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Overcoming the obstacles: Human rights activists in Guatemala and Honduras

Reports of killings, death threats, harassment and intimidation of human rights activists continue to be commonplace in Honduras and Guatemala. Despite suffering intimidation and impingements on their liberty, however, these activists often feel privileged to be in the position to make positive changes, and brave dangerous situations in the name of human rights.

Many defenders of human rights are subjected to unfounded investigations and malicious prosecutions. Their offices and homes are placed under surveillance, while at the same time important human rights information and documents are stolen to obstruct their human rights work.

In some cases, grave violations result in activists having to stop, or radically curtail, their human rights activities. Direct attacks or threats to their lives sometimes mean that they are forced to flee their homes or even countries.

Grass-roots defenders working on economic, social and cultural rights in remote areas face special challenges as their work is less visible. An atmosphere of impunity sometimes makes it impossible to continue human rights work without risking their lives and the lives of loved ones.

Most of those who commit violations against human rights defenders evade justice, and investigations into abuses against activists are grossly inadequate. Such violations also have wider repercussions -- they create a climate of fear.

Human rights activists often feel privileged to do their work, despite suffering intimidation and impingements on their liberty. They fight injustice and make a positive change in society. Their work and achievements have an impact on human rights worldwide.

Governments have obligations to take action against those who hamper or threaten the work of human rights defenders. **No one should have to live or work like this.**

A day in the life of a human rights activist in Guatemala or Honduras -- imagine what that means...

I am a human rights activist in Central America, and I

08:00

- drive to work rather than taking the bus or walking. I really like walking but have to take precautions to avoid being followed or being attacked. My own car has tinted windows, so no-one can see me. Motorcycles and cars without number plates have followed me in the past, after I received death threats.

10:00

- have gone to a friend's house today to meet with Indigenous women and interview them. I don't use my office anymore, as it's safer to keep changing locations regularly or work from home. It makes work difficult when I need an internet connection.

12:00

- have lunch in cafes that are small and where I know the people well. I still have to keep an eye on the door to see who comes in, no matter where I go.

14:00

- need to visit a community on the coast with a colleague. On long trips like these I arrange to change vehicles. This time I will change cars three times, to make sure nothing happens to us.

16:00

- start to make my way back home, changing cars along the way to avoid being followed again. I try to get home before dark, it makes it easier to keep safe, and my partner and children don't worry as much.

18:00

- am home, tired but happy because we moved things on. It was a good day's work. I do some more paperwork at home. As usual I'm the only one who picks up the phone or I let it go to the answering machine. I don't like my children and partner picking up the phone, as I've received death threats over the phone before.

Call to action

Make a difference in Guatemala and Honduras. Write to the Presidents to demand that human rights activists can work safely and freely.

Sample letter

Dear President,

I am extremely concerned that killings, threats, attacks and acts of intimidation against human rights defenders continue to take place in Guatemala and Honduras. The lack of progress in identifying those responsible and bringing them to justice perpetuates impunity and further attacks on human rights defenders. I therefore urge you to:

- protect activists by implementing comprehensive protection measures

- prevent, investigate and punish abuses, including harassment of activists
- publicly denounce abuses that undermine human rights work and compromise the security of activists

Yours Sincerely,

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A human rights activist negotiates with police at a demonstration.

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