

14 November 2017

## **Guatemala: Human rights defender Jerson Antonio Xitumul Morales detained in Izabal**

On 11 November 2017, journalist and indigenous rights defender, Jerson Antonio Xitumul Morales, was detained in El Estor, Izabal, Guatemala. The human rights defender has been targeted in a process of criminalisation of people who struggle for the preservation of the environment in El Estor.

Jerson Antonio Xitumul Morales is a human rights defender and journalist at Prensa Comunitaria (Community Press). He was recently covering the situation in El Estor, where the indigenous Maya-Q'eqchi' community opposes the effects of mining activities in the region which are polluting Izabal lake and its surroundings, affecting the communities' and endangering their livelihood. The journalist was documenting the pollution and supporting the communities in their effort to protect their land.

On 21 July 2017, Jerson Antonio Xitumul Morales and members of Gremial de Pescadores Artesanales – GPA (Artisanal Fishermen's Guild), including [Juan Eduardo Caal Suram](#), Eduardo Bin Poou, Tomas Che Cual, Cristobal Pop Coc, Vicente Rax Pop, Carlos Ernesto Choc Chub, along with journalists reporting on the pollution in El Estor and its surroundings, were informed that a criminal case was being brought against them. On 11 August 2017, the Judge of the Criminal, Narcoactivity and Environmental Crimes' Court of the Izabal department issued warrants for their arrest. The human rights defenders have been charged with threats, incitement to commit crimes, illicit association, unlawful assembly and demonstrations, damages to private property, and illegal detention. The charges were levelled following false complaints and accusations made by executives of Compañía Guatemalteca de Níquel – CGN (Guatemalan Nickel Company), whose activities are contributing to the pollution and environmental damage in El Estor.

On 27 May 2017, the Guatemalan government unilaterally abandoned negotiations with GPA, which were organised in an attempt to find a solution to the problems of the community caused by mining activities and pollution. The Guatemalan government has continuously failed to comply with international and national legislation along with judicial decisions demanding it to respect the rights of indigenous communities.

This is the latest arrest in a series of detentions and violations aimed to hinder the work of human rights defenders in the region. On 27 May 2017, [Carlos Maaz Coc](#) was [shot dead](#) by the National Civil Police Riot Unit during a peaceful demonstration carried out against the mining activities in El Estor. Front Line Defenders has also previously reported on the [arbitrary detention](#) of Juan Eduardo Caal Suram on 11 October 2017, charged based on false accusations in the same case as Jerson Antonio Xitumul Morales. On 4 February 2017, [Abelino Chub Caal](#), an indigenous Maya-Q'eqchi' defender, was detained and falsely charged with aggravated land grabbing, arson, coercion, illicit association, and belonging to illicit armed groups. He remains in detention as he waits for his case to be judged.

Front Line Defenders is deeply concerned about the arrest of human rights defender Jerson Antonio Xitumul Morales, as well as the ongoing criminalisation of indigenous rights defenders, members of GPA and journalists reporting on pollution in the region.

**Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Guatemala to:**

1. Immediately and unconditionally release Jerson Antonio Xitumul Morales, as Front Line Defenders believes that he is being held solely as a result of his legitimate and peaceful work in the defence of human rights;
2. Immediately drop all charges against Jerson Antonio Xitumul Morales, and members of GPA Eduardo Bin Poou, Tomas Che Cual, Cristobal Pop Coc, Vicente Rax Pop, Carlos Ernesto Choc Chub, Juan Eduardo Caal Suram, along with the reporting journalists, as it is believed that the charges are solely related to their legitimate and peaceful work in defence of human rights;
3. Take all necessary measures, in consultation with the defenders, to guarantee the physical and psychological integrity and security of El Estor Maya-Q'eqchi' communities, including members of GPA;
4. Cease targeting all human rights defenders in Guatemala and guarantee in all circumstances that they are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions including judicial harassment.