

**LETTER TO ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF STATE ROBERTA JACOBSON
REGARDING ATTACK ON HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDER ANNIE BIRD**

December 20th, 2013

Ms. Roberta Jacobson
Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs
U.S. Department of State
2201 C St. NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Assistant Secretary Jacobson,

We write to voice our concern regarding a brazen attack against a U.S. human rights defender by an active senior military officer from the Honduran army.

We urge the State Department and our embassy in Tegucigalpa to firmly denounce this attack, which imperils not only the life and work of a U.S citizen, but also constitutes an implicit threat to all those in Honduras who are engaged in similar critical human rights work.

As you may be aware, on Thursday, December 12, Honduran media reported that Colonel German Alfaro, commander of the Honduran army's Xatruch Task Force, publicly accused U.S. human rights defender Annie Bird, of the nongovernmental organization Rights Action, of engaging in "destabilization work" in the Bajo Aguán region. Further, Col. Alfaro announced that an investigation was being launched against Bird. Alfaro's statement was broadcast on television and radio and appeared in the Honduran press accompanied by a photo of Bird.

Annie Bird has worked in the Bajo Aguán region of Honduras for several years documenting killings and attacks that have targeted campesinos and land rights advocates, and assisting victims of abuses and their families in filing complaints with the Attorney General's office. The day before Alfaro's verbal attack, Bird accompanied a group of plaintiffs to the local Attorney General's office. Several of the complaints filed by these individuals included allegations of abuses involving troops from the Xatruch force which operates out of the Rio Claro military base.

It is our understanding that Honduran security forces operating in the Bajo Aguán area receive support and training from the United States, despite reports of their involvement in human rights abuses. Colonel Alfaro is a graduate of the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (formerly known as the U.S. Army's School of the Americas).

We are alarmed about this attack on many levels: First, it is an aggressive attack on a U.S. citizen by a leading member of the Honduran military, which receives U.S. funding and training. Second, it is part of a pattern of attacks against human rights defenders who are reporting about Honduras to those outside the country.

Other recent attacks against human rights defenders include, but are not limited to:

- earlier attacks by Colonel Alfaro against human rights defenders Wilfredo Paz of the Aguán Human Rights Observatory and Marvin Palacios of the Honduran human rights organization COFADEH;
- the kidnapping of two Swiss and French human rights companions from the Honduras Accompaniment Project (PROAH) by private security forces;
- the harsh criticism leveled at Honduran human rights defenders Bertha Oliva and Víctor Fernández by members of the Honduran Congress and Foreign Service for speaking at a briefing in the U.S. Congress;
- legal charges levied against Lenca indigenous rights defenders Berta Cáceres, Tomas Gómez and Aureliano Molina in response to their defense of Lenca land rights;
- an investigation opened by public prosecutors of lawyer Víctor Fernández in response to his work as a lawyer representing a community harassed by a mining company;
- threats against the life of Dina Meza of COFADEH.

Whether or not Colonel Alfaro proceeds with the "investigation" that he threatens to undertake, we are deeply concerned that his statement puts Annie Bird's physical safety at greater risk and that it will have a profoundly chilling effect not only on her work, but also the work of other human rights defenders who seek to assist the victims of abuses in the Bajo Aguán and other parts of Honduras.

Again, we sincerely hope that the State Department and our ambassador in Honduras will take this attack against Annie Bird seriously and will firmly and publicly condemn Colonel Alfaro's statement.

Sincere regards,

Sr. Pat McDermott, President, Sisters of Mercy of the Americas

Lisa Haugaard, Executive Director, Latin America Working Group

Cathy Feingold, Director, International Department, AFL-CIO

Laura Raymond, Advocacy Program Manager, Center for Constitutional Rights

Martin Shupack, Director of Advocacy, Church World Service

Gerry G. Lee, Director, Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns

Geoff Thale, Program Director, Washington Office on Latin America

Shawna Bader-Blau, Executive Director, Solidarity Center

Marie Dennis, Co-President, Pax Christi International

Rick Ufford-Chase, Executive Director, Presbyterian Peace Fellowship

Rev. Daniel Dale, President, Chicago Religious Leadership Network on Latin America (CRLN)

Lisa VeneKlasen, Executive Director, JASS (Just Associates)

Timi Gerson, Director of Advocacy, American Jewish World Service

Sr. Aine O'Connor, RSM, PhD, Mercy International Association at the UN

Kelsey Alford-Jones, Executive Director, Guatemala Human Rights Commission/USA

Judy Gearhart, Executive Director, International Labor Rights Forum (ILRF)

Sr. Ann Scholz, SSND, Associate Director for Social Mission, Leadership Conference of Women Religious

Bob Schwartz, Executive Director, Disarm/Global Health Partners

Rev. Kristin Stoneking, Executive Director, Fellowship of Reconciliation

Bro. Jeremiah O'Leary, CFX, Coordinator for Justice and Peace, Xaverian Brothers

Alexis Stoumbelis, Executive Director, Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador

Sharon Hostetler, Executive Director, Witness for Peace

Jim Rice, Editor, Sojourners

Ted Lewis, Human Rights Director, Global Exchange

Elaine Zuckerman, President, Gender Action

Rev. Michael Neuroth, Policy Advocate for International Issues, United Church of Christ, Justice and Witness Ministries

Arturo J. Viscarra, Advocacy Coordinator, SOA Watch

Laura Carlsen, Director, Center for International Policy Americas Program

Jennifer Atlee, Co-coordinator, Friendship Office of the Americas

Rev. Pamela Shepherd, Minister, Ashland First Congregational United Church of Christ

Diane Bardol, GNSH Social Justice Coordinator, Grey Nuns of the Sacred Heart

Alexander Main, Senior Associate for International Policy, Center for Economic and Policy Research

Pr. Rick Kremer, New England Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America