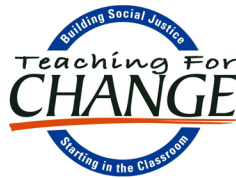


# Inside the Volcano: A Curriculum on Nicaragua

Edited by  
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## The Honduran Connection

*In recent years Honduras has been the scene of a number of large-scale military maneuvers by U.S. troops, including National Guard units from various states. As the map of Honduras and the list of U.S. military installations indicate, the United States has established what appears to be a permanent presence in the country.*

*The reading, **Gringos and Contras on Our Land**, is excerpted from a book by Elvia Alvarado, a peasant woman active in organizing the poor of rural Honduras. One of the conclusions she draws in the book is that the deeper the U.S. involvement in Honduras, the more repressive Honduran society has become. According to Alvarado, Salvadoran-like disappearances, once virtually unheard of, are becoming increasingly commonplace.*

*Alvarado's entire book could be used successfully with high school students; but Chapter 11, included here, is of direct use in a study of Nicaragua. As of late 1989, Honduras still provides sanctuary for the largest Nicaraguan contra groups. According to testimony in the Iran-Contra hearings, U.S. missions to resupply contras operating in Nicaragua originated mainly from air bases in Honduras.*

### Goals/Objectives

1. Students will become aware of some of the consequences the contra war in Nicaragua has had on neighboring Honduras.

### Materials Needed

- Handout #13: **Gringos and Contras on Our Land**.

### Time Required

- Varies with activity selected.

### Procedure

1. Distribute Handout #13: **Gringos and Contras on Our Land**. Review with students the map and charts which are found at end of the reading. Point out that the woman who narrates the student reading lives near Comayagua, just a few miles from the Palmerola military base.
    - let the contras onto its territory? Why does the government allow the U.S. military in?
  2. Read aloud Handout #13: **Gringos and Contras...**
  3. Discuss. Some questions could include:
    - Who suffers from the contra and U.S. presence in Honduras? In what ways?
    - Who benefits? In what ways?
    - Who in Honduras do you think has the most influence when it comes to deciding whether or not Honduran territory will be used by foreign military forces?
- Why does the Honduran government
  - Why might it be difficult for us in this country to get an accurate sense of how

Hondurans feel about the U.S. and contra presence?

**Possible Activities:**

1. Imagine you are a poor Honduran. Write a letter to an American soldier telling him your reactions to having the U.S. military and contras in your country.
2. Write a poem from the perspective of Elvia Alvarado, the narrator of this reading. You might “steal” one of Elvia’s lines to open your poem. For example: “Everything in our country is for sale now. . .”
3. This would be a good time to engage students in a role play of the conflicts tearing at Honduran society. Divide students into six different groups:

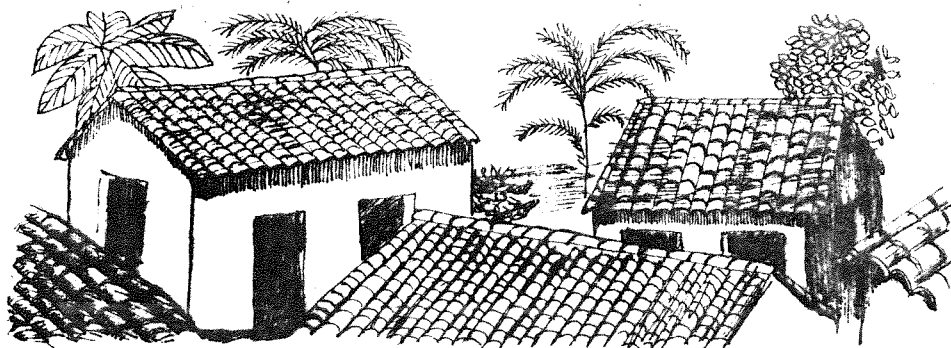
- The Honduran military
- Poor coffee growers on the Honduran border, displaced or threatened with displacement by the fighting

- Poor peasants such as Elvia
- Shopowners in the towns and cities
- Workers in the towns and cities
- Large landowners

Brainstorm with students about what life-conditions might be like for each of these groups and what their attitudes might be toward the contras and the U.S. military.

Divide students into these six groups and tell them that they will be responsible to make a presentation addressing the question: **Should the U.S. military be allowed to operate on Honduran soil?**

Give students awhile to talk among themselves and to decide on arguments. Then allow about half of each group to move around the room to meet and build alliances with other groups. Have students re-group and prepare presentations. During presentations encourage people to question and challenge one another.



## Gringos and Contras on Our Land

*The following was told to Medea Benjamin by Elvia Alvarado, a peasant leader in Honduras. Alvarado, concerned about the social problems she saw around her, first joined church-organized mother's clubs. She quit when she saw that the church, "wanted to give food out to malnourished mothers and children, but they didn't want us to question why we were malnourished to begin with. They wanted us to grow vegetables on the tiny plots around our houses, but they didn't want us to question why we didn't have enough land to feed ourselves." For Alvarado, land was the key issue; she joined a national campesino union and later, her current organization, the National Congress of Rural Workers.*

Ever since the Sandinistas came to power, the United States has been building bases all over our country. I live next to Palmerola, the biggest U.S. base. I don't know how far I live from Palmerola, because I really don't know how to measure it. By bus it takes 20 minutes. And if you walk through the fields, it's even closer. At night we can see the lights of the base from our house, and during the day we see the planes and helicopters flying overhead. They pass right over our houses.

I've never been to Palmerola, so I don't know what's really going on there. But I don't understand why these gringo bases are here to begin with.

First of all, they kicked a lot of *campesino* groups off their lands to make room for the bases. Take the Palmerola base — there were two *campesino* groups there before, and they moved them to another piece of land that isn't as good.

Secondly, the bases only strengthen the Honduran military, and that means more repression for us.

I used to feel hatred towards the gringo soldiers. Why should they be in our country, with all their guns and all their dollars, making life even more difficult for us? But now I know that these poor gringos are just ignorant; they really don't know why they're here or what this struggle is all about. I have friends who've talked to some of them, and they say that these guys don't know anything about Central America. They've just been sent here by their government. So it's really not their fault; it's the fault of the people who sent them here.

Sure, there are some people who are delighted to have the gringos here. They say, "Isn't it great we have these gringos here protecting our country?" Others are happy because the gringos spend their money here. In Comayagua, which is the town nearest the Palmerola base, the businessmen are happy to have their dollars. The people who own restaurants and bars are happy. And of course the prostitutes are happy.

There was a big scandal when the gringos first came, because the level of prostitution shot up something terrible. I won't say there weren't any prostitutes before, but not like this — with whole streets full of bordellos. The Honduran men got pissed because the prostitutes were only interested in dollars, they didn't want to sleep with Hondurans any more. And of course their prices went up, too.

There was also a scandal around the sexual abuse of children by the gringos. There were cases of children who were

raped. We'd never had anything like that before the gringos came here.

And people started talking about a sexual disease called the "flor de Vietnam," the flower of Vietnam. I guess it's named after that country Vietnam, where the United States fought another war. All I know is that it's a sexual disease that's hard to cure.

Another big problem for Honduras is the presence of the contras. The government can deny it all it wants, but everyone knows the contras are all over our country.

The contras make life hard for Hondurans living on the border. Coffee growers in the south lost their entire crop because of the fighting. These are poor farmers, not big plantation owners. I heard on the radio that they all marched to the capital to complain to the president and ask him to kick the contras out. Then they went to the U.S. embassy and asked them to pay for their losses, but the gringos said it wasn't their problem.

Where I live you don't see contras, because it's not close to the Nicaraguan border. I say you don't see them, but they might very well be there, because the Honduran military is so corrupt that it's selling its own uniforms to the contras. So you really don't know who's who any more, since there are contras going around as Hondurans. Can you imagine that? How can the military stoop so low as to sell its own uniforms? Doesn't it have any sense of dignity? Everything in our country is for sale now — from women's bodies to the army's uniforms!

Anyway, one time I was at a meeting in the south. It was right near the border between Honduras and Nicaragua where the contras have their bases. After the meeting I went around talking to the people there. I always want to learn everything I can. I'm always asking questions.

So I talked with people who lived near the border and they told me they were afraid because there was fighting going on

there all the time, right near their homes. They said that the contras live on the Honduran side of the border, and they sneak into Nicaragua when the Sandinistas aren't looking. They throw bombs and plant mines — and when the Sandinistas go after them, they run back into Honduras.

The people who live near the border are scared to death, because they get caught in the battles. Lots of *campesinos* have moved. They say there are now thousands of Hondurans who are homeless because of the contra war.

Everyone knows that if it weren't for the contras, there'd be no problems with the Sandinistas. Nobody thinks the Sandinistas are interested in taking over Honduras. They've already got one poor country to worry about. Why would they want another one?

