

9 April 2018

Guatemala: Threats, attacks and killings against those connected to indigenous rights organisation COMUNDICH

On 29 March 2018, a group of hitmen killed Crisanto Garcia Ohajaca, the uncle of the **COMUNDICH** Executive Board vice-president, Eugenio Ohajaca. The leader of the Ch'orti' de Morola community, which COMUNDICH is currently assisting, received a death threat two days after Crisanto Garcia Ohajaca's murder. In the past few weeks, threats and attacks against those associated with the indigenous rights organisation, Coordinadora de Asociaciones y Comunidades para el Desarrollo Integral del Pueblo Ch'orti' COMUNDICH, have increased.

[COMUNDICH](#) is an indigenous rights organisation that currently supports forty-eight Mayan Ch'orti' communities in eastern Guatemala. These indigenous communities, which live along the border with Honduras, suffer from exceptional levels of poverty and malnutrition.

The Ch'orti' de Morola community, which reside in the municipality of Camotán in Chiquimula, is being illegally pushed off their lands by means of violence and through a corrupt justice system. Large landholders in the area are requesting that the local administration acknowledge their claim on the land. COMUNDICH is pursuing lawsuits in national courts to have their comunal property recognised and to restitute their ancestral indigenous lands. Those involved with COMUNDICH have consequently been the subject of threats and attacks.

On 29 March 2018, at approximately 17.00, Crisanto Garcia Ohajaca was killed by a group of hitmen, while he was conducting Holy Thursday mass. Crisanto Garcia Ohajaca was not involved in the land restitution action, but he is likely to have been targeted for his family links to COMUNDICH. His knowledge surrounding the killing of another member of the Ch'orti' de Morola community, Francisco Ohajaca Guzman, who was killed in 2010 for his work on indigenous land rights, could also have been a motive. Camotán police visited the Ch'orti' de Morola community five hours after the murder and left the next day. The perpetrators have remained in the community as an act of intimidation, asking for the whereabouts of indigenous leaders.

On 31 March 2018, the indigenous leader of the Ch'orti' de Morola community was informed by a member of the Consejo de Tierra de Morola (Morola Land Council) that the hitmen responsible for Crisanto Garcia Ohajaca's murder were looking for him.

COMUNDICH believes that these threats are part of a coordinated effort on the part of the landholders to displace members of the Ch'orti' of Morola community, and to force them to withdraw their land restitution claims.

Over the past decade, seven leaders of the forty-eight Mayan Ch'orti' communities represented by COMUNDICH, have been murdered. In May 2017, another seven indigenous leaders were arrested, and remain wrongly imprisoned.

Human rights defenders continue to experience targeted threats and attacks in Guatemala. Few attacks against human rights defenders are investigated and even fewer result in convictions. The climate of impunity regarding human rights violations increases the risk to human rights defenders, especially those who live in remote areas, that are more vulnerable to attacks. Human rights defenders operate in an extremely hostile environment in Guatemala, with [483 attacks](#) against them recorded in 2017 by local NGOs, the majority of these incidents involved indigenous and land rights defenders.

Front Line Defenders condemns the killing of Crisanto Garcia Ohajaca and acts of intimidation and threats carried out against members of indigenous community Ch'orti' of Morola, which it believes is related to their legitimate work in defence of indigenous rights and land restitution.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Guatemala to:

1. Carry out an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation into the killing of Crisanto Garcia Ohajaca and the threats and acts of intimidation against members of COMUNDICH and the indigenous community Ch'orti' of Morola, with a view to publishing the results and bringing those responsible to justice in accordance with international standards;
2. Take all necessary measures to guarantee the physical and psychological integrity members COMUNDICH and indigenous community Ch'orti' of Morola, in consultation with the beneficiaries;
3. Carry out a fact finding mission on the risks and threats the Ch'orti' community of Morola is facing;
4. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Guatemala are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions.