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## **Mexico must free indigenous activists jailed on trumped-up charges**

The Mexican authorities must immediately and unconditionally release two indigenous men imprisoned after an unfair trial in the central state of Puebla, Amnesty International said today.

In a letter delivered on Tuesday to officials at Mexico's Supreme Court – where their case has gone on appeal – the organization called for the case to be reviewed in line with international standards on fair trials and the Mexican Constitution.

In 2010, José Ramón Aniceto Gómez and Pascual Agustín Cruz from the Nahua indigenous community of Atla were convicted to seven years in prison on a fabricated car-theft charge. Both men deny the charge and Amnesty International has named them prisoners of conscience after concluding that they were arrested and imprisoned as a reprisal for their work to improve their community's access to water.

“José Ramón Aniceto Gómez and Pascual Agustín Cruz are victims of a justice system that often discriminates against poor and indigenous people, and the case against them just doesn't stand up to scrutiny,” said Javier Zúñiga, Special Adviser to Amnesty International.

“We're urging the Mexican authorities to immediately and unconditionally release these two prisoners of conscience and quash the convictions against them, which only came about through an investigation and prosecution that were a complete sham.”

Amnesty International has documented several other cases where Mexican human rights defenders have been prosecuted and convicted on the basis of fabricated evidence.

In the case of José Ramón Aniceto Gómez and Pascual Agustín Cruz there was no proper investigation to support the charges and the judge ignored the defence's evidence while accepting the prosecution's case without question.

These issues were further compounded by the fact that the defendants – who can only express themselves in limited Spanish – were never offered an interpreter or a defence lawyer familiar with their native language or culture.

“We would have understood better in Nahuatl, because that's our language...our traditions,” José Ramón Aniceto Gómez told Amnesty International.

“Sometimes we have talked, Pascual and I, saying, if only we could get out of here one day, one month, out there we'll be happy – working – law abiding, not presenting ourselves to others as enemies, showing others that we have good thoughts, understanding.”

The men have already served more than two years of their seven-year sentence in Huauchinango prison,

where their family members cannot make regular visits due to the cost and difficulty of travelling there across the mountains from Atla.

Elected by their community in 2008 to carry out public works, the two were instrumental in bringing running water into many homes.

While the project initially showed promise with more families receiving running water, it was cut short after a powerful local group controlling the water supply spread allegations that the two indigenous men had stolen a car. Despite a lack of evidence to support these claims, the men were arrested, put on trial and convicted.

“Although the Mexican authorities had approved and funded the project to supply water to the indigenous community in Atla, they failed to protect the scheme’s leaders from reprisals and from serving time for a crime they didn’t commit,” said Javier Zúñiga.

“In line with Mexico’s international human rights obligations – but also because they owe it to these two men and the indigenous community they represent to set the record straight – they must now carry out a full investigation into what happened. Anyone found responsible for the reprisals against these prisoners of conscience must be brought to justice.”

In Mexico City on Tuesday and in many cities around the world on Wednesday, Amnesty International is leading public events in solidarity with José Ramón Aniceto Gómez and Pascual Agustín Cruz, calling for their immediate and unconditional release.