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Costa Rica: Arson attacks and threats against indigenous peoples' rights defender Pablo Sibar

On 3 March 2020, unidentified individuals set fire to **Pablo Sibar**' land plot, located in the Brörán indigenous territory in Térraba, Buenos Aires, Costa Rica. The indigenous peoples' rights defender has received a number of death and arson threats in the past.

[Pablo Sibar](#) is an indigenous and land rights defender from Costa Rica who works to peacefully recover the lands which have been subjected to illegal grabbing. He is one of the leaders of the Brörán indigenous people, who have been discriminated against by the Costa Rican authorities and targeted by land grabbers for over forty years. Since 1980, he had defended human rights alongside Sergio Rojas, who was killed in March 2019 as a result of his human rights activities.

On 3 March 2020, unidentified individuals set fire to Pablo Sibar' land plot in the Brörán indigenous territory in Térraba, Buenos Aires. On the following day, there were arson attacks in two other locations on the farm. Three family houses were damaged and many hectares of crops and meadows were completely destroyed.

The Crun Shurin Farm is located on the Térraba indigenous territory. In March 2018, it was peacefully recovered from non-indigenous land grabbers by 17 Brörán families, including Pablo Sibar and his wife. By law, lands recognised as indigenous territory can only be used by indigenous peoples. The families who currently occupy the Crun Shurin Farm have asked the authorities to prioritise its regularisation as part of the government Plan for Recovery of Indigenous Territory. The indigenous people who return to live and work on the recovered lands often face threats as a result. Those leading the processes of land recovery, including Pablo Sibar, face additional risks due to their land rights work.

Weeks before the attack, Pablo Sibar had received a number of death threats on social media. He was informed that hitmen had been hired to kill him and several other indigenous leaders. He has also been targeted with a defamation campaign on national television, falsely portraying him as violating the rights of farmers in the region, and thus increasing the risk he is facing. On 5 March, Pablo Sibar lodged a formal complaint with the police, concerning the threats against him.

In 2015, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights granted precautionary measures to the Bribri and Brörán indigenous peoples in Salitre and Térraba. The Commission ordered the government of Costa Rica to take measures to protect the lives and physical integrity of the Bribri and Brörán. However, these measures have not been implemented by the authorities despite the continued targeting of indigenous rights defenders.

The Vice Minister for Political Affairs and Citizen Dialogue Randall Otárola, who is responsible for implementing these protection measures, has stated publicly that he was informed by firefighters that the fire on Pablo Sibar' plot had started naturally. He did not address the pre-existing threats against Pablo Sibar. The government has offered relocation to Pablo Sibar but the defender refused to leave the Térraba territory. He is convinced that this would empower land grabbers and legitimise the violence commonly perpetrated against indigenous leaders, thus reinforcing their vulnerability.

Following the recent arson attack, Pablo Sibar has been provided with police protection. However, he is only accompanied when he leaves the indigenous territory or during trips that he considers dangerous. The defender believes that this measure is not appropriate as the community does not feel secure in the presence of the police, who have subjected them to intimidation in the past. According to the community, monitoring of the people and vehicles entering and leaving the territory would be a more appropriate and effective security measure.

Over the last forty years, the Brörán indigenous defenders of the Térraba territory have denounced the human rights violations perpetrated against their people, which has often cost them their lives, such as in the cases of [Jerhy Rivera](#) and [Sergio Rojas](#). On 18 March 2019, nationally renowned Bribri indigenous leader Sergio Rojas was shot dead at his house by unknown perpetrators. The crime remains unpunished. On 9 February 2020, [Mainor Ortíz Delgado](#), a member of the traditional Bribri Council who works to protect indigenous land rights in the context of land grabbing in the Salitre territories, was shot in the leg in the Bribri indigenous territory, after a series of attacks and threats against him. The perpetrator of the attack was released after spending 24 hours in police custody.

Front Line Defenders is deeply concerned about the arson attacks and ongoing threats, including death threats, against Pablo Sibar, as well as the lack of effective action by the Costa Rican authorities to ensure his protection. It believes that the human rights defender has been targeted solely as a result of his peaceful activities defending indigenous land rights. Front Line Defenders is also concerned about the continued impunity over crimes against indigenous rights defenders in Salitre and Térraba, which reinforces the pattern of violence against them.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Costa Rica to:

1. Carry out an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation into the death threats and arson attacks against Pablo Sibar, recognising the probable link between these crimes and his human rights work, with a view to publishing the results and bringing those responsible to justice in accordance with international standards;
2. Take all necessary measures, including collective security measures, to guarantee the physical and psychological integrity and security of Pablo Sibar and of all indigenous rights defenders in the Salitre and Térraba territories, in consultation with them, and effectively implement the precautionary measures issued by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights;
3. End the impunity of perpetrators of violence against indigenous peoples by impartially investigating reports of threats and violence against indigenous rights defenders in Salitre and Térraba, and adopting immediate effective measures to ensure their protection, including the immediate removal of illegal occupants;
4. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Costa Rica, in particular those defending indigenous rights, are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions.