



Human Rights News
GUATEMALA & HONDURAS
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Guatemala

2020 Breaks Record for Attacks on Human Rights Defenders According to the Unit for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders in Guatemala (UDEFEGUA), 2020 is the worst year on record in terms of attacks on human rights defenders since the organization began documenting abuses in 2000. From January 1 to December 15, UDEFEGUA documented 1,004 attacks on human rights defenders. Women defenders were the targets of 33.66 percent of these attacks. The attacks include 15 assassinations and 22 attempted assassinations of human rights defenders.

Four women defenders were killed, according to UDEFEGUA's [statistics chart](#), constituting 28 percent of the total number of defenders murdered, a marked increase over previous years. For comparison's sake, in 2019, 11 percent of the defenders killed were female.

UDEFEGUA in a December 17 [communiqué](#) notes that in an administration's first year, attacks on defenders usually decrease. The opposite occurred this year, in spite of the shutdown mandated to control the spread of COVID-19. In fact, the shutdown appears to have been taken advantage of, as UDEFEGUA notes; President Alejandro Giammattei has sparked a consolidation of authoritarianism and the closing of democratic spaces.

According to UDEFEGUA, "In practical terms, the current government has dismantled all the institutionality of peace and human rights, as well as the few and weak protection mechanisms. . . . [T]his period [of the pandemic] was used to repress, violate, and attack those who defend human rights in the country."

UDEFEGUA called on the international community to increase its observation and documentation of such incidents, denounce the violations, and demand that the Guatemalan government stop the violence and decrease the impunity afforded to perpetrators of crimes committed against human rights defenders.

Guatemala Militarizes Border with Honduras under Two-Week State of Prevention

As journalist Sandra Cuffe [reports](#), on January 14 Guatemala instituted a two-week state of prevention to prevent the entry of Honduran migrants into the country. The militarization considered a health threat. Thousands of migrants have entered Guatemala and hundreds [broke through](#) the security forces' blockade in Chiquimula, Guatemala, on January 16. On January 17, migrants were teargassed, beaten with batons, and prevented from advancing. The Human Rights Ombudsman's Office issued [statements of concern](#) about the use of force and noted that a number of people were injured.

Two Million Guatemalans Affected by Hurricanes The tropical storms Eta and Iota, which passed through Central America in early November, devastated much of the territory in Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua, leaving almost 5 million people affected so far, 2 million of whom are from Guatemala. The north and northeast of Guatemala were the regions most affected, as PBI's team in Guatemala [reports](#). The data provided by the National Coordinator for Disaster Reduction (CONRED) is staggering: at least 60 people were killed, 30 were injured, and 100 disappeared from communities in Alta Verapaz, while another 308,834 were evacuated. Many communities, mostly in Quiché, Alta Verapaz, Huehuetenango, and Izabal, remained flooded for an extended period of time, without communications, and could only receive support by boat or helicopter. A total of 277,781 people sought refuge in shelters (of these only 31,000 were staying in official shelters). CONRED estimated that as a result of both storms more than 80,000 homes were damaged or at risk. Likewise, 468 roads, 340 schools and 79 bridges were damaged, while 26 roads and 44 bridges were completely destroyed. Families in El Estor, Izabal, lost their entire harvest, as the Guatemala Human Rights Commission [points out](#), and a landslide caused by the rains buried half of the residents of the village of Queja, a Poqomchi' community near Coban.

Police Brutally Repress Protests as Thousands Call for President's Resignation

On November 21, tens of thousands of Guatemalans poured into the streets in Guatemala City, Quetzaltenango, and other cities to protest a hastily passed budget that gave members of the Guatemalan Congress an increase in spending on their personal meals and slashed funding to address serious malnutrition, suffered by more than half of Guatemala's children. The budget also cut funding to the Human Rights Ombudsman's Office. The budget was passed in secret, overnight. On hearing the news, Guatemalans began demanding the resignation of various members of Congress, cabinet members, and the president himself.

Guatemala's National Civil Police force responded to the protests with arbitrary arrests, beatings, and indiscriminate use of teargas, [according to](#) the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. Two men [lost their left eyes](#) as they were hit with teargas canisters. Thirty people were arbitrarily arrested in Guatemala City and some dozen more in Quetzaltenango. Part of the building where Congress meets was set on fire, and this act was the pretense for the arrests, though human rights monitors in Guatemala note that protesters who were arrested were all detained in front of the National Palace, at least five blocks away, and hours after the setting of the fire. Yet police maintained those arrested had been caught in the act of arson. All the protesters were released for lack of evidence, though some had to spend up to two days in jail waiting for a judge to hear the charges against them. Ivan Velásquez, who headed the UN-backed International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG), said in a [tweet](#) that it was very strange that anyone could get in and set fire to a building which is supposed to have the highest levels of security. The budget, in the end, was not ratified by the President Giammattei, but the protests continued.

