

15 June 2016

## Venezuela - Human rights defender Marco Antonio Ponce target of ongoing smear campaign

Human rights defender Mr **Marco Antonio Ponce** has been subjected to a protracted smear campaign by Venezuelan authorities since March 2015, most recently on 8 June 2016. During this time there have been over 25 recorded incidents where either his own work or that of the organisation he works for, have been vilified and insulted by State-owned media, in particular by Congressman Diosdado Cabello on his weekly programme "*Con el Mazo Dando*".

Marco Antonio Ponce is the Coordinator of the Venezuelan Observatory of Social Conflict (**Observatorio Venezolano de Conflictividad Social - OVCE**), an organisation dedicated to the promotion of human rights in Venezuela. The *OVCE* regularly monitors protests and demonstrations, as well as the State's response on a daily basis. Marco Antonio Ponce is a national and international expert on the right to peaceful assembly in Venezuela, On 20 March 2015, the human rights defender was granted [Precautionary Measures](#) (No. 71-15) by the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights as a result of the smear campaign conducted against him by high public officials.

On 8 June 2016, congressman Diosdado Cabello called the human rights defender a traitor to Venezuela ("[vendepatria](#)") in his weekly programme "*Con el Mazo Dando*" as a result of the human rights defender's participation in the 47th General Assembly of the Organisation of American States (OAS). Diosdado Cabello also provided information about a flight the human rights defender would board on 11 June 2016, including the exact place where he would be seated. This is the latest event in a long smear campaign conducted by the Venezuelan authorities against Marco Antonio Ponce since March 2015, in a climate of intimidation against human rights defenders in the country.

On 20 May 2016, an article published on the website of "*Con el Mazo Dando*" suggested that *OVCE* and its staff were agents of the [political opposition and were responsible for inciting violence](#) in Venezuela, because they had received foreign funding. The publication featured a picture of the human rights defender, along with several other human rights defenders, suggesting they were 'traitors' to the national interest. On 5 May 2016, the State-owned daily newspaper "*Ciudad Caracas, Revolución a Diario*" printed an article entitled "International Benefactors from NGOs Revealed", which featured Marco Antonio Ponce's picture and suggested he was acting against the interest of the nation and inciting violence. Other media outlets insulting him and his work include *Misión Verdad* and *Aporrea*.

Front Line Defenders is concerned about the continuous smear campaign against human rights defender Marco Antonio Ponce and his work at the *OVCE*. The fact that Marco Antonio Ponce's name and picture are routinely shown on State-owned media channels, along with content suggesting he is a threat to the nation, constitute an incitement to violence and hostility against

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the human rights defender, putting him at risk of harm as a result of his peaceful and legitimate work. For instance on [1 October 2015](#), human rights defender Mr **Marino Alvarado** was subject to an aggravated robbery at his home following public declarations made against him by the President of Venezuela on national television some weeks previously.

Front Line Defenders is equally concerned at the government of Venezuela's persistent efforts [to criminalise](#) any human rights organisation receiving foreign funding, in particular through the use of the Political Sovereignty and National Self-Determination Law, the Organic Law Against Organised Crime and the Law Against Organised Crime and Financing of Terrorism. Together these three pieces of legislation give the State ample discretion to scrutinise and arbitrarily punish human rights organisations for exercising their legitimate and peaceful activities, in contravention to necessary guarantees for freedom of association and freedom of speech contained in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Venezuela is a party.

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

1. Cease the ongoing smear campaign against human rights defender Marco Antonio Ponce and carry out an investigation into all incidents;
2. Take measures to ensure that government officials or other public figures refrain from making statements or declarations stigmatising his legitimate work and issue an official apology for publicly discrediting and insulting him and his work;
3. Make all necessary efforts to protect the physical and psychological integrity of Marco Antonio Ponce;
4. Cease the criminalisation of human rights organisations in receipt of foreign funding in Venezuela through the above-mentioned pieces of legislation;
5. Guarantee in all circumstances that human rights defenders in Venezuela are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without undue restrictions, fear of harassment, threats or retaliation, and publicly recognise their important role in a just civil society.

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