
The New York Times

THE SATURDAY PROFILE

A Cold War Ghost Reappears in Honduras



Edgard Garrido for The New York Times

Billy Joya in Tegucigalpa, Honduras.

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Published: August 7, 2009

TEGUCIGALPA, [Honduras](#)

THE coup here has brought back a lot of Central America's cold war ghosts, but few as polarizing as Billy Joya, a former police captain accused of being the former leader of a death squad.

He didn't sneak quietly back into national politics. He made his reappearance on a popular evening talk show just hours [after troops had rousted](#) President [Manuel Zelaya](#) out of bed and loaded him onto a plane leaving the country.

Mr. Joya's purpose, he said, was to defend the ouster and help calm a public that freed itself from military rule less than three decades ago. Instead, he set off alarms among human rights activists around the world who worried that the worst elements of the Honduran military were taking control.

"The name Billy Joya reverberated much more than Micheletti," Mr. Joya protested, perhaps a little too strenuously, referring to the head of the de facto government, [Roberto Micheletti](#), installed by the military. "Instantly, my image was everywhere."

Mr. Joya's conflicting images — a vilified figure who portrays himself as a victim — are as hard to reconcile as his life story. Human rights groups consider him one of the most ruthless former operatives of an American-backed military unit, known as Battalion 316, responsible for kidnapping, torturing and murdering hundreds of people suspected of being leftists during the 1980s.

Today, Mr. Joya, a 52-year-old husband and father of four, has become a political consultant to some of the most powerful people in the country, including Mr. Micheletti during his failed campaign to become president last year. Now that Mr. Micheletti has effectively secured that post, Mr. Joya has resurfaced again as a liaison of sorts between Mr. Micheletti and the international media.

Mr. Joya looks straight out of central casting, though not for the role of a thug. He has more of the smooth, elegant bearing of a leading man. And in the 14 years since he was first brought to trial on charges of illegally detaining and torturing six university students, he has undertaken a solitary quest — one that can at times border on obsession — aimed not only at defending himself, but also at vindicating the government's past fight against Communism.

In 1995, he released a 779-page volume of newspaper clippings, government records and human rights reports meant to substantiate the military's narrative of the cold war, which essentially accuses its opponents of having blood on their hands as well. And in 1998, after living for a couple

of years in exile in Spain, Mr. Joya said he was the first and only military officer to surrender himself for trial.

“Not once in 14 years has there been a single legitimate piece of evidence linking me to these crimes,” he said. Referring to human rights organizations, he said, “What they have done is to condemn me in the media, because they know if they proceed with these cases in court, they are going to lose.”

The odds would appear to be on Mr. Joya’s side. In 1989, the [Inter-American Court of Human Rights](#) determined that the Honduran military was responsible for systematic abuses against government opponents. Still, in the 27 years since this country returned to civilian rule, authorities say, Honduran courts have held only two military officials — Col. Juan Blas Salazar Mesa and Lt. Marco Tulio Regalado — accountable for human rights violations.

ONLY about a dozen other officers ever faced formal charges. And most of those cases, like Mr. Joya’s, remain unresolved by a judicial system that remains crippled by corruption.

Meanwhile, Mr. Joya has not suffered silently in legal limbo. In some ways, he has hardly suffered at all. His business as a security consultant and political adviser to some of the most powerful elected officials and businessmen in the country has been lucrative.

“He is like one of those guys who went to Vietnam,” said Antonio Tavel, president of Xerox in Honduras. “He had an ugly job to do once upon a time, and now he’s a regular family guy.”

Mr. Joya is the son of a businessman who helped start several successful companies in Honduras but gambled away more money than he made. Mr. Joya, one of four children, said he enrolled in the military academy at 14, mostly as a way to gain early independence.

He was expelled from the academy, he said, when a teacher caught him cheating on an exam. But instead of giving up his dream to be a soldier, he

enlisted as a private and within two years had risen to become the youngest sergeant in the army.

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Mr. Joya joined the military police, and in 1981 — as the Reagan administration spent tens of millions of dollars to turn this impoverished country into the principal staging area for a covert war against the region's left-wing guerrilla groups — Mr. Joya said that he and 12 other Honduran soldiers received six weeks of training in the United States.

He acknowledged that he went on to become a member of Battalion 316. But that's where his version of events diverges from those of his accusers. He has been charged with 27 crimes, including illegal detention, torture and murder.

The most noteworthy case involved the illegal detention and torture of the six university students in April 1982. The students said they were held in a series of secret jails for eight days. During that time, the students testified, they were kept blindfolded and naked, denied food and water, and subjected to beatings and psychological torture.

Among those detained was Milton Jiménez, who later became a lawyer and a member of Mr. Zelaya's cabinet. In 1995, Mr. Jiménez [told The Baltimore Sun](#) that officers from the battalion stood him before a firing squad and threatened to shoot him.

“They said they were finishing my grave,” he said at the time. “I was convinced I was going to die.”

Edmundo Orellana, the former Honduran attorney general who was the first to try to prosecute human rights crimes, said it was “absurd” that Mr. Joya remained free.

“Billy Joya is proof that civilian rule has been a cruel hoax on the Honduran people,” Mr. Orellana said. “He shows that ignorance and complicity still reign inside our courts, especially when it comes to the armed forces.”

Absurd, Mr. Joya countered, are the charges against him. After his television appearance, he said he received so many threats that he took his wife and youngest daughter to the United States. Now he returns to Honduras only intermittently to meet with clients.

PORING over dozens of newspaper clippings and court dockets during an interview, he argued that Battalion 316 was not established until two years after Mr. Jiménez's detention, and that it was a technical unit specializing in arms interdiction, not counterinsurgency.

He also argued that the former students' testimony against him is rife with contradictions. He said Mr. Jiménez, for example, later recanted his charge that Mr. Joya was involved in his interrogations.

“It was never my responsibility to detain people, to torture people or to disappear people,” Mr. Joya said. “But if those had been my orders, I am sure I would have obeyed them, because I was trained to obey orders.”

“The policy at that time was, ‘The only good Communist is a dead Communist,’ ” he continued. “I supported the policy.”