



Joint Submission to the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of Honduras

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Submission by:

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The **World Evangelical Alliance (WEA)** (<https://un.worlddea.org>) was founded in 1846 and is a network of churches in over 140 nations that have each formed an evangelical alliance, and over 100 international organizations joining together to give a world-wide identity, voice, and platform to more than 600 million evangelical Christians worldwide. **Email:** geneva@worlddea.org

Introduction

1. As a result of Honduras' third cycle of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) in 2020, the country received 223 recommendations. Of the total number of recommendations, the State accepted 203, and 20 were noted.

2. In the third cycle of the UPR, Jordan made a recommendation to adopt policies that encourage interfaith harmony and promote the protection and tolerance of followers of religious minorities (A/HRC/46/12/Add.1, para. 9, Jordan, p. 104.89).

3. Several countries provide recommendations related to guaranteeing the protection of Indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples, especially concerning the combat of any form of discrimination and respect for and protection of their cultural, territorial and environmental rights (Italy, 104.206; Djibouti, 104.26; Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan, Argentina, 104.27; Togo, 104.210; Trinidad y Tobago, 104.211; Austria, 104.213; Costa Rica, 104.214; Denmark, 104.215; Islamic Republic of Iran, 104.205; Switzerland, 104.209) Recommendations were also made regarding the importance of including Indigenous communities in the development and implementation of climate change and disaster risk reduction policies. (Fiji, 104.38; Indonesia, 104.36).

4. Regarding child recruitment, recommendations were made to strengthen programs that seek to prevent the recruitment of children and protect them from gang violence (Ukraine, 104.203; Cuba, 104.204; Panamá, 104.202).

5. Governments also recommended that Honduras ensure proper investigation and accountability for crimes against human rights defenders, Indigenous and Afro-Honduran activists, journalists, and land rights defenders. They also urged the country to protect freedom of expression by addressing intimidation, harassment, and attacks against these groups and prosecuting those responsible. Additionally, they emphasized the need to strengthen efforts to investigate and prosecute violence, reprisals, corruption, and human rights violations while ensuring judicial independence. Preventing the criminalization of human rights defenders and activists and guaranteeing a safe environment for their work was also highlighted. Lastly, they called for improved protection measures for journalists, human rights defenders, and environmentalists. (Norway, 104.92; Canada, 104.108; Austria, 104.103, Canada, 104.78; Germany, 104.100,). In this regard, it is essential to consider the role of religious communities.

6. Among other recommendations, governments urged Honduras to take action to reduce organized crime, including cartel and gang activity, and to implement measures to prevent crime and combat drug trafficking. They also emphasized the importance of programs and incentives that create an environment where children and youth can develop their full potential. (Poland, 104.53; Indonesia, 104.83).

7. This report considers all these recommendations made during the third cycle of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), as they address key aspects of protecting the right to freedom of religion in Honduras, particularly in relation to Indigenous communities. Promoting interfaith harmony and protecting religious minorities is essential in a context where discrimination and violence affect these groups. Likewise, the recommendations on the protection of Indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples are relevant, as these communities face threats to their cultural and territorial rights, which directly impact their ability to freely exercise their religion. Additionally, issues such as child recruitment, violence against human rights defenders, and organized crime have a direct impact on the security of religious communities and their ability to practice their faith without fear of reprisal. By addressing these issues, this report aims to contribute to the formulation of policies that ensure religious freedom and protect vulnerable populations in the country.

International commitments

8. Among some of the international commitments, we can point out:

- i. The government of Honduras has ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. It has also accepted the individual communications procedure through the Optional Protocol to the ICCPR and the Optional Protocol to the ICESCR.
- ii. The government of Honduras has ratified the International Labor Convention No. 169 and approved the Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Ratified by Decree No. 26-94 of the National Congress dated May 10, 1994 and published in the Official Gazette "La Gaceta" No. 27,413 of July 30, 1994.

Constitutional and domestic legislative framework

9. The legal system of Honduras that recognizes religious freedom and related rights includes:

- i. Political Constitution of Honduras (1982): Article 77 guarantees the free exercise of all religions and states that ministers may not hold public office or engage in religious proselytism. Additionally, Article 16 stipulates that the National Congress must approve all international treaties before the Executive Branch ratifies them, and Article 18 specifies that in the event of a conflict between a treaty or convention and the law, the treaty or convention shall prevail.
- ii. Decree 144-83 (1983): Approves the Penal Code and articles 27 (27), 175, 210 to 213 and 319, punishes affectations to religious sentiment and disrespect for the

deceased, punishes whoever commits crimes against a national ethnic or religious group; commits any crime with hatred or contempt for reasons of religion, and punishes the minister of worship who authorizes a religious marriage without preceding the celebration of the civil marriage.

