

Land and water defenders in Honduras, March 2019. (Flickr/Peg Hunter/CC BY-NC 2.0)



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The Sisters of Mercy celebrated the release of six anti-mining protesters in Honduras, who spent nearly two-and-a-half years in pre-trial detention — in a case the country's Supreme Court said should have never proceeded.

"We celebrate the release of the #Guapinol Water Defenders who were wrongly imprisoned and tried for protecting their communities from destructive mining," the Sisters of Mercy tweeted Feb. 11, two days after the Supreme Court decision.

"People around the world stood with them because protecting water is not a crime. They deserve reparations."

Six men — part of a group known as the Guapinol 8 — were convicted Feb. 9 on charges of causing criminal damage and the illegal detention of the mining company's security chief, according to the Guardian newspaper. Two of the accused were found not guilty.

Barely a day later, the Honduran Supreme Court overturned the convictions and annulled the trial involving the eight defenders, ruling the lower court judge lacked the jurisdiction to preside over the case.

The charges against the Guapinol 8 — along with the lengthy pretrial detention and the brief convictions — drew international condemnation, while exposing the close ties among political, economic and judicial elites in the Central American country.

Honduras has been notorious in recent years for the murders and persecution of environmental defenders, who often oppose dams or mines being built near their

communities without their consultation.

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"(The Guapinol 8) symbolize the solidarity of peoples in defense of life and freedom. They strengthen our hope and give meaning to our struggles," tweeted Jesuit Father Ismael Moreno Coto, founder of Radio Progreso in Honduras.

The Guapinol 8 had opposed the construction of an iron oxide mine in a national park, which polluted the river and water source of their community. The mine is owned by a powerful and politically connected individual, Lenir Pérez, according to researchers, who raised questions over alleged irregularities in the approval process and lack of community consultations.

"(It's) economic elites working with political elites," Jean Stokan, justice coordinator for Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, said in an interview.

The Sisters of Mercy, who have had a presence in Honduras for 60 years, advocated on behalf of the Guapinol community prior to the detention and trial of the Guapinol 8.

The sisters took the case to the U.S. Embassy in Honduras, where Stokan recalled being told: "We're talking behind the scenes." The sisters wanted the embassy to speak out publicly. It finally did in December, after Honduras elected a new president, Xiomara Castro, who promised justice for the Guapinol 8 and said she would address issues such as poverty and violence.

Stokan said she was "extremely hopeful" about the Castro presidency, but she cautioned U.S. officials to focus on more than curbing corruption.

"This president is going to need U.S. support for the entire project that she's trying to put forward," Stokan said.