

[Honduras: End defamation of human rights defenders, guarantee their security and legislate for their effective protection](#)

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(Geneva) - ISHR today called upon Honduras to end the wave of [stigmatisation](#) against human rights defenders, which apparently constitutes a reprisal for having exercised their right to interact with the UN Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process. ISHR also joined other civil society organisations in demanding that the Honduran Congress incorporate civil society feedback into the draft law for the protection of defenders, currently at risk of passing in a severely weakened form.

In a [public letter](#) to the President of the Congress (also available in [Spanish](#)), ISHR - together with the Honduran Human Rights Defenders Network, CEJIL, JASS and Protection International - congratulated the previous work of Congress to involve civil society in the process of drafting *the Law to protect human rights defenders, journalists and justice operators*. However, local defenders and international NGOs warned that the law would be ineffective if passed in its current state. ISHR had previously recommended the incorporation of civil society input into the law as part of a [submission](#) to Honduras' upcoming UPR.

'In the context of the UPR, Honduras has an important opportunity to demonstrate its commitment to human rights defender security,' said ISHR's Ben Leather. 'Regrettably, the current draft of the human rights defender protection law is inadequate. Only a law which incorporates human rights defender input will be effective, with a weak law being as bad as no law.' Local and international human rights organisations provided a list of inputs and recommendations to the Congress in August last year which have not been adequately reflected in the draft law.

The move to pass a weakened law comes against a backdrop of reprisals against human rights defenders seeking to use the UPR to demand better human rights protection. Honduras will be reviewed in May and defenders travelled to Geneva last week to participate in UPR pre-sessions. Their participation provoked a surge of defamatory statements by public officials and journalists, suggesting that activists seek to [denigrate](#) the country, [undermine](#) the government, and make [money](#) through their actions. In a disturbing parallel of recent reprisals in [Venezuela](#), officials also suggested that civil society participation in the Inter-American Human Rights Commission in [Washington](#) is evidence of the same vested interests. Among those making the defamatory comments are the Foreign Affairs Minister, staff of the Presidency and large national newspapers. Many comments refer explicitly to civil society participation in the UPR process.

'Human rights defender participation is central to the UPR process', said Mr Leather. 'This wave of

stigmatisation is a threat to the security of defenders. We call upon Honduras to abide by its obligations under international law to protect human rights defenders and safeguard against reprisals. Stigmatisation must cease, those guilty should be sanctioned, and measures must be put in place to protect those at risk. The world is watching’.

‘It is clear under international law, including Human Rights Council Resolution 25/18, that Honduras has a duty to create a safe and enabling environment for human rights defenders. Now is a crucial time for that obligation in Honduras: the State must act urgently both to combat these reprisals and guarantee that a strong law for human rights defender protection is passed, rather than the current weakened version,’ Mr Leather concluded.

The letter to the Congress outlines the following key flaws in the current draft of the law:

- The National Protection System created would not be guaranteed autonomy. Civil society has consistently argued that this must reside in the Secretary of State for the Offices of Human Rights, Justice, the Interior and Decentralisation, but be given certain budgetary and decision-making autonomy if it is to be effective.
- The conformation of the defenders' protection mechanism contemplates the participation of the military. Civil society have demonstrated that the army is not prepared for protecting activists, nor is it constitutionally mandated to do so.
- Human rights defender representation on this mechanism has decreased from five to two, and has been conditioned upon their accreditation by the Honduran NHRI. Thus, independent civil society oversight is limited.
- The representation of judges and magistrates on the mechanism has also been limited.

ISHR and other local and international NGOs will also be encouraging other actors - such as UN Special Procedures, the diplomatic community in Honduras and the President of the Human Rights Council - to act according to their responsibilities by raising these issues with the Honduran authorities and taking steps to support and protect local defenders.

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