

MINING IN HONDURAS: PERSECUTION OF COMMUNITIES

There are growing concerns about the violence and intimidation suffered by communities in northern Honduras because of their peaceful opposition to mining operations. Two of the communities concerned – La Nueva Esperanza and Locomapa – are notable examples of a general escalation in the persecution of human rights defenders acting to protect the country's natural resources, a trend which has become particularly noticeable in the second half of 2013.

La Nueva Esperanza

The 16 campesino communities in Florida district of Tela municipality, Atlántida, have been united in peacefully opposing mining in the area for 12 years. However, the situation has deteriorated dramatically over the past year, particularly in La Nueva Esperanza, where its leaders started to receive death threats due to their expressed opposition to planned iron ore mining exploration by Minerales Victoria, a Honduran company. As a result, two leaders were granted precautionary measures in October 2012 by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.¹ Other supporters of the community, including its parish priest, have also been targeted.²

Minerales Victoria was granted an exploration permit earlier this year, without any consultation with the community, contrary to Honduran law.³ Before this, a “police station” - in reality the private home of a sympathizer of Minerales Victoria - was imposed by the mayor of Tela in January, very close to La Nueva Esperanza, also without consultation. It is staffed by 10 officers, including 4 COBRAs⁴, an unusually strong force for a peaceful rural area. When they arrived, they essentially operated as the mining company's security guards, issuing death threats, including to journalists,⁵ and intimidating the population.

All 10 officers were changed on June 5 after a particularly serious incident when the police threatened the community and fired at the feet of the villagers. However, that same evening, the community witnessed the new police officers escorting about 12 men in civilian clothing into the community, carrying high-calibre rifles – the mining company's private security guards, who have patrolled La Nueva Esperanza ever since, intimidating the villagers and issuing threats to those who refuse to sell their land to Minerales Victoria. Investigations by the Fiscalía (Public Prosecution Service) have revealed that the men are contracted to the Orion security company, believed to be the same company as the one implicated in the killings of campesinos in the Bajo Aguan".⁶ Since the arrival of the security guards, the police's role has been one of complicity, turning a blind eye to their abuses.

In response to requests by members of the community, the Honduras Accompaniment Project (PROAH)⁷ has been accompanying it through the dissemination of information and international alerts, and has visited it several times. It was on one such visit, on July 25, that the security guards, together with workers at the mine site, abducted two members of PROAH's team, holding them captive for 2 and a half hours. It is significant that the day before, the PROAH members had informed the local police station of their arrival, identifying

1 IACHR precautionary measures – PM 342/12 of 3 October 2012 – César Adán Alvarenga Amador and Roberto García Fúnez, Honduras. <http://www.oas.org/es/cidh/decisiones/cautelares.asp>

2 See [public statement of June 7 2013 by MADJ](#) (Broad Movement for Dignity and Justice) which has been supporting the community.

3 Ibid. Para. 10.

4 Police responsible for special operations, including riot control

5 See [public statement of June 7 2013 by MADJ](#) Para. 8.

6 Orion features prominently in [the report by the UN Working Group on the Use of Mercenaries](#), on their visit to Honduras in February this year.

7 A project of the [Friendship Office of the Americas](#) which is registered in Washington

themselves as international human rights observers. However, during the kidnapping, not one of the 10 police officers was apparently at the station. Furthermore, although police were mobilized to search for the international observers, no effort was made to capture the security guards. The family where the PROAH members were staying the day they were abducted had to flee the area that night because of the threats they received from the security guards, as did another member of the community on August 3. In both cases, they had been threatened because the mining company wanted their land for its operations.

Despite the concern generated nationally and internationally by the abduction of the PROAH members, the gunmen are still in the community, with the full knowledge of the state authorities, including the Ministry of Security. They regularly fire shots at night to intimidate the villagers. The *Fiscalía* has been actively investigating the case. Charges have been brought and the first hearing is scheduled for September 18. However, it remains to be seen whether the case will result in the arrest or withdrawal of the armed men, or in the arrest of the intellectual author of the intimidation of the community of La Nueva Esperanza.

Nevertheless, despite the abuses they have suffered, the villagers of La Nueva Esperanza continue to be steadfast in their opposition to the mining operations, with the support of the national and international community. Acts of solidarity have included visits to the community by activists and international delegations, including one of 250 people just two days after the kidnapping and another of 400 on 6-7 September, and peaceful demonstrations in Tela and La Ceiba. Outside Honduras, actions have included a letter to the US State Department in which 24 US church denominations and organizations registered their concerns about the situation.

Locomapa

It was against this background of impunity that three members of the Tolupan indigenous group were shot and killed on August 25, 2013 in Locomapa, Yoro, in northern Honduras. Two of the victims, Armando Funez Medina, and Ricardo Soto Funez, were manning a roadblock set up by members of the community to stop vehicles of illegal loggers and of companies illegally mining antimony on their territory. They died when two local men, allegedly employed by one of the mining companies, opened fire on the dozen or so activists at the roadblock. The third victim, Maria Enriqueta Matute, was an elderly woman who came out to see what was happening.⁸

According to MADJ (Broad Movement for Dignity and Justice) which is supporting the community, there are at least six different mining companies involved, all apparently Honduran. Before the killings, the authorities had been notified of death threats against community leaders but had failed to act. Arrest warrants have been issued for the two killers, but to date they remain at large. At least 10 members of the community have been forced to flee the area for their own safety, and those who remain continue to receive death threats.

The Tolupan live in the mountains in the north of the department of Francisco Morazan as well as in Yoro, the majority in desperate poverty. With a population of around 18,000, it is one of the smaller of Honduras' nine indigenous groups but, according to the government itself, the one that has suffered the most persecution. Fifty seven of their leaders have been assassinated with impunity since the 1970s, the victims of powerful economic interests.⁹

Honduras Accompaniment Project (PROAH) <http://hondurasaccompanimentproject.wordpress.com>

“The Honduras Accompaniment Project provides international accompaniment to human rights defenders, including human rights and social movement organizations and individuals who find themselves under threat or harassment due to their individual and collective work in defense of human rights.”

8 See PROAH article [Mining: Three members of Tolupan indigenous group murdered in Yoro](#).

9 See [website of SEDINAFROH](#) (Ministry for the Development of Indigenous and Afro-Honduran Peoples)