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Isidro Baldenegro López, an indigenous environmental rights activist recognized for his efforts to protect old-growth forests in western Mexico, was murdered in his uncle’s house in the community of Coloradas de la Virgen in Chihuahua state. Baldenegro, a recipient of the prestigious Goldman Environmental Prize in 2005 (SourceMex, April 20, 2005), led a successful campaign to temporarily halt logging in and around the municipality of Guadalupe y Calvo, located in southwestern Chihuahua near the border with Sinaloa state.

Authorities said Baldenegro, 51, received six bullet shots in his chest and legs on Jan. 15. The indigenous leader is the second winner of the Goldman Environmental Prize killed in the past year. Honduran environmental activist Berta Cáceres, a leader of the Lenca indigenous community, was gunned down in March 2015. Cáceres was an outspoken opponent of the construction of a big reservoir on the Gualcarque River in western Honduras (NotiCen, April 7, 2016).

Erika Guevara-Rosas, the Americas director at Amnesty International, described the murders of Baldenegro and Cáceres “a tragic illustration of the many dangers faced by those who dedicate their lives to defend human rights in Latin America, one of the most dangerous regions in the world for activists.”

Baldenegro, a member of the Tarahumara (also known as Rarámuri) community, made several powerful enemies because of his environmental activities, alienating logging interests, drug traffickers, and corrupt public officials. In 2003, authorities arrested him and his fellow anti-logging activist Hermenegildo 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 (SourceMex, June 30, 2004). During his time in prison, Amnesty International declared Baldenegro a prisoner of conscience.

Baldenegro is the second member of his family killed for anti-logging activism. His father, Julio Baldenegro, who was working to preserve the ancestral forests in the Sierra Tarahumara, was murdered in 1986.

“The motive was never revealed, but press reports and accounts from Isidro Baldenegro indicated that the murder was promoted by groups involved in illegal trafficking of wood,” BBC Mundo reported. “Isidro was only 20 when his father was killed, and he assumed the fight against illegal logging almost immediately.”

Under constant threat

According to fellow activists, the younger Baldenegro faced constant threats, forcing him to leave Guadalupe y Calvo. “Three years ago, Isidro and his family left their community because of threats and harassment from local bosses (known as caciques), who did not desist in their intentions to exploit the forests that legitimately belong to the indigenous communities,” according to the Red en Defensa de Territorios Indígenas de la Sierra Tarahumara (Network to Defend the Indigenous Territories of Sierra Tarahumara), also known by the shorter name Defensa Tarahumara.
Eyewitness accounts identified Romero Rubio Martínez, who was present at the uncle’s house, as the person who killed Baldenegro. Rubio pulled a gun, fired six shots, and fled. Officials from the Chihuahua prosecutor’s office (Fiscalía General del Estado, FGE), said authorities have confirmed that Rubio Martínez was the perpetrator of the murder, but have not determined a motive.

The FGE is aware of Rubio Martínez’s whereabouts, and has begun the process to make an arrest, officials said. According to authorities, detaining him won’t be easy because he might be under the protection of criminal organizations.

“This is a very complex problem because of the absence of authorities, specifically a lack of municipal police, in the Sierra Tarahumara region,” said state prosecutor César Augusto Peniche Espejel. In communities that do have municipal police, law-enforcement agencies are sometimes infiltrated by criminal organizations, the prosecutor added.

Isela González Díaz, a representative of the Alianza Sierra Madre, which is headquartered in the state capital city of Chihuahua, said powerful economic interests in the area have aligned themselves with criminal organizations in their efforts to exploit the area. “They have agreements with criminal organizations, and they can hire killers any time they want,” she said.

**Human rights advocates demand justice**

Baldenegro’s murder has caused significant outrage at home and abroad. Mexico’s semi-independent human rights commission (Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos, CNDH) and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in Mexico City issued a joint statement condemning the killing.

“This murder is another red flag regarding the extreme vulnerability of the defenders of human rights in the Sierra Tarahumara,” said Jan Jarab, the OHCHR representative in Mexico. “They are attempting to preserve their lands in remote areas where criminal organizations are present.”

Michel Forst, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, also expressed his indignation and sorrow over the murder. “I am deeply shocked by the murder in cold blood of Isidro. He only wanted to preserve the traditional forests in the Sierra Tarahumara for his community,” Forst said during a visit to Mexico in January.

The killing was also condemned by the Organization of American States (OAS). “An energetic condemnation of the murder of the environmental leader Isidro Baldenegro in Mexico,” OAS Secretary-General Luis Almagro said in a message on Twitter. “The guilty parties, material and intellectual, must be punished.”

In Chihuahua, Defensa Tarahumara demanded a swift investigation from state and federal authorities and punishment for all those responsible for Baldenegro’s death. “We ask for urgent and effective action on the part of the Mexican state to clarify the murder of this indigenous leader,” it said.

Additionally, Defensa Tarahumara urged authorities to clarify the murders of other people who were killed in 2016 in the Sierra Tarahumara while defending their land. The group mentioned the names of Víctor Carrillo, Elpidio Torres Molina, and Valentín Carrillo Palma.

“Our communities have recently lost more than 10 indigenous leaders,” said González Díaz, of Alianza Sierra Madre.
Representatives of indigenous organizations at the national level also joined their voices to demand action. “During his extended fight, Isidro was jailed unjustly and later threatened on several occasions,” said a statement signed by representatives of indigenous communities in Mexico City, Chiapas, Durango, México state, Guerrero, Oaxaca, Puebla, Quintana Roo, Tabasco, Veracruz, Michoacán, San Luis Potosí, and Yucatán.

“The last time that he returned to the community, he was gunned down in his family home and perished because of a lack of medical services in the community,” it noted. “We express our deep indignation about the murder of our companion Isidro, and we demand that state and federal authorities clarify this crime as soon as possible and take the appropriate action to ensure justice.”

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