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A poster of slain environmentalist Juan López hangs in his home as a state-assigned bodyguard watches over the López family, in Tocoa, Honduras, Dec. 6, 2024. (AP photo/Moises Castillo)



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Within hours of the assassination of Juan López in Tocoa, Honduras, in September 2024, the Jesuit priest who heads the town's San Isidro Labrador parish declared that the town's then-mayor, Adán Fúnez, was responsible for the murder of the Catholic lay leader and environmental activist.

More than a year later, on May 12, Honduran police finally arrested Fúnez and two others, charging them with being the "intellectual authors" of the killing, according to the Associated Press.

"This is an important step toward justice for Juan, and we're hopeful that we're getting closer to the true masterminds who ordered and paid for this crime," Fr. Carlos Orellana told the National Catholic Reporter.

On May 16, a judge in San Pedro Sula ordered Fúnez, Héctor Méndez, and Juan Gallegos held without bail on charges of murder and conspiracy. The court scheduled a preliminary hearing for them on Aug. 12. Their indictment follows the October 2024 arrest of three men charged with actually carrying out the crime.



In front of a small Catholic church in the Fabio Ochoa neighborhood of Tocoa, Honduras, a cross marks the spot where Juan López, a Catholic delegate of the word, was assassinated on Sept. 14, 2024. López had just finished leading a celebration of the word in the church. (NCR photo/Paul Jeffrey)

During the 16-hour hearing, the court heard lengthy testimony from witnesses who described meetings in a Tocoa market to plan the hit, and how Fúnez provided 200,000 lempiras (almost $8,000) as compensation. Witnesses also detailed links between the suspects and the smuggling of guns and drugs throughout the Aguan Valley — for decades a hub of regional narcotrafficking that fuels unchecked violence, including the killing of at least 20 people at a plantation on May 21.

Orellana said charges could have been filed against Fúnez within weeks of the murder. "But an order came down from above to stop the legal proceedings against him," he said. The priest said one prosecutor was ready to file charges early on but was instead removed from the case.

"We have never grown tired of demanding justice. But the public prosecutor's office was guilty of holding back, of maintaining silence and impunity," Orellana said.

López, a Catholic delegate of the word and a leading voice fighting environmental destruction and corruption on the northern coast of Honduras, was shot seven times after leading a parish service in the poor Fabio Ochoa neighborhood where he lived. Just days before his death he had denounced corruption in Fúnez' administration.



Jesuit Fr. Carlos Orellana preaches during Mass in the San Isidro Labrador Catholic Church in Tocoa, Honduras, on March 23, 2025. Behind him is a portrait of Juan López, a Catholic delegate of the word who was assassinated in Tocoa on Sept. 14, 2024. (NCR photo/Paul Jeffrey)

Orellana believes that responsibility for López' killing doesn't stop with the former mayor, however. The slain activist angered a lot of powerful people and Orellana suggested the three men indicted this month are mere intermediaries.

"This investigation doesn't end with the arrest of these last three guys," Orellana said. "We want the public prosecutor to investigate the links between Juan's killing and his work both to end corruption in the municipality of Tocoa as well as to stop illegal mining operations in the Carlos Escaleras National Park," a nearby reserve named for another Catholic environmental activist assassinated in 1997.

"We believe the killing of Juan came in response to his defense of the environment, our common home," the priest said, calling for an investigation of potential connection between the killing and who would benefit from the mining.

Bishop Jenry Ruiz Mora of Trujillo echoed Orellana's demand that the government pursue everyone behind the killing.

"The Public Prosecutor's office bears the grave obligation of ensuring that this entire process is conducted with the seriousness, expediency, and transparency it demands, in order to establish the culpability of intermediate parties and the masterminds behind a broader web of corruption and organized crime that implicates both mining interests and political figures," Ruiz posted on Facebook on May 12.

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Orellana said the recent arrests are a product of public pressure, which he promises will continue.

"What's happening now isn't the result of the government's good will," Orellana said. "It's because of pressure from the people, the church and international organizations that the public prosecutor has decided to finally act."

The priest says justice is not yet served.

"We will continue struggling, demanding justice. We are going to demand that they clarify the truth and that those who are guilty go to prison," Orellana said.