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Honduran bishops hope talks bring just, peaceful solution

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TEGUCIGALPA, Honduras -- One day after the start of talks in the Honduran political crisis, the country's Catholic bishops appealed for calm and called for a "just and peaceful" solution.

"We cannot continue in uncertainty, personal and social tension, and economic breakdown," the bishops said in a statement dated Oct. 8. "The people of Honduras have placed great hope in this national dialogue, and those hopes cannot be frustrated, because it would lead to great disillusionment and increased personal and social tension."

The Honduran bishops, who issued their statement after their regular meeting, called for a "respectful and understanding atmosphere of dialogue," because "any form of violence, in word or deed, would be harmful and would ... lead to the loss of credibility of whoever provokes it."

Honduras has been sunk in political conflict since June 28, when the military deposed and deported President Manuel Zelaya. Although the Organization of American States and most other governments called for Zelaya to be reinstated, the de facto president, Roberto Micheletti, has resisted. The standoff has taken a toll on the Honduran economy, as countries have refused to recognize the de facto government and have suspended aid.

The bishops said the talks now under way should "not be reduced to a conflict-resolution technique, but must have an ethical dimension." Those involved "have a serious responsibility before God and society, which they must not forget or underestimate," they wrote.

The bishops said a political agreement will not be "the complete solution to the serious problems afflicting Honduras, but at least it would put the country in an appropriate position to address them."

An agreement mediated in July by former Costa Rican President Oscar Arias calls for Zelaya to be reinstated and elections, in which he would not be a candidate, to be held in November, with the new president taking office in January.

Zelaya slipped back into the country Sept. 21 and took refuge in the Brazilian Embassy, amid clashes between police and his supporters. On Sept. 26, Micheletti declared a state of emergency and shut down several pro-Zelaya broadcasters, but legislators and other politicians have been reluctant to support the suspension of basic rights, such as freedom of assembly, especially with general elections scheduled for late November.

Pressure from inside and outside the country finally forced Micheletti to agree to talks, which began Oct. 7.

Until the Oct. 8 statement, the Honduran bishops' conference had remained silent since Zelaya's return, despite threats against a Jesuit-run radio station and its director, Jesuit Father Ismael Moreno.

On Sept. 30, however, Caritas Honduras issued a strong statement opposing the state of emergency, calling it "disproportionate in its imposition of illegitimate force and an obstacle to dialogue, because it violates basic

human rights, such as freedom of expression, assembly, association and movement, and (constitutional) guarantees."

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