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PRESS RELEASE

Honduras: Early Warning Signs of Impending Crisis

An ARTICLE 19 delegation, recently returned from Honduras, reports serious abuses of human rights and freedom of expression in that country since the political coup which occurred on 28 June 2009. Amid escalating confrontations between the interim government and supporters of ousted President Manuel Zelaya which just a few sparks could fan into a full blown conflict, ARTICLE 19 calls on all sides of the conflict to commit to the San-Jose process for a peaceful and swift resolution to the conflict and to respect freedom of expression and freedom of the press.

ARTICLE 19 representatives met with more than 40 journalists, human rights defenders, NGOs and civil society, and officials to document their experiences of human rights abuses since the interim government under Roberto Micheletti was installed.

The first-hand testimonies of these people demonstrate a systemic pattern of violence and threats against journalists, media workers and human rights defenders, a highly polarised and divided media community, censorship by both State and non-State actors, and commercial pressures placed upon the pro-Zelaya camp. The overall conditions for journalistic work and media reporting are deteriorating, while the number of social and political confrontations is increasing.

Cases documented by local human rights organisations and ARTICLE 19 over the last month indicate a dramatic increase of abuses of freedom of the press and freedom of expression in Honduras, as compared with previous years.

In just one example, ARTICLE 19 received testimony from a journalist working for *Cumbre TV* in El Bonito, a community located eight hours away from the capital Tegucigalpa. The station has cancelled its daily news programming and the journalist is now in hiding after threats from members of the armed forces.

In another case, David Romero, the director of *Radio Globo*, a national broadcaster jumped out of a third floor window to escape the army after he was forewarned that the military was planning to take over the station and hold him for questioning. *Radio Globo* has since become the unofficial voice of an emerging movement supporting President Zelaya – several dozen people are gathered outside the station in an ongoing effort to prevent the army from entering the building and citizens are using the station to call in and broadcast information on unfolding events.

ARTICLE 19 finds worrying evidence of increasing violence, perpetrated by both the military and pro-Zelaya demonstrators. Journalists and photographers have been attacked and had their material destroyed. Several radio and television stations have been closed down, or have experienced unexplained power cuts, signal blocking and interrupted phone lines, as well as threatening phone calls. Some commercial enterprises, including the *Tigo* cellphone company and the national bank FICOSA, have threatened to withdraw radio and television advertising from stations accused of openly supporting Zelaya.

Human rights defenders are under threats and intimidation, and unable to investigate and report on abuses of human rights abuses. Military road blocks and curfews prevent them from reaching the areas most at risk, where allegations of abuses have been made, while their access to the media to report on these abuses is sharply limited due to their perceived or real association with the pro-Zelaya camp.

“Simmering tensions, increasingly confrontational stands, polarised, manipulative and biased information, and censorship: the ingredients are all there for a major and bloody crisis to erupt in Honduras” says Dr Agnès Callamard, ARTICLE 19 Executive Director, who was part of the delegation visiting Honduras.

ARTICLE 19 calls on the interim government to respect the human rights of the citizens of Honduras, which includes the right to freedom of expression and information. Citizens of Honduras have a right to be informed about events taking place in the country, and journalists and media workers need to be able to conduct their work freely and without restriction. All attacks and threats against media workers, journalists and human rights defenders must immediately cease and all role players must respect freedom of expression.

The international community should make every effort to support a peaceful resolution to this situation. This should include supporting the San Jose process, and international observation and monitoring missions to investigate and document abuses.

NOTES TO EDITORS:

- To read the full statement, visit: www.article19.org/pdfs/press/honduras-early-warning-signs-of-impending-crisis-statement.pdf
- For more information please contact: Ricardo Gonzalez, Ricardo@article19.org
- ARTICLE 19 is an independent human rights organisation that works around the world to protect and promote the right to freedom of expression. It takes its name from Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees free speech.