10. The legal system of Honduras that recognizes the cosmovision and spirituality of the Indigenous communities includes:

- i. Political Constitution of Honduras (1982): Article 346 stipulates that the State must implement measures to protect the rights and interests of Indigenous communities residing in the country, particularly in the lands and forests where they are settled.
- ii. Childhood and Adolescence Code (1996): Guarantees the rights of children belonging to ethnic or Indigenous peoples, or Afro-Hondurans, to maintain their own cultural life, to profess and practice their religion, and to use their language, as well as to respect their culture and social customs.
- iii. Property Law (2004): Includes a chapter related to the process of regularization of real property for Indigenous and Afro-Honduran peoples. It determines that this process must guarantee the full recognition of communal property rights, including use, administration, land management, and the sustainable use of their natural resources, through demarcation and titling in full ownership of the same.
- iv. Public Policy against Racism and Racial Discrimination for the Integral Development of Indigenous and Afro-Honduran Peoples (2016): This policy includes the right to land, territory, and natural resources as a strategic axis. Its central objective is “to protect the ancestral lands and territories recognized by the State for Indigenous and Afro-Honduran peoples, allowing for integral community development and guaranteeing the well-being of present and future generations.”

11. Despite the existing legal framework, which recognizes religious freedom and the rights of Indigenous communities, as described in this section, the practical implementation of these protections remains insufficient. As the following information will show, Indigenous peoples continue to face significant challenges in exercising their religious and spiritual traditions due to land dispossession, environmental degradation, and lack of adequate legal enforcement. Additionally, in contexts of violence, religious leaders—especially those advocating for Indigenous rights—are particularly vulnerable to threats, intimidation, and attacks. The gap between legal provisions and their enforcement not only undermines the religious freedoms of these communities but also exacerbates the risks faced by those who play a crucial role in defending their cultural and spiritual heritage.

Religious freedom of Indigenous communities

12. According to the XVII National Population Census and VI Housing Census conducted in 2013 by the National Statistics Institute (INE), the country's total population was 8,303,771 inhabitants. Of this total, 8.6% identified themselves as belonging to some Indigenous or Afro-descendant group. The central Indigenous communities are Lenca (5.46% of the total population), Miskito (0.73%), Garífuna (0.52%), Maya Chortí (0.46%), Negro Inglés (0.25%), Nahoá (0.24%), Tolupán (0.21%), Pech (0.07%) and Tawahka (0.03%)¹.

13. Honduras ratified ILO Convention 169 and incorporated it into domestic legislation through Decree 26-94. The Constitution states that the state has the duty to implement measures to protect the rights and interests of Indigenous communities in the country, particularly in the lands and forests where they reside.

14. However, despite the regulatory framework and efforts to implement public measures and policies within the governmental and institutional context, with Indigenous and Afro-Honduran expertise, these communities faced serious challenges, like discrimination, the obstacles to the exercise of the right to self-determination, the lack of protection of their cultural integrity, the weak recognition, security, and adjudication of their rights to land, territories, and natural resources.

15. The National Commissioner for Human Rights (CONADEH) provided alarming information on the situation of the rights of these groups. Between 2016 and May 2024, it identified 202 complaints from members of Indigenous and Afro-Honduran peoples, of which 60% were at risk of being displaced, and 40% had been displaced due to violence. The cases were associated with threats (60%), murder (12%), extortion (7%), land dispossession (7%), and others².

16. Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities often have deeply rooted spiritual and religious traditions that are integral to their cultural identity. Discrimination against these groups, as well as violations of their territorial and environmental rights, can directly impact their ability to practice their faith freely. When their lands are taken or degraded, sacred sites and traditional religious practices may be threatened. Ensuring their protection helps safeguard not only their cultural heritage but also their right to freely exercise their religious beliefs without interference or marginalization.

17. The destruction of sacred sites and disruption of traditional rituals due to environmental degradation threaten Indigenous religious identities. Article 27 of the ICCPR emphasizes the right of minorities to preserve and enjoy their culture, which includes their spiritual practices and traditions that are tied to their environment. The government must ensure that climate policies safeguard these religious expressions.

