



**URGENT ACTION:
INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS HELD CAPTIVE BY ARMED MEN
FROM A MINING COMPANY IN HONDURAS**

On 25 July 2013, two international companions from the Honduras Accompaniment Project (PROAH from its initials in Spanish)¹, from Switzerland and France, were held captive for two and a half hours in the community of La Nueva Esperanza by armed men who guard the mining operations of Lenir Pérez, the owner of Minerales Victoria. The armed men have been in this rural community in the department of Atlántida for almost two months, terrorizing the villagers and threatening those who refuse to sell their land to the mining company.

The incident involving the international human rights companions is yet another example of the seriousness of the situation in La Nueva Esperanza. The community is totally vulnerable, its members suffering intimidation because of their peaceful opposition to the mining exploration imposed upon them without any consultation and against their will.² The threats are so serious that some villagers have been forced to flee their homes.

In the face of this situation, and in response to requests by members of the community, PROAH has been accompanying it through the dissemination of information and international alerts, and has visited the community several times.

On 24 July, the two members of PROAH spent the night at the home of a family in El Zapote, a community near La Nueva Esperanza, to accompany them in view of the threats they had received for refusing to sell their land to Lenir Pérez.³ At 9.00 am the next day, 25 July, seven heavily armed men arrived at the house, pointing their shotguns at the two companions, reinforced by between 25 and 30 men with machetes, workers from the mining exploration site, who were led by a man identified as Wilfredo Funes by members of the community. He told the companions that they had to leave because they were impeding the exploration work. The members of PROAH explained their work accompanying human rights defenders. At one point, Wilfredo Funes' phone rang and he said that 'the boss' wanted to talk to the companions. One of them asked if it was Lenir Pérez. Funes appeared surprised and said 'You know?' but when he passed the phone, the person hung up. Other armed men (according to members of the community, there are 12 in total there) chased after the owner of the house who was out at the time, shooting at him until he arrived at his home.

After an hour, the leader of the armed men forced the members of PROAH to leave the house, threatening to use force if necessary. He also said that if they returned, they 'would be disappeared in the woods.'⁴ He forced them to walk for half an hour to La Nueva Esperanza, surrounded by the men armed with guns and machetes, who sexually intimidated the French companion, who is female. They were forced to delete the photos they had taken of the machinery used for the mining exploration.

1 The Honduras Accompaniment Project was established in the country on 1 September 2010, in response to the deterioration in the human rights situation following the 2009 coup d'état. The aim of PROAH's work is to prevent or alleviate situations of pressure or risk threatening the work of individuals and organizations who, for their defence of human rights, face imminent danger.

2 See article <https://hondurasaccompanimentproject.wordpress.com/2013/06/20/mining-project-in-la-nueva-esperanza-alarming-escalation-in-intimidation-of-the-community/>

3 See public statement by National Coalition of Environmental Networks <https://hondurasaccompanimentproject.wordpress.com/2013/07/24/la-nueva-esperanza-villagers-flee-homes-in-fear/>

4 "*Les perderían en el bosque*"

Then, Wilfredo Funes and an engineer from the mining company made them get into a pickup, with three armed men in the back. Before releasing them, Wilfredo Funes said if the members of PROAH reported the incident, the community would suffer reprisals. They left the accompaniers in the community of Nueva Florida at 11.30 am, after holding them captive for two and a half hours. The PROAH members waited there for an hour for a police patrol which took them to Tela.

There is no doubt that the pressure exerted by COFADEH⁵, PROAH, and other human rights defenders, including members of the community, in reporting the incident and requesting the immediate intervention by the national security authorities and members of the diplomatic corps, was a decisive factor in enabling them to be released.

Significantly, the day before, the human rights defenders had informed the police post in Buena Vista, on the way to the community, of their arrival, identifying themselves as human rights observers. However, the police were absent from the post during the incident.

A member of the community informed PROAH that the same night, armed men from the mining company drove through La Nueva Esperanza on motorbikes firing into the air. The family where the accompaniers were staying when they were first held captive had to flee the community for its own safety.

This incident is yet another example of the persecution of the villagers of La Nueva Esperanza and the entities accompanying them in defence of their human rights. Two community leaders, César Alvarenga and Roberto García, both members of MADJ (Broad Movement for Dignity and Justice), are already beneficiaries of precautionary measures granted by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, having received death threats texted by Lenir Pérez in August 2012.⁶ The Guatemalan, Father César Espinoza, the parish priest for Arizona, which covers the community and who has been active in its defence, has also been the target of similar attacks, receiving threats from 'supposed mining workers' on his mobile phone in January this year⁷. It was in large part due to concern about his case, combined with the authorities' failure to respond to the situation in La Nueva Esperanza, that the Diocese of La Ceiba issued a statement on mining in the region in June.⁸

In the light of these events, PROAH requests that the national and international community urges the Honduran authorities to:

- Ensure that the armed men guarding Lenir Pérez's mining operations are removed from the area immediately.
- Immediately conduct a thorough and impartial investigation into the incidents reported, requesting that the results are made public and that those directly and indirectly responsible for these threats and the intimidation of members of the community opposing the mining activity and of other human rights defenders, and for holding the members of PROAH captive, are brought to justice.

5 Committee for the Families of the Detained and Disappeared in Honduras.

6 Joint statement by MADJ and MAA (7.6.2013) http://madj.org/content/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=273:comunicado-madj&catid=56:rrmn&Itemid=117

7 Ibid.

8 See <https://hondurasaccompanimentproject.wordpress.com/2013/07/03/mining-in-atlantida-the-diocese-of-la-ceiba-issues-a-public-statement/>

- Take the necessary measures to ensure that the harassment and threats against all members of the community cease.
- Take urgent and concrete measures to implement the Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 9 December 1998.
- Ensure the implementation of the provisions of this Declaration, in particular with regards to the protection of the right of everyone "...individually and in association with others, to promote and to strive for the protection and realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the national and international levels".

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Please send copies of this urgent action to your congressional or parliamentary representatives (and, where appropriate, Members of the European Parliament), as well as to your country's diplomatic mission in Honduras, with letters expressing your concern at the worsening human rights crisis there. Please send copies of your letters to the Honduran authorities to the diplomatic representatives of Honduras accredited to your country.