

Blanca Sarahí Izaguirre Lozano

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

April 24, 2023

Dear Commissioner:

We, members of the InterReligious Task Force, are deeply concerned about the assassination of **Emerson Martínez**, age 22, in the Bajo Aguán Valley. Emerson Martínez, the stepson of an outspoken land defender, was murdered when he was attacked by armed men and shot 14 times on March 25 at 12:40pm, one block from his house in the campesino cooperative Los Laureles in Tocoa, Colón Department

The campesino families of Cooperativa Agropecuaria Los Laureles have been fighting for their land stolen by the agro-industrial company Dinant Corporation, owned by the family of the late land baron Miguel Facussé. Over the past few years, several private interests, among them the Honduran Council of Private Enterprise (COHEP), the Dinant Corporation, the Agropalma company, and a few influential families (Facusse, Canales and Morales) have persuaded judges to issue illegal eviction orders against several peasant cooperatives, including Los Laureles. In their defense, the cooperatives point to definitive land titles that the National Agrarian Institute (INA) maintains in its archives. Despite their legal standing, the campesino families have regularly faced threats of eviction or actual evictions.

Campesino land defenders have also faced false criminalization. Over the past two years, 16 members of the cooperative faced criminal charges of aggravated usurpation by the Public Ministry (MP) and Dinant, which argue that land being farmed by Los Laureles belongs to the company Exportadora del Atlántico, owned by the Facussé family. After a 3-day trial last year, the Court of Letters of Tocoa ruled in favor of the campesinos. Following an appeals process, good news was delivered to the cooperative again on March 15, 2023 when the Court of Appeals of La Ceiba affirmed the other court's dismissal of the charges against the campesinos. One of the 16 acquitted was José Omar Cruz Tomé, president of the Los Laureles cooperative, who was assassinated on January 18 (cf our letter 22 FEB 2023).

The killing of Emerson Martínez could be a warning signal directed at his step-father Abraham León, who is the spokesperson and legal representative of the Los Laureles cooperative. The family of Emerson Martínez has reported in the last few months of being monitored by unknown men, as well as surveillance by mechanical drones. He is the second member of the Los Laureles cooperative murdered over the last four months, and the eighth land defender murdered in the region this year. Others have been subject to defamation on social media.

Because of this ongoing slaughter of land defenders in the Bajo Aguán Valley, we urge you to:

- conduct a thorough and transparent investigation into the killing of Emerson Martínez, publish the results, and bring those responsible to justice
- repeal Decree 93-2021, which allows for preventive and immediate evictions without judicial control and aggravates land and territory conflicts.
- protect the constitutionally guaranteed rights of land defenders

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
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
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 ~ 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: