

## Edwin Espinal, Political Prisoners, State-sponsored Drug Traffickers and Persecution in Honduras

By Karen Spring, <https://mailchi.mp/rightsaction/karen-spring-reports>

It has been three months since Edwin Espinal was released from La Tolva prison. I haven't written anything publicly due to being exhausted for, while Edwin was in prison, I felt like I ran a 1.5-year marathon with little time to sit down, reflect, and absorb what was going on around me.

Thank you to the people who have supported Edwin's case, my human rights work in Honduras and this belated update from Honduras.



In the three months since his release, Edwin has been recovering, speaking to media, attending the legal hearings and meetings related to the cases of the other political prisoners, spending a lot of time with family, and planning our future.

Edwin continues to have a permanent, loud, ringing sound in his ear. We are told it is tinnitus but still feel we need to see another specialist that can run further tests. Edwin developed the problem in prison after complaining of an ear infection that was never

treated. The ringing sound not only interrupts his sleep or other moments of rest or quiet, but also generates a lot of frustration and anger.

It reminds him of the whole experience in La Tolva, being denied medical treatment, the unjust way he was detained, and as he often says, “the way the government wanted to make me suffer.”

The mental health impact could possibly be worse than the actual physical problem. He frequently gets headaches that he says are linked to the noise in his ears and asks me sometimes to put my head up against his to see if I can hear the loud ringing in his ears. But it is internal and I hear nothing.

Every week, Edwin goes to the courthouse to sign a ledger that is supposed to show to the Honduran judiciary that he has not left the country and that he is still present to face the charges against him. His court date is set for May 14 and 15, 2020.

As for myself, I continue my work supporting the other political prisoner cases. Within the first 6 months following the 2017 electoral crisis, all were released except five including Edwin. Now, only one political prisoner remains in jail; over 170 people still face charges and are forced to sign regularly at courthouses around the country. I am also doing human rights work related to the criminalization of people awaiting trial. Some are being harassed continuously by Honduran military and police.

One young man who was arrested for participating in protests during the 2017 electoral crisis, and who spent four months in the maximum-security El Pozo prison, has been forced into hiding. Military soldiers and police - with their faces covered, carrying heavy weapons including illegal weapons like AK-47s - have shown up four times at his small house to either raid it, when he is not home, or just stand outside to intimidate him. He reports that a red Toyota pick-up truck with tinted windows and no license plate is frequently seen parked on his street. Out of fear, the young man has since fled his home.

Many people face this type of intimidation and are forced to hide, or move frequently. They fear they will be killed.

The Honduras Solidarity Network is assisting this gentleman and others to raise their profiles to deter the government from harassing them further and to make all the details of the harassment known publicly.

On November 11, Edwin, Raúl, members of the National Committee for the Freedom of Political Prisoners and myself, traveled to the city of El Progreso for political prisoner Gustavo Cáceres' trial. It was suspended last week after two witnesses, called by the Honduran government, did not appear. As a defense strategy, Gustavo's lawyers asked him to testify before the judges.

When Gustavo took the stand, the judges asked him to state his ID number, address, and birthdate. He shrugged and could not answer completely, due to his disability. Many people in the courtroom teared up as Gustavo attempted to give his version of the events related to his detention. He was arrested while crossing a bridge where a protest was taking place.

When stopped by the police, they put a black bag over his head (a method of torture used by the police to generate fear and attempt to elicit confessions) and took him to the police station. Gustavo told the court in an honest and sincere way, but in broken sentences, that he was close to the protest; he was trying to cross the blocked bridge to go to work. Meanwhile, the police officers that arrested him, contradicted each other, including testifying that Gustavo was arrested in two different places and based on different reasons.

### **Defamation campaign**

In early October, I attended half of the trial of Juan Antonio “Tony” Hernandez (brother of President Hernandez) in New York. I posted summaries of the trial on my blog [aquiabajo.com](http://aquiabajo.com) so people could follow the case.

As a result of my attendance at the trial and being closely monitored by the Honduran government, another defamation campaign circulated against me on October 18, 2019, claiming that I was paying people \$200 each to protest outside the New York trial and that I received funding from a convicted drug trafficker who is also in jail in the US.

These campaigns are dangerous and have become a common tactic of the Honduran government to try to discredit human rights defenders and create security problems for them. This is another reason that I have not written much as both Edwin and I are aware of the exceptionally difficult security situation that we are in in Honduras, particularly given the current political context.

### **State-sponsored drug trafficking**

Since Tony Hernandez was found guilty on 4 counts of drug and weapons smuggling and lying to federal authorities, the environment in Honduras has been eerie and dangerous.

As the Canadian and US government insist that the governments in Venezuela, Nicaragua, Cuba, and now to a degree, Bolivia, are drug traffickers and dictators, it is outrageous to hear absolutely nothing from Canadian and US authorities regarding the drug conviction of Tony Hernandez in New York and the role that President Juan Orlando Hernandez continues to play in enabling and participating in drug trafficking.

Now, weeks after this conviction, military, police, and other government institutions are terrorizing the Honduran population so they do not protest.

