

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Public statement

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Mexico: Human rights defender arrested

Amnesty International is seriously concerned about the situation of Felipe Arreaga Sánchez, a well-known peasant environmental activist from Petetlán, Guerrero, who was arrested on 3 November charged with murder and criminal conspiracy. The organization believes that there are clear indications that the proceedings against him are politically motivated. Amnesty International intends to keep the legal process under close scrutiny and calls on the authorities to ensure that the rights of Felipe Arreaga Sánchez are respected and that he has a fair trial.

Arrest warrants related to the same proceedings have also been issued against other members of the Sierra de Petetlán Peasant Environmentalist Organization, including former prisoner of conscience Rodolfo Montiel. It is very worrying that well-known leaders of the Petetlán environmental movement are facing trial in a case that is apparently motivated by revenge on the part of *caciques* (local political bosses).

Felipe Arreaga Sánchez and other environmental leaders are reportedly accused of having committed a murder in 1998. However, in the original complaint about the incident, the witness to the crime did not identify the accused. Despite this, a new accusation has apparently been made in which the environmental activists are identified as the culprits. Felipe Arreaga Sánchez has already brought witnesses to court to state that he was in another community when the crime took place. Nevertheless, the proceedings are continuing and Felipe Arreaga Sánchez remains in detention.

The environmental movement has been denouncing the illegal logging being carried out by *caciques* since the mid-1990s. In 1998, in reprisal for their work with the movement, Rodolfo Montiel and Teodoro Cabrera were arrested, tortured and forced to confess to trumped up charges. Amnesty International adopted them as prisoners of conscience. It was only as a result of national and international campaigning that they were released.

It is still common in Mexico, especially in states such as Guerrero, for the justice system to be misused against human rights defenders and local opposition groups with the intention of preventing and discrediting the legitimate work they do to defend and promote human rights.