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Mexico - Intimidation and smear campaign against human rights defender Cristina Auerbach

On 30 March 2016 a new [article](#) from a series of defamatory pieces against human rights defender Ms **Cristina Auerbach** was published. This follows an incident on 29 March 2016 in which the human rights defender was intimidated and threatened by a group of people, claiming to be journalists, as she left work in the town of Cloete, Coahuila.

Cristina Auerbach is the director of the **Organización Familia Pasta de Conchos – OFPC** (Organisation of the families of Pasta de Conchos). The organisation advocates on behalf of local mining families in Coahuila. OFPC was created in 2006, following the Pasta de Conchos mine disaster, caused by an explosion resulting in the death of dozens of miners that were trapped underground. It was established to bring justice to the miners and their families. In 2009 the organisation began documenting cases of human rights abuses linked to the mining activities in Coahuila, particularly the alleged collusion between public officers and businessmen involved in mining in the region and the granting of concessions to extract coal from inhabited areas. In 2015, the OFPC opened an office in Cloete, in the municipality of Sabinas, aimed at providing support to those affected by the open-pit coal mining. Due to the risks Cristina Auerbach faces, the human rights defender was granted protection measures by the Federal Mechanism for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders and Journalists, and she has been accompanied by [Peace Brigades International](#) since 2014.

The article that was published on 30 March 2016 refers to the human rights defender as a criminal and portrays her as a fraud for allegedly not representing other widows from the mine disaster. [Previous articles](#) accused her of personally and financially benefiting from the situation in what appears to be an attempt to delegitimise Cristina Auerbach and Pasta de Concho's human rights work. Another defamatory article was published on [25 March 2016](#) in which a local council member and businessman from Sabinas, who is the concessionaire of the coalfield in Cloete, accused Cristina Auerbach of attempting to extort money from him.

On 29 March 2016 the human rights defender was unable to leave the offices of OFPC in the town of Cloete, Coahuila, as a number of people claiming to be journalists surrounded her car threatening to hurt her, and prevented her from leaving the vehicle. This follows another incident at the offices of OFPC on 28 March 2016 in which a group of people entered the premises and tore down banners and signs belonging to the organisation.

Cristina Auerbach and many other members of OFPC have been the victims of repeated harassment, physical aggressions, threats, and defamation. These incidents appear to be part of an organised attempt to discredit the work of human rights defenders and their organisations, a pattern already identified by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in its [Second Report on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders in the Americas](#), published in 2011.

For many years, Cristina Auerbach has worked to expose the alleged collusion of the state governor and his ruling party with the mining industry in Coahuila, along with the issue of mining firms not having the necessary legal documentation to operate in the region. The State Government receives a percentage of the profit in the coal mining, which generates a conflict of

interest when it has to act on complaints against the mining industry. Since the opening of the new office in Cloete, the risk faced by Cristina Auerbach has increased. OFPC has denounced the threats made by the authorities to local communities actively opposing the mine. OFPC also condemns the use of people connected to the mining business acting as mediators in the conflict, which exacerbates the tensions.

Front Line Defenders expresses its concern at the intimidation of human rights defender Cristina Auerbach and the smear campaign conducted against her, which it believes to be a direct attempt to delegitimise and stop her from carrying out her human rights work in Coahuila, Mexico. The organization is deeply concerned that such smear campaigns have frequently been a precursor to more violent acts against human rights defenders in Mexico.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Mexico to:

1. Guarantee the implementation of the protection measures authorized by the Federal Protection Mechanism for Human Rights Defenders and Journalists in favour of Cristina Auerbach;
2. Take all necessary measures, in coordination and consultation with the beneficiaries, to guarantee the physical and psychological integrity and security of Cristina Auerbach and all members of *Organización Familia Pasta de Conchos*;
3. Guarantee that *Organización Familia Pasta de Conchos* is able to carry out its legitimate and peaceful human rights demonstrations without reprisals;
4. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Mexico are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions.

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