

18 December 2020

## Honduras –Human rights defender Víctor Vásquez arbitrarily detained

On 16 December 2020, the initial hearing of human rights defender **Victor Vásquez** was held in which a judge from the Criminal Court of First Instance of the city of La Paz confirmed the preventive detention measure against the defender which linked him to a criminal process for the fabricated charge of “forced displacement”. The human rights defender has been arbitrarily detained since 11 December, and is currently detained at the Penal Centre of La Paz City, where he has access to his lawyer. Following the initial hearing, Víctor Vásquez’s lawyer filed an appeal.

[Víctor Vásquez](#) is a member of the Consejo Indígena de Simpinula (Indigenous Council of Simpinula) in Santa María, La Paz. He is also the local leader of the Movimiento Indígena Independiente Lenca de La Paz (Lenca Indigenous Movement of La Paz, Honduras – MILPAH), which advocates for the rights of Lenca indigenous peoples to self-determination and to their ancestral lands. The human rights defender has been repeatedly threatened for supporting local small farmers' groups in La Paz in activities to recover land they consider has been illegally privatised by local authorities.

On 16 December 2020, a judge from the Criminal Court of First Instance of La Paz confirmed the preventive detention measure against Víctor Vásquez and linked him to a process under the fabricated crime of “forced displacement”. The charge is related to the human rights defender’s work accompanying the indigenous community of Nueva Esperanza in their efforts in preventing territorial dispossession in the municipality of Santiago Puringla in the department of La Paz.

On 11 December 2020, Víctor Vásquez was arbitrarily detained by Honduran police officers while reporting to the La Paz court in compliance with his substitute prison measures assigned to him in 2018 for the crime of “damages”. This charge was imputed to the defender after a complaint was filed by the Public Ministry and a private accuser regarding the peaceful actions that the Lenca Simpinula Indigenous Council carried out at the time to vindicate their right to the ownership of the lands they occupy today. The oral trial to resolve the open case is scheduled for April 2021 at the Comyagua Sentencing Court.

Despite being beneficiaries of precautionary measures granted by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in 2015, Víctor Vásquez and other members of MILPAH have been subjected to a series of threats, harassment and accusations for their defense of ancestral territories. Precautionary measures were granted to the Lenca indigenous people by the National Agrarian Institute (INA) in the municipalities of Santa María and Santiago Puringla in the department of La Paz. On 13 January 2017, army officers [shot](#) Víctor Vásquez in the knee while he was assisting a man injured during a violent eviction in Santa María, La Paz. The defender accompanied members of the Grupo Campesino 9 de Julio, who had been threatened with eviction by the local authorities. On 15 May 2016, a person reportedly close to the mayor, who in 2015 had already threatened the defender, entered the property of the Lenca Indigenous Council on a tractor, damaged the pipes and confronted the defender with a machete. The attack was stopped by the community and reported the next day by the defender to the District Attorney of the city of Marcala, La Paz

Front Line Defenders [reiterates](#) its deep concern over the series of threats, attacks and recent judicial harassment against human rights defender Víctor Vásquez, as well as other members of MILPAH, as it believes his detention is part of a broader strategy of intimidation against defenders of the rights of indigenous peoples, which seeks to discourage their legitimate human rights work in Honduras.

## **Front Line Defenders urges authorities in Honduras to:**

1. Immediately and unconditionally release Víctor Vásquez 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. Carry out an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation into the threats, attacks, and judicial harassment against Víctor Vásquez, with a view to publishing the results and bringing those responsible to justice in accordance with international standards;
3. Take all necessary measures to guarantee the physical and psychological integrity and security of Víctor Vásquez as well as that of other members of MILPAH in consultation with them;
4. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Honduras are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions, including judicial harassment.

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