

ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENDERS AT RISK

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Communities in various regions of Mexico are losing their forests, lands, waters and way of life due to logging, mining, and the implementation of other "mega" development projects by the government and multinational companies. In addition to destroying the environment, these projects cause serious health problems, in part due to irreversible pollution of rivers, lakes, wells, lands, and air.

The peoples who find their environment endangered by these activities have acted in many ways to express their rejection of the environmental devastation around them.

However, as generally happens with those who defend or promote human rights, the communities and individuals that have organized to oppose the environmental degradation have encountered repression, torture, imprisonment, defamation, and even death. In 2009 alone five environmental defenders were murdered. To stop the excessive logging of forests in Costa Grande, Guerrero state, one group of farmers, following a process of community organization, formed the Organization of Farmer Ecologists of the Mountains of Petatlán and Coyuca de Catalán (OCESP) in February 1998. Among its founding members were farmers Rodolfo Montiel Flores, Felipe Arreaga Sánchez and Teodoro Cabrera García. Due to their work educating and mobilizing communities, the "logging stoppages" [1] and the dissemination of the organization's activities and proposals in the local and national media, the environmental defenders managed to stop the excessive logging in this region of Guerrero: in April 1998, the relevant logging company halted operations citing "difficult business conditions". In retaliation, a local cacique (strongman) requested the intervention of the army, whose presence in the area had led to increased human rights violations. On May 2nd 1999, around 10.30, approximately 40 soldiers assigned to the 40th Infantry Battalion arrived in Pizotla community, municipality of Ajuchitlán del Progreso, and began shooting at a group of people gathered outside Teodoro Cabrera's house. The soldiers killed Salomé Sánchez Ruiz and arbitrarily detained Rodolfo Montiel Flores and Teodoro Cabrera. Rodolfo and Teodoro remained detained for five days in the custody of the military; during this time, they were physically and psychologically tortured by their captors. Under these conditions both men were forced to sign incriminating statements in which they admitted to the fabricated crimes of planting marijuana and carrying military firearms. On May 6th, Teodoro and Rodolfo were presented before the Federal Prosecutor in Coyuca de Catalán and transferred to the local prison. In June they were transferred to a prison in the city of Iguala. Their trials were plagued with irregularities. Despite the violations to their human rights, Rodolfo and Teodoro were sentenced on August 28th 2000 to six years eight months and ten years of prison, respectively. The sentence was based predominantly on the false confessions obtained under torture during incommunicado detention with no access to legal counsel. In November 2001 the Department of Public Security granted Teodoro and Rodolfo their freedom for "humanitarian reasons," arguing that "the penalty imposed is inconsistent with their health and physical conditions". But the Mexican government never acknowledged the innocence of the farmer ecologists, never punished the military torturers and never granted reparations for the human rights violations. Despite having been released, Rodolfo and Teodoro have not had the opportunity to exercise their right to access to justice. Thus, their case joins those of others human rights defenders in Mexico. Recalling the assassination of Julian Vergara, farmer ecologist who protested against the excessive logging of forests in the municipality of Acapulco, Victor Toledo expresses the following: "How many individuals like Julian Vergara have died in their heroic defense of the forests, springs, lakes and rivers in Mexico? I dream of the day when we can reconstruct the stories of shame and rescue from the silence the hundreds, perhaps thousands, of farmer heroes, as anonymous as nature, who have risked their lives [...] to preserve the habitat and the nation's and the world's natural resources, that is, of all human beings." [2] Justice for Teodoro and Rodolfo is an integral step toward reconstructing these stories, to rescue and protect those who continue to risk their lives for the preservation of our world.

[1] The local communities blocked the roads to prevent the logs from leaving the mountains. [2] Víctor M. Toledo, "Rodolfo Montiel y el ecologismo de los pobres", *Ecología política*, 20 (2000), Spain, p. 13.