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Protest leaders punished for fighting high electricity charges in Mexico

Amnesty International today accused the Mexican authorities of misusing the justice system to detain three community leaders following their protests against high electricity prices in the state of Campeche, in the east of the country.

Amnesty International has named Sara López, Joaquín Aguilar and Guadalupe Borja from the National Movement against High Electricity Tariffs in Campeche “prisoners of conscience”.

The three were detained in July 2009 in relation to their involvement in the group. Mexico’s Federal Attorney General (Procuraduría General de la República, PGR) is accusing the three leaders of allegedly holding hostage an employee of Mexico’s Federal Electricity Company.

The charges were based on an original complaint by the legal representative of the electricity company for obstructing delivery of a public service, a minor charge.

The complaint came after the protest leaders met with the electricity company to ask for the electricity supply to be reconnected. However, the PGR then fabricated the additional charge of hostage taking, a serious offence not eligible for bail.

In January 2010, a federal appeal court ruled that the evidence against the three was unsubstantiated and did not point to the crimes ever having been committed. However, the PGR has appealed this ruling without justification thus prolonging their detention until the appeal is resolved.

Amnesty International has demanded the authorities release them immediately and unconditionally.

“The criminal charges against Sara, Joaquín and Guadalupe are completely baseless and seem to have been brought only to stop their campaign against high electricity tariffs,” said Rupert Knox, Mexico researcher at Amnesty International.

“It is time for the Mexican authorities to stop targeting individuals involved in legitimate protest and dissent.”

On 25 September 2008, around 40 people from the town of Candelaria went to the local offices of the Federal Electricity Company to ask for the power supply to be reconnected. The company had cut the supply to community members for non payment, although negotiations were underway.

After the protest, the electricity company’s legal representative filed a complaint with the PGR for the crime

of “obstructing the delivery of a public service” against those named on an electricity company list of debtors for non-payment of bills.

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