After the well-documented brutality, [condemned](#) by the UN Office of the High

Commissioner on Human Rights in Guatemala (OHCHR) and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, the Minister of the Interior, Gendri Reyes, and Attorney General Gloria Porras joined the list of officials whom protesters called on to resign. Guatemala's Human Rights Ombudsman, Jorge Rodas, [pushed for](#) the firing of Interior Minister Gendri Reyes and also recommended that the Director General of the National Police, José Tzubán, be fired.

Protests against the government's actions, including its efforts to [dismantle](#) all the institutions set up to implement the 1996 Peace Accords, continued until Christmas break.

Christian Pastor Working for Women's Rights Arrested A Christian pastor who promotes sexual and reproductive health in Cobán, Alta Verapaz has been arrested on false charges, according to a [report](#) in *Prensa Comunitaria*. [Delia Adelina Leal Mollinedo](#), as Frontline Defenders points out in an [urgent action](#), is a Nazarene and Baptist minister and has served as Regional Women's Ministry Coordinator for the Protestant Center for Pastoral Studies in Central America (CEDEPCA) since 2007. In December, two young women had sought refuge at the home of the Rev. Leal. Their living situation was precarious and they felt unsafe. They had stayed with her before when things were uncertain. On the morning of December 29, members of the National Civil Police violently entered Delia Leal's home with a warrant (without her name) issued by the Prosecutor's office. They took her to the substation of the Specialized Division in Criminal Investigation of Cobán, seized her cell phone, and arrested her for the crimes of kidnapping, trafficking of minors, and obstruction of an investigation. Although Guatemalan law establishes that the initial hearing must be held within 24 hours of arrest, she was not permitted to give her first statement before a judge until January 6. The hearing was then promptly suspended because there was no report from the Prosecutor General's Office. She remained in jail until the first deposition hearing on January 11. On January 11, the Second Court of First Criminal Instance of Cobán decided to reduce the charges against Delia Leal and to release her from prison. She has been placed under house arrest at least until her next scheduled hearing on May 27.

Murders and Attacks

Xinka Indigenous Leader Shot and Wounded On the morning of January 16, according to the Xinka Parliament, Xinka leader Julio David González suffered an attack in his home in Mataquescuintla, Jalapa. González was shot and injured and was treated for his wounds.

[According to](#) *Prensa Comunitaria*, Kelvin Jiménez, a lawyer and member of the Xinka Parliament, said that since last year they have been reporting threats against González and other people who are part of the organized resistance to the Escobal Mining Project. Two weeks earlier, a complaint was filed with the Office of the Public Prosecutor for Crimes against Activists and Human Rights Defenders for threats received by members of the resistance, Jiménez said. The [mine](#) is owned by Pan American Silver, a [Canadian](#) company. As MiningWatch Canada [explains](#), "Operations at the mine have been suspended since June 2017 as a result of direct community action and court decisions finding that the Ministry of Energy and Mines (MEM) discriminated against the Xinka and violated their indigenous rights when it failed

to consult with them.”

Mayan Spiritual Leader Tortured and Murdered Jesus Choc Yat, a 57-year-old Mayan healer and spiritual leader, was [murdered](#) in early January, according to the Mayan association Uk'ux B'É. Choc Yat was from the community of El Vergal, in the municipality of San Miguel Uspantán, in the Quiché, fue asesinado el pasado 4 de enero. He was widely recognized for his knowledge and use of medicinal plants. On January 3, he went to the community of Lancetillo La Parroquia to lead a Mayan ceremony. His body was found the next day with signs of torture.

Community Leader Murdered in Baja Verapaz Abelardo Quej Ixim, a community leader in Nueva Gloria, Purulhá, Baja Verapaz, was shot in the back and killed on the evening of December 6. He was auxiliary mayor of the community. Three days before his murder, he had [reportedly](#) received death threats from individuals townspeople say are linked to a landowner in the area. Local communities report that this landowner's private security forces have [fired on](#) campesinos living on contested land, seriously wounding two youths last summer. The Union of Campesino Organizations of the Verapaces (UVOC), which is accompanied by PBI's Guatemala Project, [called for](#) a full investigation and for protective measures to be granted to the wife and six children Quej Ixim leaves behind. UVOC also called for progress in the investigation of the disappearance of another indigenous leader in the same area, Carlos Enrique Coy, last August.

Journalists Continue to be Attacked and Killed Journalist Mario Arturo Ortega García was shot on November 10, near his home in Escuintla, Guatemala, and died four days later. He covered political and social issues for *San José Total*, a television channel and news website he founded. He was the second journalist killed in Guatemala in 2020. His murder was [denounced](#) by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

The Association of Guatemalan journalists [documented](#) 120 attacks against journalists from January to October 2020, including 19 threats. Photojournalist Carlos Sebastian was attacked by Guatemalan National Civil Police officers as he covered the November 21 protests. He was hospitalized with [head injuries](#).

Among the journalists subjected to false accusations and judicial persecution was indigenous journalist Anastasia Mejía Tiriqiz, director of the Xol Abaj Radio y Xol Abaj TV in Joyabaj, Quiché. She had covered a protest in the municipality in August and had long reported on municipal corruption. Arrested along with her on September 22 and also charged with sedition, aggravated arson, and aggravated robbery was [Petrona Siy Castro](#), a recognized leader in Joyabaj. As president of the Association of Rural Traders of the municipality, Siy Castro has ensured that the rights of the population are respected and that the municipal authorities guarantee decent conditions for local merchants. The women spent more than a month in jail awaiting trial. The proceedings against them were [decried](#) by human rights organizations. They are now under house arrest and will face an additional judicial proceeding on February 11.

Case Updates

Ex-Security Head of Canadian Mine Convicted of Murdering Indigenous Leader In Guatemala, the former security head of a Canadian-owned mine has been convicted for the 2009 assassination of Adolfo Ich, an indigenous Maya Q'eqchi' community leader and land protector.

Ex-security head Mynor Padilla pleaded guilty on January 6 in what *The Guardian* newspaper termed a rare conviction over human rights violations linked to Canadian mining corporations in Central America. Padilla worked at the nickel mine in El Estor, Izabal, Guatemala, which at the time of Ich's killing was owned by Hudbay Minerals. Ich was a leading voice of resistance against the mine.

Former Elite Soldier Will Be Tried for Dos Erres Massacre As PBI's Guatemala Project [reports](#), on November 19, Judge Claudette Domínguez ordered that Gilberto Roldán, a former member of the elite Kaibil squadron of the Guatemalan army, which perpetrated a massacre against at least 200 people in Dos Erres, Petén in 1982, be tried for crimes against humanity. The accused was extradited from the United States in March, after remaining fugitive for 20 years. According to lawyer Edgar Pérez, who represents the families of the victims through the Association of Families of the Detained and Disappeared of Guatemala (FAMDEGUA), the key elements influencing the judge's decision included the planning of the massacre, violence against the population during the massacre, the declarations of the survivors and the crimes committed against children. In addition, the judge highlighted the aggravated abuse of women who were treated as spoils of war, which, according to Edgar Pérez, "was a systematic pattern repeated throughout the war, and was not exclusive to the Dos Erres case." The State of Guatemala will also called to account in the trial. No date has yet been set for the opening of the trial, although it is expected to take place during the first four months of 2021.

More details on the human rights situation and PBI's work in Guatemala can be found [here](#) and on PBI Guatemala's [website](#).

Honduras

More Evidence Emerges that Honduran President Has Helped Drug Traffickers

A [motion](#) filed by prosecutors on January 8 in the Southern District of New York lays out Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández's involvement in facilitating shipments of thousands of kilos of cocaine to the United States in exchange for bribes. Hernández offered military support and the use of the country's armed forces as security for drug running operations, prosecutors say, and Hernández was part of a "broader criminal plan to use drug trafficking to help assert power and control in Honduras." According to the evidence, President Juan Orlando Hernández vowed to "shove the drugs right up the noses of the gringos." The [sentencing memo](#) in the case of convicted drug trafficker Fredy Nájera Montoya, formerly a member of the Honduran Congress and now awaiting sentencing on drug trafficking charges in the federal district court of New York, alludes to a tape made by a DEA infiltrator in 2014. On the tape, Nájera says Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández, who had been recently elected, "even still, is in alliance . . . with us. Because he hasn't stopped helping us." Evidence of Juan Orlando Hernández's involvement in facilitating the movement of large transshipments of drugs [came to light](#) last year, at his brother's trial for drug trafficking in New York. This involvement included receiving a [bribe](#) from the Sinaloa Cartel. President Hernández, who has not yet been charged, denied any involvement with drug trafficking.

Thousands Join Caravan to the US Border A caravan of roughly 9,000 Hondurans made its way into Guatemala on January 16 en route to the US border. According to [Radio Progreso](#), “The phenomenon of the caravans is the desperate expression of a population that can no longer bear its situation of anguish and uncertainty, and that in these times has reached its extremes of hunger and unemployment with the pandemic, the passage of hurricanes Eta and Iota, plus the uncontrolled corruption of the core that is controlled by the State.” The Guatemalan government officially wrote to the Hernández administration, asking the Honduran government to “contain the massive departure of its inhabitants.” In Guatemala, Honduran migrants have faced [brutal beatings and teargas](#) as soldiers and police have attempted to block their progress. Guatemala’s Human Rights Ombudsman in a [statement](#) on January 18 deplored the brutal use of force by the Guatemalan army.

