

January 5, 2024

**Open Letter to the Office of the Attorney General of the Republic of El Salvador on the Santa Marta Five and the Criminalization of Environmentalists, From Academics and Lawyers Across the Globe**

We write as academics and lawyers from across the globe who work in solidarity with the Salvadoran people to promote social and environmental justice, and who are gravely concerned about the criminalization of environmentalists, the systematic violation of human rights, and the flagrant undermining of democracy in El Salvador perpetrated under the ongoing State of Exception.

Many of us who have worked with and/or been inspired by the Salvadoran social movements for social and environmental justice were appalled by the arrest and detention of five Water Defenders from the department of Cabañas on January 11, 2023. The people arrested—Miguel Ángel Gámez, Alejandro Láinez García, Pedro Antonio Rivas Láinez, Antonio Pacheco, and Saúl Agustín Rivas Ortega—helped lead the struggle to save El Salvador’s stressed water supply from the notoriously water intensive and polluting metals mining industry. They played a central role in the events that led the Salvadoran government to pass the historic, first ever national prohibition on metals mining in 2017.

A growing body of evidence shows that the case brought against the five Water Defenders by El Salvador’s Attorney General—for the alleged unlawful associations, alleged unlawful deprivation of liberty, and the alleged murder of a woman named María Inés Álvarez García Leiva on August 22 of 1989—is unsubstantiated by evidence, in violation of the National Reconciliation Law of 1992, in violation of the right to due process enshrined in the Salvadoran constitution, and likely politically motivated, as expanded on below.

**Lack of evidence:** Despite the seriousness of these criminal accusations, the Attorney General’s Office filed the charges without evidence. The charges rest entirely on the testimony of a protected eyewitness who later admitted under oath that they had no first-hand knowledge of the alleged crime. Strangely, the body of the alleged victim has never been found. Moreover, several of those charged have alibis during the time of her death.

**Lack of due process:** The lack of evidence has been compounded by a lack of due process. Once transferred to a permanent detention center, the five Water Defenders were not allowed to meet with their attorney to prepare for their defense for over six months. While the five were able to finally meet with their attorney upon being transferred to house arrest in September of 2023, this violation of the right to due process highlights the worrisome irregularities of this case.

**National Reconciliation Law:** In addition to the lack of evidence and due process, the charges against the five Water Defenders should never have been brought in the first place. This is because the five have been charged as FMLN combatants for their alleged acts during the civil war. As such, they are covered by the 1992 National Reconciliation Law, signed as part of the

Peace Agreement that granted amnesty to ex-combatants of the FMLN as a central element of the reconciliation and disarmament process that ended the civil war.

**Political Motivations:** Growing evidence suggests that this case against the Santa Marta anti-mining activists is neither random nor motivated by the Attorney General's genuine pursuit of justice. Rather, community groups in El Salvador believe that the case was filed as part of the Salvadoran government's larger political strategy to allow for the entry of metals mining to El Salvador in violation of the 2017 law. For example, in 2021, the Salvadoran government created a new public agency called the General Directorate of Energy, Hydrocarbons and Mines to regulate the energy and mining industry, and then joined the international pro-mining institution Intergovernmental Forum on Mining, Minerals, Metals and Sustainable Development. **The selective violation of the National Reconciliation Law to muzzle key leaders of the anti-mining movement while stifling any meaningful attempt to bring the largest perpetrators of human rights violations during the civil war—the Salvadoran military—to justice is a telling sign of the political motivations behind this case.** The current difficulties of the Salvadoran economy—exacerbated by the disastrous losses associated with the adoption of Bitcoin as a national currency—likely add to the government's motivations to bring back metals mining and silence the Santa Marta water defenders.

