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Guatemala: Defamatory statements against human rights defender Jorge Santos and UDEFEGUA

On 18 May 2023, Ronald García Navarajo, a former bank manager in Guatemala, declared in a public hearing that human rights defender **Jorge Santos** had used influence peddling to facilitate the banker's exit from the country to evade justice.

[Jorge Santos](#) is the General Coordinator of the human rights organisation Protection Unit for Human Rights Defenders Guatemala (Unidad de Protección a Defensoras y Defensores de Derechos Humanos Guatemala "UDEFEGUA"). The organisation supports human rights defenders by empowering their work and improving their security. UDEFEGUA monitors attacks against human rights defenders, offers legal consultancies, risk analysis, security plans and security among other supports. UDEFEGUA works in Guatemala and other countries in the region such as Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua and southern Mexico. UDEFEGUA is a member of the [HRD Memorial](#) and is a long standing ally of Front Line Defenders on the ground.

On 18 May 2023, during a public hearing on the case against the Director of El Periodico, journalist José Rubén Zamora, Ronald García Navarajo made defamatory statements about the human rights defender Jorge Santos. José Rubén Zamora is facing charges of money laundering, and the main witness for the prosecution is Ronald García Navarajo who is currently on parole and had previously been a fugitive for 480 days. In his statement, Ronald García Navarajo declared that the accused journalist had colluded with human rights defender Jorge Santos by influence peddling to obtain a passport that would facilitate Ronald García Navarajo's exit from the country in order to evade justice.

UDEFEGUA has worked for the past 22 years supporting human rights defenders, including working with those who have faced criminal charges as a reprisal for their work in defence of human rights and freedoms. All of their actions have been carried out in compliance with the relevant legal mechanisms. UDEFEGUA denied any relation between the human rights defender Jorge Santos and Ronald García Navarajo, as well as any prior meeting with him or with the accused journalist José Rubén Zamora.

The defamatory statements made against the human rights defender Jorge Santos constitute a targeted attack against him and pose risks to his security and that of his family. These events have occurred in a context of systematic repression of journalists and human rights organisations in Guatemala, which has led to smear campaigns and a [rise in criminalisation](#) of their work.

Front Line Defenders expresses its concern at the acts of defamation and stigmatisation towards Jorge Santos and UDEFEGUA, as it believes these are linked to their legitimate work in defence of human rights. Front Line Defenders reiterates its call for the authorities in Guatemala to adopt and implement effective mechanisms and policies that recognise the valuable contribution of the work of human rights defenders to Guatemalan society. The organisation also recalls the government's obligation to guarantee the personal integrity of all human rights defenders.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Guatemala to:

1. Publicly condemn the defamatory statements made against human rights defenders Jorge Santos and UDEFEGUA;
2. Initiate an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation into the false accusations and defamatory statements against the human rights defenders;
3. Take all necessary measures to guarantee the physical and psychological integrity and security of Jorge Santos, in consultation with the human rights defender;
4. Take measures to put an end to attacks against human rights defenders in Guatemala, so that they can continue their activities in defence of human rights without fear of reprisals, in accordance with Guatemala's international human rights obligations.