



Guapinol defenders: standing for the land and water in Honduras

Lives on the line: human rights defenders at risk

Around the world, defenders of human rights and the environment are criminalized, persecuted, imprisoned and even killed. Front Line Defenders [reports](#)¹ that in 2022, a record 401 human rights defenders were murdered, nearly half of whom had been working for land, environmental and Indigenous peoples' rights. Latin America was the most dangerous region in the world for them, with Honduras ranking fifth worst.

Protection: a public right, a state duty

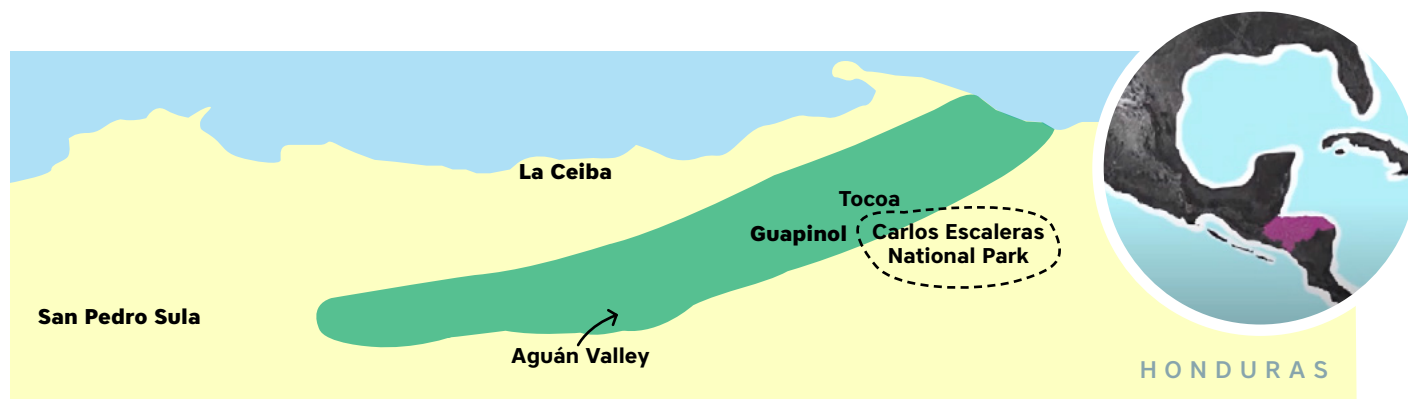
It is perverse that as states are ostensibly fighting climate change, they are failing to protect and heed the very people who are defending the Earth and its resources, forests and waters. The [Declaration on human rights defenders](#) "provides for the support and protection of human rights defenders in the context of their work" and vests states with the responsibility and duty "to protect, promote and implement all human rights."² Notably for our campaign, both Honduras and Canada have endorsed this declaration. Unfortunately, endorsement does not amount to implementation.

Honduras: a country with a grim record

Since 2014, some 135 Hondurans have been killed for defending their communities, territories or the environment, with 95% of the murders going unpunished.³ Particularly vulnerable are Indigenous peoples protecting their ancestral lands, the most emblematic of whom was the Lenca leader Berta Cáceres, who was assassinated on March 3, 2016.

An explosive mix

The Aguán Valley, which straddles the Yoro and Colón departments in northern Honduras, is wracked with deadly conflict. The trouble began in 1992, with the adoption of a new Law for the Modernization and Development of the Agricultural Sector. The law, which facilitated land sales to big agribusinesses, led to escalating land conflicts well into the 2000s. The government kept granting vast land concessions for palm oil plantations,⁴ driving peasant and Indigenous communities off their lands. The region's largest landowner is the Dinant Corporation, founded by the powerful magnate, Miguel Facussé Barjum (d. 2015). That Colón is also a major drug corridor only adds to the region's troubles.



