



Center for Gender & Refugee Studies

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Submission to the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders

Call for Input for the Report on Human Rights Defenders Working in Remote and Rural Areas

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The Center for Gender & Refugee Studies (CGRS) is grateful for the opportunity to contribute this input to the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders for the upcoming report on human rights defenders working in remote and rural areas, which will be presented to the 58th session of the UN Human Rights Council in March 2025.¹

This submission draws upon the following resources, which provide analysis and information relevant to the call for input.

- CGRS, [Root Causes of Migration: Climate Disasters and Environmental Degradation in Honduran Asylum Claims](#) (October 24, 2024). A copy of this resource is included in the Annex.

¹ The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Call for input for the report on human rights defenders working in remote and rural areas* (accessed on Oct. 1, 2024), <https://www.ohchr.org/en/calls-for-input/2024/call-input-report-human-rights-defenders-working-remote-and-rural-areas>. Questions: "Have there been any cases of human rights defenders working in remote or isolated areas physically attacked, including killed, in your country between 1 May 2020 and 30 June 2024? What action has been taken to bring the perpetrators to justice? Please provide details of cases, where possible."; "Have cases of attacks, intimidation and harassment of human rights defenders working in remote or isolated areas been investigated and prosecuted? Please provide details of cases if available."; "What more could your Government do to help protect and include human rights defenders working in remote or isolated areas?"

- Declaration of Donald Hernández Palma, Expert on Climate Disasters and Environmental Degradation in Honduras (Sep. 18, 2024) [hereinafter, Declaration].² The document is not attached. However, it is available via this [link](#) for general research purposes and is also available upon request to advocates working on fear-of-return claims for Honduran nationals through [CGRS's Technical Assistance Library](#).

Human rights defenders across the world are a common target of persecution in various contexts. This submission particularly focuses on the harm to human rights and land defenders in Honduras. Part I focuses on different types of harm defenders face, including criminalization, homicide, kidnapping, torture and other forms of violence. Part II details the unique harms experienced by women land defenders and the female family members of defenders generally. Part III addresses the Honduran State's failure to protect land defenders and its complicity in violations against them. Finally, Part IV presents recommendations to address the needs of defenders and protect their rights.

I. HARM TO LAND DEFENDERS IN HONDURAS

In Honduras, human rights and environmental defenders—often referred to as “land defenders” or “environmentalists”—are particularly vulnerable.³ This group includes *campesinos*⁴ or Indigenous Peoples dedicated to protecting the right to a safe and healthy environment, their ecosystems and their lands. It also encompasses Indigenous Peoples who reclaim their right to steward their ancestral lands. These individuals stand against powerful and harmful extractive industries that endanger their communities and environments. Given the threats to both their communities and the land they protect, land defenders work to safeguard human rights and the environment in an interconnected way.

Honduran society has divided views on land defenders. While public opinion somewhat shifted after the assassination of Berta Cáceres—a Lenca activist who fought for environmental and Indigenous rights—land defenders are still frequently portrayed as “criminals,” “vandals,” “squatters,” or “invaders” by media owned or financed by those behind

² Donald Hernández Palma is the Executive Director of the [Honduran Center for the Promotion of Community Development](#) (CEHPRODEC), a leading organization advocating for human rights and environmental protection in Honduras. As an agronomist and human rights attorney, he has worked on these issues for over three decades.

³ Declaration at p. 7.

⁴ *Campesinos* are individuals from rural areas whose lifestyle and identity are deeply rooted in their environment. For them, the land is not just used for production and livelihood but forms a core part of their customs, traditions, and values. Like Indigenous Peoples, their close connection to the land leaves them particularly exposed to the effects of climate change. Furthermore, their presence in territories coveted by extractive industries subjects them to threats, as well as physical, emotional, and economic harm.

extractive industries and the politicians who support them.⁵ Defenders remain frequent targets of defamation campaigns led by these powerful interests.⁶

To date, Honduras remains one of the most dangerous places for land defenders,⁷ where they continue to be tortured, disappeared, forcefully displaced, or assassinated. In 2022, the country had the highest per capita rate of land defender murders in the world.⁸ For example, that year, a group of hitmen tortured and killed an Indigenous Lenca land defender, who opposed mining and hydroelectric projects that threatened the *Gualcarque* river, which holds sacred significance to their community. However, there was no investigation or prosecution of the crime. Similarly, a Tolupán land defender was killed in the Comayagua department for defending the environment, and several Tolupán community leaders in Las Vegas de Tepemechín, Yoro, received death threats from mining entrepreneurs.

The violence extends beyond defenders themselves to their families. Even children of defenders are often targeted. In one instance, after a land defender was killed, 17 of his family members received death threats and remain hiding out of fear. Additionally, in many instances, land defenders are tortured before being assassinated. As the Declaration highlights, some land defenders have been beaten to death or had their tongues cut out as punishment for their dissent.

Land defenders are also frequently victims of kidnappings and disappearances. As the Declaration explains, State authorities typically do not investigate these disappearances, in part to avoid international attention. In 2020, five Indigenous Garifuna land defenders were kidnapped from their homes, and despite media coverage, they are still unaccounted for and the investigation of their cases remains stagnant.

⁵ José Luis Espinoza, *Monitoreo de Medios Sobre la Minería en Honduras [Media Monitoring on Mining in Honduras], July 2018 to July 2019*, CEHPRODEC, (2019), <https://cehprodechn.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/MONITOREO-DE-MEDIOS-MINERIA-PARA-IMPRESION.pdf>.

⁶ Contra Corriente, *Campaña Sobre «Falsos Ambientalistas» Fue Inauténtica Y Coordinada Para Reproducir Narrativa De Empresa Minera [Campaign on “False Environmentalists” Was Inauthentic and Coordinated to Reproduce Mining Company Narrative]*, (Mar. 24, 2023), <https://contracorriente.red/2023/03/24/campana-sobre-falsos-ambientalistas-fue-inautentica-y-coordinada-para-reproducir-narrativa-de-empresa-minera/>.

⁷ Graciela Martínez González, *‘Están Esperando que nos Rindamos’: Activistas que Defienden los Ríos de Honduras Sufren Acoso y Asesinatos [They Are Waiting for us to Give Up’: Activists Face Harassment and Killings In Campaign to Protect Rivers In Honduras]*, Amnesty International, (Jan. 27, 2024), <https://www.amnesty.org/es/latest/news/2024/01/activists-harassment-killings-protect-rivers-honduras/>.

⁸ Global Witness, *Siempre en Pie [Standing Firm]*, (Sep. 15, 2023), <https://www.globalwitness.org/es/standing-firm-es/>.

Another common method used to squash resistance is the wrongful prosecution of land defenders by State authorities.⁹ Individuals linked with extractive industries often exert influence over corrupt judges and magistrates, leading to lengthy pre-hearing detentions, solitary confinement, and extended prison sentences for land defenders, who are regularly beaten by police while in custody. Even in clearly frivolous cases, prosecutors often artificially extend the process for up to four years before dismissing the case, therefore allowing ample time for extractive industries to continue their operations. In other cases, prosecutors have falsified or destroyed evidence or charged land defenders with crimes completely unrelated to individuals' actions, such as illicit association, usurpation, or forced displacement. When the accused are granted bond, often the conditions are so burdensome that they drive their families into extreme poverty.

Last, entire communities, more than just land defenders, are often the target of violence and harassment by extractive industries interested in their lands. Some companies have intentionally created divisions among communities by selectively providing services, money, or jobs to certain groups while excluding others and spreading misinformation about the impact of their operations.

II. HARM TO WOMEN LAND DEFENDERS AND WOMEN-FAMILY MEMBERS

Women land defenders in Honduras face heightened risks of severe forms of gender-based violence, including physical, sexual, and psychological abuse. They are also subject to defamation campaigns designed to discredit them and are at the highest risk of femicide.

The Declaration documents how extractive industries use sexual and gender-based violence as a tool to seize territory, often acting through corrupt State authorities, private police forces, and even criminal organizations. Moreover, women are often forced into prostitution.

The Declaration also highlights the unique challenges faced by the spouses of land defenders in Honduras. When their partners are detained, these women often endure retaliation, sexual harassment or violence, and are left without means of support. They are also intimidated by threats of violence against other family members, children, and property.

⁹ See e.g., a statement from the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights, *Press Release, IACHR Condemns Murders of Rights Defenders in Honduras*, IACHR, (Feb. 14, 2023), https://www.oas.org/en/iachr/jsForm/?File=/en/iachr/media_center/preleases/2023/022.asp.

III. THE HONDURAN GOVERNMENT'S (IN)ACTIONS

The Honduran State does not protect land defenders from the repression and forms of violence describe above. The government fails to prosecute and punish, or even investigate, the crimes committed against land defenders. As detailed in the Declaration, the impunity rate for these offences exceeds 95 percent.

Honduran authorities not only neglect to protect land defenders but, through their complicity with extractive industries—enabled by corruption within the State at various levels—actively support the brutal suppression of resistance. The government provides military support for these efforts, forcibly removing land defenders from their territories using intimidation, tear gas and live ammunition.

The close collaboration between Honduran authorities and extractive industries has exacerbated the safety risks for land defenders, enabling a culture of violence and impunity. This has left land defenders as a particularly vulnerable community, with limited avenues for justice and protection.

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

The alarming situation of human rights and land defenders in Honduras, as detailed in this submission and the related resources, exemplifies a broader pattern of threats and vulnerabilities faced by those who defend rights, particularly in remote and rural areas around the world. These individuals and communities often confront powerful economic interests, face systemic corruption and impunity, and lack access to effective protection mechanisms. This submission, drawing on the Honduran case, urges the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders to consider including in its report the following recommendations to address these challenges:

- Develop or enforce existing legal frameworks rigorously to protect human rights and land defenders.
- Strengthen or establish specialized units within justice systems dedicated to investigating and prosecuting crimes against land defenders, with specific attention to the unique threats and vulnerabilities faced by women.
- Develop and fund comprehensive protection programs for land defenders and their families, which must include accessible and safe reporting mechanisms that guarantee confidentiality and protection from retaliation.

- Ensure transparency in development projects and guarantee meaningful participation of local communities, especially those impacted by land rights issues.
- Prioritize international cooperation to support and strengthen domestic efforts to protect land defenders.