



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Briefing

Briefing Series on the Shrinking Space for Civil Society

The Criminalization of Human Rights Defenders in Latin America

Friday, April 8, 2016

12:00 – 1:00 PM

B-340 Rayburn House Office Building

Panelists

Daniel Pascual is the Director of the Committee of Peasant Unity of Guatemala (CUC-Comité de Unidad Campesina de Guatemala). For his defense of indigenous and farming communities against powerful mining companies, Mr. Pascual has been charged with libel and defamation, among other charges.

Victor Fernandez is a lawyer for the National Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (COPINH), founded in 1993 to protect the Lenca people from illegal logging, and usurpation of their land and resources. On March 3, COPINH co-founder Bertha Cáceres, was brutally assassinated and the investigation into her murder is ongoing. Ms. Cáceres and COPINH colleagues have frequently been charged with alleged crimes to prevent them from doing their work. For example, Ms. Cáceres was charged in 2013 for illegal possession of a weapon which required her to report to the authorities on a weekly basis until the case thrown out a year later.

Juan Carlos Ruíz Molleda is a lawyer for the Peruvian Institute for Legal Defense (IDL). The renowned IDL has represented numerous cases of human rights defenders including indigenous leaders defending their territory and other community leaders protesting the contamination of their lands by the petrol industry. Not only does he defend people falsely accused, he himself is being investigated by the Attorney General's office for allegedly using false document used to denounce the heavy-metal contamination of farm land.

Moderator

Vicki Gass is Policy Advisor to Central America for Oxfam America, advocating for policy issues of concern to the region and integrating the work into Oxfam's global structure. She has been working on Central American social and economic justice issues since 1984, and has lived in both El Salvador and Honduras. From 1999-2001, she led regional advocacy efforts in Central America following Hurricane Mitch for the Washington Office on Latin America, WOLA, and Oxfam America. Her work helped to ensure the participation of local civil society organizations in meetings of international donors and in the design of post- Hurricane Mitch reconstruction strategies. From 1999 to 2012 Vicki served as Senior Associate for Rights and Development at WOLA, where she established the Rights and Development program that focused on the relationship between human rights, economic development and U.S. policy. She followed foreign aid and trade policy, with a special emphasis on poverty reduction, labor rights and the rural sector in Latin America. She did extensive policy and media work on Honduras after the 2009 coup d'état and on Haiti reconstruction efforts in the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake. Her publications include "Trade is not a Development Strategy."