

Blanca Sarahí Izaguirre Lozano National Commissioner for Human Rights of Honduras	Lica. Karla Eugenia Cueva Aguilar Secretary for Human Rights
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March 25, 2021

Dear Commissioner Izaguirre and Secretary Cueva:

We are saddened and horrified at the assassination of another indigenous environmental defender, **Juan Carolos Cerros Escalante**, age 41, president of the Nueva Granada Board of Trustees and a leader of the local Lenca indigenous community in his hometown of Chinda, Santa Bárbara Department. On March 21, unknown assailants fired 40 shots at him as he was returning from his mother's house with his children in the village of Nueva Granada, municipality of San Antonio in Cortés Department.

Juan Carlos Cerros Escalante led Communities United of Chinda, a local group opposing the "El Tornillito" hydroelectric dam that is being constructed in hamlets near the Rio Ulúa. This dam, which will be the second largest in Honduras, is being built by HIDROVOLCÁN (Hidroeléctrica El Volcán Company), owned by Adolfo Carlos Larach. The reservoir will encompass the municipalities of San Antonio in Cortés Department and Chinda in Santa Bárbara Department. It means the disappearance of ten communities of an indigenous Lenca population because the livestock, crops and houses of these two municipalities would drown, and their inhabitants would be forced to move.

Juan Carlos Cerros Escalante, a member of the Santa Barbara Environmental Movement (MAS, or Movimiento Ambientalista Santabarbarens), had been the victim of previous attacks due to his environmental defense work. In 2017 the municipality of Chinda declared itself a hydroelectric-free zone. The following year he received an attack that caused him and his family to be forcibly displaced. He was later admitted into the Mechanism for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders. In 2019 he returned home to continue organizing opposition to the hydroelectric project El Tornillito.

It is believed that the assailants who killed Juan Carlos Cerros Escalante have links to the criminal organization Mara Salvatrucha (MS), which is trying to establish territorial control to facilitate drug trafficking and to allow the installation of mega extractive projects by suppressing citizen-organized opposition. Some human rights groups say that the Honduran government is contracting with criminal groups to carry out attacks on environmental defenders.

We **strongly urge** that you

- conduct a thorough and transparent investigation into the assassination of Juan Carolos Cerros Escalante, publish the results and bring those responsible to justice;
- provide all resources needed for the sustainability of the communities being affected by the construction of the "El Tornillito" hydroelectric dam.

Sincerely,



Brian J. Stefan Szittai  
Co-Coordinators



Christine Stonebraker-Martinez

copies: Oscar Chinchilla Banegas, Attorney General ~ via email  
Luis Suazo Barahona, Ambassador of Honduras to the US ~ via email and US mail  
Joel Hernández, Rapporteur for Honduras, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights ~ via email and US mail  
Isabel Albaladejo Escribano, Representative to Honduras of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OACNUDH) ~ via email  
HSN: Honduras Solidarity Network ~ via email  
US Embassy in Honduras: Colleen Hoey, Chargé d'Affaires; Nate Rettenmayer, Political Officer ~ via email  
US State Dept: Honduras Desk ~ via email  
US Senators Brown & Portman and US Representatives Beatty, 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:**