



## Media statement

24 November, 2017

### **Guatemala: attacks on indigenous rights activists continue as authorities detain Jerson Antonio Morales**

Global civil society alliance CIVICUS has condemned the unlawful arrest and detention of journalist and indigenous rights activist Jerson Antonio Xitumul Morales by Guatemalan authorities on 11 November 2017.

Morales' detention is the latest action in a campaign by Guatemala's government to silence activists and members of the indigenous Maya Qeqchi community who raise concerns over the disastrous effects of mining on their livelihood. His arrest underscores the very difficult environment under which indigenous, environmental and land rights activists operate in Guatemala. In 2017 alone, two activists have been killed for voicing objections to mining and hydroelectric projects and the negative impact they have on the environment where communities live.

Morales is a member of the Guild of Small Scale Farmers or Gremial de Pescadores Artesanales de El Estor (GPA), a platform formed by four groups of associations of fishermen, to raise awareness about the harmful effects of mining activities on communities. For several years now, members of the GPA and the Maya Qeqchi community have been intimidated, harassed and targeted for speaking out about the pollution of the Izabal lake – a major source of livelihood for fishermen and community members – caused by the mining of nickel. The concerns raised by these activists and their communities have often been ignored by the authorities who collude with private corporations involved in mining.

Said Inés Pousadela, CIVICUS Senior Research Specialist: "Jerson's case is an example of the ongoing trend of attacks, violence and judicial persecution of those who stand up in defence of the environment and the sources of livelihood of communities against massive corporate interests."

"It is time for the government of Guatemala to respect the fundamental rights of its citizens and end the high levels of impunity enjoyed by those who trample on citizens' freedoms," said Pousadela.

This is just the latest in a string of actions against the activists undertaken by the government of Guatemala. In July 2017, Morales, together with members of GPA and some journalists, was accused by the nickel mining company Compañía Guatemalteca de Niquel (CGN) of damaging property. The accusation came after the activists criticised the impact of mining on the Izabal lake and its surroundings. The group were later charged with unlawful association and assembly as well as with attempts to commit

crimes and issued with arrest warrants. Morales is one of the few journalists who document and publish about the activities of mining companies and the violent repression of peaceful protests in El Estor.

Before that, on 27 May 2017, a protester was killed during the violent dispersal of peaceful demonstrations led by GPA to condemn the contamination of Izabal lake. Earlier, on 17 January 2017, paramilitary forces shot and killed activist Sebastián Alonso during a demonstration against the Pojom I Hydroelectric project in San Mateo, in the western highlands. Several other protesters were injured. The project is being carried out without the consent of the indigenous communities in the area.

Over the past four years, at least [51 human rights defenders](#), many of them working on environmental and indigenous peoples' rights were killed in Guatemala. Such attacks are fuelled by the lack of appropriate actions by the government to bring the perpetrators to justice.

The violence and harassment against activists in Guatemala mirror restrictions on those working on land, environmental and indigenous rights across the world. In September 2017, a group of 39 human rights defenders from 29 countries issued a [statement](#) to raised concerns over the regular pushback they face from states, corporations and non-state actors and called on the international community to pay more attention to their plight.

CIVICUS calls on the government of Guatemala to release Jerson Antonio Xitumul Morales, and conduct independent investigations into the attacks on members of Gremial de Pescadores Artesanales de El Estor and all other human rights defenders working on environmental and indigenous rights.

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