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Lolita Chávez: defending human rights in Guatemala

Greens/EFA Sakharov Prize nominee

Guatemalan human rights defender Aura Lolita Chávez Ixcaquic is the Greens/EFA candidate to the European Parliament's Sakharov prize for Freedom of Thought in recognition of her tireless engagement in human rights. Lolita is a defender of the rights of indigenous peoples and environmental rights, she leads the Council of Quiché Peoples for the Defence of Life, Mother Nature, Land and Territory. She, and the organisation she represents, fight for the rights of the Maya Quiché people and the preservation of the ecosystem in which they have lived for millennia.

The Maya Quiché symbolize the struggle for environmental human rights in today's world. They had to face a genocidal campaign of rape, death, cultural alienation and land grabbing during Guatemala civil war (1960-1996). Structural impunity for past and new human rights abuses continues to be the norm. Last July, Lolita and other members of the Council for Quiché Peoples managed to block a truck which was transporting wood without an exploitation licence. In reprisal, Lolita and her companions faced death threats. The Guatemalan government has been unwilling to protect them and Lolita had to flee her country for her security.

Alike Lolita, all around the world thousands of environmental activists belonging to indigenous peoples are persecuted for defending their land and humanity's natural heritage. Sadly, many of them, such as Honduran environmental rights defender Berta Cáceres, are outrageously murdered due to their struggle against corporate abuse. According to Global Witness in 2016 on average four environmental human rights defenders were murdered each week.

The European Parliament has raised the alarm about the situation of human rights defenders in Guatemala, notably in February 2017 in an urgent resolution that stressed "its concern that the continuous acts of violence and lack of security have a negative impact on human rights defenders being able to fully and freely carry out their activities" and called "for an immediate, independent, objective and thorough investigation into [...] previous murders".

It is high time that the European Parliament and the European Union step up their efforts in support of environmental rights defenders around the world, who are on the front line of human rights violence and corporate abuse and have little, if any, support from their national authorities.

Lolita Chavez is a formidable symbol of this cause!

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