

PUBLIC

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Fear for

VENEZUELA Pemón indigenous people in San Rafael de Kamoirán
Juan Ramón LEZAMA
Silviano CASTRO

Pemón indigenous people protesting against the construction of an electricity supply network in Venezuela's Gran Sabana region have been harassed by soldiers, and one person has been severely ill-treated. Amnesty International fears for their safety.

In the early hours of 29 December 2000, Juan Ramón Lezama was reportedly held by the neck and beaten by two soldiers till he fell unconscious. On regaining consciousness, he attempted to escape but was chased by the soldiers. He ended up tangled in some barbed wire where he was deliberately left. He apparently suffered injuries to his neck, arms and legs. Amnesty International does not know whether he remains in detention.

The incident took place after the army reportedly began keeping the Pemón indigenous community of San Rafael de Kaimorán in the municipality of Gran Sabana, Bolívar state, under routine surveillance in late December 2000. Troops first visited the community on 26 December, offering the inhabitants free food. The community rejected the offer in the belief that it was an attempt to persuade them to abandon their campaign against the construction of a major electrical power line in the region. Over the following three days, troops returned to the community where they interrogated community members and confiscated work-tools. They also surrounded the home of Silviano Castro, the head (*cacique*) of the community.

Members of the community have said that the continuing harassment by the army "takes place on our own territory and affects our daily life, our culture and our safety" (*"ocurre en nuestro propio territorio y afecta nuestra vida cotidiana, nuestra cultura y nuestra seguridad"*).

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Pemón indigenous people are protesting against the construction of an electricity supply network (*tendido eléctrico*) running pylons and high voltage cables across Venezuela's Canaima National Park, Imataca Forest Reserve and the Gran Sabana region. Work on the network began in 1997 following an agreement for Venezuela to supply northern Brazil with electricity.

Pemón indigenous people protesting against the construction of the network have been subjected to acts of intimidation. In October 2000, Amnesty International issued an Urgent Action on another Pemón indigenous community, Santa Cruz de Maupari, after inhabitants there received death threats (See UA 332/00, AMR 53/14/00, 30 October 2000).

The Venezuelan Constitution adopted in 1999 includes provisions for the protection of indigenous people and their environment. It also provides for the protection of human rights, and states that international human rights treaties and conventions are an integral part of the rule of law in Venezuela.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/telexes/faxes/express/airmail letters in Spanish or your own language:

- expressing concern about reports that Juan Ramón Lezama was detained and beaten by soldiers on 29 December 2000 in San Rafael de Kaimorán in the municipality of Gran Sabana, Bolívar state;
- urging that if he is still in custody, he be charged with a recognizable criminal offence or be immediately released;
- calling for a prompt and independent investigation into his alleged ill-treatment, for the findings to be made public and for those responsible to be brought to justice;
- expressing concern for the safety of all members of San Rafael de Kaimorán, including Juan Ramón Lezama and Silviano Castro, and urging the authorities to take the necessary steps to guarantee their safety.

APPEALS TO:

President of the Republic

Sr. Hugo Chávez Frías

Presidente de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela

Palacio de Miraflores

Esquina de Bolero

Av. Urdaneta

Caracas, Venezuela

Fax: + 582 806 3101/ 3325 (It may be difficult getting through to this number.

Please be patient and keep trying)

Salutation: Señor Presidente

Minister of the Interior and Justice

Sr. Luis Alfonso Dávila

Ministro del Interior y Justicia

Ministerio del Interior y Justicia

Avenida Urdaneta Esquina de Platanal

Edificio Interior y Justicia

Despacho del Ministro, piso tres

Caracas, Venezuela

Fax: + 582 861 1967/0363

Salutation: Señor Ministro

COPIES TO:

Indigenous rights organisation

AMIGRANSA

Apartado Postal 50460,

Caracas 1050-A

Venezuela

and to diplomatic representatives of Venezuela accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 15 February 2001.