10 March 2016

Lilianne Ploumen
Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation
Government of The Netherlands

Re: Count Me In! Consortium calls for action by Dutch government following the murder of Honduran indigenous and human rights activist, Berta Cáceres

Dear Ms. Ploumen,

On behalf of the Count Me In! (CMI!) Consortium, one of the strategic partnerships under the Dialogue and Dissent Programme of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, we request specific, timely and appropriate action by the Dutch government regarding the murder of Berta Cáceres and the continued insecurity faced by her family and members of her organisation, COPINH.

Ms. Cáceres was a Woman Human Rights Defender (WHRD) and prominent Lenca indigenous and feminist activist in Honduras. She co-founded and coordinated the Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organisations of Honduras (COPINH). In 2015, she was awarded the prestigious Goldman Environmental Prize for her work in raising awareness within communities and organisations across the world for the rights of the Lenca indigenous peoples and against the construction of a hydroelectric project, Agua Zarca. Agua Zarca was developed by the Honduran company Desarrollos Energéticos S.A. (DESA) with financing from the Dutch development bank – FMO and the Finnish Fund for Industrial Cooperation, among others. Ms. Cáceres was also an outspoken advocate for the rights of marginalised peoples, including lesbian and bisexual women, trans* people, and Afro-descendent people.

Berta Cáceres’ work and organisation, COPINH, were directly supported by the Dutch government from 2009-2015 through the MDG3 Fund and the FLOW fund. CMI! Consortium members AWID, JASS and the Urgent Action Fund Latin America worked closely with Ms. Cáceres and COPINH through her involvement in the National Network of Human Rights Defenders of Honduras, the Mesoamerican Initiative of Women Human Rights Defenders, the Regional Initiative on Women, Land and Territory, and Women Life Defenders against Extractive Industries. COPINH also participated in JASS’ Alquimia Feminist Leadership School. Additionally, both Mama Cash and Urgent Action Fund Latin America provided rapid response funding to ensure protective measures were in place to address the security threats that Ms. Cáceres and her organisation continuously faced.

Despite repeated threats, arrests, and violence over several years, Ms. Cáceres continued to organise her community in the defence of ancestral lands and against local and transnational corporations operating illicitly to exploit indigenous territories. According to the study How Many More? by Global Witness, Honduras has been the “most dangerous country per capita to be an environmental activist for the last five years, with 101 deaths between 2010 and 2014.” The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) granted precautionary measures to Ms. Cáceres in 2009 for her protection after an increase in the number of death threats she had received because of her work denouncing violations of human rights against indigenous peoples. In 2015, the IACHR drew the Honduran State’s attention to the risks faced by Berta Cáceres and on the State’s shortcomings in the implementation of protective measures in her favour.

However, these efforts – yours and ours combined – were not enough to protect her life and her important work as a Woman Human Rights Defender and environmental activist. We will continue and strengthen our
support and strategies to ensure safety for WHRDs. The CMII Consortium members call on the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as our strategic partner and ally, to:

- Urge the Honduran government to immediately pursue an independent and transparent investigation of the murder so as to prosecute and sanction those responsible for this crime, as well as to collaborate with the Inter-American Human Rights Commission to investigate previous threats and attacks against Berta and COPINH since 2009.
- Urge the Honduran government to abide by and fulfil the mandates of the precautionary measures provided to Berta’s family and COPINH.
- Urge the Honduran government to work towards securing an enabling environment for defending human rights in all its territory, committing to the safety and security of all human rights defenders and their organisations across the country.
- Pressure the Dutch development bank – FMO, and Dutch private investors involved in financing the Agua Zarca hydro-electric dam and other questionable mega-projects on indigenous people’s lands to withdraw support and halt construction until a thorough investigation has been completed and those responsible have been sanctioned.
- Demand that Dutch investors comply with ILO provision 169 that requires the free, prior and informed consent of communities affected by exploration and exploitation of natural resources on their lands prior to commencement of the work, and to guarantee the protection and fulfilment of their collective and individual human rights.
- Follow the European Union Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders, which provide a number of recommendations for States to support defenders, including: maintaining contact with defenders and visiting their areas of work; providing visible recognition; attending and observing trials.
- Provide resources to Berta’s family and COPINH to ensure they are safe including, if necessary, expediting visas to leave the country in an emergency.
- Denounce publicly in all inter-governmental fora, such as the UN and the EU, the murder of Berta Cáceres and encourage other governments to join in pressuring for a transparent, thorough investigation.

The murder of Ms. Cáceres directly contravenes both national law that protects individual citizens, and the provisions of United Nations General Assembly resolution 68/181 of 2013 that specifically addresses the protection of Women Human Rights Defenders. The resolution recognises the important role played by women of all ages in the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms. It indicates the many types of risk, discrimination and violence faced by women defenders of human rights and calls upon States to take all measures necessary to ensure their protection and create a safe and enabling environment for the defence of human rights.

In keeping with your support to Women Human Rights Defenders, and in partnership with us as part of the Count Me In! Consortium, we ask the Dutch government to raise the visibility of the important work of Women Human Rights Defenders, and highlight the precarious situations under which they work – both generally, and in the case of Honduras, specifically.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you require further information on the Berta Cáceres case and its development.

Sincerely,

Lydia Alpizar
Executive Director, AWID
Geetanjali Misra
Executive Director, CREA
Lisa VeneKlasen
Executive Director, JASS

Ndana Tawamba
Executive Director, Urgent Action Fund - Africa
Zohra Moosa
Acting Executive Director, Mama Cash

CC: Mr. A.G. (Bert) Koenders, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands.
Ms. M.A. (Mette) Gonggrijp, Ambassador, Royal Netherlands Embassy in San Jose, Costa Rica