

Dr Liam Fox MP
Secretary of State for International Trade
Department for International Trade
King Charles Street, Whitehall
London, SW1A 2AH

3 April 2018

Dear Dr Fox,

We, the undersigned, are Honduran and UK based human rights organisations. We are writing to express our dismay about the UK Government's sanctioning of sales of telecommunications interception equipment to Honduras, given the country's human rights situation. Furthermore, we were alarmed to learn that the export of this equipment was allowed despite the question of human rights compliance being raised multiple times in Parliament.[1] We urge you to ensure that no further export licences are granted to the Honduran Government for any equipment that could be used for internal repression.

On 8 February, The Guardian revealed that the UK granted export licences for telecommunications interception equipment to be sold to the Honduran Government just before the elections.[2] On 20 February, in response to a written question regarding the licences, the Rt. Hon. Graham Stuart on behalf of the UK Government stated that:

"all export licence applications are considered on a case-by-case basis against the Consolidated EU and National Arms Export Licensing Criteria based on the most up-to-date information and analysis available at the time, including reports from NGOs and our overseas network."[3]

Firstly, we would like to draw your attention to the fact that recent NGO reports point to an alarming human rights situation in the country as well as targeted repression of human rights defenders (HRDs), including through illegal surveillance:

- A report by Global Witness in January 2017 entitled 'Honduras: The deadliest place to defend the planet' reported that 123 land and environmental activists were "murdered in Honduras since the 2009 coup, with countless others threatened, attacked or imprisoned." [4]
- Amnesty International's 2017 report documents security incidents suffered by HRDs including killings, threats, surveillance and harassment. [5]
- A 2017 report by an independent group of experts into the murder of renowned Honduran environmentalist, Berta Cáceres, demonstrated that state security forces colluded with officials from a hydrodam company to carry out surveillance of members of Cáceres' organisation, COPINH, as part of a strategy to control and neutralise community protest. Surveillance increased in the months and hours leading up to her assassination. [6]
- Illegal surveillance of members of COPINH and Berta Cáceres prior to her assassination was not an isolated occurrence, but part of a wider pattern of repression by the Honduran state. A 2016 report by the NGO Peace Brigades International notes that eight prominent Honduran HRDs were on a government list to be put under illegal surveillance. HRDs frequently report the use of surveillance against them, among other tactics to restrict their rights to exercise freedom of expression and association. [7]

Secondly, we note that criterion two of the consolidated EU and National Arms Export Licensing Criteria states the government should:

“exercise special caution and vigilance in granting licences, on a case-by-case basis and taking account of the nature of the equipment, to countries where serious violations of human rights have been established by the competent bodies of the UN, the Council of Europe or by the European Union;”[8]

However, these international bodies have frequently drawn attention to serious human rights violations in Honduras:

- The EU Parliament adopted a resolution in April 2016 stating that “Honduras has now become one of the most dangerous countries in the region for human rights defenders.”[9]
- The UN High Commissioner’s 2017 report on Honduras states that: “In a context of stigmatization and questioning of their work, including by government representatives, OHCHR-Honduras continues to document cases of threats, surveillance, information theft and homicides involving human rights defenders.”[10]
- In August 2016, two top United Nations and Inter-American human rights experts described Honduras as one of the “most hostile and dangerous countries for human rights defenders.”[11]

We therefore consider the Government’s assertion that “the issue of the licence was consistent with the Consolidated EU and National Arms Export Licensing Criteria and remained so at the time of export”[12] to be a misrepresentation.

Furthermore, in the wake of the contested elections in November 2017, peaceful protests broke out across the country. These were met with brutal state repression, with the OHCHR registering 23 killings, 16 at the hands of the state security forces, with at least 60 people injured, half of them by live ammunition.[13] The national human rights network “Coalition against Impunity” registered at least 50 complaints related to threats and surveillance targeting individuals who participated in protests. In some cases, victims identified the author of the threat or surveillance as members of the National Police or the Military Police.[14]

We note that in recent months the UK Government has repeatedly called on Honduras to prioritise respect for human rights, highlighting in particular freedom of speech and freedom to protest peacefully.[15] However, local organisations have expressed concern that state repression is getting worse. This analysis was echoed by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein at the UN Human Rights Council in March 2018, who stated that: “The already fragile human rights situation in Honduras, which suffers from high levels of violence and insecurity, is likely to deteriorate further unless there is true accountability for human rights violations.”[16] We are concerned that in licensing the export of telecommunications interception equipment to the Honduran Government, the UK is in fact contributing to the curtailment of fundamental human rights in the country.