The case of the Salvadoran Water Defenders has political stakes that go beyond the personal injustices perpetrated against the five accused. The politically motivated threat to El Salvador's Water Defenders reopens the threat to Salvadoran's democratically enshrined right to clean water and a country free of toxic metals mining. But the case is also emblematic of the broader violation of the human rights of those 70,000 plus Salvadorans detained under the current State of Exception without due process, of the ongoing political persecution of civil society organizations, labor leaders, and journalists who speak out against those human rights violations, and of the undermining of democracy.

In light of the lack of evidence, failure to ensure the right to due process, the amnesty granted under the National Reconciliation Law that followed the 1992 Peace Accords, and the troublesome political motivations to renew metallic mining against the will of the Salvadoran people, we the undersigned write to request that the Attorney General of the Republic immediately drop the case against the Salvadoran Water Defenders. We request that the Office of the Attorney General respect and enforce the human rights of all Salvadorans, including the right to due process and freedom of association.

*Signed by (university listed for identification purposes only)*

### **Brazil**

Jose Darío Córdova Posada, Grupo Brasileiro de Pesquisas Sandor Ferenczi GBPSF  
Danilo Chammas, Ordem Dos Advogados do Brasil

### **Canada**

Laura Macdonald, Carleton University  
Liisa L. North, Professor Emerita, York University, CERLAC

Dr. Jose Garcia, Futurewatch  
Dr. Jose J Morales, MD, PhD  
Juan Francisco Carranza Cisneros, Carranza and Associates  
Shin Imai, Osgoode Hall Law School  
Lisa Kowalchuk, University of Guelph  
Dr. Catherine Nolin, University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC)  
Giada Ferrucci, Western University  
Dr. Paula Butler, Wilfrid Laurier University  
Chris Vance, York University  
Meera Karunanathan, Carleton University  
Bernie Hammond, PhD, Professor Emeritus, Western University  
Kirsten Francescone, PhD, Trent University  
Valérie L'Heureux, Concordia University  
Catherine Coumans, PhD

### **Colombia**

Cindy Forero, Abogada del Cajar

### **Costa Rica**

Emily J Yozell, Abogada  
Patricia Alvarenga, Académica jubilada, Universidad Nacional, Costa Rica

### **Denmark**

Dr. Vladimir Pacheco, Aarhus University

### **Dominican Republic**

Dr. Laurent Ross, Universidad Tecnológica de Santiago

### **El Salvador**

Saúl Baños  
Mirna Antonieta Perla Jimenez  
Andres McKinley, UCA  
Omar Serrano, UCA  
Ing. Andreu Oliva, UCA  
Luis Rubén González, University of California, Merced  
Xiomara Rodriguez, Terra Nuova  
Rafael Paz Narváez, Universidad de El Salvador  
Tomas Elizabeth Fuentes Navarro, Asociación Americana de Juristas Rama El Salvador  
Lic. José Vicente Cuchillas Melara, Universidad de El Salvador  
MSC Óscar Canjura, Asociación Americana de Juristas Rama El Salvador  
Jonathan Espinoza, UTEC  
Maximiliano Omar Martinez, Abogado  
Ariela González, Abogada  
Sandra Elvira Rivera Cabrera, Abogada, Universidad de El Salvador

Juan Ayala, Abogado  
Wily Alfonso Goitia Arze, UCA, Colproce  
Lic. Luis Gonzalez

### **England**

Grace Blakeley, Tribune Magazine  
Dr. Marcus Colchester

### **Finland**

Markus Kröger, Professor, University of Helsinki  
Dr. Rauna Kuokkanen, University of Lapland  
Teivo Teivainen, University of Helsinki

### **Guatemala**

Victor Ferrigno, Abogado Constitucionalista, MadreSelva

### **Ireland**

José Henríquez Leiva, University of Galway

### **Italy**

Nora McKeon  
Dr. John Gilbert, University of Florence

### **Mexico**

Dr. Ignacio Román, ITESO, Universidad Jesuita de Guadalajara  
Alberto Arroyo Picard, Universidad Autónoma de México – Ixtapalapa  
Dr. Miguel Angel de los Santos Cruz, Facultad de Derecho  
Dr. Hilary Goodfriend, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México  
Jaime Mauricio López, Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia  
Dra. Aideé Irina Tassinari Azcuaga, Universidad Autónoma de la Ciudad de México  
Dr. Ernesto Aréchiga Córdoba, Universidad Autónoma de la Ciudad de México  
Jorge Tripp, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México  
Nina Torres, Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana Xochimilco  
Dra. Engracia Loyo Bravo, El Colegio de México

### **New Zealand**

Dr. Pascale Hatcher, University of Canterbury

### **Philippines**

Ma. Victoria R. Raquiza, PhD, University of the Philippines  
Herbert Docena, PhD, University of the Philippines, Diliman

### **South Africa**

Dr. Adrian Murray, University of Johannesburg

## **Spain**

Dr. Ainhoa Montoya, Spanish National Research Council (CSIC)

Dr. Carlos Gómez Gil, Universidad de Alicante

Dra. Estrella del Valle Calzada, Universidad de Valencia

José Elías Esteve, Universidad de Valencia

## **Thailand**

Sor. Rattanamanee Polkla, Lawyer, Community Resource Centre

## **United States of America**

Dra. Mneesha Gellman, Emerson College

Dr. Paloma Martinez-Cruz, The Ohio State University

Diane Gifford-González, Distinguished Professor Emerita, University of California, Santa Cruz

Dr. Nicholas Copeland, Virginia Tech

Julio Gutiérrez, Universidad of North Carolina

Steven Rizzo, Harvard University

Lic. Elba E. Moreira

Ms. Maureen Brett, Retired Attorney

Jan Susler, Attorney

Constance Gordon, PhD, San Francisco State University

Ana Vieyetz, University of California, Los Angeles

Ali Kaba, American University

Julia Fischer-Mackey, PhD, American University

Mellissa Linton Villafranco, PhD, Arizona State University

Janae Choquette, Esq., Attorney

Pamela Martin, Coastal Carolina University

Jorge Cuéllar, Dartmouth College

Caitlin Schroering, PhD, University of North Carolina at Charlotte

Mary Anne Perrone, Latin America Task Force of Interfaith Council for Peace & Justice

