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Ecuador: Criminalisation of indigenous leader Leonidas Iza following indigenous justice process

On 3 September 2025, indigenous leader and human rights defender **Leonidas Iza** appeared before the Cotopaxi Provincial Prosecutor's Office to give a statement as part of an investigation where he is accused of kidnapping. These accusations arose from the alleged detention of three police officers by community members of San Ignacio in the parroquia Toscazo on 18 August 2025, after they were caught surveilling the indigenous leader. The police officers were released after a three-day indigenous justice process - which is recognised in the Constitution of the Republic of Ecuador.

[Leonidas Iza](#) is an indigenous Kichwa Panzaleco human rights defender, a member of the Union of Peasant Organisations of the North of Cotopaxi (UNOCANC) which is part of the Indigenous and Peasant Movement of Cotopaxi (MICC) and former President of the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE). He has actively participated in the Indigenous Movement of Ecuador for over 15 years as a human rights defender for indigenous peoples, the nature and peasant sectors. Leonidas Iza has been previously criminalised for exercising his legitimate right to protest peacefully, including being [arbitrarily detained](#) in 2022 during the national strike and unfairly accused of being the mastermind behind violent acts. With this new legal proceeding, Iza has accumulated fifty trials for defending the collective rights of peoples and nationalities in Ecuador.

On 3 September 2025, Leonidas Iza appeared before the Prosecutor's Office to give a statement. He had been notified that he was required to do so on 26 August 2025 as part of an investigation into the alleged kidnapping of three police officers. Their arrest was carried out within the framework and powers of indigenous justice, an instrument recognised and protected by the Ecuadorian Constitution since 1998. The police officers were released on 21 August, after an indigenous justice public hearing was held and concluded with the officers acknowledging the surveillance and harassment, and offering public apologies to the community and indigenous leader. During the three-day process, the police officers' cell phones were also examined, uncovering an entire espionage network established to monitor indigenous leaders and representatives; Iza alone had been assigned a team of sixteen high-ranking agents, including sergeants and lieutenants. On 21 August 2025, the ordinary justice system also accepted an *habeas corpus* requested by the National Police on behalf of the three officers. The National Police also filled a kidnapping complaint against the UNOCANC, whose members are accused of holding the officers in custody since 18 August 2025.

On the afternoon of 18 August 2025, indigenous human rights defender Leonidas Iza was at his home in the community of San Ignacio, Cotopaxi, when he noticed three unknown people driving past his house for the third time, filming and taking photos. When he went out to confront them, the people in the car tried to escape by driving away at high speed, almost running him over. The human rights defender and other community members managed to stop them. The three people

were later identified as members of the National Intelligence Unit for Citizen Security and Public Order, and were detained by members of the indigenous community of San Ignacio to be subjected to indigenous justice proceedings. The following day, on 19 August 2025, the State Attorney General's Office issued a statement confirming that the three individuals detained were police officers and that they were in the community "collaborating with proceedings in a previous investigation," without providing further details or specifying whether this was related to Leonidas Iza.

On the same day, the officers' cell phones were examined during the investigation phase of the indigenous justice process, revealing videos showing they had been monitoring Leonidas Iza since Friday, 15 August 2025, but the records went back much further. Later on that same day, an initial public hearing convened by the UNOCANC was held in Cotopaxi and attended by hundreds of people from the community. During the hearing, the information gathered from the cellphones was corroborated with statements provided by the police officers.

On 20 August 2025, the police officers' cellphones were examined again, revealing evidence of more than five thousand chats, documents, and videos of constant surveillance of Leonidas Iza and other indigenous leaders. The community also identified that the material discovered referred to Leonidas Iza by a nickname and that there was a plan to "disappear" him. On 21 August 2025, an indigenous justice public hearing was held again in Cotopaxi, in which the participating indigenous leaders declared the three detained police officers guilty of invading their territory, ordering them to offer a public apology to Leonidas Iza and the community, to then be released.

The Ecuadorian Constitution establishes that "the authorities of indigenous communities, peoples, and nationalities shall exercise jurisdictional functions, based on their ancestral traditions and their own laws, within their territorial jurisdiction." According to the information publicly available, the events occurred within the territory of the indigenous community of San Ignacio and to the detriment of an indigenous leader - Leonidas Iza, who participated in the proceedings as the affected party. The hearings were conducted in an open, peaceful, and transparent manner in the community, with broad citizen participation and in accordance with constitutional and human rights. The hearing was also streamed on media platforms and attended by members of the Red Cross and the Ombudsman's Office (Defensoría del Pueblo) to ensure the physical condition of the police officers. Dozens of civil society organisations expressed their solidarity with the indigenous leader and issued manifestos and statements condemning the harassment.

Front Line Defenders is deeply concerned about the ongoing targeting of indigenous human rights defender Leonidas Iza, including the surveillance he has been subjected to. The organisation also expresses concern about the potential criminalisation of Iza following the legitimate implementation of an indigenous justice process and the delegitimisation of such processes by the ordinary justice system. Various Latin American countries, including Colombia (1991), Peru (1993), Bolivia (2009), Ecuador (1998) and Venezuela (1999), constitutionally recognise indigenous justice mechanisms. The Ecuadorian Constitution also stipulates that the state must "ensure that the decisions of indigenous jurisdictions are respected by public institutions and authorities".

Finally, Front Line Defenders expresses concern about the lack of institutional action regarding the possible surveillance plan for social and indigenous leaders revealed by the indigenous justice process carried out in the community of San Ignacio. The justice systems often are quick to act against human rights defenders, yet slow to respond when they are facing attacks, which are regularly met with slow and inadequate investigations, contributing to a climate of impunity and putting defenders at greater risk. Front Line Defenders recalls that this situation is occurring in an

increasingly worrying context of persecution and criminalisation of defenders of human rights and the nature in Ecuador.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Ecuador to:

1. Immediately cease the surveillance and criminalisation of indigenous defender Leonidas Iza and other human rights and nature defender in Ecuador;
2. Take measures to ensure that government officials or other public figures refrain from taking actions that violate indigenous jurisdiction and the legitimate work of indigenous defenders;
3. Prevent the abusive and improper use of unjustified surveillance measures against human rights and nature defenders, and civil society organisations;
4. Ensure in all circumstances that all human rights and nature defenders in Ecuador are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions, including judicial harassment.

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