



Center for Gender & Refugee Studies

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Submission to the Working Group on Disappearances

Input for the Thematic Report on Enforced Disappearances in the Context of the Defense of Land, Environment, and Natural Resources

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The Center for Gender & Refugee Studies (CGRS) is grateful for the opportunity to contribute this input to inform your thematic study on enforced disappearances occurring in the context of the defense of land, natural resources, and the environment.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.
- Declaration of Donald Hernández Palma, Expert on Climate Disasters and Environmental Degradation in Honduras (Sep. 18, 2024) [hereinafter, Hernández declaration].² The document is not attached. However, it is available via this [link](#) for

¹ The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, [Call for submissions: Thematic Report on Enforced Disappearances in the Context of the Defense of Land, Environment, and Natural Resources](#) (accessed on November 1, 2024). Questions addressed: № 1 “What are the key contributing factors, patterns, and trends of enforced disappearances related to the defense of land, natural resources, and the environment?” and № 3 “Who are the main actors (state and non-state actors) involved in enforced disappearances related to the defense of land, natural resources, and the environment, and how do they contribute to risk and commission of enforced disappearances?”

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.

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](#).

- CGRS, [Honduras: Climate Change, Human Rights Violations, and Forced Displacement](#) (December 20, 2023). A copy of this resource is included in the Annex.

Land defenders commonly face various forms of persecution for opposing harmful or extractive business activities, with enforced disappearances representing one of the most severe threats. This submission focuses on enforced disappearances in Honduras, as understood by the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances³ in the context of the defense of land, natural resources, and the environment. Part I explains the particular position of land defenders in Honduras and their unique vulnerability to enforced disappearances. Part II examines the Honduran State's failure to protect land defenders and its complicity in the threats they face. Finally, Part III presents general recommendations on steps States should take to prevent and address enforced disappearances and other forms of violence against land defenders.

I. PATTERNS AND TRENDS OF ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCES RELATED TO THE DEFENSE OF LAND, NATURAL RESOURCES, AND THE ENVIRONMENT IN HONDURAS

In Honduras, land defenders—often referred to as “human rights and environmental defenders” or “environmentalists”—are vulnerable to threats and different forms of violence.⁴ This group includes *campesinos*⁵ 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.

³ Enforced disappearances are defined as: “arrest, detention, abduction or any other form of deprivation of liberty by agents of the State or by persons or groups of persons acting with the authorization, support or acquiescence of the State, followed by a refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of liberty or by concealment of the fate or whereabouts of the disappeared person, which place such a person outside the protection of the law”; see Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, [About enforced disappearance](#), The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (last accessed on Nov. 26, 2024); see also International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, 3 December 2010, No. 48088, Art. 2.

⁴ Hernández Declaration at p. 7.

⁵ *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.

Indigenous Peoples' livelihoods and worldviews are deeply connected to these lands and environments.

In Honduras, Indigenous Peoples and *campesinos* defending their lands and environments face significant threats from powerful economic and political interests. State authorities frequently grant concessions for extractive projects on Indigenous and *campesino* lands without proper community consent or even consultation. Often, both Honduran authorities and extractive companies view land defenders as obstacles to their goals, leading to violent reprisals in response to protests. As defenders work to protect or reclaim their territories, they endure severe threats, including murder, torture, kidnappings, enforced disappearances, and other grave human rights violations.

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 mainstream media outlets that are mostly financed or owned by corporations and politicians.⁶ Even under the current administration of Xiomara Castro, who promised greater respect for human rights, defenders face incredible pressure. For example, when defenders refuse to leave their lands or accept the exploitation of resources on their territories, they are categorized as “traitors to the party and the president.” This hostile environment contributes to making Honduras one of the most dangerous countries for land defenders.⁷

II. MAIN ACTORS (STATE AND NON-STATE ACTORS) INVOLVED IN ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCES

Extractive companies, often with State complicity, are frequently involved in or responsible for enforced disappearances of land defenders. As the Hernández declaration elaborates, Honduran authorities and businesses often collaborate with criminal organizations like cartels or gangs to instill fear and suppress any resistance from land defenders. The State has been known to provide military support to suppress land defenders' resistance and

⁶ 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>.

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/>.

displace them from their territories, often through intimidation, tear gas, and live ammunition. Moreover, pervasive corruption within State institutions undermines the mechanism created to protect land defenders.

The Honduran State fails to prosecute, punish, or even investigate these disappearances. This is in part to avoid international attention. In 2020, five Indigenous Garifuna land defenders were forcibly taken from their homes, a shocking incident that drew significant media coverage. However, despite the public outcry and calls for justice, these individuals remain missing and unaccounted for to this day. The investigation of their disappearance cases remains stagnant, reflecting a broader pattern of inaction and impunity in the country. As detailed in the Hernández declaration, the impunity rate for offenses against land defenders exceeds 95 percent. Concrete action is urgently needed to ensure accountability, protect land defenders from enforced disappearances and other forms of violence, and uphold human rights in Honduras.

III. RECOMMENDATIONS

The alarming situation of land defenders in Honduras, particularly their exposure to enforced disappearances, as detailed in this submission and related resources, exemplifies the pattern of threats and vulnerabilities faced by those defending their territories and environments. These individuals and communities often confront powerful economic interests, systemic corruption, and impunity, while lacking access to effective protection mechanisms. Drawing on the Honduran case, this submission urges the Working Group on Disappearances to include the following recommendations for States in its thematic study highlighting the need for:

- Enforcing existing legal frameworks, both domestic and international, to rigorously protect land defenders.
- Strengthening specialized units within justice systems dedicated to investigating and prosecuting enforced disappearances and other crimes against land defenders.
- Funding comprehensive protection programs for land defenders and their families, including accessible and safe reporting mechanisms that guarantee confidentiality and protection from retaliation.
- Addressing the underlying conditions that enable violence and human rights violations against land defenders, including corruption that fosters State complicity.