

Political turmoil cancels medical mission trip to Honduras

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Because of political turmoil in Honduras following the arrest of President Manuel Zelaya, members of St. Christopher's Episcopal Church in Killeen have canceled their annual medical mission trip to the Central American country.

Officials at the U.S. Embassy in Tegucigalpa, the capital of Honduras, issued a statement last week requesting that people avoid all nonessential travel to the region.

On June 28, soldiers ousted the democratically elected Zelaya before an unpopular constitution referendum went to a vote. The referendum could have allowed the president to run for a second term, which is forbidden by the Honduran constitution. Zelaya, forced into exile in Costa Rica, vowed to stay in power.

"There have been regular demonstrations at the presidential palace in central Tegucigalpa, and streets in the vicinity of many government offices are blocked by police or military," the Embassy statement said.

"When this situation began to develop ... our first inclination was to go. A lot of political stuff goes on in the upper echelons and the average Honduran doesn't feel a lot of difference in their life," said the Rev. Paul Moore, the rector at St. Christopher's.

"But then the whole situation just got a little unstable," Moore said.

The trip, organized by Bobbi and Don Hopkins of St. Christopher's, provides medicine and medical services for about 3,000 people every year in remote areas of southwestern Honduras.

The local Episcopal congregations in these villages bring in people from across the countryside who need medical attention. Often, these people have records of laboratory work and prescriptions for drugs, but they just can't afford the medication, Don Hopkins said.

The leading causes of death in Honduras are from complications resulting from intestinal parasites and respiratory ailments. The missionary group has medication worth \$113,000 for this trip, about half of which will expire in a month.

The group will return the medication to the charity that donated it, or send it to another country. The rest of the medication can be saved until next year's trip.

Hopkins said that he will poll members to determine when the group will return to Honduras. They are considering returning in a small group in February and resuming their normal operations next summer.

"Certainly, the mission is not over. We've been doing this for 12 years, and we're not going to stop now," Hopkins said.

Moore asks that people pray for political stability in Honduras so they can return to helping people there.

"There's an African saying that goes, 'when elephants fight, the grass gets trampled.' The people who most need the help aren't getting it because the big people are fighting and squabbling," Moore said.

Other churches involved with the Honduras trip are St. Matthews Episcopal Church and St. Luke's on the Lake Episcopal Church in Austin, Episcopal Church of the Holy Spirit in Waco and St. Francis Episcopal Church in Temple.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.