

ENTREVISTAS PBI MÉXICO

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Entrevistas is a publication of PBI Mexico that highlights situations that increase risks to the physical or psychological integrity of Mexican human rights defenders, or that damage the legitimacy of their work. The opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the opinions of PBI Mexico.

Interview with Raúl Hernández Abundio, declared a prisoner of conscience by Amnesty International

On 17 April 2008, five members of the Organisation of the Indigenous Me'phaa People (Organización del Pueblo Indígena Me'phaa, OPIM) were detained, accused of committing a murder in the community of El Camalote, in the state of Guerrero. After almost a year of imprisonment, four OPIM members were released; all charges against them were dropped for lack of evidence. Although there was also a lack of incriminating evidence in his case, Raúl Hernández Abundio continues to be gaoled in the Centre for Social Rehabilitation (Centro de Readaptación Social, CERESO) in Ayutla de los Libres, Guerrero.

This interview was carried out in the Ayutla CERESO on 12 November 2009, a year and a half after Raúl was first gaoled. The following day, the alleged witnesses to the homicide gave testimony at a hearing. According to the Tlachinollan Human Rights Centre of the Montaña, which coordinates the case's legal defence, the two witnesses made contradictory accusations against Raúl. Both Tlachinollan and the OPIM expect that Raúl will be exonerated of all charges and released.

PBI: According to Amnesty International, you're a 'prisoner of conscience'. What does this mean for you?

Raúl Hernández Abundio (RHA): I understand that for Amnesty International there is no evidence that I killed that person, which is why they have declared me a prisoner of conscience. I am being detained for being a member of the organisation [OPIM], for defending my people.



Members of the Organisation of the Indigenous Me'phaa People (OPIM) demand justice to the judge presiding over Raúl Hernández Abundio's case. The protest was held outside the Centre for Social Rehabilitation in Ayutla de los Libres, Guerrero. Photo: PBI

PBI: When did you find about the accusations against you?

RHA: In 2007, when Manuel Cruz Victoriano was commissary in El Camalote, he was informed that that person [the murder victim] was missing; after three days, his body was located. I was there at the time, I was with the authorities, and they never said that I was guilty. Months passed. I came to an organisation [OPIM] meeting in Ayutla, and on my way home I met with both military and police checkpoints. They brought us here, and that was when I found out that I was accused of killing that person. I never expected to live through anything like this.

We are organising ourselves, and the authorities don't like it: that's why they've created problems for us. The ones who committed this crime, the ones who killed this person, they're still free. I'm paying for it, but I didn't kill him.

PBI: Why are members of the OPIM accused of committing this crime?

RHA: Because what the authorities want, and what they agreed on with the cacique [local political chief] in El Camalote, is to destroy our organisation. In my community, there is an individual who we recognise as a cacique. He doesn't agree with us when we put

pressure on the municipal president, insisting that he carry out public works, or complete those he's already started. This isn't only a problem for El Camalote, but in several other communities as well. They don't like it that we make demands. The government knows very well that we're telling the truth about what is happening and about the community's needs. Now 15 people from the OPIM are accused of the same crime, even the [OPIM] president is accused of killing that person. That's why we continue to struggle for our dignity.

We're not going to stop because they're trying to scare us. Although I'm in gaol, I continue to make demands from here, as do other OPIM members. We will not stop protesting.

PBI: What impact has being in gaol had on your family life?

RHA: I've already been in gaol for one year and seven months, and it's not the way it was before [when I was with my family]. My wife couldn't sow the crops for the last harvest. We have a daughter. My wife doesn't have enough money to come regularly from our community. I'd like to see her, because here I'm alone. My wife is suffering because she doesn't have money to come here, or to buy school materials or medicines for our daughter. These are the problems we face.

PBI: Before this, had you suffered any problems or harassment because of your work with the OPIM?

RHA: The same person who accused me of this crime used to go around saying that the OPIM doesn't help people. He said that we're delinquents, that they were going to force us to leave the community. The people in the paramilitary group said, "Anytime now, there'll be an OPIM member dead."

PBI: How do you see your case and the problems encountered by other OPIM members within the general context of aggressions against human rights defenders in Mexico?

RHA: Before joining the organisation, I didn't know that there were people who defended their rights, their communities, their homes – and that they were detained for that.

