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On-going Repression in Honduras

Rights Action sends this information in response to a recent escalation in violations of political and civil rights against the leaders of COPIN, the Civic Council of Indigenous and Popular Organizations, in Honduras.

Some readers will remember that Bertha Caceres (a COPIN indigenous rights activist) came to the US in the fall of 1999 on a 6-week educational speaking tour, hosted by Rights Action. [See below, for more information about repression against Bertha and her family]

Some readers will recall that on October 18, 1999, Rights Action circulated an urgent action appeal concerning State repression that took place last October 12, 1999, when police and soldiers open fired and seriously wounded dozens of peaceful indigenous and campesino marchers. [Contact our office to get copy]

Please copy and redistribute this information.

For more information: Contact our offices, in Washington [202-783-1123; info@rightsaction.org] or Guatemala City [011-502-251-9803; partners@guate.net]. Rights Action is a tax-exempt 501c3 organization that raises funds for and otherwise supports the work of community development and human rights organizations in Chiapas, Guatemala, Honduras and Haiti. Financial contributions: To support the human rights and community development work of COPIN, contact our office.

Current Situation

COPIN, an organization of indigenous Lenca people from the departments of Intibuca, Lempira and La Paz (located near the border with El Salvador), represents over 400 communities in the area. COPIN works to gain legal and actual control for indigenous peoples over ancestral lands, and achieve guarantee of and respect for all human rights (economic, cultural, civil, social and political) of indigenous peoples.

To date, COPIN has obtained communal titles for 21 communities in the municipality of San Francisco de Opalaca (Intibuca), and has a further 17 communities under study. These activities --to legalize community-held title-- have placed COPIN in conflict with large landholders who maintain close relationships with the Honduran military, police, politicians and organized crime. As a result, COPIN has been subject to constant acts of intimidation and repression.

In recent months threats against COPIN members and leaders have escalated, including death threats, physical aggression, violation of property, false imprisonment, attempted rape. The organization's leaders have noticed unidentifiable cars patrolling outside their homes. Incidents of intimidation and repression have been occurring almost daily, conducted overtly, mainly in the daytime, and against well known members of COPIN.

COPIN has denounced these acts of aggression to the Public Ministry, the Special Fiscal for Ethnic peoples, the National Agrarian Institute (INA) and the national press. State authorities have acted with negligence and irresponsibility. They have failed to protect those at risk and have fed the violence by ensuring that the acts of repression go uninvestigated and unpunished.

Recent incidents repression

June 6 - COPIN office, La Esperanza (Intibuca)

Two men armed with machetes, who were standing on the corner beside the COPIN office, threatened to kill Salvador Zuniga --a COPIN leader-- in the street. This threat was made to another COPIN person.

May 31 - Home of Salvador Zuniga & Bertha Caceres, La Esperanza (Intibuca)

An unknown man displaying a gun remained outside the house when the children and their care-giver were there. When a representative of COPIN arrived, the aggressor promptly left.

May 26 - Home of Salvador Zuniga & Bertha Caceres

A man known as Pedro Sanchez broke into the house, where the caregiver and one child were alone. The aggressor attempted to rape the caregiver, physically attacking her, kicking, hitting, punching and wounding her in four places. The attacker fled, rebuffed by the guard dogs. The following day, Pedro Sanchez returned, drunk to the house, and shouted out threats to the family. The Public Prosecutor showed great reluctance to accept the complaint lodged by Bertha Caceres. The investigation they carried out was deficient, and scarcely included the forensic evidence presented for the caregiver's wounds or her testimony. The crime of illegal entry was ignored. Pedro Sanchez was captured but set free within a few days. COPIN's own investigations discovered that Pedro Sanchez is the brother of a policeman.

May 31 – Gracias (Lempira)

Four COPIN members from the community of Montana Verde were on their way to visit the INA when they were arrested in the town of Gracias, accused of property usurpation. The police were traveling in the vehicle of local landowners at the time, equipped with a remote control radio, and had an arrest warrant signed by a judge. The landowners identified the men to the police. The men were thrown into the Justice of the Peace jail for 6 days. When a COPIN leader went to the jail to investigate on June 1, 2000, the Justice of the Peace had fled, and an illiterate prisoner was in charge of the jail. COPIN denounced the case to the Public Prosecutor and sought legal help from the Public Defensor's Office, who refused to represent them. The men were released after 6 days, following the intervention of the INA. This case was also denounced before the Special Fiscal for Ethnic Peoples. These arrests violate a Special Agreement between CONPAH (the Federation that represents nine indigenous peoples of Honduras) and the Supreme Court of Justice, signed May 6, 1997 which states in Articles 1 & 2 that any indigenous person accused by landowners should be freed and that indigenous leaders imprisoned for defending their rights should be immediately released.

Montana Verde, (departments of Lempira and Intibuca)

COPIN believes the attacks on their members in Montana Verde are a direct result of the land legalization process currently underway with INA, which will benefit four communities in Lempira and Intibuca. This involves INA land procurators visiting the area, witnessed by local landowners in Lempira, the families of Urtecho Iamborde, Calix and Caravantes. The landowners have military and political connections. The Regional Command no. 7 in Tegucigalpa is headed by Colonel Urtecho Iamborde, who was also a protagonist in the above mentioned State violence against a peaceful indigenous protest march in Tegucigalpa on October 12, 1999.

May 8 - Montana Verde (Lempira)

Approximately 30 men illegally crossed three COPIN communities -- private communal property -- in the municipality of San Francisco Opalaca. In the village of Monte Verde, in full view of the mayor and police, they unloaded provisions, including firearms (AK47) and barbed wire. They went to the Natural Reserve Montana Verde, where the INA is currently studying the possibility of granting communal titles. There they set up a military style encampment, surrounded with barbed wire and with huts fabricated from trees they illegally chopped down. They had guards watching the camp and stayed for three days.

The above situation gives cause for concern, particularly regarding the lives and safety of the COPIN members and their families. COPIN is making the following demands:

- That the Office of the Human Rights Commission in La Esperanza be re-opened;
- That the government provide immediate protection for Salvador Zuniga and Bertha Caceres and their family, and other COPIN leaders who have also been threatened;
- That the government carry out an evaluation of police and Public Prosecutor procedures in those cases against COPIN members, including a careful review of the legal complaint lodged against Pedro Sanchez;

Actions

1- Please call or write (preferably in spanish) short letters of concern, and send copies to the following offices:

Honduran Embassy to the US

T: 202-966-7702

F: 202-966-9751

President of Honduras
Carlos Roberto Flores Facusse
Palacio Jose Cecilio del Valle, Tegucigalpa
Tel: 001 (504) 239-3687
Fax: 001 (504) 239-4750
Fax: 011 (504) 237-1121

Ministerio Público
Abog. Roy Edmundo Medina, Fiscal General del Estado
Tel: 001 (504) 239-3687
Fax: 001 (504) 239-4750

Supreme Court of Justice, Tegucigalpa
Presidente: Lic. Oscar Armando Avila
Fax: 011 (504) 233-7921

Defense Minister
Eduardo Duma Rodriguez
Palacio de los Ministerios, Tegucigalpa
Fax: 011 (504) 238-0238

National Commission for Human Rights
Commissioner Leo Valladares Lanza
Fax: 011 (504) 237-9238

Special Fiscal for Ethnic Peoples,
Lic Gilberto Sanchez Chandia
Fax: 011 (504) 221-4094

Ministry of Public Safety
Elisabeth Chuiz Sierra
Fax: 011 (504) 235-9912

Please email copies of correspondence to:
COPIN, care of: CONPAH, the *Confederacion de Pueblos Autoctonos de Honduras*, E:
conpah@itsnetworks.net, or papica@sdnhon.org.hn; and to Rights Action.

2- Accompaniment:

If you are interested in going to Honduras and doing some human rights accompaniment work, contact Rights Action.