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October 12, 2020

Dear Attorney General Chinchilla and Secretary Cueva:

We are writing to urge protection for the residents of the ethnic Garífuna community of Vallecito, in Limón municipality, Colón Department.

On October 7, several unknown armed men entered Vallecito and questioned residents about local businesses and the value of the territory. They directly approached community leader Audelia Arzú, who serves as the sub-coordinator for OFRANEH (Black Fraternal Organization of Honduras) in Vallecito.

Residents of Vallecito struggle to hold onto their ancestral land against several threats, including drug trafficking and plantations of African palm for palm oil. Over the past 15 years, armed men with organized criminal groups have taken control over parts of Vallecito territory; they built a clandestine airstrip for drug smuggling. The Dinant Corporation, a major producer of palm oil, fraudulently seized control of approximately 15km of Garífuna ancestral lands between Limón and Vallecito. Today, Vallecito is completely surrounded by the company's palm plantations.

Vallecito is one of the Garifunas' oldest ancestral sites on the mainland of Honduras, dating back to the early 1800s. Nonetheless, for many years the residents have been victim to harassment, intimidation and threats over their land. In 1997, the National Agrarian Institute (INA) recognized 2,700 hectares of land as Garífuna property when it issued land titles in the Vallecito territory for six "associative businesses" of the Garífuna people. Today the legal protection those land titles provided is being undermined by the ZEDEs (Zones of Economic Development and Employment), also known as "Model Cities." After the ZEDE legislation was passed in 2013, attempts at forced seizures of Garífuna territories have intensified. It is widely believed that ZEDE economic interests were the motivation behind the torture and assassination of 71-year-old community leader Antonio Bernárdez in Punta Piedra and the forced disappearance of four Garífuna community leaders from Triunfo de la Cruz (cf our letters July 20 and 24, 2020).

The Inter-American Court of Human Rights has criticized the government of Honduras for not adhering to its mandates to protect Garífuna ancestral lands and adequately investigate the murders of Garífuna community leaders. As recently as May 2019, the Court acknowledged that Garífuna community members are still experiencing "direct death threats," "blackmail, increased robbery," and "profiling of leaders." The forced disappearance of at least four Garífuna men from Triunfo de la Cruz on July 18 is evidence of the ever-present dangers faced by the Garífuna communities along the Atlantic coast (cf our letter July 20, 2020).

We strongly urge that you

- investigate the incursion of armed groups into Garífuna communities, including the incident of October 7 in Vallecito
- work with local Garífuna leadership and OFRANEH to develop protection measures for Vallecito residents
- respect the mandates of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights by working with Garífuna leadership to start a process of returning lands along the Atlantic coast that have been illegally seized from Garífuna communities

Sincerely,


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 Christine Stonebraker-Martinez

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 Margarete May Macaulay, Rapporteur on the Rights of Peoples of African Descent ~ via email and US mail
 US Embassy in Honduras: Colleen Hoey, Chargé d'Affaires, and Nate Rettenmayer, Political Officer ~via email
 David Tagle, Honduras Desk, US State Dept ~ via email
 ODECO: Organización de Desarrollo Etnico Comunitario ~ via email
 Honduras Solidarity Network ~ via email
 OFRANEH: La Organización Fraternal Negra Hondureña ~ via email
 US Senators Brown & Portman and US Representatives Beatty, Fudge, Gibbs, González, Johnson, Jordan, Joyce, Kaptur, Latta, Ryan ~ via email

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