18. In this sense, the importance of regulating and enforcing regulations regarding the protection of the territories and resources of Indigenous peoples lies in the fact that they have a deep spiritual connection with their territories, especially with the sacred sites located within those territories. As the IACHR understands it, ancestral territories hold profound spiritual significance for Indigenous and tribal peoples. Intrinsic elements of their cultural identity are "ancestral burial grounds, places of religious significance and importance, and ceremonial or ritual sites linked to the occupation and use of their physical territories. In this sense, the land, the territory, and its natural resources are not conceived by Indigenous peoples as merchandise but rather as a source of life in themselves. They are the basis of their economic subsistence, cultural identity, and spiritual well-being; in this sense, the loss of their ancestral lands and territories can pose a significant threat to their collective survival.³

19. Both state and non-state actors, including gangs, multinational corporations, and organized crime groups, can cause these significant challenges for Indigenous communities.

20. One of the pressing risks is the recruitment of children by gangs, which weakens community structures, disrupts religious practices, and creates an atmosphere of fear that limits the ability of Indigenous groups to develop their collective identity⁴. In response, churches and faith-based organizations play a crucial role in shielding children from recruitment by providing safe spaces, education, and moral guidance⁵. Strengthening programs that prevent child recruitment and protect children from gang violence is essential not only for upholding their right to safety and development but also for ensuring that religious communities can continue their work without fear of retaliation. This protection allows children to participate freely in spiritual activities, reinforcing their right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, as recognized in Article 14 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. At the same time, it safeguards the collective rights of Indigenous peoples.

21. It is also worrying the permanent human rights violations of defenders of Indigenous territories, who are exposed to kidnappings, assassinations, and criminalization. According to the report presented by Global Witness, Honduras was the country with the highest number of murders per capita 2023 of land and environmental defenders⁶. The monitoring team of the Unit for the Protection of Defenders at Risk of ACI PARTICIPA documented, between January and December 2023, a total of 90 attacks against 32 defenders of the ancestral rights of Indigenous peoples, of which 7 were killed in violent conditions⁷. In 2024, the case of the murder of Juan Antonio López, environmental defender and coordinator of the Municipal Committee of Common and Public Goods in Tocoa, was emblematic. He was also a member of the Mesoamerican Ecological Ecclesiastical Ecological Network and the National Apostolic Council of the Society of Jesus in Honduras. This violence not only violates the right to life and security (Articles 6 and 9 of the ICCPR) but also restricts religious communities' ability to worship freely without fear of persecution.

22. This issue is highly relevant to the protection of religious freedom in Honduras because many Indigenous land and environmental defenders have deep spiritual and religious connections to their ancestral territories. Their defense of these lands is often rooted in their religious beliefs, which view nature as sacred and integral to their faith. The violence, criminalization, and assassinations they face not only threaten their physical safety but also undermine their ability to practice and uphold their spiritual traditions.

23. Furthermore, the killing of religiously affiliated environmental defenders highlights the intersection between faith-based advocacy and the protection of land and natural resources. When defenders who are part of religious networks or institutions are attacked, it also creates a climate of fear that can silence religious communities from engaging in social justice and environmental causes. Protecting these individuals is essential to ensuring that religious leaders and communities can freely express their beliefs, advocate for justice, and practice their faith without fear of persecution.

Organized crime and Religious Freedom

24. Local criminal gangs and other organized crime groups have a national presence in the country. Among the latter are the Mara Salvatrucha (MS—13) and the Barrio 18 gang, which have become the de facto authorities in various communities, mainly in urban areas such as Tegucigalpa, Comayagua, and San Pedro Sula.

25. Given the persistence of high crime rates, the government adopted a partial state of emergency in December 2022. This measure allows the temporary suspension of certain constitutional guarantees and has been extended every 45 days until February 19, 2025. The last extension, made in January, was not ratified by Congress⁸.

26. In 226 of the 298 municipalities in Honduras, regulations were implemented to counteract the criminal incidence derived from organized criminal structures, including measures that limit the following rights: freedom of movement, the right of association and assembly, the inviolability of the home, in addition to granting the military internal security powers. Given the history of abuses by the security forces, some sectors, especially human rights advocates, have questioned the military's security reinforcement operations⁹. The construction of a [mega-prison](#) to house more than 20,000 people is also planned, following an approach similar to that adopted by El Salvador under President Nayib Bukele¹⁰.

27. However, the current security strategy has failed to reduce the level of violence in the country. According to the report "Fighting Gangs Under the State of Exception in Honduras," violence has spread beyond the traditional hotspots of Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula, possibly due to "increased pressure on gangs in the most populated urban areas due to frequent law enforcement operations."¹¹ Organizations such as Insight Crime attribute the lack of effectiveness in the security strategy to poor institutional development, geography, and politics, as well as the high degree of corruption among government elites.

