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Attorney's kidnapping highlights dangers activists



Tracy L. Barnett March 10, 2023



Wixárika land defender and attorney Santos de la Cruz Carrillo in 2010, at the beginning of the fight to c
Canadian mining. (Tracy L. Barnett)

This past weekend was an intense and frightening one for many here in Western Mexico — at le; land and Indigenous people: high-profile Wixárika land defender and attorney Santos de la Cruz with his wife and two children, including a three-month-old baby.

They had been taking their pickup truck to a mechanic in a nearby town on the rugged backroad Santos' community of Bancos de Calitique, Durango, close to the state line with Nayarit. When r didn't answer his phone, his companions reported him missing and demanded that the governm the family — alive.

The kidnapping's timing in itself was suspicious because Santos is the leader of a half-century-old invaded Wixárika (also known as Huichol) territory. Just last week I saw that the battle had been home to celebrate this landmark victory with his community.

In Bancos de Calitique, Santos was preparing to begin the next steps of this restitution process ' weekend.



I use the transitive verb form here intentionally, as did other local media, because they didn't sin

Thanks to his community's swift and unrelenting efforts and intelligence work on the part of the alive and unharmed a couple of days later.

As soon as de la Cruz went missing, his community acted swiftly, with a publicity campaign and a targeted campaign at law enforcement. The government's Indigenous people's agency, INPI.

This kidnapping came at a time when Mexico has been named the deadliest place in the world for Indigenous people protecting their ancestral territories, according to the nonprofit Global Witness. In 2021, 10 land defenders were killed in Mexico.

And the problem goes far beyond Mexico, with violence against Indigenous land defenders prevalent in many countries.

the U.S. and Canada. Indigenous peoples, who comprise around 5% of the world's population, protect biodiversity. Now, extractive industries are coming full force after these Indigenous lands, seeking

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Santos' disappearance hit me hard because he is the first Wixárika person I ever met when I first joined the Jalisco Association for the Support of Indigenous Peoples (AJAGI), the leading group supporting defend and recover their territories here in western Mexico.

I went with the team of AJAGI that year to document that struggle and other territorial defense. It was such an eye-opening trip that it inspired me to come back and work with them to document the most sacred site, **Wirikuta**, from Canadian mining operations. Santos became the key spokesperson

De la Cruz, left, consults with Café Tacvba lead singer Rubén Albarrán, center, at a press conference announcing the Wirikuta Initiative in 2012 to raise money for defense of the Wixárika's sacred territory. (Tracy L. Barnett)

When I saw the announcement that Santos' long legal fight had at last been won, we connected

invited me to his community to come and write about it. I thought of his sweet family, of his special laugh and teasing demeanor, of his sharp mind and eloquent discourse in defense of Tatei Yuriei.

What happened to him and his family highlights the danger that land defenders face throughout the Wixárika territories are in particular crisis due to cartel activity. Regardless of the fact that they remain on the frontlines and are very vulnerable, and are far from the only ones.

The work that Santos and his colleagues are doing is a small attempt to shift the balance toward decolonialism. That reckoning has begun in the U.S. and Canada with the #landback movement, and individual landowners in the U.S. and Canada working with tribes to return portions of their ancestral lands and themselves occupying treaty lands that have been stolen.

The legal battles being fought by de la Cruz and his colleagues to recover land that has been invaded over 100 years are part of that. In that century, the government has not only turned a blind eye to the granting of titles to the land generations ago.

A small amount of progress was made when a presidential decree more than 50 years ago acknowledged that Indigenous communities have been fighting for restitution in the courts — and winning — ever since. But it

A parallel and similar fight has been waged by the Wixárika communities of San Sebastian and Tenejapa, who have established the ownership of 11,000 hectares across the state line in Nayarit around the ranchin, where they saw their leaders killed in the process.

Indigenous activist Miguel Vázquez, left, with Santos de la Cruz Carrillo in Huajimic, Jalisco, reviewing the map delineating the land returned to the Wixárika community of San Sebastian. (Abraham Pérez Vázquez)

In 2016, I went to San Sebastián to report on that land restitution and was received by Miguel Vázquez. That night at Miguel's home, ate breakfast at his table with his wife and the tiny daughter who adored me.

I traveled with him to the first land parcel that had been returned after the court officials had signed the deed. It was a tiny ranch, just a tiny fragment of those 11,000 hectares.

Local law enforcement had refused to accompany them to take possession of the land, and the ranch was owned by a community whose members had generations ago been wrongly granted title to that land by a corrupt official. They had a road and threatened violence.

So the Indigenous community organized.

More than 1,000 walked together to the land parcel, taking the back route through the mountainous terrain. They stayed in families as they set up their homestead, and for many weeks afterward until things had settled down.

Five months later, Miguel and his brother Agustín were dead, shot down in broad daylight by car

community had the courage to take up the issue again, this time under the leadership of schoolt who organized a 1,000-km march to the nation's capital to demand support from President López

De la Cruz, kneeling in front, second from left, was part of a 1,000-km march in 2022 to the nation's capital by Wixárika leader Jalisco and Nayarit to demand greater security for their people, targeted by cartels in the region. (Presidencia)

That march led to a visit by López Obrador to the Wixárika territories and a security plan for the as does justice for those who seek restitution of their lands.

Meanwhile, back in Santos' home territory, after the long legal fight and the victory, the most da he and his family are OK — for now. But I am painfully aware of his precarious position and that defenders.

It is time to stop the impunity and the violence, and time to look within to see what we can do to Santos who are putting their lives on the line to defend what remains of the Earth's wild places.

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