But the *campesinos* down there are scared of the contras. They're scared about getting deeper into a war with Nicaragua, and they're scared to talk about their fears. They talk to me because I'm one of them. But they won't talk to outsiders, because there are lots of Honduran soldiers in the area. They say the soldiers told them not to talk to anyone, especially journalists.

Our government allows these contras to hide out here, but who are the ones to suffer? The Hondurans. Which Hondurans? The poor. The soldiers in the army, you see, are not the sons of the rich. Never. The sons of the rich are untouchable. They go to fancy schools or they hang around the street smoking marijuana. But the sons of the poor go into the army.

They recruit the *campesinos* by force. I know cases where the army has gone to the *campesino* settlements and taken away young boys right from the fields. They make the sons of the poor fight against their own brothers and sisters, against their own people or against their brothers and sisters in Nicaragua.

Just a few days ago we heard the

news that a Honduran military plane crashed near the Nicaraguan border. It was a plane that the United States sold to Honduras. I don't know what kind it was — I don't understand all that stuff about DCs and F2s. All I know is that it was a plane carrying 52 people — colonels, lieutenants, sergeants, soldiers, and a few civilians, including children. All 52 of them died; there wasn't a survivor in the lot.

No one knows exactly what happened — if the Nicaraguans shot it down, if there was something wrong with the plane, or what.

Fifty-two Hondurans died, and the whole country was in mourning. But no one asked why they died. They asked what happened to the plane, but they didn't ask why the plane was there to begin with.

The base they were flying to was a base in the Mosquitia. Before the gringos were around, Honduras never had an air base in the Mosquitia. Why should we? The Mosquitia's in the middle of nowhere — just a lot of mountains and trees. We're not such a rich country that we can afford to have bases in the middle of nowhere. No. It was the U.S. that built that airstrip. If we hadn't been dragged into this U.S. war, those 52 Hondurans wouldn't have been there to begin with.

But all the government says is, "Oh, what a terrible tragedy. Oh, the poor Colonel and the poor lieutenants and the poor little boy and their poor families. Oh, the Honduran people are in mourning." But they don't say anything about why they died, about why the Honduran military is flying around the Nicaraguan border.

Instead of all the condolences and the

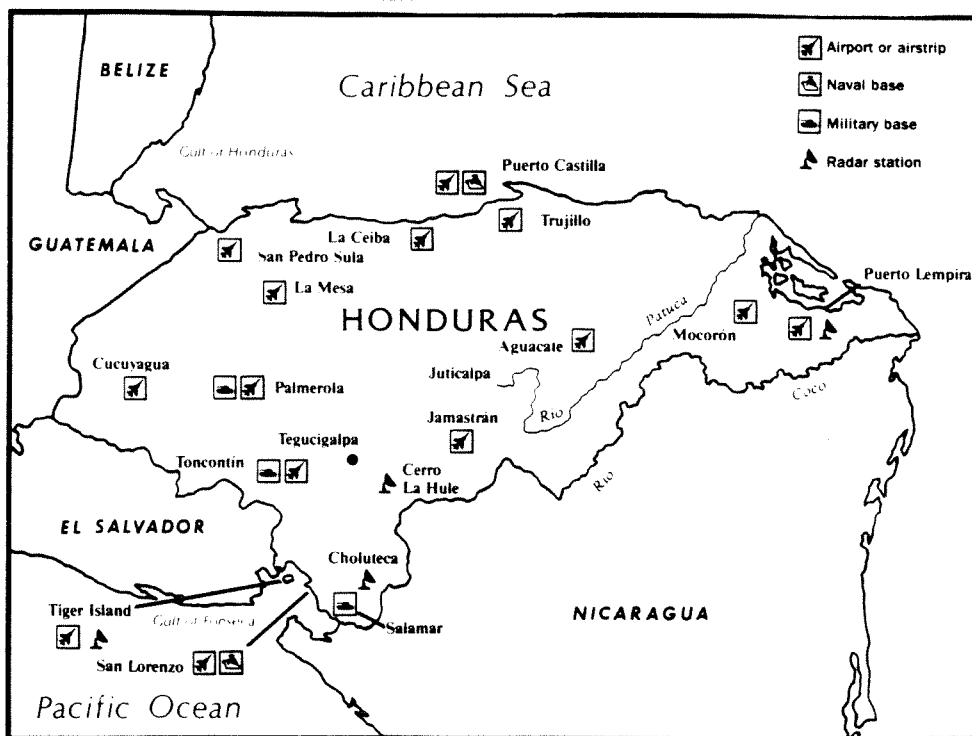
mourning, why doesn't the government say, "That's enough. We've had it with the U.S. bases and the U.S. military and this U.S. war. We won't be cannon fodder for the United States. Enough!"

