

16 March 2016

Guatemala – Killing of human rights defender Walter Méndez Barrios

On 16 March 2016, human rights defender Mr Walter Méndez Barrios was shot and killed outside his home in Las Cruces, in the department of Petén.

The human rights defender was shot after leaving his house on the morning of 16 March 2016. Gun shots were heard by members of the human rights defender's family, who then rushed outside and found Walter Méndez Barrios wounded. The human rights defender was subsequently brought to the Regional Hospital of San Benito, however he was pronounced dead on arrival.

Prior to his assassination, Walter Méndez Barrios had recently visited the Boca del Rio Hydroelectric Dam and had been conducting activities to raise awareness about the negative environmental impact of palm oil production in Guatemala, the expansion of which has caused the destruction of the Petén Rainforest.

The killing of Walter Méndez Barrios is not the first assassination of an environmental rights defender to have been carried out in the area. On 18 September 2015, Mr [Rigoberto Lima Choc](#), one of the first documenters of environmental damage occurring due to the activities of the Empresa Reforestadora de Palma de Petén SA – REPSA in the Río de la Pasión, was also [killed](#).

Front Line Defenders strongly condemns the killing of human rights defender Walter Méndez Barrios, which is believed to have been directly motivated by his peaceful and legitimate work in defence of the environment and the rights of indigenous and rural communities in El Petén, and expresses its serious concern at the increasing risks faced by environmental human rights defenders in Petén.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Guatemala to:

1. Strongly condemn the killing of human rights defender Walter Méndez Barrios;
2. Take all necessary measures, in consultation with the defenders or their representatives, to guarantee the physical and psychological integrity and security of all members of “La Lucha” Cooperative, FPCR and ACOFOP, as well as the family of Walter Méndez Barrios;
3. Carry out an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation into the killing of Walter Méndez Barrios, with a view to publishing the results and bringing those responsible to justice in accordance with international standards;

4. Implement the necessary measures to prevent the recurrence of these abuses;
5. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Guatemala are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions.

Front Line Defenders respectfully reminds you that the United Nations Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, adopted by consensus by the UN General Assembly on 9 December 1998, recognises the legitimacy of the activities of human rights defenders, their right to freedom of association and to carry out their activities without fear of reprisals. We would particularly draw your attention to Article 6 (b): *“Everyone has the right, individually and in association with others: (b) As provided for in human rights and other applicable international instruments, freely to publish, impart or disseminate to others views, information and knowledge on all human rights and fundamental freedoms,”* and to Article 12 (2): *“The State shall take all necessary measures to ensure the protection by the competent authorities of everyone, individually and in association with others, against any violence, threats, retaliation, de facto or de jure adverse discrimination, pressure or any other arbitrary action as a consequence of his or her legitimate exercise of the rights referred to in the present Declaration.”*

Yours sincerely,



Mary Lawlor

Directora Ejecutiva