

EL SALVADOR

Preliminary hearing for four suspected in murder of anti-mining activist in Cabañas

In August 2009, RRN wrote to Salvadoran officials after the murder of community activist **Gustavo Marcelo Rivera** from San Isidro in Cabañas Department. His body was found in a well in the village of Agua Zarca on June 30. He had disappeared on June 18 after leaving his house for San Salvador. DNA tests had to be done to confirm the identity of the body. Reports from the National Civilian Police state that gang members were responsible for the murder, but community members reported that the body exhibited signs of torture techniques generally tied to targeted political assassinations.

Rivera, director of the Casa de Cultura in San Isidro, was active in social justice and environmental struggles. He had received many death threats in response to his public denunciations of San Isidro Mayor Ignacio Bautista of the ARENA party. He was outspoken against attempted fraud in the municipal and legislative elections of January 18 and was active in the national movement against mining projects that threaten El Salvador's principal watersheds.

At least three more letters from RRN to Salvadoran officials followed because of a growing number of threats after Rivera's murder. Despite the increasing frequency and political overtones of the threats and assassinations, local police authorities and the former attorney general's office have classified these cases simply as "common crimes."

On July 24, death threats in anonymous letters and text messages were received by three broadcasters at Radio Victoria, a community radio station in Cabañas: **Jose Alexander Beltrán Castillo**, age 19, **Ludwin Franklin Iraheta**, age 20, and **Vladimir Abarca Ayala**, age 16. They had reported on Gustavo Marcelo Rivera's killing. One message said, "You are also on the list...you saw what happened to [Marcelo] the next one is you."

On July 27, **Father Luis Quintanilla**, a Catholic priest in Cabañas, was on the same radio station calling for justice for Gustavo Marcelo Rivera. Driving home, he was forced off the road by a vehicle with four hooded gunmen who surrounded his car; he managed to escape unhurt. On August 4, community leader **Héctor Antonio García Berrios** was warned that if he and Gustavo Marcelo Rivera's brother, **Miguel Rivera**, continued campaigning for justice for the murder, their lives would be at risk.

On July 29, **Antonio Pacheco**, Director of the Social and Economic Development Association of Santa Marta (ADES), received death threats. ADES has been campaigning against the negative consequences of gold mining in Cabañas and calling for justice in the killing of Gustavo Marcelo Rivera.

On August 7, **Ramiro Rivera**, vice-president of the Environmental Committee of Cabañas (CAC), was shot eight times outside his home. Amazingly, he survived.

Then, tragically, during the last week of December 2009, Ramiro Rivera was shot again; this time the assassins succeeded. On December 20, **Ramiro Rivera Gómez**, was shot by hitmen carrying M-16 rifles. His **thirteen-year old daughter** was injured and his neighbor **Felicita Echeverria** in the small community of Trinidad was killed. Protective measures by two police officers from the Witnesses and Victims Protection Unit of the National Civilian Police were ineffective in preventing Rivera's death.

Ramiro Rivera was a local leader in the community struggle against the environmentally-destructive "El Dorado" gold mining projects which Pacific Rim, a Vancouver, B.C.-based company, is desperate to open, despite widespread community and governmental opposition.

Another anti-mining activist from the community of Trinidad, **Dora "Alicia" Sorto Recinos**, was killed after doing laundry at a nearby river on December 26. She was eight months pregnant. Her **two-year old child** whom she was carrying was also shot in the leg. Alicia's life partner, **José Santos Rodríguez**, a board member of CAC, had also received a number of recent death threats and survived three separate attempts against his life.

Despite the threats and assassinations, community organizing efforts have successfully blocked Pacific Rim's attempts to obtain gold mining permits. However, the company has filed a lawsuit against the Salvadoran government under the U.S.-Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) for hundreds of millions of dollars in damages.

Prosecution begins

Four Alleged Gang Members Accused of Killing Marcelo Rivera Appear Before Judge

On April 30, 2010, four alleged gang members arrested for the murder of Marcelo Rivera went before a judge for their preliminary hearing to determine whether the prosecutor has enough evidence to go to a full trial.

While this is a positive step, it is disappointing that investigators and prosecutors have not pursued the intellectual authors of this heinous torture and murder. If this murder is left in a state of impunity, it will generate a climate of intimidation and uncertainty for social leaders and activists, undermining the advances in the democratic process in El Salvador. Community members believe that until these cases are thoroughly investigated for political motives and the perpetrators brought to justice, impunity against the mining resistance movement in Cabañas will continue.

Read more at <http://voiceselsalvador.wordpress.com/2010/04/28/four-alleged-gang-members-accused-of-killing-marcelo-rivera-to-appear-before-a-judge-friday/>