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Mexico: Indigenous human rights defenders in Nahuatzén criminalized

On the morning of 23 October 2019, after spending almost a year in pretrial detention, human rights defenders José Antonio Arreola and José Luis Jiménez were declared guilty on charges of “sabotage”. According to civil society organizations, the sentence appears to be an act of retaliation against their work in defence their indigenous community as there was a clear lack of evidence of them having committed the crimes of which they are accused.

José Antonio Arreola, José Luis Jiménez are Purépecha indigenous rights defenders and members of the [Concejo Ciudadano Indígena de Nahuatzén](#) (Indigenous Citizens’ Council of Nahuatzen). The Indigenous Citizens’ Council is a direct democracy style community government in the state of Mochoacán, which began a process of gaining autonomous status for the indigenous community in 2015, and has worked to defend the rights of the indigenous people of Nahuatzen. José Antonio Arreola and José Luis Jiménez are part of the Indigenous Citizens’ Council, which, in 2017 was recognized as an indigenous authority by the Electoral Tribunal of the State of Michoacán and the Federal Government of Mexico. In addition, José Gerardo Talavera, who supports the council by renting out a space for it to carry out its functions, was also sentenced to prison on the same charge.

José Antonio Arreola, José Luis Jiménez and José Gerardo Talavera were arrested and imprisoned on 11, 12 y 14 of November ,when they were evicted from the offices of the National Development Sistem (DIF). They were accused of stealing a vehicle and other objects that were in the offices a few days before. Almost a year since their arrest and following a process full of inconsistencies, including unsubstantiated evidence, and witness statements that contradict facts, on 23 October 2019, the judge of the Centro de Reinserción Social (Centre for Social Reinsertion), Eduardo Ruiz, from Uruapan, Michoacán, ruled that the defenders committed the crime of “sabotage”.

Front Line Defenders condemns the criminalisation of human rights defenders José Antonio Arreola and José Luis Jiménez, and José Gerardo Talavera. It believes that the sentence against them is an act of retaliation against their work and that of the Indigenous Citizens’ Council of Nahuatzén, in the fight for self-determination for the Nahuatzén community.

Front Line Defenders urges the Mexican authorities to:

1. Drop all charges against José Antonio Arreola, José Luis Jiménez and José Gerardo Talavera and release them immediately;
2. Cease the harassment, legal or otherwise, against members of the Concejo Ciudadano Indígena de Nahuatzén, as well as against other organizations that defend the rights to self-determination in Mexico.
3. Open a process of respectful dialogue with the indigenous authorities of the community of Nahuatzen in order to ensure respect for their rights to self-determination and autonomy as an indigenous people.

4. Guarantee that human rights defenders in Mexico can carry out their human rights work without fear of reprisals and without restrictions, including judicial harassment.

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