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Venezuela: Intimidation and threat of arrest against human rights lawyers Engels Puertas and Juan Carlos Barroeta Rivas

On 6 October 2021, a judge and a prosecutor of the Public Prosecutor's Office of the Criminal Judicial Circuit of the state of Merida in Venezuela threatened to order the arrest of human rights lawyers **Engels Puertas** and **Juan Carlos Barroeta Rivas**, accusing them of defamation. The threat was made in the middle of a trial in which Engels Puertas and Juan Carlos Barroeta Rivas were acting as legal representatives on the defence team.

[Engels Puertas](#) is a lawyer and human rights defender. For more than six years he has been defending people who have been incriminated in unjust criminal proceedings. Engels is also a member of the legal team in the organisation 100% Estrogen, where he works on cases with a gender perspective. He also directs the organisation *Iniciativa Para Una Justicia Igualitaria*, where he works alongside lawyer and human rights defender [Juan Carlos Barroeta Rivas](#), who has been litigating in defence of human rights, specifically in favour of the right to a legitimate defence of victims and the right to due process of their defendants.

Human rights lawyers Engels Puertas and Juan Carlos Barroeta Rivas are part of the defence team of the case of 2 individuals who were arbitrarily detained and allegedly tortured in prison. The case has been ongoing for over 5 years. On 6 October 2021, when the case was being heard before the Criminal Judicial Circuit of the state of Merida, Engels Puertas and Juan Carlos Barroeta Rivas were threatened by the prosecutor one day after they recused and denounced the judge presiding over the case in the Venezuelan General Inspectorate of Courts for alleged violations of due process. The judge in question declared the accusations by the human rights defenders inadmissible and threatened to file a complaint against them in order to remove them from the case and inhibit their work as defence lawyers. The judge, while deciding to continue the trial and ignoring the complaint against him, has appointed other public lawyers to represent the defendants, ignoring their appeal to continue with their lawyers.

Front Line Defenders expresses serious concern about the misuse of the judicial system to intimidate human rights lawyers Engels Puertas and Juan Carlos Barroeta Rivas. Front Line Defenders believes that these acts are being carried out in retaliation for their peaceful human rights work in Venezuela.

Front Line Defenders urges the Venezuelan authorities to:

1. Review the claims made in Engels Puertas and Juan Carlos Barroeta Riva's complaint to the Inspector General of Venezuelan Courts and ensure the defamation charges are not brought against them;
2. Cease judicial harassment against human rights lawyers Engels Puertas and Juan Carlos Barroeta Rivas and to allow them to exercise their legitimate human rights work;
3. Guarantee the physical and psychological integrity of the legal team defending the case and the lawyers Engels Puertas and Juan Carlos Barroeta Rivas and their families;

4. Guarantee that human rights lawyers in Venezuela are free to fully exercise their legal functions;
5. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Venezuela are able to operate in a safe environment conducive to the defence of human rights.

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