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Colombia: Intensified threats and attacks against members of Movimiento Ríos Vivos

In the last weeks, attacks against members of the Movimiento Ríos Vivos, in particular against its spokesperson, **Isabel Zuleta** and **William de Jesus Gutierrez** have intensified. Likewise, other members of the movement had to leave the country due to threats against their life.

[Movimiento Ríos Vivos \(MRV\)](#) is a human rights movement composed of 15 associations and families in the West, North and Lower-Cauca sub-region in Antioquia, affected by the negative environmental and human rights impact of the hydroelectric project “Hidroituango”. The project under construction in the Cauca river is one of the largest embankment dams in Latin America. It is carried out by *Empresa Públicas de Medellín* (Public Enterprises of Medellín – EPM) and affects more than 300,000 people in 27 municipalities in the region. The region in question has historically been affected by violence and armed conflict. For the past 11 years, MRV has denounced the negative impacts of the “Hidroituango” project and as a result, its members and their families have suffered multiple violations of their rights, including death threats, smear campaigns, criminalisation, intimidation and killings. MRV was one of the winners of the National Human Rights Prize 2018 in Colombia.

During the last few weeks, people have approached [Isabel Zuleta's](#) relatives to ask about her past and her private life. The women human rights defender's 12 year old niece was verbally attacked due to her aunt's work as a human rights defender. For this reason, Isabel Zuleta has had to distance herself from her family in the last weeks. Furthermore, she has been insulted for "opposing development" and for being a “bad leader” by civil servants and public figures of Ituango. This is not the first time that Isabel Zuleta received threats for her work defending human rights. She was a victim of surveillance, death threats, criminalisation, and her electronic devices were hacked in relation to her denouncing the neglect of rural areas in the peace process, the militarisation of those territories, and the generalised discourse affirming that social and environmental struggles hinder the peace process. For this reason, she has been granted protection measures by the *Unidad Nacional de Protección* (National Unit of Protection) but these have proven to be insufficient to guarantee her safety.

[William de Jesus Gutierrez](#) is the president of *la Asociación de pescadores artesanales y mineros de Puerto Valdivia* (association of fishermen and miners) in the municipality of Valdivia. He was chosen by Movimiento Ríos Vivos to lead the Technical Committee of the Hidroituango project, which aims to produce a technical report on the stability of the project. William de Jesus Gutierrez has been denouncing the link between the armed conflict and the construction of Hidroituango dam for years.

William de Jesus Gutierrez has been directly affected by the Hidroituango project. In May 2018, his house was destroyed by an avalanche produced by the project. He has also been the victim of constant surveillance in recent months, especially when he goes to Bogotá for events related to his work as a human rights defender.

Other defenders belonging to the movement have been deliberately excluded from censuses related to the mega-project in Ituango, and have been banned from entering the mayor's office in Valdivia. Similarly, due to the repeated criminalisation and selective attacks, which have intensified

in recent weeks, the woman human rights defender and vice-president of the Movimiento Ríos Vivos, **Milena María Flórez** was forced to flee the country temporarily.

Although the *Unidad Nacional de Gestión del Riesgo y Desastres* (National Disaster and Risk Management Unit) lifted the red alert in Hidroituango in July 2019, stating that the project is safe for inhabitants of nearby communities, so far none of the Colombian authorities are certain about the stability of the project. On several occasions, MRV requested an independent technical analysis to determine that the project does not constitute a risk for communities. To date, local and national authorities have remained silent in this regard. The project was initiated without consulting with the surrounding communities.

Front Line Defenders is concerned about the human rights violations related to the Hidroituango project and the concomitant risks for human rights defenders. Likewise, Front Line Defenders is concerned about the smear campaign carried out against members of the Movimiento Ríos Vivos, in particular against its spokeswoman, Isabel Zuleta, and reiterates its concern about the continuous harassment, attacks and criminalisation that members of the movement have suffered in recent weeks.

Front Line Defenders urges the Colombian authorities to:

1. Carry out an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation into the threats against Isabel Zuleta and William de Jesus Gutierrez, with a view to publishing the results and bringing those responsible to justice in accordance with international standard
2. Immediately take all necessary measures and ensure that the existing protection measures are effective to guarantee the physical and psychological integrity and security of Isabel Zuleta and William de Jesus Gutierrez and other members of MRV and their families, in coordination with the human rights defenders concerned;
2. Carry out an independent investigation to ensure that the works being carried out in Ituango are safe and free of all risks;
3. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Colombia can carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and without restrictions.