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Honduras: Major Towns and Other Important Features

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Chief, Geography Division, OGI

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Honduras: Major Towns and Other Important Features

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With 112,150 square kilometers, Honduras is the second-largest country in Central America following Nicaragua and is comparable in size to Tennessee. It has a smaller population than tiny El Salvador—less than a fifth its size. Although most of its 4,000,000 inhabitants are located in the western part of the country, especially in and around Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula, some growth has taken place in the east in the past decade. Spanish-speaking mestizos make up the bulk of the population, but a considerable number of Indians and blacks live along the Caribbean coast where English is widely spoken in addition to Spanish. Despite considerable agricultural and forest potential, Honduras has lagged behind its neighbors in many respects: it has the lowest literacy rate, the lowest road network density, and the lowest per capita gross domestic product in Central America. Nevertheless, large numbers of Salvadorans and Nicaraguans still flee to Honduras seeking refuge from violence in their own countries.

Populated Places

The 18 departmental capitals and four other significant towns listed below are the most important urban centers in Honduras. The population figures, shown in parentheses, are projections for 1982 made by the Honduran Central Planning Office and are considered the most accurate estimates available. The map grid reference follows each place name.

Amapala -G4- (2,000) is a lighter port on Isla del Tigre, a small volcanic island in the center of the Golfo de Fonseca. At one time the island was ceded to the United States to guard against possible English control of a route across Central America via the Rio Coco and the Rio Choluteca; it was also once notorious as a refuge for pirates. Amapala acts as the gateway to the rivers that service the agricultural lands of the southwest. Ships offload their goods by lighters, which bring them to Amapala customs; the goods are then reshipped by lighter to the mainland town of San Lorenzo. Handling costs are high. Charter boats go to La Union, El Salvador, and a ferry connects the island to the mainland. Honduran naval patrol boats operate out of a small base on Isla del Tigre. A small airfield is located on the northeast side of the island.

Choluteca -G5- (47,000), capital of the department of the same name, is a commercial center located at the point where the Inter-American highway crosses the

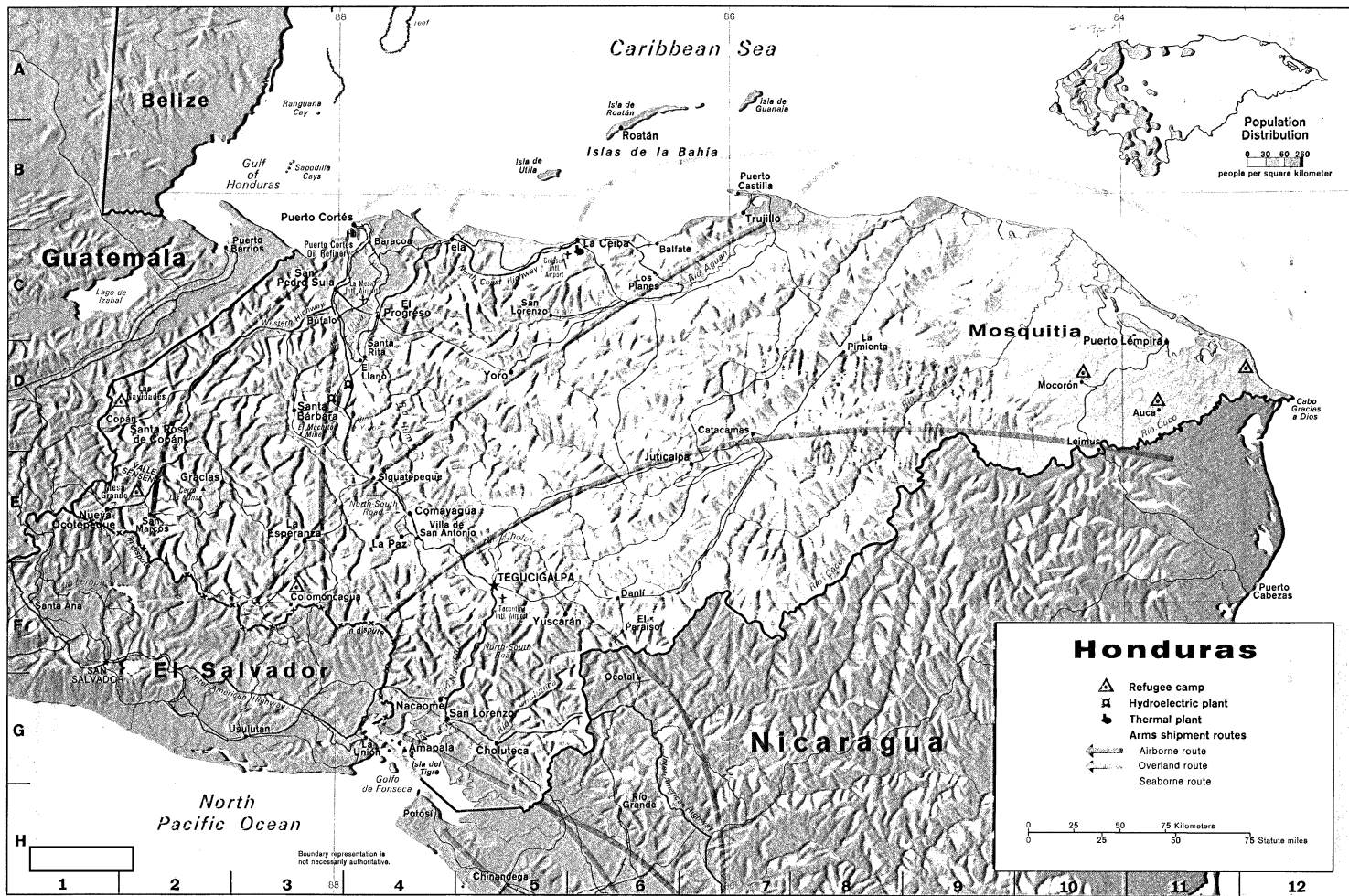
Rio Choluteca. The area is noted for coffee and cattle. Industries include food-processing plants, a sugar refinery, and a sawmill. An airfield southeast of town is home base for several crop-dusting companies. The population of Choluteca is expanding rapidly and poverty is widespread.

Comayagua -E4- (23,000) is located on the North-South Road between Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula, in a valley largely dedicated to cattle ranching and citrus farming. A principal industry of the town is the manufacture of fireworks. During colonial times Honduras was divided into two separate administrative units—one ruled from Tegucigalpa, the other from Comayagua. After independence there was strong rivalry between the two cities. The title of national capital was frequently transferred from one city to the other until 1880. Comayagua is now simply the capital of its department. Many of the old colonial buildings remain; the Army still uses a fortress built when Comayagua was the national capital.

Gracias -E2- (4,100), capital of Lempira Department, is one of the oldest, most historic settlements in the country. It was the base from which a great Indian revolt was put down in early colonial times, and, for a short period, was the administrative center for all of Central America. Some coffee is grown in the area, but access to markets is difficult because of the rugged terrain and poor roads. Lempira Department occupies the most mountainous land in Honduras.

Juticalpa -E7- (20,000), capital of Olancho Department, is located in a rich agricultural area of cattle, cereals, and sugarcane. Timber, now the country's third-largest export, is expected to gain importance with the development of paper and pulp complexes in Olancho; these projects, costing some \$200 million, are scheduled for completion in 1985. A newly paved road from Tegucigalpa continues on from Juticalpa northeastward to Catacamas; plans call for paving the route all the way to the Caribbean coast.

La Ceiba -C6- (80,000), a major Caribbean port and capital of Atlantida Department, serves as an outlet for bananas, pineapples, and timber. The port, an open, exposed roadstead, is connected to coastal settlements to the east and west by paved roads and rail. Standard Fruit Company headquarters are located here. Goloson International Airport, west-southwest of La Ceiba, has direct jet service to New Orleans and Miami as well as to Mexico and domestic destinations.



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The airport also serves as headquarters for the Honduran Second Tactical Air Force and has support facilities for jet fighters.

La Esperanza -E3- (4,800), the capital of Intibuca Department, is situated in a valley at almost 1,500 meters above sea level amid forest-covered mountains. Lenca Indians from nearby villages sell blankets and other wares in the local market on Sundays. A surfaced road leads northeastward to connect with the North-South Road between Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula. The high elevation and resulting temperate climate of the area permit the cultivation of potatoes as well as such fruits as peaches and apples.

La Paz -E4- (14,000), capital of the department of the same name, is located about 15 kilometers south-southwest of Comayagua, to which it is connected by a dirt road. A shorter dirt road runs east to connect with the North-South Road to Tegucigalpa. Nearby, in the mountainous region to the southwest, is one of the few pure Indian communities in Honduras and also one of its finest coffee-producing areas.

Nacaome -G4- (10,000), capital of Valle Department, is situated on the Inter-American Highway by the Rio Nacaome, which flows into the Golfo de Fonseca. A small airport is located a short distance west of town. Cotton and cattle are important in the local economy.

Nueva Ocotepeque -E1- (8,700), capital of Ocotepeque Department, is located on the upper reaches of the Rio Lempa in the highlands near the triborder point of Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador. Significant deposits of coal have been discovered in nearby Valle Sensenti, and planning is under way for a 40-MW thermal power plant that will meet the electricity needs of a large section of Western Honduras. Roads lead northeast from Nueva Ocotepeque to San Pedro Sula, northwest to Guatemala, and south to El Salvador; the town is reportedly used as a transit point for supplies going to insurgents in El Salvador.

Puerto Cortes -B4- (45,000), on the Caribbean coast with a good natural harbor near the mouth of the Rio Ulua, is the country's principal port, handling more than half the total exports (principally bananas, coffee, and lumber) and imports (general cargo, and crude and refined petroleum). It is the northern terminus of the National Railway and has railroad repair facilities and a classification yard. The small oil refinery, owned by Texaco, is the only one in Honduras.

Puerto Lempira -D11- (1,000), capital of sparsely inhabited Gracias a Dios Department, is a fishing village situated on the mangrove-fringed shores of Laguna de Caratasca in the extreme northeastern portion of Honduras. Most of the people of the town are mestizos and blacks; the surrounding area includes practically all of Honduras's approximately 25,000 Miskito Indians. (The regional name "Mosquitia" is derived from the name of the Indian group.) Except for the road that stretches 100 kilometers to Leimus on the Nicaraguan border and a few other roads and unimproved tracks, land surface transport is practically nonexistent in the Honduran Mosquitia. Travel is mostly by air or boat. On the west edge of town is a small airfield used by domestic airlines and military aircraft.

Roatan -B6- (2,000), known locally as Coxen's Hole, is the capital of Islas de la Bahia (Bay islands) Department. The islands once served as bases for English, French, and Dutch buccaneers. They were under British control for more than a century and were not ceded to Honduras until 1859. The majority of the inhabitants are of British descent, but there are also many blacks and Black Caribs (of mixed black and Indian ancestry). English, as well as Spanish, is spoken. Coconuts, bananas, and plantains are the most important products; boatbuilding, for which the islands were once noted, is now a dying industry. The islands are popular with American tourists and may be reached by boat from La Ceiba and Trujillo. Small airfields are located at Roatan and on two other islands.

Santa Barbara -D3- (13,000), capital of the department of the same name, is located in a valley to the west of Lago de Yojoa. It is on a road that connects the North-South Road with the Western Highway. The principal industrial activities of the town include sugar processing and the manufacture of Panama hats. Nearby, on the western side of Lago de Yojoa, are the El Mochito lead, zinc, and silver mines owned by the New York and Honduras Rosario Mining Company.

San Lorenzo -G4- (16,000) is a small port situated on an inlet that opens to the Golfo de Fonseca. Construction of new docking facilities has allowed San Lorenzo to replace Amapala as the country's chief Pacific port. The port's location on the Inter-American Highway provides good access to Tegucigalpa via the North-South Road. A small airfield is located northwest of town.

