

Reporters Without Borders

<http://www.rsf.org/honduras-journalists-and-human-rights-21-02-2013,44108.html>

Americas - Honduras

Dangerous information

Journalists and human rights defenders stigmatized for covering land conflicts

21 February 2013

The Honduran Committee of Families of Disappeared Detainees (COFADEH) has told Reporters Without Borders that grave allegations were levelled against journalists, human rights defenders and civil society activists on 18 February by the head of the Xatruch Joint Intervention Force operating in [Bajo Aguán, a militarized region](#) in the northeastern department of Colón.

Reporters Without Borders regards these accusations as a clear attempt to intimidate and censor, and fears for the lives of all those involved in providing information about this region at a particularly dangerous time.

Speaking at a news conference, Xatruch Intervention Force commander Col. Germán Alfaro Escalante accused four people by name of “denigrating the actions of the armed forces” and of “besmirching the image of the Honduran nation.”

Those named were **Marvin Palacios**, a journalist and COFADEH member; **Wilfredo Paz**, a spokesman for the Aguán Permanent International Human Rights Monitoring Unit; and **Vitalino Alvarez** and **Yony Rivas**, leaders of the Aguán United Peasant Movement (MUCA) and announcers on local community radio stations.

Col. Alfaro also issued a press release making the same charges against other persons “who hide under anonymity.” Three news websites – Defensoresonline.com (COFADEH’s online newspaper), Voselsoberano.com and Hondurastierralibre.com – were also named.

“This kind of public stigmatization directly exposes those concerned to significant risks, given the human rights situation in Aguán in particular and Honduras in general, where [those who dare to provide information about land disputes and environmental problems are systematically criminalized](#),” Reporters Without Borders said.

“The government must explain under what capacity a senior military officer, who is supposed to be subject to political control, took this initiative. It poses a real threat to freedom of information, one that should be referred to Inter-American and international bodies.”

A total of 30 journalists have been murdered in Honduras in the past decade, [25 of them since a military coup in June 2009](#). Reporters Without Borders is still awaiting a response from the government to its [request for specially adapted protection for journalists and human rights defenders](#).

Consisting of more than 500 soldiers and police officers, the Xatruch Intervention Force was created to “carry out stabilization operations in Colón department.” According to its commander, it respects “human rights and the dignity of the individual” and guarantees “respect for private ownership” of agricultural land.

MUCA spokesman Vitalino Alvarez told Reporters Without Borders: “This communiqué is an insult to all those who report human rights violations and who are repeatedly threatened by the armed forces. These soldiers and policemen do nothing to stop the abuses by the militia of landowners who persecute us.”

Announcing that the organizations concerned are to hold a news conference today in Tegucigalpa, Alvarez added: "This is an outright act of censorship. And it is a threat that concerns even leading news media such as *El Herald*o, when they publish the least report about the situation in Aguán."

In a press release on 19 February, the day after Col. Alfaro's news conference, COFADEH criticized the "militarization of the country" by means of a military presence on the streets and in institutions designed to "annihilate the public's requests and demands."

The COFADEH press release also condemned the Xatruch Intervention Force's use of firearms, tear-gas grenades, torture, detention, criminalization of social struggle and attacks on the media.

The dangers of covering land conflicts and environmental issues were also highlighted by the threats that **Isaac Guevara Amaya**, *Radio Progreso's* correspondent in the northern city of Tela and founder of community *Radio Exclusiva*, received from police on 18 February.

According to the Reporters Without Borders partner organization, the Committee for Free Expression (C-Libre), which reported the threats, Guevara is known for his coverage of local opposition to open-cast mining projects on the Atlantic coast.

Reporters Without Borders reiterates its call for protection for [Radio Progreso's journalists](#). The [July 2011 murder of Nery Jeremía Orellana](#), a *Radio Progreso* correspondent and director of *Radio Joconguera* in the southwestern municipality of Candelaria, is still unpunished.

Agrarian, mining and environmental disputes are among the leading underlying causes of serious violations of freedom of information throughout Latin America.

(Photo, from left to right: Wilfredo Paz, Juan Chinchilla, Osman del Cid, Yoni Rivas, Vitalino Alvarez, Marvin Palacios)

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