

Testimony of Margaret Huang, Executive Director of Amnesty International USA

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing: Threats to Civil Society around the World

March 21, 2017; 1:00 PM – 2:30 PM; 2255 Rayburn House Office Building

Good afternoon. I would like to thank the Lantos Human Rights Commission and Chairman McGovern and Chairman Hultgren for this important hearing and for inviting Amnesty International USA.

I also want to take this opportunity to acknowledge the critical work of the Lantos Commission in highlighting human rights as a priority for the U.S. Congress. Your work has helped free prisoners of conscience around the world, including doctor Tun Aung in Myanmar; school teacher Soni Sori in India; and human rights defender Nguyen Tien Trung in Vietnam.

You have helped to change lives. But we must work to change many more. As members of the Commission and other panelists have noted, human rights defenders—people who take non-violent action for human rights—are under grave threat around the world. We truly are in a moment of crisis.

Today, almost 70 years after the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and 20 years after the adoption of the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, the space in which human rights defenders work is shrinking and defenders themselves are being targeted, attacked, imprisoned, and killed.

Governments, armed groups, companies, and others in power are taking a range of measures to silence criticism and stop the work of defenders. As those in power seek to protect their interests, they portray those who challenge them as “foreign agents”, terrorists, or threats to development, thereby creating divisions between communities. This paves the way for them to attack defenders, ruin reputations, unjustly imprison people, and use violence.

Governments are legislating to restrict the peaceful exercise of human rights, placing obstacles in the way of defenders’ work and putting them at greater risk. Such laws ban access to foreign funding for civil society organizations or place hurdles in the way of registration; authorize the use of excessive force or punitive charges against peaceful protesters; or allow for mass surveillance. Day-by-day, the space in which civil society operates shrinks a little more.

Hate speech and the casting of collective blame onto minority groups for real or perceived social ills or economic hardship is on the rise and is creating an environment of hostility. The persistent disregard for international law and standards is also creating an unstable and dangerous environment for defenders.

Defenders often lack access to the information, networks and tools they need to bring about change and keep themselves safe. Many countries lack laws and programs to support their work or protect them from attacks by authorities, companies and, often, their own communities. Those who attack them are rarely brought to justice.

Defenders in all regions and from every walk of life are risking everything to end injustice. We must support them, see ourselves as human rights defenders and recognize our responsibility to protect the rights of all people. In light of this, Amnesty International will launch a global campaign for and with human rights defenders in May. The campaign will seek to support, empower and protect defenders around the world. We will cover a range of themes, including killings; surveillance; the use of laws to shrink space for civil society; and the important role of women human rights defenders.

In the rest of my remarks, I would like to focus on the grave problem of killings and attacks against human rights defenders, particularly in the Americas region. We have submitted a copy of Amnesty International's Annual Report which goes into much greater detail about trends, concerns and countries around the world.

Amnesty International has documented the physical attacks, killings and enforced disappearances of defenders across all regions of the world. Rarely a day goes by without reports of physical attacks against defenders and sometimes their families. The attacks often result in permanent debilitation or death, destruction of homes, offices and computers. These actions, whether committed by state or non-state actors, are a direct attempt to stop the important human rights activities carried out by defenders and are a way of sending a 'chilling' message to others in the community that they should refrain from defending human rights.

When a defender is attacked or killed it is rarely a single event and is more often preceded by a long-term and highly orchestrated series of events of smearing, intimidation, harassment, attacks, and criminalization. In many places, the authorities do not record the crime, or investigate and prosecute those responsible for killings, sending a message to perpetrators that they will be granted impunity for their crimes, while in parallel sending a message to defenders that the state is not concerned about their right to justice.

In the Americas region in 2016, defending human rights remained extremely dangerous. Defenders were targeted with threats, attacks, torture and enforced disappearances; some were even killed by state and non-state actors as a way to silence them. Defenders also faced smear campaigns and vilification. Yet there was little progress in investigating these attacks or bringing perpetrators to justice. Human rights defenders and social movements opposing large-scale development projects and transnational corporations were at particular risk of reprisals. Women and Indigenous human rights defenders as well as those from other communities historically excluded were also targeted with violence.

Honduras and Guatemala were the most dangerous countries in the world in 2016 for those defending land, territory and the environment, with a wave of threats, trumped-up charges, smear campaigns, attacks and killings targeting environmental and land activists. In March of 2016, the murder of prominent Honduran Indigenous leader Berta Cáceres – who was shot in her home by armed men – highlighted the generalization of violence against those working to protect land, territory and the environment in the country.

In Peru, Máxima Acuña – a peasant farmer caught in a legal battle with Yanacocha, one of the biggest gold and copper mines in the region, over ownership of the land where she lived – won the

2016 Goldman Environmental Prize, a highly respected environmental award also won by Berta Cáceres. Despite a campaign of harassment and intimidation in which security personnel were alleged to have physically attacked Máxima and her family, she stood firm and refused to end her struggle to protect local lakes and remain on her land.

In Cuba, despite claims of political openness and the re-establishment of relations with the USA the previous year, civil society and opposition groups reported increased harassment of government critics. Human rights defenders and political activists were publicly described as “subversive” and “anti-Cuban mercenaries”. Some were subjected to short-term arbitrary detention before being released without charge, often several times a month.

And here in the United States, Amnesty International is seriously concerned about allegations of excessive, militarized force against Indigenous water protectors and their allies at Standing Rock, as well as the recent rash of state laws introduced this year that could undermine the right to peaceful protest.

In closing, we have much work to do together to support civil society and the critical activism of human rights defenders around the world. We are grateful to have the partnership of the Lantos Commission in this effort. We would encourage you to:

- **Continue** to take action for specific prisoner of conscience and human rights defender cases through the Defending Freedoms project—and encourage your colleagues in Congress to do the same;
- **Call** for investigation and prosecution of threats and killings against human rights defenders, and to recognize the importance of their role in society;
- **Join** dear colleague letters, support resolutions and pass legislation that will help human rights defenders around the world;
- **Vote** to protect and increase U.S. government funding used by the Department of State, the United Nations and other actors to help free prisoners of conscience, support human rights defenders and open space for civil society around the world;
- **And stand against** any U.S. federal or state legislation or policy that would undermine the rights to peaceful protest, expression or assembly.

Thank you.