

U.S. Civil Society Groups Denounce Assassinations of Two Honduran Activists, Call for Action to Protect Honduras's Endangered Environmental Activists

January 17, 2023

We denounce the January 7, 2023 assassinations of Honduran environmental activists Aly Domínguez and Jairo Bonilla. Domínguez was one of 32 people criminally charged for protesting environmental damage to their communities and the Guapinol River caused by a mining company operating in the Montaña de Botaderos Carlos Escaleras National Park. Eight environmental activists protecting the Guapinol River spent 914 days in jail before being freed February 2022 when the Supreme Court overturned a verdict against them. Those eight environmental activists are still awaiting letters from judicial authorities affirming their liberty.

Members of local communities had denounced escalating threats in recent weeks, including death threats and surveillance by unidentified people in cars without license plates. The assassinations took place just two weeks after the December 21, 2022 assassination of land rights defender Mauricio Esquivel in the same township of Tocoa, Colón in the Bajo Aguán region. Extremely concerning are new allegations that some 25 land defenders are on a list of possible assassination targets in the Aguán. In a January 10, 2023 press conference, the Municipal Committee for the Defense of Common and Public Goods in Tocoa, a winner of the 2019 Letelier-Moffitt human rights prize, stated, "The structures of organized crime are still in force in the territory, they do not lose their criminal nature and it is possible that a serious, responsible and objective investigation will show links between organized crime structures, extractive companies and public officials participating in this criminal front against people and movements that fight for life."

Guapinol defenders had requested protective measures from the National Protection Mechanism, and that request remained pending when the murders occurred. They had also publicly called on President Xiomara Castro to address their concerns regarding mining concessions in the Carlos Escaleras National Park.

The assassinations took place shortly before the start of a bilateral human rights dialogue between the U.S. and Honduran governments focused on issues including human rights defender protection, gender-based violence, and labor rights. The murders underscore the urgency of addressing perils faced by land and environmental defenders in Honduras, which continues to be one of the most dangerous countries to be an environmental activist despite the promises made by President Xiomara Castro, who took office one year ago. Honduras ranks #5 in the world for greatest number of environmental and land rights defenders killed from 2012-2021 as documented by Global Witness, following countries with much larger populations (Brazil, Colombia, Philippines, and Mexico).

We urge the Honduran justice system to ensure a rapid, thorough, and impartial investigation and prosecution of the murders of Domínguez and Bonilla, taking into account their work as defenders and identifying the intellectual as well as material authors of the murder. To be impartial, such an investigation should not be carried out by the same police and prosecutors who have criminalized the

Guapinol environmental defenders, so the case should be transferred out of the Tocoa area. We further urge the Honduran government to take immediate steps to protect environmental and land rights defenders, including in the Bajo Aguán area. In addition, judicial authorities must issue the letters declaring unconditional liberty for the eight environmentalists whose rights were violated by arbitrary detention, denial of due process, and lengthy pretrial detention, according to United Nations human rights experts.

We call upon the Honduran government to address the concerns repeatedly raised with appropriate authorities by the Guapinol community regarding environmental damage caused by the Inversiones los Pinares/Ecotek mine; failures to secure appropriate licenses and procedural anomalies in granting the mining concession; and concerns about ongoing mining within an environmentally protected area, all of which are clear grounds to suspend the mining license.

Moreover, we urge the Honduran government and legislature to address the long-term problems that help create the extremely dangerous situation for environmental and land rights defenders. These measures should be developed in careful consultation with the nation's land and environmental defenders and Indigenous, Garifuna, and campesino communities and organizations. Solutions may include such steps as: revising laws regarding extractive industry concessions to ensure free, prior, and informed consent of Indigenous, Garifuna, and campesino communities regarding projects that would affect their lands, livelihoods, and wellbeing; ensuring proper individual and collective land titles to Indigenous and Garifuna communities and small farmers, including agrarian reform beneficiaries and other small farmers in Bajo Aguán; developing protocols to ensure communities and activists are not subject to excessive use of force against protest; reforming laws that subject defenders to spurious prosecution; vigorously investigating and prosecuting threats and attacks against environmental and land defenders, including the intellectual authors; and ensuring that land and environmental defenders are promptly granted effective protective measures by the government's human rights protection mechanism. Signing and ratifying the Escazú Agreement is also an important step to protect these vulnerable defenders.

Finally, the U.S. government must denounce the threats and attacks against Honduras's environmental and land rights defenders, as the U.S. ambassador did in this particular case. Moreover, the USG should support the long-term measures to protect these defenders and communities discussed above, including consultation of communities affected by extractive industry concessions and operations. The USG should suspend security assistance to security forces engaged in gross human rights violations and corruption, which frequently takes place in collusion with organized crime and extractive and large-scale agricultural projects. But far more than that is needed—Honduras must reform its armed forces and police, purge members engaging in crimes, corruption, and human rights violations, and demilitarize public security. The U.S. government should help address the nexus of corrupt companies, security forces, and public officials driving attacks against environmental and land activists by levying visa and financial sanctions on private sector individuals and security and public officials engaged in major acts of corruption and gross violations of human rights.

We express our solidarity with the families and community members affected by the assassinations of Aly Domínguez and Jairo Bonilla.

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Center for Gender & Refugee Studies (CGRS)
Chicago Religious Leadership Network on Latin America (CRLN)
Global Exchange
Global Labor Justice – International Labor Rights Forum
Hope Border Institute
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