

August 19, 2013

Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Liliana Ayalde
Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor Jane Zimmerman
The State Department
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Deputy Assistant Secretary Ayalde and Deputy Assistant Secretary Zimmerman,

We write to express our concern over a serious human rights situation in the Florida district of Tela municipality, in Atlántida, Honduras.

Communities in the Florida district, especially the community of Nueva Esperanza, have lived over the past year with threats of violence and intimidation from representatives of a mining company. The situation escalated in late May 2013 when the mining company, Minerales Victoria, attempted to bring mining machinery onto land owned by community members, escorted by members of the Honduran police. Since then, armed men have intimidated community members. Two community leaders in Nueva Esperanza were granted precautionary measures in October 2012 by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights due to death threats.

On July 25, 2013, [two international human rights accompaniers](#) with the Honduras Accompaniment Project (PROAH), deployed to the area in light of the threats against community members, were abducted and held captive for 2.5 hours in the community of Nueva Esperanza by 7 armed men. The men are believed to guard the mining operations of Lenir Perez, the owner of Minerales Victoria.

The abduction of these international accompaniers follows incidents in which community members were intimidated and priests accompanying the community as well as journalists covering the story on radio shows were threatened. On June 26, 2013, the Catholic Diocese of La Ceiba issued a [public statement](#) denouncing the conduct of police and state security forces and threats against the religious workers of the Nuestra Señora del Pilar de Arizona Parrish, in particular Fr. Cesar Espinoza, who have accompanied these communities. The Diocese also expressed concern about the human and environmental impact of “the avalanche of mining projects” in the region and the frequent lack of consultation and consent, required under the General Law of the Environment, with affected communities.

We request that the State Department make a public statement of support for the work and mandate of national and international human rights defenders, and urge the Honduran government to take the following steps:

- Conduct an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation into the kidnapping of two international human rights defenders in Nueva Esperanza on July 25, 2013, by armed men, with the results made public and those responsible brought to justice;
- Take all necessary measures to ensure that the harassment and threats against members of the community of Nueva Esperanza and local and international human rights defenders and church leaders in the area cease;

- Provide protection measures, in accordance with their wishes, to community leaders, international accompaniers, journalists and church leaders in the Florida district who are at risk; and
- Guarantee prior and informed consultation with affected communities prior to permitting mining operations in the area.

This situation is just one example of a disturbing trend in Honduras in which companies and land owners appear to be using private security forces to pressure communities to sell land or permit resource exploitation, often apparently with the complicity or tacit consent of state actors. We would greatly appreciate the State Department's assistance in urging these measures to address this specific situation as well as in encouraging respect for human rights, protection for human rights defenders and strengthening of the rule of law in Honduras.

Sincerely,

Jesuit Conference

Franciscans International

Presbyterian Church (USA)

Center for Constitutional Rights

AFL-CIO, American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations

Sister Pat McDermott, RSM, President
Sisters of Mercy of the Americas

American Jewish World Service

Latin America Working Group

Witness for Peace

Pax Christi USA

Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns

United Church of Christ, Justice and Witness Ministries

Friendship Office of the Americas

Conference of Major Superiors of Men

School Sisters of Notre Dame SHALOM North America Contacts

CEPHRI, Ecumenical Committee of English Speaking Church Personnel in Nicaragua

School of Americas Watch

Network in Solidarity with the People of Guatemala (NISGUA)

Val Liveoak, Coordinator
Peacebuilding en las Americas
Friends Peace Teams

Ann Scholz, SSND, PhD
Associate Director for Social Mission
Leadership Conference of Women Religious

Rev. Dan Dale, President
Chicago Religious Leadership Network on Latin America (CRLN)

Rev. Fritz Gutwein
Associate Director
Presbyterian Peace Fellowship

Herbert Rothschild
Board Chair
Peace House

Jeffery Ott, OP, Promoter of Justice and Peace,
Southern Dominican Province

cc: Scott Hamilton, Director, Office of Central American Affairs