

An Introduction to
ENRIQUE'S HONDURAS
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The Land Enrique Left Behind:

Although Enrique's journey ends in the United States, the beginning is in his native Central American country of Honduras. Honduras, with a little over 7,640,000 people, is the second largest of the states that lie between Mexico and South America's Colombia. Unfortunately it is also one of the poorest, with an annual Gross Domestic Product of little more than \$1800 per capita per year. Although the country's income levels have improved somewhat in recent years, it is high unemployment and low wages that cause Hondurans such as Enrique's mother, Lourdes, to leave. The mother of his girlfriend, María Isabel, claims that, "jobs that pay OK," could change that. Unfortunately, despite some gains in recent years, the economy is still so fragile that money sent home by immigrants, legal and illegal, is an important source of income for Honduras.

The Economic Challenge

A major challenge for Honduras lies in the fact that the economy is rather narrowly based, resting on two agricultural commodities, bananas and coffee. When prices for these rise, the country naturally benefits. However, commodity prices can fluctuate widely, and when they are in steep decline, it severely hurts a country such as this. The historic dominant economic and political influence of the United States' United Fruit Company "earned" Honduras the derogatory nickname of a "Banana Republic," long before that title became associated with the popular clothing outlet. Foreign corporate influence is now on the decline.

In addition to bananas and coffee, the tropical eastern lowlands produce valuable hardwoods, and exports also include seafood, fruit, gold, and palm oil. Silver mines attracted the first Spanish settlers.

The People and Their Culture

Honduras was part of the area settled by the Mayans. The area near Copán contains significant Mayan archeological sites. Approximately 90 percent of Enrique's countrymen are *mestizos*, people of mixed Spanish and Indian ancestry. They speak Spanish. The increasingly fashionable Bay Islands, off the Caribbean coast, are predominantly English speaking. Afro-Hondurans here and on the coastal mainland are descendants of former slaves and indentured servants. Today you might see the islands featured in programs on the House and Garden Channel, as upscale developments attract a wealthy international clientele.

Most Hondurans are Roman Catholic, but there is freedom of worship, and various Protestant denominations have active congregations here. Membership in Protestant churches, especially the evangelical ones, is increasing.

The typical Honduran lives in a rural setting, and most communities are of modest size. Much of the country is mountainous or highlands, which gradually gives way to the tropical lowlands of the east. Unfortunately the soils for the most part are not very fertile, and thus add to the economic difficulties the typical Honduran faces. Agriculture has still not fully recovered from Hurricane Mitch in 1998.

Tegucigalpa, the nation's capital, is by far the country's largest city, with a population of 1,324,000. It has the misfortune to be the only Central American capital city (unless Belize is included) not to be situated on the Inter-American Highway, the principal link to the other Central American states, Mexico, and the United States. This is especially unfortunate given the country's lack of adequate infrastructure. San Pedro Sula, near the Caribbean coast, is the country's industrial center.

Politics in Honduras

Honduras has a 1982 Constitution that was amended in 1999. This document calls for a powerful president who is also commander-in-chief of the armed forces. The National Legislature has limited powers. There are approximately five political parties, with the Partido Liberal de Honduras and the Partido Nacional de Honduras considered the strongest. Before the present Constitution went into effect, many governments were dominated by the military. Much of the government's financial resources go to support a large bureaucracy, leaving little to support programs or build infrastructure.

Important Dates in Honduran History

5th to 9th century: Height of the Mayan civilization in Honduras

1502: Columbus lands in the Bay Islands and claims the Honduran region for Spain

1821-1822: Central America gains independence from Spain and unites with Mexico

1823-1838: Honduras is part of the Federal Republic of Central America

1838: Honduras emerges as a separate independent state

1969: Honduras and El Salvador fight the "Football War"

1972: The United States turns over the disputed Swan Islands to Honduras

1982: The present Constitution goes into effect, ending a lengthy period of military rule

1998: Hurricane Mitch destroys "fifty years of progress," according to the President

The Football War

The so-called 1969 "Football War" between Honduras and El Salvador is definite proof that poverty and hunger (our SAGA theme for this year) can be a direct cause of war. Poverty-stricken, land-hungry peasants from El Salvador pushed across the ill-defined mountainous border to squat in more sparsely populated Honduras. The government of Honduras was angry about this, noting that Honduras was poorer than El Salvador.

Tensions reached a low point when the two countries met in a World Cup elimination soccer match. Shortly after this both armies clashed, and Salvadoran troops entered Honduras. Through the efforts of the Organization of American States a cease fire and troop withdrawal were arranged, and by 1970 the situation had calmed considerably. Florida Southern College student Ruben Garcia was among the group of American military forces that were a key component of the OAS peace force that went in to restore order.

Relations with the United States

Relations between the United States and Honduras have often been better than America's relationships with other Central American and Caribbean states. None-the-less, they have not been free of difficulty. Many Hondurans long resented the influence of the United Fruit Company and other corporations that dominated the country's agriculture and mining operations. They resented even the limited rail network that had been built to transport bananas rather than Hondurans. Today the situation has improved, and Hondurans are more likely to feel they control their own country.

A seemingly unlikely source of controversy, is the tiny Swan Islands, first discovered by Columbus, that lie approximately ninety miles north of Honduras. In the 1960s they received a brief period of notoriety when the American CIA built an anti-Castro radio station there known as Radio Swan (later Radio Americas). Supposedly owned and operated by the Gibraltar Steamship Company, this corporation owned not a single ship. In 1961 Radio Swan transmitted the messages to begin the ill-fated Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba. It continued broadcasting until 1968.

Based on the Columbus landing, in the 1920s Honduras laid claim to the islands. In the 1960s it began to vigorously press this claim, and some Hondurans saw the American presence on Swan Island as evidence of "Yankee imperialism." In 1972, in a goodwill gesture to improve relations, Washington dropped all claims to the islands in favor of Honduras in exchange for the right to continue to operate a weather station. As a result of this, relations between the United States and Honduras warmed considerably.

During the 1980s the leftist Sandinista movement gained control of Nicaragua, the southern neighbor of Honduras. As a result, Washington countered with a very close military relationship with Honduras. In addition to joint military exercises and the construction of bases, the United States equipped and trained so-called insurgent Contra Forces who conducted guerrilla operations inside Nicaragua and hoped to overthrow the Sandinistas. Many Hondurans did not like their country used in this way and also believed that the United States supported extreme right-wing elements within the government who were quite willing to use violence to remain in and extend their power. With the peaceful end of Sandinista rule in Nicaragua the situation finally eased.

Chiapas: The Neighbor to the North

Readers will recall that some of the most difficult part of Enrique's journey is the time he spent crossing the most southern of all the Mexican states, Chiapas. Chiapas lies just north of Guatemala, which Enrique entered after leaving Honduras. This state, especially the eastern half, with a population of approximately 4,300,000 is the poorest in Mexico. Most people are small, poor farmers who believe the government has totally failed in its promises to bring about land reform. Many, especially among the Mayans, support the Zapatista National Liberation Army, which actually controls a number of small towns, although it tries to avoid clashes with the government.

Chiapas is also a place of cultural clash. It is the only state in Mexico where a significant number of persons of completely Mayan ancestry live. Many speak only Mayan, not Spanish. Throughout the entire Yucatan region of Mexico you can find tension between those of predominantly Mayan background and those of mostly Spanish ancestry. The Mayans see the Spanish as culture destroyers. The Spanish saw the Mayan culture as cruel and barbaric. The tension is fueled by the poverty of the land.

Given this background, it is not surprising that residents of Chiapas often display severe hostility toward immigrants. They may feel these people left conditions better than those in Chiapas, that there is nothing to share, and no reason to share even if there were things worth sharing. Immigrants, even transitory ones, are not welcome. They are only a threat to the few jobs and resources that are available.

Florida Southern in Honduras

Florida Southern College does have a helping presence in Honduras! During the 2009 spring break, students led by Spanish Professor Dr. Patricia Suppes went to Honduras to help support projects of the Hope for Honduran Children Foundation. They had the opportunity to teach and make friendships with children in several rural communities, including Flor Azul and Nuevo Paraiso. They demonstrated successfully that we are able to do more than just read or hear about poverty. We can help eliminate it. Another group will be going during our fall 2009 break. Future groups will be going after that. Perhaps you may want to consider membership in one of these. There is no pay, but the rewards are priceless.