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Ecuador: Arbitrary detention and criminalization of indigenous defender Leonidas Iza Salazar in the context of national peaceful protests

On 14 June 2022, indigenous human rights defender, **Leonidas Iza Salazar**, was arbitrarily detained early in the morning by members of the Ecuadorian National Police during the first hours of a national strike called by indigenous leaders in the Andean province of Cotopaxi. Leonidas Iza Salazar was held incommunicado for nearly 15 hours without being notified of the reasons for his detention. On the night of the 14th, a judge of the Latacunga Criminal Unit ordered his immediate release and issued alternative measures against him. The detention and criminalization of Leonidas Iza Salazar takes place in the context of a worrying wave of arbitrary detentions and stigmatization of social protest carried out by the National Government in response to the national strike initiated on 13 June 2022.

[Leonidas Iza Salazar](#) is a Kichwa Panzaleo indigenous human rights defender and current president of the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE). He has more than 15 years of experience in the Indigenous Movement of Ecuador and as a human rights defender of indigenous peoples, the environment and rural sectors.

On 12 June 2022, CONAIE called on various sectors of Ecuadorian society to join a national strike and a mobilisation to demand a response from the government to the high fuel prices, the high level of unemployment, the high prices of rural products and the increase in the extractive activities that threatens the lives and territories of indigenous peoples in the country, among other issues.

Once the strike began, in the early hours of 14 June 2022, President Guillermo Lasso [announced](#) via Twitter a series of arrests of people whom he described as ‘perpetrators of material and intellectual acts of violence’ in reference to the national strike. That same night, Leonidas Iza Salazar was arbitrarily detained by members of the police, who proceeded to transfer him immediately in a car with civilian plates to the police unit in the city of Quito. He was then taken by military helicopter to the airport in Latacunga where he was prosecuted for the alleged offence of paralysing public services (obstructing the streets).

The arbitrary detention of Leonidas Iza Salazar became known because of a video recorded and published on social networks by one of the indigenous leaders who witnessed his deprivation of liberty. The defender was held incommunicado for nearly 15 hours, without being presented before a competent authority and without being notified of the reasons for his detention. CONAIE's lawyers filed a *habeas corpus* petition to order his immediate release. Despite the fact that there is a constitutional guarantee aimed to immediately protect the liberty, life and integrity of a person, it was not immediately heard or resolved.

On the night of 14 June 2022, a judge of the Latacunga Criminal Unit ordered the immediate release of the indigenous defender and issued alternative measures that include a ban on leaving the country and his mandatory appearance two days a week before the Public Prosecutor's Office. In addition, the judge announced the convening of a hearing to resolve the defender's legal situation on 4 July 2022.

Local organisations have reported that in the first two days of the national strike, the government has ordered a wave of arrests in the cities of Quito and in the provinces of Pichincha, Cotopaxi, Imbabura, Sucumbios, Morona Santiago and Santa Elena.

Front Line Defenders is deeply concerned about the due process irregularities in the detention of the human rights defender and the intimidating effect these arrests have on other human rights defenders exercising their legitimate right to peaceful social protest, in particular those who continue to denounce police abuses in the context of the ongoing national strike.

Finally, Front Line Defenders expresses its concern at the fact that the national authorities publicly express stigmatising statements about the legitimate right to peaceful social protest in Ecuadorian society and the negative effects that such pronouncements may have on activists and human rights defenders.

Front Line Defenders urges the Ecuadorian authorities to:

1. Drop the fabricated charges against Leonidas Iza Salazar and carry out an impartial investigation into the arbitrary detention and criminalisation against him;
2. Take all necessary measures to guarantee the physical and psychological integrity and security of the human rights defender, as well as that of the other members of CONAIE, in constant consultation with him;
- 3.
4. Respect and guarantee the right to peaceful social protest to all sectors of Ecuadorian society, without discrimination, adopting the highest international human rights standards to regulate the actions of the security forces in the context of protests, based on the principles of **legality, absolute necessity and proportionality**¹;
5. Refrain from actions against the legitimate right to peaceful social protest and avoid stigmatising and criminalising statements against activists, human rights defenders and social movements involved in demonstrations;
6. Guarantee that all human rights defenders in Ecuador are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free from all restrictions, including judicial harassment.

1 <https://www.oas.org/es/cidh/expresion/publicaciones/ProtestayDerechosHumanos.pdf>