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San Pedro Sula -C3- (300,000), capital of Cortes Department, is the industrial heart of Honduras. It is the second-largest city in the country and one of the fastest growing urban areas in Central America. A commercial center for bananas, coffee, sugar, and timber, it also serves as the principal distribution point for northern and western Honduras. Industrial facilities include textile mills, lumber mills, furniture factories, food-processing plants, breweries, an antimony extraction plant, and a steel rolling mill. San Pedro Sula is connected by road and rail to Puerto Cortes. La Mesa International Airport, 12 kilometers southeast of town, is the country's only airfield that can accommodate the largest commercial jets; it is used by the Honduran Air Force as a dispersal base for combat aircraft.

Santa Rosa de Copan -D2- (20,000), capital of Copan Department, is the center of a rich agricultural and cattle-raising region. Maize and tobacco are grown in the area, and Panama hats are manufactured in this old Colonial town. Most of the population is Indian; a festival is held in the last 10 days of August. Located on the Western Highway from San Pedro Sula to El Salvador, the town has reportedly been a key link in the arms supply network serving Salvadoran insurgents. The famous ruins of Copan, southernmost of the great Maya cities, are located to the west of Santa Rosa de Copan near the Guatemalan border.

Tegucigalpa -F5- (470,000), capital of Honduras and also of Francisco Morazan Department, sits in a highland basin just under 1,000 meters above sea level. Textile plants, food-processing plants, and breweries serve local needs; there are no heavy industries. No rail line reaches anywhere close to the capital. It is, however, connected to the southern port area via the North-South Road and the Inter-American Highway and to the industrial center of San Pedro Sula and Puerto Cortes. Tocontin International Airport on the south side of the city cannot accommodate the largest jets because of its relatively short runway length and the high surrounding mountains.

Tela -C4- (40,000), a banana port on the Caribbean, is connected by road and rail to La Ceiba and San Pedro Sula. It serves as a transshipment point connecting Standard Fruit Company's narrow-gauge rail line from La Ceiba to the (somewhat broader) narrow-gauge United Brands line extending to the west. An airport west of town, built by United Brands, is controlled by the government and is used for domestic flights. Exxon has petroleum storage facilities in Tela.

Trujillo -B7- (7,000), capital of Colon Department, is a small port on the Caribbean that has been revitalized after a long period of stagnation. Shrimping is important in the area, and a meat-packing station operates in Puerto Castilla to the north. Puerto Castilla is the site of an early landing by Columbus (or in Spanish, *Colon*, for whom the department is named) and plans for a major tourist complex there are under way. The entire area is also scheduled for further development in support of the Olancho paper and pulp complexes.

Yoro -D5- (8,000) is the capital of Yoro Department, which is noted for its extensive banana and sugarcane plantations. The town is connected to the valley of the Rio Ulua and San Pedro Sula by a road running westward through mountainous terrain and to the upper valley of the Rio Aguan by one extending northward.

Yuscaran -F5- (2,000), capital of El Paraiso Department, is a typical Spanish colonial village with cobbled streets and old houses situated on steep hillsides. It was once an important mining center. A short road connects the village to the highway leading from Tegucigalpa to Nicaragua.

Major Transport Routes

Railroads. The only railroads in Honduras consist of less than 600 route-kilometers of single track, narrow-gauge, nonelectrified lines that make up three interconnected systems, all located in the north. There are no international rail connections. The state-owned Honduran National Railroad (FNH), with a total of 170 route-kilometers, runs southward from Puerto Cortes to San Pedro Sula and El Llano. The other two rail systems are owned and operated by US fruit companies. United Brands has a 155-route-kilometer system with a line extending from Baracoa to Bufalo (with connections at both places to the FNH) and another line following the east bank of the Rio Ulua to join Tela with Santa Rita. Standard Fruit operates a 250-route-kilometer line linking Tela, La Ceiba, and San Lorenzo; it is of a narrower gauge than the other railroads and necessitates a transloading platform at Tela.

