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Nicaragua: Human rights defender stigmatized and publicly discredited by government authorities

As part of a campaign carried out by Nicaraguan government officials to stigmatize and publicly discredit Vilma Nuñez, the director and founder of the Nicaraguan Centre for Human Rights (Centro Nicaragüense de Derechos Humanos, CENIDH), on 8 March 2017, 9 government officials, among them six government ministers, wrote a letter to the United States ambassador to Nicaragua in response to Vilma Nuñez's nomination for the International Women of Courage Award, presented by the United States government Department of State. The officials writing the letter claimed that her nomination was an "act of hostility" and added that Nuñez's work has insulted and offended the people and government of Nicaragua. For Nuñez this is a "direct attack from the government" which puts her at risk, given the current volatile situation in terms of human rights in the country.¹

Vilma Nuñez and other members of CENIDH have been granted precautionary measures by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights since 2008 due to the risk to their life and integrity which they face as a result of their work to defend human rights. To date, the Nicaraguan government has not guaranteed these measures.

The campaign of stigmatization and discreditation against Nuñez is yet another example of the harassment and persecution faced by human rights defenders in Nicaragua, which Amnesty International has documented for several years.² Smear campaigns against human rights defenders increase the risks they face, permitting and even encouraging attacks against them. State authorities have the duty to create a favourable environment for the defence of human rights, according to the 1998 UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, and therefore must not make statements which stigmatize, discriminate against or discredit those carrying out their legitimate work to defend human rights.

Amnesty International urges the Nicaraguan authorities to redress the hostile messages against human rights defenders and publicly and unconditionally show support for the important and legitimate work of this human rights defender to promote human rights. Additionally, it calls on the government to promptly ensure that the necessary measures are in place to guarantee the safety of Vilma Nuñez and the members of CENIDH, in consultation with them.

¹ Interview with Vilma Núñez, 9 March 2017

² Annual Report 2016/2017: "The situation of human rights in the world". Amnesty International, (Index: POL 10/4800/2017) pages 328-330