

Root Causes of Migration: How Climate Change and Environmental Degradation Impact Honduran Asylum Seekers

Expert Declaration by Donald Hernández Palma

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Renowned environmental expert Donald Hernández Palma has written a declaration to support the claims of Honduran asylum seekers who have fled, at least in part, due to the devastating effects of climate change and environmental disasters. This groundbreaking resource, available through the Center for Gender and Refugee Studies (CGRS), details the profound impact of these effects on human rights in Honduras.

Donald Hernández Palma is the Executive Director of the [Honduran Center for the Promotion of Community Development](#), a leading organization advocating for human rights and environmental protection in Honduras. As an agronomist and human rights attorney, he has worked on these issues for over three decades.

Context: Over the past three years, nearly [one million people in Honduras](#) have been displaced by disasters, with [thousands more](#) uprooted by conflict and violence. The State's environmental and land policies, compounded by its inadequate response to climate change, are key drivers of this displacement. These policies are partly influenced by the interests of the U.S. government and multinational corporations, despite their grave human and environmental costs. The recent assassination of environmentalist [Juan López](#), one of Mr. Hernández Palma's collaborators, is a tragic reminder of the continued violence faced by those who challenge the effects of these policies and defend their communities.

Key Takeaways from the Declaration

Vulnerable Communities Face Disproportionate Impact: Despite contributing less than 0.1% of global greenhouse gas emissions, Honduras is severely impacted by climate change, including stronger hurricanes, storms, floods, droughts, and rising sea levels. Environmental degradation from unregulated mega-industrial projects—such as mining, hydroelectric dams, monoculture farming (e.g., palm oil, bananas), and cattle ranching—exacerbates these effects. However, these consequences do not affect all Hondurans equally; specific communities bear the harm.

- **Indigenous peoples** have distinct social, cultural, economic, and political structures intrinsically tied to their ancestral lands. Their identity is profoundly intertwined with their surrounding ecosystems, on which they depend. The State has recognized the special relationship of the Indigenous people with their land, as well as their guardianship role over it, by classifying some ancestral territories as protected national reserves. Nevertheless, Indigenous peoples have historically been the most neglected and oppressed populations in Honduras. Many environmental laws and regulations have been enacted partly to limit Indigenous peoples' rights over their lands. Those who resist the exploitation of their resources by extractive industries or refuse to leave their territories are displaced,

criminalized, forcibly disappeared, or even killed. Moreover, Indigenous Peoples' close relationship to the land makes them especially vulnerable to the impacts of climate change.

- **Campesinos** are individuals from rural areas whose lifestyle and identity are deeply rooted in their environment. For them, the land is not just used for production and livelihood but forms a core part of their customs, traditions, and values. Like Indigenous Peoples, their close connection to the land leaves them particularly exposed to the effects of climate change. Furthermore, their presence in territories coveted by extractive industries subjects them to threats, as well as physical, emotional, and economic harm.
- **Women** are often expected, due to social norms, to manage household resources. Responsibilities such as gathering water increase their vulnerability to the effects of climate change and environmental degradation. Contamination of water sources by mega-industrial projects has caused health issues, including miscarriages and skin diseases. Additionally, the long distances women must often travel to collect water or food—due to droughts or depletion of local water sources from industrial activities—heightens their risk of sexual violence. This risk increases after disasters, where a sharp rise in gender-based violence, including femicides, is observed. Following hurricanes Eta and Iota, shelters and emergency centers failed to adequately protect women, leading to reports of rape, physical and sexual assaults, and other attacks. The lack of a gender-based lens in the State's disaster response, combined with its failure to investigate and prosecute gender-based crimes, exacerbated these dangers.
- **Land Defenders** in Honduras face growing risks, making it one of the most dangerous countries for those protecting their ecosystems, lands, and the right to a healthy environment. In 2022, the country had the world's highest number of land defenders killed per capita. These defenders include *campesinos*, Indigenous peoples, and others reclaiming their right to access and cultivate historically held lands. Land defenders are systematically criminalized or repressed and targeted with violence, often with State complicity.

The State Has Failed to Respond: The Honduran government has failed to protect vulnerable communities or adequately address the effects of climate change. Efforts to monitor environmental degradation or respond to disasters are insufficient and often marred by corruption. Protections for human rights defenders are ineffective.

Dangers and Challenges of Internal Relocation: Relocating within Honduras to escape targeted violence from opposing extractive projects or from living in communities coveted by extractive industries is extremely difficult, if not impossible. Threats can persist for years, even with changes in the country's political leadership.

How to Access the Declaration

The document is available upon request to advocates working on fear-of-return claims for Honduran nationals through [CGRS's Technical Assistance Library](#) or via [this link](#) for general research purposes.