

23 June 2021

Mexico: Police intimidate and disrupt peaceful demonstration in Santa María Zacatepec

On 10 June 2021, an operation with approximately 100 police officers and 60 vehicles from Puebla's State Police forcefully limited the access of environmental and human rights defenders, activists and neighbours to the community of Santa María Zacatepec, Municipality of Juan C. Bonilla, Puebla. Members of various collectives including **Frente de pueblos en defensa de la tierra y del agua Morelos, Puebla, Tlaxcala** (FPDTA) (Front of Peoples in Defence of Land and Water Morelos, Puebla, Tlaxcala) attempted to demonstrate peacefully about the lack of support from the authorities regarding a potentially very dangerous sinkhole that has emerged in the community and against the exploitation of the region's aquifers, stating that this is one of the reasons why the sinkhole was caused at the end of May.

The [Front of Peoples in Defence of Land and Water Morelos, Puebla, Tlaxcala \(FPDTA\)](#) is an organisation of indigenous Nahuatl communities in the states of Morelos, Puebla and Tlaxcala, that has been working since 2012 to defend their territory and to promote and exercise their self-determination as indigenous peoples.

The operation conducted by Puebla's State Police was deployed in the midst of the State Governor Miguel Barbosa Huerta's visit to the community, where since the end of May, community members have detected a growing sinkhole in the middle of the community's fields. At the moment, the dimensions of the sinkhole have reached 126 metres long and 56 metres deep, risking the safety of neighbouring houses and other inhabitants of the region. Collectives and environmental human rights defenders including FPDTA, Pueblos Unidos and [Guardianas del río Metlapanapa](#) were present to denounce such dangers caused by the exploitation of their resources.

During the governor's visit, police officers forcefully and arbitrarily prevented neighbours and demonstrators from entering the community by pushing and shoving them. Human rights defender, communicator and member of the FPDTA **Alejandro Torres Chocoat**, was assaulted by state police who, upon seeing him taking photographs of the events, took his mobile by force and threw it to the ground. Alejandro Torres Chocoat has been a beneficiary of the Protection Mechanism for Human Rights Defenders and Journalists since 2020.

Members of the community of Santa María Zacatepec have reported to local organisations that during the last week, officials of the municipal and state police have arbitrarily and forcefully prevented people from entering the community, as well as denouncing the lack of timely information about the risks to the houses around the sinkhole or any emergency procedures. Members of collectives and human rights defenders have stated that the inhabitants of Santa María Zacatepec are at greater risk because there is a gas pipeline in close proximity to the sinkhole and have highlighted the fact that there are other underground cavities in the area, that may also develop into sinkholes.

Front Line Defenders condemns the actions of the state police against those seeking to peacefully demonstrate against the exploitation of natural resources in the community of Santa María Zacatepec, as well as those seeking to protect the well-being and safety of the community's inhabitants. Front Line Defenders believes that the intimidation of environmental rights defenders is intended to hinder their valuable work in defense of environmental and land rights in Mexico, and represents a pattern of violence against communities opposing extractivism in their territories. Furthermore, Front Line Defenders is concerned that a heavy handed police response to peaceful protests risks to exacerbate a situation where there are very serious concerns regarding the environmental damage that threatens the local community of Santa María Zacatepec.

Front Line Defenders urges the Mexican authorities to:

1. Guarantee that all human rights defenders, in carrying out their legitimate activities, including the right to protest in defence of human rights and the environment, are able to operate freely without fear of police harassment;
2. Guarantee that human rights defenders and communities in Mexico are able to continue their human rights activities without fear of reprisals and without restrictions.