

16 August 2018

Guatemala: CCDA members were beaten and detained in Cobán

On 14 August 2018, human rights defenders and members of the **Farmer's Committee of the Highlands** (Comité Campesino del Altiplano – CCDA) **Edwin Choc** and **Martín Chub** were arbitrarily detained in Cobán, after a meeting with government authorities that was part of the so-called Permanent Dialogue between authorities, campesino and indigenous communities.

Edwin Choc and Martín Chub are local leaders in Alta Verapaz and members of the [CCDA](#), an organisation that promotes the development of rural and indigenous communities to increase their standard of living through programmes aimed at creating equality and at increasing participation in social, economic, cultural, and political processes. CCDA has advocated against the land grabbing efforts of landowners on indigenous territories and demanded better policies in favour of rural development. CCDA members have been the subject of attacks, smear campaigns, criminalization and killings. In 2018 alone, three of its members were killed.

The Presidential Commission of the Permanent Dialogue (Comisión Presidencial de Diálogo Permanente) convened a meeting on 14 August 2018 with farmers from the Secopur community, located in the Laguna de Lachúa micro-region, CCDA leaders and national authorities. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the rise in the number of killings and in the instances of criminalization, threats and evictions of indigenous and campesino communities in the region. The Vice-Minister for Crime Prevention, Axel Romero, attended the meeting as representative of the Ministry of Governance to follow up on previous commitments undertaken by the Secretariat for Land Affairs (Secretaría de Asuntos Agrarios-SAA), National Council of Protected Zones (Consejo Nacional de Áreas Protegidas – CONAP), Register of Cadastral Information (Registro de Información Catastral – RIC) and the Presidential Commission on Human Rights (Comisión Presidencial Coordinadora de la Política del Ejecutivo en Materia de Derechos Humanos – COPREDEH).

When the meeting ended, several police officials were waiting outside the building. The police officers cornered a small group of CCDA members and, without presenting any arrest warrants, proceeded to beat and violently arrest the human rights defenders. While a few of them were able to escape the attack, Edwin Choc and Martín Chub were detained. According to CCDA, Edwin Choc and Martín Chub are being accused of usurpation of protected lands.

This is not an isolated incident, as several CCDA members have been facing criminal charges in an effort to curtail or hinder their work protecting the rights of indigenous and campesino communities. On 14 September 2017, Juan Bautista Riveiro and José Manuel Coc Saquil, also members of CCDA, were detained in Alta Verapaz and accused of murder and attempted murder. The defenders remain in pre-trial detention at Cobán's prison. Similarly to Edwin Choc and Martín Chub, Juan Bautista Riveiro and José Manuel Coc Saquil actively participated in meetings of the Permanent Dialogue, including the CCDA, national authorities and other actors regarding land conflicts in their territory. Local organisations accompanying the case since 2017 have [documented irregularities](#) in the trial and a lack of evidence to substantiate the charges.

Human rights defenders operate in an extremely hostile environment in Guatemala. According to the Guatemalan NGO UDEFEGUA, defenders are often subjected to unfounded judicial complaints. In most cases, they are notified of the charges against them months after the start of the criminal procedure, thus affecting their right to a proper defence. Defenders are also frequently subjected to pre-trial detention. Court hearings are frequently postponed or delayed by the prosecution or the complainant, a worrying pattern that prolongs the detention of the accused defenders and the uncertainty of their situation.

Front Line Defenders has also reported on a number of cases of criminalization in other regions of the country, such as those of [Abelino Chub Caal](#), [Juan Eduardo Caal Suram](#), [María Magdalena Cuc Choc](#), among others.

Front Line Defenders expresses its deep concern at the judicial harassment of human rights defenders Edwin Choc, Martín Chub, Juan Bautista Riveiro and José Manuel Coc Saquil, as well as other members of CCDA, as it believes that the arrest and charges against them constitute a reprisal to their human rights work.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Guatemala to:

1. Unconditionally release Edwin Choc, Martín Chub, Juan Bautista Riveiro and José Manuel Coc Saquil, as Front Line Defenders believes that they are being held solely as a result of their legitimate and peaceful work in the defence of human rights;
2. Carry out an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation into the death threats, arrests and attacks reported by CCDA members, with a view to publishing the results and bringing those responsible to justice in accordance with international standards;
3. Cease targeting all human rights defenders in Guatemala and guarantee in all circumstances that they are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions including judicial harassment.