

via US mail James Nealon US Ambassador to Honduras	via fax: 202 647 2597 Olivia Franken Desk Officer for Honduras, US State Department
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February 25, 2016

Dear Ambassador Nealon and Desk Officer Franken:

We are writing to express our outrage at the use of police and military force to suppress legitimate, nonviolent protest by citizens of Honduras (mostly Lenca indigenous people) who, since 2012, have been organizing resistance to the Agua Zarca hydroelectric dam project.

On February 20, members of the Lenca community and COPINH (National Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations) organized a demonstration. Buses carrying the approximately 100 demonstrators were detained by authorities both before and upon arrival at San Francisco de Ojuera, Santa Bárbara Department. A bulldozer was placed in the middle of the road to prevent the passage of the vehicles. During nearly eight hours of walking, at least one marcher was aggressively pushed by a soldier who threatened to detain him for trying to pass the barricade. The protesters reached the DESA-Agua Zarca project site after sundown. They were met by 15 National Police, five private security guards, five army soldier armed with high-powered assault AK-47 rifles, and eight TIGRES (a US-funded, trained, and vetted Honduran special forces unit focused on fighting criminal gangs and drug trafficking). The militarized response was excessive; no weapons of any kind were found among the protesters.

Indigenous communities across Honduras are defending their rivers, lands and way of life against construction of hydroelectric dam projects. In 2012 members of the local Lenca community in Río Blanco, Intibucá Department, began a peaceful protest to block the construction of Agua Zarca, financed by the Honduran company DESA (Desarrollo Energético Sociedad Anónima). Security guards for the company and Honduran police and military have incited violence on more than one occasion. They have broken into homes and arbitrarily detained and tortured indigenous leaders. Some of the protesters have been killed, including Tomás García (cf our letter of July 26, 2013), Maycol Ariel Rodríguez (cf our letter of Nov 11, 2014), and his older brother William Jacobo Rodríguez (cf our letter of June 21, 2014).

Because of the human rights abuses associated with the dam project, original partner Sinohydro (of China), pulled out from the project, as did the World Bank's International Finance Corporation. In response, DESA simply relocated its construction site from Río Blanco to the other side of the Gualcarque River and proceeded to launch a two-pronged campaign strategy: 1- to defame, criminalize, and persecute protesters, and 2- to buy community support through its social investment programming, funded in part by US taxpayer dollars through USAID's MERCADO project.

In light of this volatile climate, we **strongly urge** that you take the following actions:

- investigate why heavily armed military and police (some trained and funded by the US) are defending the interests of a private company while violating Honduran citizens' right to peaceful assembly
- urge the Honduran government to take all necessary measures to guarantee the safety of Lenca and COPINH members and their legitimate right to protest construction of the Agua Zarca dam

Sincerely,

Brian J. Stefan Szittai and Christine Stonebraker-Martínez
Co-Coordinator

copies: Sr. Juan Orlando Hernández, President of Honduras ~via US mail
 Sr. Oscar Chinchilla Banegas, Attorney General of Honduras ~ via US mail
 Sr. Jorge Alberto Milla Reyes, Honduran Amabassador to the US ~ via US mail
 Sr. Francisco José Eguiguren Praeli, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, Rapporteur for Honduras and for the Rights of Indigenous Peoples ~ via email
 US Senators Brown & Portman and US Representatives Fudge, Gibbs, Johnson, Jordan, Joyce, Kaptur, Latta, Renacci, Ryan ~ via email

Witness for Peace 2/25/2016_Honduras

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