28. During the third cycle of the UPR, the government received recommendations related to taking action to reduce organized crime, including cartel and gang activity, and to implement measures to prevent crime and combat drug trafficking. They also emphasized the importance of programs and incentives that create an environment where children and youth can develop their full potential. Criminal organizations coerce children into illicit activities, often targeting churches and religious communities that oppose their influence. This undermines the right of children to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion (Article 14 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child).

29. If there is one component that is almost absent from current security policies, it is that of prevention. In this sense, it is crucial to recognize and strengthen the capacity of religious communities to welcome and support young people, particularly those in vulnerable situations. However, in certain areas, religious leaders do not engage in active evangelization of young people, as this would mean compromising the source of recruitment for the maras. Only some young people in the community can participate in the activities of the church, always under the surveillance of the gangs.

30. Another crucial issue is that the government's security policies have yet to acknowledge the vulnerability of religious leaders and communities in this context. From 2022 to 2024, the Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America, through its Violent Incidents Database, recorded 41 murders of religious leaders and congregants, 5 kidnappings, and over 200 other attacks against the physical integrity of spiritual leaders and congregants, including death threats¹².

31. Findings indicate that religious leaders with significant presence or influence in their communities are the most vulnerable, especially when their mission involves denouncing criminal activities or corruption networks, defending human, environmental, or Indigenous rights, challenging criminal control in their territory, mediating between criminal groups, or working to prevent youth recruitment. By taking on these roles, religious leaders disrupt the status quo and become obstacles to organized crime, making them targets of retaliation, which directly impacts the exercise of faith.

32. Several scenarios illustrate how organized crime actions affect religious freedom on both an individual and collective level. The murder of a religious leader not only constitutes a direct attack on their life but also creates a climate of fear that restricts the religious freedom of the entire community. When leaders are forced to pay extortion fees, their religious communities suffer economically, limiting their ability to manage resources and maintain worship activities, thereby affecting their financial and organizational autonomy. Criminal groups that impose curfews or restrict movement within a territory effectively hinder collective religious practice. Threats or censorship against religious leaders prevent them from addressing violence in their sermons, restricting their religious freedom of expression and depriving their communities of guidance aligned with their beliefs. Forced

displacement due to death threats not only strips a leader of their home but also denies them the right to congregate and lead their faith community, weakening collective religious practice. Entire communities forced to flee due to organized crime threats lose their religious and cultural ties, impacting their identity and preventing stable worship. This is particularly devastating for Indigenous communities, whose forced displacement due to violence severs their connection to their ancestral spiritual traditions.

Recommendations

33. The government of Honduras should fully implement ILO Convention 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples to protect Indigenous religious traditions from external interference, recognizing that land dispossession, environmental degradation, and extractive projects threaten Indigenous spiritual practices, which are deeply connected to their ancestral lands. To strengthen these protections, the government should amend the Property Law (Decree No. 82-2004) to explicitly recognize Indigenous land as inalienable, non-transferable, and protected from commercial exploitation without the free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) of the affected communities. Furthermore, Congress should pass a new Indigenous Land Protection Act that criminalizes land grabs and imposes mandatory prison sentences for government officials who authorize land concessions in violation of ILO Convention 169. To ensure enforcement, the government should create an Indigenous Land Rights Tribunal with the authority to hear land disputes, issue binding rulings, and oversee compliance with these legal protections, thereby preventing corporate and state-led encroachment on sacred sites.

34. The government should ensure the active participation of Indigenous communities in the development and implementation of policies addressing climate change and disaster risk reduction. This inclusion is essential to safeguarding their sacred sites, traditional rituals, and religious practices, which are integral to their cultural and spiritual identity. Policies should prioritize the protection of Indigenous lands and resources to prevent environmental degradation that could disrupt their ways of life and religious traditions.

35. The government should ratify the Escazú Agreement to strengthen the regulatory framework related to environmental issues. This measure will be a boost for the protection of territories/natural resources of Indigenous peoples and in that sense, it will be a first step for the protection of the spiritual relationships they maintain with their sacred territories.

36. The government should take concrete steps to establish the International Commission against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (CICIH) by expediting negotiations with the UN and approving the necessary legal frameworks. Both the Executive and Legislative branches must prioritize the adoption of the required decrees to activate the Commission, demonstrating a genuine commitment to combating corruption and impunity.

37. The government of Honduras should establish a dedicated Indigenous Security Force within the National Police, staffed by officers from Indigenous communities and trained in human rights, cultural sensitivity, and community-based conflict resolution. To support this initiative, the Secretariat of Security should partner with the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) to design specialized protection protocols for Indigenous leaders facing threats from land traffickers, criminal groups, and corrupt officials. Additionally, the National Congress should pass a Whistleblower Protection Act that guarantees legal immunity and financial support for Indigenous activists reporting government complicity in land seizures and violence.

