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Guatemala: Smear campaign, threats and police violence against the Peaceful Resistance of Ixquisis Microregion

Beginning on 14 July 2018, *La Resistencia Pacífica de la Microregión de Ixquisis* (**the Peaceful Resistance of Ixquisis Microregion**) and members of the community they represent have conducted a series of protests opposing the violation of their human rights allegedly caused by the activities of the hydroelectric company *Energía y Renovación SA* formerly known as *PDH S.A.*, and requesting the closure of a military garrison and a police station at the company's facilities in Ixquisis. Police officers based at the company's facilities have reportedly threatened members of the community and used force against protestors. The organisation and community have since been subjected to smear campaigns on social media, repression and threats from the national police force and private security.

[La Resistencia Pacífica de la Microregión de Ixquisis](#) is an organisation formed in response to grave human rights violations committed in the name of economic development in [Guatemala](#), against members of the indigenous Ixquisis community, located in San Mateo Ixtatan, in the north of Huehuetenango department. The government has authorised mining and hydroelectric mega-projects in their region, which have caused numerous violations of the rights of the communities. This included the denial of meaningful consultation and participation, (the projects met with widespread opposition from the 12 communities in the Microregion). Human rights defenders in the Peaceful Resistance risk their lives to defend the territory. In 2017 alone, there were more than 75 reported attacks against human rights defenders in the Peaceful Resistance, including killings, shootings, harassment, and defamation campaigns. *La Resistencia Pacífica de la Microregión de Ixquisis* was one of five global recipients of the [2018 Front Line Defenders Award for Human Rights Defenders at Risk](#), in recognition of their dangerous struggle for land rights and environmental justice.

On 14 July 2018, members of the Peaceful Resistance met in Ixquisis to write a letter directed to the Guatemalan authorities on behalf of themselves and other indigenous communities affected by the activities of the company *Energía y Renovación SA*, formerly known as *PDH S.A.*, in their ancestral territories.

According to the Peaceful Resistance, the hydroelectric company has planned to build three hydroelectric projects (7 dams) in the region and has already diverted rivers in the area from their original paths, severely affecting the livelihood of indigenous peoples' communities and restricting their access to water resources. In addition, in 2014, *Energía y Renovación SA* successfully requested the administration of the then President Otto Perez Molina for the reinstatement of a military garrison which was previously situated there during the civil war. Since then, the garrison has functioned as a National Civil Police (Policía Nacional Civil -PNC) and military station within the company's facilities, officers of which have participated in threats against the local community and the forcible repression of protests.

On 14 July 2018, the community authorities also organised a march to the PNC station to deliver the letter requesting the police station and military garrison's closure and the cessation of the activities carried out by *Energía y Renovación SA* in their territories. In the letter, the community gave the company and the PNC two days to leave Ixquisis microregion. At least 400 people participated in the march to the station. When they met with police and military officers, the officers refused to accept the letter, stating that they were not authorised to take it. The community leaders instead read the document aloud in front of the garrison and the demonstrators returned to their homes peacefully. During the demonstration, police and military officers took pictures of the community protesters, some of which later appeared in articles branding the peaceful resistance as a violent and illegal armed group.

On 15 July 2018, the web page Actualidad Huehuetenango published an article title "*Nuevas acciones armadas contra comunitarios en el norte de San Mateo Ixatán*" (New armed attacks against community members in San Mateo Ixatán). In the article, they accused some Ixquisis protesters of firing shots and burning down a convenience store after the demonstration, and used pictures taken the day before by the police and military forces. The pictures, however, do not substantiate the allegations. Moreover, *Energía y Renovación SA* published a press release on their Facebook page, which matches the article on Actualidad Huehuetenango in language and style.

On 16 July 2018, the community leaders organised another peaceful protest outside the PNC station to demand compliance with their letter. However, PNC officials and riot police closed the road to the station on the bridge and stayed in the area to block the protesters. The protesters left and community leaders decided instead to organise a march on 18 July 2018.

According to the Peaceful Resistance, on 18 July 2018, a group of 50 people from the community, grouping to organise for the upcoming visit of the Office of the Human Rights Ombudsman (Procuraduría de Derechos Humanos, PDH) to the microregion, led a march to the PNC station. Among the protesters were women and children. When the demonstration reached the bridge, a large presence of PNC officials had already closed the road to the station. The community leaders of Ixquisis tried to establish a dialogue with the police forces, however they were fired upon with tear gas canisters. Moreover, during the repression, some of the Peaceful Resistance members were individually threatened. A group of PNC officials shouted at community leader Natanael Gómez, stating "hey you Natanael, we know you, you will fall down", while others said to another leader, Lucas Jorge, that they were going to pay a visit to take him from his house at night. Police forces also threatened the protesters by referring to their Front Line Defenders Award, saying that they would give the community of Ixquisis their award, while pointing at their firearms.

On the same day, 18 July 2018, a delegation of the Office of the Human Rights Ombudsman (Procuraduría de Derechos Humanos, PDH) [travelled](#) to the microregion to verify the complaints made by residents of Ixquisis concerning violations of human rights and the use of force by the PNC. The PDH delegation called for the community's rights to free movement and peaceful demonstration to be guaranteed, and facilitated a dialogue between community members and agents of the PNC. In addition, they talked with representatives of *Energía y Renovación SA* about the situation.

Alongside the threats and violent attacks against the community, from 14 July 2018 to 18 July 2018, there were several attacks on social media platforms that sought to defame community leaders of

Ixquisis, including false accusations of violent conduct, homophobic insults and denigrating references to their Front Line Defenders Award. The Peaceful Resistance believes that the smear campaign is being carried out by the company via various digital media pages as well as through fake social media profiles and people which are coordinated by the company.

Front Line Defenders condemns the police violence and threats suffered by the Peaceful Resistance of Ixquisis Microregion and the members of the community they represent during the peaceful demonstrations in Ixquisis microregion. Furthermore, Front Line Defenders is deeply concerned about the use of mainstream and social media to carry out smear campaigns and insults against the Peaceful Resistance of Ixquisis Microregion, and particularly against their leaders Natanael Gómez and Lucas Jorge, as well as Rigoberto Juárez, representative of Gobierno Ancestral Plurinacional. Front Line Defenders is concerned that such attacks and smear campaigns may further lead to an increase in violence against the Peaceful Resistance of Ixquisis Microregion and human rights defenders in Guatemala in general.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Guatemala to:

1. Carry out an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation into the police violence, threats, acts of intimidation and smear campaigns against peaceful protesters in Ixquisis and members of the Peaceful Resistance of Ixquisis Microregion, with a view to publishing the results and bringing those responsible to justice in accordance with international standards;
2. Take all necessary measures to guarantee the physical and psychological integrity of the members the Peaceful Resistance of Ixquisis Microregion and members of the Ixquisis community, in consultation with them;
3. 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 their right to peaceful protest.