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Colombia: Renewed threats against environmental rights defenders in Tolima

The collectives and organisations [Comité Ambiental en Defensa de la Vida - CADV](#) (Environmental Committee in Defence of Life), Colectivo Socio-ambiental Juvenil de Cajamarca COSAJUCA (Socio-environmental Youth Collective of Cajamarca), the Conciencia Campesina (Peasant Conscience), members of the Universidad Católica de Colombia UCAT (Catholic University of Colombia), and the Cajamarca Municipal Council, have in recent years actively advocated for environmental justice and peasants rights in the Tolima region. They have mobilised in defence of water and for land rights, and denounced human rights violations resulting from the implementation of extractive projects.

On 14 May 2019, human rights defenders and members of environmental rights organisations COSAJUCA, Comité Ambiental en Defensa de la Vida, Conciencia Campesina and UCAT, as well as the President of the Cajamarca Municipal Council were targeted by online death threats. At 9:50am, they received an e-mail with accusations of illegally profiting from their human rights activities and blocking development in Cajamarca. The message contained death threats such as “we will finish each one of these guerrilla members” and “death to all [...] environmentalists”. The human rights defenders involved in the Public Consultation are also facing smear campaigns by local landowners, government officials and private companies, who seek to portray them as illegitimate activists opposing progress.

The level of risk for environmental rights defenders and members of human rights organisations in Tolima has increased since 26 March 2017, when a Public Consultation, which they had campaigned for, took place in Cajamarca. The referendum concerned the implementation of the La Colosa gold mining project, designed to be the largest open air gold mine in Latin America. More than 98% out of the 6,000 consulted people voted against the project, which effectively stopped its implementation. The strong opposition to La Colosa resulted from the history of destructive impacts of extractive projects carried out in the municipality without the prior consultation or consent of its traditional residents.

The Cajamarca municipality is part of the Tolima department, which has been a key region for the development of mega-mining projects in Colombia. Human rights defenders and Cajamarca inhabitants have demanded that the government respect the results of the referendum and block the mining company from undertaking further projects in the municipality. According to Article 33 of the [National Law 136 of 1994](#), the national government needs to seek the approval of the Council of the relevant municipality to implement extractive projects that might significantly impact the use of land in the area.

Human rights defenders and organisations who denounced human rights violations resulting from the negotiations around the implementation of La Colosa have been threatened [on a number of occasions](#). On 30 March 2017, a local journalist received death threats through an anonymous call. The threats were linked to his work covering the environmental case against La Colosa and were made while he was providing media coverage of the Public Consultation process in Cajamarca. On 25 March 2017, members of the Comité Ambiental en Defensa de la Vida and other local human

rights defenders were threatened via a text message which ordered them to stop working against the “development process” brought to the region by mining projects.

On 15 May 2019, environmental rights organisations COSAJUCA, Conciencia Campesina, Comité Ambiental en Defensa de la Vida, FUNMATI (Fundación para la Defensa de la Madre Tierra), and Unión Campesina, issued a public [statement](#) calling for the recognition of the legality and legitimacy of the Public Consultation.

Human rights defenders in Colombia have been targeted by increased violence, which often results in killings. The country witnessed more killings of human rights defenders than any other country worldwide in 2018, as stated in Front Line Defenders’ [Global Analysis Report](#).

Front Line Defenders condemns the threats made against the environmental rights defenders of Tolima, and expresses concern over the increased risk of violence that they are facing. Front Line Defenders is also concerned about the lack of official recognition of the systematic character of crimes against human rights defenders, which are often carried out with the participation, authorization, support or acquiescence of agents of the state, reinforcing the high levels of impunity for violations against human rights defenders.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Colombia to:

1. Strongly condemn the online attacks, intimidation and threats against the environmental rights defenders of Tolima, which are believed to be motivated by their legitimate human rights work;
2. Carry out an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation into the threats against the environmental rights defenders of Tolima, with a view to publishing the results and bringing those responsible to justice in accordance with international standards;
3. Guarantee the physical and psychological integrity and security of the environmental rights defenders of Tolima and their family members, in consultation with them;
4. Take all the necessary measures to recognise and implement the Public Consultation held in Cajamarca on 26 March 2017, in accordance to the national legislation;
5. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Colombia are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions.