



## Peace Brigades International-USA

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Attacks on human rights defenders and journalists in Honduras have increased in the first months of 2019. Below are a few selected incidents illustrating a trend toward a continued closing of space for dissent.

**Young Protester Shot and Killed in Choluteca** Wilfredo de Jesus Moncada, 17, was shot to death on April 10 during a protest in the southern city of Choluteca. He was reportedly fired on by National Police forces passing in vehicles and was hit twice, once in the head. He was hospitalized but died of his wounds. The protests, held for over a year now every Wednesday and Saturday, are against the presidency of Juan Orlando Hernandez. The National Police in a communique stated that they are forming a special commission to investigate Moncada's death. During his funeral on April 13, police [reportedly](#) threw teargas at the procession. According to ACI-Participa, a human rights group monitoring incidents in Choluteca, a witness to the shooting who identified himself as such at the wake has been followed by armed men wearing ski masks and driving a white Toyota Hilux.

**Journalist Murdered, Others Attacked in Choluteca** According to the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, a joint program of the World Organization Against Torture and the International Federation for Human Rights, attacks against human rights defenders in the south of Honduras have intensified. The Observatory in a March 26 statement [denounced](#) five attacks in less than a month, including the murder of journalist Carlos Gabriel Hernández. Hernandez was shot six times as he returned to his home in the city of Nacaome, in the Valle department, on March 17. He [hosted](#) a program on a privately-owned local television station called The People Speak and reportedly had been critical of local officials and congressional representatives. In 2018, Hernández had reported to Honduras' National Protection System that he was at risk, but he had not received any protective measures. The Observatory statement mentions a "systematic campaign of attacks" against human rights personnel associated with ACI Participa, which is monitoring human rights violations in the area. As she was monitoring weekly protests held in Choluteca, duly identified by her vest as a human rights worker, Nivia Vargas was surrounded, insulted, threatened, sexually assaulted, and beaten by a group of thirty men linked to the National Party. She had protective orders granted by the National Protection System, but had no effective protective measures in place. On February 27, Melissa Hernández, a journalist, was covering the weekly protests in Choluteca and José Gudiel, wearing a vest identifying him as a human rights observer, was monitoring the protests when National Police officers insulted them and then fired tear gas directly at them. Police have also [reportedly](#) fired live ammunition at protesters in Choluteca in recent weeks. The Committee for Free Expression (C-Libre) has registered [three attacks](#) on journalists by the security forces in Choluteca in April alone.

**Journalist Arrested at his Workplace Faces Ten Years for Defamation** Journalist David Romero was [arrested](#) on March 29 by Military Police and an elite US-trained police division known as Tigres, who [broke down](#) the door to the radio station he directed, Radio Globo. Romero had been accused of [defamation](#) after denouncing alleged crimes committed by a

politician linked to the National Party. Romero took refuge in the station a few days before his arrest, after the Supreme Court in January unanimously upheld a 2016 conviction and a warrant was issued for his arrest. On March 21, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, which granted [precautionary measures](#) on behalf of Romero, [requested](#) that Honduras not act on the Supreme Court ruling until the commission had decided on the petition filed on the case. [According](#) to the Committee to Project Journalists, in a March 26 statement, the Honduran government said the case was not a freedom of expression issue. After the arrest, the commission condemned Romero's detention and urged the government to reconsider. In a [tweet](#), the Inter-American Commission said it “reproves the decision of Honduras regarding journalist David Elnor Romero, a beneficiary of protective measures by reason that he is in a grave and urgent situation as far as the exercise of his freedom of expression.” Even the Human Rights Commission of Honduras (CONADEH), a Honduran government agency, demanded that Romero be protected. The CONADEH Commissioner [stated](#) on March 25, “In the exercise of our constitutional faculties and attributions of guaranteeing the respect for the right to life and physical integrity of the human person, we are asking for security measures to prevent eventual irreparable harms against journalist David Romero.” The streets around Radio Globo were blocked by security forces and businesses were closed for two days before the Tigres ((Intelligence Troop and Special Security Response Groups), who are [supposed](#) to be working against narco-trafficking and gangs, went ahead with his arrest. The Committee to Protect Journalists’ South and Central America Program Coordinator Natalie Southwick [stated](#), “Instead of enforcing outdated laws criminalizing defamation, authorities in Honduras should focus on improving conditions for the press and ensuring all journalists are able to work freely.”

**Opposition Leader Convicted of Defamation** Opposition politician María Luisa Borjas was accused of defamation and found [guilty](#) of allegedly injuring with her words Camilo Atala, whom she named as the intellectual author of the murder of activist Berta Cáceres in a complaint she filed with CONADEH. Borjas, a retired police commissioner who also [named](#) a number of other powerful people as involved in the murder, was [sentenced](#) to two years and eight months in prison.

**Journalist and Labor Leader Flee into Exile** After an official with the Technical Agency of Criminal Investigation (ATIC) told journalist Edgar Francescoly Serrano Portillo that they knew of a plan to murder him, he left Honduras in late March, headed for the United States, according to [reports](#). Labor leader Waldin Banegas also [fled](#) Honduras recently after receiving death threats. He is the president of the labor union Sitrastar in El Progreso, Yoro.

**Tolupán Indigenous Activists Murdered** On February 25, in the municipality and department of Yoro, Salomón Matute y Juan Samael Matute, father and son respectively, were shot to death in the early morning as they headed out to work. Both were members of Tolupán tribe in the community of San Francisco de Locomapa. They both were well known for their history of defending their ancestral rights over the territory as well as the natural goods within it, from mining and timber interests. They were going to work in the fields when they were reportedly attacked by individuals identified as René and Melvin Córdova. Most of the members of the Tolupán tribes in the Locomapa sector are members of the Broad Movement for Dignity and Justice (MADJ), a human rights organization that has accompanied them in their struggles. Through MADJ’s efforts, thirty-seven members of this indigenous community received protective measures from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. Beneficiaries of

these measures included Salomón and Juan Samael Matute. As the human rights organization ACI PARTICIPA points out, the murders of these defenders is not an isolated incident. Ricardo Soto Fúnez, María Enriqueta Matute, and Armando Fúnez Medina were killed in August 2013; Luís de Reyes Macía was killed in April 2015; Eracio Vieda Ponce was murdered in July 2015; and in February 2016 Santos Matute, the son of Salomón Matute, was killed. All of these murders remain unpunished.

**Campesinos Affiliated with CNTC Suffer Attack** [According to](#) the Honduras Solidarity Network, campesino groups affiliated with the National Center of Rural Workers (Central Nacional de los Trabajadores del Campo - CNTC) in the San Pedro de Tutule area of La Paz were attacked and beaten by police and armed civilians on April 14. Live ammunition and tear gas was used against the unarmed campesinos. Many people were reportedly injured by beatings and suffered respiratory problems as a result of the tear gas. Since Sunday, April 14, two campesino leaders from the CNTC in La Paz have received serious death threats: Sebastian Reyes, General Secretary of the CNTC for the La Paz region and Luis Calis, member of the National Executive Board of the CNTC and a renowned leader in the campesino and Lenca indigenous communities in the region.

**Protester Shot as National Police and Cobras Use Live Fire in Eviction** On April 24, National Police officers and Cobras, a special operations unit of the police, reportedly used [live fire](#) against protesters opposing the imposition of a hydroelectric dam on the Petacón River in Reitoca, a municipality in the department of Francisco Morazán. As police evicted the protesters from their camp, one protester was hit by a bullet and injured. Last year Military Police [injured](#) two in Reitoca as they opened fire on protesters. Since a twenty-year concession was granted to the [Italian-owned](#) and [managed](#) Clean Energy Generation Promotion Company (PROGELSA), communities in the area have reported irreparable damage to the water supply, endangering their right to health, water, and food. The municipality decided in public forum last year to declare the area free of all extractive industries. Protesters have since maintained a protest camp at the entrance to the construction site of the dam.

**Protesting Students Teargassed on Campus by Army Helicopters** On April 9, four army helicopters dispatched teargas throughout the campus of the National Autonomous University of Honduras, where students were protesting high gasoline and electricity prices and the closing of the National Professional Training Institute. This incident marks the first use in Honduras of army helicopters to drop teargas on protesters.

**UN Reports Signal Concern About Criminalization, Failure to Demilitarize, and Impunity** The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, on March 20 presented the [annual report](#) on Honduras. “Impunity,” she said, “remains a very serious concern, including for human rights violations. There has, for example, been little progress concerning the prosecutions and trial of members of the security forces for the human rights violations committed in the context of protests following the elections in November 2017.” She expressed regret that “the comprehensive National Political Dialogue, intended to overcome the crisis of November 2017, concluded in December 2018 without any formal agreement.” She called for further steps to “demilitarize public order and to develop a professional and accountable civilian police force that is properly vetted and trained.” There could be a further deterioration of the human rights

situation, she said, unless accountability for human rights violations is promptly pursued and there is movement on the reforms in the social, economic, justice and security sectors.

While she commended the efforts to establish a Special Prosecutor for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, Journalists, Media Workers, and Persons Responsible for the Administration of Justice, she said the UN Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights “continues to observe a pattern of criminalization of human rights defenders, including indigenous, peasant, and environmental activists.” She pointed to the necessity of developing strong, human rights-based policies to address root causes of migration, given the links between violence, insecurity, involuntary displacement, and the country's high levels of poverty, inequality, and exclusion. She suggested that these policies should address the right to work, to education, to adequate health care, and to be protected from violence.

The UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Michel Forst, visited Honduras from 29 April to 12 May 2018 and in February released his [report](#). Among his findings, he learned that defenders “continue to identify the national police, the military police, and the armed forces as the main perpetrators of human rights violations and attacks against defenders.” He also found that women defenders of land and territory, as well as other rights, were the most at risk of attack: The Special Rapporteur has identified women land activists and defenders of the rights of indigenous peoples, the rights of lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgender and intersex persons, and the rights of women as the persons who are the most likely to be attacked and at the highest risk in Honduras. In the last three years alone, he said, “twenty-nine attempted murders of such women have been recorded, and 6 women have been killed.

Peace Brigades International 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 globe support efforts on the ground to open space for peace and the defense of human rights. PBI has worked in [Honduras](#) since 2013.