¹ [Global Analysis 2022 | Front Line Defenders](#)

² [Declaration on human rights defenders | OHCHR](#)

³ [Unos 135 defensores de los derechos humanos han muerto violentamente en Honduras, desde el año 2014 – CONADEH](#)

⁴ [Palm oil, fire pushing protected areas in Honduras to the 'point of no return' \(mongabay.com\)](#)

The Guapinol case

For over 25 years, activists have been campaigning to preserve their water and land in the Guapinol region and the San Pedro sector. Between 2010 and 2014, more than 150 peasant farmers were killed or disappeared in the Aguán Valley.⁵ The huge palm oil plantations have led to:

- Deforestation and biodiversity loss
- Pesticide and fertilizer pollution and the drying up of streams and rivers
- Territorial conflicts between local communities, Indigenous peoples and corporations
- The loss of livelihoods among peasant and Indigenous communities

To the further detriment of local communities, a new industry appeared in the 2010s. The Inversiones Los Pinares company (formerly Emco Mining)⁶ set up an open-pit iron ore mine in the Carlos Escaleras National Park with an irregularly granted permit.⁷ The mine is controlled by the Facussé family (viz., Miguel's daughter, Ana Isabel, and her husband Lenir Pérez), who were implicated in many regional conflicts. From 2015, locals mobilized under a Municipal Committee for the Defence of Common and Public Goods to

oppose two concessions granted to *Inversiones Los Pinares* in the Carlos Escaleras National Park.

Things escalated in 2018, when mine effluents turned the waters of the Guapinol river brown and unfit for household or agricultural use. In protest, the community occupied a municipal building in Tocoa for 11 days in May. Then, on August 1, they set up the Guapinol Camp for Water and Life and peacefully blockaded the CA-13, a Pinares-built highway linking the village of El Guapinol to Carlos Escaleras National Park. After 88 days, the camp was violently dismantled by over 1,500 police officers and soldiers armed with rifles, batons, riot shields and tear gas.

“Social protest is an essential service for peace, justice and democracy.”

— Fr. Ismael Moreno (a.k.a. Padre Melo),
former director, ERIC - Radio Progreso

Defenders criminalized and killed with impunity

The Tocoa Public Prosecutor laid trumped-up charges against 32 of the Guapinol camp protestors. Twelve of them were released after 14 days in prison and eight, who came to be called the Guapinol Eight were unjustly incarcerated for 914 days.⁸



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If that was not enough, three defenders have been killed since January 2023! Aly Domínguez and Jairo Bonilla were assassinated in the street on January 7, and Aly's brother, Oquelí Domínguez, was murdered in his home on June 15.



Aly Domínguez
38 years



Jairo Bonilla
28 years



Oquelí Domínguez
42 years

“We call on the state to urgently investigate these crimes and put an end to these mining projects once and for all, so that we can return to the peace that prevailed before 2017.”⁸

— Reynaldo Domínguez, who fears the same fate as his brothers, Aly and Oquelí

⁵ [Honduras's Deadly Water Wars | The Nation](#)

⁶ [The hidden connection between a US steel company and the controversial Los Pinares mine in Honduras \(guapinolresiste.org\)](#)

⁷ [The Irrationality of Extractivism in Honduras: The Guapinol Case | Elvin Hernández](#)

⁸ [Honduras: Deaths of environmental activists reopen wounds in Aguán Valley | Latin America Bureau \(lab.org.uk\)](#)

Timeline



April 2013
EMCO Mining applies for two concessions in the park's core, where mining is prohibited.



2014 and 2015
The concessions are granted to EMCO Mining (*Inversiones Los Pinares*).

2017
Mining begins, polluting waterways including the Guapinol river.

August 2018
Protestors establish the Camp Guapinol for Water and Life.

October 2018
The police and army violently break up the peaceful Guapinol camp.

January 2019
32 defenders are charged with the unjust deprivation of liberty, aggravated arson, theft and unlawful association.



November 29, 2019
Tocoa declares itself "mining-free" and asks *Inversiones Los Pinares* to leave.¹⁰

October 13, 2020
One of the defenders, Arnold Joaquín Morazán Erazo, is shot dead.

February 9, 2022
Six of the Guapinol Eight are convicted for aggravated damage, simple damage and unjust deprivation. The other two are released.

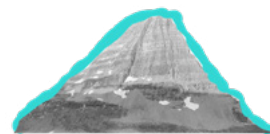


January 7, 2023
Aly Domínguez and Jairo Bonilla are murdered.

Summer 2023
The mining company suspends operations for two years. Resultant mass layoffs add to mounting tensions that force several Guapinol families to flee.

October 8, 2012

The Montaña de Botaderos National Park (now called Carlos Escaleras) is created to protect biodiversity and ecosystems, including the sources of 34 rivers.⁹



December 23, 2013

President Porfirio Lobo Sosa obtains a Congressional decree to resize the park's core zone so that it excludes the area of the concessions.

2015 to present

Communities mobilize against mining in the park.



May 2018

Protesting the pollution, the community occupies a municipal building in Tocoa for 11 days.

September 2018

18 defenders are charged with usurpation, damage and the illegal appropriation of public space.

November 2018

Jeremías Martínez, one of the Guapinol Eight, is arrested.



August 2019

7 defenders voluntarily appear in court and are remanded pending trial.

February 2020

The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention calls for the release of the Guapinol Eight.



November 2021

The UN Working Group reiterates its call for the release of the Guapinol Eight.

February 24, 2022

The remaining six of the Guapinol Eight are released.

June 15, 2023

Aly's brother, Oquelí Domínguez Ramos, is murdered in his home.



⁹ 2012-2013 Creación y reconfiguración del Parque Nacional Montaña de Botaderos | The Legal Cultures of the Subsoil (sas.ac.uk)

¹⁰ Honduras: Comunidad se declara libre de minería - Business & Human Rights Resource Centre (business-humanrights.org)

Who was Carlos Escaleras?

In the mid-1990s, peasant activist Carlos Escaleras Mejía opposed the construction of a palm oil factory that threatened the livelihoods of communities along the Guapinol river in the Tocoa region.¹¹ His activism even persuaded the World Bank to cancel a loan to the Cressida company controlled by local businessman Miguel Facussé Barjum. While running for mayor of Tocoa, Escaleras was offered a bribe to end his struggle. His refusal did not go down well. After many threats failed to deter him, he was shot to death by two hitmen on October 18, 1997.¹²

In 2018 the Inter-American Court of Human Rights “found the Honduran State responsible for the death of the environment defender Carlos Escaleras Mejía.”¹³ As part of a settlement agreed with the court, the government renamed Montaña de Botaderos National Park after Carlos Escaleras.

Between corruption and hope

Like it did everywhere, colonialism in Honduras left a legacy of inequities between the few it enriched and the masses it impoverished. By giving free rein to mining and agroindustry corporations, corrupt governments entrenched these divisions. President Manuel Zelaya, who tried to right some wrongs through social reform, was deposed in a coup in 2009. Corruption and violence have increased since then. Juan Orlando Hernández, who was president from 2014 to 2022, was extradited to the United States on drug and gun trafficking charges.

There was a glimmer of hope in January 2022, when Zelaya’s wife, Xiomara Castro, became Honduras’s first female president. Her progressive platform won massive civil society and popular support, but she faces an uphill task with cleaning up governance. Crimes against environmentalists are still going unpunished.

Standing with the impoverished

For years, our Honduran partner, the Jesuit-run ERIC–Radio Progreso, has been helping impoverished local peoples understand and assert their rights. Many of the communities they support have formally declared their territories mining-free zones.

Padre Melo, the popular former director of ERIC – Radio Progreso, sees the Church as both an ally and an opponent of the government, depending on how it acts.¹⁴ As long as a government “attends to the cry for justice and the grievances of the poorest people,” he thinks the Church should support it whilst maintaining its independence. But when “a government distances itself” from the impoverished, he feels the Church must embody “critical consciousness” to become “a channel for denunciations and a defender of the rights of the poorest.”

Acting in solidarity with Guapinol

ERIC–Radio Progreso has asked that we support the defenders of Guapinol and the San Pedro sector, who have waged a years-long struggle for water and life in the face of stigmatization, criminalization and even murder. That is why, as part of our **Stand for the land** campaign, we are writing a letter to the Honduran ambassador to Canada, asking her government to:

- Fairly recompense the Guapinol Eight and their families
- Bring the killers of the slain defenders to justice
- Cease all mining in and restore Carlos Escaleras National Park
- Better protect all Honduran environment and human rights defenders

To add weight to the letter and to convey to the Honduran government that Canadians are watching and care, we want to **collect 32,000 signatures on the letter** (1,000 for each of the 32 people charged at the Guapinol camp) by **February 25, 2024**, the second anniversary of the release from prison of the last six of the Guapinol Eight.

Sign the letter, join the
campaign or find out more at
devp.org/act



¹¹ [The Legacy of Carlos Escaleras Looms Large Over Current Tensions in Honduras - Unitarian Universalist Service Committee \(uusc.org\)](#)

¹² [Caso Escaleras Mejía y otros Vs. Honduras | CEJIL](#)

¹³ [Comunicado de Prensa \(corteidh.or.cr\)](#)

¹⁴ [Jesuit Fr. Melo on the presidential victory of Xiomara Castro in Honduras - The Jesuit Post](#)