

July 23, 2009

Hon. Peter Kent,
Minister of State of Foreign Affairs (Americas)
Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade
125 Sussex Street
Ottawa, ON K1L 8A1

Dear Minister,

The Americas Policy Group (APG), a working group of the Canadian Council for International Co-operation, is writing to ask you to urge the Government of El Salvador to undertake a prompt and impartial investigation into the torture and murder of Marcelo Rivera, a prominent Salvadoran human rights defender and community activist.

Marcelo Rivera's tortured body was found July 1st – eleven days after his disappearance – in the course of a delayed search conducted by local police only after community leaders had publicly pressured high ranking security officials to act.

Marcelo Rivera was a legal representative of the Friends Association of San Isidro (ASIC) and an activist in the National Roundtable Against Metallic Mineral Mining – an organization of which ASIC is a member. The Roundtable is a forum of approximately 120 municipal governments, community groups, churches, and non-governmental organizations which conducts research, public education and coordinated events on mining issues in El Salvador. It is also the principal actor in public debates about the future of mining in El Salvador including a recent controversy which resulted in the withholding of operating permits to the Canadian mining corporation Pacific Rim for its operations at the El Dorado mine site.

Four gang members have recently been charged with Mr. Rivera's murder and an account of the circumstances of his death has been released by the Attorney General's Office. According to this account, Mr. Rivera's death was the result of an argument he had with these gang members during a drinking bout.

Many who knew Mr. Rivera have dismissed this account. They assert that Mr. Rivera was not involved with gang members and have concluded that the motive for his murder is connected to his work as a human rights defender and activist.

Civil society groups in El Salvador are expressing concern that these types of killings which are frequently dismissed by the authorities as being linked to gang violence are reminiscent of death squad killings of the sort previously linked to the ARENA party and are increasing in El Salvador.

Last year Canadian officials and MPs met with a colleague of Mr. Rivera's in Ottawa. Bernardo Belloso had come to Ottawa on behalf of the National Roundtable Against Metallic Mineral Mining to express the network's concerns about the viability of mining in El Salvador and the role of Canadian mining prospectors in his country. The APG facilitated Mr. Belloso's contact with officials and parliamentarians. While the APG does not itself adopt any position as to whether mining should or should not proceed in El Salvador, we do believe that it is imperative that public debate and discussion of the question in El Salvador should freely occur. This kind of free debate is, obviously, closed down and made impossible when activists and human rights defenders are made the target of death squad style killings.

We share the concern of our colleagues in El Salvador that the killing of Mr. Rivera could be related to his activities as a human rights defender and his work with the National Roundtable Against Metallic Mining. Further investigation is required to clarify the circumstances of Marcelo Rivera's death.

Specifically, we ask that the government of Canada call on the Government of El Salvador to:

Ensure that the Attorney General's Office carry out a prompt, thorough and impartial investigation into the assassination of Marcelo Rivera. Special care must be taken to assure that the prosecutors chosen do not have records of being questioned for committing serious violations of procedure in the prosecution of past cases with presumed political ties. The investigation should culminate in the prosecution of all those found responsible for his death.

In addition, the investigation should look into whether this act was related to his high profile work as a human rights activist or his work in support of local people's rights to resist the imposition of foreign mining in their homeland.

Thank you in advance for raising these important concerns. We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Jim Hodgson
APG Co-Chair

Nadia Faucher
APG Co-Chair

CC:

Rafael Angel Alfaro Pineda, Ambassador of El Salvador to Canada

Claire A. Poulin, Ambassador of Canada to El Salvador

Bob Rae, Foreign Affairs Critic MP, Liberal Party of Canada

Francine Lalonde, Foreign Affairs Critic, MP, Bloc Quebecois

Paul Dewar, MP, Foreign Affairs Critic, New Democratic Party

Alexandre Leveque, Director Caribbean, Central America & Regional Policy, Central America Division, DFAIT

Barbara Curran, Director, Canadian International Development Agency, Central America Division

Michael Kaduck, Director, Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada

Peacekeeping and Peace Operations Group

Claude Beauséjour, Program Manager, Canadian International Development Agency