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## Chihuahua Environmental Activist Receives Prestigious Goldman Award

by LADB Staff

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Mexican environmental activist Isidro Baldenegro Lopez was one of six individuals honored by the California-based Goldman Foundation for grassroots efforts to protect the environment. The foundation also gave awards to environmental activists from Honduras, Kazakhstan, the Congo, Romania, and Haiti. Baldenegro and Hermenegildo Rivas, both members of the Raramuris community, led a successful campaign to temporarily halt logging near the community of Coloradas de la Virgen in the sierras of Chihuahua. The Raramuris are commonly known as the Tarahumara.

In 2003, authorities arrested Baldenegro and Rivas on trumped-up charges of drug and weapons violations. A year later, a federal judge ordered Chihuahua state authorities to release the two men after a federal investigation concluded that the charges were fabricated (see SourceMex, 2004-06-30).

Baldenegro is the third Mexican to be honored by the Goldman Foundation. In 2000, environmental activists Teodoro Cabrera and Rodolfo Montiel received the prestigious award for their campaign to stop multinational companies from exploiting forest resources in Guerrero state.

Cabrera and Montiel also spent time in prison because of charges fabricated by state authorities (see SourceMex, 2000-04-12, 2000-09-13, and 2001-11-14). As part of the award, Baldenegro received a cash prize of US\$125,000, some of which he said would be used to meet the needs of the community Coloradas de la Virgen. "The rest I may use to open a business in Chihuahua," Baldenegro told the Mexico City daily newspaper El Universal.

In his acceptance speech at a ceremony in San Francisco, California, Baldenegro criticized the Comision Nacional Forestal (CNF) and the Procuraduria Federal de Proteccion al Medio Ambiente (PROFEPA) for failing to protect Mexico's forests. He said forests are most vulnerable near indigenous communities. "[PROFEPA] does not even lift a finger to defend our rights," said Baldenegro.

### *Guerrero activist remains in jail*

Environmental and human rights advocates are hoping that the award of the Goldman prize to Baldenegro will bring attention to the plight of Felipe Arreaga, who took on powerful landowners in a campaign to halt logging in the Coyuquilla River Valley in Guerrero state. Arreaga and members of his community set up several blockades temporarily preventing trucks from transporting logs taken from the region.

The environmental activist was arrested in 1998 on charges of murdering Abel Bautista, son of powerful landowner Bernardo Bautista Valle. Abel Bautista was killed in an ambush by unknown assailants. Arreaga claims he was nowhere near the scene of the murder, and several people have

supported his alibi that he was attending a wedding at the time. "I am innocent and a lot of people know it," Arreaga said in an interview. Local accounts suggest someone else might have been behind the murder. "A different explanation for the slaying has gained credence in the valley," said a report in the Los Angeles Times. "The landowner's estranged wife allegedly ordered one of his bodyguards killed for setting up her husband with a mistress, but the hired gunmen mistook her son for the intended target."

A local judge has refused to clear Arreaga for lack of evidence to counter eyewitness accounts by the only survivor of the ambush, Abel's brother Bernardino. The international human rights organization Amnesty International (AI) and local residents have accused Bautista Valle of fabricating the murder charge against Arreaga as revenge for the anti-logging roadblock. "Our justice system is used as a mechanism to block the work of those who defend the environment or fight for human rights," said Carlos Mario Gomez, director of AI's Mexico office.

Arreaga is banking on a recent change in the political structure of Guerrero state to clear his name. The Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), which had governed the state for many generations, lost the gubernatorial election in February 2005 to the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) by a fairly wide margin (see SourceMex, 2005-02-16).

PRD Governor-elect Zeferino Torreblanca has promised to conduct a thorough review of the murder case. He has also pledged to work to reduce the influence of caciques powerful local leaders and landowners who have traditionally been allied with the PRI. "[The caciques] are powerful because governors have been complicit," Torreblanca said. "If I had taken their money, I would be their accomplice, but I did not. I will govern without them." (Sources: Los Angeles Times, 03/29/05; Associated Press, 04/17/05; Reuters, CNI en Linea, 04/18/05; La Jornada, 04/15/05, 04/19/05; El Universal, 04/19/05)

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