



Peace Brigades International

Human Rights News

HONDURAS

August 21, 2020

In spite of an ongoing curfew, human rights defenders in Honduras in recent months have been attacked, abducted, and assassinated. From March to July, according to the Center for Democratic Studies, five defenders of environmental rights were assassinated. In July and August, that violence continues. Selected attacks are outlined below.

OFRANEH Leaders Abducted Around 6:00 AM on July 18, according to community witnesses, heavily armed men arrived in the northern coastal community of Triunfo de la Cruz in three 4x4 vehicles. The men, who wore police uniforms, broke into four Garifuna men's homes and at gunpoint forced five men in total into the unmarked vehicles. Three of the men were members of the Black Fraternal Organization of Honduras, including Alberto Snaider Centeno Thomas, a prominent OFRANEH leader in the town and president of the elected town council. The other men abducted were Milton Joel Martínez Álvarez; Suami Aparicio Mejía García; Gerardo Misael Trochez Calix; and Junior Rafael Juárez Mejía. The men remain missing, and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights has ordered the government of Honduras to take all necessary measures to find them and has issued protective measures for residents of Triunfo de la Cruz and the community of La Piedra who collectively defend the rights of the Garifuna. The armed men reportedly wore uniforms of the Police Investigation Bureau (DPI). The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights in Honduras released a statement condemning the men's "forced disappearance," a term that recognizes the perpetrators as state security forces. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights also condemned the forced disappearance of the men.

In October 2015, the community won a case against the Honduran government before the Inter-American Court, which ordered that the government must recognize the community's right to its ancestral lands. Alberto Sneider Centeno actively led the community's work during the trial and in later efforts to have the sentence implemented.

According to OFRANEH, on July 25, as members of the Garifuna community of Santa Fe protested to demand the return of the young leaders, state security forces opened fire, wounding at least one man. In a statement at the end of July, OFRANEH asserted, "There is one proven fact: the forced disappearance of the young Garifunas in Triunfo de la Cruz, in the early hours of July 18, was carried out by individuals wearing bulletproof vests with the initials of the Police Investigation Bureau (DPI) and uniforms of the Military Police, who, acting violently, removed the young people from their homes, threatening their families and witnesses. . . . We are emphatic in indicating that precisely on Saturday, July 18, there was a curfew in the country, which theoretically prevented the mobilization of vehicles without the permission of the authorities. In this sense, we find it impossible to believe that the mobilization of three vehicles, in which heavily armed individuals were transported, went totally 'unnoticed.' We state that the inclusion of the Police Investigation Bureau (DPI) in the search for the young people and in the alleged investigations being carried out implies a conflict of interests; it cannot be that the same agency apparently involved in the facts is in charge of the investigations."

Congressman Albio Sires (D-NJ) and Congressman Gregory Meeks (D-NY), Chairman and Vice Chair of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, Civilian Security, and Trade, led a [letter](#) with 12 of their colleagues to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, urging him to speak out on human rights and anti-corruption efforts in Honduras. The letter, which expresses alarm about the abduction of the Garifuna leaders, urges Secretary Pompeo to reassert the United States' interest in supporting Hondurans' efforts to build a just, inclusive, and democratic society. "We are deeply concerned that rather than pressing the Honduran authorities for accountability," the members of Congress stated in the letter, "the Trump Administration has been holding public photo-ops with President Hernández and lauding his assistance in implementing asylum restrictions that rely on an executive order that was struck down in US federal court. Trump political appointees' expressions of unqualified support for President Hernández do not advance US or Honduran interests in working toward making Honduras a place where Hondurans can imagine a future. We urge you to engage the Honduran government directly about these serious setbacks in the fight against corruption and the protection of human rights, and to recommit to using the diplomatic strength of the United States as a force for good in Honduras."

Young Environmental Leader Found Dead in Choluteca The body of human rights defender [Marvin Damián Castro Molina](#) was found on July 13 and showed evidence of violence. The young environmental rights leader had [reportedly](#) been abducted from his house a day earlier. His body was found in the Sacamil River, in the community of Perspire, Choluteca, about twelve miles south of Tegucigalpa. He was president of the Youth Network of the Perspirese-Honduras Development Association and coordinator of the Social Environmentalist Movement for Life of the South (Mass-Vida). He had been a beneficiary of collective protective measures from the National Protection System since 2019. According to Committee of Families of the Detained-Disappeared in Honduras (COFADEH), the 29-year-old environmental leader had expressed fear for his life at the National Protection System just days before his murder. The National Protection System is a government body set up to protect human rights defenders, journalists, and lawyers.

