

# *Protect Human Rights and Land Rights Activists in Honduras*

## *Join Letter to Secretary of State Tillerson*

Dear Colleague,

We invite you to join us on a letter to Secretary of State Tillerson regarding the attacks against environmental and land activists, human rights defenders and local communities in Honduras. We ask that he vigorously apply U.S. law, written and approved by Congress, related to aid and investment in Honduras.

Last year, Members of Congress were shocked and outraged by the March 2016 assassination of Berta Cáceres, a well-known indigenous and land rights activists who had been awarded the 2015 Goldman Prize in a ceremony held on Capitol Hill. Her murder highlighted for many of us the perilous situation confronting Honduran human rights, land rights, indigenous, Afro-Honduran, campesino and other activists in Honduras. On January 21<sup>st</sup>, the nongovernmental organization Global Witness released a new report describing Honduras as “the most dangerous place in the world to defend land rights and the environment,” with over 120 activists murdered since 2009 (<https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/environmental-activists/honduras-deadliest-country-world-environmental-activism/>). The report details the widespread threats, attacks, stigmatization and criminalization of civil society actors, including journalists, who raise concerns about large-scale development projects that exploit land, water and other natural resources.

Congress has clearly articulated in law that U.S. assistance should promote and protect human rights and address corruption in Honduras. Please join us on this letter to Secretary Tillerson asking that he ensure the law is implemented accordingly.

Should you like further information or to sign onto the letter, please contact Cindy Buhl (McGovern) at [cindy.buhl@mail.house.gov](mailto:cindy.buhl@mail.house.gov) or Leslie Zelenko (Pocan) at [leslie.zelenko@mail.house.gov](mailto:leslie.zelenko@mail.house.gov). The **deadline** to join the letter is March 15<sup>th</sup>.

Sincerely,

James P. McGovern  
Member of Congress

Mark Pocan  
Member of Congress

Jan Schakowsky  
Member of Congress

Keith Ellison  
Member of Congress

John Conyers, Jr.  
Member of Congress

Hank Johnson, Jr.  
Member of Congress

The Honorable Rex W. Tillerson

Secretary of State

U.S. Department of State

Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Tillerson:

We write to express our grave concern with the attacks against environmental and land activists, human rights defenders and local communities in Honduras. As you know, Congress has approved specific conditions to promote and protect human rights and address corruption in Honduras. We therefore urge the Administration to vigorously apply U.S. law related to assistance for, and investment in, Honduras.

Almost a year ago, renowned Honduran indigenous activist Berta Cáceres was murdered. She had denounced 33 death threats against her and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights had previously tasked the Honduran government with providing her protective measures. Unfortunately, Ms. Cáceres's death was part of a longstanding pattern of killings of human rights defenders and environmental activists who advocate for the protection of their natural resources, and journalists and others who expose corruption associated with extractive activities.

On January 31<sup>st</sup>, the nongovernmental organization Global Witness published a report which concludes that Honduras is "the most dangerous place in the world to defend land rights and the environment," with over 120 activists murdered since the coup d'état in 2009. The report details the widespread threats, attacks, stigmatization, and criminalization of civil society activists who raise concerns about the human rights, social and environmental impacts of hydropower, agribusiness, mining, logging and tourism projects. The report indicates that government officials, security forces, and business elites have colluded to impose extractive projects on indigenous, Afro-Honduran and campesino communities and to silence opposition. Lack of political will and weak institutions too often fail to respond effectively to these crimes, reinforcing impunity in Honduras.

We are concerned with reports from these communities that their free, prior and informed consent is not being obtained in relation to the use of their land. Meanwhile, acts of corruption undermine laws governing environmental impact assessments, and conflicts of interest are ignored in order for extractive projects to proceed.

We are concerned that U.S. assistance has been provided to the Honduran government despite recurring threats and assassinations of human rights defenders and land rights and environmental activists, and the requirement in U.S. law that civil society be able to "operate without interference." Indeed, some of us are so troubled that we called for the suspension of

U.S. military and security assistance and cosponsored the *Berta Cáceres Human Rights in Honduras Act* in the last Congress.

Mr. Secretary, it is essential to ensure effective scrutiny of Honduras' compliance with human rights conditions on U.S. assistance. In that regard, we call on you to:

- Establish effective criteria for measuring compliance with such human rights conditions, with the input of representatives of Honduran human rights and other civil society organizations that have been targeted and in consultation with the relevant U.S. congressional committees.
- Ensure effective scrutiny of whether such conditions are met, and if not met that assistance is withheld.
- Provide transparency and public access to comprehensive information regarding U.S. bilateral and multilateral assistance for Honduras.
- Work with the Department of the Treasury to oppose investments by International Financial Institutions in Honduran industries credibly implicated in human rights violations.
- Urge the Honduran government to take vigorous steps to eradicate corruption, ensure the free, prior and informed consent of communities affected by extractive projects; protect human rights defenders; and end impunity for human rights violations.
- Publicly express strong and consistent support for the legitimate and important role of Honduran human rights defenders and environmental and land rights activists.

Thank you for your serious attention and consideration of these urgent matters. We look forward to your response and working together on these issues.

Sincerely,

Members of Congress