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Venezuela: Ongoing smear campaign against OVP Director Humberto Prado Sifontes

On 26 October 2016, Mr **Humberto Prado Sifontes** was once again the target of an ongoing smear campaign against human rights defenders animated by Venezuelan congressman Diosdado Cabello through his weekly TV show and online news outlet "Con El Mazo Dando".

[Humberto Prado Sifontes](#) is a lawyer and the general coordinator for the ***Observatorio Venezolano de Prisiones (Venezuelan Prison Observatory, OVP)***. The OVP is a non-governmental organisation founded in 2002 in order to advocate for the rights of persons deprived of liberty in Venezuela. Since 2009, human rights defender Humberto Prado Sifontes has been the target of threats, attacks, intimidation and defamation campaigns animated by high level public officials.

On 26 October 2016, congressman Diosdado Cabello alleged in his TV programme "Con El Mazo Dando", and then published [an article](#) in the show's online news outlet reiterating it, that Humberto Prado Sifontes receives funding from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), that he steals the funds, and that he sends them to a company registered in Panama under his wife's name. The website also claims that this imaginary company is dedicated to buying and selling arms. All of these allegations are false, including claims that the human rights defender receives funds from the NED. The false allegations against Humberto Prado Sifontes are presumably aimed at discrediting him and creating animosity towards him by accusing him of stealing and siphoning funds abroad at a time of economic and political crisis. The allegations are also consistent with a pattern of smear campaigns animated by Venezuelan public officials to stigmatise and criminalise civil society organisations who have international ties, receive foreign funding or make use of international and regional human rights mechanisms.

For the past five years, Humberto Prado Sifontes has been the target of constant smear campaigns and defamatory statements by public officials. Most recently, on 20 October 2016, Diosdado Cabello made more false allegations against the human rights defender in retaliation for his participation in the United Nations Universal Periodic Review (UPR) and the hearings of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR). Previously, on [23 April 2016](#), Tareck El Aissami, the governor of the Aragua state and former Minister of Interior and Justice, slandered the human rights defender by suggesting he had a leadership role in prison gangs. On the same day, the Facebook account of the human rights defender was hacked and used to spread false and defamatory information.

Front Line Defenders condemns the false and defamatory allegations against human rights defender Humberto Prado Sifontes and his family, which it considers to be in retaliation to his legitimate and peaceful human rights work. Front Line Defenders expresses its concern for the security of Humberto Prado Sifontes and his family, particularly as the allegations against the human rights defender take place in a climate of civil unrest and repression of freedom of expression and freedom of assembly. Given the current anti-government protests and the role of human rights groups in denouncing violations, human rights defenders expressed concern that they might soon be subjected to intensified harassment.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Venezuela to:

1. Ensure that all public officials involved in the smear campaign against human rights defender Humberto Prado Sifontes and his family members issue a public apology for the defamatory statements pronounced against him;
2. Take measures to ensure that government officials or other public figures refrain from making statements or declarations stigmatising the legitimate work of human rights defender Humberto Prado Sifontes;
3. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Venezuela are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions, including judicial harassment.