

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

April 5, 2017

The Honorable Rex Tillerson
Secretary of State
Department of State
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Tillerson:

We write to urge the Administration to enforce conditions in U.S. law on assistance to, and investment in, Honduras.

Over the past few years, Honduras has become an increasingly dangerous place for social and political activists, particularly indigenous rights activists. On January 31st, the nongovernmental organization Global Witness published a report which concludes that Honduras is “the most dangerous place in the world to defend land rights and the environment”, with over 120 activists murdered since the 2009 coup. The report details the widespread threats, attacks, stigmatization, and criminalization of civil society activists who raise concerns about the human rights, social, and environmental impacts of hydropower, agribusiness, mining, logging and tourism activities. Similar abuses have been noted by the Department of State. The report indicates that government officials, security forces, and business elites have colluded to impose extractive projects on indigenous and afro-Honduran communities and to silence opposition.

One year ago, renowned Honduran indigenous activist Berta Cáceres, co-founder of the Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras, was murdered. She had denounced multiple death threats against her and the Inter-American Human Rights Commission had tasked the Honduran government with providing her, and others similarly threatened, with protection. Eight individuals, including active and retired Honduran military officers, have been arrested in connection with her murder, and the investigation is ongoing. Unfortunately, Ms. Cáceres’s death was part of a pattern of killings of human rights defenders and environmental activists who advocate for the protection of their natural resources, and journalists and others who expose corruption associated with extractive projects. Few of these crimes have been investigated or prosecuted.

Many of these individuals and organizations were advocating for their right of ownership against the government’s attempts to appropriate land without the free, prior, and informed consent of affected communities. Meanwhile, persistent corruption weakens governance structures and institutions intended to protect individual rights, protect the environment, and prevent conflicts of interests regarding extractive projects.

We are concerned that U.S. assistance has been provided to the Honduran government despite recurring threats and assassinations of human rights defenders and environmental activists, and contrary to the requirements in section 7045(a) of division K of Public Law 114-113, including that civil society be able to “operate without interference”.

We support continued U.S. engagement in Honduras to achieve common goals. However, it is essential to ensure effective scrutiny of Honduras’ compliance with human rights conditions on U.S. assistance. In that regard, we call on you to:

- Establish effective criteria for measuring compliance with such human rights conditions, with the input of representatives of Honduran human rights and other civil society organizations that have been targeted and in consultation with the relevant U.S. congressional committees.
- Ensure effective scrutiny of whether such conditions are met, and if not met that assistance is withheld in accordance with U.S. law.
- Provide transparency and public access to comprehensive information regarding U.S. bilateral and multilateral assistance for Honduras.
- Work with the Department of the Treasury to oppose investments by International Financial Institutions in Honduran industries credibly implicated in human rights violations.
- Urge the Honduran government to take vigorous steps to eradicate corruption; ensure the free, prior and informed consent of indigenous communities affected by extractive projects; protect human rights defenders and environmental activists; and end impunity for human rights violations.
- Express strong support for the legitimate and important role of civil society organizations in Honduras.

We remain committed to working toward a more secure and prosperous future for the people of Honduras, and believe that continued U.S. leadership and engagement in Central America will enhance U.S. interests and benefit the entire region.

Thank you for your consideration. We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



PATRICK LEAHY
United States Senator



BENJAMIN L. CARDIN
United States Senator



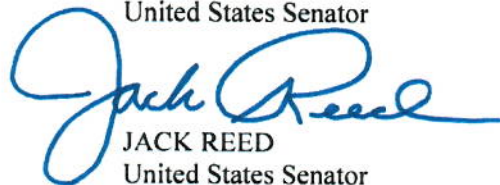
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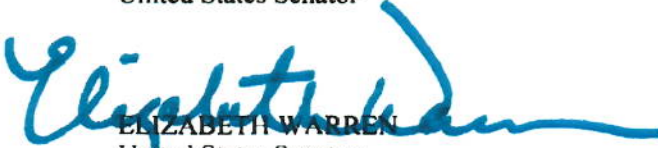
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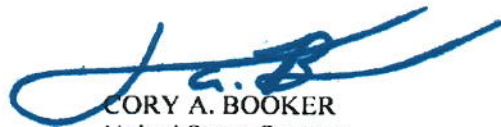
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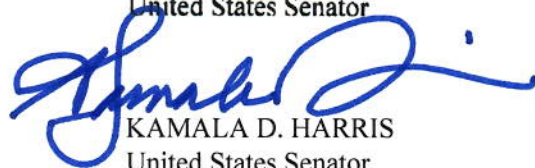
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