

21 October 2020

Honduras: Killing of defender Arnold Joaquín Morazán Erazo, who had been criminalised for his defense of the River Guapinol

On the night of 13 October 2020, two unknown men entered the home of human rights defender **Arnold Joaquín Morazán Erazo** in the municipality of Tocoa, Colón and shot the defender to death. Morazán Erazo was one of the 32 defenders and other individuals in Tocoa who have been criminalised for their involvement in a community camp set up to defend of the Guapinol River.

Arnold Joaquín Morazán was an environmental defender who defended natural resources and territory from extractive industry, including the Guapinol River in the municipality of Tocoa, Colón. Morazán Erazo actively participated in activities organised by the Comité Municipal de Defensa de los Bienes Comunes y Públicos (CMDBCP) a group which organises the efforts of various groups to campaign against the dispossession of common and public goods by extractive industries. With CMDBCP, he publicly denounced at the municipal level the implementation of mining projects in the Carlos Escaleras Mountain National Park. As a result of his work, he was named in two fiscal subpoenas presented by the Tocoa Public Ministry following complaints made a mining company and the security company it hired.

On 13 October 2020, two unidentified individuals arrived by motorcycle to Arnold Joaquín Morazán's home, entered his house and shot him multiple times. The human rights defender died of his injuries. Morazán Erazo was part of an ongoing case along with 32 people criminalised for their involvement in a community camp set up to defend of the Guapinol River.

A few days before Arnold Joaquin Morazán Erazo's death, the CMDBCP of Tocoa publicly denounced an intimidating increase in military and police surveillance in Guapinol, yet after the killing, the CMDBCP were subjected to defamation campaigns and numerous false rumours that were posted on social media, seeking to blame them for the killing of the defender and insecurity in the area. The smear campaigns are intended to undermine the CMDBCP's legitimate resistance against mining in the Carlos Escaleras National Park, sowing fear and distrust and seeking to break the social fabric of the community.

Since August 2018, the affected communities have been organised in what is known as a [camp for Water and Life in the Guapinol community](#) to prevent the contamination of the San Pedro and Guapinol rivers due to the activities of a mining company at Montaña de Botaderos National Park. The mining project, which is alleged to have irregularly obtained its license to operate and is the subject of ongoing criminal investigations, was carried out

without the prior consultation and consent of the affected communities. On 29 November 2019, a town hall was held at the municipal level, but to date it has not been respected.

In total, 32 defenders and other individuals from Tocoa have been charged with fabricated crimes. The judicial process that began in September 2018 has been marked by irregularities, including the improper use of criminal law as well as violations of due process, such as the failure to comply with the procedural deadlines for the issuance and notification of judicial decisions. [Since September 2019, eight Guapinol defenders](#) have been arbitrarily detained in the Olanchito and La Ceiba Penal Centers for the crimes of “aggravated arson” and “unjust deprivation of liberty”, for which their legal team has requested a new hearing to review the measures. Five more defenders are at risk of re-arrest under the same charges after an acquittal in their favour was recently overturned by a higher court.

The use of preventive detention against eight defenders is a reflection of the misuse of criminal law which aims to inhibit and criminalise the work of human rights defenders who exercise their right to defend their territory in Honduras. The murder of defender Arnold Joaquín Morazán, occurred at a decisive moment in the ongoing trial of Guapinol human rights defenders and reveals the systematic threats faced by the Guapinol community, where violence is employed to punish their work in defence of water and the environment. The investigation into his death has yet to yield results.

Threats and killings of members of the CMDBCP, such as the killing defender [Roberto Antonio Argueta](#) in August 2019, have not been properly investigated by the authorities, leaving the perpetrators to enjoy impunity. Front Line Defenders strongly condemns the murder of defender Arnold Joaquín Morazán, and expresses its deep concern over the effect his killing may have over the creation of a safe and enabling environment for environmental defenders in Honduras.

Front Line Defenders urges the Honduran authorities to:

1. Strongly condemn the murder of defender Arnold Joaquín Morazán;
2. Carry out an immediate, exhaustive and impartial investigation into the murder of Arnold Joaquín Morazán, with a view to publishing the results and bringing those responsible to justice in accordance with international standards;
3. Take all the necessary measures to guarantee the physical and psychological integrity and the safety of the members of the Comité Municipal de Defensa de los Bienes Comunes y Públicos, in coordination and agreement with them;
4. 4. Guarantee that all human and environmental rights defenders in Honduras, in the development of their legitimate activities in defense of human rights, can operate freely without fear of restrictions or reprisals, including criminalisation and death.