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Honduras: police launches tear gas at family members and individuals connected to Hedme Castro

On 6 April 2019, in the city of Choluteca, the National Honduran Police launched tear gas at individuals connected to the human rights organisation **ACI PARTICIPA**. Police officers on motorcycles threw a tear gas grenade at Julia Vargas, the mother of ACI PARTICIPA's director **Hedme Castro**. On the same evening, a tear gas grenade was also thrown at the office of a TV network where Hedme Castro's sister and a volunteer of ACI PARTICIPA were working. A third grenade was directed at a softball camp, where members of the La Libertad neighbourhood were gathered.

[Hedme Castro](#) is a woman human rights defender and the director of Asociación para una Ciudadanía Participativa - ACI PARTICIPA. The organisation promotes citizen participation in decision-making as well as the knowledge and exercise of civil and political rights. It also pushes governmental institutions to act in accordance with the principles of social equality and transparency, in particular with reference to the administration of resources. Since the opening of a regional office in Choluteca, ACI PARTICIPA has increasingly denounced the human rights violations against local community members, especially in relation to police brutality.

On the evening of 6 April 2019, around 7pm, uniformed members of the National Honduran Police arrived on identified motorcycles at the door of Julia Vargas, mother of woman human rights defender Hedme Castro, in the neighborhood of La Libertad. A police officer wearing a helmet launched a [tear gas grenade](#) to an area outside the front door, where Julia Vargas was sitting, in front of a number of witnesses. The woman, who is 90 years old and suffers from multiple health issues affecting her mobility and breathing, was almost hit by the grenade. Nonetheless, the smoke severely affected her breathing.

On the same evening, National Police officers appeared at the headquarters of the television channel Metro TV, where Hedme Castro's sister Elizabeth de López and ACI PARTICIPA's volunteer Melissa Hernández were working. A tear gas grenade was thrown inside the building, interrupting their work. Later, another tear gas grenade was fired at families with children playing at a softball camp in La Libertad, according to witnesses. The tear gas from the grenade thrown at the camp also reached the nearby Hospital del Sur, affecting its patients.

Over the past year, members of the Choluteca community have been protesting against government policies validating extractive activities in the region, regardless of their environmental impact. The manifestations have taken place every Saturday and Wednesday and have often been met with police brutality. However, on 6 April 2019, the police did not act in areas related to the protests. Such unjustified acts of violence raise concerns that they might constitute a reprisal for the human rights work of Hedme Castro and ACI PARTICIPA.

Front Line Defenders condemns the police brutality in Choluteca, which appears to be targeted towards family members and individuals associated with the organisation ACI PARTICIPA. Front Line Defenders remains concerned about the repeated intimidation attempts against Hedme Castro, since this is not the first time it draws attention to [attacks](#) and [threats](#) suffered by the human rights defender as a result of her work, in particular when exposing human rights violations by the police.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Honduras to:

1. Condemn the reprisals against Hedme Castro and ACI PARTICIPA, motivated by their peaceful human rights work in Choluteca;
2. Carry out an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation into the allegations of human rights violations by police officials against family members of Hedme Castro and persons associated with ACI PARTICIPA in Choluteca;
3. Ensure that members of security forces act in compliance with the Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials, as well as the relevant international standards on the use of less lethal weapons;
4. Take all necessary measures to guarantee the physical and psychological integrity and security of Hedme Castro, her family members, as well as members of ACI PARTICIPA, in consultation with them;
5. Cease the targeting of all human rights defenders in Honduras 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.