One Honduran journalist has reported that since the conviction, 11 people linked to the President and the President’s brother’s drug cartel have been murdered, likely to stop

them from testifying against them. Human rights and social movement leaders have been kidnapped and tortured, and in some cases, brutally killed. Their bodies are dumped off at the side of a road, which is a strategy to terrorize the population.

There have also been 51 massacres in different parts of the country so far this year and often involve individuals dressed in police or military uniforms getting out of unmarked vehicles, open firing at groups of young people in public areas, and then fleeing the scene. The massacres and lack of investigations into why and who committed them, send a cold chill through communities and the entire population in Honduras. However, smaller groups of people still take to the streets to protest this corruption when demonstrations are organized.

Hondurans are well aware that Juan Orlando Hernandez (JOH) is scared and feeling insecure about his control over the Presidential Palace because he has been exposed as a co-conspirator in the drug case against his brother. They believe that while JOH remains in power, it is less likely that the US will ask for his extradition. Hondurans also understand that JOH is not only protecting his political power as President but also his and his brother's drug cartel interests. Evidence brought forward in the NY trial reveals that their involvement in drug trafficking has converted them into one of the major suppliers of cocaine to the US through the infamous and now-imprisoned Mexican drug trafficker, Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman and the large, Mexican-based Sinaloa cartel. As one cooperating witness said in the New York trial when asked why he was scared to testify against Tony Hernandez, "All drug traffickers are dangerous and violent, but none [as much as] the brother of the President of a country that can control the military and the police."

Edwin and I await an end to this fearful time. We are deeply grateful for the support we continue to receive from our community of Simcoe County that advocates for his freedom, the freedom of all political prisoners, and for human rights in Honduras. Thank you!

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### **Rights Action (U.S. & Canada)**

Since 1995, Rights Action funds human rights, environment and territory defense struggles and projects in Guatemala and Honduras; funds victims of repression and human rights violations, health harms and natural disasters; works to hold accountable the U.S. and Canadian governments, multi-national companies, investors and banks (World Bank, etc.) that help cause and profit from repression and human rights violations, environmental harms and forced evictions, corruption and impunity in Honduras and Guatemala.

## **Why are 10s of thousands of Hondurans & Guatemalans fleeing home and country?**

The U.S., Canada and “international community” are helping keep in place the very regimes that force Hondurans and Guatemalans to flee their countries, every year, decade after decade.

## **International complicity and impunity**

The U.S. and Canadian governments, the World Bank and global businesses and investors (hydro-electric dams, mining, African palm, sugar cane and fruit production, garment “sweatshop” factors, tourism, etc.) maintain profitable relations with anti-democratic, corrupt, repressive governments in Honduras and Guatemala, participating in or benefitting from exploitation and repression, environmental harms and human rights violations, corruption and impunity. There is no political or legal oversight or accountability in the U.S. and Canada for our complicity in Guatemala and Honduras’ nightmare.

## **Act – Stir up the pot – Chip away**

Keep sending copies of Rights Action information (and that of other solidarity groups/ NGOs) to family, friends and networks, politicians and media – always asking the question as to why our governments, companies and investment firms benefit from and turn a blind eye to poverty, repression and violence, environmental and health harms that caused the forced migrancy / refugee crisis in Guatemala and Honduras.

- U.S. Senate: <https://www.senate.gov/senators/contact>
- U.S. House: <https://www.house.gov/representatives/find-your-representative>
- Canadian Parliament: <https://www.ourcommons.ca/Parliamentarians/en/members>

## **Other solidarity/ NGO groups in U.S. and Canada**

Honduras Solidarity Network: [www.hondurassolidarity.org](http://www.hondurassolidarity.org);

Witness for Peace Solidarity Collective: [www.solidaritycollective.org](http://www.solidaritycollective.org);

School of Americas Watch: [www.soaw.org](http://www.soaw.org);

Common Frontiers Canada: [www.commonfrontiers.ca](http://www.commonfrontiers.ca);

Breaking the Silence: [www.breakingthesilenceblog.com](http://www.breakingthesilenceblog.com);

NISGUA (Network in Solidarity with People of Guatemala): [www.nisgua.org](http://www.nisgua.org);

Mining Watch Canada: [www.miningwatch.ca](http://www.miningwatch.ca);

CISPES (Committee in Solidarity with People of El Salvador): [www.cispes.org](http://www.cispes.org);

Alliance for Global Justice: [www.afgj.org](http://www.afgj.org);

CODEPINK: [www.codepink.org](http://www.codepink.org);

GHRC (Guatemalan Human Rights Commission): [www.ghrc-usa.org](http://www.ghrc-usa.org);

Mining Injustice Solidarity Network: <https://mininginjustice.org>;

Mining Justice Alliance: <https://miningjusticealliance.wordpress.com>;

Simcoe County Honduras Rights Monitor:

<https://simcoecountyhondurasrightsmonitor.wordpress.com>;

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Credit-Card Donations: <http://rightsaction.org/donate/>

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