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Mexico: Concern over criminalisation and stigmatisation of human rights defenders of La Esperanza de Sitalpech

On 3 March 2023, the collective "**La Esperanza de Sitalpech**" was notified by the State Attorney General's Office based in the city of Izamal, in the region of Yucatán, Mexico of a complaint against eight human rights defenders and members of the Mayan community, who protested against the functioning of a pork factory farm in their territory. They were charged with the state crime of "gang obstruction of roads." Also, on 23 March 2023, four more members of the collective were arbitrarily detained during a peaceful demonstration, and there is concern that further arrest warrants will be issued in the coming days.

"[La Esperanza de Sitalpech](#)" is a Maya collective from the region of Sitalpech, in the province of Yucatán, Mexico. Since 2021 they have denounced the negative impacts to their territory of the mega-farm Kancabchén II. Kancabchén II is a pork factory farm consisting of around 48,000 pigs, installed in 2013, 1km away from the community's territory. Despite the long presence of the mega-farm in the territory, the community of Sitalpech only began to mobilise after the industrialisation of the operations began to negatively impact their way of life, leading the community to form the collective "La Esperanza de Sitalpech". The community claims the farm was installed without their knowledge and previous consent and, in particular, that its operation has resulted in negative impacts including contamination of the drinking water, emission of foul odours and the appearance of hives on the skin of community residents.

On 25 May 2021, "La Esperanza de Sitalpech" filled a constitutional action against the operation of the mega-farm Kancabchén II, alleging breaches of their right to a healthy environment, the right to health, land, consultation and free, prior and informed consent, participation, and self-determination. During legal proceedings the farm's operations were initially suspended based on a finding of water pollution by a report of the Yucatan branch of the National Water Commission (Organismo de Cuenca Peninsula de Yucatán de la CONAGUA). The report found that "the farm didn't have a concessionary title for the loading and unloading of water. In addition, it exceeded the permitted limits for faecal coliform, fats and oils." Nonetheless, on 10 February 2023, the farm reopened due to the final decision of a federal judge who dismissed the constitutional action, alleging a procedural defect, noting that the action should have been filed the moment the mega-farm was first opened.

The reopening of the mega-farm led the community to protest on 10 February 2023, stopping the entry of trucks, carrying approximately 500 pigs, to the mega-farm Kancabchén II. Thus, the collective "La Esperanza de Sitalpech" installed a camp at the entrance of the mega-farm which was violently dispersed by the police on 18 February 2023. Approximately 100 riot police from the Yucatán state and Izamal municipal police stormed the camp, occupied mostly by women and children. According to the reports, the police beat people, damaged motorcycles, dismantled the camp and took objects such as

chairs, tables, utensils and tents. The police also took away their mobile phones to prevent them from documenting violations. After these events, the collective “La Esperanza de Sitalpech”, supported by the civil society association “Kanan”, filed another constitutional action related to police harassment. This action resulted in a precautionary measure, ordered by a judge to suspend all police intervention against the Sitalpech community.

Front Line Defenders condemns the attacks against “La Esperanza de Sitalpech” and expresses further concern that these events led to the stigmatisation of members of the collective and of the civil society association Kanan, which local media outlets have characterised as “violent” and consisting of “fake environmentalists” and “drunks.” Equally, local media spread false accusations¹ regarding an alleged kidnapping of farm workers by members of the collective, which was later denied in a public statement by the collective “La Esperanza de Sitalpech”.

Front Line Defenders received concerning reports that members of “La Esperanza de Sitalpech” face constant harassment by the local police, who regularly watch their houses, follow them, set checkpoints in the area and request personal information from each inhabitant. This situation has also caused division in the community, between the collective of “La Esperanza de Sitalpech” and other members of the community who worked for the mega-farm and who have contributed to the stigmatisation of the members of the collective by spreading false accusations against them through social media. Furthermore, the owner of the mega-farm has strengthened this narrative against the collective, by giving benefits to whoever supports their presence in the territory.

Front Line Defenders expresses its concern at the aggressions towards, and harassment of members of the collective of “La Esperanza de Sitalpech”, as it is presumed that these are linked to their legitimate activity in defence of human and environmental rights. Front Line Defenders reiterates its concern regarding the climate of impunity and lack of protection for human rights defenders in Mexico, as well as the negative impact that the criminalisation and stigmatisation of protesters has on the rights of the Mayan community in Mexico.

Front Line Defenders urges the Mexican authorities to:

1. Take all necessary measures to guarantee the protection of the collective of La Esperanza de Sitalpech;
2. Drop the charges against the 12 human rights defenders arbitrarily detained and guarantee their right to due process;
3. Guarantee that all human rights defenders, in carrying out their legitimate human rights activities and their right to protest, can operate freely without fear of restrictions or reprisals in Mexico;
4. Refrain to use the law to criminalize human rights defenders and issuing further arrest warrants against other members of the collective La Esperanza de Sitalpech;

¹ https://fb.watch/j0sir1_IAF/?mibextid=AjGOFVLW81EPr28a <https://www.facebook.com/groups/544261883648691/permalink/745929163481961/?mibextid=VhDh1V>
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