

13 September 2017

Honduras: Arbitrary detention, attack and criminalisation of human rights defenders and students

On 8 September 2017, human rights defenders Hedme Castro, Ariel Díaz, Carlos del Cid and Tommy Morales were attacked by police officers and arbitrarily detained while providing support to students detained in the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Honduras – UNAH (National Autonomous University of Honduras), in Tegucigalpa.

Hedme Castro is the General Coordinator of Asociación para una Ciudadanía Participativa - ACI Participa (Association for Participative Citizenship). [Ariel Díaz](#) is the General Coordinator of Juventud por la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos (Youth for the Defence of Human Rights). [Carlos del Cid](#) is a member of the Observatorio Ecueménico Internacional de Derechos Humanos (International Ecumenical Observatory on Human Rights). [Tommy Morales](#) is a journalist and member of Asociación por la Democracia y los Derechos Humanos – ASOPODEUH (Association for Democracy and Human Rights).

On 8 September 2017, at roughly 5:00am, police were deployed to implement an eviction order at UNAH, where a group of students were peacefully occupying several buildings. More than 500 police officers set up a blockade of the University campus. Several organisations and human rights defenders went to UNAH to try to mediate the situation and show their support to the students. After negotiating with the authorities, Hedme Castro, Ariel Díaz and a student were permitted to enter the university in a minibus with members of the Comisionado Nacional de los Derechos Humanos – CONADEH (National Commission for Human Rights) in order to monitor the situation.

Carlos del Cid and Tommy Morales, who were already at the University, joined Hedme Castro, Ariel Díaz, and the members of CONADEH. As the group was about to exit the university, they tried to help a group of seven students who had been locked in the building by the police and had been deprived of water and food for several hours. After an unsuccessful attempt by the human rights defenders to negotiate the release of the students, the group of students decided to jump out of the window and entered the minibus. The police surrounded the minibus and prevented the passengers from leaving, and at around 3:00 pm, forcibly opened the windows of the vehicle and sprayed pepper spray inside. The passengers were dragged out of the minibus, beaten and had pepper spray directed at their faces by the police. The members of CONADEH were subsequently escorted away by the police. The human rights defenders and eight students were brought to the police station in Colonia Kennedy, but were later released. Hedme Castro was released without charge, while Ariel Díaz, Carlos del Cid and Tommy Morales were accused of “concealment” and “attack on State security”. The eight students face charges of “illegal occupation”. The human rights defenders and students who are facing charges will appear before a judge on 21 September.

Since 2014, when UNAH approved several [changes](#) in its internal regulations, the student movement has engaged in widespread peaceful protests against restrictions to the right to education. These have been met with a violent response from Government and university authorities, including the use of excessive force, arbitrary detention, criminalisation and smear campaigns against students and their supporters.

This is not the first time that Front Line Defenders has reported on the violent context in which student human rights defenders are operating. On 23 June 2017, Roberto Antonio Gómez was [murdered](#). He was the father of student and human rights defender Andy Johan Gómez Jerónimo, and in the weeks prior to his death, he had been active in denouncing the state security forces' repression of UNAH students.

On 20 July 2016, following a wave of protests, criminalisation of students and police repression, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR) negotiated an [agreement](#) whereby the authorities agreed to end criminal procedures against students, but have since violated the agreement. The UN Office in Honduras issued a statement emphasizing its “serious concern about the conviction issued for the crime of trespassing, considering that (...) the use of this crime in contexts of criminalization of protest poses serious problems in light of international human rights standards”.

Honduras is considered to be one of the world's most hostile and dangerous countries for human rights defenders. According to a [press release](#) issued by UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Michel Forst, and the Inter-American Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, José de Jesús Orozco Henríquez, the Government of Honduras “must immediately adopt and apply effective measures to protect human rights defenders, so they can carry out their human rights work, without fear or threat of violence or murder.” Front Line Defenders [reported](#) that at least 33 human rights defenders were killed in 2016. In a official visit to the country on 28 July 2017, the UN Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights, Andrew Gilmour, emphasized “the paramount need to increase protection for human rights defenders in Honduras”.

Front Line Defenders condemns the illegal detention, attack and criminalisation of human rights defenders Hedme Castro, Ariel Díaz, Carlos del Cid and Tommy Morales, as well as other university students in Honduras, as it believes that the actions against them are related to their human rights activities.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Honduras to:

1. Immediately drop all charges against Ariel Díaz, Carlos del Cid and Tommy Morales, as well as other university students in Honduras, as it is believed that they are solely motivated by their legitimate and peaceful work in defence of human rights;
2. Carry out an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation into the attacks against Hedme Castro, Ariel Díaz, Carlos del Cid and Tommy Morales, as well as other university students in

Honduras, with a view to publishing the results and bringing those responsible to justice in accordance with international standards;

3. Take all necessary measures to ensure the physical and psychological integrity and security of Hedme Castro, Ariel Díaz, Carlos del Cid and Tommy Morales, as well as other university students in Honduras;
4. Refrain from using the justice system to intimidate, harass and discredit human rights defenders;
5. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Honduras are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions.