

Collective power

The struggle for protection for
land and environmental defenders

September 2026



Cover image: Zenaida Pérez Odicio and other members of the Kakataibo Indigenous Guard pictured during the annual congress and fourth anniversary of the Guard in Yamino, Peru, in May 2026. Leslie Searles / Global Witness

This report is dedicated to all those individuals, communities and organisations bravely speaking out or taking action to defend their rights to land and a clean, healthy and sustainable environment.

Last year, 124 people were murdered for doing this work.

We acknowledge that the names of many defenders who were killed last year may be missing, and we may never know how many more gave their lives to protect our planet. We honour their work too.

In memory

Brazil Alessandro Santos Santana • Álex Oliveira • Alex Santos Santana • Ednaldo Palheta da Cunha • Elias Camilo Lima • Everton Lopes Rodrigues • Francisco do Nascimento de Melo • Gideone Sinfrônio de Menezes • Gil do Monteiro dos Santos • Gleison Barbosa de Carvalho • Itarauí Santana de Souza • João Celestino Lima Filho • José Jacó Cosotle • Josenir Vieira de Oliveira • Leandro Conceição da Silva • Luciana Cristiano de Souza • Marcelo Ortiz • Paulo Maciel Gonçalves dos Reis • Raimundo Nonato de Souza Gomes • Robinson dos Santos Guedes (Bob) • Ronilson de Jesus Santos • Sebastião Orivaldo da Fonseca Lopes • Valdir do Nascimento de Jesus • Vanderley Cardoso Lopes • Vicente Fernandes Vilhalva • Vitor Braz • **Colombia** Aida Damaris Flor Camayo • Alberto Quitumbo Yatacué • Astrid Viviana Ordoñez Arcos • Carmelo Guerrero Reyes • Célimo Hurtado Bulgara • Cristian Fernando Guanga • Darli Lucía Arcia Anaya • Edgar Tumiñá Gembuel • Eduardo Campo Chá • Elizabeth Mojica Nieves • Erik Anderson Menza Pavi • Ernesto Esaú Muñoz Casamachín • Ferley Perdomo Molina • Germán Roso Aristizábal • Guillermo Velasco • Hernán Amaya Velásquez • Jacinto Chocué • Jaime Alonso Gallego Gómez • Jairo Alberto Díaz Salazar • James Tomás Guanga Quelal • Jesús Alveiro Chaves Quejuan • José Albeiro Liz Muchicón • José Erlery Velasco Bolaños • José Miguel Mojica Conchangui • Juan Carlos Rodríguez Torres • Julián Arenas • Leonairo Samir Montero Paz • Luis Alberto Peña • Luis Aurelio Araujo Hernández • Luis Eduardo Cisneros Gómez • Luis Fernando Mayorga Rodríguez • Luz Heneida Hinestroza • Marco Antonio Suárez Arroyave • Marcos Yonda Toconás • Pedro María Roperio Delgado • Willy David Pérez Quiroz • Wilmer Solarte Pascal • Yackson Orlando Solarte Chunata • Zuleima Mosquera Beltrán • **Democratic Republic of the Congo** Fiston Wilondja Mazambi • **Ecuador** Efraín Fuérez • Jorge Humberto Jijón Montenegro • José Alberto Guamán Izama • **France** Pierre Alessandri • **Guatemala** Abel Hernández Ramírez • Arelis López • Clovis Aguirre • Hanswer Adolfo Gómez Marroquín • Manuel Orellana • Marco Antonio Zuleta Quevedo • Misael Mata Asencio • Víctor Manuel Colindres • **Honduras** Abel Monroy • Arnulfo Díaz • Carlos Antonio Rivas Canales • Douglas Alexander Pereira • Héctor Otoniel Hernández Castro • José Luis Hernández Lobo • Josué Esaú Aguilar Cárcamo • Juan Antonio Silva • Juan Bautista Silva • Ramón Rivas Baquedano • Roger Alexis Castillo Fuentes • Suyapa Guillén •

India Jagabar Ali • **Indonesia** Rudolfus Oktavianus (“Vian”) Ruma • **Mexico** Arnoldo Nicolás Romero • Cándido Essaú Román Pérez • Cristino Castro Perea • Francisco Macías Sánchez • José Luis Lucas Quirino • Karina Ruiz Ocampo • Marco Antonio Suástegui Muñoz • Marcos Aguilar Rojas • Sergio Hugo Ureiro Castañeda • Silvia Hernández Meza • **Nicaragua** D.M.C. • I.G. • S.C.C. • **Peru** Andy Raúl Coquinche Vásquez • Benny Raúl Coquinche Vásquez • Denisse Ana García Solsol • Hipólito Quispe Huamán • **The Philippines** Ali Jejhon Macalintal • Davie Ugking • Fernando Promboy • Hulyo Agtay • Joan Escuadro • Juan Sumilhig • Nickasio Tayas Mindo • Ramon M. Lupos • Rico Gonzaga Malubay • Rudolph Dela Cruz Espe • Veronico Anterio • Warlita Jimenez • **Tanzania** Hamprey Mhaki • Kulwa Igembe • **Türkiye** Hakan Tosun •

— their fight *lives on*

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In 2025, 124 land and environmental defenders were murdered worldwide. Our data uncovers the drivers behind these attacks, revealing the perpetrators of killings and the underlying forces that place defenders at risk.



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Joan Carling

**Executive Director,
Indigenous Peoples' Rights International**



Above: Joan Carling visits
an Indigenous community
in Chiang Rai, Thailand.
Supplied by Joan Carling

Foreword

As an Indigenous activist from the Philippines, I've seen networks of solidarity hold strong against deadly threats – safeguarding the lands, waters and cultures that so many depend upon.

In the 1980s, I lived for several months with tribal communities resisting the Chico River Dam in the Philippine highlands. Backed by the World Bank, the project threatened to flood ancestral territories and displace 100,000 Kalinga and Bontoc people.¹

Their courage in the face of militarisation, mass arrests and the assassination of Kalinga leader Macli-ing Dulag profoundly shaped my understanding of what it means to be Indigenous.²

The government – whose soldiers riddled Macli-ing's home with bullets³ – accused protesters of opposing development.⁴

They failed to understand that, for Indigenous Peoples, land is life. Any threat to our lands, territories and resources is a threat to our very existence – our cultures, our identities, our dignity and our future generations. That is why our communities were willing to risk everything to protect them.

The same language is still being used to stigmatise land and environmental defenders today. In the Philippines and around the world, companies and state authorities label Indigenous Peoples as obstructionists who stand in the way of progress.⁵

This is a narrative rooted in racism: a colonial dismissal of Indigenous knowledge and practice that is based on living in harmony with nature.⁶

In today's world, that ancestral knowledge is vindicated every day. From sustainable agriculture to climate-resilient water management, Indigenous Peoples' customs offer effective climate solutions.⁷

But the climate crisis is testing our capacity to adapt to the natural world. It is too drastic, too vast in scale. Rather than try to respond to this emergency on our own, we want to contribute to collective global efforts.

Instead of being listened to, however, Indigenous Peoples are being excluded from major decision-making spaces. As a result, the very projects touted as solutions – renewable energy, transition minerals – drive land grabs, dispossession and violence. We call this “green colonialism.”⁸

If we resist attempts to steal our land and resources, we are criminalised, disappeared or killed. In 2025, at least 124 defenders were killed just for standing up to protect their homes, according to Global Witness.

Take the resistance of Dayak communities in Indonesia. Corporate clearances were destroying community farmland and customary forest, while also fuelling the loss of carbon-rich peatlands and orangutan habitat. Ritual sites – central to Dayak spiritual life – were trashed. Local Dayak leaders organised to resist this damage, imposing customary sanctions on the company responsible.



If we resist attempts to steal our land and resources, we are *criminalised or killed*

But instead of being supported in their efforts to protect these climate-critical ecosystems, they were criminalised. A community leader was charged with extortion for using traditional practices to hold a company accountable for its reckless environmental destruction.

We see similar tactics in the Philippines, one of the deadliest places on the planet to defend the environment. My former organisation, the Cordillera Peoples Alliance – which grew out of the resistance to the Chico Dam – had bank accounts frozen after four of its leaders were classified as terrorists.⁹

Other threats are more severe. In the Philippines, 12 defenders were killed in 2025. Global Witness linked five of those killings to the armed forces, showing how, when attempts to criminalise defenders fail, the military reverts to more direct attacks.

Facing an indifferent or hostile state, Indigenous communities do what we have always done. We self-organise to protect ourselves, our homes, our forests, our mountains, rivers and territories.

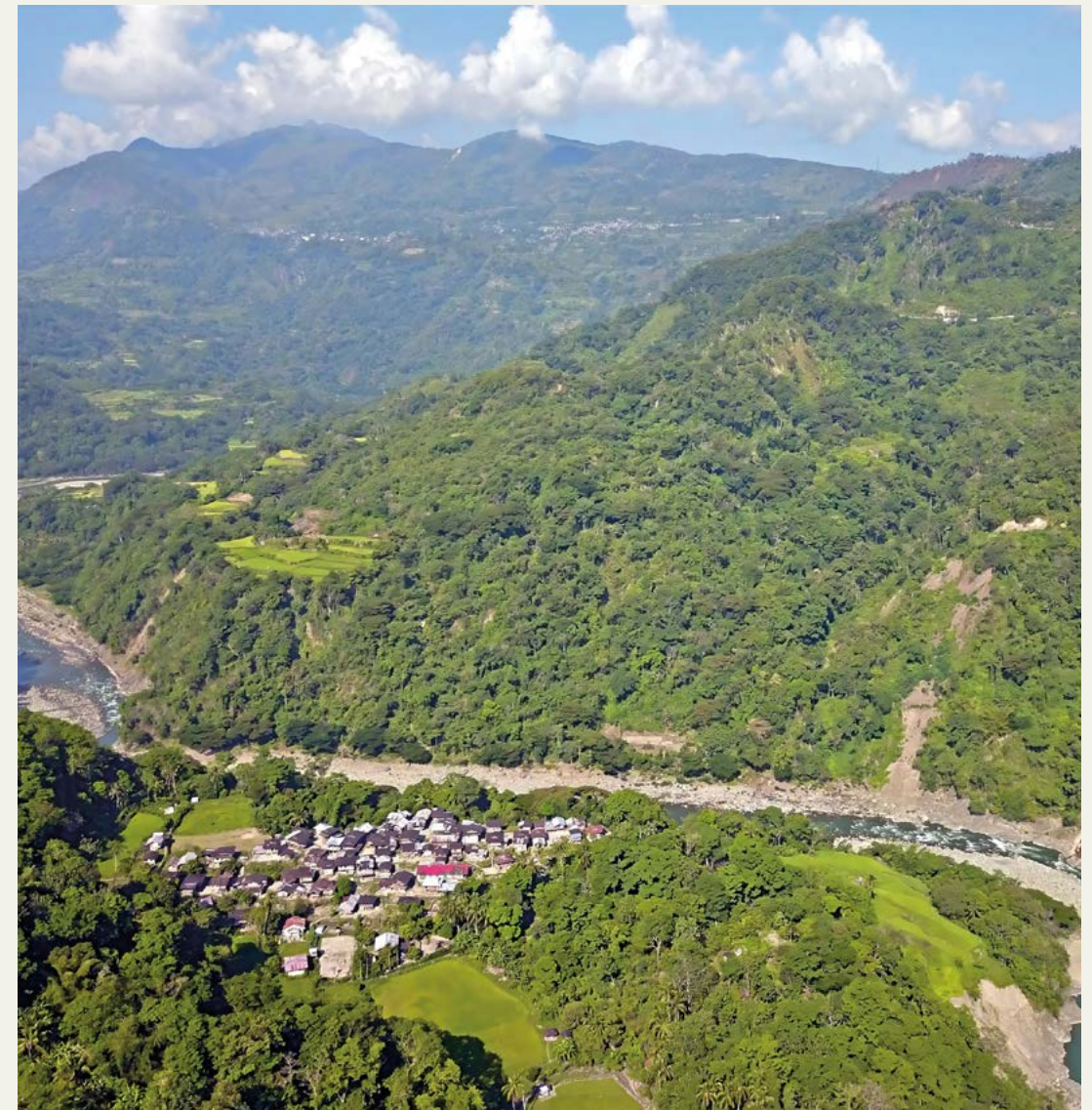
This is the case in the Peruvian Amazon, where dozens of Indigenous leaders have been killed as criminal groups seek to establish themselves on their territories.

In response, Amazonian Peoples, such as the Kakataibo and Shipibo, have developed their own Indigenous guards. These monitor and patrol their land, challenge illicit actors, respond to threats and coordinate outreach to state institutions.



Left: A monument in Kalinga District, the Philippines, erected in tribute to three leaders of the Chico Dam Resistance: Macli-ing Dulag (centre), Pedro Dungoo (left) and Lumbaya Aliga Gayudan (right). David Stanley

Below: The Chico River on the island of Luzon, the Philippines. Erwin Mascariñas





Left: Joan Carling (right) speaks at a United Nations press conference in 2023, calling for the Sustainable Development Goals framework to centre Indigenous Peoples. Albin Lohr-Jones / Pacific Press / LightRocket via Getty Images

Left bottom: Activists commemorate murdered Indigenous people and environmental defenders in Quezon City, Metro Manila, the Philippines. Ezra Acayan / Getty Images



Around the world, Indigenous Peoples have had to establish such systems to protect themselves. Leaders no longer travel on their own. Safe houses and vehicles are put in place to provide refuge or streamline escape when threats escalate. Alliances are built with lawyers and doctors, who can respond in the event of legal or physical attacks.

Support is needed from mental health specialists, too. I know this myself. While I was chair of the Cordillera Peoples Alliance, two brilliant Indigenous colleagues were killed – Alyce Omengan Claver and Rafael Markus Bangit.¹⁰ As threats circulated, I was forced to live in the office temporarily to avoid travelling back and forth to my home. I fell into a serious depression after this, although it took me some time to realise it.

Tragically, during 2025, another 44 Indigenous people, including seven Indigenous Guards, were killed for defending their land, their culture and their resources. From Edgar Tumiñá Gembuel (a Nasa Guard from Colombia) to Nickasio Tayas Mindo (a Teduray leader from the Philippines), here we honour their legacy.

Despite the stress and danger, defenders have made progress. The Chico Dam resistance spurred the World Bank to develop its policy on Indigenous Peoples.¹¹ The UNFCCC has established the Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples' Platform to integrate Indigenous practices into global climate action.¹²

The problem is that these tools are kept away in a corner. They don't feed into other processes, such as multinational discussions on just transition pathways or climate adaptation.

This is the opposite of what is needed. Indigenous Peoples and our knowledge must be at the heart of climate decision-making. Our role as custodians of land, our understanding of the consequences of climate breakdown, and our collective resistance to dispossession must have an influence on policy at the centre of power.

But this can only happen when our territories are secure and our people protected from harm. States and leaders must work with us firstly to ensure that our communities are safe – and then to tackle the environmental crises that pose an existential threat to us all.

124

defenders *killed* in 2025

Global findings

At least 124 land and environmental defenders were killed in 2025 for standing up to protect their lands and livelihoods from destruction.

This figure brings the total number of killings and disappearances documented by Global Witness since we began this work in 2012 to 2,375.

Every one of these deaths represents an attempt, in the most brutal fashion, to impose a chilling effect on movements that resist environmental and human rights abuses. We remember the families, friends and communities who have been left devastated by each attack.

As well as recording the names of the defenders who have been killed and disappeared, our data helps to uncover the underlying causes of the violence. Identifying these trends and challenging the drivers that shape them is vital so that defenders can demand their rights to land and a clean environment without risking their lives.



View of the Sabar Bubu hill covered in morning fog in Ketapang Regency, West Kalimantan, Indonesia. For generations, the Dayak Indigenous community has designated the hill as a sacred site and protected it. Adi Renaldi / Global Witness

2,375

defenders *killed or disappeared*
between 2012-2025



A demonstrator displays a photo of Efraín Suárez during a national strike in Quito, Ecuador, convened by CONAIE (Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador). Suárez was an Indigenous land defender, reportedly shot by the Ecuadorian military while on a protest march on 28 September 2025. Franklin Jacome / Agencia Press South / Getty Images

Analysis

We verified the killings of 124 land and environmental defenders in 2025. This represents a decrease from 2024, when we documented 142 killings and four disappearances. This was itself a decline from 2023, when we registered 196 killings.

At first glance, this could indicate a positive downward trend. But the reality is that these figures are likely a significant underestimate, as many cases go unreported.

This is typical of situations involving serious armed conflict and genocide, where generalised insecurity and mass killings make identifying and verifying individual cases difficult.

Research is also challenging in repressive contexts where victims and civil society groups face reprisals for reporting and documenting abuses. This is especially the case in Africa and Asia, but increasingly in Latin America, too.¹³

Of the 15 countries where we documented killings, 10 were categorised as repressed by civic freedom tracker CIVICUS Monitor. However, only Nicaragua was classified as closed, the most repressive category in CIVICUS's taxonomy – reflecting the challenges of accessing data in places controlled by heavily repressive regimes.¹⁴

Killings are only the most extreme form of reprisal that defenders face. Beneath them lies a “hidden iceberg” of non-lethal attacks – including criminalisation, threats and smear campaigns – as described by the ALLIED network of human rights monitors.

Increasingly, social media is weaponised to discredit and harass defenders, eroding public trust and isolating them from their communities.

Such diversification of repressive strategies, which all share the same goals of intimidating and silencing defenders, may also explain some of the reduced number of killings in our data.¹⁵

Colombia is the deadliest place

Killings by country

Colombia	39
Brazil	26
The Philippines	12
Honduras	12
Mexico	10
Guatemala	8
Peru	4
Nicaragua	3
Ecuador	3
Tanzania	2
DRC	1
France	1
India	1
Indonesia	1
Türkiye	1



Soldiers walk on a destroyed illegal gold mine at Farallones Natural park near Cali, Valle del Cauca, Colombia. Joaquín Sarmiento / AFP via Getty Images

Where

Regions and countries

Latin America again accounts for most of the cases we documented in 2025, as it has for over a decade, representing 85% of the global total last year.

This persistently high level of lethal attacks reflects pervasive state failures to protect environmental defenders.

Land tenure insecurity continues to be a key driver of attacks, demonstrating the urgent need for governments to secure territorial and land rights for Indigenous and Afro-descendant people, and small-scale farming communities.¹⁶

In Brazil, where we verified a doubling of cases from the previous year, all but one of the cases we documented were primarily driven by conflict over land. Seven killings were related to Indigenous demands for ancestral land recognition and 14 to land reform claims primarily relating to small-scale farmers and Afro-descendant communities.

We also continue to see corporate extractive projects driving attacks. In Guatemala, we documented the killings of two defenders opposing mining projects and two protesting the impacts of a hydroelectric plant.

Such cases reveal the inadequacies of both states and businesses in guaranteeing meaningful consultation processes for projects affecting Indigenous and traditional communities.¹⁷

Weaknesses in state protection mechanisms – specialised tools for defenders under threat – also leave defenders exposed.

In 2025, we recorded the killings of two Mexican defenders who were covered by such schemes.¹⁸ We also recorded five killings in Honduras of defenders who were members of a campesino cooperative that had previously been granted protective measures by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.¹⁹

To strengthen their protection of defenders, states must move beyond solely reactive mechanisms focused on individual defenders and towards collective approaches that work with communities and organisations.

We also saw hardline security policies drive killings, as part of broader trends towards the deployment of authoritarian tactics by governments in the region.

In Ecuador, where President Daniel Noboa has used the military to suppress social protest, we documented three cases. Two Indigenous protesters were killed while demonstrating against fuel hikes and state crackdowns on Indigenous Peoples and environmentalists.²⁰

In Argentina, defenders Federico Soria and Mauricio Cornejo were criminalised under a dictatorship-era law after opposing mining projects that threatened water bodies in the Andes.²¹

Violence against defenders in Latin America is exacerbated by the growing power of organised crime, which fosters a climate of corruption and impunity across the region. We identified cases with suspected links to organised crime in all six countries that experienced the most killings – Colombia, Brazil, the Philippines, Honduras, Mexico, Guatemala – five of them in Latin America.

Beyond Latin America, Asia accounted for 12% of the killings we verified this year. Most occurred in the Philippines, where counter-insurgency programmes and extractive projects again drove violence against defenders.²² We also recorded killings in India and Türkiye – the latter is set to host this year's COP.

In many parts of Asia, tightly controlled civic space makes documenting cases difficult, meaning the lower figures do not necessarily represent drastically different levels of violence to other regions.

In Indonesia, the administration of President Prabowo has intensified repressive policies put in place by his predecessor Jokowi, spurring the criminalisation of activists and a sharp decline in civil liberties.²³

Authoritarian regimes in Russia²⁴ and across central Asia have criminalised, fined and stigmatised defenders and journalists as part of broader crackdowns on political opponents.²⁵

Human rights groups also face multiple challenges documenting cases in Africa, where similar constraints on civic space exist in many countries. Across Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, governments have increasingly weaponised the legal system to deploy fabricated charges of terrorism and facilitate disappearances of defenders.²⁶

At the same time, long-running conflicts in countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Sudan are causing catastrophic death tolls. Violence, mass displacement, impunity and the breakdown of the rule of law all hinder efforts to verify attacks against defenders in these conflict zones.²⁷

Taking into account these limitations, we documented three killings of defenders in Africa: two in Tanzania and one in the DRC.

Making up just under a third of the lethal attacks we documented globally in 2025, Colombia remains one of the deadliest places to defend the planet. We were able to confirm 39 killings of defenders in 2025, a decline from 48 in the previous year.

Our data shows clear trends in both the groups of defenders targeted and who was responsible. Almost half of those murdered were Indigenous, and a further 15 were small-scale farmers. Reflecting this, 35 of the 39 deaths were linked to land conflicts.

We have identified suspected links to organised crime in 17 of the deaths, and linked a further five to hitmen carrying out contract killings.

At the heart of this violence is the department of Cauca in southwestern Colombia, where we recorded 13 murders in 2025, including four Indigenous Guards. This brings the total number of cases we have documented in Cauca since 2012 to 171 – the highest in any department.

Due to its strategic location near the Ecuadorian border and its access to Pacific export routes, Cauca has become a key corridor in the cocaine trade. Coca cultivation increased fivefold over the past decade, amid the growing influence of both Colombian armed groups and Mexican cartels.²⁸

These actors, and other criminal economies such as illegal mining, are driving the degradation of Cauca's forests and waterways.²⁹

Other areas rich in biodiversity suffer from similar pressures, such as the southern departments of Nariño and Putumayo, where we documented three killings each.³⁰

Illegal mining and coca cultivation are major drivers of violence and environmental degradation in both departments, providing financing to armed groups, displacing communities, and contaminating rivers and waterways.³¹

As part of its efforts to combat this violence, the Colombian government should sign and implement the Public Policy for Security Guarantees for Human Rights Defenders, a civil society-led framework which aims to create a comprehensive, preventive approach to protecting environmental and human rights defenders.³²



Top: Indigenous people march in Bogotá, Colombia, demanding that the government act to end violence against communities. In October 2020, around 8,000 Indigenous people travelled from the Cauca region to the capital to draw attention to the presence of armed groups in their territories. Juancho Torres / Anadolu Agency via Getty Images

Right: Members of different Indigenous communities demonstrate against recent violence and attacks at the Pan-American highway in El Pescador, Cauca, Colombia, on 28 April 2026. Sebastian Marmolejo / Long Visual Press / Universal Images Group via Getty Images





Indigenous people stage a peaceful protest outside the main entrance to COP30 in Belém, Brazil. The protest was organised by Conselho Indígena Tapajós e Arapiuns. Fernanda Frazão / Global Witness



Killings in Brazil in 2025 doubled compared to the previous year, rising to 26 cases. Most were related to demands for the recognition of ancestral territory and the demarcation of landholdings. We documented 11 small-scale farmers and seven Indigenous people among those killed.

Attacks were concentrated in the Amazonian states of Rondônia and Pará, which together account for half of verified cases. Here, the agricultural and extractive frontiers continue to encroach on small-scale farming communities, with illegal loggers, miners and cattle ranchers driving incursions, land grabs and lethal violence.³³

Although COP30 in Belém marked a high level of Indigenous participation and included important commitments on land rights, implementation remains uneven.³⁴ The Lula administration announced the titling of 10 Indigenous territories at the summit, but hundreds of applications are still pending.

The escalation in lethal attacks underscores the urgent need for measures to protect defenders. Brazil's Chamber of Deputies has approved the country's ratification of the Escazú Agreement – a landmark treaty to protect environmental defenders by promoting access to information, public participation in environmental decision-making, and access to justice. The ratification now awaits approval by the Senate.³⁵



The escalation in lethal attacks underscores the urgent need for measures to protect defenders

Global Witness

We also documented a doubling of cases in Honduras, with 12 defenders killed in 2025. Ten of these deaths occurred in the department of Colón on the country's northern Caribbean coast – a strategic location in cocaine trafficking routes and the site of a violent land conflict in the fertile Bajo Aguán valley.³⁶

All 10 of the defenders killed in Colón were small-scale farmers. We have identified suspected links to organised crime in all their murders, and to corporate interests in eight of them.

The Bajo Aguán was the location of an ambitious agrarian reform programme in the 1970s and 80s. Through subsequent decades, however, powerful business interests have sought to seize the land and install industrial African palm plantations.³⁷

This has sparked a long-running conflict with huge human cost. The Honduran human rights ombudsperson has recorded the killings of more than 200 small-scale farmers. Despite the death toll, the Honduran state has failed to implement the mechanisms necessary to clarify the legal status of disputed areas.³⁸



Left: A labourer chops up branches at a palm oil farm in Atlántida, Honduras. Fritz Pinnow.



Right: Ana Luiza Hernández Raudelez shows photos of her husband Juan Bautista Silva (middle) and her son Antonio (upper right) who were murdered last year. Fritz Pinnow



We recorded a decline in lethal attacks on defenders in Mexico in 2025, falling to 10 from 19 in the previous year.

Yet data from the Mexican organisation Centro Mexicano de Derecho Ambiental (CEMDA) shows an increase in non-lethal aggressions. It documented 107 cases of criminalisation – which continues to be a serious problem in Mexico – as well as hundreds of instances of stigmatisation, intimidation and defamation.³⁹

Disappearances remain a major issue, with UN experts judging the systematic nature of these attacks in Mexico to be “a crime against humanity.”⁴⁰

In 2025, one defender was killed in the state of Guerrero while still searching for his brother, also an environmental defender, who disappeared in 2021.⁴¹



Left: Maroo Antonio Suástegui Muñoz (centre), spokesman for the Council of Ejidos and communities against the dam La Parota (Cecop), pictured in 2015 as he celebrated his liberation. Suástegui was jailed for 13 months and was considered by the Council of Ejidos as a political prisoner at the time. Suástegui was murdered in 2025. Pedro PARDO / AFP via Getty Images

Above: A protester takes part in a demonstration against the newly approved anti-terror law on 4 July 2020 in Quezon City, Metro Manila, the Philippines. Ezra Acayan / Getty Images

The Philippines saw the highest number of killings of defenders outside Latin America in 2025, with 12 cases recorded.

State actors continue to play a central role in this violence. We identified five killings involving the suspected participation of the Philippine military.

These murders occurred amid President Marcos Jr’s expanded counter-insurgency campaign. Rights groups contend that the National Action Plan for Unity, Peace and Development has further militarised rural areas, enabling the Armed Forces to impose repressive measures, such as restrictions on working hours and free movement.

In one case, Veronico Anterio, a 65-year-old farmer, was allegedly shot dead by soldiers after speaking out against these rules.

On top of these lethal attacks, defenders are also targeted with criminalisation, particularly via “red-tagging”, where they are accused of being communists or terrorists. Philippine rights body KARAPATAN documented the use of terror charges against 227 activists in 2025.⁴²

We documented one defender killing in the DRC in 2025. Journalist Fiston Wilondja Mazambi was found dead with a rope round his neck in Bukavu, a provincial capital in the east of the country. He had been investigating allegations of illegal gold mining by the Rwanda-backed rebel group M23, which took control of Bukavu in 2025.⁴³

Mineral wealth has helped to turn parts of eastern DRC into zones of protracted conflict. Competition over resource-rich territories has devastated ecosystems and driven violence against Indigenous Peoples and local communities.

We have documented 79 killings of defenders in the DRC since 2012, making it the deadliest country in Africa based on our data.

Mining is often under the control of armed groups, who use minerals to finance the purchase of weapons. Local communities bear the brunt of the occupation of mining sites by militias, who impose illegal taxes and commit serious human rights violations.

At the same time, resource extraction accelerates environmental degradation through deforestation, soil depletion, water pollution and the disruption of local livelihoods.⁴⁴



Right: Workers at a cobalt mine in Rubaya, DRC. Global Witness



Competition over resource-rich territories has devastated ecosystems and driven violence against Indigenous Peoples and local communities

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Who

Which defenders are targeted

Almost three-quarters of the killings we documented in 2025 were of Indigenous people and small-scale farmers, targeted for defending their territories and access to land.

Seven of the Indigenous people killed were members of guard systems working to protect their territory from threats. In five of these cases, we were able to identify links to organised crime – a clear indicator of the state’s failure to protect communities from the impacts of illicit economies.

Of the 124 killings we verified, 109 were men, 14 women and one non-binary. Two of the murdered women were in Central America and two in Mexico.

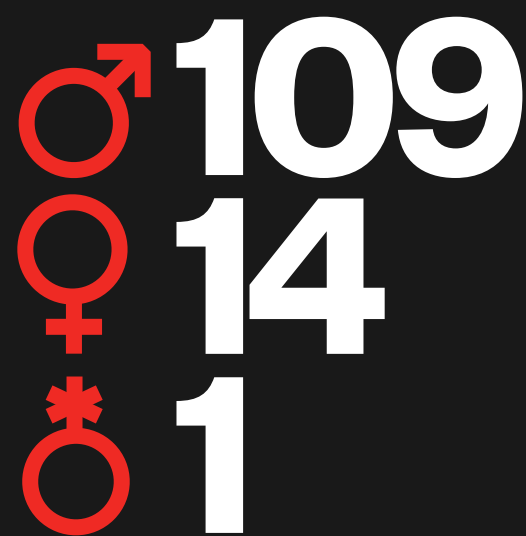
The Mesoamerican Initiative of Women Human Rights Defenders has highlighted how women also endure persistent non-lethal aggression. Between 2012 and 2023, the group documented more than 30,000 non-lethal attacks on women in Mexico and Central America, including harassment, smear campaigns, verbal threats, surveillance of everyday practices, and psychological violence.⁴⁵



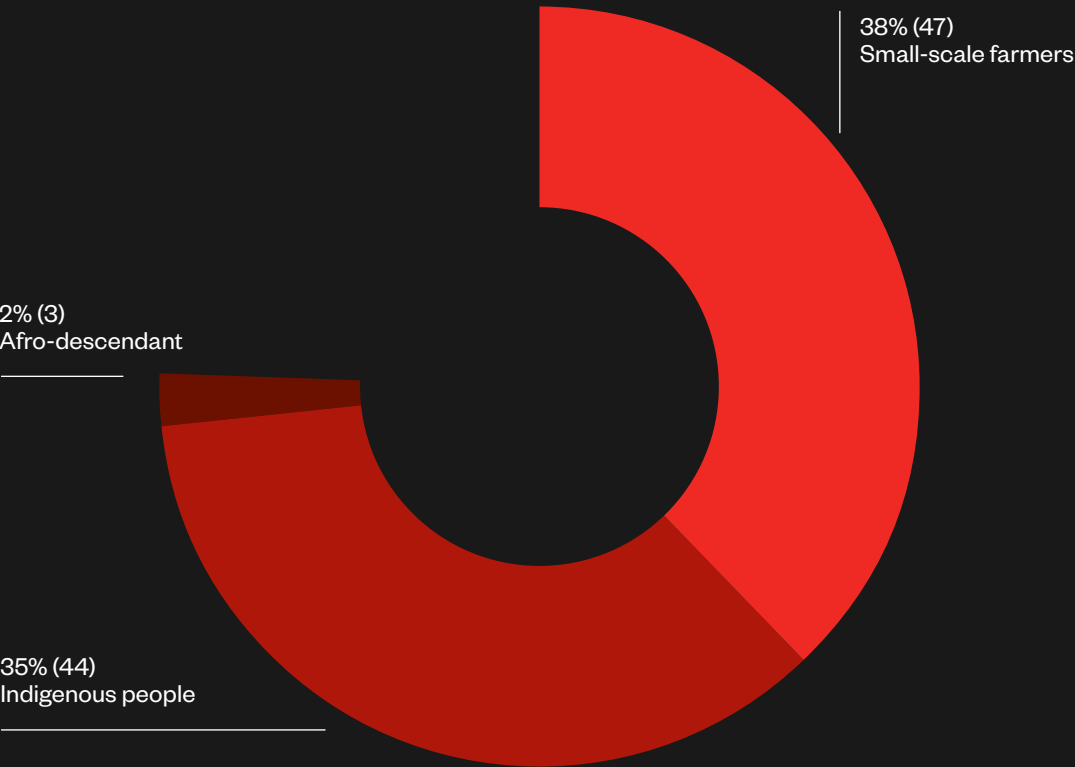
Indigenous Guards killed in 2025



More than 3/4 of defenders killed in 2025 were small-scale farmers, Indigenous or Afro-descendant



Of the 124 victims we verified, 109 were men, 14 women and one non-binary



Land disputes triggered more than half of the killings

Killings by driver



Suspected perpetrators and drivers

What lies behind the attacks

Determining what drives the killings of defenders is challenging, as the very factors that fuel attacks also make it difficult to establish the circumstances behind them. Impunity, corruption and a repressed civic space increase defenders' vulnerability while simultaneously hindering investigations into those responsible.

We can see some clear trends in our data, however. Land disputes triggered more than half of the killings we documented in 2025, demonstrating how authorities' failure to resolve competing land claims or demarcate territory paves the way for attacks on defenders and their communities.

Extractive projects also continue to drive killings. Mining emerged as the deadliest sector, with 11 related cases in 2025. A global spread of mining projects fuels these attacks. Four occurred in the Philippines, two in Peru, one in India and one in the DRC.

Logging interests lay behind eight killings, with two each in Mexico, Honduras and Peru, one in Guatemala and one in Brazil.

We also linked agribusiness to six killings, half of them affecting Indigenous Peoples on Nicaragua's Caribbean coast. Here, the Miskitu, Mayangna and Rama Peoples have long been among the principal victims of violence and dispossession, with a total absence of access to justice under Nicaragua's authoritarian regime.⁴⁶

While Nicaragua is an extreme example – around a million people live in exile and more than 5,000 NGOs have been dissolved – the closure of civic space in multiple countries is making it more difficult to identify perpetrators and address the drivers of attacks globally.⁴⁷

In 2025, Peru, Ecuador and El Salvador all implemented legal and regulatory measures that further restrict the rights and funding of civil society organisations.⁴⁸

In August 2025, Ecuador's National Assembly passed legislation which can be used to freeze the funds or order the temporary closure of civil society organisations, known as the Social Transparency Law.

One Ecuadorian organisation that could be threatened with reprisals through this law is the Ecumenical Commission for Human Rights (CEDHU), which is facing a smear campaign over its support for farming communities in Las Naves resisting the Curipamba–El Domo metal mining project.⁴⁹

States must reverse this trend and support civil society in monitoring and documenting abuses, including by removing legislative obstacles to funding. At the same time, they must address the rampant impunity that allows the perpetrators of attacks – both the direct assailants and especially the intellectual authors – to evade accountability.

With current justice systems proving inadequate to the task, states should create specialised prosecutorial and investigative units dedicated to crimes against land and environmental defenders.

Another key actor threatening the territorial and social integrity of communities is organised crime. We identified suspected links to organised crime and hitmen in more than a third of the killings of defenders in 2025, making them by far the most frequently implicated perpetrators.

This is the case in countries that regularly rank among the deadliest for environmental defenders based on our data, such as Colombia, Mexico and Honduras. But criminal dynamics are also driving killings in places that were previously relatively peaceful.

