

via email: aberger@mingob.gob.gt <b>Sr. Enrique Antonio Degenhart Asturias</b> Minister of the Interior of Guatemala	via email: fiscalgeneral@pm.lex.gob.gt <b>Lic. María Consuelo Porras Argueta</b> Attorney General of Guatemala
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June 26, 2018

Dear Minister of the Interior Degenhart and Attorney General Porras Argueta:

We call on you to immediately release political prisoner **Bernardo Caal Xol**, an indigenous and environmental defender active in organizing resistance to hydroelectric dam projects in Maya q'eqchi' territories on the Oxec and Cahabón Rivers in Alta Verapaz Department.

Strong opposition to the dams is vocalized by indigenous communities in Alta Verapaz and by organizations such as CODECA (Committees for Campesino Development), CUC (Committee for Campesino Unity), and the Madre Selva Ecological Collective. The Oxec and Oxec II dams were built without consulting the indigenous population, as required by law. Construction has resulted in the destruction of local ecosystems, clear cutting of old growth forests, and decimation of mountain ridges sacred to the q'eqchi' people. For centuries, Mayan peoples have seen the Oxec River as an important water source in the creation of living beings. Reference to its sanctity is found in the Popul Vuh, a creation and cosmology narrative written before the Spanish conquest.

On August 27, 2017, q'eqchi' communities in the municipality of Santa María Cahabón, where the dams located, organized a referendum (as is their legal right under national and international law). Despite threats of repression from the government and large businesses, the turnout was greater than voter turnout in the past three presidential elections. Only 12 people voted in favor of the dams, and 26,000 people voted against! The government chose to ignore the referendum and, instead, prosecute q'eqchi' leaders like Bernardo Caal Xol.

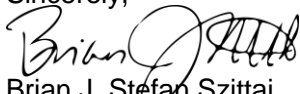
Bernardo was arrested on January 30, 2018, by agents of the Special Criminal Investigation Directorate (DEIC). He was charged with aggravated robbery, aggravated illegal detention, and instigating a crime. These are charges that do not allow Bernardo to leave prison on bail; some suspect they were invented for that reason.

Bernardo Caal Xol says: "I am a political prisoner who is in this situation to denounce the kidnapping of the rivers, to declare that they are killing them, to make known the looting of the territory of the Q'eqchi people."

We strongly urge that you

- immediately release Bernardo Caal Xol from prison and drop all criminal charges against him
- stop the criminalization and judicial repression against indigenous community leaders and environmental defenders
- respect the legal right of indigenous people to decide on their own economic and energy projects in their territories

Sincerely,

  
 Brian J. Stefan Szittai  
 Co-coordinators

  
 Christine Stonebraker Martínez

copies: Manuel Espina, Ambassador of Guatemala to the US ~ via website and email  
 Luis E. Arreaga, US Ambassador to Guatemala, in care of human rights officer Rain Bian ~ via email  
 Stefanie Fabrico, Guatemala Desk, US State Department ~ via email  
 Esmeralda Arosemena de Troitiño, Rapporteur for Guatemala, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights ~ via email  
 Antonia Urrejola, Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights ~ via email  
 US Senators Brown & Portman and US Representatives Beatty, Fudge, Gibbs, Johnson, Jordan, Joyce, Kaptur, Latta, Renacci, Ryan ~ via email

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