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| <p>Agapito Alexander Rodríguez Executive Director of INHGEOMIN Honduran Institute of Geology and Mining</p> | <p>Liliam Lizeth Rivera Minister of MiAmbiente Honduras Energy, Natural Resources, Environment, and Mining</p> |
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January 25, 2022

Dear Executive Director Rodríguez and Minister Rivera:

We are writing once again to express our deep concerns about the militarization of the 200-year-old Indigenous Maya-Chortí cemetery in the Azacualpa community in La Unión, Copán Department. When community leader **Nicolás Rodríguez** attempted to enter the cemetery on January 19, he was detained and beaten.

The cemetery on a hill is at the center of a longstanding controversy over gold mining. For several years, the Azacualpa Environmental Committee has been organizing to shut down the San Andrés gold mine, which is owned by US- and Canada-based Aura Minerals and operated by its Honduran subsidiary MINOSA (Minerales de Occidente SA). Like other large scale open-pit mechanized mines, its operations leach deadly chemicals such as cyanide into water sources. There have been at least 37 documented cases of persons in La Unión contaminated with mercury, arsenic, and lead in their blood and urine, as well as animals dying from the cyanide. There is also a strong correlation between mining operations and landslides.


For at least ten years, MINOSA has expressed plans to expand the San Andres gold mine. To reach the gold reserves that are found under the cemetery hill, MINOSA, in conjunction with the government, has been exhuming graves. After hearing the strong disapproval from residents of Azacualpa, in November 2020 the Supreme Court of Justice (CSJ) issued an order to stop the exhumations. In a contradictory ruling a year later, the Court of First Instance of the Judicial Section of Santa Rosa de Copán issued an "urgent order" to resume exhumations and relocate the skeletal remains.

MINOSA has been taking steps to avoid community resistance by exhuming graves at night and in the early morning hours. The military and National Police have been deployed to facilitate the exhumations by preventing residents from entering the cemetery. January 19, as community leader **Nicolás Rodríguez** approached the cemetery with the intent of protecting his parents' tomb from exhumation, security personnel fired a gunshot at him. Four police agents apprehended him, threw him into a vehicle, handcuffed him, and beat him with batons. After spending at least one night in detention, he was released, showing swelling and bruising on his right arm, hand and foot.

To protect the civil liberties and physical health of the residents of Azacualpa, and to respect the sacred grounds of their ancestral cemetery, we strongly urge you to

- order a suspension of the exhumations of graves in the cemetery in La Unión, Copán
- order a retreat of the military and police from the cemetery hill
- reassure the community's access to the cemetery
- suspend any approval of requests for expanding the geography of the San Andrés Mine until local communities are consulted and give their approval through an inclusive process
- investigate the threats and violence against Nicolás Rodríguez and other community residents, with particular attention to any connections with MINOSA employees, local police, and local political authorities

Sincerely,


Brian J. Stefan Szittai
Co-Coordinators


Christine Stonebraker-Martinez

copies: Aura Minerals: Rodrigo Barbosa (President & CEO), Sofia Aguilar (Gen. Mgr for Community, Institutional and Legal Relations) ~ via US mail and email
MINOSA ~ via US mail
Luis Suazo Barahona, Ambassador of Honduras to the US ~ via email and US mail
Carlos Bernal Pulido, 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
Alice Shackelford, UN Resident Coordinator in Honduras, Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights ~ via email
Bufete de Estudios para la Dignidad / Office of Studies for Dignity ~ via email
US Embassy in Honduras: Colleen Hoey, Chargé d'Affaires; Nate Rettenmayer, Political Officer; Ariel Jahner, Human Rights Officer ~ via email
US State Department: Molly Runyon, Honduras Desk Officer ~ via email
US Senators Brown & Portman ~ via email
US Representatives Beatty, Brown, 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: