

and along its coast since time immemorial. Hasked Brooks Wood, Juana Jackson Ambrosio, Candelaria Trapp Nelson, and Emerson Martinez had every right to be on the Patuca River at any time of day or night. They were victims of an armed invasion of their own territories: by militarised state and private forces from elsewhere in Honduras, by foreign traffickers, and by US DEA agents. A distinctive constellation of historical factors led to personal tragedies of their murders. I sincerely hope that this paper has served to some extent to honour their memory.

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