Dr. Camille-Mary Sharp, New York University

Eileen Weitzman, Attorney

Matthew Garr, PsyD student

Dr. Anne Reissner, Poverello House

Robert Andolina, Seattle University

Augusta Goldstein

Dr. Carlos Rivas, The Ohio State University

Katherine Borland, The Ohio State University

Zsea Bowmani, The University of Toledo College of Law

Rebekah Kaump, University of California, Davis

Nathanael Joseph, University of California, Irvine

Jackie Smith, University of Pittsburgh

Jamie de Moya-Cotter, University of Wisconsin-Madison

Victor Goldgel Carballo, University of Wisconsin, Madison

Sarah Ann Wells, University of Wisconsin, Madison  
Nancy Escalante, Yale University  
Enrique Rivera, PhD, University of California, Los Angeles  
Jesse Broad-Cavanagh, Northeastern University School of Law  
Dr. Fabian Romero, Ohio State University  
Rev. John M. Caldwell, PhD  
Dr. Antonio Ramirez, Elgin Community College  
Gilbert Saucedo, Law Office of Gilbert Saucedo  
Alejandra Watanabe Farro, University of California Santa Cruz  
Richard Falk, Emeritus, Princeton University  
Teresa A. Velásquez, PhD, California State University, San Bernardino  
Angela Sanbrano, JD  
Lucia Zamora Chamorro  
Alexis Meza, New York University  
Madeline Baer, Occidental College  
Alfonso Gonzales Toribio, University of California Riverside  
Yvette Borja, Esq. United States  
Dr. Robin Broad, American University  
Professor Jonathan Fox, American University  
Professor Jesse Ribot, American University  
Yansi Pérez, Carleton College  
Joanna Beltrán, CUNY  
Dr. E.J. Zita, Evergreen St. College  
Dr. Michael Berghoef, PhD, MSW, Ferris State University  
Patrick Murphy, IECA  
Joanne E. Morrison, Attorney at Law  
LaDawn Haglund, John Jay College  
Dr. Sara Koopman, Kent State  
Jacey Anderson, Montana State University  
Dr. Molly Todd, Montana State University  
Cheryl Trine, Attorney  
Dr. Karen Melander-Magoon  
Dr. Elana Zilberg  
Dr. Ann Lutterman-Aguilar  
John Gershman, NYU - Robert F Wagner Graduate School of Public Service  
Kathy Glatz, retired professor  
Prof. Katherine Cushing, San Jose State University  
Dr. Tabitha Hart, San José State University  
Alejandro Artiga-Purcell, San José State University  
Costanza Rampini, San José State University  
Manuel F. Montes, Society for International Development  
Todd Davies, Stanford University  
Lawrence Mosqueda PhD, Professor Emeritus, The Evergreen State College

Jeanne Hahn, Emeritus faculty, The Evergreen State College  
Dr. Peter Bohmer, The Evergreen State College  
Amy Argenal, University of California, Santa Cruz  
Liza Grandia, University of California, Davis  
Haejin Bang, University of California, San Diego  
Leisy Abrego, University of California, Los Angeles  
Valerie L Thatcher, PhD  
Tina Shull, UNC Charlotte  
Summer Lopez Colorado, University of California - Los Angeles  
William I Robinson, University of California at Santa Barbara  
Dr. Elana Zilberg, University of California San Diego  
Nathan Edenhofer, University of California Santa Cruz  
B. Richard Salas, University of California, Irvine  
Stacy Philpott, University of California, Santa Cruz  
Flora Lu, University of California, Santa Cruz  
Steve Depoe, Professor Emeritus, University of Cincinnati  
Miranda Cady Hallett, PhD, University of Dayton  
Professor Andrew B. Reid, JD, LLM, University of Denver Sturm College of Law  
Andrew Klapper, PhD, Professor Emeritus, University of Kentucky  
Alessandro Morosin, University of La Verne  
Dr. Mark Ginsburg, University of Maryland, College Park  
Professor Gerald Epstein, University of Massachusetts, Amherst  
Dr. Randall A. Lake, University of Southern California  
Kat Williams, University of Texas at Austin  
Christopher Helali, Vermont Law and Graduate School  
Elizabeth O'Donnell Gandolfo, Wake Forest University School of Divinity  
Dr. Christine Wade, Washington College  
Elisabeth Jean Wood, Yale University  
Manuela Picq, Amherst College  
Ailesha Ringer, PhD, Metropolitan State University  
Ching Ching Tan, San Jose State University  
Marisol Lebrón, University of California, Santa Cruz  
James K. Boyce, University of Massachusetts Amherst  
Elja Roy, University of Memphis  
Elizandro Umana, California State University, Los Angeles  
Namiko Kunitomo  
Rigo Fernandez  
Diane L. Middleton  
Mark Stern  
John Blanco, University of California, San Diego

### **Organizations**

Blue Planet Project, Canada  
Socorro Jurídico Humanitario, El Salvador

Panorama Económico, El Salvador  
Monitoring Committee on Attacks on Lawyers, International Association of People's Lawyers  
(IAPL), France  
Transnational Institute, Netherlands  
Katribu Kalipunan ng Katutubong Mamamayan ng Pilipinas, Philippines  
American Association of Jurists (AAJ), United States  
Central American Students Association, Harvard University, United States  
Doctors for Global Health, United States  
Foundation Earth, United States  
Extractivism and Society Research Cluster, University of California Santa Cruz, United States  
National Lawyers Guild - San Francisco Bay Area, United States  
National Lawyers Guild, Task Force on the Americas, United States  
Project South, United States