38. The government of Honduras should create a Special Prosecutor's Office for Crimes Against Religious Leaders within the Public Ministry, tasked with investigating threats, extortion, and attacks against clergy. This office should have an independent budget and be required to publish quarterly reports detailing case progress, arrests, and prosecutions. Additionally, the government should amend the Penal Code to include enhanced penalties for crimes against religious leaders, ensuring that perpetrators linked to organized crime face mandatory minimum sentences of at least 25 years. A national emergency hotline specifically for religious leaders to report threats anonymously should be established, with guaranteed 24/7 police response to verified cases of intimidation or violence.

39. The government of Honduras should allocate a percentage of the national security budget to fund faith-based gang prevention programs in the country's most violent municipalities, such as San Pedro Sula, Tegucigalpa, and La Ceiba. The Secretariat of Education should integrate vocational training and job placement programs into public high schools, in partnership with religious organizations, to provide at-risk youth with employment alternatives to gang involvement. Furthermore, the government should create tax incentives for businesses that hire former gang members and youths from faith-based rehabilitation programs, reducing recidivism and strengthening economic reintegration. To ensure accountability, the government should appoint an independent oversight commission composed of faith leaders, civil society representatives, and law enforcement officials to evaluate program effectiveness and recommend policy adjustments.

¹ Conadeh. 2024. *Informe en el Marco del Día de los Pueblos Indígenas*. Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos de Honduras. Accessed April 2, 2025. https://conadeh.hn/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Informe-en-el-marco-del-dia-de-los-pueblos-indigenas-.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

² Ídem, p. 7

³ IWGIA & Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, December 2021. Available at: <http://ojs.uc.cl/index.php/bjur/article/view/49825/39479>

⁴ Muñoz, Omar David. 2018. *El Impacto del Reclutamiento en la Educación y la Identidad Cultural de las Comunidades Indígenas*. Revista Investigaré. Accessed April 2, 2025. <https://revista-investigare.uexternado.edu.co/wp-content/uploads/sites/41/2018/06/Omar-Mun%CC%83oz.pdf>.

⁵ United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect. 2017. *Plan of Action for Religious Leaders and Actors to Prevent Incitement to Violence that Could Lead to Atrocity Crimes*. United Nations. Accessed April 2, 2025. <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/Plan%20of%20Action%20Advanced%20Copy.pdf>.

⁶ ReliefWeb. 2020. *Voces Silenciadas: La Violencia Contra las Personas Defensoras de la Tierra y el Medioambiente*. Accessed April 2, 2025. <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/voces-silenciadas-la-violencia-contra-las-personas-defensoras-de-la-tierra-y-el-medioambiente>.

⁷ Asociación para una Ciudadanía Participativa (ACI Participa). 2023. *Informe Situacional 2023*. Accessed April 2, 2025. <https://aciparticipa.org/informe2023/>.

⁸ Infobae. 2025. "Preocupa a Comisionado de Derechos Humanos en Honduras Legalidad del Estado de Excepción." *Infobae*, January 9, 2025. <https://www.infobae.com/america/agencias/2025/01/09/preocupa-a-comisionado-de-derechos-humanos-en-honduras-legalidad-del-estado-de-excepcion/>.

⁹ Swissinfo. 2025. "Piden Derogar Estado de Excepción en Honduras por Presuntas Violaciones a Derechos Humanos." *Swissinfo*, January 9, 2025. <https://www.swissinfo.ch/spa/piden-derogar-estado-de-excepcion-en-honduras-por-presuntas-violaciones-a-derechos-humanos/78225129>.

¹⁰ ABC. 2024. "Honduras Construirá una Megacárcel Contra el Crimen al Estilo Bukele." *ABC*, June 15, 2024. <https://www.abc.es/internacional/honduras-construira-megacarcel-crimen-estilo-bukele-20240615111304-nt.html?ref=https://www.google.com/>.

¹¹ ACLED. 2023. "Fighting Gangs Under the State of Exception in Honduras." *ACLED*, December 5, 2023. <https://acleddata.com/2023/12/05/fighting-gangs-under-the-state-of-exception-in-honduras/>.

¹² International Institute for Religious Freedom and the Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America. 2025. Violent Incident Database. <https://app.powerbi.com/view?r=eyJrljoiZjYxMDdjNzAtOTg3YS00MzUzLTlkOTAtODhjMGM1YjYyZTY4IiwidCI6IjdiMTY0ZjRiLTcwNWY1h0ThhLTJjOWJhZjZiNWQ2ZiIsImMiOiJ9>