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Written statement* submitted by Society for Threatened Peoples, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[29 January 2021]

* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.

Escalation of Violence against Indigenous Human Rights Defenders in the Republic of Honduras

The pandemic outbreak of Covid-19 and hurricanes Eta and Iota aggravated the political, economic, social and human rights crisis in the Republic of Honduras. This crisis, far from being resolved, is aggravated by corruption and has condemned the population to expropriation, forced displacement and violence.

The Republic of Honduras remains amongst the deadliest countries for land and environmental defenders in the world. In 2019, the country had the highest rate of killings per capita, registering over 14 lethal attacks against activists that stand up for their land and environment. This trend increases: Honduras is the country with the greatest percentage increase in lethal attacks against environmental and human rights defenders. Among them, indigenous human rights activists are significantly more often victims of the full scale of repression, ranging from expulsion to extermination. Among the 14 killed human rights defenders in 2019, eleven were members of indigenous communities.

In late December 2020, two Honduran indigenous leaders, environmentalists and human rights defenders were murdered in the same week. On December 27th 2020, Jose Adán Medina was found shot dead in a remote location in the community of El Volcan in the west of Honduras. Medina was a leader of the Tolupán indigenous community and a prominent figure in the clashes with loggers and landowners in the mountainous regions of Francisco Morazán and Yoro. He was attacked on his way back from tending to his corn crops in Candelaria, a rural community in the northern department of Yoro. On December 26th 2020, Félix Vásquez was murdered by a group that is still not fully identified. According to the COFADEH (Committee of Family Members of the Arrested Disappeared in Honduras), witnesses report that four hooded men broke into Vásquez' house in the municipality of Ocotal (Santiago de Puringla municipality in La Paz state in the west of the country). The attackers beat up present residents and shot the indigenous leader. Vásquez belonged to the Lenca indigenous people. These are the same people to which the Honduran human rights defender Berta Cáceres belonged, who was shot dead in 2016. She fought for years against infrastructure projects that threatened to displace indigenous people and was awarded for her activism. Félix Vásquez was also an environmentalist who had fought hydroelectric projects and land abuses for years and was seeking the nomination to run for congress for the opposition Libre party. National elections are scheduled for March 2021. Vásquez had been filing complaints and reporting threats since 2017, but the Government never acted.

On 24th November 2020, Laura Carolina Valentín Dolmo, a young Garífuna human rights defender and member of the Honduran Black Fraternal Organisation (OFRANEH), was found dead in the Danto River in the city of La Ceiba, Honduras. This murder took place in a context of systematic violence perpetrated against the Garífuna population and persecution against those who defend human rights in Honduras, without due recognition and protection by the State. In July 2020, five defenders of Garífuna ancestral territory were abducted in the community of Triunfo de la Cruz in the early hours of 18th July 2020. The victims are Garífuna fishermen from a region where communities are involved in a longstanding struggle to save their ancestral land from drug traffickers, palm oil magnates and tourism developers aided by corrupt officials and institutions. OFRANEH reported further killings and abductions. However, in most cases the people responsible for these crimes remain unidentified. Due to widespread corruption among police forces as well as economic interests in these regions, most cases remain unsolved and perpetrators are not prosecuted. This impunity hinders justice for the victims' families and indigenous communities as such.

Yet, Honduras is not the only country where indigenous human rights defenders fear violence and killings. The Republic of Colombia, the Republic of the Philippines or the Federative Republic of Brazil are further examples. Like in Honduras, impunity for these crimes is very high. Society for Threatened Peoples is very concerned about the security of indigenous human rights defenders. A more effective protection mechanism is needed to ensure their security.

Society for Threatened Peoples therefore calls upon the UN Human Rights Council to urge the Government of the Republic of Honduras to:

- create an effective mechanism for the protection of indigenous human rights defenders,
 - ensure diligent and impartial investigations into the events and attacks against indigenous human rights defenders to provide the necessary mechanisms to ensure access to justice for indigenous communities and persecution of perpetrators,
 - ensure that these protective measures have a focus on ethnic and gender, guaranteeing differentiated responses for the most vulnerable populations.
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