

1 April 2020

Venezuela: Arbitrary detention and ill-treatment of human rights defender Henderson Maldonado

On 31 March 2020, **Henderson Maldonado** was violently detained when engaging in talks with the police on behalf of a group of health workers and patients with kidney diseases who were peacefully protesting in front of the National Bolivarian Guard Detachment 121 in Barquisimeto, Lara, Venezuela. He was beaten by the police and informed that he would be charged with contempt and disturbing the peace on 1 April 2020. The human rights defender was held handcuffed to a pillar inside the building of the National Bolivarian Guard Detachment 121 for more than 12 hours.

[Henderson Maldonado](#) is a lawyer and human rights defender from Venezuela. He is an active member of human rights organisations *Movimiento Vino Tinto*, *Red de derechos humanos del estado Lara*, *Civilis Derechos Humanos* and *Programa Venezolano de Educación Acción en Derechos Humanos*. He is well known for his work defending the rights of more than 200 persons subjected to state repression in the context of public protests, including professors, trade unionists, artists and the families of those killed as a consequence of police violence.

On the morning of 31 March 2020, Henderson Maldonado observed a peaceful protest held by health workers and patients with kidney diseases in front of the National Bolivarian Guard Detachment 121 in Barquisimeto, Lara. The protesters were demanding access to car fuel to allow for the provision of health services. The defender approached the police asking them to engage with the protesters. Given the lack of response from the police, he started filming the protest to raise awareness online on the importance of car fuel for health workers and those who need dialysis treatment.

When the police realised that Henderson Maldonado was filming, they aggressively forced him to erase the video. He was then taken inside the National Guard building under the pretext that he was disturbing peace, and was told to give away his phone for inspection. The defender refused to do so, after which he was formally detained for contempt and disturbing the peace. After being detained, Henderson Maldonado was violently beaten. Moreover, a police Colonel verbally abused him saying that he was a member of an NGO working against the interests of Venezuela, and destroyed his mobile phone.

Henderson Maldonado was informed that he would be formally charged with contempt and disturbing the peace on 1 April 2020. The defender was held handcuffed to a pillar inside the National Guard building for over 12 hours. He received visits from his family and members of his human rights network. A human rights defender who was able to visit Henderson Maldonado heard from a soldier that “he would not get out, he would be killed”. The case is being closely [monitored](#) by the Lara Delegate of the Public Defender’s Office, who has visited Henderson Maldonado.

Local human rights defenders express their concern for the life and physical integrity of Henderson Maldonado, since several officers from Detachment 121 have been named in the complaints concerning violence, torture and killings of protesters that Henderson Maldonado lodged in the past, many of which are still under investigation. The defender has been previously threatened by an officer from Detachment 121 whom he had denounced for altering police registers.

The work of human rights defenders is of even greater importance at a time when concerns over the COVID-19 pandemic are growing rapidly. Henderson Maldonado was detained when trying to

safeguard the right to life of patients with kidney diseases, who are at higher risk of death if infected with the virus, and need safe transportation to hospital facilities, which requires car fuel.

Instead of being criminalised, human rights defenders working to safeguard human rights in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and minimise its impact on the most vulnerable groups should be recognised and protected by the authorities. Front Line Defenders strongly condemns the arbitrary detention and ill-treatment of Henderson Maldonado and expresses its concern over the hostile environment for human rights defenders in Venezuela.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Venezuela to:

1. Immediately and unconditionally release Henderson Maldonado and drop all charges against him, as Front Line Defenders believes that he is being held solely as a result of his legitimate and peaceful work in the defence of human rights;
2. Ensure that the treatment of Henderson Maldonado, while in detention, adheres to the conditions set out in the *'Body of Principles for the Protection of All Persons under Any Form of Detention or Imprisonment'*, adopted by UN General Assembly resolution 43/173 of 9 December 1988;
3. Carry out an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation into the ill-treatment of Henderson Maldonado, with a view to publishing the results and bringing those responsible to justice in accordance with international standards;
4. Publicly acknowledge the important and legitimate role of human rights defenders and guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Venezuela, in particular those promoting the right to health in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions.