

# Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

September 10, 2025

The Honorable Marco Rubio  
Secretary of State  
U.S. Department of State  
2201 C Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Rubio:

On the eve of the one-year anniversary of the assassination of Honduran Catholic leader and human rights advocate Juan Antonio López, we write to express our concern regarding the lack of progress in his case and the dire situation in the Tocoa municipality of the Bajo Aguán region of Honduras. We urge the Department's active engagement with the Honduran government to deliver justice for the murder of López, to work to guarantee the safety of all environmental and human rights defenders, and to fully implement Decree 18-2024, which protects the Carlos Escaleras Botaderos Mountain National Park.

In 2012, the Honduran National Congress created this National Park, declaring the region surrounding the Guapinol and San Pedro rivers a protected area. Only a year later, the same Congress redrew the park boundaries<sup>1</sup>, clearing the way for concessions to EMCO Mining (later renamed Inversiones Los Pinares) to establish an open-pit iron ore mine, a petroleum coke power plant, and an iron oxide pelletizing plant. These concessions, linked to large-scale environmental degradation<sup>2</sup> of the rivers, have threatened to contaminate the water sources that provide for dozens of communities throughout three separate Honduran departments.

Since 2015, the *Comité Municipal de Defensa de los Bienes Comunes y Públicos* (CMDBCP), representing dozens of communities, religious groups, and local environmental organizations in Tocoa, has contested the legality of these concessions<sup>3</sup>. This struggle has spanned multiple Honduran administrations under both the *Partido Nacional* and the *Partido Libre*.

López was a nationally respected leader in the Catholic Church and the aide to the local bishop. He was recognized as “a well-known and respected environmental defender” in the State Department's Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2024. As a leader of the CMDBCP, he fought corruption and impunity related to these mining concessions for many years.

On September 14, 2024, he was shot multiple times by two men on a motorcycle, assassinated as he was leaving a chapel where he had just led a prayer service. His killing came days after he had publicly called

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<sup>1</sup>School of Advanced Study University of London, “2012-2013 Creation and reconfiguration of Montaña de Botaderos National Park.” [\[Link\]](#)

<sup>2</sup>Ministerio Público Republica de Honduras, “Auto de formal procesamiento a tres implicados en supuesto daño ambiental al Parque Nacional Montaña de Botaderos Carlos Escaleras Mejía.” [\[Link\]](#); Criterio.hn, “Procesan a ejecutivos de Los Pinares por destrucción ambiental; Lenir Pérez sigue prófugo.” [\[Link\]](#)

<sup>3</sup>European Parliament (europarl.europa.eu), “Guapinol activists and Berta Cáceres, Honduras.” PDF [\[Link\]](#); Contra Corriente, “Victims of mining conflict expect an indictment against Lenir Pérez in view of a possible concession extension.” [\[Link\]](#)

for the resignation of Adán Fúnez<sup>4</sup>, the mayor of Tocoa, following the publication of a video showing Fúnez and the president's brother-in-law discussing bribes with Honduran drug traffickers who have since been extradited and tried in the United States<sup>5</sup>.

Although three people have been charged in connection with López's killing, no charges have been levied against intellectual perpetrators of the crime. The preliminary hearing has been postponed multiple times<sup>6</sup>, and the investigation of additional conspirators continues, as noted in the Country Reports.

Defenders of the Carlos Escaleras Botaderos Mountain National Park have been subjected to persistent harassment, criminalization, and assassination. In 2019, because of opposition to the mining project, eight Guapinol community members were jailed for over two years in pretrial detention on charges widely regarded as unfounded. In 2023, Aly Domínguez and Jairo Bonilla, who had advocated against the mine<sup>7</sup>, were murdered. Five months later, Aly's brother, Oquelí, was also assassinated. In response to this climate of extreme violence, in October of 2023 the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights of the Organization of American States granted precautionary measures to thirty individuals.<sup>8</sup>

These crimes occur within a broader pattern of corruption and impunity in cases linked to powerful corporate and political interests. Lenir Pérez and Ana Facussé, the married co-owners of Inversiones Los Pinares, have repeatedly been accused by local communities and both national and international human rights organizations of corruption, involvement in violent land conflicts, unlawful influence over the judicial system, and ties to drug trafficking. The Inter-American Court of Human Rights previously ruled against the Government of Honduras in a case involving the murder of environmentalist Carlos Escaleras, for whom the park is named, citing insufficient and unreasonably delayed investigations that implicated members of the Facussé family. Lenir Pérez has also been investigated by the FBI at his property in Florida.<sup>9</sup>

In May 2024, the Honduran National Congress approved and published Decree 18-2024, which re-established the original boundaries of the park and prohibited the granting of mining concessions within protected areas and designated water-producing zones. However, the decree, which provided for community participation in the restoration of these protected areas, has yet to be implemented. The installations and personnel of the megaproject of Inversiones Los Pinares, the root cause of this violence, remain in place, prohibiting the restoration of the national park and intimidating the affected communities<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Associated Press, "He fought to save jungles in Honduras. Now his killing haunts environmental defenders." [\[Link\]](#); Contra Corriente, "Guapinol defender Juan López murdered." [\[Link\]](#)

<sup>5</sup> Insight Crime, "Narco Video Shows Traffickers Discussing Bribes With Honduras President's Brother-in-Law." [\[Link\]](#)

<sup>6</sup> Criterio.hn, "Deficiencias de fiscalía obligan a suspender nuevamente audiencia en causa por asesinato de Juan López." [\[Link\]](#)

<sup>7</sup> The Guardian, "Honduran environmental defenders shot dead in broad daylight." [\[Link\]](#); El País, "Jairo Bonilla y Aly Domínguez, los primeros ambientalistas asesinados en 2023." [\[Link\]](#); Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, "IACHR Condemns Murders of Rights Defenders in Honduras." [\[Link\]](#)

<sup>8</sup> Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, Resolution 55/2023 [\[Link\]](#)

<sup>9</sup> Criterio.hn, "FBI toca las puertas de Lenir Pérez y su esposa Ana Facussé en Florida." [\[Link\]](#)

<sup>10</sup> Criterio.hn, "Exigen cumplimiento de normativa para restaurar áreas protegidas afectadas por minería." [\[Link\]](#)

The unresolved prosecutions and the unenforced environmental legislation create an atmosphere of instability, undermine investor confidence and fuel migration. Many members of the Guapinol community and other surrounding communities have relocated to the United States, either as recognized U.S. refugees or while pursuing asylum claims.

We believe that the United States government should press for concrete action. We therefore request that the State Department:

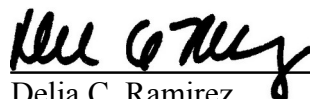
1. Encourage the Public Prosecutor's Office to prioritize the investigation and prosecution of all material and intellectual authors of Juan López's murder, ensuring no political or corporate interference;
2. Press Honduran authorities to uphold the rule of law and guarantee the protection of all environmental defenders, especially those under IACHR precautionary measures, and to hold accountable any actors who violate these protections; and
3. Urge the Honduran Secretariat of Natural Resources and the Environment (SERNA) and other pertinent authorities to fully implement Decree 18-2024<sup>11</sup>, restoring the park's original boundaries, halting all mineral extraction within its limits, and initiating ecological restoration.

Justice for the assassination of Juan Antonio López, and for the many others killed in defense of their communities in the Bajo Aguán, is vital to promoting stability, protecting constitutional rights, and upholding the rule of law in Honduras. A secure and law-respecting Honduras is in the strategic interest of the United States, helping to reduce corruption, crime, and migration pressures. We urge you to make these priorities a core part of our bilateral relationship and to inform Congress of the specific actions the State Department has taken to achieve these goals.

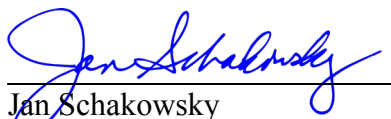
Sincerely,



James P. McGovern  
Member of Congress



Delia C. Ramirez  
Member of Congress



Jan Schakowsky  
Member of Congress

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<sup>11</sup> Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Decreto No. 18-2024." PDF [\[Link\]](#)