In an [open letter to President Joe Biden](#), 78 US organizations urged the incoming administration to adopt new approaches and strategies toward Central American, including on issues related to migration. The organizations urged Biden to “terminate policies that support the militarization of borders and US cooperation with and training of security forces involved in violating the human rights of migrants.” Among many other points, the civil society organizations called on the administration to “perform a full review of US security assistance to the region with input from human rights defenders, land rights defenders, and indigenous leaders from recipient countries,” and “to suspend all security assistance to Honduras and vote no on multilateral security-related loan programs with the government there in light of widespread corruption and human rights abuses promoted by Honduran state actors,” as well as considering a similar suspension of security assistance to Guatemala and El Salvador in light of ongoing abuses by security forces in those countries.

The Latin America Working Group (LAWG) responded to President Biden’s January 21 executive orders on immigration with a [press release](#), welcoming the actions yet calling for more transformative change. “Will the \$4 billion aid package for Central America included in the immigration bill help solve why people are forced to flee their homes in Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador?” asked LAWG co-director Lisa Haugaard. “That depends what’s in the package and whether it is paired with strong diplomacy against the massive corruption, human rights abuses, and authoritarian trends we are seeing in these countries. Pouring aid into corrupt, predatory governments and abusive security forces is not the answer. Nor is the answer just promoting private investment. Private and multilateral bank investments need strict safeguards in countries like Honduras and Guatemala where the needs of indigenous, Afro-descendant and poor communities are routinely ignored and their demands met with threats and violence.”

Hurricanes, Excessive Rain Leave Destruction In November, according to the Permanent Commission on Contingencies (COPECO), hurricanes Iota and Eta together affected [more than four million](#) Hondurans. COPECO documented 91 deaths and the destruction of 58 bridges and 26,000 homes. At least 87 highways were damaged or collapsed, and eighty percent of the

country's agricultural production was affected. By late November, there were 969 shelters housing 88,722 people. Continuing rains caused further losses. In Santa Barbara at least 300 homes were left underground by a landslide in the community of La Reina. More than 18,000 families in the Sula Valley were housed in educational centers and churches in precarious conditions of hygiene and overcrowding. The Social Forum for the External Debt of Honduras (FOSDEH) estimates the total economic loss from the storms at \$10 billion. PBI's Honduras Project in a publication highlights the link between deforestation and severe flooding. In the north of Honduras, even in late January, people are living along the roadsides in camping tents.

In response to the damage caused by the hurricanes, Representative Nydia M. Velázquez (D-NY) has introduced the Hurricane Eta Relief Act of 2020, to grant Temporary Protected Status (TPS) to countries impacted by the devastation, including Nicaragua, Honduras, and Guatemala. Temporary Protected Status is a designation given to individuals from specific countries of origin that now temporarily reside in the United States. This status is typically granted to individuals from countries facing armed conflict, natural disasters, or other serious conditions that prevent safe return. Once granted TPS, individuals cannot be detained by the Department of Homeland Security on the basis of their immigration status in the United States.

Murders and Attacks

Human rights advocate Berta Oliva, General Coordinator of the Committee for Relatives of the Disappeared in Honduras, termed 2020 a tragic year for Honduras, with a resurgence in forced disappearances and continuing abuses by members of the security forces. With primary elections in March and the presidential election in November, violence is expected to increase. According to the Center for the Study of Democracy (CESPAD), the state of exception decreed in response to COVID-19, which involved a suspension of certain constitutional guarantees, "has opened a new wave of violence in the territories against territorial leadership." From March to October, 2020, CESPAD documented 8 assassinations of leaders; 3 forced disappearances; and 100 cases of undue use of the judicial system to persecute human rights defenders. Some of the attacks in recent months are outlined below.

Journalists Murdered On December 19, Pedro Arcángel Canelas was shot to death by unidentified gunmen on a motorcycle. He was the fourth journalist killed in Honduras in 2020, leaving Honduras just behind Mexico (with 11 murders) and second among all Latin American countries in the number of journalists killed in 2020. Canelas was the owner of Radio Bambi and host of the news show *Correo Informativo*. He was murdered in the municipality of Dulce Nombre de Culmí, in the department of Olancho. In his last program, on December 10, he reportedly discussed a proposal in the National Congress to reverse a prohibition on two men traveling on a motorcycle. He referred to the ineffectiveness of the security forces, saying, in part, "The day a hitman wants to end the life of a human being, the police are occupied with something else, what a coincidence."

On September 28, Luis Alonso Almeyda, an independent journalist in Comayagua,

was murdered. He had reported at least 10 threats he had received to the police and the National Mechanism of Protection for Journalists. The Honduran government confirmed that he had had protective measures but that these were ended on February 26, 2019. The 35-year-old journalist was heading to a restaurant for lunch, taking video footage of the street, when two men on a motorcycle opened fire. He died hours later in the hospital. He had reported on human rights issues and local corruption.

Two Indigenous Leaders Killed in December Lenca indigenous defender Félix Vásquez was shot to death in his home on December 26, in Santiago de Puringla, in the department of La Paz. He had reported death threats related to his work just weeks earlier. Four armed men in ski masks kicked his kitchen door in and opened fire. They beat Vásquez’s adult children and threatened them. Vásquez had been involved in the defense of indigenous land rights for three decades and was nationally known for his work organizing opposition to large-scale development projects and helping indigenous communities recover land titles. Amid a tense land dispute between a small indigenous community and a local farmer allegedly connected to the ruling National party, [according to](#) the *Guardian*, Vásquez had reported being followed and surveilled at home. [Two other](#) Lenca leaders were [jailed](#) on trumped-up charges related to the land dispute. Vásquez had participated at a protest calling for their release before he was assassinated. Vásquez also had recently announced his intention to run as a candidate for the Libre party in the March 2021 primaries. The State Department and the US Embassy, as well as US Congress member [Albio Sires](#), denounced the murder. The State Department [called for](#) an “expedited investigation of all the assassinations of human rights defenders” in 2020. In a [communique](#), the Honduran government condemned the murder of Félix Vásquez, Pedro Arcángel Canelas, and Adán Mejía (see below), all occurring in December, said the incidents were of great importance for the institutionality of the country, and said President Juan Orlando Hernandez had ordered effective and objective investigations into the murders.

Indigenous Tolupán defender Jose Adán Mejía was murdered on December 29, reportedly shot to death on his way back from tending to his corn crops in Candelaria, Morazán, Yoro. Honduras’ National Human Rights Commission (CONADEH) [condemned](#) the murders of the two indigenous defenders, calling them “attacks on the rule of law.”

The Black Fraternal Organization of Honduras (OFRANEH) [tweeted](#), “The violence against indigenous leaders who protect ancestral territories and common goods has increased in the midst of the pandemic, in the face of an offensive on the part of companies and state officials to come to plunder the indigenous peoples. Extractive projects, ZEDEs, and the control of territory, promoted by organized crime.”

Young CNTC Member Assassinated in Santa Barbara On November 29, a young member of the National Union of Rural Workers (CNTC) in Santa Bárbara, Kevin Javier Chacón López, [was assassinated](#) by heavily armed, unidentified men. Chacón López was the son of José Nerio López, the secretary of finances of the CNTC in Santa Barbara.

CNTC Regional General Secretary Seriously Wounded in Armed Attack Regional General Secretary of the CNTC, Neptaly Ventura Orellana, suffered an attack on November 24 after accompanying the La Libertad group, which is in possession of land in the highlands of Pinalejo, Santa Bárbara. Heavily armed hitmen ambushed Ventura Orellana and wounded him badly in his ankles and knees. PBI Honduras [posted](#) on its Facebook page: “PBI Honduras expresses our concern about this new aggression towards defenders of the land and the territory of CNTC and we urge that what happened be investigated quickly and thoroughly.” PBI-Honduras has accompanied the CNTC since May 2018. Since May, PBI Honduras has registered more than 10 incidents affecting CNTC members, among which are forceful evictions, threats to local campesino groups, and police searches of campesino communities, affecting over 341 families.

Female OFRANEH Activist Murdered On November 24, Laura Carolina Valentín Dolmo, a 32-year old Garífuna woman and a member of the Black Fraternal Organization of Honduras (OFRANEH), was found dead in the city of La Ceiba, with signs that indicated she had been murdered. She [reportedly](#) was an activist working on gender and sexual rights. Her murder forms part of a pattern of targeted killings of members of OFRANEH, an organization that defends the social, economic, cultural and territory rights of the Garifuna people in Honduras.

The murder of Edwin Fernández in May and the forced disappearance of three OFRANEH members in July were detailed in a thirteen-page letter sent by seven UN Special Rapporteurs to the Honduran government in September, along with other cases of concern. The [letter](#) included an expression of concern about justice in the Berta Cáceres case and about unresolved murders of members of the LGBTQ+ rights organization Arcoiris.

