

Ottawa, July 28, 2017

The Honourable François-Philippe Champagne
Minister of International Trade
House of Commons
Ottawa, ON, K1A 0A6

Dear Minister Champagne,

We, the undersigned Canadian civil society organizations, have worked in solidarity with human and environmental rights defenders around the world for many years, including in Honduras and other Latin American countries. We are writing to express our profound concern regarding a recent report produced by the Office of the Extractive Sector Corporate Social Responsibility Counsellor which, we believe, places Canadian and Honduran human and environmental rights defenders at risk.

This month, the Office of the Extractive Sector CSR Counsellor issued its report of a 2016 visit to Honduras¹. According to the report, the visit was structured to enable the Counsellor “to meet with a range of stakeholders and permit an open exchange of views, concerns and aspirations”. While the report’s analysis of the situation in Honduras warrants a more thorough critical response, we would like to raise our deep concern with regard to one specific section of the report, entitled “The Canada NGO Connection”. In this section, the Counsellor makes a series of sweeping, unsubstantiated, biased and irresponsible accusations against Canadian CSOs. The Counsellor describes them as having “framed much of the discourse in Honduras”, contributing to the “strained and tense situation” concerning extractive activities in Honduras. Providing no substantiation, the report characterizes Canadian CSOs as being “*ideologically positioned against mining*”², leading to “confrontational and adversarial approaches when dealing with companies and the Honduran government”.

The CSR Counsellor minimizes the agency of entire communities, local civil society leaders and organizations in Honduras. These actors have long expressed their legitimate concerns about the impact of the extractive sector in that country, regularly mobilizing in defence of their rights and the environment. Through his misrepresentation of the role of Canadian CSOs in Honduras, the Counsellor exposes his fundamental lack of understanding regarding the nature of solidarity relationships between Canadian organizations and local actors.

The report goes a step further by naming specific Canadian organizations that the Counsellor considers problematic, specifically MiningWatch Canada and Rights Action. He suggests that these and other international CSOs could be aggravating or blocking resolution to conflict, manipulating local actors and setting the discourse around mining in Honduras. These serious, unsubstantiated accusations threaten to undermine important solidarity work that facilitates information sharing with mining-affected communities and supports efforts to have their legitimate concerns addressed. The importance of this

¹ Honduras Country Trip Overview, July 11, 2017, http://www.international.gc.ca/csr_counsellor-conseiller_rse/trip_overview_Honduras-apercu_voyage_Honduras.aspx?lang=eng#meet

² Emphasis in the original.

work in the context of environmental conflicts has been underscored by the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and the Environment who identifies the need to protect speech relating to environmental issues: “[a]ll persons have the right to hold and express opinions and to disseminate ideas and information regarding the environment”³.

Furthermore, the Counsellor minimizes the danger faced by human rights defenders in Honduras, casting doubt on a perceived “culture of impunity” in the country. In fact, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights describes “a situation of structural impunity”⁴ in Honduras that places human and environmental rights defenders at risk of retaliation⁵. This widely known fact garnered international attention following the 2016 murder of Berta Cáceres. Coincidentally, a report by Global Witness⁶ released the same week as the Counsellor’s drew further international attention to the threats faced by environmental and land defenders across the world. That report identifies Honduras as “the most dangerous country per capita over the last decade”. Moreover, in June of this year, a delegation from the United Nations Working Group on business and human rights to Canada specifically raised the issue of business-related rights abuses by Canadian corporations in their end of mission statement. They stressed that human rights defenders and environmentalists must be protected from harassment and violence, both in Canada and in countries where Canadian companies operate⁷.

The CSR Counsellor’s approach in this respect contradicts Canada’s guidelines on supporting human rights defenders, which he has a role in carrying out in his capacity as a government official. His report not only fails to promote protected space for all forms of peaceful stakeholder engagement, it may act to undermine such conditions. The Counsellor’s irresponsible assertions may give licence to other actors, including Honduran authorities, to take action against the international organizations that work in solidarity with mining-affected communities and local organizations. Indeed, Honduran authorities have engaged in smear campaigns and other attacks against international organizations and activists in recent years.

Canadian civil society organizations are deeply disturbed by the Counsellor’s report and its potential impacts. We call on you to order the immediate withdrawal of the Honduras Country Trip Overview in English, French and Spanish from the CSR Counsellor’s website, to halt its distribution by other means and to inform those who have received copies that the report has been retracted, pending its review by your office and by those responsible within Global Affairs Canada for the administration of Canada’s guidelines on supporting human rights defenders. We also call on you to urgently issue a statement

³ Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and the Environment, 1994, Draft Declaration Principles on Human Rights and the Environment, at para. 16.

⁴ Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, December 2015, Situation of Human Rights in Honduras, p. 107, <http://www.oas.org/en/iachr/reports/pdfs/Honduras-en-2015.pdf>

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 35.

⁶ Global Witness, July 13, 2017, Report: Defenders of the Earth, <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/environmental-activists/defenders-earth/>

⁷ “The government should work [with] all relevant stakeholders to ensure more space for peaceful dissent and protest at home and abroad.” United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, Statement at the end of visit to Canada by the United Nations Working Group on Business and Human Rights, 1 June 2017, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=21680&LangID=E>

affirming the legitimate role of Canadian and Honduran civil society organizations and human rights defenders working in Honduras, and to stay seized of the situation.

Sincerely,

Above Ground
Atlantic Region Solidarity Network
Amnesty International Canada
The British Columbia Government and Service Employees' Union
Canadian Council for International Co-operation
Canadian Jesuits International
CoDevelopment Canada
Comité pour les droits humains en Amérique latine/Committee for Human Rights in Latin America
Common Frontiers
Development and Peace
Entraide missionnaire
Friends of the Earth Canada
Horizons of Friendship
Inter Pares
KAIROS: Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives
Maritimes-Guatemala Breaking the Silence Network
MiningWatch Canada
Mining Justice Action Committee
Nobel Women's Initiative
The Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation
Public Service Alliance of Canada
Rights Action
Solidarité Laurentides Amérique centrale
United Church of Canada

cc. Jeffrey Davidson, Office of the Extractive Sector Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Counsellor