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Mexico: Disappearance of human rights defenders Antonio Díaz Valencia and Ricardo Arturo Lagunes Gasca

On January 15, 2023, human rights defenders Antonio Díaz Valencia and Ricardo Arturo Lagunes Gasca disappeared in Cerro de Ortega, municipality of Tecomán, Colima.

[Antonio Díaz Valencia](#) is a leader and member of the indigenous community of San Miguel de Aquila. He is also a candidate for the presidency of the ejidal commissariat of Aquila, Michoacán, as well as a teacher and human rights defender. [Ricardo Arturo Lagunes Gasca](#) is a lawyer and human rights defender, recognized by various national and international organizations. He has played a fundamental role in legally representing the community of Aquila in the negotiations over the operation of the Aquila mine related to its environmental, social and health effects on the community.

The disappearance of Antonio Díaz Valencia and Ricardo Arturo Lagunes Gasca occurs against a backdrop of tension due to the upcoming local elections, and in the context of negotiations between members of the community and a local mining company. The presence of the mining activity in Aquila has been a source of conflict since it began operating in 1998 due to the non-compliance with agreements between the mining company and the community, which has resulted in threats against, detention, and deaths of members of the community.

Antonio Díaz Valencia and Ricardo Arturo Lagunes Gasca were travelling to Tecomán, Colima in a white Honda pick-up truck after attending an assembly in the Aquila community auditorium where issues related to the operation of the Las Encinas iron mine were discussed. The defenders last communicated at the Coahuayana bridge in the state of Michoacán at 18:50. Later, on Sunday, January 15, 2023, the truck in which they were travelling was found abandoned in the area known as "Topes de Cerro de Ortega" on highway 200 leading to Manzanillo. There were signs of bullet holes in the truck.

The disappearance of Antonio Diaz Valencia and Ricardo Arturo Lagunes Gasca was reported to the authorities, including the Michoacan State Attorney General's Office, on January 16, 2023. Additionally, the disappearance was reported to the National Search Commission where they were registered under the unique search folio 1AA67B3D1-8CAF-4A7D-979A-78B786BA141E. The Protection Mechanism for Human Rights Defenders and Journalists was also notified, as Ricardo Arturo Lagunes Gasca was granted protection measures from this government institution. Finally, the National Human Rights Commission was notified. To date, the whereabouts of the defenders is unknown.

Front Line Defenders expresses its concern regarding the disappearance of Antonio Díaz Valencia and Ricardo Arturo Lagunes Gasca, as it is presumed to be linked to their legitimate activity in the defence of human rights. Front Line Defenders reiterates its concern regarding the climate of impunity and the lack of protection of human rights defenders in Mexico.

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Front Line Defenders urges the Mexican authorities to:

1. Initiate an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation into the disappearance of human rights defenders Antonio Díaz Valencia and Ricardo Arturo Lagunes Gasca, in order to guarantee their protection and release alive, publishing the results and bringing those responsible to justice in accordance with international standards and prioritising the line of investigation of their human rights defence work;
2. Take all necessary measures to guarantee the protection of the family members of Antonio Díaz Valencia and Ricardo Arturo Lagunes Gasca, ensuring their safety and physical and psychological integrity;
3. Guarantee that all human rights defenders in Mexico, in the development of their legitimate activities in defense of human rights, can operate freely without fear of restrictions or reprisals.
4. Conduct search actions in a comprehensive and coordinated manner that take into account the UN Guiding Principles for the Search for Disappeared Persons, and that include their families.