Taking into account the above, there is reason to believe that the telecommunications interception equipment are highly likely to be used for internal repression. We urge you to ensure that no further export licenses are granted to the Honduran Government for any equipment that could be used for internal repression.

We look forward to hearing from you further to the above.

Yours sincerely,

Amnesty International UK
Asociación de Jueces por la Democracia
Asociación LGTB Arcoíris de Honduras
La Asociación por la Democracia y los Derechos Humanos (ASOPODEHU)
ATALC-Amigos de la Tierra (FoE) América Latina y El Caribe
The Business and Human Rights Resource Centre
Campaign Against Arms Trade
La Coalición contra la Impunidad
Coordinadora de Organizaciones Populares del Aguan (COPA)
The Corporate Responsibility Coalition (CORE)
The Environmental Network for Central America (ENCA)
Foro de Mujeres por la Vida
Fronteras Comunes de Canadá
Global Justice Now
Global Witness
Grupo Lésbico Bisexual LITOS
Latin American Mining Monitoring Programme
Movimiento Madre Tierra Honduras
Movimiento Mesoamericano contra el Modelo extractivo Minero -M4-
Organización Fraternal Negra Hondureña (OFRANEH)
PAPDA – Haïti
Tavistock Peace Action Group
War on Want

- [1] Written questions ‘Honduras: Arms Trade’/‘Honduras: Electronic Surveillance’ 8 February 2018 -12 March 2018 <https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-questions-answers/?house=commons&max=20&member=4615&page=1&questiontype=AllQuestions>
<https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2018-03-12/131977/>
- [2] The Guardian. ‘UK sold spyware to Honduras just before crackdown on election protesters.’ February 2018 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/feb/08/uk-sold-spyware-to-honduras-just-before-crackdown-on-election-protesters>
- [3] Honduras: Electronic Surveillance:Written question - 127539. February 2018 <https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2018-02-08/127539/>
- [4] Global Witness. ‘Honduras: The deadliest place to defend the planet.’ January 2017 <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/gb/campaigns/environmental-activists/honduras-deadliest-country-world-environmental-activism/>
- [5] Amnesty International Report 2017/18 <https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/americas/honduras/>
- [6] GAIPE. ‘Dam Violence: The plan that Killed Berta Cáceres.’ November 2017. https://justassociates.org/sites/justassociates.org/files/exec_summ_dam_violencia_en_final.pdf
- [7] PBI Honduras Bulletin. December 2016 http://www.pbi-honduras.org/fileadmin/user_files/projects/honduras/files/Bulletins/BOL04-EN-12-1.pdf
- [8] EU and National Arms Export Licensing Criteria <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmhansrd/cm140325/wmstext/140325m0001.htm#14032566000018>
- [9] European Parliament resolution of 14 April 2016 on Honduras: situation of human rights defenders. April 2016 <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=TA&reference=P8-TA-2016-0129&language=EN&ring=P8-RC-2016-0469>
- [10] Annual report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the human rights situation in Honduras. February 2017 <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G17/029/29/PDF/G1702929.pdf?OpenElement>
- [11] ‘Honduras, one of the most dangerous countries for human rights defenders – Experts warn’. August 2016 <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=20397&LangID=E>
- [12] Honduras: Electronic Surveillance:Written question - 130861. March 2018 <https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2018-03-05/130861/>
- [13] Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights ‘Human rights violations in the context of the 2017 elections in Honduras.’ March 2018 http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/HN/2017ReportElectionsHRViolations_Honduras_EN.pdf
- [14] *ibid*
- [15] ‘British Embassy calls for restraint in Honduras’, 19 Dec 2017; ‘Honduras’ General Elections’, 8 Jan 2018; ‘UK Statement following the Presidential inauguration in Honduras.’ 31 Jan 2018 https://www.gov.uk/government/announcements?include_world_location_news=1&world_locations%5B%5D=honduras
- [16] ‘Honduras election protests met with excessive and lethal force – UN report.’ March 2018 <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=22799&LangID=E>