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HONDURAS: Update -- Montaña Verde Political Prisoners Struggle for
and Justice

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INDIGENOUS POLITICAL PRISONERS STRUGGLE FOR FREEDOM AND JUSTICE IN

"With the good intentions of transmitting a message of hope to all
compañeros in different communities, to indigenous peoples, to those
struggling for justice, those of us who are always characterized by
work to defend the rights of the people, especially the right to
and all the resources our communities possess ..."

These words, spoken by political prisoner Marcelino Miranda, reflect
unshakeable hope and courage that three years in jail have not been
tarnish. This past Monday, January 9th, marked three years since a
violent and brutal police attack on the remote Lenca descendent
community of Montaña Verde, in southwestern Honduras.

The 30 police, special forces agents and armed civilians involved in
January 8-9, 2003 operative, who stormed the community at night, with
bullets, tear gas and fear when they illegally arrested Marcelino
Leonardo Miranda and marched them to jail in the town of Gracias.
Miranda brothers, both Indigenous Communal Council leaders and
community organizers in the struggle for Montaña Verde's communal
resources, were tortured in the community, on the hike and ride to
Gracias and during the first months of their detention.

A frequent strategy for criminalization of indigenous resistance is
grassroots activism in Honduras is the (un)justice system. While
State agents - police, investigation agents, State prosecutors, judges
continue in a climate of complete impunity, fabricated criminal charges
have been laid for years against the majority of the Montaña Verde
Indigenous Communal Council members, falsely accused of crimes ranging
land usurpation (of the community's own communal land) to murder.

"Brothers and sisters, we are here in this place, prisoners - not
because we are criminals, but because we have raised the voice of
a voice for those who have none," explains Marcelino Miranda in a
statement recorded for community radio.

The most serious (false) charge against six council members is murder,
which Marcelino and Leonardo Miranda have been sentenced to the maximum
sentence of 25 years by the corrupt judicial authorities in Gracias.

while and to liberate our peoples, our communities," says Marcelin and focused.

Luciano Pineda, another indigenous council member accused of the murder, was violently attacked in early June of last year by armed civilians working as paid paramilitaries for powerful regional landowners. While undergoing treatment in the public hospital in Tegucigalpa, national capital, he was placed under arrest and promptly transferred to the prison in Gracias. The machete wounds and the early release from medical treatment have caused permanent damage to his right hand, head.

Luciano was recently acquitted of the murder; however, he has not been released due to another charge for theft and property damage, the accusation that kept council members Felipe Bejerano and Luis Beni imprisoned for 27 months and 14 months, respectively, until their release on lack of evidence in 2003. Furthermore, in keeping with ongoing irregularities and abuses within the judicial system, although Luciano was acquitted in December, he did not receive the official documentation confirming his acquittal until yesterday, January 11.

Luciano's acquittal has set a precedent for the others charged of crime. On the morning of Tuesday January 10, council members Marg Vargas and Marcos Reyes were presented to the judge in Gracias, after three years of living partially in hiding, under the constant threat of arrest or violent attack. They have been imprisoned for the duration of their trial, which is expected to end this week with their release and acquittal.

UNDERLYING CAUSES

At the root of the repression and abuse of the legal system against leaders of Montaña Verde is their struggle to defend the community communal land and rich natural resources from the powerful landowners who have attempted to take it over for decades. As a result of a powerful indigenous resistance movement in the mid-1990s led by the Civic Grassroots and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (COPINH) - organization with which Montaña Verde is affiliated - communal land titles were granted for many indigenous and afro-indigenous (Garifuna) communities, and in recent years there have been multiple attempts to undermine, fragment and privatize communal land by the State and international institutions like the World Bank.

Of the two Montaña Verde communities, Vertientes finally received recognition of its communal land a few years ago, but Planes (which includes part of the rich cloudforest in the Montaña Verde Wildlife Sanctuary) continues to struggle for a communal land title in order to protect the community and leaders from the invasions and repression of the landowners and the State.

"Now I send a message of encouragement to all the peoples who hear here in Honduras and elsewhere in the world: we have not lost hope a better world is possible. Brothers and sisters, let's struggle to with strength and courage."

For more information, to get involved in the campaign to free the Verde political prisoners, or to send tax-deductible donations for and humanitarian support for them and their families, contact Rights Action: info@rightsaction.org, 416-654 2074, www.rightsaction.org.

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