

International Civil Society Organizations Denounce Abuses in Honduras in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic

May 21, 2020

We urge the Honduran government to end excessive use of force by security forces and cease the restrictions and abuses that make it difficult for human rights defenders and journalists to carry out their vital work. While governments must take action to protect citizens from the pandemic, such restrictions must not violate human rights norms. As UN special rapporteurs [noted](#), "Breaking a curfew, or any restriction on freedom of movement, cannot justify resorting to excessive use of force by the police; under no circumstances should it lead to the use of lethal force There are other ways to police than force first."

Security forces have used teargas and live ammunition against people [protesting](#) lack of food, water, and medicine. In Choloma, on April 7, members of the Military Police of Public Order (PMOP) [beat](#) people protesting for food and fired shots in the air. On April 23, members of the PMOP [used live ammunition](#) as well as tear gas against people protesting against the politicization of food distribution in Metalias near Tela, Atlántida, leaving two people wounded, 20-year-old Rommel Josué Reyes Cruz and 26-year-old Francisco Javier Manueles Aguilar. Five people were detained by security forces during the incident, including two members of the Movimiento Ambientalista por la Dignidad y la Justicia (MADJ). On April 24, members of the PMOP [shot at and beat](#) three brothers from El Paraiso returning from selling bread; one brother, Marvin Rolando Alvarado, [died the next day](#) of his wounds, one was seriously injured, and the third was detained.

As part of its mandatory lockdown, the Honduran government suspended constitutional guarantees, including freedom of expression and assembly. While journalists were since granted permission to circulate with press passes, they continue [to face](#) serious obstacles to their work. Human rights defenders and anti-corruption activists cannot circulate freely to report on the crisis, protect citizens' rights, and conduct oversight. The human rights organization COFADEH [documented](#) just in the first several weeks of the pandemic that 45 human rights defenders suffered attacks, harassment, or reprisals for their work during the crisis and 7 journalists were assaulted, detained, and/or had their equipment taken and camera footage deleted. Human rights defender Iris Argentina Alvarez Chávez was shot to death on April 2 in Choluteca by private security guards during an illegal eviction. Police were aware of the eviction and the violence and did not respond.

Reprisals against and restraints on the activities of human rights defenders and journalists have made it difficult or impossible for them to monitor and defend the rights of the thousands of people being detained. Government detention policy in Honduras is repressive, unequal, and violates public health norms. From mid-March to April 9, over [6,000](#) people were detained for violating curfews and lockdown restrictions or for protesting over lack of food and layoffs.

While many were released within 24 hours, being held in close confinement was hardly a measure designed to protect public health.

As attention has focused on the pandemic, a broad range of [civil society organizations](#) are seeking to delay the coming into effect of a new Penal Code that reduces penalties for large-scale acts of corruption, reduces oversight to prevent corruption, introduces vague anti-terrorism laws that could be used to repress human rights defenders, and [restricts ability of journalists](#) and defenders to expose corruption, increasing possibilities of charges against journalists for libel and charges against human rights defenders for organizing protests. The Penal Code also reduces penalties for crimes of violence against women. While the Congress has voted to delay its coming into force until June 25, it has rejected efforts to permanently delay the implementation of the new Penal Code or introduce major reforms. This harsh penal code becomes even more problematic given abundant concerns regarding new acts of corruption during the pandemic. Corruption is even harder to prosecute given the Supreme Court's delay in ruling on objections to the Departmental Funds Law which now essentially blocks the Attorney General's Office from investigating cases involving the improper use of state funds for up to seven years.

We also join [concerns expressed](#) by 100+ national and international human rights organizations regarding the increased vulnerability of environmentalists and human rights defenders in the COVID-19 context. At imminent risk are the Guapinol water defenders, who have been in arbitrary, pre-trial detention for over eight months.

We urge the Honduran government to immediately end excessive use of force against protesters and permanently withdraw the Military Police of Public Order from policing; end arbitrary detentions and enforce stay-at-home restrictions with an understanding of people's basic needs and respect for human rights; and guarantee the rights of human rights defenders, humanitarian agencies, and journalists to circulate to carry out their essential duties of protecting the population and reporting. Human rights defenders have requested and need to be issued credentials to be able to circulate freely and must be able to relocate when under threat during pandemic restrictions. In accordance with [guidance](#) from the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights office in Honduras, we urge Honduran authorities to free the Guapinol water defenders as well as releasing other prisoners who are vulnerable and in jail for minor offenses, while maintaining detention for those who have committed gross violations of human rights or major acts of corruption.

We urge the Honduran Congress to suspend putting in force the Penal Code and to ensure a transparent and participatory process to revise it with civil society input, strengthening provisions against corruption and to protect human rights defenders, journalists, and vulnerable members of the population, including victims of gender-based violence and indigenous and Garifuna persons.

We urge the international community to withhold funding for security forces, as called for in the Berta Cáceres Human Rights in Honduras Act. We urge the international community to strongly press the Honduran government to comply with these urgent recommendations to protect the rights of its citizens.

International Civil Society Organizations

Alianza Americas
American Friends Service Committee
Asociación para una Ciudadanía Participativa, ACI-Participa
Center for Gender & Refugee Studies
Colectivo Ansur, Colombia
Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, U.S. Provinces
Due Process of Law Foundation
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
Guatemala Human Rights Commission
Honduras Forum Switzerland
Institute for Policy Studies - Global Economy Project
International Institute on Race, Equality and Human Rights
Jesuit Conference Office of Justice and Ecology
Latin America Working Group (LAWG)
Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns
Mennonite Central Committee U.S., Washington Office
National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd
Network in Solidarity with the People of Guatemala (NISGUA)
Oxfam
Protection International Mesoamérica (PI-Mesoamérica)
Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights
School of the Americas Watch (SOA Watch)
Sisters of Mercy of the Americas - Washington, DC Justice Team
SHARE Foundation
TROCAIRE, Ireland
United Church of Christ, Justice and Witness Ministries
Unitarian Universalist Service Committee
Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA)
Witness at the Border

Local & Regional U.S. Organizations

Abolish ICE Denver
Denver Justice and Peace Committee (DJPC)
Central American Resource Center --CARECEN of Northern California

Central American Resource Center - DC

Chicago Religious Leadership Network on Latin America – CRLN

Florida Immigrant Coalition

Friends of Miami-Dade Detainees

Kickapoo-Guatemala Accompaniment Project

National Lawyers Guild South Florida Chapter