

HONDURAS: Indigenous Leader Released!

RRN letters May 21 2003, Nov 1 2003, Jan 12 2004, June 3 2004, Oct 21 2004, Aug 2 2005

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On 8 January 2003, brothers Marcelino and Leonardo Miranda, indigenous leaders of COPINH, were arrested in the Planes community in Montaña Verde. They and Feliciano Piñeda, another indigenous community leader, had been falsely charged with the 2001 killing of Juan Reyes Gómez. On 16 December 2003, Marcelino and Leonardo Miranda were both **sentenced to 25 years each for murder**, despite evidence that the case against them was fabricated in reprisal for their role in trying to secure a communal land title for the Montaña Verde communities. Other irregularities include the fact that **10 witnesses placed the Miranda brothers far away from the scene of the crime at the time of the murder**. Amnesty International has called the Miranda brothers and Feliciano Piñeda political prisoners of conscience.

On February 2, 2006, a court in Gracias, Lempira, ordered the provisional release of Feliciano Piñeda for lack of evidence. Piñeda was jailed last June 5 after paramilitaries attacked him with machetes. Last December a judge acquitted Piñeda of the Reyes Gómez homicide charge; the judge refused to dismiss theft and vandalism charges, even though the statute of limitations on those crimes had run out. On January 19, Montaña Verde community members Margarito Vargas Ponce and Marcos Reyes were also acquitted of murder charges in the Reyes Gomez killing. Marcos Reyes was released; Vargas remains in custody on a charge of causing bodily harm. The two men surrendered to the court on January 12 after living in hiding for three years.