The ones who speak up to defend themselves, the ones who say what is happening in their community – they create problems for them. The government we have now doesn't investigate, but instead overrules the

law. They make threats against some people, they accuse others of robbery or kidnapping. It doesn't matter if we're men or women, the government threatens us: if we speak up they can gaol or kill us. This isn't only happening to me, but also to other organisations. Instead of offering support, we face gaol, threats, assassination. There is no peace, no country for us to live in with dignity. In Mexico and in other countries we're experiencing the same problem.



Raúl Hernández Abundio, declared a prisoner of conscience by Amnesty International, in the Centre for Social Rehabilitation in Ayutla de los Libres, Guerrero. Photo: PBI

PBI: Have you received much outside support in your time in gaol?

RHA: There are several organisations abroad which are supporting me, like Amnesty International and the lawyers. They've given me a lot of encouragement, so I won't be so sad. They give me the confidence that I will get out of here. I've had a lot of support, even from people in other countries.

PBI: What motivates you and other members of the OPIM to continue to struggle as human rights defenders?

RHA: People have been hurt by what has happened.

For example, Inés was raped – we can't leave her alone, we have to move forward, we have to support her. Her brother was murdered, and there is no justice in that case either. And, as another example, there are also 14 other people who were accused of the same crime as I was. We aren't going to let ourselves be beaten. Instead it's the opposite; it gives us more spirit to fight for them and for ourselves, despite the fact that I'm here in gaol. Here I'm learning what the government is like, and what it is capable of doing to each and every one of us.

But now that five of us have already been put in gaol, it's not going to make us afraid to keep fighting. On the contrary. We don't have any money, but we do have the support of the people, and that is what gives us encouragement. Even though the government believes there are only a few of us, we're telling the truth about what is happening to us and what we are suffering.

I'm an example of that. Here I am in gaol. I'm not in my house criticising the government, instead I'm here, detained in gaol.

PBI: Do you have anything else to say that you'd like to appear in our publication?

RHA: I ask the government that it doesn't attack innocent people, that they find the people who have really committed crimes. I haven't. And that the government conduct an investigation into who really killed that persona. I want to be released now, as I had nothing to do with the case.



Raúl Hernández Abundio (OPIM), Rogelio Rogelio Téliz García (lawyer with the Tlachinollan Human Rights Centre of the Montaña, and Otilia Eugenio Manuel (OPIM president), with a PBI volunteer. Photo: PBI

I ask that there be justice, that there be peace. That's what we're asking for, not only myself but the whole of the OPIM asks the government for justice and dignity. That's why we're dying, because of the community's needs. I'm not the only one who is suffering; the organisation suffers, my family suffers. The people in the government live quite calmly, working there at their desk, every two weeks they get their salary – while I am poor, they have me in gaol and unable to provide food for my children. I can't work because I'm detained, and that's what I ask: that I be released.

The **Organisation of the Indigenous Me'phaa People (Organización del Pueblo Indígena Me'phaa, OPIM)** works to defend and protect the basic rights of the Me'phaa communities. One of its aims is to put an end to impunity, and to demand justice for human rights violations committed against the community. They attribute many of these aggressions to public employees, among them the security forces of Guerrero. A key element of the OPIM's work has been providing support to Inés Fernández Ortega and Valentina Rosendo Cantú, who have reported members of the Mexican Army. They have demanded that these cases be investigated by the Mexican justice system and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. These cases have been transferred to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights and are now awaiting trial.

The **Tlachinollan Human Rights Centre of the Montaña, A.C.** is a non-governmental organisation based in Tlapa de Comonfort, Guerrero. For the last 14 years they have accompanied both non-indigenous Mexicans and the Nauas, Na Savi (Mixtec), Me'phaa (Tlapanec), and Amuzgo indigenous peoples of the Montaña and Costa Chica regions of Guerrero, supporting their struggle for justice and the full respect of their human rights. Tlachinollan's mission is to promote and defend – from an understanding of cultural adversity – the rights of the peoples of the Montaña and the Costa Chica, to design legitimate, pacific ways to guarantee the validity of their human rights.

For more information on the case of **Raúl Hernández Abundio**, see the web page of the [Peace Brigades International—Mexico Project](#), as well as the [Tlachinollan Human Rights Centre of the Montaña](#) and [Amnesty International Mexico](#).