In Ecuador, shifting patterns in the global cocaine trade have spurred a surge in violence, with Guayaquil and other seaports becoming key export hubs. This generalised insecurity has translated into widespread public support for a hardline state response, facilitating repressive crackdowns on defenders.⁵⁰

Organised crime operates not solely as a perpetrator of killings, but also as a corrupting force on the underlying structures and institutions that should protect people from violence. Efforts by criminal groups to control territory and ensure immunity from prosecution contribute to pervasive corruption, weakened governance and compromised justice systems.

With current frameworks failing to stem the growing influence of criminal groups, there is a need to rethink approaches to tackling the nexus of organised crime and human rights abuses.⁵¹



Aerial view of illegal mining areas in Kayapó Indigenous territory in Pará state, Brazil. Pablo Porciuncula / AFP via Getty Images

Global context

Several trends have weakened the systems that provide support and advocacy for defenders through 2025, making an already difficult context even more challenging.

Much of the prevailing wind has come from the White House, where huge cuts implemented shortly after US President Donald Trump's inauguration in January stripped funding from organisations working across human rights and the environment.⁵²

Global development aid fell by 23%, the largest annual drop ever recorded according to the OECD. Such cuts have drained the pool of funds available to marginalised communities and the institutions that work with them.⁵³

The dismantling of USAID, which previously supported initiatives for Indigenous Peoples to steward their own land, has had particularly serious implications for defenders.⁵⁴

Similarly, the failure of the US and other states to pay UN fees on time has contributed to a scaling back of the organisation's work on climate and human rights.⁵⁵

In June 2025, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Colombia announced the dismissal of almost half its staff due to funding cuts.

In parallel with these aid cuts, the Trump administration has shown a growing disregard for the principle of an international rules-based order and the human rights frameworks underpinning it.

The US withdrew from the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) in February 2025.⁵⁶ They were soon followed by Nicaragua, where in 2023 UN-appointed investigators found evidence of human rights violations that they said could amount to "crimes against humanity."⁵⁷

This trend comes amid a broader authoritarian shift from other governments. In Peru, legislative changes have drastically expanded government oversight of foreign-funded NGOs and prohibited civil society from taking legal action against the state for human rights abuses.⁵⁸

Similar "foreign agent" laws were introduced in central and eastern Europe throughout 2025, threatening a chilling effect on defenders' campaigning.⁵⁹

23%

Global development aid fell by 23% in 2025 – the largest annual drop ever recorded according to the OECD.



A climate justice march during COP30 in Belém, Brazil. Fernanda Frazão / Global Witness



Romulo Santiago Castro
is an Indigenous Guard from
the Kakataibo community.
Leslie Searles / Global Witness

Guarding the forest



We have to *stand up* and stop the invasion

Gerónimo Remigió Silvano



Gerónimo Remigió Silvano, a member of the Kakataibo Indigenous Guard holds an arrow crafted from pijuayo wood, a traditional material used for tools and spears. Leslie Searles / Global Witness

Peru

Under the shade of an African palm, Gerónimo Remigió Silvano wipes sweat from his brow with one hand. In his other, he grasps a tall red-and-black arrow, its spikes carved from the dense bark of the pijuayo tree. For centuries, the Kakataibo have used this native Amazonian palm to craft spears and tools.⁶⁰

Head of a unit of the Kakataibo Indigenous Guard, Silvano has returned to base from a patrol to inspect a site of recent deforestation. Following a five-mile hike through the tropical heat, he found what he feared: 4 hectares (ha) of forest cleared and replaced with illegal coca.

“Patrolling here is risky. They could ambush us,” Silvano says.⁶¹

His caution is justified. Since 2020, six Kakataibo leaders have been killed, victims of a wave of violence linked to the advance of organised crime into the rainforest.⁶²

“But we don’t want more illicit crops to be planted, or for coca paste to be produced on our territory,” he continues. “We have to stand up and stop the invasion.”⁶³



Left: The Kakataibo inhabit the rainforests and tributary valleys of the Ucayali River. Located in the Peruvian Amazon, the Ucayali is a major headwater of the greater Amazon River.

Right: Members of the Kakataibo Indigenous Guard pictured during the annual congress and fourth anniversary of the Guard in Yamino in May 2026. Leslie Searles / Global Witness

The Kakataibo's vanishing Amazonian home

An Indigenous People from the Peruvian Amazon, the Kakataibo inhabit the rainforests and tributary valleys of the Ucayali River – a major headwater of the Amazon.⁶⁴

In the more remote reaches of this forest, small groups of Kakataibo still live in voluntary isolation, splintered from the main body of the Kakataibo during the brutal days of the Amazonian rubber boom.⁶⁵

In 2021, the Kakataibo Reserve was established to protect them, encompassing 150,000 ha of forested highlands.⁶⁶

Their refuge, however, is disappearing. Between 2000 and 2023, ancestral Kakataibo territory – which encompasses around 1,500,000 ha – lost roughly a fifth of its tree cover. If this trend continues, the Lima-based Institute for the Common Good warns, more than a quarter of its forests will be gone by 2030.⁶⁷

This loss is not only environmental. It threatens the fabric of Kakataibo culture and identity, says Olga Huayta Maynas, Treasurer for the Kakataibo Guard.

“It is our market, our hospital. From it we produce our medicine. From it we have these beautiful gardens. From it we create our crowns and our jewellery,” she tells us.

As she speaks, fighting off mosquitoes by a stream that flows past the Guard base, several members of Silvano’s unit plunge into the water from the opposite bank.

“If it disappears, where would we get any of this?”⁶⁸

Mobilising the Indigenous Guards of the Amazon

Faced with this threat to their home from organised crime, compounded by inaction from state authorities, Kakataibo communities have decided to act. In May 2022, they established the Indigenous Guard of the Kakataibo People of Peru (GIPKAP).⁶⁹

What began with a few dozen recruits quickly grew into a force with more than 150 members. Today, it has bases in 10 communities across Kakataibo territory. These community units together form a General Assembly, which votes for a six-person directorate to oversee the Guard’s operations.⁷⁰

When the Guard identifies a threat – such as the coca discovered by Silvano, or illegal loggers or land grabbers – the Assembly meets to determine a response. Often, this involves starting a dialogue with whoever is responsible.

“If they are planting coca, we tell them: this is community territory, you cannot do that here,” says Segundo Ispón, the Guard’s Commander and head of the six-person directorate.

“We give them a timeframe to leave our land, or we will expel them.”⁷¹

In enforcing these rulings, the Guard represents something broader than territorial defence. It also asserts the Kakataibo’s right to administer justice independently of the state, explains Álvaro Másquez Salvador, a lawyer with the Peruvian Legal Defense Institute (IDL).⁷²

This right is enshrined in Article 149 of Peru’s Constitution, which recognises Indigenous communities’ authority to

“exercise jurisdictional functions within their territory.”⁷³ It is also backed by international human rights agreements ratified by the Peruvian state, such as ILO Convention 169.⁷⁴

Most importantly, though, it is an expression of the Kakataibo’s autonomy as an Indigenous People – “a powerful act in a political and historical context that has tried to erase this,” Másquez says.

This is especially significant in Peru. Unlike Colombia and Ecuador, where Indigenous Peoples enjoy constitutional recognition as collective political entities, Peru’s legal framework instead vests legal personality and collective land rights in individual communities.

