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Honduran environmental activist and lay Catholic leader Juan Antonio LÃ³pez was killed Sept. 14, 2024. (Video screen grab)



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TOCOA, HONDURAS â?? September 18, 2024

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Catholic leaders throughout the Americas are expressing grief and outrage at the killing of Juan Antonio LÃ³pez, a Honduran environmental activist and local Catholic leader, in Tocoa, in northeastern Honduras, on Saturday (Sept. 14).

LÃ³pez, described by friends as his local bishopâ??s right-hand man, was [shot dead](#) by several men as he left church Saturday night, according to Reuters. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights said LÃ³pez had recently received threats from a gang member, a Honduran businessperson and a mining company representative.

A member of the Municipal Committee for the Defense of Common and Public Goods in Tocoa, LÃ³pez had advocated against the harmful impacts of an open-pit iron oxide mine. His group had [protested](#) that the mine was polluting the Guapinol and San Pedro rivers, which communities in the area rely on for their daily water supply.

In a message addressed to LÃ³pez after his death, Bishop Jenry Ruiz of the Diocese of Trujillo wrote, "You told me that you were not an environmentalist because for you, the social, ecological and political commitment were not an ideological question, but a question of your being of Christ and of the church."

The bishop noted the activistâ??s understanding of Pope Francisâ?? environmental teaching and "tenderness and truth" in responding to his detractors. Ruiz wrote too that LÃ³pez knew of the risks. "You knew very well that the extractivist and mining system is a system that kills and destroys the whole world, along with the corruption of the false politicians and the narco-governments."

In a [video](#) posted by several Honduran news outlets, the Rev. Carlos Orellana, a Catholic priest in Tocoa, called the killing of LÃ³pez "a death foretold" and accused Tocoa Mayor AdÃ¡n FÃ³nez and his "minions" of being responsible for the hit that killed LÃ³pez.

FÃ³nez told Honduran outlet [HRN](#) that he was praying that the truth would be revealed, that his family was in fear due to the accusations and that he had been attacked with stones.

The Honduran Jesuits released a statement also holding the government responsible for LÃ³pez's death, pointing to officials' failure to keep mine owners in check and investigate threats against LÃ³pez's group and punish those responsible for them.

"We demand that the investigation to determine the truth of the facts be carried out with the effective accompaniment of an international commission that guarantees impartiality, diligence and independence to determine the material and intellectual responsibilities in the murder of our comrade and brother Juan Antonio LÃ³pez," the order wrote.

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LÃ³pez's death is the latest in a number of killings in a country known to be particularly deadly for environmental activists. The 2016 [murder](#) of Indigenous environmental activist Berta CÃ¡ceres drew international attention, but many deaths occur with far less international scrutiny.

Earlier this year, the Organization of American States' Inter-American Commission on Human Rights [expressed alarm](#) at the high rates of assassinations and other violence against environmental and land defenders in Honduras, saying that 17 defenders were assassinated in 2022 and another eight were killed violently in the first four months of 2023.

Outside Honduras, Catholic organizations, including [Caritas Canada](#) and the [Jesuit European Social Centre](#), expressed grief at LÃ³pez's death.

The Latin American bishops' conference, known by the acronym CELAM, wrote to LÃ³pez's colleagues and family, emphasizing LÃ³pez's service as a leader of ecclesial base communities, a pastoral worker, diocesan coordinator and member of the Ecclesial Network of Mesoamerican Ecology (REMAM).

"We emphatically repudiate and condemn all forms of violence, and regrettably the assassination of Juan is a reflection of a small portion of society that is intolerant, unjust and who want to impose their will through force," the conference wrote.

In the U.S., the Sisters of Mercy's justice team has long [argued](#) that extractivist development, violence and corruption in Honduras are among the root causes

driving migration to the U.S., asserting that Hondurans should have "the right not to migrate."

The U.S. religious congregation Sisters of Mercy has supported the Guapinol River activists, particularly over the almost three-year period that eight activists, who did not include LÃ³pez, were [imprisoned](#) after organizing an encampment to block the local mining company from accessing their roads.

During the protests, which began peacefully, military police killed one civilian and injured eight others. Ultimately, the Honduras Supreme Court ruled that the judge who ordered the men's detention lacked jurisdiction to do so and threw out the case.

Sister Mary Kay Dobrovlny, of the Sisters of Mercy, said that LÃ³pez had called for FÃ³nez, the mayor, to resign because of his links to drug traffickers just days before he was killed. Dobrovlny wrote in a statement, "Too many people have died striving to protect the land that they love."

The sister also said that, while visiting Honduras with a solidarity delegation organized by the Share Foundation in 2021, she witnessed the assassination of a man in front of his wife and children. "The wailing of intense grief and shock of his family is a sound that I will never forget," she wrote.

"I join my voice with the loved ones of Juan Lopez and all environmental activists who say the killing must end," Dobrovlny, the congregation's new membership ministry coordinator, wrote.

As he came to the conclusion of his letter to LÃ³pez, Ruiz, his bishop, wrote, "Dear Juan LÃ³pez, may your blood make the seeds of Kingdom bloom and we have fruits of justice, where a new Honduras is possible."