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Peru: Ongoing criminalisation of Asháninka human rights defender Fabián Antúnez

On 30 January 2026, an arrest warrant against Asháninka human rights defender Fabián Antúnez was confirmed, following an appeal submitted by his legal team. The judicial case against the human rights defender arose as a reprisal for protests organised by the Asháninka people in Puerto Ocopa in 2023, demanding justice for the killing of human rights defender [Santiago Contoricón](#). In the context of the protests, four individuals disappeared and their disappearance was used as a pretext for initiating an unfounded criminal prosecution against Asháninka leaders, including Fabián Antúnez.

[Fabián Antúnez](#) is a human rights defender and Asháninka Indigenous leader from the district of Río Tambo, Junín, in the Peruvian Amazon. He is a survivor of the internal armed conflict, marked by severe human rights violations committed against members of his family. He is the former president of the Indigenous organisation Central Ashaninka del Río Tambo (CART), which is composed of more than 50 native communities. His human rights work focuses on the protection of Indigenous territory by leading efforts against illegal logging, deforestation, and the illegal cultivation of coca leaf linked to drug trafficking. He has publicly denounced these activities and promoted community-based actions to protect the life, security, and rights of the communities of Río Tambo. In 2016, he founded the Kemito Sankori Cooperative, which promotes sustainable cocoa cultivation and handcrafts to improve the economic stability of Indigenous communities and to contribute to a dignified community environment.

The investigation against human rights defender Fabián Antúnez began with a legitimate complaint filed by the families of those disappeared during the 2023 protests. Despite the lack of compelling evidence concerning the identity of the perpetrators, the First Provincial Corporate Criminal Prosecutor's Office of Satipo in the department of Junín accused Asháninka Indigenous leaders of kidnapping the four disappeared persons and, [in September 2023, initiated judicial proceedings against three human rights defenders and Asháninka leaders](#): Fabián Antúnez, then President of the Central Asháninka del Río Tambo (CART), Fredi Gavilán, President of the Federación Asháninka del Río Ene (FARE), and [Ángel Pedro Valerio](#), President of the Central Asháninka del Río Ene (CARE).

In August 2024, after eleven months of investigation, the [Satipo Preliminary Investigation Court excluded Asháninka leader Ángel Pedro Valerio from the proceedings](#). The Court recognised the lack of evidence and dropped the charges against the human rights defender. In the preceding months, national and international human rights organisations

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had raised [concerns](#), pointing out a series of irregularities in the judicial process and in the alleged involvement of Ángel Pedro in the disappearances. To date, the proceedings against Fabián Antúnez and Fredi Gavilán remain ongoing, despite the existence of the same irregularities in the alleged evidence linking the two Indigenous leaders to the disappearances.

Fabián Antúnez's right to due process was reportedly violated by several procedural irregularities and the accusations against him were based on contradictory testimonies. Evidence presented by the Prosecutor's Office and testimonies of referential witnesses contradicted the investigations and evidence gathered by the Criminal Investigation Directorate (Dirincri), and witnesses link Fabián Antúnez to the disappearances based solely on his role as president of CART in 2023 and on his participation in the peaceful protest. He is not mentioned by name in the witnesses' testimony, but rather associated with a nickname he never used. In addition, a key testimony by a Franciscan nun from the convent where Indigenous people from different Asháninka communities were staying during the days of the protest has not been fully taken into account during the investigation and hearings before the Criminal Appeals Chamber of Satipo. Her testimony affirms that Fabián Antúnez spent the night at the convent and could not have left the place as the entrance is strictly controlled by the nuns. Regardless, the Prosecutor's Office has continued to pursue the case, and an arrest warrant was issued against him.

Since 2023, the criminalisation of Fabián Antúnez, and in particular the arrest warrant, has resulted in risks to his life and physical and emotional integrity, caused amongst others by his prolonged isolation. For this reason, in January 2026, Fabián Antúnez and his legal team sought to overturn this warrant and to promote transparency in the investigation through an appeal before the Criminal Appeals Chamber of Satipo. However, on 30 January 2026, the judges of the Chamber decided to uphold the arrest warrant against the human rights defender, resulting in his continued isolation. Regardless, Fabián Antúnez and his legal team continue their efforts to overturn the Chamber's decision and to prove his innocence.

The criminalisation of Indigenous Asháninka leaders takes place within a broader context of risks for Indigenous human rights defenders in Peru. The country records some of [the highest numbers of killings of Indigenous leaders in the region](#). Particularly, the Asháninka people currently face serious risks due to the expansion of drug trafficking, cattle ranching, illegal logging, and illicit cultivation in their territory, as well as other territorial conflicts. [State, businesses, and organised crime actors](#) are equally involved in appropriating Indigenous land and thus leaving Indigenous leaders and their communities exposed to threats and violations of their security, territory, and collective rights. Consequently, Asháninka people are affected by increasing violence when attempting to stop these activities, strengthen Indigenous sovereignty over their territories, and protect and promote indigenous rights.

Front Line Defenders expresses its deepest concern over the criminalisation of Asháninka Indigenous leader Fabián Antúnez within the broader context of attacks against Indigenous

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leaders in the Peruvian Amazon. Front Line Defenders believes he is targeted as a reprisal for his work defending Indigenous people's rights.

Front Line Defenders highlights that by isolating and criminalising Indigenous leaders, the Peruvian authorities weaken the ability of Indigenous people to exercise their right to peaceful assembly and to demand justice. By targeting Indigenous leaders, the authorities also delegitimise and undermine the organisational processes carried out by Indigenous peoples in the country.

Finally, Front Line Defenders reiterates the Peruvian Government's obligation to guarantee that human rights defenders can carry out their work in an environment free from attacks, threats and restrictions, as well as to recognise the importance of their work for society, particularly that of Indigenous defenders in protecting the environment and their territories.

Front Line Defenders calls on the Peruvian authorities to:

- 1) Drop the charges against indigenous rights defender Fabián Antúnez and guarantee due process, the right to defence and the presumption of innocence;
- 2) Take all necessary measures to guarantee the physical and psychological integrity and security of human rights defender Fabián Antúnez;
- 3) Halt the use of unfounded investigations of Indigenous leaders in the Peruvian Amazon and recognise the legitimate processes of rights defence undertaken by Indigenous peoples and their leaders;
- 4) Front Line Defenders reiterates the need for the authorities to promote a serious, transparent, objective and effective investigation that ensures access to justice for the disappeared persons and their families;
- 5) Ensure that all human rights defenders in Peru are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free from all restrictions, including judicial harassment.

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