“This arrangement is convenient for the government because it is easier to divide, negotiate with, or co-opt individual community leaders than it is to deal with strong organisations representing entire Peoples,” Másquez says.⁷⁵

Following the same principle of autonomy, the Guard does not base its claim to legitimacy on recognition from the Peruvian state. Rather, it is accredited by Indigenous organisations who collaborate on both a national and international level.

This network enables the Kakataibo to learn from other Amazonian Peoples – joining a chain of Indigenous Guards that spans the western Amazon, linking Colombia, Ecuador and Peru.

These Guards include the battle-hardened Asháninka, whose self-defence units confronted the Shining Path guerrilla insurgency that ravaged Peru during the 1980s.⁷⁶

They also include the Shipibo, whose territory, like the Kakataibo, encompasses the lagoons, forests and streams of the Ucayali river basin. Historically, this contiguity between two Peoples sparked conflict, says Kelly Valera Silva, President of the Shipibo Guard, which was founded in 2021.

“But over time that changed. Today we work together like siblings. We can see that we share the same struggle.”⁷⁷

On an international level, these Peruvian guards have learned from their Colombian counterparts, whose Indigenous Peoples have the region’s most developed self-protection systems.⁷⁸ At cross-border gatherings, members meet to share experiences in territorial defence, self-protection and human rights.⁷⁹



Gender and cultural defence working in unison

As well as building alliances, the Guard works to strengthen community ties internally. Currently, half of its six-person directorate are women. Under their influence, promoting women's rights and addressing gender-based violence have become key priorities.⁸⁰

"I joined the Guard two years ago," says Olga Huayta. "At first, I was invited to cook for an assembly with 78 people, including lawyers and human rights organisations.

"They started talking about women's rights and I loved it," she continues. "I started answering questions and participating.

"Little by little I became more involved. It was not easy. It was difficult for me to leave my family and children. But now I see myself differently: empowered."⁸¹

Today, Huayta and other leaders organise events for female guards from across the Peruvian Amazon. Working with allies from the IDL, they teach classes on gender-based rights and develop strategies to strengthen women's political participation.⁸²

"Only when women are part of decision-making will there be peace and security for our sons, daughters, and families," reads a declaration issued during the First Gathering of Amazonian Indigenous Women Guards, held in 2025.⁸³

Empowering women through the Guard doesn't only strengthen Kakataibo communities, adds Belmira Pérez Odicio, President of the Federation of Kakataibo Women. It also deepens the Guard's relationship with Kakataibo territory and culture.

"We feel a connection through conservation, because Kakataibo women create our crafts," Pérez says. "We use mahogany bark, yacushapana bark, huayruro and other seeds."

As well as the materials, imagery on Kakataibo textiles and jewellery is also drawn from the forest, Pérez adds. "We depict paths that our ancestors walked through the hills," as well as plants, fish and animals, such as the anaconda.⁸⁴

In all these ways – territorial defence, political autonomy, alliance-building, community empowerment and cultural reinforcement – the Kakataibo Guard feeds into broader, long-term collective protection strategies that run through Amazonian history.

Such strategies work not just to shield physical territories, but also the cultures, languages and histories of the Amazonian Peoples who defend them. They provide a bulwark against the forces that seek to extinguish this resistance and seize the land and resources the Guard protects.



I'm going to fight until the day they kill me

Arbildo Meléndez,
Kakataibo leader
Killed 2020

Drug trafficking brings a new era of violence to Peru's Indigenous Peoples

In today's Amazon, such collective protection strategies are urgently needed. The Kakataibo Guard was founded during what regional leader Herlín Odicio describes as "one of the most difficult periods in our history."⁸⁵

"During the rubber boom, many Indigenous people were killed because outsiders wanted access to Indigenous territories and resources. There was slavery too," Odicio tells us.

"Now we are living through something similar."⁸⁶

Six Kakataibo leaders have died in this new wave of violence. The first, Arbildo Meléndez, was shot while hunting in April 2020.⁸⁷

Meléndez had been fighting to finalise long-pending land titles for his community, Unipacuyacu.⁸⁸ Before his death, he received threats for his opposition to coca cultivation on community land, his sister, Sara Meléndez, tells us.

"We don't know exactly who ordered it, but most likely it was coca growers," she says.

"I said to him, 'Brother, you should get out of there because your life is in danger.' And my brother said, 'No, I'm going to fight until the day they kill me.'"⁸⁹

More attacks followed. Over the next year, three Kakataibo leaders – Santiago Vega, Yenes Ríos and Herasmo García – were murdered. In December 2023, another leader, Benjamín Flores, was killed at home after receiving threats from local coca growers. A few months later, the body of a sixth leader, Mariano Isacama, was found dumped on a riverbank with signs of torture.⁹⁰

These killings are part of a surge in violence across the Peruvian Amazon.⁹¹ Since 2020, 35 Indigenous leaders have been killed, according to the Interethnic Association for the Development of the Peruvian Rainforest (AIDESEP). Ucayali, the primary home of the Kakataibo, is the worst-hit region.⁹²

"The threats mainly come from people involved in drug trafficking, because they need untouched forest land to clear and replace with coca crops," AIDESEP's President, Jorge Pérez Rubio, tells us.

"They also come from logging activities, as well as gold mining."⁹³



Left: Women representatives of the Kakataibo Indigenous Guard demonstrate their skills in archery during the annual congress of the Guard. Leslie Searles / Global Witness

Right: Sara Meléndez, a member of the Kakataibo Indigenous Guard, whose brother was killed after opposing coca cultivation on community land. Leslie Searles / Global Witness



*Without territory
we are nothing,
without territory
there is no culture,
and without territory
our children will
not be able to live*

Olga Huayta,
Kakataibo Indigenous Guard leader



Olga Huayta, leader in the
Kakataibo Indigenous Guard,
walks in Yamino. Leslie Searles /
Global Witness

Prohibition and global demand intensify coca's harms to Indigenous Amazon

This crisis is not confined to Peru. “The unchecked actions of increasingly powerful criminal organisations pose an existential threat to the planet’s most biodiverse region and the communities it shelters,” Amazon Watch warned in 2023.⁹⁴

A joint Colombian-Brazilian-Ecuadorian-Peruvian investigation into 75 key border locations within the Amazon found that almost three-quarters were controlled by drug trafficking groups.

Coca also acts as a “driving force behind the expansion of other types of illegal economic activities in the Amazon”, the investigation concludes, including “gold mining, logging, wildlife trafficking, illegal fishing [and] irregular land occupation.”⁹⁵

The power of these groups is fuelled by surging demand for cocaine. According to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, the global number of cocaine users rose by almost 50% between 2013 and 2023. With production rising rapidly to meet demand, cocaine is the world’s fastest-growing illicit drug market.⁹⁶

In Peru, the proceeds of this criminal bonanza don’t remain in the hands of coca growers, who are often “impoverished settlers who have migrated from the Andes,” says Luis Hallazi, a Peruvian analyst specialising in human rights and illicit economies.⁹⁷

Rather, profits soar as coca moves through the supply chain.⁹⁸

These profits fund powerful cartels that control critical smuggling routes. With the cocaine trade prohibited under a UN-backed global policy regime, participants operate in an illicit market where legal contracts and state enforcement are unavailable. Consequently, control of supply lines is maintained through corruption, coercion and brute force.⁹⁹

This has helped make countries at the heart of the industry – particularly Colombia, Mexico and Honduras – among the most dangerous in the world for defenders.¹⁰⁰

In the past decade, this storm of corruption and impunity has hit Ucayali. Between 2019 and 2023 – a period which saw five of the aforementioned killings of the Kakataibo leaders – coca cultivation in the region increased by more than 600% to over 12,000 ha.¹⁰¹

“Ucayali has become a major hub for the export of cocaine,” says Ricardo Soberón, a former Peruvian drug tsar and expert on the “Amazonisation of drug trafficking.”

