



Honduras

Introduction

Official Name: Republic of Honduras
Nationality: Honduran
Area: 112,090 square kilometers (43,278 square miles)
Languages: Spanish, Amerindian dialects
Currency: lempira (HNL)
Location: Central America, bordered by Guatemala, Nicaragua, and El Salvador with coastline on the Caribbean Sea and the Gulf of Fonseca

Statistical Information

Population	7.5 million
0-14 years	39.3 percent
15-64 years	57.2 percent
65+ years	3.5 percent
Birth rate	28 births/1,000
Death rate	5 deaths/1,000
Fertility rate	3.5 children/woman
Pop. growth rate	2.091 percent
Life expectancy	69.4 years
Literacy	80 percent
HIV/AIDS rate	1.8 percent
Below poverty line	50.7 percent
Ethnic groups	90 percent mestizo 7 percent Amerindian 2 percent black 1 percent white
Religion	97 percent Roman Catholic 3 percent Protestant

Economy

Honduras is the second poorest country in Central America and one of the poorest countries in the Western Hemisphere. The country receives debt relief through the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries initiative. The distribution of income is very unequal, and levels of unemployment run high. The Honduran economy relies heavily on a few export items, particularly bananas and coffee, so it is vulnerable to natural disasters and depressed commodity prices. Efforts are being made to diversify the economy, in

order to make it less vulnerable. Reduction of the high crime rate will help attract foreign investment in the economy.

Government

Capital: Tegucigalpa

Honduras is a democratic constitutional republic. The president is both chief of state and head of government; he is elected by popular vote for a four-year term. The legislature consists of the unicameral National Congress or Congreso Nacional, whose 128 members are elected to serve four-year terms on the basis of the proportion of votes received by their party's presidential candidate.

Climate

The coastal zones are generally warm and humid, while the central mountain region is cooler and drier. Honduras experiences two defined seasons: the rainy season, from May to October, and the dry season, from November to April. Along the northern coast and in the Bay Islands, it is very hot and humid, and rain falls year-round, though the rainiest time is October to November.

Environmental Concerns

Both logging and clearing of land for agricultural purposes result in widespread deforestation. Land degradation and soil erosion are hastened by rapid development and improper land use practices, such as the farming of marginal lands. Lago de Yojoa, the country's largest source of fresh water, and several rivers and streams are being polluted by high concentrations of heavy metals as a result of mining activities.

History

The earliest recorded civilization in Honduras was the Mayan Empire. The Mayan Empire grew in power during the fourth century A.D. Maya civilization was most likely centered around small, city-state-like entities rather than a strong central

government. Each city-state had its own social order. The Mayan religion was most likely centered around ancestor worship. They had a system of hieroglyphic script, syllabic in nature.

After 900 A.D. the Mayan civilization went into rapid decline, and most of the major cities were abandoned. By the time of the Spanish conquest, most Mayan populations were centered around small villages.

In 1502, Columbus sighted Honduras on one of his explorations. He called it "Honduras," meaning "depths," because of the deep water off the coastline. Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés arrived in 1524. He ordered Pedro de Alvarado, another conquistador, to found settlements along the coast. The cities of Comayagua and Tegucigalpa grew up around early Spanish mining centers.

From 1537 to 1538, Spain fought the indigenous peoples of Honduras. After the death of the native leader Lempira, Spain succeeded in crushing the rebellion.

In 1821, Honduras gained its independence from Spain. It became part of Agustín de Iturbide's Mexican empire. In 1825, Honduras became part of the Central American Federation, a political confederation of the Central American republics newly independent from Spain. The Central American Federation included Honduras, Nicaragua, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Costa Rica. Rivalries between conservatives and liberals along with each country's fear that the other countries would gain more power led to the dissolution of the congress of the Central American Federation in 1838.

Conservatives and liberals waged bloody wars to control Honduras, and Central American neighbors frequently interfered in Honduran government. In 1860, William Walker, an American filibuster, sought to gain control of Central America from the Islas de la Bahía of Honduras. He was forced to surrender to the British navy. Walker was turned over to Honduras and executed by firing squad on September 12, 1860. Honduras continued to promote Central American unity, but its efforts were continually frustrated by political enmity among the various republics.

Beginning in the late 19th century, foreign capital, plantation life, and conservative politics were the major forces in Honduras. When dictator Tiburcio Carías Andino announced his retirement in 1948, the liberal movement was brought to the forefront and presidential elections were held. In 1955, Honduras adopted a labor code, which defined and protected

the rights of laborers. In 1957, the country adopted a new constitution and elected its first liberal president in 25 years, Ramón Villeda Morales. In 1960, the five states of the former Central American Federation formed the Central American Common Market, a trade organization designed to increase trade between member nations.

Shortly before the scheduled presidential election of 1963, Villeda was overthrown in a military coup. A military junta headed by Osvaldo López Arellano took over the government. In 1969, several hundred thousand Salvadorians illegally crossed the poorly defined El Salvador-Honduras border. Honduras deported many of the immigrants, which led to a war with El Salvador in July of 1969. The war lasted only five days, but led to Honduras' withdrawal from the Central American Common Market, which collapsed shortly thereafter due to increasing political tension in Central America. Border disputes with El Salvador continued.

In 1971, Ramón Ernesto Cruz was elected to succeed López, only to be ousted by López the next year. In late 1974, a powerful hurricane devastated the Caribbean coast of Honduras. In 1975, López was removed from office by a coup after accepting \$1.25 million in bribes from the United Brands Company. Another coup in 1978 placed General Policarpo Paz García in control of Honduras. In 1980, a peace treaty with El Salvador was finally signed.

Political unrest in Central America continued to increase throughout the 1970s and early 1980s; the United States began to put pressure on the Honduran government to hold democratic elections. In 1982, a new constitution calling for democratic elections was put into place and Roberto Suazo Górdova was elected president.

During the 1980s, Honduras served as a base for rebels trying to overthrow the Nicaraguan government. The Contra rebel bases were supported by aid received by the government of Honduras from the United States. By 1988, Honduran discontent with the presence of the Contra rebels in their country led to widespread demonstrations and the declaration of a national state of emergency. In 1989, Rafael Leonardo Callejas Romero became president; the Contra war ended in 1990.

During the 1990s, Honduras worked to develop its economy and reduce dependence on the United States. Regional peace and cooperation aided the Honduran government in its pursuit. In 1992, Honduras and El Salvador signed an agreement which mostly settled the border controversy between

the two nations. The final disputed section of the border was agreed upon in 2006.

Late in 1998, Hurricane Mitch left 5,600 Hondurans dead and thousands more missing. Most of the country's crops and livestock were destroyed, dealing a heavy blow to its economy.

Ethnic Groups

Ninety percent of the Honduran population is mestizo, or mixed Amerindian and European (mostly Spanish), a result of Spanish conquistadors and settlers intermarrying with native Amerindians during the colonial period.

An estimated seven percent of Hondurans are members of one of Honduras' seven recognized indigenous groups. Indigenous Hondurans often face discrimination from the mestizo population. The Ch'orti' tribe is of Mayan descent; they live in northwestern Honduras. The Garífunas are a tribe of mixed Amerindian and African heritage who live along the Caribbean coastline. The Pech tribe of the Olancho department, in northeastern Honduras, has only a few hundred members left. The Tolupan, or Jicaque, tribe lives primarily in the community of the Montaña de la Flor. The Lenca Amerindians live in the western highlands of Honduras, in the Valle and Choluteca departments. The Miskitos live along the Mosquito Coast; there are few pure-blooded Miskitos left, since over the centuries many escaped slaves have intermarried with the tribe.

Afro-Hondurans reside mainly along the Caribbean or Atlantic coasts. Most are descendents of West African slaves or indentured servants brought to Honduras during the colonial period.

Religion

The majority of Hondurans are nominally Roman Catholic. Catholicism was brought to Honduras by Spanish settlers, and became an ingrained part of Spanish and mestizo culture. Today, membership in the Roman Catholic Church is beginning to decline, while membership in Protestant churches is on the rise. There are several Protestant seminaries in Honduras.

Culture

Food—Beans and corn tortillas are staples of the Honduran diet. Beans are often fried, and tortillas are usually small, thick, and handmade; they are often served warm. Other favorite foods include fried plantains, white cheese, rice, fried meat, scrambled eggs, cabbage and tomato salad, avocados, and *mantequilla*, a type of thickened semi-sweet cream. Mantequilla is comparable to a sweet

butter. Bottled soft drinks and sweet coffee are popular drinks.

Social status—Wealthy Hondurans have their own social clubs and live in large adobe mansions. Imported cars and foreign vacations are signs of wealth. Educated professionals often live in smaller but well-kept houses and drive older cars.

Marriage—Hondurans are free to marry whomever they wish; there are few societal rules prohibiting the marriage of two people with different social backgrounds. Many Hondurans marry neighbors or people they meet at work or school. Most Hondurans choose to marry and have children.

Education—Higher education, especially a degree from the U.S. or Europe, is valued. There are branches of the national university in most major cities, and thousands of Hondurans attend night classes after work. Honduras also has private universities and both a national and a private agricultural school.

Etiquette—A handshake is the basic Honduran greeting, although hugs are also common among close friends who have not seen each other recently. Hondurans are very friendly and quick to offer a smile or greeting. In offices, workers commonly greet everyone they pass in the hallway. People often smile and greet strangers on the street.

Dress

Most Hondurans wear Western-style clothes. Many indigenous tribes also dress in Western-style clothes, although there are some indigenous communities whose people retain their traditional manner of dress. More traditional clothing, which is often brightly colored, may be seen on festival days.

Travel/Transportation

Driving in Honduras can be dangerous. Roads are often in poor condition; many are unpaved and unmarked. After dark, roads are usually not well-lit. Rockslides are common, especially during the rainy season, and pose a hazard to drivers. Drivers should always keep doors locked and windows rolled up, since Honduras has a relatively high rate of carjacking and highway robbery.

Buses regularly run between large cities and offer three types of service: multiple-stop service, direct service, and luxury direct service. The price of the bus ticket will depend upon the distance and the level of service.

Visitors who wish to drive in Honduras should obtain an Inter-American or International Driving Permit. These permits allow a motorist to operate a vehicle in

a foreign country when accompanied by a valid license from his or her own country. The Inter-American or International Driving Permit is a translation of a U.S. or Canadian driver's license.

Either of these permits can be obtained in the United States or Canada before traveling. The American Automobile Association (AAA) and the American Automobile Touring Alliance are the only organizations in the U.S. authorized by the State Department to issue Inter-American or International Driving Permits. The Canadian Automobile Association (CAA) is authorized to issue Inter-American or International Driving Permits to Canadian citizens. The cost is under \$20; the application will need to be accompanied by two passport-sized photos.

Illness/Injury

Medical care in Honduras varies greatly in quality and availability, depending upon location. Outside the major cities of Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula, medical care is rudimentary and cannot address complex issues. Honduras does not have facilities which can support advanced surgical procedures. Some areas of the country, including the Bay Islands, a popular tourist destination, do not have a general surgery hospital. Ambulance services are available on a limited basis in major cities.

Many hospitals and clinics will require cash payment at the time of service rendered. Many insurance policies do not cover international claims.

Crime

Honduras has a high rate of crime; both Hondurans and visitors may be targeted by criminals. The rate of violent crime, including murder, kidnapping, and assault, is high. Pickpocketing is a problem in crowded and tourist areas, so visitors should be careful with belongings. Carjackings and highway robbery may also occur, particularly in rural areas and in certain parts of the country. It is best to keep windows rolled up and doors locked to deter carjackers.

Most members of the Honduran police force do not speak English. There are special tourist police forces in popular tourist destinations. Members of these forces will be able to speak English.

Safety and Security

Political demonstrations in Honduras will sometimes disrupt traffic flow, but demonstrations are usually peaceful, and the Honduran police do not attempt to break them up. It is best to go around such road blocks.

Entry/Exit Requirements

Americans must have a passport valid for at least three months beyond the date of entry. A visa is not required.

As of June 2006, Honduras entered a "Central America-4 (C-4) Border Control Agreement" with Guatemala, Nicaragua, and El Salvador. Under this agreement, citizens of the four countries may travel freely across land borders between the four countries without entry and exit formalities at border stations. This agreement also extends to visitors who have legally entered one of the four countries. Once a visitor has entered one of the four countries, he or she may freely cross land borders between the four countries without additional visas or tourist entry permits.

For more information concerning entry and exit requirements, contact the Embassy of Honduras at 3007 Tilden St. NW, Washington, D.C. 20008.

Immunizations

There are no required immunizations for entry into Honduras, although yellow fever and hepatitis A and B vaccines are strongly recommended, as Honduras has a high transmission rate of these illnesses. Malaria is a risk in all areas of Honduras; chloroquine is the recommended antimalarial drug. Other mosquito-borne illnesses, including dengue fever, are also a high risk factor in Honduras. There is no vaccination for dengue fever, but it is a good idea to use repellent spray and protect against mosquito bites.

Special Circumstances

Carry enough Honduran lempiras to cover your expenses, especially when traveling in rural areas. The availability of banks is limited outside major cities, and many rural establishments cannot accept traveler's checks or foreign currency. Carry small bills, as many taxi drivers do not carry enough cash to make change for large bills.

Tap water is not safe to drink in Honduras. Bottled or bagged purified water is readily available, and bottled juice or soda is also a safe alternative.

Electricity

American appliances may be used in Honduras without a power converter or adapter plugs. Honduras uses 110V/60Hz power and types A and B plugs.