



“I’m not going to keep quiet because I’m defending the rights of a people – people that too often have been silenced.”

– Consuelo Soto, wife of murdered activist Luis de Reyes Marcia¹⁴⁹

Consuelo Soto now lives in hiding after her husband was murdered for opposing illegal logging and mining. © Global Witness

CASE STUDY 4: THE MASSACRE OF TOLUPAN COMMUNITIES

In early 2014, the house of indigenous Tolupan leader Santos Córdoba was broken into, his crops burnt down, and his children threatened at gunpoint by ex-army general Filánder Uclés and his bodyguards,¹²⁵ who threatened to return the next day to destroy the home and the family’s belongings.¹²⁶ Uclés, who had US military training at the notorious School of Americas, has continually threatened Tolupan community members to leave their lands¹²⁷ and is currently facing charges for these threats.¹²⁸

The ex-general’s nephew, Kenton Uclés, has also been embroiled in conflict with the Tolupan community of San Francisco de Locomapa.¹²⁹ His logging company Velomato was reportedly granted an illegal concession on their indigenous lands without any prior consultation.¹³⁰ Indigenous leader Santos Matute and others began protests against the loggers, which led to criminal cases being filed against them for ‘obstructing the implementation of forestry management plans’.¹³¹ In March 2013, the case was dismissed, with the court arguing the community’s right to be consulted under international law had been violated.¹³² In spite of this ruling, Kenton Uclés and Velomato continued to illegally log Tolupan land according to local activists.¹³³

For nearly a decade, Tolupan indigenous peoples from northern Honduras have been threatened, criminalised and killed for taking a stand against illegal logging and mining operations which have pillaged their resources without consulting communities.¹³⁴ The Tolupan are the most marginalised indigenous group in Honduras, living in extreme poverty in remote rural areas with little access to basic services.¹³⁵ Santos Matute told Global Witness that illegal mining permits were given out by a former local mayor for the ruling National Party, Arnaldo Ubina Soto,¹³⁶ who is currently in jail accused of leading a gang of hit men involved in drug trafficking, murder and money laundering.¹³⁷

PEACEFUL PROTESTS MET WITH EXTREME VIOLENCE

In August 2013, Matute and other members of the community, along with the civil society organisation MADJ, held a peaceful sit-in to stop the passage of mining and logging trucks through their territory.¹³⁸ Local indigenous leaders reported receiving text messages warning them to ‘desist from their efforts to protect the environment’ or they would be killed.¹³⁹ A week later, gunmen approached the protestors at the sit-in and opened fire, killing indigenous leaders Armando Fúnez Medina and Ricardo Soto

Fúnez. Another leader, María Enriqueta Matute, fled to her nearby home, where she was tracked down and fatally shot.¹⁴⁰

Matute told Global Witness that the hitmen¹⁴¹ work for a nearby mining operation in La Lagunita.¹⁴² He says that despite being clearly identified and warrants being issued for their arrest, they continue to be seen in the community as the police stand idle.¹⁴³ In June 2015 they struck again, killing another Tolupan leader, Erasio Vieda Ponce.¹⁴⁴ In an interview with Global Witness, the indigenous rights prosecutor's office said it twice attempted to arrest the hitmen, but failed because someone tipped them off before they arrived.¹⁴⁵

PROTECTION ORDERED BUT NOT PROVIDED

Many community members went into hiding after the 2013 murders and only returned six months later once they were granted emergency protection by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR).¹⁴⁶ One of these returning members, Luis de Reyes Marcía, was found murdered on 5 April 2015, after filing a police complaint for receiving death threats.¹⁴⁷ He was the husband of Consuelo Soto, one of the beneficiaries of the IACHR's emergency protection. A month after her husband's killing, Consuelo Soto's house was peppered with bullets by unknown gunmen.¹⁴⁸ She is now living in hiding.

Soto told Global Witness: "My family say I shouldn't leave the house because it's too dangerous. But I'm not going to keep quiet because I'm defending the rights of a people – people that too often have been silenced."¹⁴⁹ Soto also stated that when the community warned the police of the presence of the hitmen in the community, the authorities, rather than making the arrests, would ensure the gunmen got safe passage out of the area.¹⁵⁰

"I'm one of those that has been given emergency protection. But the authorities aren't fulfilling their roles—I returned to my home more than a month ago and have never been paid a visit by them. The government has failed to ensure emergency protection for me."

– Consuelo Soto, wife of murdered activist Luis de Reyes Marcía¹⁵¹

Another activist who has had to flee the community, despite being granted IACHR emergency protection, is José María Pineda. Pineda, one of the MADJ coordinators, fears for his life after gunmen posted a death threat to

the door of his house stating: 'Today get ready, as the fire's been lit, because you haven't curbed your tongue. We know where you are, but we're going to get you where it hurts most.'¹⁵² Santos Matute was also granted emergency protection in December 2013 by the IACHR, but this didn't stop him from being attacked last year: he is now living in hiding.¹⁵³

MADJ has repeatedly denounced the lack of implementation of the IACHR protection measures by the Honduran state.¹⁵⁴ Although the IACHR's rulings are binding, it is the responsibility of the Honduran government to implement them. Since 2013, MADJ has continually attempted to meet the state security ministry, which is responsible for the measures, and has either been ignored or had its concerns dismissed.¹⁵⁵ Meanwhile, the killers of Tolupan activists Armando Fúnez Medina, Ricardo Soto Fúnez, María Enriqueta Matute and Erasio Vieda Ponce roam free, living side by side with their victim's families.

WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE

Global Witness is calling for the cessation of illegal mining and logging in and around the indigenous community of San Francisco de Locomapa. Honduras' state security ministry must guarantee protection for community members, many of whom are supposed to have emergency protection from the government as required by the IACHR. Selvin Fúnez and Carlos Matute, suspected killers of four community leaders, should be immediately arrested. Similarly the perpetrators of the killing of Luis de Reyes Marcía and the ongoing attacks against indigenous leaders must be held to account.

MAIN FINDINGS

Specifically, Global Witness is calling for an investigation into:

- Ex-National Party mayor of Yoro, Arnaldo Ubina Soto, because of allegations he granted permits illegally to mining operations in San Francisco de Locomapa.
- Ex-general Filánder Uclés because of allegations he threatened members of the indigenous community of San Francisco de Locomapa to try and force them off their land.
- Filánder Uclés' nephew, Kenton Uclés, because of allegations his logging company Velomato continues to log illegally on indigenous land in the community.

Global Witness approached Filánder and Kenton Uclés for comment on these allegations but received no responses.