

7 August 2019

## **Guatemala: Smear campaign against CCCND and COMUNDICH in relation to deaths of workers of the *Corredor Interoceánico* project**

On 2 August 2019, the Facebook group Public-Private Alliance, (*Alianza Pública Privada desde lo Local*) managed by *ODEPAL internacional*, founding group and promoter of the *Corredor Interoceánico* project, implied a connection between members of the *Central Campesina Ch'orti Nuevo Día* and the *Coordinadora de Asociaciones y Comunidades para el Desarrollo Integral del Pueblo Ch'orti'* and the death of three of its employees working in the *Corredor Interoceánico*.

[The Central Campesina Chortí Nuevo Día](#) (CCCND), works with Maya Ch'orti indigenous communities in the Chiquimula region of Guatemala. The organisation provides legal support and visibility to these communities, who face threats and human rights violations due to the implementation of hydroelectric and mining projects in their territories.

[Coordinadora de Asociaciones y Comunidades para el Desarrollo Integral del Pueblo Ch'orti'](#) (COMUNDICH) is an organisation dedicated to the protection of the rights of indigenous peoples, currently representing 48 indigenous communities belonging to the Mayan Ch'orti' Pueblo in eastern Guatemala. The Ch'orti' communities located in the municipalities of Camotán and La Unión in the department of Chiquimula, near the border with Honduras, experience extreme levels of poverty and malnutrition.

On 2 August 2019, *ODEPAL internacional*, on its Facebook page called the Public-Private Alliance, published a list of names and photographs of indigenous and community leaders asking for their collaboration in shedding light on the murder of three workers in the *Corredor Interoceánico* project. The photographs include **Domingo Vásquez**, principal of the Indigenous Council of the Pelillo Negro Community, (Jocotán Chiquimula), **Dámaso Aldana**, indigenous authority of the Matasano Community, (Jocotán Chiquimula), **Hector Ovidio Vasques**, community authority of the Lela Chancó Community, (Camotán Chiquimula), **Eloida Castillo**, indigenous authority of the community Campanario Avanzada (La Unión, Zacapa) and president of COMUNDICH, and **Rodimiro Castillo**, director of COMUNDICH.

On 8 July 2019, seven people hired by *Sistema Interoceánico de Guatemala S.A* (SIGSA), the company hired to build the *Corredor Interoceánico*, went to the Lelá Chancó Village, in Camotán, Department of Chiquimula, to, according to the company, carry out topographical measurements. The bodies of three of the workers were found half decapitated in the same night. The next day, the company published on the Public-Private Alliance Facebook page a post containing the names and pictures of CCCND and COMUNDICH leaders asking them to collaborate in clarifying the kidnapping and murder of its workers. Asking for information about a crime in a context of tension regarding the implementation of projects in the communities, and of repeated attacks against HRDs, could be misunderstood and misused. This could contribute to increasing the environment of hostility for the defenders and lead to violence against them.

This is not the first time that [CCCND](#) and [COMUNDICH](#) have been targeted in an attempt to delegitimise their work. Front Line Defenders is concerned about the latest smear campaign, which seems to be carried out against some of their members in order to undermine their valuable work in defence of indigenous, environmental and land rights in Guatemala.

**Front Line Defenders urges the Guatemalan authorities to:**

1. Carry out an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation into the murder of the three project workers, with a view to publishing the results and bringing those responsible to justice, in accordance with international standards;
2. Take proactive steps to counter the smear campaign against CCCND and COMUNDICH and publicly acknowledge the legitimacy and importance of the human rights work of the communities and the need for their protection by all actors;
3. Take all necessary measures to guarantee the physical and psychological integrity and security of all members of CCCND and COMUNDICH and their families, as well as all indigenous Maya Chortí people, in consultation with them;
4. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Guatemala can carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free from all restrictions.

**Furthermore, Front Line Defenders urges the company *ODEPAL internacional* to use the appropriate legal avenues for further investigation instead of issuing statements on social media. Such posts could be misinterpreted and misused, particular in a context of tensions surrounding projects affecting indigenous communities in Guatemala.**