



Award statement 24.09.2015

THE 2015 RAFTO PRIZE AWARDED TO HONDURAN PRIEST PADRE MELO FOR HIS DEFENCE OF FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION IN ONE OF THE MOST VIOLENT COUNTRIES IN THE WORLD

The 2015 Rafto Prize is awarded to the Honduran priest, radio activist and human rights campaigner Ismael Moreno Coto, better known as Padre Melo. The Prize is awarded in recognition of his use of the media in defence of freedom of expression and fundamental rights in Honduras, a country plagued by extreme violence. Journalists, human rights activists and others are subjected to serious harassment and death threats, and the murder statistics have been alarmingly high in the past ten years. In this situation, Padre Melo is a fearless spokesperson who works tirelessly to investigate and communicate the reasons for the violence and abuse committed against vulnerable groups in society.

'In proportion to its population, Honduras has the most alarming violation of the freedom of expression in the world.'

-Frank La Rue, UN Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression.

JESUIT PRIEST AND RADIO ACTIVIST PADRE MELO

Padre Melo is a 57-year-old Jesuit priest with a background in philosophy and theology who leads two important human rights organisations in the city of El Progreso in Honduras: Radio Progreso and ERIC (Equipo de Reflexión, Investigación y Comunicación). He also founded the Honduran edition of the regional journal *Envío* and the Honduran journal *A Mecate Corto*, both of which analyse topical social problems. Through his use of radio, his writings in journals and in his work as a priest, Padre Melo has become a strong public advocate of democracy, freedom of expression and human rights.

'If you don't see things from the viewpoint of the groups whose rights are being constantly violated and whose freedom of expression has been taken from them, then tell me: where is the Christian gospel?' - Padre Melo

Every Sunday, Padre Melo holds a service in a small chapel in El Progreso together with musicians, elderly local community leaders and young people. As he says himself, he wants to see God's splendour shine in the midst of all the cruelty. Padre Melo enjoys little support, however, from the Catholic hierarchy in Honduras. Despite the fact that Padre Melo has received several death threats and despite the pressure that Radio Progreso and ERIC are under from various powerful groups, the cardinal has not offered him any support.

Padre Melo is neither for nor against any specific political party. He is not just critical of the power elite, but also of the political left for not looking after people's interests. As a result of his strong public voice and searching analyses of society, he enjoys great respect among a wide range of social groups and organisations, including the trade union movement, farmers' organisations, indigenous peoples' organisations, residents' associations in towns and cities, LGBTI organisations, women's organisations and youth groups.

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HONDURAS IN CRISIS

The human rights situation in Honduras is precarious and it has deep historical roots. Until 1980, the country was largely under military rule, with periods of relatively unstable civilian government and very many coups. The political scene has been dominated by two parties, but opportunities to engage in civil politics have been limited. In June 2009, President Zelaya was overthrown in a coup d'état carried out by the economic and political elite with support from the military.

Violence was on the increase already before the coup, but it escalated afterwards. According to Amnesty International, attacks on journalists, indigenous and women's activists, and human rights activists have increased strongly in recent years. According to the UN, the murder rate in Honduras is the highest in the world. The violence is partly related to the fact that Honduras is an important hub for drug smuggling from South America to the USA, with the increased presence of drug cartels this entails. Weak state institutions, authoritarian traditions and extreme inequality that results in 40% of the population living in extreme poverty are other important factors.

Corruption and abuse of power by the police are a big and increasing problem in Honduras, and the judicial system is weak. Only 20% of murders are investigated, the courts are not independent and judges are suspended and subject to threats. Impunity from prosecution is widespread, and the UN Special Rapporteur concludes that, in most cases, the perpetrators of acts of violence go unpunished. Honduras has also seen an extreme militarisation of public security in response to the high crime rate, and accusations of human rights violations by the military are widespread.

RADIO PROGRESO – A DEFENDER OF FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

The lack of freedom of expression and freedom of the press is highlighted by very many international organisations. The national media are concentrated in the hands of the economic elite, which also dominates politics in Honduras. The few independent media that do exist are subject to constant attacks and threats, and many journalists are subjected to violent attacks and are forced to exercise self-censorship. According to the UN, 23 journalists and media employees were murdered between 2008 and 2013. PEN International emphasises that Honduras is one of the most dangerous countries in the world in which to work as a journalist.

Despite this risk, Radio Progreso has demonstrated the ability and the will to be a critical voice that stands up to the violence and human rights violations that plague Honduran society.

Padre Melo became director of the radio station in 2006. It reaches one and a half million listeners of a population of about eight million. The radio station gives a voice to human rights activists, trade unions, small farmers and organisations that rarely have access to the private and national media. It criticises the way in which democracy is practised in Honduras, the corruption and impunity from prosecution enjoyed by people in positions of authority, and policies that threaten natural resources and indigenous land rights. The station strongly criticised the military coup against Zelaya in 2009, following which it was occupied by the military and temporarily closed down. Padre Melo describes as follows how he and the team decided to reopen the radio station already the day after the coup:

"The same afternoon, we sat down and talked: What do we do? Already after our first exchange of views, we knew what we had to do. We are a radio station, we are a voice. If we do not have a voice, we are no longer a radio station. Let us defend the voice of the station, because we are



the voice of those without a voice of their own. We reopened the radio station on the morning of 29 June.'

As a result of its investigative journalism and the alternative information it broadcasts, the editors have received repeated threats, and Padre Melo has received death threats. Two of the radio station staff have been killed despite the Honduran government being ordered by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) to use all available means to protect their lives. The authorities did not investigate the threats, however, and did not take any protective measures. Reporters Without Borders has cited Radio Progreso as an example of global media that operate under constant threat.

DEFENDING NATURAL RESOURCES AND VULNERABLE GROUPS

In 2001, Padre Melo became director of ERIC, a centre for social analysis, research and communication about social and political issues. ERIC was founded in 1980 – a time of conflict in Central America – in order to shed light on the problems in rural Honduras. Today, ERIC helps local community leaders to develop organisations that can safeguard their rights to natural resources and work for social justice in Honduras. Spreading information is one of its most important tasks, and ERIC cooperates closely with Radio Progreso. In 2002, Padre Melo established a human rights department in ERIC. It helps the IACHR to file reports about cases relating to murdered human rights activists, while also maintaining a dialogue with the national authorities.

The problems in rural Honduras still have a central place in ERIC's work. Indigenous groups and small farmers who are fighting to retain their ownership rights to land are subjected to violence and rights violations, and the country's natural resources are increasingly being laid open to exploitation by international mining companies. A proposal has been put forward to give international companies territorial control of 'development zones' where they are granted licences to extract natural resources. This has given rise to strong local resistance, and ensuing prosecutions. Since 2013 alone, there have been 3,064 criminal prosecutions against leaders of indigenous groups and human rights campaigners.

Both ERIC and Radio Progreso are working actively to prevent major development projects being given the go-ahead without the local population being heard or having any influence. Sexual minorities are at particular risk of violence. According to Human Rights Watch, more than 90 LGBTI persons were murdered between 2009 and 2012, and many more have suffered violence and harassment. The Honduran police are sometimes involved in such acts, but they go unpunished. Padre Melo condemns the violence and advocates inclusion instead of discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation, and he supports the work of sexual minorities that organise in order to fight for their rights in a society where they are discriminated against and murdered.

NON-VIOLENT STRUGGLE FOR FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION IN THE MOST VIOLENT COUNTRY IN THE WORLD

Through the different media channels Padre Melo is in charge of, he provides alternative information about the causes of the human rights crisis in Honduras. He criticises the corrupt democratic and judicial institutions, the widespread impunity from prosecution and militarisation of the public domain. He condemns the oppressive means by which the authorities try to bring the violence under control and he underlines that peaceful resistance and organisation at the grassroots level is the best path to change. He also emphasises dialogue across the social divide despite his criticism of the political elite.



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By awarding Padre Melo the Rafto Prize 2015, the Rafto Foundation wishes to highlight the profound human rights crisis in Honduras, a country where freedom of expression is under constant attack and where the level of violence is extreme. The Rafto Foundation also wishes to highlight how important freedom of expression is in the defence of human rights, and to draw attention to the oppression and violence that journalists and other critical voices are subjected to when they expose abuses and the misuse of power.

Radio Progreso, ERIC, A Mecate Corto and the Honduran edition of Envío serve as spokespersons for a broad spectrum of social movements. Padre Melo's critical voice and struggle against all forms of abuse of power have put both his and his closest associates' lives in danger. Despite this, he continues his uncompromising endeavours for a more just Honduras. The Rafto Foundation wishes to turn the spotlight on Padre Melo's work as an example of how a non-violent struggle for freedom of expression and fundamental human rights can sow seeds of hope for a better future in one of the most violent countries in the world.

We strongly urge the Honduran authorities to bring to an end the extensive human rights abuses that plague the country: violations of fundamental rights such as the right to life and personal safety, serious violations of freedom of expression, systematic impunity from prosecution and discrimination.

We also urge the Norwegian authorities and the international community to use the means at their disposal to put pressure on the Honduran authorities to live up to the commitments they have undertaken by acceding to the UN's fundamental human rights conventions.

The Rafto Foundation, Bergen, Wednesday 19 August 2015

The Rafto Prize will be presented at 18.00 on Sunday 1 November 2015 at Den Nationale Scene (DNS) in Bergen.

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