

The Toronto Star: “Honduran Activist Wants Prime Minister Trudeau To Pressure Canadian Mining Companies On Human Rights Abuses”

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Honduran Activist Wants Prime Minister Trudeau To Pressure Canadian Mining Companies On Human Rights Abuses

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By [Marina Jimenez](#), Foreign Affairs Writer, Aug. 16, 2016

Father Melo fears he may soon be a target of assassination. His home country is both one of the most dangerous in the world for activists and fertile ground for Canadian investment.



Honduran priest and activist Padre Melo was in Toronto on Monday to speak about the violence he faces as an activist in his home country. Melo is urging Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to stop turning a blind eye to human rights abuses in Honduras. (Carlos Osorio / Toronto Star)

Father Melo lives every day as though it is his last. He knows assassins are out to kill him. And, eventually, they may succeed. "I cannot walk in the streets or ride my bike," said Melo, a Jesuit priest, human rights activist and radio host from Honduras. Melo, whose real name is Ismael Moreno Coto, travelled to Toronto this week to talk about the risks he faces in his home country at an event hosted by Canadian Jesuits International. "I have police patrolling outside my house but I don't know if they are protecting me or watching me. I am the government's No. 1 enemy."

Honduras is one of the deadliest places in the world to be an environmental activist, according to Global Witness, an international non-governmental organization focused on natural resource exploitation. Between 2010 and 2014, 101 environmentalists were killed in the country, and few of the cases have been prosecuted.

This is a fact Melo knows well. On March 2, 2016, Berta Cáceres, a recipient of the Goldman Environmental Prize and a close friend of Moreno's, was shot to death.

Such impunity seems shocking in a country of just eight million, and one with a strong Canadian presence. Canada signed a free-trade agreement with Honduras in 2014, and an estimated 100,000 Canadians visit each year. But it's the mining sector where Canada has the biggest impact: 90 per cent of all foreign mining investments in Honduras are Canadian, according to the Council on Hemispheric Affairs (COHA), a Washington, D.C., think-tank.

Melo wants Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to stop turning a blind eye to human rights abuses in Honduras. The priest wrote a letter to Trudeau this May, on behalf of more than 200 human rights and environmental groups, asking him to ensure mining companies operating outside Canada comply with international environmental and human rights standards and not displace local communities without prior consultation.

"It is vital that the Canadian government and mining companies respect the rights of indigenous communities to self-determination ... and respect the decisions of those who have said no to large-scale mining," the letter states.

Melo said he received a reply from the Prime Minister's Office saying the government was going to discuss the matter. Jeffrey Davidson, Ottawa's social corporate responsibility counsellor, paid him a visit this summer. "Canada can pressure mining companies to change their policies, I told him," recounts Melo. Davidson did not reply to a request for an interview by Tuesday night.

Since a coup in 2009 deposed Honduras' democratically elected president, Manuel Zelaya, conflicts between foreign companies and local communities have intensified. The new government privatized land and water resources and passed legislation removing barriers to large development projects.

Honduran police are also corrupt, according to a Human Rights Watch report, and organized crime is a growing problem.

"Since the coup, Canadian companies are maintaining or increasing their economic interests in Honduras, benefiting from exploitation, racism, repression, corruption and impunity," said Grahame Russell, director of Rights Action, a non-government organization which worked closely with Cáceres and her family.

The activist was best known for her opposition to the building of the Agua Zarca Dam on the Gualcarque River, considered a fragile ecosystem and sacred place for the indigenous Lenca people. She received 33 threats before she was killed. A colleague was killed two weeks later. Of the five people arrested for her murder, one is a member of the military, another is a retired soldier and a third is an employee of a Honduran company [DESA] that is working on the disputed dam.

Following her death, 62 members of the U.S. Congress sent a letter to U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry asking that he pressure Honduras to halt the Agua Zarca project and lobby for a system to protect activists.

"Canada needs to give higher priority to the regulation of corporate behaviour overseas and establish especially strong guidelines for extractive industries," says Mercedes Garcia, a research associate with COHA. A recent COHA report cited complaints against Canadian companies and their subsidiaries in Honduras, and elsewhere in the region.

As for Melo, even though he takes security precautions, he has made peace with the possibility he may pay with his life for exercising his right to speak freely and criticize these conflicts. "Every night when I return home after my radio show, I breathe a sigh of relief that I have survived another day," he said.

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