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Mexico: Violent attack against human rights defenders of the Unión de Comunidades Indígenas de la Zona Norte del Istmo

In the early hours of 24 March 2023, a protest-camp of the **Union of Indigenous Communities of the Northern Zone of the Isthmus (UCIZONI)** was attacked by civilians and police from the State of Oaxaca, leaving two people injured.

The [Union of Indigenous Communities of the Northern Zone of the Isthmus \(UCIZONI\)](#) is an indigenous organisation with more than 37 years of experience defending human rights of indigenous peoples in Mexico. UCIZONI has also worked in solidarity with other indigenous struggles in the Americas. One of the pillars of its work, led by the Ayuujk indigenous community, is the resistance to the implementation of mega-projects on their territories. In particular, UCIZONI has denounced and mobilised against abuses and the negative impacts resulting from the modernisation works of the railroad of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, in the State of Oaxaca.

On 24 March 2023, civilians accompanied by Oaxaca state police attacked the UCIZONI camp, which had been peacefully blocking the section of the Mogoñe Viejo-Vixidu railroad tracks for 24 days. The attacks left two people injured. This blockade has been one of UCIZONI's forms of resistance to the construction of the Mogoñe Viejo-Vixidu railroad, a section of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec railroad, located in indigenous territories, without their free, prior and informed consent. The construction of the Isthmus to Tehuantepec railroad will form part of the eventual development of a commercial-industrial corridor, the construction of commercial ports, a network of primary and secondary highways, digital connectivity networks and a gas pipeline, as well as ten industrial parks. The project also plans to connect with another large-scale investment project called "Tren Maya". UCIZONI claims these works pose a risk to the livelihoods of the 12 indigenous communities living in the area, as well as to the preservation of their territory and the environment. Despite the acts of aggression on 24 March 2023, the community has been able to keep the railroad blockade intact.

This attack comes after three previous attacks by armed civilians on UCIZONI's actions and takes place in the context of repression of indigenous rights defenders in the area of Tehuantepec. The Mexican Center for Environmental Law (CEMDA) has registered 26 aggressions against indigenous rights defenders between October 2021 and March 2023, all related to the construction of the Tehuantepec railroad. In addition, human rights defenders have faced stigmatisation from high profile authorities from the Mexican government, including by the President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who described UCIZONI and human rights defender **Carlos Beas** (UCIZONI's representative), as ["fiercely opposing the projects and sabotaging the progress"](#) at a [press conference](#) held on 21 March 2023.

Front Line Defenders expresses its concern at the attacks and stigmatisation of UCIZONI and its members, as it is presumed that these are linked to their legitimate activity in defence of indigenous and environmental rights. Front Line Defenders reiterates its concern regarding the increasing attacks and lack of protection for human rights defenders in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, as well as the negative impact that the attacks and stigmatisation of protesters has on the rights of indigenous communities and human rights defenders working on indigenous rights.

Front Line Defenders calls on the Mexican authorities to:

1. Initiate an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation into the attacks that occurred on 24 March 2023, in order to identify those responsible, bring them before a competent and impartial tribunal, and apply the sanctions provided by law;
2. Take all necessary measures to guarantee the security and physical and psychological integrity of the members of the Union of Indigenous Communities of the Northern Zone of the Isthmus (UCIZONI);
3. Take measures to put an end to intimidation against human rights defenders in **Mexico**, so that they can continue their activities in defence of human rights without fear of reprisals, in accordance with the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders and the Escazú Agreement;
4. Take the necessary measures to ensure that public officials and other public figures refrain from making statements that stigmatise the legitimate work of human rights defenders;