

13 November 2018

## Honduras: Smear campaign against *Fundación San Alonso Rodriguez* and its director Juana Esquivel

Woman human rights defender **Juana Esquivel**, director of *Fundación San Alonso Rodriguez*, in Tocoa, Colón, Honduras, is currently being targeted in a smear campaign against her and the human rights organisation. The harassment is related to their support to activists of the Guapinol camp, who have suffered eviction attempts, police aggression and criminalisation due to their peaceful demonstrations against environmental damages caused by the activities of the mining company *Empresa Minera Inversiones Los Pinares*.

**Juana Esquivel** is a woman human rights defender who, in her role as the director of **Fundación San Alonso Rodriguez**, supports and legitimises peaceful human rights initiatives and struggles. She has issued numerous interviews and reports on the Guapinol camp case, and has been recognised as its spokeswoman. The *Fundación San Alonso Rodriguez* is a civil non-profit organisation that is a member of the *Comité Municipal de Defensa de los Bienes Comunes y Públicos de Tocoa* (Municipal Defense Council on the Common and Public Goods of Tocoa) and advises, accompanies and shares information on the criminalisation cases against 18 members of the Guapinol camp.

Woman human rights defender Juana Esquivel and members of the *Fundación San Alonso Rodriguez* face a defamation campaign on social and mainstream media. The *Radio Cadena Voces* [claimed](#) in a Facebook post that *Fundación San Alonso Rodriguez* was the cause of all conflicts in Colón, portraying it as being “against progress”. Several media teams filmed the organisation’s employees outside their office and portrayed them as criminals. Furthermore, all members of the *Comité Municipal de Defensa de los Bienes Comunes y Públicos de Tocoa* were [accused](#) by Mundovision Media’s facebook page of destroying the mining company *Empresa Minera Inversiones Los Pinares*’ property. Another post blamed Juana Esquivel and other members of the *Fundación San Alonso Rodriguez* of being terrorists and arming the camp protesters.

The harassment is related to the support that *Fundación San Alonso Rodriguez* has been granting to the Guapinol camp activists. The Guapinol camp protest, named *Campamento Guapinol en Defensa del Agua y la Vida* (Guapinol Camp on the Defense of Water and Life) began on 1 August 2018, when hundreds of residents of the Guapinol community occupied the margins of a road leading to the *Empresa Minera Inversiones Los Pinares*. The activists have been protesting for more than three months against the systematic violations of their rights to access to land, food and water caused by the company’s hydroelectric dam project. The dam project began in 2014, and has polluted the water of the Guapinol river, resulting in the death of livestock and illnesses among residents. There are numerous allegations of irregularities regarding the project’s license and implementation.

On 13 September 2018, a Honduran national court specialised in organised crime, issued arrest warrants against 18 of the camp protesters. On 27 October 2018, the Guapinol camp was attacked by military and police with live bullets and tear gas. The attack resulted in the murder of camp activist Levin Alexander Bonilla and two members of the military. Since then, state security forces have maintained a presence in the area. The private mining company has also been involved in attacks and intimidation attempts against the Guapinol camp members, such as the kidnapping of its leader Irma Serrano and her two daughters for more than 20 hours.

Honduras is considered one of the world’s most dangerous countries for human rights defenders. A [press release](#) issued by UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Michel

Forst, and the Inter-American Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, José de Jesús Orozco Henríquez, requests that the Government of Honduras “must immediately adopt and apply effective measures to protect human rights defenders, so they can carry out their human rights work, without fear or threat of violence or murder.” During an official visit to the country on 28 July 2017, the UN Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights, Andrew Gilmour, emphasised “the paramount need to increase protection for human rights defenders in Honduras”.

Front Line Defenders is deeply concerned about the ongoing defamation of Fundación San Alonso Rodríguez and its director Juana Esquivel, which is believed to be an attempt to delegitimise their work to protect environmental rights and the right to access to water in the region of Colón. Front Line Defenders is concerned that such smear campaigns can lead to an increase in violence against human rights defenders in Honduras.

**Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Honduras to:**

1. Carry out an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation into the smear campaign against Juana Esquivel and *Fundación San Alonso Rodríguez* with a view to publishing the results and bringing those responsible to justice in accordance with international standards;
2. Take measures to ensure that government officials or other public figures refrain from stigmatising the legitimate work of human rights organisation *Fundación San Alonso Rodríguez* and its members;
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.