LGBTQ Activist Murdered Scarlet Cambel, a defender of LGBTQ rights and a member of the rights organization [Arcoíris](#), was [killed](#) on July 10 at approximately 8:00 PM, in the La Plazuela neighborhood of Tegucigalpa. Her assailants pulled up in a car without license plates and opened fire. One of the trans women with her at the time was also injured. Scarlet Cambel was shot three times in the back and died in the ambulance on the way to the hospital. A trans woman, she was 22 years old. She had been the victim of other attacks in recent months which had not been investigated. For example, on April 15, Scarlet Cambel and two of her companions were attacked by a military patrol in the center of Tegucigalpa, under the pretext that they were enforcing the curfew put in place as a response to the pandemic. The soldiers threatened to disappear them if they reported the attack. Between January and July, eight gay men, one lesbian, and seven trans women were murdered, [according to](#) the Lésbica Cattrachas Network. Five of the trans women murdered were killed in July alone; in addition to Scarlet Cambel, Alejandra Ortiz, Monic Martinez, Erlin Alexi Rivera, and Cristal López were murdered. Cristal López and her partner, Erlin Alexi Rivera, were shot to death by heavily armed men wearing military uniforms who entered their home, killed Rivera and López, and abducted López' sister.

University Employee Murdered While Returning Home from Demonstration A security guard at the Atlantic Coast Regional University Center, part of the National Autonomous University of Honduras system, was [assassinated](#) on July 13 after taking part in a protest with university employees to demand unpaid wages. Oscar Obdulio Turcios Funes, 51 years old, was heading home around noon after the protest and was shot to death by two men on a motorcycle who intercepted him and opened fire. Protests on the same issue occurred that same morning on university campuses throughout the country.

Special Police Force, Funded by the US, Fires on and Kills Young Man at Roadblock On June 21, at around 1:00 AM, Riner Argueta Oliva was heading to his property to work when he apparently failed to stop for a curfew-related roadblock that National Police and the special forces known as the [TIGRES](#) were beginning to set up in San Esteban, Olancho. Because he didn't stop, agents of the TIGRE force fired on the vehicle, killing the young man instantly. Several of the police officers involved turned themselves in and are awaiting trial. The human rights organization COFADEH fears for the safety of Argueta Oliva's family members, especially his brother Adrián Argueta, believing they could face reprisals for having denounced the killing. COFADEH [has asked](#) the Inter-American Commission for protective orders for the family.

Elderly Man Dies in National Police Custody; His Body Shows Signs of Torture On August 3, according to COFADEH, 74-year-old Rufino Portillo López was [arrested](#) by National Police officers for supposedly violating curfew in Nueva Frontera, Santa Bárbara. According to his family, he was on the sidewalk in front of his house, a custom of many Honduran families, especially in rural communities. The Honduran population had been under strict lockdown since March 16. As the National Police officers took the man in custody, according to his relatives, he was not resisting. Nonetheless, the family received a call from police a while later, telling them that Portillo López had died in custody. The National Police officers turned over his body to them with no explanation. Portillo López had a deep cut under his ear, one of his eyes was torn out, he had a broken bone, and he had marks all over his body where he had been beaten.

Son of Opposition Politician Disappears Sixteen-year-old José Miguel Hernández Tejada set off on his motorcycle around 9:00 AM on August 3 to bring bread to his aunt and uncle in Las Vegas, Santa Bárbara. He never arrived at his destination. The Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights in Geneva, Switzerland, sent an [urgent action](#) on his disappearance to the Permanent Representative of Honduras to the United Nations. The UN Committee on Forced Disappearances through the missive required "urgent action from the government of Honduras to adopt all necessary means to search for and find José Miguel Hernández Tejada and protect his life and physical safety, in conformity with its obligations under the convention." The Committee pointed out that the boy is the son of Aylin Tejada, a member of a well-known family of the political opposition in the municipality, who in the context of the pandemic has participated in a movement against corruption called Where is the Money? The Committee also noted that the disappearance of the boy occurred in the context of a suspension of constitutional rights implemented nationally by the Juan Orlando Hernández government since March 16 in response to Covid-19. The boy's family reported his disappearance to the DPI and the National Police and COFADEH filed a writ of habeas corpus on his behalf. As the Committee on Forced

Disappearances conveyed in its communication to the Permanent Representative of Honduras, no operations had been carried out to locate the boy, and the habeas corpus had not been executed. The Committee urged the Honduran government to send information before August 21 on the measures it had taken to find José Miguel Hernández Tejada.

Journalist and Cameraman Killed Journalist German Vallecillo and camera operator Jorge Posas were [shot](#) to death by gunmen on a motorcycle who opened fire on the pair on July 1, as they drove back to the station after having lunch. The murders occurred in La Ceiba, Atlántida. Both worked for the privately owned TV station Canal 45, where Jorge Posas was also a technician and producer. Police have made several arrests. Of the 86 journalists murdered in Honduras in the last 17 years, only five percent have been successfully prosecuted.

Journalist Unjustly Criminalized and Sentenced Dies in Jail of COVID-19 On July 18, David Ellner Romero, the director of Radio Globo who was arrested and convicted amid international protest, died of respiratory arrest days after being transferred from prison to a hospital. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights had issued protective orders for Romero and [had asked](#) that he be allowed to carry out his journalistic labor. Nevertheless, he was arrested while broadcasting on air after police surrounded and [raided](#) his office. He was charged with defaming a former prosecutor and sentenced to ten years in prison.

Member of Congress Sentenced for Defamation On July 20, Supreme Court of Honduras [denied an appeal](#) by former Police Commissioner and Member of Congress María Luisa Borjas, who has been convicted of defamation and sentenced to three years in prison. The case stems from a statement she made in 2017, while running for Congress, in which she named Camilo Atala, president of Ficohsa bank, as a suspected mastermind in the 2016 killing of environmental activist Berta Cáceres. Camilo Atala filed charges against her for defamation but has faced no charges himself related to Cáceres' murder. According to the [Seattle Times](#), Borjas read Atala's name from a security ministry's inspector general report about the murder of Berta Cáceres. She said she read it publicly because she knew it was in prosecutors' possession but had not been acted on. Atala's name was one of 16 that she read. Before becoming a member of Congress, Borjas was Director of Internal Affairs for the National Police. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner on Human Rights in Honduras [lamented](#) her conviction in 2019 and warned that the treatment of calumny and defamation as criminal offenses could be a means of enforcing silence.

In response to the denial of Borjas' appeal, Senator Jeff Merkley [posted](#), "Honduran authorities have repeatedly targeted environmental defenders like Berta Cáceres, giving the country the highest per capita killings of environmental activists in the world. I stand with Congresswoman María Luisa Borjas, the Garifuna land defenders, and all who demand justice and an end to corruption."

During a July 30 Senate Foreign Affairs Committee hearing on the 2021 budget request, Senator Merkley [commented](#) on the situation in Honduras: "The State Department Human Rights Report talks about extrajudicial killings, torture, arbitrary arrests, detention, violence against indigenous Hondurans and LGBT communities. And in addition, we had in October the US Federal

Court find that the President was implicated as a co-conspirator in widespread drug trafficking and money laundering and there's huge reports of systemic corruption and human rights abuses. In the context of all of this, is it time to reevaluate our relationship, which has been quite cozy with the president of Honduras?"

Secretary of State Pompeo responded, "We're constantly demanding that the leadership in Honduras take this set of facts on board. We're well aware what's taking place. . . . we've not had the effect that we desire. We're working on it."

Retweeting the exchange, Senator Patrick Leahy stated, "The State Department, which brags of its devotion to the rights of life and liberty enshrined in the Declaration, ignores all of that when those rights are trampled in Honduras by a government that the Department continues to call a friend and partner." Representative Jan Schakowsky tweeted, "The US must stop backing the @JuanOrlandoH dictatorship and its grave human rights abuses including state sanctioned murder, arbitrary arrest and detention, and torture of its own citizens."

United States Announces Billion-Dollar Investment in Honduras Over Three Years The [U.S. Development Finance Corporation](#) plans to finance \$1 billion of private sector investment over three years in Honduras. The DFC's mission is to "offer innovative development finance to businesses operating in developing countries." The DFC replaces the Overseas Private Investment Corporation and was created with bipartisan support "in recognition that this model of mobilizing private investment must become a more prominent tool of US foreign policy." In Honduras, according to the DFC's [announcement](#), the DFC's effort "will complement a memorandum of understanding signed . . . between the governments of the United States and Honduras to establish a framework for bilateral cooperation in support of the Administration's [América Crece](#) initiative." América Crece began in 2018 as an energy infrastructure-focused initiative and has now expanded to encompass broader infrastructure. In an event celebrating the memorandum of understanding with Honduras, the DFC's Chief Executive Officer Adam Boehler [stated](#), "Today, we are working with our partners at IDB Invest to advance the Jilamito [dam] project to provide a steady supply power to La Ceiba, the third largest city in Honduras."

