Señor Manuel Zelaya Rosales
Presidente de la República de Honduras
Casa Presidencial
Boulevard Juan Pablo Segundo
Tegucigalpa, Honduras

January 22, 2007

Honorable President Zelaya:

We, the undersigned organizations and individuals, wish to express our deep concern regarding the circumstances surrounding the shootings of environmental activists Heraldo Zúñiga and Roger Ivan Murillo Cartagena on December 20, 2006, in the Municipality of Guarizama, Olancho, Honduras. We write to urge you to ensure that Honduran authorities give this case the thorough attention and due process it requires to ensure that the perpetrators are brought to justice, and do everything within your power to prevent this from ever happening again.

The two dead men were members of the Environmental Movement of Olancho (MAO), an organization whose leaders and members have repeatedly been the target of threats by the powerful logging industry whose illegal activities they oppose.[1] In June 2006, in the face of rising tensions, MAO and the Center for Justice in International Law petitioned the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights to require that Honduras implement precautionary measures for the group's leadership, including Heraldo Zúñiga.[2] According to MAO colleagues, on December 19th Mr. Zúñiga expressed fears about increasing threats he had received from logging employees of the Sansone company. In the days immediately after the shooting, official police sources released information to the Honduran press about the murders which is contradictory and inconsistent with information from eyewitnesses and other sources close to the event.[3]

We urge that the Honduran Public Ministry and the Honduran National Human Rights Commission conduct a full and impartial investigation of this case. We emphasize that it is necessary to investigate and bring to justice not only the actual perpetrators of the

killings, alleged to be local policemen, but also any intellectual authors of this crime on whose behalf and payment it was committed. Any allegation of conspiracy involving the police or links to timber companies must be fully explored, given the past record of threats and violence against MAO members.

We also urge Honduras to respect the decision by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, which has already indicated the need for precautionary measures to ensure the protection of MAO's leaders whose lives remain under daily danger: Father Andrés Tamayo, Víctor Manuel Ochoa, Elvin Noé Lanza, Santos Efraín Paguada, René Wilfredo Gradiz, Macario Zelaya, and Pedro Amado Acosta, as well as any other members receiving threats.

Finally, the Honduran government urgently needs to address the ingrained problems against which MAO is fighting of a forestry sector plagued by unchecked exploitation of community lands and resources. The pattern of systematic intimidation and violence in forested regions will never be resolved unless the country establishes a clear environmental policy and enforces its existing laws. Despite your Excellency's proclamations and initial steps to this effect since taking office one year ago, the murder of Heraldo Zúñiga and Roger Ivan Murillo Cartagena is a tragic demonstration of the severe problems that still exist.

Since 1995, at least eight environmentalists – six of these in Olancho – have now been killed for speaking out against illegal logging or industrial development on community lands and within national parks.[4] Only two of these cases have resulted in an arrest and conviction of the perpetrator, without any punishment for their intellectual authors. Such a record of human rights abuses and violation of international instruments to which Honduras is party, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the American Convention on Human Rights, is taken seriously by the international community, civil society and aid donors.

How the present case is handled will demonstrate whether your Excellency is committed to defending your citizens' basic human rights and changing a system whereby powerful economic interests can commit crimes with impunity. The international community will be watching, and Honduras's reputation on the international stage is at risk.

Respectfully,

Patrick Alley
Director, Global Witness

Board of Directors
La Asociación Coordinadora Indígena y Campesina de Agroforestería Comunitaria Centroaméricana (ACICAFOC)

Efraín Diaz Arrivillaga
Former Representative, Honduran Congress (Democratic Christian Party); Former Representative, Central American Congress

Ari Hershowitz
Director, BioGems Project Latin America, Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC)

Peter Jenkins
Director of International Programs, Defenders of Wildlife

Iola Leal
Development Cooperation Campaigner and E.C. Forest Platform Coordinator, Forests and the European Resource Network (FERN)

Daniel Magraw
President, Center for International Environmental Law (CIEL)

Osvaldo Mungia
Executive Director, Mosquitia Pawisa – Desarrollo de la Mosquitia (MOPAWI)

Fito Steiner
Vice President, Red Ecológico Hondureña para el Desarrollo Sostenible (REHDES)

Miguel Ángel Soto
Forest Campaigns Coordinator, Greenpeace Spain

Allan Thornton
President, Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA)

David Waskow
International Program Director, Friends of the Earth-U.S.

***CC**:*
Ramón Custodio López, National Human Rights Commission
Leonidas Rosa Bautista, Attorney General
Roberto Flores Bermúdez, Ambassador of Honduras to the United States
Charles Ford, Ambassador of the United States to Honduras

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[1] See e.g. 2003 documentation in Amnesty International Public Index of Urgent Actions at http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/ENGAMR370092003?open&of=ENG-HND**;** 2006 documentation by Observatory for the Defense of Human Rights Defenders at http://omct.org/index.php?id=&lang=es&actualPageNumber=1&articleId=6124&itemAdmin=article
[2] Center for Justice in International Law, June 2006, http://www.cejil.org/comunicados.cfm?id=733
[3] See "Tres muertos deja emboscada en Olancho", *El Heraldo* 22 December 2006; four of the country's five national newspapers carried the official police version on 22 December, and then published the version established by MAO on 23 December and thereafter.
[4] Jeannette Kawas was killed in 1995 in Atlántida. Carlos Escaleras of Colón was killed in 1997. The following six men were killed in Olancho: Carlos Luna (1998); Carlos Roberto Flores (2001); Mauricio Hernandez (2002); Carlos Arturo Reyes (2003); Heraldo Zúñiga, Roger Ivan Murillo Cartagena (2006).