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Madagascar: Immediately and unconditionally release environmental human rights defender jailed for questioning a Chinese gold mining company

Malagasy environmental human rights defender Raleva, a member of human rights organisations 'Justice et Paix' and OIDESCM, a satellite of the national NGO CRAAD-OI, has been jailed on trumped-up charges, accused of using a false title for requesting the mining and environmental permits of a Chinese gold mining company. He is currently being detained at the Mananjary prison, in eastern Madagascar.

Amnesty International considers him to be a prisoner of conscience, solely detained for his peaceful human rights activism. The organization is calling for his immediate and unconditional release.

He was arrested in the Vohilava village on 27 September 2017 by local police, after a public meeting organized by representatives of the company and the local head of district. The meeting was to inform the population that the mining company had received the necessary permits to resume their previously suspended activities.

During the meeting, Raleva asked for the mining and environmental permits to be shown. According to his lawyer, representatives of the company then threatened him, and he was subsequently arrested on charges of identity theft – accused of having used the title of "Head of District".

According to his lawyer, he was taken to a private home where he was kept for a night, before being transferred to the Mananjary police station where he spent five nights. He was finally sent to prison on 3 October, where he is now held in pre-trial detention with no hearing date set.

Background

Since 2016, there have been increasing tensions amongst the local population around the presence of a Chinese mining company's activities in the Vohalava and Ambaladara villages, in the Mananjary district. Local people have complained that the company does not have the permits required by law to extract gold, and they have protested against the environmental degradation they believe is caused by the mining activities. People who live in the surroundings of the mine have complained about the pollution of the Itsaka River, vital for the water and food provision of the nine neighbouring villages.

On 27 August 2016, following several protests, Madagascar's Ministry of Mines and Petrol informed the mining company of the suspension of all their activities until they were able to provide the documents required by Madagascar's Mining Code, including the mining and environmental permits. On the same day, the regional authorities proceeded to the sealing of the company's equipment. On 7 June 2017, the Ministry of Mines and Petrol authorized the unsealing of the mining equipment on the condition that they not be used until the required approvals and permits had been granted.

Amnesty International is deeply concerned about the abuse of the criminal justice system to target and harass human rights defenders and silence those who speak out against natural resource exploration and exploitation projects throughout the country. The organization has also documented the excessive use of pre-trial detention, particularly against human rights defenders, as a form to obstruct and delegitimize their work.