

26 April 2021

## Honduras: Upcoming trial of seven environmental rights defenders on charge of “forced displacement”

The trial of environmental rights defenders **Christopher Castillo, Jeffry Suazo, Michael Aguilar, Víctor Hernández, Patricia Godoy, María Valladares** and **Fernando Hernández** is scheduled to take place on 27 April 2021 before the Supreme Court in Barrio la Granja, Tegucigalpa. The environmental rights defenders have been under house arrest since they were forcibly detained on 29 March 2021. All seven are charged with "forced displacement", which carries a possible sentence of three to nine years' imprisonment.

Christopher Castillo, Jeffry Suazo, Michael Aguilar, Víctor Hernández, Patricia Godoy, María Valladares and Fernando Hernández are environmental defenders from the community of Loarque and members of [Alternativa de Reivindicación Comunitaria y Ambientalista de Honduras \(ARCAH\)](#), an organisation that defends the community's natural resources and advocates against extractive projects in Honduras. Christopher Castillo is the General Coordinator of ARCAH.

On 29 March 2021, the seven environmental rights defenders and other members of ARCAH were carrying out a peaceful demonstration outside the offices of the poultry company "El Cortijo" to protest the company's activities which have polluted a local river, when they were violently detained and threatened by around 90 officers from the State security forces. The group of law enforcement officials was comprised of officers from the Honduran National Police, the "Tigres" Command, and members of the Police Investigation Directorate (DPI). The officers arrived at the site in two military tanks and five patrol cars, and did not present a dispersal order or arrest warrant. The officers confiscated the defenders' mobile phones and searched through them, before taking them to the Police Directorate of Investigation (DPI) in Kennedy, Tegucigalpa. From there, the environmental rights defenders were then taken to the Metropolitan Prevention Unit (UMEP 1), where they were detained for more than 20 hours and charged with "forced displacement". Christopher Castillo, Jeffry Suazo, Michael Aguilar, Víctor Hernández, Patricia Godoy, María Valladares and Fernando Hernández were released from UMEP 1 on 30 March 2021 and placed under house arrest until their trial.

Members of ARCAH have previously reported to the authorities threats and attacks against them in relation to their legitimate work in defence of natural resources and territory. Since January 2020, Christopher Castillo has been a beneficiary of Security Measures from the Protection Mechanism for Human Rights Defenders in Honduras, due to previous attempts on his life and repeated death threats he has received.

In recent months, Front Line Defenders has observed a worrying increase in the use of the charge of forced displacement against human rights defenders in Honduras, particularly those defending the environment, and land and territory rights. In December 2020, human rights defender **Víctor Vásquez** from Movimiento Indígena Independiente Lenca de La Paz (Lenca Indigenous Movement of La Paz, Honduras (MILPAH)) was [indicted](#) on fabricated charges of forced

displacement and in March 2021, woman human rights defender **Jennifer Solórzano** member of Black Fraternal Organisation of Honduras (OFRANEH) was [indicted](#) with the same charge.

Front Line Defenders is deeply concerned by the criminalisation on baseless charges of Christopher Castillo, Jeffry Suazo, Michael Aguilar, Víctor Hernández, Patricia Godoy, María Valladares and Fernando Hernández, the persistent threats against them, and the excessive use of force used during their detention. Front Line Defenders believes that the excessive use of force in their detention and the criminalization of the environmental rights defenders during a peaceful demonstration is part of a broader strategy of intimidation against environmental rights defenders in Honduras, that attempts to to discourage their legitimate human rights activities.

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

1. Immediately drop the charges against Christopher Castillo, Jeffry Suazo, Michael Aguilar, Víctor Hernández, Patricia Godoy, María Valladares and Fernando Hernández on the grounds that they are motivated solely by their legitimate and peaceful work in defence of human rights;
2. Take all necessary measures to guarantee the physical and psychological integrity and safety of Christopher Castillo, Jeffry Suazo, Michael Aguilar, Víctor Hernández, Patricia Godoy, María Valladares and Fernando Hernández as well as that of other members of ARCAH in constant consultation with them;
3. Guarantee that all human rights defenders in Honduras are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free from all restrictions, including judicial harassment.