

IRTF

InterReligious Task Force on Central America
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Blanca Sarahí Izaguirre Lozano

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

March 25, 2023

Dear Commissioner:

We are writing to denounce the unjust criminalization of five water defenders from the community of Guapinol in Tocoa, Colón Department. Five members of the Municipal Committee in Defense of the Common and Public Goods of Tocoa (Comité Municipal en Defensa de los Bienes Comunes y Públicos, or CMDBCP) are being prosecuted again, even though the criminal proceedings against them were annulled in June 2022. Defenders **Juan López, Leonel George, Reynaldo Domínguez, Marco Tulio Ramos, and Adaly Cedillo** are now facing criminal charges again, along with others.

The group's lawyer, Rosa Aquino, said the Public Ministry in Tocoa filed an appeal on the June 2022 annulment on December 8, 2022, but her clients were only notified to appear and present a response to the appeal in 2023. The public prosecutor who filed the appeal is Héctor Velásquez, who has been previously denounced by the CMDBCP. Leonel George, one of the water defenders, called this criminalization "[evidence that the Tocoa Public Ministry] is protecting itself and that they are doing the job for the interests of the mining company Inversiones Los Pinares/Ecotek."


Formed in 2015, the CMDBCP has been fighting to protect the Carlos Escaleras National Park and local water sources. The Guapinol Environmental Defense Committee, which is one of several organizations constituting the CMDBCP, organized the Encampment on the Defense of Water and Life in August 2018. They point to contamination of the Guapinol and San Pedro Rivers, caused by an iron oxide mine being constructed by Inversiones Los Pinares (owners: Lenir Pérez and Ana Facussé). They have identified several environmental, social, human, and economic impacts of large scale mining projects in the Atlantic zone operated by Inversiones Los Pinares. The Guapinol and San Pedro Rivers, which supply drinking water to fourteen surrounding communities, empty into the Río Aguán, risking the drinking water, fishing, and agricultural crops of 90,000 inhabitants.

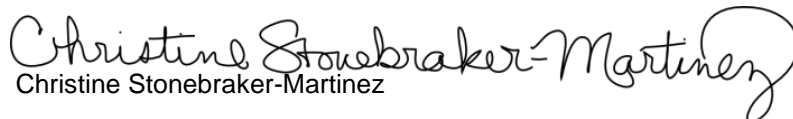
The Guapinol water defenders have been surveilled, harassed, threatened, and criminalized for the past five years. Some have even been killed. Eight were held in pre-trial detention for more than two years until the Supreme Court dismissed the case and ordered their release on February 10, 2022 (they were released February 24, 2022). In January of this year, two members of the Guapinol Environmental Defense Committee, Aly Domínguez (age 38) and Jairo Bonilla (age 28), were assassinated by unidentified gunmen (cf our letter of 24 JAN 2023).

Because of the assassinations of Aly Domínguez and Jairo Bonilla Marco and years of criminalization of environmental human rights defenders in Guapinol, we call upon your government to:

- conduct a thorough, independent, and impartial investigation into the continued criminalization of the aforementioned five water defenders
- cancel the mining concession, which was carved out of the protected Carlos Escaleras National Park
- redress the harms caused by the mine's pollution to the rivers
- guarantee that all human rights defenders are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities including defending the environment, without fear of criminalization or reprisals in Honduras.

Sincerely,


Brian J. Stefan Szittai
Co-Coordinator


Christine Stonebraker-Martinez

copies: Javier Efraín Bú Soto, Ambassador of Honduras in Washington, DC ~ 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 Ariel Jahner~ via email
US State Department: Bryan Schell, Honduras Desk Officer ~ via email
US Senators Brown & Vance and 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: