

3 July 2017

Honduras – Attack and attempted killing of Berta Zúniga Cáceres and other COPINH members

On 30 June 2017, human rights defenders **Bertha Zúniga Cáceres**, **Sotero Chavarría**, and **Asunción Martínez** were attacked twice by unidentified assailants on their way back from the Cancire community, in Santiago Puringla municipality, La Paz, Honduras.

[Bertha Zúniga Cáceres](#) is the general coordinator of *Consejo Cívico de Organizaciones Indígenas Populares* – [COPINH](#) (Civic Council of Popular Indigenous Organisations) and the daughter of **Berta Cáceres Flores**, who was killed in 2016 due to her work defending the rights of the Lenca people. [Sotero Chavarría](#) and [Asunción Martínez](#) are also human rights defenders and members of the coordination of COPINH. The organization's members have been campaigning for their right to free, prior and informed consent in relation to mega-projects that threaten the environmental and social rights of the Lenca people, forcing them out of their ancestral lands. COPINH members have constantly been targeted in reprisal for their work, and as a result several of its members have been killed.

On 30 June 2017, around 2:30 pm., while on their way back from the Cancire community, human rights defenders Bertha Zúniga Cáceres, Sotero Chavarría, and Asunción Martínez were attacked twice by unidentified assailants. On the first incident, a black Toyota Tacoma was used to block the road between Cancire and San Antonio. When the COPINH members' car approached, three men carrying machetes attempted to attack them, however the human rights defenders managed to escape the blockade. A fourth assailant inside the vehicle threw a rock at the driver's side window before pursuing the COPINH members. The unidentified assailant made various attempts to collide with their vehicle in order to force the vehicle off the road and over the cliff. This went on for several minutes until the COPINH members were able to take a detour and escape the pursuit.

COPINH members believe that these attacks are in connection with a dispute over access to a local water source that supplies the communities of San Antonio, Cancire, Higuito, and Cedrito. According to the defenders, some members of the Lomas de San Antonio and Las Delicias communities who are in favour of a project to restrict the access to the spring may have carried out the attack. The original water source for the Lomas de San Antonio and Las Delicias community was depleted by the Zazagua hydroelectric dam.

Front Line Defenders has previously reported on [violations](#) against COPINH members in Honduras, including smear campaigns, harassment, threats and attempts of killings. Several human rights defenders – including [Berta Cáceres](#), [Tomas García](#), [Nelson García](#) and [Lesbia Urquia](#) - have been killed. They have faced increased risks since their leader Berta Cáceres Flores was [killed](#) on 3 March 2016. Berta Cáceres Flores was an internationally recognised and celebrated activist. She endured years of judicial harassment, threats and intimidation due to her work defending the rights of populations affected by the Agua Zarca hydroelectric project, which threatens the Gualcarque river basin, and is held sacred for the Lenca people.

Honduras is considered to be one of the world's most dangerous countries for human rights defenders and is known for failing to protect those that uphold human rights, as [outlined by](#) the United Nations

and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights' Special Rapporteur for human rights defenders last year. Front Line Defenders reported that [at least 33 human rights defenders were killed in 2016](#).

Front Line Defenders condemns the attacks carried out against COPINH members and human rights defenders Bertha Zúniga Cáceres, Sotero Chavarría, and Asunción Martínez, as it believes that it was carried out due to their peaceful and legitimate work in the defence of environmental rights in Honduras.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Honduras to:

1. Carry out an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation into the attacks carried out against Bertha Zúniga Cáceres, Sotero Chavarría, and Asunción Martínez, with a view to publishing the results and bringing those responsible to justice in accordance with international standards;
2. Take all necessary measures, in consultation with the human rights defenders, to guarantee their physical and psychological integrity and security;
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.