

25 October 2019

Venezuela: Harassment and threats by Lara state officials against human rights defenders

Since 10 October 2019 intimidation and threats by senior regional officials and members of the police against members of **REDHELARA** have intensified. These attacks are taking place in the context of an economic and humanitarian crisis in Venezuela in which the work of human rights defenders has become crucial to spread accurate information amongst the population and defend their rights.

[La Red de Derechos Humanos del Estado Lara](#) (The Lara State Human Rights Network or REDHELARA) brings together seventeen non-governmental organisations in the state of Lara, Venezuela. The network acts by coordinating efforts to promote human rights and assist human rights defenders to carry out their work in a state that has acutely suffered from the repercussions of Venezuela's political and humanitarian crisis. REDHELARA supports human rights defenders who have faced arbitrary detentions, police attacks on freedoms of expression and association as well as those whose relatives have been victims of extrajudicial killings.

On 10 October 2019, human rights defender **Alcides Pérez** went to document maintenance and restoration of water pipes in the Iribarren municipality, which had been requested by its citizens for nine months. While he was photographing and videoing the work, he was approached by a group of individuals linked to the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), the clerk of the Lara State Government and the Mayor of the Iribarren municipality. They insulted him for appearances he has made in the media denouncing the lack of access to energy and water and they attempted to confiscate his phone.

On 15 October 2019, human rights defender **José Miguel Romero** organised a protest against the arbitrary name change of an important parish in Barquisimeto which was made without consultation of its residents. Days later, members of the Bolivarian National Police (PNB), in an act of intimidation, approached members of the community, repeatedly asking neighbours and relatives for with the exact physical description of the human rights defender. In the past, José Miguel Romero has been detained for more than eight hours for participating in peaceful protests and was forced to sign a document which prevented him from participating in political affairs, public marches or protests.

Human rights defender Omar Escalona has denounced the delays in the investigations into extrajudicial killings of participants of local protests in El Tocuyo, and condemned the impunity enjoyed by those who committed the crimes. On 15 October 2019, he was approached by a high-ranking official from the mayor's office of the Morán municipality who warned him that the mayor, Gisela Rodríguez, has put together a list of forty "Guarimberos" (participants in a "Guarimba", a new term that refers to an organized protest in Venezuela) which she is preparing to send to the Special Action Forces branch of the PNB, the 'FAES'.

Of particular concern is the deployment of the FAES to intimidate and threaten human rights defenders. According to data available to Front Line Defenders, between August 2018 and August 2019, these armed forces have extrajudicially killed 238 people in the state of Lara. It is notable that after her last visit, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, asked the Venezuelan State to dissolve the FAES and to investigate them and the other armed groups responsible for the extrajudicial killings, in her [Report to the Human Rights Council](#).

Front Line Defenders is concerned that heads of state and public officials are using their authority to threaten and intimidate human rights defenders, in order to create an unfavourable climate for the defence of human rights. Likewise, Front Line Defenders is particularly concerned that the authorities have systematically undermined freedom of expression. This affects all human rights defenders who have publicly spoken about or documented human rights violations, even influencing their private lives, through surveillance and intimidation of relatives.

Front Line Defenders urges the Venezuelan authorities to:

1. Take all necessary measures to guarantee the security and physical integrity of the members of REDHELARA, in accordance with them;
2. Refrain from prosecuting, criminalizing, monitoring and threatening human rights defenders, especially through the FAES.
3. Dissolve FAES in accordance with the recommendations of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.
4. Publicly recognise the importance of the work carried out by human rights defenders in the context of the political and humanitarian crisis in the country.
5. Ensure that human rights defenders in Venezuela can continue their human rights activities without fear of reprisals and without any restrictions, including police harassment.