

**Congress of the United States**  
**Washington, DC 20515**

July 30, 2020

The Honorable Michael R. Pompeo  
Secretary of State  
U.S. Department of State  
2201 C St. N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Pompeo,

We write to express our deep concern about the deterioration of human rights protections and the growing culture of impunity under the administration of Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández. The recent kidnapping of four Garífuna leaders, reportedly by Honduran police officials, reflects the continued determination of the country's politically powerful to prevent progress in the fight for equal justice in Honduras. We urge the Trump Administration to speak up on human rights and anti-corruption efforts in Honduras and reassert the United States' interest in supporting Hondurans' efforts to build a just, inclusive, and democratic society.

In the early morning hours of July 18, 2020, four Garífuna community leaders were kidnapped from their homes and forced into unmarked vehicles at gunpoint by officers dressed in the uniforms of the National Investigative Police (DPI)<sup>1</sup>. One of the individuals, Alberth Snider Centeno Thomas, is president of the local community board and had already received repeated threats in relation to his land rights activism. The Honduran government's Secretary of Human Rights issued a statement calling for the identification of those responsible, but the four individuals are still missing and the perpetrators remain at large. This is just the latest attack on the historically marginalized Garífuna community. At least five Garífuna leaders have been killed in Honduras since September 2019, according to the United Nations, including Antonio Bernardez, whose body was found on June 19<sup>th</sup>.

The Honduran government owes the international community an explanation as to what role state officials had in these egregious violations of human rights against the Garífuna community. It must ensure immediate, independent investigations into this kidnapping and each of the recent murders. It must also answer for the repeated and ongoing attacks against community leaders, human rights defenders, and journalists, including the recent killing of an environmental rights activist<sup>2</sup> and the death of a journalist in government custody<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> "Secuestran a cuatro líderes de etnia garífuna en Honduras" ["Four Garífuna Ethnic Leaders Kidnapped in Honduras"]. *Deutsche Welle*, 19 July 2020, [p.dw.com/p/3fXpw](https://p.dw.com/p/3fXpw).

<sup>2</sup> Agence France-Presse (AFP). "Body of Missing Environmentalist Found in Honduras." *Yahoo News*, 14 July 2020, [news.yahoo.com/body-missing-environmentalist-found-honduras-145638499.html](https://news.yahoo.com/body-missing-environmentalist-found-honduras-145638499.html).

<sup>3</sup> "Honduran Journalist David Romero Dies after Contracting COVID-19 in Jail." *Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)*, 19 July 2020, [cpj.org/2020/07/honduran-journalist-david-romero-dies-after-contracting-covid-19-in-jail/](https://cpj.org/2020/07/honduran-journalist-david-romero-dies-after-contracting-covid-19-in-jail/).

These human rights abuses have occurred in a context of growing impunity, enabled by a series of setbacks in Honduras' fight against corruption. On January 19, President Hernández allowed the mandate of the Mission to Support the Fight Against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (MACCIH) to expire. His decision not to renew the MACCIH's mandate came after months of aggressive lobbying by some Honduran legislators—many of whom faced corruption investigations themselves—to kill the MACCIH. The decision not only demonstrated the Hernández Administration's lack of commitment to combating corruption, but also showed a disregard for the will of the Honduran people, 75% of whom supported the MACCIH<sup>4</sup>. Emboldened by their victory against the MACCIH, last month Honduran legislators ratified a new penal code, which reduces sentences for corruption convictions, as well as for crimes that disproportionately affect women and other victims of violence.

We are deeply concerned that rather than pressing the Honduran authorities for accountability, the Trump Administration has been holding public photo-ops with President Hernández<sup>5</sup> and lauding his assistance in implementing asylum restrictions<sup>6</sup> that rely on an executive order that was struck down in U.S. federal court.<sup>7</sup> The State Department also certified on May 7, 2020 that the Central Government of Honduras is “protecting the rights of civil society, opposition political parties, and the independence of the media,” despite tremendous evidence to the contrary. Trump political appointees' expressions of unqualified support for President Hernández do not advance U.S. or Honduran interests in working toward making Honduras a place where Hondurans can imagine a future.

As members of the United States Congress, we believe that unless and until serious and sustained efforts are made to erode Honduras' culture of impunity and ensure equal rights and equal justice under the law for the country's historically marginalized, desperate Hondurans will continue to make the dangerous journey north to the United States. It is shortsighted to think that physically limiting Hondurans' movement through illegal executive orders—while turning a blind eye to the deterioration of the conditions driving individuals to flee in the first place—will help the United States achieve a long-term solution to the challenge of irregular migration. We urge you to engage the Honduran government directly about these serious setbacks in the fight against corruption and the protection of human rights, and to recommit to using the diplomatic strength of the United States as a force for good in Honduras.

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<sup>4</sup> “75% de hondureños quiere que la MACCIH se quede, revela encuesta del IUDPAS” [“75% of Hondurans want MACCIH to stay, reveals IUDPAS survey”]. *Criterio.hn*, 21 Nov. 2019, [criterio.hn/75-de-hondurenos-quiere-que-la-maccih-se-queda-revela-encuesta-del-iudpas/](http://criterio.hn/75-de-hondurenos-quiere-que-la-maccih-se-queda-revela-encuesta-del-iudpas/).

<sup>5</sup> @JuanOrlandoH. “Inversión, Empleos.” *Twitter*, 22 July 2020, 2:13 p.m, [twitter.com/JuanOrlandoH/status/1285639014343565312](https://twitter.com/JuanOrlandoH/status/1285639014343565312).

<sup>6</sup> U.S Embassy in Honduras, “Acting DHS Secretary Wolf's Remarks with Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández.” *U.S. Embassy Tegucigalpa*, 9 January 2020, [hn.usembassy.gov/acting-dhs-secretary-wolfs-remarks-with-honduran-president-juan-orlando-hernandez/](https://hn.usembassy.gov/acting-dhs-secretary-wolfs-remarks-with-honduran-president-juan-orlando-hernandez/).

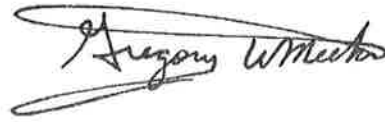
<sup>7</sup> “Federal judge strikes down Trump asylum rule targeting Central Americans.” *Washington Post*. July 1, 2020. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/legal-issues/us-judge-strikes-down-trump-asylum-rule-targeting-central-americans/2020/07/01/96e57616-bb4a-11ea-bdaf-a129f921026f\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/legal-issues/us-judge-strikes-down-trump-asylum-rule-targeting-central-americans/2020/07/01/96e57616-bb4a-11ea-bdaf-a129f921026f_story.html).

Sincerely,



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Albio Sires  
Chairman  
Western Hemisphere Subcommittee



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Gregory W. Meeks  
Vice Chair  
Western Hemisphere Subcommittee



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Eliot L. Engel  
Chairman  
House Foreign Affairs Committee



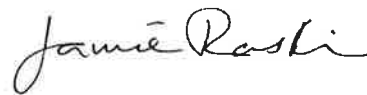
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James P. McGovern  
Co-Chair  
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission



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