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Mexico: Prisoner of Conscience Felipe Arreaga acquitted and released – a first step towards justice

Amnesty International has received with pleasure the news of the acquittal of Felipe Arreaga Sánchez, environmental activist, founder of the Peasant Environmentalist Organization of the Sierra de Petatlán (*Organización Campesina Ecologista de la Sierra de Petatlán - OCESP*) and prisoner of conscience. This judicial decision means that human rights defender Felipe Arreaga can finally enjoy his unconditional freedom and return to his family after ten months of unjust detention. The organization would, however, like to remind the authorities that there is still a long way to go before justice can be guaranteed in this case.

In this regard Amnesty International added that, “The State must now ensure his safety, that of his wife Celsa Valdovinos and his family, as well as other environmental and human rights activists in Guerrero state.”

The organization believes that his acquittal was due to the determination of Felipe Arreaga and his family, their defence lawyers from the Tlachinollan Mountain Human Rights Centre (*Centro de Derechos Humanos de la Montaña Tlachinollan*) and national and international pressure demanding justice. All these efforts led the judiciary to take a decision that is in line with the law and justice.

Nonetheless, Amnesty International is concerned that the State Attorney-General’s office (*Procuraduría General de Justicia del estado*) has stood firmly by the accusation against Felipe Arreaga, despite clear proof of the involvement of state agents in the fabrication of evidence. Amnesty International warns the authorities that they must now use this judicial decision to carry out in-depth investigations into the fabrication of evidence and the apparent tolerance of such crimes on the part of senior officials within the state authorities.

“This is an opportunity to implement an in-depth reform of the state’s prosecution service in order to ensure that the Attorney-General’s office acts impartially and in line with the interests of justice,” insists the organization.

“In addition, it must be recalled that the authorities have taken no steps to bring to an end the criminal action against 13 other environmental activists named on the same arrest warrant that led to the prosecution of Felipe Arreaga”, insists the organization.

Amnesty International believes that there is a series of actions the authorities should take following the acquittal of Felipe Arreaga:

- Guarantee the safety of Felipe Arreaga, his family and other environmental and human rights activists in Guerrero;
- Guarantee compensation to Felipe Arreaga for his unjust detention and prosecution;
- Cancel the arrest warrant for another 13 environmental activists and conduct an exhaustive and

impartial investigation into the Office of the Attorney-General's original investigation into the murder of Abel Bautista Guillen in 1998.

Investigate the attack last May on Petatlán anti-logging activist Albertano Peñaloza and his family, which resulted in the murder of two of his sons, and bring those responsible to justice.

Deal urgently with the fundamental problems in Petatlán municipality, including environmental issues and the continuing tolerance of abuses of power on the part of the *caciques* (local political bosses).

Background information

Felipe Arreaga was one of the founders of the Peasant Environmentalist Organization of the Sierra de Petatlán (OCESP) and has been active in his defence of the area's forests for the last 7 years. He was arrested in November 2004, accused of a murder that took place in 1998. Another 13 activists were named on the same arrest warrant, including Albertano Peñalosa.

After considering his case, Amnesty International believed that the arrest and prosecution of Felipe Arreaga was in retaliation for his peaceful struggle to prevent excessive logging of the region's forests. The organization adopted him as a prisoner of conscience, calling for his immediate and unconditional release.

Earlier, in 1998, Amnesty International had already adopted the case of the two OCESP members, Rodolfo Montiel and Teodoro Cabrera, who were arrested by the military and tortured to confess to arms and drugs-related crimes. They were found guilty on the basis of false evidence and were adopted as prisoners of conscience by Amnesty International. National and international pressure in the case forced President Vicente Fox to order their release from prison in 2001.

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