

## **Urgent Action - More State & Corporate Repression in Aguan Valley** By Rights Action

Honduran land rights activists denounce threats of violence today, April 20, in the communities of Rigores and/or Maranones, in the Aguan region along Honduras' north coast, by a large landholder backed by Honduran security forces, and a plan for military intervention of campesino communities.

**PLEASE WRITE** – to your own elected politicians, and to the US and Canadian government officials (listed below), and ask that they immediately look into this situation (explained below) and into the on-going human rights violation and political repression in Honduras. US citizens – please demand that the US Army immediately withdraw soldiers from the Aguan region and that the US State Department express concern regarding the Honduran armed forces participation in human rights violations, specifically with participation of the 15th Battalion and 4th Naval base.

A Honduran national newspaper quotes a large landholder, closely associated with the Army, as threatening to enter campesino communities on April 20. This wealthy landowner states this will result in bloodshed. Moreover, the Honduran Minister of Defense claims the Honduran military will then permanently occupy the Maranones farm, home to 1,400 campesino families.

Ever since the June 2009 military coup, ousting the democratically elected government of President Zelaya, the Honduran government has demonstrated a complete lack of political will to resolve agrarian conflict in Honduras. Over the past two years, while prolonged and fruitless negotiations processes are carried out, State security forces openly assist private security forces and armed bands in carrying out violence against campesinos as a

means of forcing them to cease demanding the respect of their land and human rights.

Over the past four months, a series of criminal and violent acts have occurred both inside and near campesino communities on the Left Bank of the Aguan River, in a campaign to eliminate campesino leaders through violence and threats, to criminalize the campesino movement in general, and to justify a military occupation of the region.

Military intervention in campesino communities by the Honduran Army will only increase violence and repression of the land rights movement. The armed forces have consistently acted in a biased and illegal manner to benefit large landholders, which includes participation in systematic killings and other violence directed against land rights activists.

The US military has been training and reportedly undertaking joint operations specifically with the two Honduran units most implicated in human rights violations, the 15th Battalion in Rio Claro and the 4th Navel Base in La Ceiba.

In December, acts of violence in and near the Marañones farm grew noticeably. Reports began to emerge in the towns surrounding Marañones that a large landholder based in the town of Atascosa, Erick Rivera, was maintaining contact with an armed network that is infiltrating the campesino movement. Rivera is directly involved in land conflicts with the communities of Rigores and Marañones, and controls a large group of armed men that operate in the area. It is reported that he maintains very close ties to the military and police, and that the military has provided personal security for his home.

On March 2, two bank robberies involving close to 30 armed men occurred in the town of Sonaguerra; local authorities and press blamed residents of the nearby campesino community of

Maranones. Then, on March 26, a military convoy was attacked by an armed band and 5 soldiers were killed.

Though at the time of the attack the press reported that the convoy was patrolling the area, an April 15 article, in La Prensa newspaper, claimed that the convoy was attempting to take control of a property in the town of La Atascosa controlled by a campesino movement.

The next day, on March 27, campesinos from Maranones were attacked by an unidentified armed band. Though the press reported that three campesinos were killed, campesino leaders and local human rights activists claim no campesinos were killed. Unconfirmed reports have emerged that soldiers were later seen leaving the area, and the attackers traveled in trucks associated with the 15th Batallion.

Around this time some of the same individuals, reported by neighbors to maintain communication with Rivera and to have use of heavy weapons, occupied palm plantations within the Maranones farm, preventing the campesino businesses associations in Maranones from harvesting their fruit products.

On April 10, 2012 a large military operation took place along the highway from La Ceiba to Planes near Tocoa, reportedly with the direct participation of U.S. soldiers. The same day, Arnold Trochez, a campesino in Maranones close to a MUCA leader Juan Galindo, was killed while working in the African palm plantations.

On Friday, April 13, soldiers from the 15th Battalion entered the Las Maranones community and detained Juan Galindo, an important leader who has participated in the land negotiations. He was detained without an arrest warrant, though it has been reported that an arrest warrant existed for a different person with the same name. There have now been several instances of arrests of MUCA leadership with the same explanation.

On Sunday, April 15, the Honduran newspaper La Prensa published an article which argued the urgency of a Honduran military occupation of the Aguan, particularly focusing on the Left Bank and the communities of Rigores, Marañones and La Atascosa.

In the article Erick Rivera is quoted giving the Honduran authorities until April 20 to resolve conflicts in lands he claims to own that have been occupied by campesinos. Otherwise, he claims he will enter the farms himself and blood will run. Rivera's statements, as reported by La Prensa, are extremely concerning; especially given his reportedly close relationship to official security forces and that he manages a large group of armed men.

On Monday, April 16, several reports describe an operation in which the army entered the Marañones farm and escorted the heavily armed group which had occupied palm plantations into the town of Marañones. The army then withdrew from the town, and the armed band burned homes, beat community members and kidnapped one man, who was eventually freed after the Human Rights Procurators office intervened at the request of his wife.

On Tuesday, April 17, the victims of the April 16 attack filed a complaint with the Human Rights Procurators office. The same day the military again entered Marañones, this time arresting 14 people on charges of possession of stolen vehicles and illegal weapons.

On April 17, La Prensa ran another story focused on the Aguan, this one quoting the Minister of Defense, Marlon Pascua in stating that as of April 17 the army, through the Xatruch II operation, would establish a permanent presence in the Marañones Farm, elaborating that "This will allow us to have control of the area, identify people and watch their movements."

This statement is extremely concerning, given that since January 2010 approximately 60 targeted, death squad style killings of land rights activists have occurred in the region, many with the direct

participation of the same military and police units that comprise the Xatruch II operation.

The latest victim of these killings was Adonis Lopez, a member of the Las Camarones Campesino Business that forms part of the Unified Campesino Movement of the Aguan of the Right Bank (MUCA-MD). He was killed on April 11 by shots fired from inside the Salama Cooperative, very close to the border it shares with the San Isidro farm, heavily controlled by the Dinant Corporation and the security guards they employ. Dinant is in an intense conflict with the campesino movement.

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### **NO MORE POLITICS AND BUSINESS AS USUAL**

We ask that North Americans keep on, keep on, keep on sending copies of this information, and your own letters, to Canadian and American politicians and government officials ... and to your local media.

Since the June 2009 military coup, that ousted the democratically elected government of President Zelaya in Honduras, the governments of the USA and Canada are the governments that have most supported and legitimized the post-coup, repressive regimes of Honduras. North American companies and investors have increased their business activities in Honduras since the coup. In no small part, this illegitimate, repressive regime remains in power due to its political, economic and military relations with the USA and Canada.

### **USA**

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CONGRESS: Go to <http://www.house.gov/> to get info for your member of Congress, and call: 202-224-3121

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STATE DEPARTMENT - Office of Western Hemisphere Affairs: 202 647-0834, [WHAAsstSecty@State.Gov](mailto:WHAAsstSecty@State.Gov)

MARIA OTERO, Under Secretary for Democracy and Global Affairs; c/o Laura Pena, Assistant: [Penal@state.gov](mailto:Penal@state.gov)

BENJAMIN GEDAN, Honduras Desk Officer, (202) 647-3482, [GedanBN@state.gov](mailto:GedanBN@state.gov)

NATHAN ANDERSON, [andersonn2@state.gov](mailto:andersonn2@state.gov)

U.S. EMBASSY IN HONDURAS

Silvia Eiriz, Political Counselor, [eiriz@state.gov](mailto:eiriz@state.gov)

Simon Henshaw, [HenshawS@state.gov](mailto:HenshawS@state.gov)

## **CANADA**

Minister of Foreign Affairs - John Baird, [john.baird@parl.gc.ca](mailto:john.baird@parl.gc.ca)

Minister of State of Foreign Affairs (Americas) - Peter Kent, [kent.p@parl.gc.ca](mailto:kent.p@parl.gc.ca)

NDP Foreign Affairs Critic - Paul Dewar, [Dewar.P@parl.gc.ca](mailto:Dewar.P@parl.gc.ca)

NDP International Trade Critic - Peter Julian, [Julian.P@parl.gc.ca](mailto:Julian.P@parl.gc.ca)

Liberal, John McKay, [MckayJ@parl.gc.ca](mailto:MckayJ@parl.gc.ca), [McKayJ8@parl.gc.ca](mailto:McKayJ8@parl.gc.ca)

Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development - Kevin Sorenson, [SorenK@parl.gc.ca](mailto:SorenK@parl.gc.ca)

Foreign Affairs Committee Chairperson - Dean Allison, [allison.d@parl.gc.ca](mailto:allison.d@parl.gc.ca)

CANADIAN Embassy in Costa Rica (responsible for Honduras)  
Ambassador Cameron MacKay,

[Cameron.MacKay@international.gc.ca](mailto:Cameron.MacKay@international.gc.ca)

Political Officer Léonard

Beaulne: [Leonard.Beaulne@international.gc.ca](mailto:Leonard.Beaulne@international.gc.ca)

[sjra@international.gc.ca](mailto:sjra@international.gc.ca), [tglpa@international.gc.ca](mailto:tglpa@international.gc.ca)

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Go to: <http://rightsaction.org/content/honduras-delegation-coup-vs-democracy-struggle-popular-movements>

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