

IRTF

InterReligious Task Force on Central America

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Lic. Apolinario Córdova Álvarez, Director
CONAP: Consejo Nacional de Áreas Protegidas
5a. Calle 1 Avenida Zona 1, Calle Litoral al Lago
San Benito, Petén
Guatemala

August 24, 2022

Dear Director Córdova Álvarez:

We are shocked and deeply saddened to hear about another incident of the violation of Indigenous peoples' rights and the invasion of their lands as **army and police forces raided local communities in the Sierra del Lacandón region** in La Libertad municipality in El Petén on August 17 and destroyed their roads.

At around 2:00 am on Wednesday, August 17, members of the Guatemalan Army and the National Civil Police (PNC) drove into the communities of Nueva Jerusalem II and La Revancha, detonating explosives that left 12 large holes along the road, claiming to comply with a judicial order to destroy two alleged clandestine highways inside the Sierra del Lacandón National Park. It is curious that the roadways are described by authorities as "clandestine" since CONAP personnel themselves have traveled by those roadways many times. The heavy incursion by government security forces (150 PNC patrol cars, 12 army trucks) occurred without warning. By the time the residents felt safe enough to leave their homes and survey the damage, the roads were already destroyed.

These roads were built by the local communities themselves along paths that have existed for multiple decades and were initially used for agricultural purposes. These transportation routes are vital to ensure mobility during health emergencies. Community members themselves have been maintaining the roads with no support from the government.

This is not the first time the PNC and military forces have violated the rights of Indigenous communities with extreme violence. There have been several violent incidents reported around the Petén region and the Sierra del Lacandón National Park. Security forces are known to enforce the initiatives of private companies to install hydroelectric dams that pollute the local rivers and drinking water sources. They also enable the deforestation of biodiverse regions for industrial-scale agricultural plantations for the production of palm oil. Those who resist environmental destruction are met with repression. For instance, on March 16, 2016 Walter Méndez Barrios, a well-known environmental rights defender, was shot and killed outside his home in Las Cruces, Petén Department (cf our letter of March 25, 2016).

We strongly denounce the repeated violation of Indigenous peoples' rights and the invasion and destruction of their lands and territory, and **strongly urge you to:**

- investigate the destruction of the two roads in the Sierra del Lacandón and prosecute those responsible
- assist local communities in restoring and maintaining the roads that are vital to their mobility
- show strong efforts to protect the local communities of the Sierra del Lacandón and include them in decision processes, as well as respect for their territories

Sincerely,



Brian J. Stefan Szittai
Co-coordinators



Christine Stonebraker-Martinez

copies: Licda. María Consuelo Porras Argueta, Fiscal General de Guatemala/ Attorney General ~ via email
José Alejandro Córdoba, Ombudsman for Human Rights of Guatemala (PDH) ~ via email
Alfonso José Quiñónez Lemus, Ambassador of Guatemala in Washington, DC ~ via email and US mail
IACHR: Esmeralda Arosemena de Troitiño, Rapporteur for Guatemala and for Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights ~ via email and US mail
OACNUDH: Mika Kanervavuori, Representante de la Oficina del Alto Comisionado de las Naciones Unidas para los Derechos Humanos en Guatemala (OACNUDH) ~ via email
US State Department: Guatemala Desk Officers in Washington, DC: Doug Choi, Moises Mendoza ~ via email
US State Department: William Popp, US Ambassador to Guatemala, in care of human rights officer Sarahann Yeh ~ via email
US Senators Brown & Portman and US Representatives Beatty, Brown, Gibbs, Gonzalez, 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: