

**Blanca Sarahí Izaguirre Lozano**

National Commissioner for Human Rights of Honduras (CONADEH)  
via email

January 23, 2023

Dear Commissioner Izaguirre Lozano:

We are deeply concerned about the escalation of violence and conflicts in the Aguán Valley of Colón Department. Increased violence against land defenders is intensifying a climate of fear, tension, and terror.

On the night of December 21, 2022, land defender **Mauricio Esquivel**, 53 years old, was assassinated. He was a member of the Farmers' Agricultural Production Cooperative "El Tranvía," located in the Quebrada de Arena community in the municipality of Trujillo, Colón. He was intercepted while heading to town; his body was dumped, death squad style, on the road the following morning. To our knowledge, the material and intellectual authors of the crime are still unknown.

Members of the Tranvía cooperative have been in a land dispute with the powerful Dinant corporation which operates a plantation on land that the cooperative says was stolen from them. It is suspected that corporations like Dinant have the backing of illegal armed groups. Los Cachos, a group of around 30 men with military-grade weapons, has been operating in Quebrada de Arena since early 2022. Community residents have faced numerous acts of intimidation from Los Cachos, who have showed up at the cooperative wearing masks and carrying AR-15s, demanding that the campesinos leave.

Extreme violence like the assassination of Mauricio Esquivel is occurring within the context of criminalization of land defenders and an upsurge of extrajudicial killings. According to campesino organizations in the Aguán Valley, around 25 defenders are currently facing criminalization processes. They are also being labeled as "objects of extermination" in a strategy to destabilize campesinos' organized campaigns for recovery of lands from which they were dispossessed by the Agricultural Modernization Law. The threats to them are real. Residents of the Aguán Valley are facing an unprecedented wave of dozens of brazen death squad style murders. The assassins openly advertise the targets as alleged gang members, with blood smeared posters.

We urge that the State of Honduras take responsibility for protecting land rights defenders and implement the following:

- conduct a thorough and transparent investigation into the killing of Mauricio Esquivel, publish the results, and bring those responsible to justice
- in consultation with campesino and other community organizations, develop mechanisms to stop the murders, violent dispossession, criminalization, persecution, and threats against human rights defenders who are fighting for the recovery of their lands
- undertake an immediate investigation into the criminalization of defenders who are in a state of vulnerability because some have identified them as "targets of extermination."
- instruct representatives of the justice system to abide by the law and not act biasedly in favor of powerful groups that have historically violated the rights of the peasant sector
- instruct the National Police to desist from the siege against land rights defenders

Sincerely,

  
Brian J. Stefan Szittai  
Co-Coordinator

  
Christine Stonebraker-Martinez

copies: Javier Efraín Bú Soto, Ambassador of Honduras in Washington, DC c/o Alejandra Sandoval Taixes ~ via email and US mail  
Carlos Pulido, Rapporteur for Honduras, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) ~ via email and US mail  
Jsabel 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  
US Embassy in Honduras: Ambassador Laura F. Dogu and Human Rights Officer ~ via email  
US State Department: Bryan Schell, Honduras Desk Officer ~ via email  
US Senators Brown & Vance ~ via email  
US Representatives Balderson, Beatty, Brown, Johnson, Jordan, Joyce, Kaptur, Latta, Miller, Sykes ~ via email

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