

12 October 2017

Guatemala: Human rights defender Juan Eduardo Caal Suram arbitrarily detained

On 11 October 2017, indigenous and environmental rights defender, **Juan Eduardo Caal Suram**, was arbitrarily detained by officers in plain clothes, while he was working in his barbershop in El Estor, Izabal, Guatemala. The authorities have not provided any arrest warrant or explanation for his detention.

[Juan Eduardo Caal Suram](#) is a member of the indigenous Maya-Q'eqchi' community and an environmental and land rights defender. He is part of the **Gremial de Pescadores Artesanales – GPA (Artisanal Fishermen's Guild)**, which, alongside several other local organisations, tries to protect Maya-Q'eqchi' communities in El Estor, Izabal, from contamination by nickel mining activities in the region which may affect their land and endanger their livelihood.

On 11 October 2017, around 2:30 pm, Juan Eduardo Caal Suram was detained while he was working in his barbershop. The unidentified policemen in plain clothes failed to provide an arrest warrant. Juan Eduardo Caal Suram was being kept incommunicado, and his family, lawyers, and fellow human rights defenders from GPA were unaware of his whereabouts until the morning of 12 October, when they were informed that he was detained in Puerto Barrios, Izabal.

On 21 July 2017, human rights defenders and members of GPA, including Juan Eduardo Caal Suram, **Eduardo Bin Pouu, Tomas Che Cual, Cristobal Pop Coc, Vicente Rax Pop, Carlos Ernesto Choc Chub, Jerson Antonio Xitumul Morales**, along with journalists reporting on the pollution in El Estor and its surroundings, were informed that a criminal case was being brought against them. On 11 August 2017, the Judge of the Criminal, Narcoactivity and Environmental Crimes' Court of the Izabal department issued warrants for their arrest. The human rights defenders have been charged for threats, incitement to commit crimes, illicit association, unlawful assembly and demonstrations, damages to private property, and illegal detention of another person. The charges were levelled following false complaints and accusations made by executives of *Compañía Guatemalteca de Níquel* – CGN (Guatemalan Nickel Company), whose activities are contributing to the pollution and environmental damage in El Estor.

On 27 May 2017, the community of El Estor decided to perform a peaceful demonstration by closing the road leading to Alta Verapaz, and the mining facilities located there, following the unilateral abandonment by the government of negotiations with the GPA regarding mining and pollution. The Ministry of Interior of Guatemala ordered the deployment of the National Civil Police Riot Police Unit. The disproportionate force used by the Riot Police Unit, including the use of rubber bullets, live ammunition, gas bombs and sound bombs, caused many people to be injured and led to the death of [Carlos Maaz Coc](#), who was [shot dead](#). Several Guatemalan authorities, including the Minister of Environment, Sydney Samuels, have [publicly denied](#) the killing.

The Guatemalan government has continuously failed to comply with international and national legislation along with judicial decisions demanding it to respect the rights of indigenous communities. This latest arrest follows a systematic pattern of harassment on indigenous and land rights defenders in Guatemala. Recent examples include threats and harassment of [Lesbia Artola](#),

[Abelino Chub Caal](#) and [Angélica Choc](#).

Front Line Defenders is deeply concerned at the illegal arrest of human rights defender Juan Eduardo Caal Suram, as well as the ongoing criminalization of members of GPA and journalists reporting on pollution in the region.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Guatemala to:

1. Immediately and unconditionally release Juan Eduardo Caal Suram, as Front Line Defenders believes that he is being held solely as a result of his legitimate and peaceful work in the defence of human rights;
2. Ensure that the treatment of Juan Eduardo Caal Suram while in detention adheres to the conditions set out in the '*Body of Principles for the Protection of All Persons under Any Form of Detention or Imprisonment*', adopted by UN General Assembly resolution 43/173 of 9 December 1988;
3. Immediately drop all charges against Juan Eduardo Caal Suram, and members of GPA Eduardo Bin Poou, Tomas Che Cual, Cristobal Pop Coc, Vicente Rax Pop, Carlos Ernesto Choc Chub, Jerson Antonio Xitumul Morales, along with the reporting journalists, as it is believed that such are solely motivated by their legitimate and peaceful work in defence of human rights;
4. Take measures to ensure that government officials or other public figures refrain from making statements or declarations stigmatising the legitimate work of human rights defenders;
5. Take all necessary measures, in consultation with the defenders, to guarantee the physical and psychological integrity and security of El Estor Maya-Q'eqchi' communities, including members of GPA;
6. Cease targeting all human rights defenders in Guatemala 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.