

Sr. Presidente Juan Orlando Hernández
President of Honduras
via fax: 011 502 2290 5088

April 14, 2014

Dear President Hernández:

We are very concerned for the safety of **Marlen Cruz Licona**, a human rights lawyer with CODEH (Committee for the Defense of Human Rights) who advocates for peasant farmer land rights. She is being unjustly persecuted by the legal system.

On March 8 Marlen Cruz Licona was arrested for the alleged crime of "usurpation" at La Posta de la Pavana, near Choluteca. After being transferred to San Pedro Sula, she was brought before a court on March 10 and accused of participating in a land occupation and of instructing a group of peasant farmers to attack agents from the General Directorate of Criminal Investigation (DGIC). She was released, ordered to sign in every 15 days, and not to approach the plantations where the alleged crimes took place.

Defending the rights of campesino (peasant farmer) communities is dangerous. Her colleague, lawyer Antonio Trejo Cabrero, was assassinated in September 2012.

Marlen Cruz Licona has been involved in the land rights struggles around the eviction of campesino communities by the Sugar Plant of the North Ltd (AZUNOSA) and the Honduran Sugar Company Ltd (CAHSA). The Movimiento Campesino de San Manuel Cortés (MOCSAN) asserts that the land at the center of this dispute is not owned by the companies, since the National Agrarian Institute (INA) seized it from them in 2012. The above-mentioned state agents of the DGIC were carrying out intelligence work in the area where MOCSAN members were occupying lands.

We are concerned that the arrest of Marlen Cruz Licona is indicative of an increase in stringent measures against human rights defenders. We are also concerned that her legitimate right to offer legal assistance to displaced peasant communities is being denied because of complicity among Honduran sugar companies, state agents and the judiciary.

We strongly urge you to:

1. immediately and unconditionally drop all charges against Marlen Cruz Licona, as they are solely based in her peaceful and legitimate work in defense of human rights;
2. ensure that if Marlen Cruz Licona goes to trial, it conforms to all international standards of fair trial;
3. guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Honduras are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions.

Sincerely,

Brian J. Stefan Szittai
Co-Coordinator

copies: Jorge Ramon Hernandez Alcerro, Honduran Ambassador to the US ~ via fax 202 966 9751
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Kelsey Cambronne, Honduras Desk, US State Dept ~ via email
Christopher Johnson, Diplomacy Officer for Central America, US State Dept. ~ via email
Tracy Robinson, Rapporteur for Honduras, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights ~ via fax: 202 458.3992
US Senators Brown & Portman and US Representatives Fudge, Gibbs, Johnson, Jordan, Joyce, Kaptur, Latta, Renacci, Ryan ~ via email

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The following people hereby urge you to take action on this matter as indicated in this letter: