

The Murder of Demetrio López: Chronicle of Another Death Foretold

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(Photo of Demetrio Lopez with Vice-Minister Anibal Fernandez De Soto)

“I fear for my life because the threats were very serious, and according to [a credible source] it appears that they were not playing around with the threats.” That is how Demetrio López Cardenas denounced the death threats against him before the Attorney General’s Office (Fiscalía) in August of 2012.

López was the president of the Executive Board of the Community Council of La Caucana in Valle del Cauca. The prosecutor assigned to the case immediately asked the Commander of the Police in Buenaventura to carry out a risk assessment and provide protective measures for his family. Neither the risk assessment, nor the protective measures were implemented. Six months later, on February 23, Demetrio Lopez was shot dead in Buenaventura.

After the murder, Director of the National Protection Unit (Unidad Nacional de Protección, UNP) Andres Villamizar tweeted that Lopez had not asked for protection or denounced the threats against him. This is not true, as evidenced by his denouncement and the letter from the prosecutor. In August 2012, Lopez reported the threats against him and the Attorney General’s Office asked the police to protect him and his family.

Demetrio Lopez, born and raised in Buenaventura, was thirty years old and had three children with his wife. His family describes him as a noble man that was committed to promoting and defending the rights of his community. Beginning at an early age, he was instilled with a sense of responsibility and honesty, and he was loved by the community of La Caucana. His family was one of the founders of the Community Council. In addition to his role as a leader in the community, Demetrio was part of the team that monitored the Port Project of Aguas Dulces. His murder deeply affected all of the families that are part of the Community Council and the black movement in Buenaventura.

Lopez was running for the position of Legal Representative of the Community Council of La Caucana last August. This Community Council consists of 55 families and has a collective land title of 747 hectares.

Despite its modest size, the Community Council of La Caucana is located in a strategic area: the highway between Buga and Buenaventura passes through more than five Community Councils, and La Caucana is one of them. This important infrastructure project for the government and the country is subject to a process of free, prior, and informed consultation with all of the Community Councils that it will affect. Meanwhile, the construction continues and, as one leader manifested before the Vice-Minister of Interior on March 11, “Why previously consult when the highway is already built?”

In early February, the government declared that “previous consultations are a process for recognizing the identity of ethnic minorities, but they cannot be turned into blackmail.” However, it appears that those that are most blackmailed are the communities and leaders that defend their right to autonomy and self-determination, and those that don’t accept the blackmail are met with threats and death.

The case of Demetrio Lopez is one of many. Miller Angulo, a leader of AFRODES in Tumaco, received threats from the Aguilas Negras one month before he was murdered in December of 2012. Members of the Executive Board of the Community Council of La Esperanza, which is also located along the highway between Buga and Buenaventura, are currently displaced because of threats against them. The Community Council of Plata Bahía Málaga is receiving threats again after the government recognized their right to more than 30,000 additional hectares for their collective land title last December. They are also receiving threats because the Legal Representative, Hoover Carabali, submitted a writ for protection of their fundamental rights, which was recognized by the Constitutional Court in Sentence 823 of 2012. Meanwhile, the government avoids its responsibility to protect its own citizen as it moves forward with the projects that violate their rights.

Demetrio Lopez was threatened twice on the election day in La Caucana. In his report to the Attorney General’s Office, Lopez said that the threat declared “if he do not renounce as president or your candidature they would fill he and his family with lead.” However, he continued with his campaign and insisted that the vote should be private in order to “guarantee that the people could vote according to their consciousness and without pressure.” However, the pressures to manipulate the elections were very strong, and, despite the fact that it appeared that Lopez won, he was not recognized as the winner. According to his official denouncement, after he received the second threat, people from the community recommended that he “go to the Attorney General’s Office to report the

threat in writing so that they would investigate where the threat came from and who could be behind it.”

Lopez officially impugned the elections on September 3, 2012. The Vice-Minister for Participation and Equality, Aníbal Fernández, signed a resolution on February 7, 2013, that not only recognized that Lopez was threatened but also nullified the August election. All of the officials that saw the resolution should have solicited his protection as their duty, just like the prosecutor did on August 26, 2012. Two weeks later Lopez was murdered in Buenaventura.

Two suspects in the murder of Demetrio were captured in the last few weeks. The government must ensure their protection and guarantee an investigation into the intellectual authors of the case. It must also guarantee the effective protection of all of the threatened leaders and communities, such as La Caucana, La Esperanza, and Bahía Málaga, so that this does not happen again.

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