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Guatemala: increased threats and smear campaigns against Central Campesina Chortí Nuevo Día

For the past three months, on a daily basis, members of the **Central Campesina Chortí Nuevo Día** have suffered direct threats and intimidation attempts by local authorities and individuals linked to the mining project Cantera de los Manantiales, INCAMIN S.A, and the development project Interoceanic Corridor. On 2 May 2019, a former member of the organisation was killed in connection with its work. Human rights defenders from the Maya Chortí indigenous communities in Chiquimula have been the target of increased and coordinated smear campaigns and threats for defending their right to free, prior and informed consent.

The [Nuevo Día Chortí Indigenous Association](#) (Central Campesina Chortí Nuevo Día, CCCND) provides legal support and visibility to indigenous Chortí communities in the region of Chiquimula, Guatemala. The communities supported by the organisation face threats and human rights violations due to the implementation of hydroelectric and mining projects on their territories.

On 25 February 2019, a peaceful protest camp known as the “resistance point” was set up near one of the main entrances of the mining project Cantera de los Manantiales, INCAMIN S.A. in the community of La Prensa, Olopa. Human rights defenders from CCCND and community members established a permanent assembly to discuss visibility strategies and pressure local authorities to implement the decisions of the Ministry of Environment. According to the Ministry, the mining project had not fulfilled the legal and environmental requirements to operate, and thus was given 15 days to cease the work and remove the machinery from the project site.

On 8 April 2019, a second peaceful protest camp was established close to a different entrance of the mining project, nearby the community of El Carrizal. Since then, the private company has stopped its work in the area, but has kept the machinery close to the mine and threatened to resume operations on a number of occasions.

Since the start of the peaceful protests against the implementation of the mining project, the human rights defenders have seen an increase in the number of security incidents and threats against them. Members of the Central Campesina Chortí Nuevo Día have been the target of what seem to be coordinated efforts by local authorities and private security guards hired by Cantera de los Manantiales, INCAMIN S.A., aimed at suppressing the resistance to the implementation of the project.

Threats including gunshots fired in the air, direct and phone warnings, and surveillance attempts have been reported on a daily basis by human rights defenders in La Prensa and El Carrizal. On 27 March 2019, 15 armed persons shot in the air close to where the protesters were gathered; on 3 April 2019, an unknown individual passed by the protest site with a gun and threatened the community members for speaking out; and on 9 April and 11 April, gunshots were fired in the air and near the protesters. Moreover, persons linked to the mining company have been seen surveilling the protest site.

On 2 May 2019, a former member of CCCND, who was also a family member of one of the organisation’s coordinators, was killed. Local human rights defenders believe that his killing was related to the work of the Central Campesina. Since the killing, the number of threats made against members of CCCND, especially those holding leadership roles, has increased. The killing has also been followed by intensified smear campaigns and security incidents against members of the organisation, including house and office surveillance.

Members of Central Campesina Chortí Nuevo Día have faced increased threats in other municipalities located in the Chiquimula region as well. In Jocoatán and Camotán, they have received death and criminalisation threats in reprisal for their work denouncing human rights violations associated with the implementation of the development project Corredor Inter-Oceanico (Interoceanic Corridor). The project encompasses the construction of a highway, a railway and an oil pipeline connecting the Pacific and Atlantic coasts of Guatemala.

The authorities and private companies responsible for the implementation of the project have failed to seek the free, prior and informed consent of the local Maya Chortí communities, who believe that the project would adversely affect their rights to access to water, land and use of the territory. The implementation of the project would entail mass privatisation of land and the draining of the region's scarce water resources. The community resistance has led the local judicial authorities to issue preventive arrest warrants against a number of community members, a practice that has been used against the Central Campesina since 2010.

The local community members and human rights defenders have received direct threats from groups linked to the companies responsible for the implementation of the Interoceanic Corridor, as well as from the local mayor, who said that "the only option was to eliminate them". The human rights defenders have tried to report these threats to the local police, who has refused to take up some of the cases, while failing to effectively investigate others or to provide security measures for the human rights defenders at risk.

Members of Central Campesina Chortí Nuevo Día have also been the target of an ongoing smear campaign, which portrays them as taking advantage of their leadership roles in the communities for personal gain. The human rights defenders have suffered bribery attempts, phone harassment and home surveillance. Further, the children of the human rights defenders associated with the organisation have faced harassment at school, including by the teachers.

Indigenous leaders from Central Campesina Chortí Nuevo Día have received direct death threats, and eight of them have been informed that hitmen have been hired to kill them, which severely increases the risk levels they are facing. On 21 December and 17 April 2019, two of the targeted human rights defenders were physically attacked by armed men, and one of them had his hand severely injured. The attackers also made death threats against the two human rights defenders and members of their organisation.

The Central Campesina Chortí Nuevo Día is part of the Peasant Front (Frente Campesino), a network allowing grassroots human rights defenders and organisations to articulate and implement joint strategies for the defence of human rights in Guatemala. Other members of the network include CODECA and CCDA, who in total, had 7 of their members killed between 9 May and 8 June 2018. The recent escalation of threats puts the Central Campesina and its members at an increased risk.

Front Line Defenders is deeply concerned about the threats and attacks against the human rights defenders from CCCND, as they are believed to be directly linked to their legitimate human rights work. Front Line Defenders expresses further concern about the [ongoing criminalisation](#) of indigenous, environmental and land rights defenders working to protect their land and livelihoods in Guatemala.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Guatemala to:

1. Strongly condemn the killing of the family member of a coordinator of Central Campesina Chortí Nuevo Día, as well as the threats and attacks against members of the organisation and their families;
2. Carry out an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation into the killing of the family member of a coordinator of Central Campesina Chortí Nuevo Día, with a view to publishing the results and bringing those responsible to justice in accordance with international standards;

3. Carry out immediate, thorough and impartial investigations into the threats and attacks against CCCND members, with a view to publishing the results and bringing those responsible to justice in accordance with international standards;
4. Take all necessary measures to guarantee the physical and psychological integrity and security of all members of CCCND and their families, as well as all indigenous Maya Chortí people, in consultation with them;
5. Take all necessary measures to guarantee the right of indigenous peoples to free, prior and informed consent regarding the implementation of projects that might affect them, as enshrined in the International Labor Organisation Convention 169;
6. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Guatemala are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions, including judicial harassment.