URGENT ACTION

GARIFUNA LAND DEFENDERS STILL FACE CRIMINALIZATION

Five members of Organización Fraternal Negra Hondureña (OFRANEH) are still facing criminal proceedings after being arrested during a police operation in the Garífuna community of San Juan, Tela, in July 2026. They are accused of aggravated usurpation for defending ancestral territory. Their prosecution comes amid racist rhetoric targeting Garífuna communities and Honduras' failure to fully implement four Inter-American Court of Human Rights judgments protecting Garífuna territorial rights. We call on the Public Prosecutor's Office to end the criminalization of these five defenders and ensure that Garífuna people can defend their ancestral territories without fear of harassment.

TAKE ACTION:

- Write a letter to the government official(s) listed. Use the sample letter below as a guide or use your own words.
- Click here to report your action(s) on ***Second UA 89.26***. We share this number with the officials we are trying to persuade.

General Attorney
Pablo Emilio Reyes Theodore
Lomas del Guijarro
Tegucigalpa, Honduras
Email: fiscaliageneralhnd@gmail.com

Send a copy of your letter to the address below

CC: Honduran Embassy in the United States
Ambassador Roberto Flores Bermúdez
1220 19th St NW #320,
Washington, D.C. 20036
Web Contact Form:
https://hondurasemb.org/contactanos

Dear General Attorney,

I am concerned by the ongoing criminal prosecution of **Deinor Osmany Mejía Arzu**, **Irbin Rene López Cortes**, **Carlos Enrique Fernández Guzmán**, **Onil Rigoberto Hernández Zelaya**, and **Sara Abigail Acosta**, five members of the Garifuna community of San Juan and the Organización Fraternal Negra Hondureña (OFRANEH) for defending their ancestral territory. The five defenders were arrested in July 2026, following a police operation to carry out an eviction in their community. Although released hours later, they continue to face criminal proceedings for aggravated usurpation.

At the request of the Public Prosecutor's Office, the judge suspended the two attorneys representing the community. Furthermore, according to the information received, the Public Prosecutor's Office has focused solely on presenting evidence against the five defenders, without conducting any investigative proceedings regarding the ownership of the disputed land—which could exonerate them. The legal cause was also transferred to the Criminal Court with National Jurisdiction over Organized Crime, normally reserved for crimes by organized crime groups.

Their prosecution appears to be part of a broader pattern of criminalization affecting Garifuna communities seeking protection of their collective land rights.

I urge you to carry out independent and exhaustive investigation into the landownership from a human rights perspective, to end the criminalization of these five defenders, and to ensure that Garifuna people can freely carry out their legitimate human rights activities without intimidation, discrimination, or judicial harassment.

Yours sincerely,

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

For the Garifuna people, their territory is the foundation of their collective identity, their culture, their spirituality, their ways of life, their food sovereignty, and their very survival as a people.

Between 2015 and 2026, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights has issued four judgments against Honduras for violating the rights of four Garifuna communities in northern Honduras regarding their ancestral territory and other rights: the Garifuna Community of Punta Piedra (2015); the Garifuna Community of Triunfo de la Cruz (2015); the Garifuna Community of San Juan (2023); and the Garifuna Community of Cayos Cochinos (2026). OFRANEH has repeatedly denounced that the Honduran government has failed to comply with the measures ordered by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights despite these being binding judgements under international law.

On July 6, 2026, more than 200 police officers arrived in the Garifuna community of San Juan, in Tela, Atlántida Department, to carry out an eviction. According to testimonies, during the operation, security forces used tear gas and fired live munitions. Authorities also arrested the five human rights defenders, who were released hours later. However, they still face criminal proceedings for aggravated usurpation in their own ancestral territory, which could lead to prison sentences.

The legal cause against the five human rights defenders was initially handed by the National Jurisdiction Court of San Pedro Sula, a type of court with special jurisdiction on organized crimes only. Despite the appeals filed by their lawyers for its treatment by ordinary judges, on October 8, 2026, it was handed back to the National Jurisdiction Court of San Pedro Sula. Their lawyers filed new judicial actions, still pending, to challenge this decision. At the end of October, the judge ordered a two-month suspension of practice for the two lawyers from OFRANEH representing them, as a sanction for alleged misconduct. Since August 10, 2026, OFRANEH has maintained a peaceful protest camp in front of the Supreme Court of Justice in Tegucigalpa to demand the end of criminalization, compliance with the four judgments of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, and the cease of the campaigns of stigmatization and racial discrimination against them.

Human Rights bodies, such as the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and civil society organizations had already raised concern over the ambiguous definition of the crime of usurpation in the Criminal Code. Despite this, in May 2026, the Honduran Congress passed a new Law for the Strengthening and Protection of the Agro-industrial Sector, Energy Projects, Tourism, Livestock, and Small-Scale Agro-industrial Producers. Among others, the law prohibits demonstrations and strikes across a wide range of territories and authorizes evictions without judicial control nor fair trial, thereby jeopardizing the rights to food, housing, peaceful assembly, and freedom of expression. It also aggravates the risk of criminalization of peasants, Indigenous People and Afrodescendants.

PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO ADDRESS TARGET: Spanish or your own language.

PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL: February 5, 2027

NAME AND PREFFERED PRONOUN: Garífuna Land Defenders. They/them

LINK TO PREVIOUS UA: https://www.amnestyusa.org/urgent-actions/honduras-end-criminalization-of-garifuna-land-defenders/