

**AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL
PRESS RELEASE**

AI Index: PRE 01/170/2010
21 May 2010

Mexico urged to release imprisoned community leaders on hunger strike

Amnesty International is calling on the Mexican authorities to release three community leaders who began a hunger strike in protest at their detention for taking part in a campaign against high electricity prices.

Community leaders Sara López, Joaquín Aguilar and Guadalupe Borja were detained in July 2009 over their involvement in the National Movement against High Electricity Tariffs in the eastern state of Campeche.

On Friday 14 May 2010, the three pledged to refuse food until their innocence is recognized and they are released.

"Sara, Joaquín and Guadalupe have gone on hunger strike as a last resort to demand their release. It is a desperate act to protest against their unfair imprisonment," said Kerrie Howard, Deputy Director of Amnesty International's America's programme.

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 in 2008.

Amnesty International believes that there is no evidence to support the charges against the three and that the case was fabricated in order to secure their detention and prosecution in reprisal for their leading role protesting against the high electricity tariffs.

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 press for the electricity supply to be reconnected.

The company had cut the supply to community members for non payment, because some were unable to pay and others would not pay in protest at the high bills.

In January 2010, a federal appeal court ruled that the evidence against the three was unsubstantiated and was insufficient to suggest the crimes had ever been committed. At this stage the three leaders should have been released.

However, the PGR requested a review of the federal appeal court ruling without justification thus prolonging their detention until the appeal is resolved.

Amnesty International has requested the PGR to withdraw the petition for review in order to end the unfair and unwarranted detention but the PGR has so far refused.

"The criminal charges against Sara, Joaquín and Guadalupe are completely unfounded and have been brought by the PGR only to stop their campaign against high electricity tariffs," said Kerrie Howard.

On 25 September 2008, around 40 people living in the town of Candelaria, Campeche State, whose electricity had just been cut off went to the local offices of the Federal Electricity Company to press for the electricity supply to be reconnected.

While members of the local community gathered in front of the offices, Sara López and Joaquín Aguilar led the talks with a company official to secure reconnection of the power supply.

The official then accompanied the community delegation to reconnect the electricity supply to the affected houses.

According to the case file, the electricity company's legal representative filed a complaint with the PGR on the same day as the protest for the minor offence of "obstructing the delivery of a public service".

Those accused of the offence by the electricity company were simply the names on a list of debtors for non-payment of electricity bills – which did not include Sara López, Joaquín Aguilar and Guadalupe Borja.

Nine months later, on 25 June 2009, the PGR charged Sara López, Joaquín Aguilar and Guadalupe Borja and 11 other people with the crime of obstruction, but also for the far more serious offence of hostage-taking during the protest.

At 5am on 10 July 2009, five people were arrested; two were subsequently released on appeal, but Sara López, Joaquín Aguilar and Guadalupe Borja are still in custody.