

via fax: 011 503 22 43 99 47 or 011 503 2271 0850

Estimado Sr. Salvador Sánchez Cerén
President of El Salvador

April 16, 2015

Dear President Sánchez Cerén:

We are very concerned about police harassment of Catholic priest and environmental rights defender **Father Santos Neftalí Ruíz Martínez**, President of the Environmental Committee of Cabañas (CAC).

On April 4, while he and Father Carlos Castillo were waiting outside for people to arrive for Mass at a chapel in Nejapa in San Salvador Department, two members of the National Civil Police approached, interrogated them and ordered Father Santos Neftalí Ruíz Martínez to lift his shirt to reveal if he had tattoos or was carrying a weapon. Although he identified himself as a priest, the policemen called for back-up. When two additional officers arrived, the interrogation began again; one police officer verbally attacked the priest and accused him of being a former member of a gang. They spoke by phone with their superiors at headquarters. Father Santos Neftalí Ruíz Martínez explained that he is a human rights defender and informed them that he would report the harassment and intimidation to international organizations. The officers registered his name and said that they would not file their report if he agreed not to file his.

The Environmental Committee of Cabañas works to educate the community about the health and environmental risks of cyanide contamination resulting from gold mining operations. The El Dorado mine was closed after local protests in 2008. It remains non-operational because since 2009 there has been an Executive Decree that bans open-pit metallic mining in El Salvador. In response, Canada-based Pacific Rim Mining initiated a legal case, suing the Salvadoran government for millions of dollars in compensation. In November 2013 OceanaGold, a Canadian-Australian firm, acquired Pacific Rim Mining.

This is our tenth letter in the past six years to officials in El Salvador regarding abuses against those opposed to gold mining in Cabañas. Since 2009, at least five members of CAC have been assassinated, others attacked, and many more threatened. Father Neftalí has been harassed and intimidated since 2008. In January 2012, two men entered his home, tied him up at gunpoint and stole his personal computer, cell phone and external hard drives. During the robbery they were in constant communication with someone who seemed to be organizing it from a distance (cf our letter March 5, 2012).

We believe that the recent police harassment against Father Santos Neftalí Ruíz Martínez is part of this pattern of ongoing harsh intimidation of environmental rights defenders. Because we are seriously concerned for the safety of human rights defenders and their families in the Cabañas region, we **strongly urge** that you

- carry out an immediate, impartial and thorough investigation into the police harassment against Father Santos Neftalí Ruíz Martínez, publish the results and bring those responsible to justice;
- take all necessary measures to effectively and adequately ensure the safety of Father Santos Neftalí Ruíz Martínez, as well as all members of CAC, other anti-mining activists and their families;
- guarantee that all human rights defenders in El Salvador are able to carry out their legitimate and peaceful work in the defense of human rights without fear of restrictions and reprisals.

Sincerely,

Brian J. Stefan Szittai
Co-Coordinator

copies: Mari Carmen Aponte, US Ambassador to El Salvador ~ via fax: 011-503-2501-2775
Francisco Altshul Fuentes, El Salvador Ambassador to the US ~ via fax: 1-202-234-3834
Martha Pacheco, El Salvador Desk at US State Dept. ~ via fax: 202-647-2597
Christopher Johnson, Diplomacy Officer for Central America, US State Dept. ~ via email
Rosa Maria Ortiz, Rapporteur for El Salvador, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights ~ via fax: 202.458.3992
US Senators Brown & Portman and US Representatives Fudge, Gibbs, Johnson, Jordan, Joyce, Kaptur, Latta, Renacci, Ryan ~ via email

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The following people hereby urge you to take action on this matter as indicated in this letter: