

WASHINGTON, DC (*March 12, 2012*) – Today Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-IL) and 93 fellow House members sent a letter to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to raise the alarm over human rights violations in Honduras where human rights defenders, journalists, community leaders and opposition activists are subject to death threats, attacks and extrajudicial executions. Today also marks the 18th fatal attack on a member of the news media in the past two years after a Honduran journalist was killed by an unknown attacker wielding a machete.

In the Bajo Aguán region, forty-five people associated with peasant organizations working to resolve ongoing land disputes have been killed since September 2009, as well as seven security guards, a policeman, a journalist and his partner, and three other persons. Underlying the violence are long-standing land conflicts, and witnesses have reported that private security guards on disputed farmlands are the perpetrators of many of these crimes.

These cases have yet to be investigated and prosecuted, resulting in a climate of impunity. In September 2011, Human Rights Watch reported that while some arrest warrants have been issued, no one has been arrested or charged for these killings. While the legal system has failed to effectively prosecute perpetrators of extrajudicial executions, legal proceedings have been initiated against at least 162 small farmers and more than 80 were temporarily arrested, largely on charges of trespassing and theft of farm produce, between January 2010 and July 2011.

“In the absence of a serious commitment to stopping human rights abuses, including a full investigation and prosecution of the killings and the suspension of any members of the Honduran official security establishment involved in the abuses, the U.S. should suspend military assistance to Honduras,” **said Rep. Schakowsky**. “Those who have perpetuated these crimes should be punished. The Honduran government ought to know that the United States is absolutely serious about stopping these human rights violations. I’m optimistic about getting a meaningful response from the State Department.”

The letter asks the State Department “to suspend U.S. assistance to the Honduran military and police given the credible allegations of widespread, serious violations of human rights attributed to the security forces.” The letter also asks the State Department to continue efforts to pressure the Honduran government to protect the fundamental human rights of its citizens, investigate and prosecute abuses in the Bajo Aguán region and throughout the country, give an accounting of the specific status of cases, and hold accountable private security companies that have acted with impunity. In addition, the Honduran government should comply with the agreements already signed with peasant associations to address the land conflicts in Bajo Aguán and seek comprehensive solutions to lack of access to land and livelihoods that underlie this conflict.

Schakowsky traveled to Honduras in 2009, after the coup, at the invitation of prominent human defender Berta Oliva. At the time, she raised serious concerns about the widespread human rights abuses that continue to plague the country nearly three years later.

“Given U.S. support for the Honduran government, including assistance for the police, military and judicial system, we have an obligation to ensure that human rights are respected,” said Schakowsky.

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