*Campesinos* don't want war. War only makes our lives more difficult than they already are. What we want is land and jobs, not war. War only means a lot of poor people will die. We've got enough problems without fighting the rich man's war.

I'd like to know how the United States thinks this whole thing is going to end. What's going to happen to the contras? How long are they going to stay in Honduras? Forever?

Because I don't think they'll ever win, unless they have U.S. troops fighting with them. So what's going to happen to them? They can't go back to Nicaragua, because they've killed too many people. They've caused too much suffering for the Nicaraguans to let them back in. So will they stay here in Honduras? That's what worries us.

From: Don't Be Afraid, Gringo: A Honduran Woman Speaks from the Heart, the story of Elvia Alvarado, translated and edited by Medea Benjamin, Food First Books.



# U.S.-Honduran Military Establishments in Honduras (1)

*Asterisks indicate sites of U.S. military construction between 1982 and 1986.*

- CUCYAGUA\*: Airstrip constructed to accommodate U.S. military C-130 transport planes.
- LA MESA: Airport of Honduran Air Force, used by U.S. military transport planes during the Big Pine II maneuvers.
- SAN PEDRO SULA\*: Airstrip with capacity to handle C-130 transports.
- LA CEIBA\*: Air base and advanced ammunition depot. Recently upgraded runway.
- PUERTO CASTILLA\*: Permanent military port and air base. Former site of Regional Military Training Center, where Salvadoran and other Central American armed forces received training from Green Berets. Training center was closed in 1985.
- TRUJILLO\*: Enlarged airport, used as a supply base for Puerto Castilla. Airstrip improved to handle C-130 military transport planes.
- PUERTO LEMPIRA\*: Secret satellite communication center. Airstrip upgraded to accommodate C-130 transports.
- MOCORON\*: Airfield improved to handle C-130 military transports.
- AGUACATE\*: Airstrip extended during Big Pine maneuvers, has capacity to handle C-130 transports.
- JUTICALPA\*: Honduran National Training Center. Staffed initially by U.S. Special Forces. Will train 2,000-3,000 new Honduran recruits per year in the use of weapons and counterinsurgency tactics.
- JAMASTRAN\*: Airport constructed during Big Pine maneuvers, has capacity to handle C-130 transports. Road and runway improvements during Big Pine 1987.
- SALAMAR: Base for advisors from U.S. Special Forces Mobile Unit.
- CERRO LA HULE\*: Radar station staffed by U.S. Tactical Air Command personnel.
- CHOLUTECA: Radar station staffed by U.S. personnel observing and coordinating "contra" attacks across Nicaraguan border.
- TONCONTIN: International Airport for Tegucigalpa. Site of U.S. MILGP (Military Group) base. MILGP is responsible for all U.S. military training activities in Honduras.
- SAN LORENZO\*: Naval base and airport, now capable of handling C-130 transports. Facility for remotely piloted intelligence-gathering vehicles.

Used to launch U.S. reconnaissance flights over El Salvador to detect guerilla activity.

- TIGER ISLAND\*: Radar station staffed by 150 U.S. Marines. Monitors activity in Nicaragua and El Salvador. Has airstrip with capacity to handle C-7 transports. Also used as base for CIA speedboats.
- PALMEROLA\*: Site of General Headquarters for Joint Task Forces Bravo, with 800-1,200 permanently stationed U.S. troops. Base for Mohawk and Beechcraft surveillance aircraft used over El Salvador and Nicaragua. Primary forward munition and jet fuel storage depot for U.S. forces in region.

## Additional Facts on U.S. Militarization of Honduras

- In 1980, the U.S. had 25 military personnel in Honduras. By 1984, from 800-1,200 maintained a regular presence, with the bulk on the Palmerola Base
- From 1983 to May 1987, almost 80,000 U.S. troops have been trained in Honduras on military maneuvers. (2)
- Between 1982 and 1986, the U.S. has built or upgraded in Honduras 11 airfields, 2 radar stations, roads, tank traps, fuel storage areas and air intelligence installations. (3)

## Notes

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2. Food First, phone interview, Captain Ferrara, Marine Corps Desk, U.S. Pentagon.

3. LeMoyné, James, "U.S. Said to Plan a Long Presence in Honduran Bases," *New York Times*, July 13, 1986.