

via email: mprelacionespublicas@gmail.com ngosorto@gmail.com <b>Óscar Fernando Chinchilla Banegas</b> Attorney General of Honduras	via email: karlacueva144@gmail.com <b>Lica. Karla Cueva</b> Secretary of State for Human Rights Affairs
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October 1, 2019

Dear Attorney General Chinchilla and Secretary Cueva:

We are deeply concerned about the criminalization of land and environmental defender **María Concepción Hernández**, age 52, who was unjustly arrested in Zacate Grande, Valle Department.

On September 22, agents of the Police Investigation Directorate (DPI) arrived at the home of María Concepción Hernández with an arrest warrant, and took her to a jail in Amapala municipality. She is accused of the crime of usurpation of land. For many years, landowner Jorge Cassis Leiva has harassed and threatened the inhabitants of Playa Blanca, on the Zacate Grande peninsula in the Gulf of Fonseca. Her family has been the victim of previous attacks by landowner Jorge Cassis Leiva. In February, Sabino González, an employee of Cassis, attacked Santos Hernández, the domestic partner of María Concepción Hernández, sending him to the hospital with head and leg injuries.

Zacate Grande is home to 1,000 families inhabiting 11 communities who live principally on fishing and agriculture. They are under threat because the geographical location of Zacate Grande is strategic to powerful economic interests. We understand that your government plans to install autonomous model charter cities called ZEDES (Employment and Economic Development Zones) there. The ZEDES will be granted special conditions to foreign investors to carry out their economic activities. The ZEDES, not subject to the laws of Honduras, will enjoy total autonomy in terms of fiscal, customs, labor, judicial and security policy. They may also establish their own health, education and social security systems.

María Concepción Hernández serves on the Board of Directors of ADEPZA (Association for the Development of the Zacate Grande Peninsula), one of the member organizations of the National Network of Human Rights Defenders in Honduras. ADEPZA is working to protect the land and beaches of Zacate Grande, located inside the National Marine Park, which in 1999 was declared a protected natural area and integrated into the National System of Protected Areas of Honduras (SINAPH).

There is a systematic pattern of criminalizing land and environmental defenders in Valle Department. Abel Pérez, the president of ADEPZA, was convicted of defending the same territory as María Concepción Hernández and imprisoned with Santos Hernández for 101 days in 2016. They were both convicted in 2017, but the conviction was overturned. In November 2018, authorities issued an arrest warrant for María Concepción Hernández. In July of this year (at a public forum convened by the Coalition Against Impunity in Choluteca), she denounced ongoing human rights violations and attacks by state prosecutors.

We strongly urge that you drop the criminal charge of usurpation of land that was falsely made against María Concepción Hernández and immediately release her from detention.

Sincerely,



Brian J. Stefan Szittai  
 Co-Coordinator

and



Christine Stonebraker-Martinez

- copies: Marlon Ramsses Tábora Muñoz, Ambassador of Honduras to the US ~ via website or fax, and US mail  
 Lawrence J. Gumbiner, Chargé d'Affaires, US Embassy in Honduras ~ via email  
 David Tagle, Honduras Desk, US State Dept ~ via email  
 Joel Hernández, Rapporteur for Honduras, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights ~ via email and US mail  
 Soledad García Muñoz, Rapporteur on Economic, Social, Cultural, and Environmental Rights – Inter-American Commission on Human Rights ~ via email, US mail  
 US Senators Brown & Portman and US Representatives Beatty, Fudge, Gibbs, González, Johnson, Jordan, Joyce, Kaptur, Latta, Ryan ~ via email

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