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Honduras: Intimidation and death threats against members of the Indigenous Councils Santiago Apóstol and San Isidro Labrador

On 7 December 2016, land, environmental and indigenous peoples' rights defenders Ms **Ana Mirian Romero**, Mr **Roberto Gómez**, Ms **María Felicita Lopez** and Mr **Rodolfo Vasquez** received death threats and were intimidated by two alleged supporters of Santa Elena's mayor Víctor Ventura as well as local authorities from the neighbouring indigenous community of El Potrero.

[Ana Mirian Romero](#) is a leader of the *Consejo Indígena San Isidro Labrador* (San Isidro Labrador Indigenous Council) and member of *Movimiento Independiente Indígena Lenca de La Paz Honduras* – MILPAH (Lenca Indigenous Movement of La Paz, Honduras). She is the winner of the 2016 [Front Line Defenders Award for Human Rights Defenders at Risk](#). María Felicita López and Rodolfo Vásquez are also members of the *Consejo Indígena San Isidro Labrador*. Roberto Gómez is the President of the *Consejo Indígena Santiago Apostol* (Santiago Apostol Indigenous Council) as well as a land, environmental and indigenous peoples' rights defender. All of the aforementioned human rights defenders are beneficiaries of precautionary measures ([MC589/15](#)) granted by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IAHCR).

The human rights defenders have been active in opposing the construction of the Los Encinos hydroelectric dam (Hidroeléctrica Los Encinos) on the Chinacla river, owned by Los Encinos S. de R.L.. Since 2010 they have been advocating for the recognition of their ancestral lands in Santa Elena, La Paz. Permission to build the dam was granted without the free, prior and informed consent of the affected indigenous peoples. On 10 July 2016, MILPAH organised a consultation that revealed overwhelming opposition to the construction of the hydroelectric dam with 825 votes against and 94 in favour. The mayor of Santa Elena reportedly threatened to withdraw government benefits and stop development projects in the neighbourhoods where residents participated in the consultation. The mayor also allegedly ordered state security agents to harass, intimidate and attack local human rights defenders opposing the dam. Community members of El Potrero, who have allegedly been promised numerous benefits by the owners of the hydroelectric project, have violently attacked several indigenous human rights defenders in retaliation for their opposition to the project.

On 7 December 2016, a group of persons from the community of El Potrero and three alleged supporters of Santa Elena Mayor Víctor Ventura went to the community of El Volcán where the aforementioned human rights defenders live. The defenders previously lived in El Potrero, but relocated to El Volcán after a series of violent attacks by the hydroelectric dam's supporters. When alerted about the presence of outsiders in El Volcán, the human rights defenders went to meet the group and asked them to leave. The group claimed to be measuring the land for an irrigation project

supported by USAID. The defenders rejected the idea as they had not been consulted about the use of their ancestral land and stated that they had already allocated the land for the construction of a local school.

The group responded with intimidation and threats. Santos Vásquez López, who stated he was the spokesperson of the community of El Potrero, demanded that Ana Mirian Romero present papers that demonstrate her ownership of the land. He threatened to hit her with his cane and also threatened Roberto Gómez saying he would find him and kill him. Another resident of El Potrero also threatened Ana Mirian Romero. Another member of the group, Hernán Ventura, threatened María Felicita López and Rodolfo Vásquez with a machete. Further confrontation was avoided by the intervention of police.

Since 2014, members of the councils have been subjected to constant threats and attacks. According to the information available, between September and November 2015, there were several acts of violence against members of the indigenous councils by both armed civilians and state security agents. On 2 November 2015, unidentified men fired over fifteen shots outside of Ana Mirian Romero's home. This incident occurred on the same day that she was discharged from hospital following a previous attack, which took place on 22 October 2015. That day, at approximately 4:30 am, Ana Mirian Romero's home was raided by police. A contingent of 30 officers entered the house using force and without displaying a warrant. During the incident, police officers beat Ana Mirian Romero, who was 24 weeks pregnant at the time, as well as Maria Felicita López. Ana Mirian Romero was subsequently taken to the hospital in serious condition. Those attacks ultimately led to the approval of the IACHR's precautionary measures.

Despite the precautionary measures, the attacks have not stopped. On [29 January 2016](#), unknown assailants carried out an arson attack at the home of Ana Mirian Romero and Rosario Vasquez Pineda. The attack took place when the family was away from home, and the assailants have not been identified. On [9 May 2016](#) Ana Mirian Romero and her children received death threats and were intimidated by four men in their home.

Front Line Defenders condemns the acts of intimidation and threats against human rights defenders of the indigenous councils of San Isidro Labrador and Santiago de Apostol, which appear to be related to their legitimate and peaceful work in defence of their land and environmental rights, in opposition to the construction of an hydroelectric project in their territories.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Honduras to:

1. Take immediate action to safeguard the physical and psychological integrity of human rights defenders Ana Mirian Romero, Roberto Gómez, María Felicita López and Rodolfo Vásquez, in particular by implementing existing precautionary measures ([MC589/15](#)) granted by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights on 24 November 2015, in consultation with the defenders and/or their representatives;
2. Carry out an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation into the allegations of intimidation and death threats against the human rights defenders, with a view to publishing the results and bringing the perpetrators to justice in accordance with international standards;

3. Take immediate action to uphold the rights of indigenous peoples over their ancestral land as well as their right to free, prior and informed consent over any project that affects their communities;
4. 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, including judicial harassment.