

Jesuits issue open letter denouncing ‘grave threats’ against Honduran priest

Zac Davis January 02, 2018



Father Moreno at a protest in 2016 of the construction of a toll booth just outside of El Progreso, Honduras. It has been a site of constant protests for over a year now. (Radio Progreso)

The conference of Jesuit provincials in Latin America and the Caribbean have released an open letter to the international community defending Jesuit Ismael Moreno, commonly known as “Padre Melo,” against “grave threats,” saying they hold Honduran president “Juan Orlando Hernández and his allies responsible for the safety and physical and moral well-being” of Father Moreno and eight other regional leaders.

An anonymous flyer has been circulating on social media accusing Father Moreno and other regional leaders of having ties to criminal organizations and drug cartels and of inciting violence and destruction among Hondurans.

Father Moreno is the director of Radio Progreso, a Jesuit-run radio station featured in the **America** documentary "La Voz del Pueblo," and the Reflection, Investigation and Communication Team (ERIC), a Jesuit social action and analysis center.

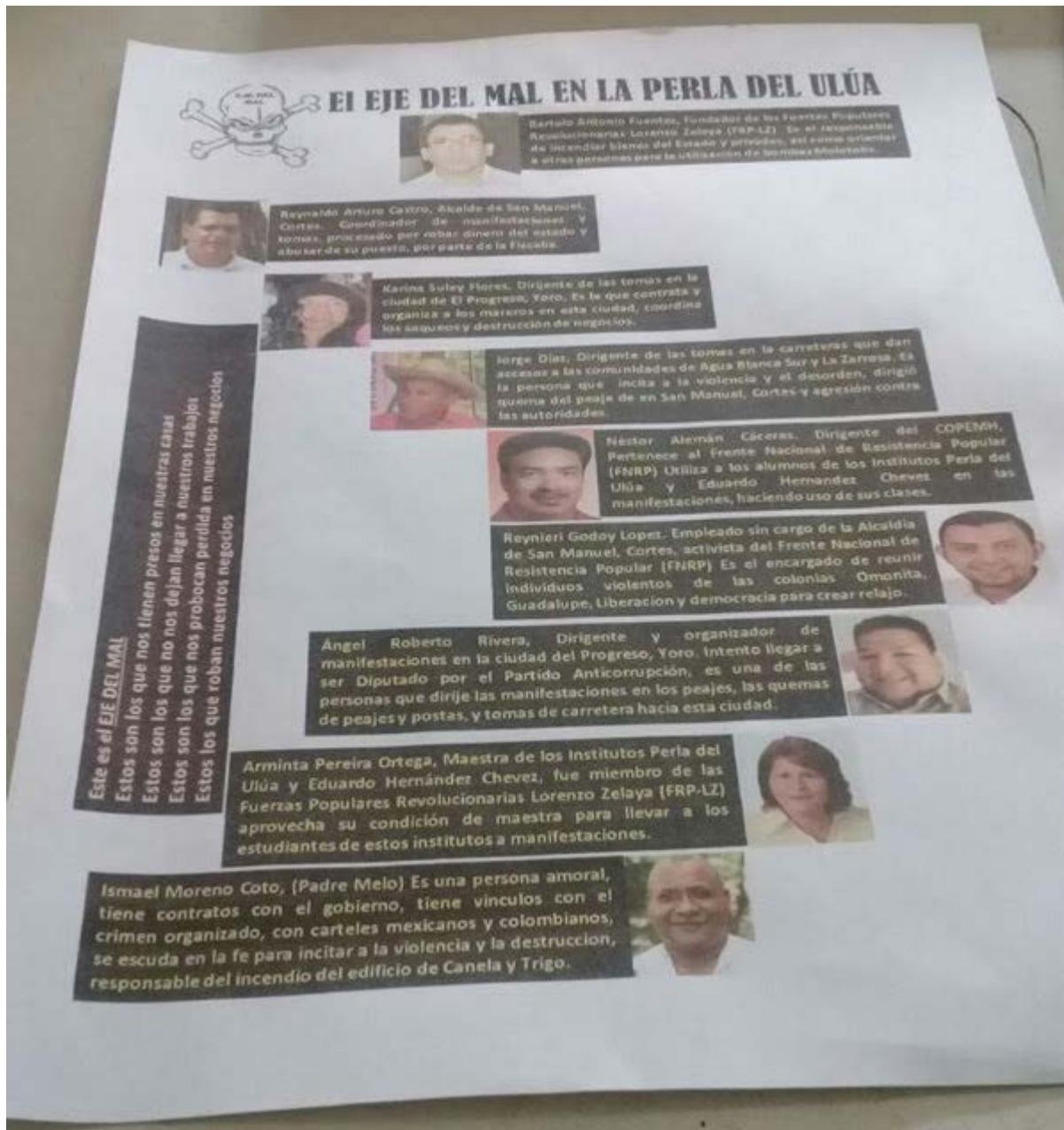
“I am convinced that [the flyer] is a campaign of stigmatization and criminalization against defenders of human rights and the opposition that originates in circles of the government itself,” Father Moreno said in a statement to **America**. “In my case, this attempt to implicate me in drug trafficking has been going on for at least a year and has the purpose of provoking a criminal action against me.”

The threats and the letter come on the heels of a contentious presidential election in Honduras. The incumbent, Juan Orlando Hernández, was declared the victor despite the call for new elections from the Organization of American States.

A cycle of protests in the aftermath of the election left at least 30 people dead, according to observers.

Radio Progreso, which reaches more than 1.5 million listeners, has been strongly critical of the election and the violent response to civilian protesters. The morning of Dec. 10, Radio Progreso woke to find one of its antennas fallen. After initially suspecting weather to have caused the fall, a technician discovered that screws had been loosened. Father Moreno blamed President Hernández and his allies for the destruction.

The letter, signed by the Roberto Jaramillo, S.J., compares the flyer to the “Be a patriot—kill a priest” graffiti that was common in the days before the murder of Jesuit Rutilio Grande in El Salvador.



The flyer accusing Father Moreno and eight other regional leaders of having ties to criminal organizations and drug cartels and of inciting violence and destruction among Hondurans.

While the current flyer lacks a clear call for murder, Matt Ippel, S.J., an American Jesuit scholastic studying philosophy in Lima and a close friend of Father Moreno, believes the flyer is part of a familiar pattern of suppression in Honduras.

“It starts with ignoring [oppositional voices], then it moves to delegitimization, which is where this flyer would fall under,” Mr. Ippel said. “Then to criminalization, then to assassination.” Mr. Ippel said a recent example of this pattern is found in the case of Berta Cáceres, an environmental activist and friend of Father Moreno, who was murdered in March 2016.

Although this is not the first threat made against Father Moreno or the employees of Radio Progreso/ERIC, Father Jaramillo says the threat level is uniquely high for three reasons. First, it was released around the holidays, when murders can be overlooked more easily. Second, it fuels an environment of hate in Honduran society and provides an incentive to potential vigilantes. Finally, “it is clear that Melo and all the collaborators of Radio Progreso/ERIC have become ‘a stone in the shoe’ of Juan Orlando Hernández in his [goal] to control everything in Honduras,” Father Jaramillo wrote to **America**.

On New Years Eve, Father Moreno posted to Twitter and Facebook that “I’m receiving accusations that put my life at risk.”

“It is not just about Melo but all the people who are working in the ERIC and Radio Progreso’s team, more than 30 collaborators that are part of our apostolic body,” Father Jaramillo said. “[They are] mothers, fathers of families that are really committed to the work of justice, democracy and participation.”

Two employees of Radio Progreso/ERIC have been murdered in recent years: Carlos Mejía in 2014 and Nery Jeremías Orellada in 2011. And since 2009, threats have been made against 16 employees, Mr. Ippel wrote in August for The Jesuit Post.

Father Moreno has remained vocal despite the threats against him. He called on all Hondurans, starting Jan. 2, to keep up strong and constant actions of civil disobedience to “prevent an illegal, illegitimate and usurper government from the sovereign will of the people.”

Father Jaramillo hopes that the letter will not only help keep Father Moreno and his colleagues safe but also promote the causes they risking their safety for:

“We as the Conference for the Jesuits in Latin America must stand with them not only to defend our fellow priests and lay people that are working in the name of the Society, but especially to defend and promote the causes they are fighting for.”