

11 May 2017

## **Venezuela: Intimidation against human rights defenders Yonaide Sánchez and Nelsón Freitez**

On 8 May 2017, while in Barquisimeto, Lara, the house of human rights defenders **Yonaide Sánchez** and **Nelsón Freitez** was broken into for the third time and their belongings were rummaged by unidentified persons. The invaders left a pickaxe and two knives in the dining area, which appears to be a way to intimidate the defenders.

Yonaide Sánchez and Nelsón Freitez are professors at the *Cátedra de Derechos Humanos de la Universidad de Lisandro Alvarado (Human Rights Program of the Lisandro Alvarado University)*, in Barquisimeto, Lara. Both defenders have been active in the media, academic, social, popular and community sectors of Barquisimeto in Lara state, with a focus on accompanying victims of State violence and on supporting other human rights organisations. Nelsón Freitez was previously a member of the *Comité de Víctimas contra la Impunidad del Estado Lara (Committee of Victims against Impunity of the Lara State)*, an organisation which works with the relatives of victims of extra judicial executions by law enforcement and military forces in the region during the government of General Luis Reyes Reyes in Lara state.

General Luis Reyes Reyes is a member of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) who has held positions in the national executive, including as Minister under the Presidency of former President, Hugo Chávez. The General is currently president of CORPOLARA, a corporation created and sponsored by the federal government, with [powers](#) parallel to the government of the state, such as improving, evaluating and controlling public administration, administering public resources, and implementing public policies.

On 8 May 2017, when the human rights defenders arrived home, at approximately 8.00pm, they noticed that someone had entered their home and rummaged through their belongings. In the dining area, they found a pickaxe along with two knives, which they understood to be a threatening and intimidating message.

This is the third time that their home has been invaded by unidentified persons. In November 2016, their home was broken into and several of their belongings, including computers, were stolen. The second theft happened in April 2017, when their belongings were also taken while they were not at home.

Since 19 April 2017, the Venezuelan government has been implementing the Plan Zamora in the Barquisimeto region. Plan Zamora is a military plan to enforce strict surveillance, monitoring and patrol in determined regions, with increased military and police presence. The enforcement of the Plan in several areas of Venezuela has resulted in mass arrests and in civilians being accused of and tried for military crimes, such as insubordination, in military courts.

Recent mass protests at national level have generated a series of mobilisations and demonstrations, including in Barquisimeto which have been disproportionately suppressed by the Guardia Nacional

Bolivariana - GNB (Bolivarian National Guard). In some cases, repressions have received the cooperation of armed civilians and have taken place during night hours in residential areas.

Yonaide Sánchez and Nelsón Freitez have worked together with the *Consejo de Estado por la Paz y la Justicia en Lara – CEPAZ-Lara (State Council for Peace and Justice in Lara)* as mediators attempting to cease the repression so as to be able to take care of the wounded. The human rights defenders have condemned the violence and blamed the Commander of the *Zona Operativa de Defensa Integral de Lara – ZODI-Lara (Defence Operative Zone of Lara)*, José Rafael Torrealba, as responsible for excessive use of force and violations of human rights by the military and paramilitary in the region.

Yonaide Sánchez and Nelsón Freitez consider that the robberies and threats they have been subjected to have a direct link with the reports they issued about the actions of the military and paramilitary troops.

Front Line Defenders is concerned at the acts carried out against Yonaide Sánchez and Nelsón Freitez, as well as against other human rights organisations and defenders in Venezuela, and it believes the acts against them are directly linked to their legitimate work in the defence of human rights. Front Line Defenders is further concerned with the general situation in Venezuela, including the state of emergency currently in force, and the numerous reports of ongoing violations against human rights defenders.

### **Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Venezuela to:**

1. Carry out an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation into the break-ins and intimidation against **Yonaide Sánchez** and **Nelsón Freitez**, with a view to publishing the results and bringing those responsible to justice in accordance with international standards;
2. Take all necessary measures, in consultation with the human rights defenders, to guarantee their physical and psychological integrity and security;
3. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Venezuela are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions.