

Defending land and river rights

La Paz, Honduras

2015 – present

Martín Gómez Vásquez is a leader of the Movimiento Indígena Lenca de La Paz Honduras (Lenca Indigenous Movement of La Paz, Honduras - MILPAH), an organisation dedicated to defending and promoting the rights of Lenca indigenous communities in the context of their ancestral lands (located in the Honduran department of La Paz).

An important part of MILPAH's work is to secure and leverage procedural rights such as access to information, access to decision making, etc. – including by pressing the Government to respect its obligations under ILO Convention 169 on the right of indigenous communities to previous, free and informed consent.

Despite the peaceful nature of its activities, and the fact it is merely calling on the authorities to respect their international human rights and labour obligations, MILPAH has been regularly targeted by the authorities and associated private actors. Numerous members of MILPAH have been threatened, assaulted and even killed.

In 2015 alone, five environmental human rights defenders in Santa Elena were killed because of their work to draw attention to, and assert their human rights in the context of, mineral and hydroelectric concessions affecting their ancestral lands.

Despite the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights deciding that Martín Gómez Vásquez and his colleagues, including Ana Mirian Romero, 2016 laureate of Front Line Defender's (an NGO) Award for Human Rights Defenders at Risk, are at serious and immediate risk, and therefore issuing 'precautionary measures' (calling on the Honduran authorities to prevent 'irreparable harm'), they have also been repeatedly targeted.

In mid-July 2016, after MILPAH had secured an important victory when the people of Santa Elena voted 'no' to a planned hydroelectric project, Martín Gómez Vásquez was violently attacked by supporters of the National Party. The attackers were identified as Hernan Ventura and Tito Ventura, known associates of Mayor Victor Ventura (a staunch supporter of the hydroelectric projects that have been challenged by indigenous groups). Despite the extreme nature of the attack (Martín Gómez Vásquez was also told he would be killed if he continued his activities) neither assailant has been arrested or charged.

Gómez Vásquez said in February 2016: 'The problems of persecution, criminalisation, accusations, imprisonment, repression and torture, are all very severe for our people.'