

TOLEDO ALCALDES ASSOCIATION

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Maya leaders and villagers arrested

Punta Gorda, Toledo – At approximately 4 am on Wednesday June 24th, 2015, Santa Cruz villagers, the Village Chairman, the Second Alcalde and the Maya Leaders Alliance spokesperson were arrested on charges of unlawful detention. Villagers report that police awakened them and forcefully removed them from their homes.

The charges arise from a criminal complaint filed by Mr. Rupert Myles. Mr. Myles was detained by Santa Cruz village on Saturday June 20, 2015 at a village meeting after he became unruly, making threatening remarks and approaching his car where he claimed to have a firearm. One of the issues the village intended to discuss was Mr. Myles' unlawful construction of a house on Uxbenka, an ancient Mayan temple and sacred place for the Maya people. Mr. Myles had ignored repeated requests to remove the structure and caused irreparable damage to the sacred site by bulldozing a road to the structure. The Maya authorities had previously alerted the Punta Gorda Police, the Belize Defense Force and the Belize Institute of Archeology about the situation.

At the meeting, Mr. Myles was detained but not arrested by the village police because he agreed in writing to remove the structure and his belongings within 14 days. He was not physically harmed, as he has claimed. Following the incident, Mr. Myles began accusing the Alcalde and villagers of racial discrimination. He had not made this accusation in the many months he unlawfully occupied property within Santa Cruz.

Yesterday, on national television, the Prime Minister of Belize, Dean Barrow, admonished the Maya people saying the treatment of Myles was “outrageous” and “absolutely intolerable” while admitting he did not have all of the facts. The Prime Minister went on to say he would find out from the authorities if they intended to do anything about the situation, fueling a national debate on the issue. When asked by the media about the illegal destruction of the sacred site by Myles, he said he did not know about it.

These arrests undermine the orders of the Supreme Court of Belize and the Caribbean Court of Justice which recognize the property rights of the Maya people in accordance with their customary land tenure system. Maya customary law, which forms part of the law of Belize, requires that people apply for residence in the village. Mr. Myles did not do this and further violated the village's commitment to protect Uxbenka sacred site which is managed in partnership with the Belize Institute of Archaeology. The laws of Belize prohibit building on or damaging any archaeological site, as seen in the recent destruction of Noh Mul in Orange Walk. The Maya villagers will continue to defend these cultural heritage sites that are important to all Belizeans.

The Toledo Alcaldes Association and the Maya Leaders Alliance are extremely concerned with this escalating situation and have reported to the United Nations and other international human rights monitoring bodies.