

3 June 2022

Mexico: Arbitrary arrest of Tzeltal human rights defender Manuel Santiz Cruz

On 29 May 2022, Tzeltal indigenous human rights defender [Manuel Santiz Cruz](#) was arbitrarily detained along with two other people by members of the municipal police in San Juan Cancuc, the municipal capital of Chiapas, during an operation carried out in conjunction with the National Guard and the Mexican Army. The human rights defender was transferred to the Indigenous Justice Prosecutor's Office in the municipality of San Cristóbal de Las Casas without being notified of the reason for his detention and was held for over 24 hours without access to a translator or a lawyer.

Manuel Santiz Cruz is an indigenous Tzeltal human rights defender and president of the Human Rights Committee of the parish of San Juan Evangelista in the municipality of San Juan Cancuc, Chiapas. Manuel Santiz Cruz's work focuses on the defence of the rights of indigenous peoples, particularly the right to autonomy and self-determination.

After being arrested on the morning of 29 May 2022, human rights defender Manuel Santiz Cruz was transferred to the Office of the Prosecutor for Indigenous Justice in the municipality of San Cristóbal de Las Casas. 24 hours later, the authorities filed false charges of "drug possession" against the human rights defender. On 31 May 2022, Manuel Santiz Cruz was released and immediately re-arrested by the Indigenous Justice Prosecutor's Office for the crime of "aggravated homicide".

On 1 June 2022, relatives and colleagues of Manuel Santiz Cruz went to the Control Court, where two more people were arrested without arrest warrants: Agustín Pérez Velasco and Martín Pérez Domínguez, who testified on Manuel's behalf, have been charged with "aggravated homicide". In the courtroom, members of the legal team of the Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas and international human rights observers of the organisation SweFOR were threatened by the state police.

The arbitrary detentions take place in a context in which inhabitants of the municipality of San Juan Cancuc have opposed the military presence in their territory and the construction of a highway project that would connect San Cristóbal de las Casas with the region of Palenque. The highway is part of the development of mega tourism projects in the region that have been promoted by the government without free, priorly informed and culturally appropriate consultation with the indigenous communities who are defending their territory and their human rights.

Front Line Defenders reiterates its deep concern regarding the arbitrary detention of Manuel Santiz Cruz and other members of the community, which appear to be directly linked to legitimate collective work in favour of indigenous peoples' rights, in particular self-determination and

autonomy. The arbitrary arrests appear to be part of a broader strategy to repress communities working peacefully for the recognition of their rights to consultation for autonomy and self-determination of indigenous peoples.

Front Line Defenders urges the Mexican authorities to:

1. Drop the fabricated charges against human rights defender Manuel Santiz Cruz and the other people detained and allow his immediate and unconditional release;
2. Conduct an impartial investigation into the criminalisation of the human rights defender as well as the irregularities of his arbitrary detention;
3. Bring those responsible to justice, in compliance with international standards;
4. Adopt all necessary measures, in consultation with the human rights defender, to guarantee his physical and psychological integrity and safety, as well as that of his family members and legal representatives;
5. Guarantee that human rights defenders and indigenous communities in Mexico are able to continue their human rights activities without fear of reprisals and without restrictions.