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Guatemala: Concern at the violence and continued lack of protection of land and territory defenders of the Maya Q'eqchi' region in Alta Verapaz

Front Line Defenders is deeply concerned at the lack of investigation of the armed attacks, threats and continued forced displacement faced by human rights defenders in the department of Alta Verapaz. Of particular concern is the lack of protection for the 16 families belonging to the Maya Q'eqchi' las Pilas Sellamch community in the municipality of Santa María Cahabón who have been displaced and placed at imminent risk for more than 70 days.

For 39 years, the Maya Q'eqchi' families that make up the community of Las Pilas Seyamch have collectively defended their right to land and territory. The community has also tried to stop the negative impacts that the logging of mountain trees has on the environment and the social fabric of the municipality. In retaliation for their collective defence work, the families have faced defamation and discrimination by landowners who seek to generate conflict and manipulation between communities and neighbours in order to benefit from land ownership.

The inhabitants of Las Pilas Sellamch have suffered threats, armed attacks and intimidation since last year but the context has worsened since May 2022 after the community persisted in their reports of logging to the municipal authorities.¹ On 9 May 2022, armed neighbours and unknown persons broke into the community in order to evict them, followed the families with weapons, including pregnant women, children and elderly people, and burned down all the houses in the community. The families fled to the mountains for the safety of their lives, where they stayed for a number of days.

Currently, the Pilas Sallamch Community has been displaced for more than 70 days with serious implications for their safety and without any support from the National Civil Police or the Human Rights Ombudsman's Office of Alta Verapaz. Of particular concern is the impact that the threats and forced displacement have had on the children, as they have not been able to return safely to school and have lost all their belongings during the burning of their homes.

[El Comité Campesino de Desarrollo del Altiplano \(CCDA\)](#) is an organisation dedicated to promoting the rural development of indigenous and peasant communities in Guatemala in order to improve their living conditions through programmes aimed at creating equality and encouraging participation in social, economic, cultural and political processes. According to the CCDA, there is a pattern in which local authorities try to portray attacks against organised indigenous communities as problems between communities or problems between neighbours in an attempt to shirk their investigative and protective responsibilities. Since its creation, the CCDA has denounced the advances by farmers and landowners in the appropriation of ancestral territories belonging to indigenous communities.

The CCDA - Verapaces Region is currently led by two women human rights defenders, [Lesbia Artola](#) leading coordinational aspects and [Imelda Teyul](#) leading organisational aspects. Both women human rights defenders have been subjected to [threats, intimidation and defamation](#) shrouded in misogynistic and racist overtones in the past. Attacks against CCDA members have

¹ <https://www.prensacomunitaria.org/2022/05/comunidad-qeqchi-las-pilas-sallamch-en-cahabon-sufre-desalojo-extrajudicial/>

persisted for years, including the murders in 2016 and 2018 of human rights defenders **Daniel Choc Pop**, **José Can Xol**, **Mateo Chemán Pauu** and **Ramón Choc Sacrab**.²

Front Line Defenders has in the past highlighted the seriousness of the context in which human rights defenders in the Maya Q'eqchi' territory carry out their work, in particular the situation faced by [women human rights defenders in northeast Guatemala](#). Front Line Defenders reiterates that the systematic lack of protection of women human rights defenders has a negative impact at the national level which profoundly affects the social fabric and development of communities in the country.

Front Line Defenders is deeply concerned for the safety of human rights defenders who are members of the community of Las Pilas Sallamch and members of the CCDA, especially as the acts of violence have not been addressed by the authorities.

Front Line Defenders calls on the Guatemalan authorities to stop and condemn the harassment and repression against communities engaged in the legitimate work of defending human rights. It also urges the authorities to provide urgent and necessary protection so that the 16 human rights defender families receive adequate reparation and are able to return to their territory.

² <https://www.fidh.org/es/temas/defensores-de-derechos-humanos/guatemala-estigmatizacion-y-difamacion-contra-el-ccda-y-la-sra-lesbia>