LGBTQ+ Activist Murdered Activist and trans woman Mía Zabala was assassinated in Amapala, Valle on November 8. Isabel Albaladejo Escribano, representative of the UN High Commissioner on Human Rights Office (OHCHR) in Honduras, stated, “The Office I represent is deeply concerned about the stigmatization, discrimination, and violence based on sexual orientation and gender identity that LGBTI people in the country are subjected to.” The OHCHR in Honduras condemned the murder, stating that it “should have been prevented through actions aimed at guaranteeing the right to life of trans people in Honduras.” Nineteen LGBTQI+ individuals have been killed so far in 2020, according to data from Cattrachas. Zabala volunteered for the Horus LGBTI People’s Association.

On November 11, as the [hearing](#) in the case of murdered trans activist Vicky Hernández, murdered in 2009, began at the Inter-American Court on Human Rights—a murder which the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights stated was linked to the security forces—a plaintiff and a member of Cattrachas suffered [harassment](#) and immediately requested and were granted provisional protective measures by the Court. The Court [noted](#) that Honduras has one of the highest rates of trans murders in the world, and Honduran security forces are involved in various of these acts of violence.

Miskito Indigenous Men Killed by Military Police On December 4, a young member of the Miskito indigenous group, Adalin Yeckster, was shot and killed, according to [reports](#), when Military Police fired on him from a helicopter as he was working his land. The killing occurred in the municipality of Brus Laguna in Gracias a Dios, Barra Patuca, in La Mosquitia. On December 2, another man [reportedly](#) was killed in the community by Military Police. Community members protested at the military base in Barra Patuca in response.

Young Man Shot to Death as Police Open Fire During Eviction Rafael Flores Hernández was shot to death by state security forces on December 1 during an eviction in San Pedro Sula. Flores Hernández, who lived on the banks of the Blanco River in San Pedro Sula, was killed as Municipal Police, accompanied by National Police and the Honduran Military, violently evicted people living by the river. A number of people were wounded. The eviction was carried out on the orders of Mayor Armando Calidonio. Flores Hernández was 24 years old and earned his way by washing cars. He lived in a make-shift shelter, surrounded by extremely poor families also living on the river bank. The mayor had given them two hours to evacuate the area with all their belongings but, contrary to international law, no plan for their resettlement was offered. The office of the United Nations High Commissioner on Human Rights in Honduras (OHCHR), in response to the eviction, [tweeted](#) a quote by the UN Special Rapporteur on housing: “During a pandemic forced evictions are even more detestable and can constitute a grave violation of humanitarian law.” The OCHRH also decried the excessive use of force and called for the prosecution of those responsible.

Political Prisoner Stabbed [Raúl Alvarez](#), arrested during the [post-electoral period](#) three years ago and considered by Honduran human rights groups to be a political prisoner, was [stabbed](#) and seriously injured in La Tolva maximum security prison on November 29, where he spent twenty months in pretrial detention. He was hospitalized and treated for his injuries. Alvarez is charged with aggravated damages and arson, accusations related to a fire set during a post-electoral protest which damaged a Marriot Hotel and a Burger King.

Guapinol Water Defender Murdered Guapinol community member Arnold Joaquín Morazán was [murdered](#) in his home on October 13 by two men who arrived on a motorcycle, entered his house, and shot him. Morazán Erazo was part of an ongoing [case](#) in which 32 people face charges related to their action to defend their water supply from contamination by a mine being built near the Guapinol River in Tocoa, Colón.

Eleven Journalists Arbitrarily Arrested in Past Nine Months According a December [report](#) by the Freedom of Press group C-Libre, eleven journalists have been arrested at road blocks or covering protests since the state of emergency declared to combat the pandemic began. On December 4, journalist Eduin Castro, who works for TV Channel 4 in Victoria, Yoro, was beaten and arrested by National Police officers as he covered a protest in the community of La Sabana. Police accused him of sympathizing with the protesters. He was released, but his injuries prevented his return to work the next day. On November 2, the International Day to End

Impunity for Crimes against Journalists, C-Libre members Miriam Grizel and Cesario Padilla [were detained](#) at a checkpoint in Tegucigalpa. Grizel was charged with making a comment to police that lacked respect for authority, and Padilla was arrested while filming her arrest. They were detained for eight hours in four different police stations, making it difficult for their colleagues to find them. They were released only after signing a statement admitting fault and promising not to publicize their arrest.

Case Updates

Guapinol Water Defenders Denied Bail The eight Guapinol water defenders in pretrial detention on what the international human rights community deems false charges were once again denied bail. The UN Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights in Honduras [lamented](#) the denial of bail, pointed out that the men had spent 15 months already in pretrial detention, and reiterated its commitment to monitoring the trial and the situation in the Guapinol community. The defenders, [protesting](#) the construction of an iron ore mine in a protected area that would affect the drinking water of nearby communities and cause ecological damage, were finalists for the European Community's Sakharov Prize. The day after the nomination was announced, another Guapinol community defender with charges pending against him was [assassinated](#) in his home. (See Murders and Attacks).

The largest steel producer in the United States, the [Nucor Corporation](#), spent at least four years associated with the Guapinol mine, according to documents obtained through a cross-border journalism collaboration between *Contracorriente*, the Centro Latinoamericano de Investigación Periodística (CLIP) and the Univision Investigative Unit. [According to](#) Univision, Nucor, a publicly traded company, partnered in 2015 with the prominent Honduran businessman Lenir Pérez and his wife Ana Isabel Facussé, owners of Inversiones Los Pinares. The Honduran company plans to construct the mine in the [Carlos Escaleras National Park](#) in the department of Colón.

Teacher Faces Years in Jail for Charges Stemming from Protest On December 4, the Honduran Supreme Court found a young teacher guilty of involvement in a fire that damaged the doors of the US embassy in 2019. Rommel Valdemar Herrera Portillo was found guilty of complicity in aggravated arson but was acquitted of causing damage to the doors of the US embassy. According to Herrera, the police beat and isolated him after arresting him. He was transferred to the maximum security prison known as La Tolva, where he spent five months in pretrial detention before being transferred to a psychiatric hospital because of his deteriorating mental health. He could face at least four years in jail and possibly as many as twelve.

The charges stem from a May 31, 2019 protest when hooded people set fire to tires outside one of the embassy entrances. The protest, organized by the Platform for the Defense of Health and Education, was in response to the government's announced intention to take measures that would privatize the healthcare and education systems. The guards who would normally be at the embassy entryway were not present, a fact that has not been explained. Although video cameras

recorded someone dressed like Herrera engaging with the burning tires, no one has been arrested for stacking the tires outside the entrance or placing gasoline there.

David Castillo Hearing Suspended for Tenth Time Scheduled to begin on the morning of January 21, the trial of David Castillo, accused of planning and orchestrating the murder of human rights defender Berta Cáceres, was at the last minute suspended. On January 11 also, the proceedings were suspended the morning they were set to begin, on that occasion due to an appeal filed by the defendant’s legal team. In a January 11 [statement](#), COPINH—the organization Berta Cáceres had led—announced that it had irrefutable evidence of Castillo’s involvement in Cáceres’ murder. According to COPINH, David Castillo, general manager of the Agua Zarca Project and subordinate to the Atala Zablah, family, committed criminal acts against Berta Cáceres for her actions in defense of the Lenca people’s life and rivers. COPINH called for the trial to held promptly and to be public and transparent, and for other intellectual authors to be brought to trial.

Impunity For Majority of Accused in Gualcarque Fraud Case Ten of the men accused of corruption in the Gualcarque Fraud Case will not be prosecuted. In 2010, as COPINH [explains](#), COPINH filed a complaint against 51 projects that had illegally obtained concessions and licenses. The Agua Zarca Hydroelectric Project, owned by the Atala Zablah family, was one of these. In 2019, the Mission Against Corruption (MACCIH), [presented its case](#) showing corruption in the “renewable” energy generation sector as evidenced by the illegalities surrounding the Agua Zarca project. The Gualcarque Fraud case involves [16 officials from ENEE, SERNA, and local mayoral offices](#), who acted fraudulently to impose the hydroelectric project.

In a [statement](#) posted to Twitter by the Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (COPINH), the organization called on the international community to stop supporting a justice system that promotes impunity for corrupt people and human rights violators and to reconfigure all cooperation agreements to include these issues. House Foreign Affairs Committee Chair Eliot Engel [tweeted](#) on December 18, “I’m disappointed by the Honduran Constitutional Court’s decision to side with many of those involved in the Gualcarque fraud case. . . I stand with Honduran UFERCO [Special Prosecutor’s Office Against Networks of Corruption] director Luis Santos Santos in condemning this decision and thank him for his commitment to critical anti-corruption work. . . .”

Other News

Municipality Rejects Hydroelectric Project on Jilamito River In an open town hall held on December 17 in the municipality of Arizona, department of Atlántida, according to Martín Fernández, of the Broad Movement for Dignity and Justice (MADJ), community members gave a mandate to municipal authorities and hydroelectric companies already installed in various communities that they must invest resources to improve the situation of the people who were affected by hurricanes Eta and Iota. Another important agreement ratified in the town hall was

that the Jilamito River is not subject to any negotiation and will be used as the water source for the 16 communities of the Arizona municipality. Fernández [noted](#), “The residents made it clear that they want the company Ingelsa out of Arizona, as it plans to build a hydroelectric project on the Jilamito River.” A public hearing on trumped up charges faced by five defenders opposing the dam was supposed to take place during the week of January 18 but was postponed.

The Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) Invest in November [approved a \\$20,250,000 loan](#) for the hydroelectric project, in spite of the violence—[including three murders](#)—unleashed on those opposing it. The [US Development Finance Corporation](#), which plans to finance \$1 billion of private sector investment over three years in Honduras “in recognition that this model of mobilizing private investment must become a more prominent tool of US foreign policy,” is [advancing](#) the Jilamito dam project. Representative Ilhan Omar led an August [letter](#) to oppose the DFC’s plan, stating, “By any reasonable standard, the human rights and environmental impacts of the Jilamito hydropower project and the record of both Ingelsa and the Honduran state should have prevented this investment from going forward.” Ingelsa (Inversiones de Generación Eléctricas, S.A.) is a special-purpose vehicle established under Honduran law to carry out the project, IDB Invest notes. The Borrower’s share capital is owned by Hermacasa, S.A, a company ultimately controlled by Emin J. Abufefe and [Simonds International Corporation](#).”

National Police Arrested for Human Trafficking The Honduran Attorney General’s office uncovered a human trafficking [ring](#) in which National Police officers were involved. Fifteen people were arrested in a bust in November. Five were active members of the Secretariat of Security, one with the rank of commissioner. The investigation, in which the United States assisted, had been underway for a year. The trafficking ring exacted thousands of dollars from undocumented immigrants to facilitate their passage through Honduras towards the United States.

President Must List and Block Entry of Corrupt Individuals In December, the US Congress passed the [Northern Triangle Enhanced Engagement Act](#) (H.R. 2615) which was authored by Representative Eliot Engel and included in the omnibus appropriations and COVID-19 relief package. The act requires President-Elect Biden to publish a list of individuals from Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemalans who “are engaged in significant corruption and the undermining of democratic institutions and ensure that they are denied entry into the United States.” The act also requires the creation of a five-year strategy from the Secretary of State and USAID Administrator to advance prosperity, combat corruption, strengthen democratic governance, and improve civilian security in the Northern Triangle and curb irregular migration.

Honduran Government is Criticized at Third Universal Periodic Review On November 5, Honduras underwent its [Third Periodic Review](#) before the UN Human Rights Committee to monitor its compliance with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. As the Honduran daily *El Heraldo* [relates](#), “Representatives from several countries regretted having to repeat the same thing as in 2015 to the Honduran delegation and demanded that the State be

more efficient in fulfilling its commitments.”

The United States [expressed concern](#) about the lack of accountability for the actions of the Military Police and National Police during the 2017 post-electoral protests. The US also expressed “deep concern about the lack of effective command and control infrastructure in the National Inter-Institutional Security Forces [FUSINA].” The United States representative said, “It is important for the civilian authorities to maintain effective control of civilian and military forces,” adding that the military should no longer be charged with the civilian duties of transportation, airport, and prison security. The US recommended that the Honduran government adopt and implement the proposed use of force legislation to guide security forces’ interactions with civilians. Additional recommendations included strengthening the commitment to fighting corruption by increasing funding for the Specialized Fiscal Unit Against Corruption and removing legal and political barriers so that the organization can hire more personnel. The US also recommended that the government enact a law to guarantee judicial independence and update the procedures for the selection and appointment of Supreme Court judges and the Attorney General and his or her deputy. The UN High Commissioner’s Office on Human Rights held an analysis of the review that can be found [here](#).

Three [joint submissions](#) to the UPR, comprising international and Honduran organizations, noted that the prevailing model of exclusive development and the climate of violence and discrimination were fueling mass migration to North America and that, in 2018 and 2019, this had resulted in the formation of migrant caravans. [Peace Brigades International](#) drew attention to the systematic use of criminal legislation to criminalize, curtail, and undermine the work of human rights defenders. PBI expressed serious concern about the definition of the offense of association for purposes of engaging in terrorism contained in the new Criminal Code, which, owing to the ambiguous manner in which it was phrased, could permit the criminalization of other forms of conduct and could be used against rights defenders. PBI recommended that Honduras refrain from deploying the armed forces in citizen security operations, commit to a time frame for phasing out the Military Police, and improve the human rights training provided to the security forces.

For more detailed information on Honduras, see Swiss Honduras Forum’s [monthly publication](#).

For information on PBI’s work in Honduras and special reports, see the PBI Honduras’ [website](#).

[Peace Brigades International](#) is a nongovernmental organization with consultative status before the United Nations and a dedication to nonviolence. PBI sends teams of international observers to areas of conflict and repression to provide protective accompaniment to human rights defenders whose lives and work are under threat. Founded in 1981, PBI has worked in fourteen

countries on four continents. PBI's international office in Brussels and advocacy staff around the world support efforts in the field to open space for peace and for the defense of human rights.