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Highways. The basic highway network is made up of four main paved routes that connect the most productive agricultural areas with the capital, the commercial centers, and the ports. The Inter-American Highway extends through the southern part of the country from El Salvador to Nicaragua. Branching off the Inter-American Highway is the North-South Road which goes to Tegucigalpa and to San Pedro Sula and Puerto Cortes on the Caribbean. Just south of San Pedro Sula, the North-South Road is joined by the Western Highway and extends to Nueva Ocotepeque, from which roads lead to Guatemala and El Salvador. The North Coast Highway connects San Pedro Sula and El Progreso to the ports of Tela and La Ceiba. Other than these highways and a few others, such as the one from Tegucigalpa to Catacamas, most of the other roads are unpaved. During the wet season (May through October) many of the roads in low-lying areas are flooded while those in the highlands are subject to washouts and frequent blockage by landslides.

Supply Routes for Salvadoran Insurgents. Many routes through Honduras have been used for the clandestine shipment of arms, ammunition, equipment, and medicine to insurgents in El Salvador. Deposits of these supplies have been discovered at sites scattered throughout the country. The map includes a generalized depiction of the major routes reportedly used over the past few years.

Other Important Features

Golfo de Fonseca -G4- is a relatively shallow gulf opening to the Pacific Ocean and shared by Honduras with El Salvador and Nicaragua. It contains numerous islands, islets, reefs, and shoals, and its low-lying shores are fringed by extensive tidal flats, marshes, and mangrove swamps. There are no beaches suitable for large-scale landings, but a labyrinth of tidal passages provides excellent routes for the clandestine introduction of small parties of men and supplies.

Rio Coco -D11-, also known as the Rio Segovia or Wanks, rises in the highlands of western Nicaragua and flows northeastward to form a long (600 kilometer) segment of the border between Honduras and Nicaragua before emptying into the Caribbean at Cabo Gracias a Dios. The banks on both sides of the lower course of the river were long inhabited by Miskito Indians, but the Nicaraguan Government, for security reasons, has destroyed most of the Miskito

villages on the Nicaraguan side and moved Nicaraguan Miskitos away from the border zone.

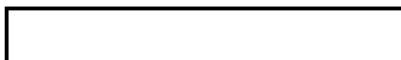
Cerro Las Minas -E2-, a short distance southwest of Gracias in the western part of the country, is the highest peak (2,848 meters) in Honduras.

Refugees

Because of widespread violence in neighboring countries, Honduras is host to thousands of refugees. The UN High Commission on Refugees, with support from the World Relief Organization, has set up camps at a number of locations. In the remote northeastern part of the country, a camp at Mocerón shelters some 8,000 Miskito Indians who fled from repression in Nicaragua; smaller numbers of Nicaraguan Miskitos live in temporary camps, one near Auca and one near the coast in the vicinity of the border. Besides the Miskitos, some 600 other Nicaraguan exiles have sought refuge in Honduras. They have been given resident status. Most reside in Tegucigalpa, but about 100 still live in and around El Paraiso on the Honduran-Nicaraguan border.

Refugees from El Salvador are even more numerous than those from Nicaragua. There are perhaps 13,000 Salvadoran refugees housed in two large UN camps in Honduras: the camp at Mesa Grande north of San Marcos houses from 7,500 to 8,000 refugees; the other camp immediately north at Colomoncagua has 5,000. Mesa Grande received refugees from a string of smaller camps near the border that were closed by Honduran authorities in mid-April 1982. Plans are being made to move the refugees from the Colomoncagua camp to an as-yet-undetermined location farther from the border. Many of the Salvadoran refugees are sympathetic to the insurgents in their homeland and provide them with an effective support/safehaven infrastructure in Honduras. The refugees also represent a potential threat of subversion to Honduras itself.

Comparatively, there are few Guatemalan refugees in Honduras. About 700 or 800 Guatemalans, probably including a large percentage of guerrillas, are housed in a camp called Las Navidades northeast of Copan.



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