

Global Struggles

# Honduras: A Tribute to a Brave Anti-Mining Activist. ¡Juan López, Presente!

Sunday 27 October 2024, by [PEREZ ROCHA Manuel](#) (Date first published: 23 September 2024).

**The assassination of an environmental rights defender comes as multinational corporations use dubious legal mechanisms to hamstring Xiomara Castro's administration.**

As hired gunmen kill human rights leaders to protect private interests, transnational corporations are suing Honduras for halting "mafia-style" investments made during coup-instituted regimes, before the current government led by Xiomara Castro.

Juan López is the latest in a long list of environmental defenders whose lives have been taken for opposing extractivism, often linked to narcotrafficking. He was assassinated on Saturday, September 14 as he left mass. I met him when he came to Washington, D.C. to receive the Letelier-Moffitt human rights award on behalf of the Municipal Committee in Defense of Common and Public Goods of Tocoa, along with a large Honduran delegation. In his acceptance speech he bravely said that "the eye of the hurricane of global capitalism appears to be drugs, tied to agro-industrial, mining, and other industries."

The best [description](#) of Juan comes from his colleagues with this Municipal Committee:

*"Juan López. A friend, a brother, an inexhaustible guide that dedicated his life to defending nature, justice and the wellbeing of the most vulnerable communities. Humble and knowledgeable, he did not seek to become famous. Instead he put down roots in villages, among the people, educating and empowering them with the dream that the Montaña de Botaderos Carlos Escaleras Mejía National Park would be free and that the people would learn to defend themselves from extractivism and oppressive forces. Juan was a man of deep faith, in love with life, people, and hope, that, with serenity and conviction, embraced the cause of justice, leaving behind an unerasable legacy in the hearts of those who knew him."*

The Honduran group received the Letelier-Moffitt prize for its campaign in defense of the Guapinol river against the wave of extractive industries funded by American, Canadian, and European corporations. The previous Honduran administration of Juan Orlando Hernandez (later extradited and convicted in the United States for narcotrafficking) responded to this resistance with repression, militarization of the region, and the arrest of environmental activists. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights granted protective measures in October 2023, but the current government of Xiomara Castro, despite the perilous situation, has not implemented these measures.

Juan, in his award acceptance speech, warned that "in the face of this neoliberal empire, with the same spirit as Berta Cáceres (a fellow Honduran water defender killed in 2016), we say: Wake up humanity, there's no time left!"

Juan's assassination has shaken spirits beyond Honduras. Members of Congress including

Representatives Jan Schakowsky, Jim McGovern, Jamie Raskin, and Chuy Garcia have posted demands for justice on social media. Garcia [said](#): “Honduran water defender Juan López was murdered Saturday as he left church. He’s the 4<sup>th</sup> activist killed since 2023 for opposing illegal mining projects in the Guapinol area. I strongly support an independent, international investigation into these crimes.”

Faith and non-governmental organizations with long histories of working for human rights in Honduras have also [called on](#) President Castro to fulfill her campaign promises to end open-pit mining in the country and strengthen measures to protect environmental activists. They also note that Honduras is one of the most dangerous countries for environmental activists, with 18 killed in 2023, per Global Witness. The Inter-American Commission has also [condemned](#) Juan’s assassination.

It’s obvious that these acts of violence in Tocoa, perpetuated by mining interests like those of the Emco Holdings/Los Pinares/Ecotek Project, are not isolated incidents. They are part of the machinery of impunity with which transnational corporations operate in the region and of the pseudo-judicial apparatus of free trade treaties and investments that they use to muzzle and sue countries.

Coincidentally two weeks ago, my colleagues Jen Moore (Institute for Policy Studies), Luciana Ghiotto (Transnational Institute), Karen Spring (Red de Solidaridad con Honduras), and Aldo Orellana (Terra Justa), traveled to Honduras to deliver a [report](#) titled “The Corporate Assault on Honduras.” The report details how the majority of lawsuits under the mechanism of investor-state dispute settlements have been brought by transnational corporations “whose investments were made in an irregular manner during the period known as the narco-dictatorship in Honduras, after the 2009 coup d’état” and “make local communities affected by investment projects invisible.”

As the report indicates, “the most expensive claim against Honduras has been filed in an attempt to constrain the current administration’s efforts to dismantle the regulatory framework of the Employment and Economic Development Zones (ZEDE) that was introduced following the coup d’état. U.S.-based consortium Próspera is claiming \$10.775 billion, equivalent to almost three times the approved Public Investment Plan for Honduras for 2024.”

“These findings are a wake-up call to end extreme corporate privileges in U.S. trade agreements and address the harm from investments plagued with irregularities and corruption under the narco-dictatorship,” Moore said in a press release. “As our report shows, it is unconscionable that the Honduran people must now pay millions just to fight corporate claims, let alone to possibly ‘compensate’ transnational corporations for their relentless greed.”

I’ll leave the final written words I received from Juan López on July 21 of last year as a memory of this great defender and human being and an example for us to follow: “The search for justice is much stronger when the oppressor class knows that the oppressed are ready to listen and utter their words in the correct place, moment, and tone. Peace is our goal, not silence. To the contrary, the struggle for peace requires revealing all the graves of corruption that exist so that justice can flourish and that peace can be durable. Let us not be afraid.”

**Manuel Pérez-Rocha**

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## **P.S.**

- Inequality. October 03, 2024:  
<https://inequality.org/research/a-tribute-to-a-brave-anti-mining-activist-juan-lopez-presente/>
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