

15 April 2019

Paraguay: Elisa Barrios and her son criminalised and discriminated against while performing humanitarian work

On 9 April 2019, **Elisa Barrios** and her 17-year-old son **E. B.** were conditionally released after more than 46 hours of detention. On 7 April, they were arrested for ‘resistance’ against the orders of the authorities, while providing humanitarian assistance to flood victims.

[Elisa Beatriz Barrios](#) is a woman human rights defender from Paraguay and a member of human rights organisation **Rebeldes del Sur** (Rebels of the South), where she assists on the promotion of the rights to adequate housing, women’s rights, and the right to self-determination. Elisa Barrios is locally recognised for her human rights work in the marginalised neighbourhood of Bañado Sur, in the outskirts of Asunción, where she lives with her family.

On 9 April 2019, after a preliminary hearing, Elisa Barrios and her son E. B. were conditionally released from the 17th and 8th National Police stations, respectively, where they had been detained for over 46 hours. The human rights defender and her son are facing charges of resisting authority, punishable with up to two years’ imprisonment or a fine. They were conditionally released, with the application of alternative measures to prison, which includes a prohibition to leave the country.

The accusations against Elisa Barrios and E. B. were upheld by the Prosecutor’s Office, based on a police report which included fabricated information. Among other irregularities, the document claimed that E. B. had been under the influence of alcohol and that Elisa Barrios had attempted to disrupt the work of the police by bringing 30 individuals to the 8th Police Station, which did not happen.

On 7 April 2019, at 4pm, E. B. was assisting in the resettlement of some of his neighbours due to seasonal floods from the Paraguay river, which had severely affected 4,000 families in the region. A truck that E. B. was travelling in was approached by officers from the 8th Police Station (Comisaría Octava), who asked the minor to present his identification document. E. B. handed them a police registry as proof that his documentation had been lost during the resettlement of his family. The police did not accept it and they stated that there were grounds for his detention based on that, following a pattern of harassment against residents of the area for reasons such as not presenting an identification document. The minor was then violently grabbed and thrown into a police car, where he was hit in the face by the police officers. E. B. was subsequently taken to the 8th Police Station.

On the same day, at 8pm, Elisa Barrios went to the 8th Police Station to intervene on behalf her son. The facility to which he was taken is nationally known for reiterated practices of [torture](#) against young persons. Elisa Barrios was blamed for the incident for being a “bad mother”. The human rights defender questioned the origin of the bruises on her son’s face, at which point the police officers told her to “shut up”. When Elisa Barrios refused to accept the arbitrary arrest of her son, she was also detained, for “disrespecting authority”. She resisted being arrested, due to which she was also accused of “resistance”, and taken to the Comisaría 17.

The arbitrary detention of Elisa Barrios and her son, which lasted for over 46 hours, highlights the existing patterns of criminalisation and police harassment based on social discrimination against residents of the Bañado Sur neighbourhood, who are often marginalised and poor. Such harassment is especially targeted against those residents who carry out human rights work and report human rights violations. In 2017, Elisa Barrios denounced an officer from the 8th Police Station for sexually harassing and threatening to rape her then 14-year-old daughter. The complaint was rejected by the police station and no actions were taken on the matter. As Elisa Barrios has worked on the issues of police accountability, Front Line Defenders believes that the criminalisation that she and her son face might constitute a reprisal for her human rights activities.

Front Line Defenders condemns the detention and undue use of force by the law enforcement agents against the human rights defender and her son.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Paraguay to:

1. Drop all charges against Elisa Barrios and her son E. B., as it is believed that they are solely motivated by her legitimate and peaceful work in defence of human rights;
2. Take all necessary measures to guarantee the physical and psychological integrity and security of Elisa Barrios and her son E. B., in consultation with them;
3. Carry out an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation into the allegations of ill-treatment of the minor E. B. during the time of his arrest;
4. Ensure that members of security forces act in compliance with the Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials, as well as the relevant international human rights standards;
5. Cease targeting all human rights defenders in Paraguay and guarantee in all circumstances that they are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions, including judicial harassment.