

Sr. Rodolfo Antonio Delgado Montes

Fiscal General de la República (FGR)
San Salvador, El Salvador

April 13, 2025

Dear Attorney General:

We are deeply concerned for the safety of human rights defender **Fidel Antonio Zavala Pérez**, who was transferred on April 2 to the notorious Centro Penitenciario La Esperanza (Penitentiary Center La Esperanza, more commonly known as “Mariona”) on the outskirts of San Salvador. Fidel Zavala has previously denounced torture or other ill-treatment in penitentiary centers, including the abusive treatment of detainees by prison guards at Mariona. His testimony has been crucial in exposing violations. We suspect that his arrest and detention is intended to silence his work and discourage further reporting of state abuses.

Fidel Zavala is spokesperson for the Unidad de Defensa de Derechos Humanos y Comunitarios (UNIDEHC, or Unity of Defense for Human and Community Rights). UNIDEHC was founded in 2019 to provide free legal assistance to persons forcibly displaced by government or private businesses and to persons arbitrarily detained during the State of Exception, which was initiated in March 2022. For several months UNIDEHC has been supporting the land rights of residents of the community of La Floresta, who have been fighting against forced eviction in San Juan Opico, La Libertad Department. For several years, the 140 families of La Floresta have been working to legalize their land titles.


On February 9, the National Civilian Police (PNC) arrested La Floresta community leaders **Medardo Rodríguez** and **Alejandra Cañas**. UNIDEHC supported a complaint (“denuncia”) before the Procuraduría para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos (Human Rights Ombudsman) regarding their arbitrary arrest and detention. Then on February 25, the PNC raided the home of lawyer Ivania Cruz (director of UNIDEHC) and the UNIDEHC headquarters, arresting Fidel Zavala. Also arrested on February 25 were **José Alberto Pérez Ramírez** and **María Margarita Flamenco**, two members of the steering council (“directiva”) of La Floresta; they had filed a criminal notice with the Prosecutor's Office on February 13 against agents of the PNC for coercion, threats, and breach of duty. To date, more than 20 residents and community leaders from La Floresta have been arrested.

On March 13, the Fifth Court Against Organized Crime in San Salvador began judicial proceedings against Fidel Zavala and 24 community leaders from La Floresta. They are being charged with usurpation of property, irregular marketing of subdivision parcels, illegal restriction of movement, and aggravated threats connected with illegal criminal groups (i.e., gangs).

We urge that your government

- release Fidel Zavala from detention and drop all charges against the residents of La Floresta and members of UNHIDEC
- stop the misuse of criminal law to persecute and criminalize the legitimate defense of human rights

Sincerely,


Brian J. Stefan
Stefan Szittai
Co-Coordinators


Christine Stonebraker-Martinez

copies: Sr. Presidente Nayib Bukele, Presidente de la República ~ via email and US mail
Licda. Raquel Cabellero de Guevara, Procuradora para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos/ Human Rights Ombudsman of El Salvador ~ via email
Carmen Milena Mayorga de Monterrosa, Ambassador of El Salvador in Washington, DC ~ via email & US mail
Carlos Bernal Pulido, Rapporteur for El Salvador, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights ~ via email & US mail
William H Duncan, Ambassador of the US in San Salvador ~ via email & US mail
US State Department: El Salvador Desk ~ via email
US Senators Husted and Moreno and US Representatives Beatty, Brown, Jordan, Joyce, Kaptur, Latta, Miller, Rulli, Sykes ~ via email

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The following people hereby urge you to take action on this matter as indicated in this letter: