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## Uruguay: human rights defenders called to testify on defamation case against Richard Mariani

On 3 April 2019, human rights defenders, who in 2018 co-signed a letter calling for the dismissal of Miguel Zuluaga, then in charge of the security of the Uruguayan national football team, were called to testify before the Attorney General's Office (Fiscalía General de la Nación) in Montevideo in a case against human rights defender **Richard Mariani**. Richard Mariani is facing a defamation lawsuit that was brought against him by Miguel Zuluaga.

[Richard Mariani](#) is a football player and a human rights defender. He is the President of the Directive Commission of [Rebeldía Organizada](#) (Organised Rebelliousness), a civilian association that promotes human rights and solidarity, who fights against the impunity of perpetrators of crimes against humanity committed during the Uruguayan dictatorship. Richard Mariani has been recognised for his work in defence of human rights since 2015, and has been working to promote women's rights, children's rights, access to justice and the exercise of cultural rights in Uruguay.

In April 2018, Rebeldía Organizada presented a [public letter](#) to the authorities at the Uruguayan Football Association (Asociación Uruguaya de Fútbol, AUF), denouncing the then chief of security of the National Team, Miguel Zuluaga, as bearing responsibility for human rights violations committed during the dictatorship. Miguel Zuluaga was the sub-commissioner of Department 4 of the National Police Intelligence Directorate (Dirección Nacional de Inteligencia de la Policía de Uruguay) in the period 1976-1982. The organ was notorious for the systematic use of torture against political dissidents during the civic-military dictatorship, which lasted from 1973 to 1985. According to statements made by the victims, Miguel Zuluaga signed police reports of interrogations of political prisoners who were subjected to torture, and was present during police raids and torture sessions.

The aforementioned letter was co-signed by more than 30 human rights organisations and over 50 individuals, and aimed at provoking “social condemnation” and the removal of Miguel Zuluaga from his position with the national football team. Simultaneously, the signatory organisations launched the campaign “Let's Strike a Goal Against Impunity: Zuluaga out of the national football team” (Hagámosle un gol a la impunidad: Fuera Zuluaga de la selección) to attract public attention to the issue of impunity. Richard Mariani acted as the spokesperson for the campaign. In May 2018, Miguel Zuluaga's removal from the UAF was announced.

On 9 November 2018, Richard Mariani was called before the 4th Criminal Prosecutor's Office (Fiscalía Penal de 4to Turno) to testify in the case concerning the criminal complaint of defamation and reputational damage brought against him by Miguel Zuluaga. The complainant seeks for Richard Mariani to publicly retract his statements regarding Zuluaga's alleged responsibility for human rights violations committed during the dictatorship.

A number of human rights defenders who co-signed the letter were called to present testimonies in the case against Richard Mariani on 03 April 2019, including the Group of Mothers and Family Members of Detained and Enforcedly Disappeared Uruguayans (Grupo de Madres y Familiares de

Uruguayos Detenidos Desaparecidos). The civil society group is leading the call for the national and international community to engage in the fight against the criminalisation of Richard Mariani and any defender supporting victims of human rights violations. A [social mobilisation](#) is planned to take place in front of the Prosecutor's office on 03 April 2019.

Is it not the first time that Front Line Defenders [raises concerns](#) about the climate of impunity and the lack of a safe environment for human rights defenders whose work focuses on the mass atrocities committed during the Uruguayan dictatorship. There is an emerging pattern of intimidation and death threats against these activists. In 2016, unknown individuals stole information and evidence from the Forensic Anthropology Research Group at the University of the Republic (Grupo de Investigación en Antropología Forense de la Universidad de la República). The group of anthropologists also received death threats. In January 2017, thirteen people received death threats from Comando General Pedro Barneix, including one state official, two justice operators and ten human rights defenders working on cases concerning mass atrocities committed during the dictatorship. In October 2017, unknown individuals made at least two attempts to access Battalion 13 and the Anti-aircraft Artillery Group No. 1, the areas where excavations of the remains of the victims of enforced disappearances were being conducted. Front Line Defenders worries that these incidents have not been properly investigated or sanctioned by Uruguayan authorities.

Front Line Defenders remains concerned about the attempts of silencing and intimidating human rights defenders who work on the rights to truth, justice, reparation and non-repetition in Uruguay. Front Line Defenders expresses particular concern about the attempts to criminalise Richard Mariani and any organisation supporting victims of human rights violations. Front Line Defenders remains worried that this criminalisation process may set a chilling precedent against human rights defenders who report serious human rights violations committed by public officials, as well as with the possibility of other criminal proceedings being brought against the organizations and defenders who co-signed the letter and led the public campaign for the social condemnation of Miguel Zuluaga.

**Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Uruguay to:**

1. Immediately drop the charges against Richard Mariani;
2. Cease the targeting of human rights defenders in Uruguay, especially those working on the promotion of the rights to truth, justice, reparation and non-repetition of past human rights violations;
3. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions, including judicial harassment.