

via fax: 011 502.238.17.34 Estimado Sr. Presidente Jimmy Morales President of Guatemala	via fax: 011 502 2411 8168/9210 Estimada Sra. Fiscal Lic. Thelma Esperanza Aldana Hernández Attorney General of Guatemala
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March 25, 2016

Dear President Morales and Attorney General Aldana:

We are extremely disturbed at the murder of environmental rights defender **Walter Méndez Barrios**, who was shot and killed outside his home in Las Cruces, in the Department of Petén, on the morning of March 16.

Walter Méndez Barrios was a well-known environmental advocate who fought to protect natural resources in communities of the Maya Biosphere Reserve. He was a founding member of Petenero Front Against Dams (FPCR), an organization formed in 2005 to fight for the land rights and the right to water and other natural resources of those affected and threatened by the construction of hydroelectric dams. He was the president and legal representative of the La Lucha Cooperative and a board member of the Association of Forest Communities of Petén (ACOFOP). Both groups advocate for the improvement of the quality of life of indigenous and rural communities through community forest management and the sustainable use of resources.

Prior to his assassination, Walter Méndez Barrios had recently visited the Boca del Río Hydroelectric Dam and had been conducting activities to raise awareness about the negative environmental impact of palm oil production, the expansion of which has caused the destruction of the Petén rainforest.

The killing of Walter Méndez Barrios is not the first assassination of an environmental rights defender in the area. On September 18, 2015, Rigoberto Lima Choc, one of the first persons to document the environmental damage occurring in the Río de la Pasión due to the activities of the Empresa Reforestadora de Palma de Petén SA (REPSA), was also killed (cf our letter of Oct 12 2015).

We believe Walter Méndez Barrios' murder was directly motivated by his peaceful and legitimate work in defense of the environment and the rights of indigenous and rural communities in El Petén. Because of our serious concern at the increasing risks faced by environmental human rights defenders in Petén we **strongly urge** that you

- carry out an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation into the killing of Walter Méndez Barrios, publish the results and bring those responsible to justice;
- take all necessary measures, in consultation with the defenders or their representatives, to guarantee the security of all members of La Lucha Cooperative, FPCR and ACOFOP, as well as the family of Walter Méndez Barrios;
- implement the necessary measures to prevent the recurrence of these abuses;
- guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions.

Sincerely,

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

copies: José Julio Alejandro Ligorria Carballido, Guatemalan Ambassador to the US ~ via fax: 202 745 1908
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 Francisco José Eguiguren Praeli, Rapporteur for the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, ~ via email
 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: