

ENTREVISTAS PBI MÉXICO

Num. II/2009 • March 2009

Entrevistas is a publication of PBI Mexico that highlights situations that increase risks to the physical or psychological integrity of Mexican human rights defenders, or that damage the legitimacy of their work. The opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the opinions of PBI Mexico.

The Cerezo Committee receives Héctor and Antonio Cerezo, freed on the 16th of February 2009.

Peace Brigades International has accompanied Emiliana, Francisco and Alejandro Cerezo Contreras, members of the Cerezo Committee, since February 2002. Following the detention of their brothers Alejandro, Héctor and Antonio in August 2001 and their activities to demand their release, Francisco and Emiliana Cerezo Contreras have been victims of various episodes of harassment and threats. Alejandro Cerezo was exonerated of all charges and freed from prison in March 2005. On February 16th, 2009, Héctor and Antonio Cerezo were freed from prison after completing their sentence. Soon after their liberation, PBI interviewed Francisco, Héctor and Antonio Cerezo to talk about this situation.

The Cerezo Committee was created in response to the detention of Héctor, Antonio and Alejandro Cerezo. The fight for their release has been the principal focus of the Committee's work. Can you share some of the Committee's reflections regarding Héctor and Antonio's seven and a half years of imprisonment?

Francisco: The imprisonment represents: First, the injustice and impunity of the Mexican state as far as human rights violations are concerned. We should remember that this case involves – in the case of those who were detained – arbitrary detention, torture, together with the continued torture for six and a half years in high security prisons, being denied the right to a fair trial, and – in our case – illegal surveillance, harassment, and repeated death threats against us. Second, it represents the solidarity movement which has flowed from so many people and organizations, and which allowed us to create the Committee and endure the fight for liberty and a respect for human rights. Third, it represents the experience of family and friends who became human rights defenders. And, finally, it represents finding – in the fight against injustice and impunity and for human rights – a project which was born out of solidarity, but which now maintains this momentum in order to provide solidarity for other families of political prisoners and human rights defenders who receive death threats.

The brothers' liberation represents the fulfilment of the original objective of our organization: to obtain freedom for Sergio Galicia Max, Pablo Alvarado Flores and the brothers Alejandro, Héctor and Antonio Cerezo Contreras; it's a triumph for the solidarity that has thwarted the injustice which could have



PBI accompanies the Cerezo Committee on their way to the prison to receive their brothers. Photo: PBI

continued for much longer had we not worked to raise awareness and denounce human rights violations.

How were Héctor and Antonio received on the day of their liberation?

Héctor and Antonio: It was very moving and emotional to see well-known faces, friends and people who had shown solidarity and visited us in prison. We also saw many people who we did not know, but who we knew had accompanied our case in one

way or another. There were also many people from the media – cameras and photographers all around – and all of this made us comprehend the true magnitude of the work of the Cerezo Committee to raise awareness of our case. And while we didn't recognize all of the people who were there waiting for us, we found out afterwards that there were representatives from many organizations: The Fray Francisco de Vitoria Center for Human Rights, Serapaz, The Independent Committee for Human Rights of Morelos, members of the Don Sergio Méndez Arceo Foundation, and International Service for Peace (SIPAZ). And of course we also met the people who had accompanied our brothers – you, Peace Brigades International, and other organizations like the Unified Movement of the Triquis of Oaxaca, The People's Front in Defense of the Land of Atenco, student organisations from the UNAM University, our Alma Mater amongst other people who, in solidarity, had written us letters during our imprisonment, or who had visited us in jail.

How important has international support been for you over the years?

Francisco: It has been very important. For us as the Cerezo Committee Mexico, international support has allowed us to provide a voice to the human rights violations committed in Mexico and, it was one of the fundamental pillars that meant that the Mexican state couldn't threaten us worse than they did. The dissuasive power of international accompaniment – specifically that of Peace Brigades International – has allowed us to continue working without having to face (as others have) forced exile or physical attacks against us, which would have slowed our work to defend and promote human rights in Mexico.

What is the security situation for the Cerezo Committee?

Francisco: If we analyze the risks that we faced during the last seven and a half years of work, we can say that the surveillance and harassment against all Committee members was a constant, and worsened during the more important legal periods, with death threats against the free brothers as well as threats and attacks against other Committee members. Some aggressions were due to the specific dynamics of other cases we accompany, unrelated to the Cerezo case. In 2007 for example, attacks were not necessarily a result of the work of the Committee, but because of factors related to increased repression in our country.

What are the plans for the Cerezo Committee now?

Francisco: Over these seven and a half years, we have understood that the injustice and human rights violations which we have seen are not isolated cases, but instead a policy of the state, and a strategy aimed at criminalizing social protest in general. Looking at our own experience retrospectively, we have created new objectives and goals. Today we provide accompaniment for the families of other people who have been incarcerated for political reasons and for activists or human rights defenders threatened with death. We give workshops on understanding human rights as a tool to achieve justice and fight impunity, we document and raise awareness of the cases of political prisoners, and we participate in the coordination of civil society in the fight for their freedom. We help with risk assessment for sister organisations who suffer state harassment; we promote and support the creation of laws which will permit the liberation of all political prisoners, - all this work from the standpoint of human rights. The Cerezo case was certainly the beginning of our human rights organization, but today it is just one more case that is part of our history, whilst the experience gained by our organization now allows us to accompany other similar cases.

According to the analysis of the Cerezo Committee, what is the current situation for prisoners in the country?

Francisco: Judicial reforms which violate human rights have been put into place by the Mexican state as part of their 'war against organized crime', or the strategy to criminalize social protest. This creates serious risk for human defenders in this country, since now they face the reality that human rights defenders will be labelled as 'delinquents', while members of social organizations will be labelled as members of organized crime. All this means that legitimate rights to free demonstration, social protest, freedom of speech, might be criminalized and – as a result – there will be more political prisoners who will be sent to high-security prisons which, as we know, are centers where human dignity is exterminated and where one's rights are restricted more and more, leaving you in isolation and, therefore, at further risk of human rights violations.

The **Cerezo Committee** (Comité Cerezo) was created following the detention and incarceration of Alejandro, Héctor and Antonio Cerezo Contreras together with Pablo Alvarado Flores and Sergio Galicia Max in August 2001, who were incarcerated in high security prisons following a trial with many irregularities. Since then, the Committee began to work to defend the rights of political prisoners, prisoners of conscience, and those who have been unfairly imprisoned for political reasons in Mexico, with a specific focus on working towards the freedom of brothers Alejandro, Héctor and Antonio Cerezo Contreras. For more information about the Cerezo Committee, please check the web page of the Committee at www.espora.org/comitecerezo