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Guatemalan Environmental Activist Shot to Death as Repression Against Rights Defenders Intensifies

by Louisa Reynolds

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On March 16, Walter Manfredo Méndez Barrios, a Guatemalan environmentalist, was found dead in his home. According to forensic reports he died from multiple gunshot wounds.

Méndez Barrios had been receiving death threats from illegal land invaders whom he had publicly denounced, said a statement from the Asociación de Comunidades Forestales de Petén (Association of Forest Communities of Petén, ACOFOP), an organization that represents several communities living in the Maya Biosphere Reserve in northern Guatemala. The group receives grants for sustainable forest development and actively opposes development projects with a detrimental impact on the environment, such as large scale hydroelectric dams. Méndez Barrios had been an ACOFOP leader.

In addition, the organization said, Méndez Barrios was part of the Frente Petenero Contra las Represas (Petenero Front Against Dams, FPCR), a group that opposes the creation of hydroelectric projects in the Usumacinta River.

Death follows killings in Honduras

Méndez Barrios’ murder comes after the killing of well-known Honduran environmental activists Berta Cáceres and Nelson García, which sparked international outrage (NotiCen, April 7, 2016).

ACOFOP charged that these three deaths reveal a region-wide wave of repression against Central America’s environmental activists. It argues that the crimes “are the result of systematic violence suffered in Central America by leaders who are struggling to defend nature, cultures and territories, threats such as large hydroelectric dams [and] field crops.”

For the past 40 years, Guatemala has been heavily reliant on hydropower, which has been promoted by successive administrations as a clean source of energy. According to the Comisión Nacional de Energía Eléctrica (National Commission on Electric Power, CNEE), between 40% and 60% of the country’s electricity generation comes from hydroelectric plants, depending on the level of rainfall (NotiCen, May 3, 2007, and May 29, 2008, and NotiEn, May 27, 2010, and June 17, 2010).

However, large-scale hydroelectric projects are perceived by local communities as having devastating social and environmental consequences and have been listed by the Procuraduría de los Derechos Humanos (Human Rights Ombudsman’s Office, PDH) as one of the main causes of conflict in Guatemala, together with mining projects and land disputes.

Along with their negative environmental impact, another major grievance frequently voiced by communities is the fact that the affected communities rarely benefit from large-scale hydroelectric dams, as they often lack access to basic services such as electricity and running water while their hydric resources are used to provide electric energy for urban areas hundreds of miles away.
The FPCR, to which Méndez Barrios belonged, strongly opposed a number of ongoing hydroelectric projects on the Usumacinta River, which originates in the Chamá mountain range and has a basin of 106 sq km that stretches across the states of Tabasco and Northeastern Chiapas in Southern Mexico, as well as the departments of Quiché, Huehuetenango, Alta Verapaz, and Petén in Guatemala. About 7.5 million people live in the region.

According to the FPCR, if these projects go ahead, communities, crops, Mayan archaeological sites, and protected areas rich in biodiversity would be flooded, which would entail displacement and loss of livelihoods for the inhabitants of a number of municipalities in Petén such as Las Cruces and La Libertad.

**Activists under threat**

Méndez Barrios, 36, was born into a family of farmers in eastern Guatemala, where he lived until the age of 10, when his family emigrated to the northern department of Petén.

During his teenage years, he became an active member of the community, joined a cooperative known as La Lucha (The Struggle) and eventually became its president. He was also elected assistant mayor of the community and used his position to launch sustainable development projects.

La Lucha stood out as one of the most important cooperatives of the Usumacinta river basin in the Sierra del Lacandón National Park. During his time as president of La Lucha, Méndez Barrios presented a comprehensive forest management plan to the Consejo Nacional de Áreas Protegidas (National Council for Protected Areas, CONAP) with the aim of generating employment and a source of income for impoverished farming communities through the commercialization of products such as ramon nut, xate, and other non-timber products.

Soon after Méndez Barrios’ murder hit the headlines, Freedom House, a US-based pro-democracy and human rights organization, issued a statement urging the Guatemalan government to bring those responsible to justice.

“Authorities in Guatemala should promptly conduct a thorough, unbiased investigation into the murder of Walter Méndez Barrios and bring those responsible to justice,” said Carlos Ponce, director of Latin America programs at Freedom House. “Given the tensions in the region over communal rights to natural resources, it is imperative that authorities make a stronger commitment to providing security to local leaders and activists.”

According to the Unidad de Protección a Defensoras y Defensores de Derechos Humanos de Guatemala (Unit for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders in Guatemala UDEFEGUA), a local human rights NGO, nine Guatemalan activists were killed during the first half of 2015 alone, and 337 suffered attacks including death threats and kidnapping, most of them in indigenous communities that oppose large-scale infrastructure projects and open-pit mining.

The UDEFEGUA report highlights the fact that attacks on human rights activists increased dramatically under the administration of former President Otto Pérez Molina (2012-2015), a retired Army general who was forced to step down in September 2015 in the midst of a huge corruption scandal known as “La Línea” (NotiCen, Sept. 3, 2015).
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