



8 March 2017

**Justice is as far away as the stars in the sky: Violence against women
journalists in Honduras**

Comments by Dina Meza, President PEN Honduras to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission (check against delivery).

Thank you to the Commission for holding today's hearing.

My name is Dina Meza, I am an investigative journalist and the President of PEN Honduras, an NGO working to protect journalists and defend freedom of expression.

Today in Honduras, women journalists and human rights defenders are under siege like never before, especially following the highly contested 2017 election which was marred by widespread electoral fraud and violence. We are living a nightmare of state violence and mass incarceration of journalists, students and human rights defenders. This is happening in a climate of complete impunity with the backing of the US government. I come to you today, on International Women's Day, urging you to act.

"Justice is as far away as the stars in the sky."

These are the words of Dunia Montoya, a leading female Honduran journalist who was brutally beaten by the police and security forces as she covered a protest against state corruption in September 2015. As she filmed the protest, Dunia was surrounded by several rings of police who attacked her without mercy. With their police boots, they kicked her, damaging her collarbone, they punched her and tried to choke her. She fainted from the pain.

Unlike Dunia, her attackers have little to fear. The only policeman who has charged with this assault, Carlos Alberto Arzú Herrera, went to her house with a group of police two months ago. In violation of a restraining order he threatened her children and assaulted her brother.

Arzú Herrera says he was only following orders.

Last Monday, the judge in the case once again postponed the hearing against him. No reasons were given. In Honduras, the judiciary is neither independent nor effective. We have little hope for justice, it is as far away as the stars in the sky.

The violence against Dunia is emblematic of the widespread violence against women journalists in Honduras, a country in which seventy-five (75) journalists and media workers have been murdered with a ninety six per cent impunity rate.

For women journalists in Honduras, the authorities attack both our bodies and families. The patriarchal, macho system is entrenched throughout the whole justice system. Seeking justice is a thorny path for women.

Women journalists in Honduras are the targets of physical and digital surveillance. They are the victims of smear campaigns, of calls and whatsapp messages threatening to kill their children if they continue to report on issues such as corruption, militarization, human rights violations or violence against women. Women journalists rarely report this violence to the authorities because these officials are often the source of the threats. Where the state does assign bodyguards to women journalists at severe risk – like I was – we are made to pay for their travel and accommodation.

I have received countless sexual threats. An army officer put his gun to my head and threatened to pull the trigger. When my daughter was just 13 years old, a man approached her in a restaurant. He took a photo of her, looked at her and gestured to cut her throat. My other two children have been followed to school. Armed paramilitaries surrounded my home - I had to move my family six times in two years. Armed men tried to kidnap my father. All of this is an attempt to silence my voice as a journalist, so that nothing is known about the serious human rights problems facing Honduras. But I will not be silenced.

These threats have made me leave the country at various moments. But leaving the country has also given me the opportunity to denounce this repression.

It is essential that the United States Congress stand in solidarity with female journalists in Honduras. Today, on International Women's Day you can send a powerful message of support for women journalists in Honduras.

For too long, the government of the United States has been complicit in the crimes of the Honduran government against their people. In fact, at the moment, the US is giving more financial support to the Honduran administration under President Juan Orlando Hernández than ever before.

This money supports the militarization of the country and the consequent abuse of women journalists. The intervention by the United States in Honduras over decades has left thousands dead because in addition to sustaining corruption this unconditional support embraces impunity.

Berta Cáceres, the great defender of environmental rights, was murdered two years ago this week. She came to this country to tell the US government that her people, the Lenca, were suffering the consequences of US-backed policies, like the Alliance for Prosperity, which finance militarization and which have resulted the mass forced migration they were supposed to prevent.

She told you that we had to end this unconditional support because it is directly resulting in unprecedented violations of human rights in my country. Bertha was murdered and to this day the trial of those responsible has been a circus. We still do not know who planned and ordered this horrendous crime.

So I call on the United States Congress to counteract this violence. It is not possible to continue financing a terror regime and talk about justice. I urge you to pass the Berta Cáceres Human Rights in Honduras Act (H.R. 1299) without delay. Congress must enforce the human rights conditions in the Foreign Aid Bill which require the protection of Human Rights Defenders and Journalists. Congress can act immediately to freeze security assistance in light of these violations.

Punishing those responsible and fighting impunity in Honduras is the only oxygen which will allow women journalists like me to continue to breathe and work. Today on International Women's Day, we, the women journalists and human rights defenders of Honduras urge the US Congress to act.

Thank you.