The announcement sparked a sharp response from human rights advocates, including concerned members of the US Congress, given that the dam project on the Jilamito River that the DFC plans to finance faces strong opposition from local communities. Communities affected by the dam project have protested against it and come under steady attack: two opponents of the dam have been murdered in the last two years. In 2018, Ramón Fiallos, a local coordinator with the Broad Movement for Dignity and Justice, [was shot](#) in the arm by Honduran police forces sent to quell a demonstration against the dam and died of blood loss. He was extremely active in the Encampment of Dignity for the Jilamito River, a consortium of 16 communities in the vicinity of Arizona committed to protecting the river. Three months later, the mayor of the community, after siding with those opposing the dam, faced trumped up charges related to protesting. The lawyer defending the mayor in the case, Carlos Hernandez, was [shot to death](#) in his law office. The community of Jilamito is located in the department of Atlántida, and the Jilamito River provides water for 16 communities. If the project continues, these communities will lose their main source of water for human consumption, washing clothes, watering their crops, and even bathing.

Representative Ilhan Omar led a [letter](#) to DFC CEO Boehler, signed by 27 other members of Congress, expressing "in the strongest possible terms" opposition to the DFC's plan. The letter reads,

in part, “Just days ago, five Garifuna community leaders were forcibly disappeared by men dressed in military and police uniforms in Triunfo de la Cruz, less than 20 miles from the Jilamito dam site. It is deeply alarming that you, Chargé Hoey, and Mr. Claver-Clarone found it acceptable to appear with President Hernández and announce an investment in the same region of the country where those disappearances—and years of human rights violations—have taken place. As you know, members of Congress were deeply shocked by the murder of Berta Cáceres and have repeatedly urged not only justice for her murder but also changes in policy to ensure that the United States stands on the side of human rights defenders and environmental activists in Honduras defending their communities’ rights. 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. Given that existing protocols at DFC have failed, we will now consider legislative options to prevent this project going forward. . . . Anti-corruption measures have been actively thwarted or weakened by the Hernandez administration—the DFC should not invest any US tax dollars until anti-corruption mechanisms are in place. Finally, we urge full disclosure regarding the other projects that this \$1 billion investment plans to support in Honduras. ”

Appeals Court Rules Against Imprisoned Guapinol Defenders and Charges Five More

An appeals court has ruled that eight [environmental defenders](#) from the community of Guapinol, in Tocoa, Colón—currently in pretrial detention—must be formally indicted for charges pressed by the Pinares mining company and the Public Ministry. Revoking a lower court’s acquittal of thirteen other defenders, the court ruled that five of those previously acquitted, in addition to the eight in jail, must also face charges. The court made the ruling in March and just last week informed the defenders’ defense team.

“The court’s decision clearly reaffirms the alliance between the Public Ministry, the Judiciary, and the private sector to punish all who dare to defend the public and common resources of Honduras,” said a member of the defense team, lawyer Edy Tábora. This case is not just about Guapinol. This case is emblematic for all who struggle to guarantee rights in the context of extractive projects in their territories.”

The appeals court confirmed an earlier court decision to try the eight defenders in pretrial detention for aggravated arson, and “unjust deprivation of freedom” of Santos Corea, the head of the Pinares mining company’s private security. The five additional defenders who will now face the same charges are well known: Juan López, Leonel George, Reynaldo Domínguez, Marco Tulio Ramon, and José Cedillo. Juan López [spoke](#) on behalf of the Guapinol defenders as they [received](#) the Letelier-Moffitt Award in Washington last October.

Eyewitnesses allege that the security chief was detained until police could arrive, after a young member of the peaceful resistance to the mine was injured by a security guard. The incident occurred in September 2018, when Santos Corea brought dozens of armed security guards to the peaceful encampment that had been set up a month earlier in the community of Guapinol to defend the rivers that provide water to the community and which the mine, illegally installed in Montaña Botaderos Carlos Escaleras National Park, would contaminate. To date, the Public Ministry has not investigated the attack on the young man by the security forces, which left him seriously injured.

The Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights in Honduras has expressed concerns about [irregularities](#) in the judicial processes at [various points](#) and has [highlighted](#) the important role of the Guapinol defenders.

Peace Brigades International is a nongovernmental organization committed to the principle of 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. For more information on Honduras, see PBI Honduras' [website](#) and subscribe to Honduras Daily and Swiss Honduras Forum's [Another Month in Honduras](#) (available from Daniel Langmeier, daniellm@bluewin.ch).