Prohibition incentivises drug traffickers to operate in “remote areas with weak law enforcement,” Soberón explains.

At the same time, traffickers require access to transport and smuggling networks to move their product into international markets.¹⁰²

Ucayali – which borders Brazil, the world’s second-largest cocaine consumer and the principal hub for exports to Europe – fits the bill perfectly.¹⁰³ “It has a highway from the mountains to the regional capital of Pucallpa, which connects the jungle to the coast,” Soberón says.

“Then on the other side there is an empty space – just remote forests with Indigenous reserves.”¹⁰⁴

These provide traffickers with shelter to install infrastructure such as labs and landing strips.

Landing strips have been found within the Kakataibo Reserve. A 2024 flyover spotted three clandestine strips, as well as deforested areas planted with coca and studded with maceration pits.¹⁰⁵

Concern over this existential threat to the isolated Kakataibo spurred the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights to order the Peruvian state to protect them.¹⁰⁶

But any government action is slow to materialise in a region where the power of organised crime has corroded state institutions.

“In recent years, the Peruvian state has weakened while organised crime has advanced,” says Hallazi. “Institutional weakness is exacerbated by the deliberate sabotaging and weakening of legislative tools that can be used to challenge illegal activities.”¹⁰⁷

For now, the Guard is forced to fill the vacuum, says Ispón.

“There is inaction from the state, inaction from the authorities. Faced with that, what do we do? We protect ourselves. We take care of each other.”¹⁰⁸

W
We protect ourselves.
We take care of each other

**Segundo Ispón,
Commander of the Guard**



Members of the Kakataibo Indigenous Guard patrol the Yamino community forest. Leslie Searles / Global Witness

Legal frameworks to safeguard the future

In May 2026, Silvano, Huayta, Ispón, Pérez, Odicio, Valera, Másquez and dozens of other Guards and their allies have gathered at a Congress marking the GIPKAP’s fourth birthday. Inside a large circular pavilion crowned with dried palm leaves, they discuss their strategy and demands for the year ahead.¹⁰⁹

One key demand is for legislation that codifies the legitimacy of Indigenous Guards at both national and regional levels. Provisionally termed “Laws of Amazonian Indigenous Security,” these are “politically necessary to avert the risk of criminalisation,” Másquez explains.

“Otherwise, they’re called terrorists, or accused of being paramilitaries.”¹¹⁰

Such laws would have the additional benefit of providing a framework through which ministries and regional governments can support Guards with equipment. This includes drones, enabling the Kakataibo to monitor their territory without having to attend sites in person.¹¹¹

It should also include “uniforms, bulletproof vests,” Ispón says, “communication tools like radios” and “cameras to record evidence.”

Such equipment is desperately needed to mitigate the risks that high-profile guards face, Ispón adds. To date, at least six Kakataibo Guard members have received death threats via messages on WhatsApp and social media.

“They say: ‘These people, the six of you, are on a list, and one by one we will go after you,’” he says.

“I am here at an event. Tomorrow, everything becomes silent, and I go back to my farm. Who accompanies me? No one.”¹¹²

Other demands also aim to make conditions safer for the Guards. One calls on the Interior Ministry and police to take the lead in eradicating coca from Kakataibo territory, while guaranteeing the participation of Indigenous Guards in drug policy decisions.¹¹³

Another urges Peru’s Congress to repeal a string of laws that have weakened environmental regulation, legitimised illegal mining and tightened state control over civil society.¹¹⁴

Other measures to protect defenders – such as ratifying the Escazú Agreement, twice rejected by the Peruvian Congress amid claims it undermined national sovereignty – would also provide much-needed support.¹¹⁵

With or without this assistance, the Kakataibo guards remain committed to their role.

“As future generations are born, I hope they keep protecting this land with the same dedication, so that our customs don’t disappear,” says Silvano, who has travelled from his community for the Congress. Round his neck hangs a disc of ayahuasca bark, gifted by his grandparents, who use the hallucinogen in ritual practice.

“That is what we want. That is why we are here.”¹¹⁶

From the Legal Defense Institute

Human rights organisation, the Legal Defense Institute (IDL), calls on the Peruvian government and other states to:

- Ensure the territorial integrity of the Kakataibo Indigenous People through the legal and physical regularisation of their lands, a responsibility that falls under the jurisdiction of the regional governments of Huánuco and Ucayali. This process should begin with the land titling of the Unipacuyacu People, as a reparation measure for the killing of their leader, Arbildo Meléndez.
- Guarantee effective participation of the Kakataibo Indigenous People in the design and development of state protection plans against the invasions in the Kakataibo North and South Territorial Reserves. This should include meaningful participation in decision-making processes on territorial planning and strategies to combat organised crime.
- Legally recognise the territorial defence work of Indigenous Guards by approving the draft Law on Amazonian Indigenous Security and the proposed regional ordinance submitted to the Regional Council of Ucayali. These frameworks should advance regulations to recognise the territorial corridor initiative to ensure the protection of extensive transboundary forests inhabited by the various Indigenous Peoples in Voluntary Isolation and Initial Contact (PIACI) across the Pan-Amazon region.
- Reinforce the Ministry of Justice's Intersectoral Mechanism for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders to expand the operational capacity of the Kakataibo Indigenous People as defenders of individual and collective rights.
- Develop intercultural mechanisms of collaboration between community self-protection bodies, such as the Indigenous Guards, and the State authorities who should provide personal protective equipment and logistical, operational and technical support. These mechanisms should enable joint operations between Indigenous Guards and state authorities to combat illicit activities on Indigenous lands.
- Develop and advocate for alternatives to prohibition-based drug policy regimes that currently displace coca cultivation and trafficking into the most remote and vulnerable areas, while simultaneously undermining the governance and justice systems intended to protect forests, defenders and Indigenous Peoples.
- Strengthen the State presence in critical areas such as the Pacuyacu stream in Unipacuyacu. This should include providing protection officers from the Ministry of Culture with appropriate protocols and resources and strengthening the work of the National Police, environmental inspectors, prosecutors and judges to tackle impunity effectively and hold accountable illegal economies that invade and commit violence against the Kakataibo territory.
- The Peruvian Congress should repeal laws, particularly Laws No. 31751, 31990, 31973 and 32138, and reject bills No. 06816/2023-CR and 09938/2024-CR, which have weakened – or would weaken – environmental regulation, legitimised illegal mining and increased state control over civil society.
- The Peruvian government should sign and ratify the Escazú Agreement and use it as a framework to strengthen state protection mechanisms for human rights defenders.



Emilio Estrella, a member of the Kakataibo Indigenous Guard, stands in Yamino. Leslie Searles / Global Witness

Collective protection



Emilio Estrella, a member of the Kakataibo Indigenous Guard, stands in Yamino. Leslie Searles / Global Witness

Collective protection recognises that land and environmental defenders are rarely targeted as isolated individuals.¹¹⁷ They are attacked because they are part of communities defending their lands, territories, ecosystems and collective rights against powerful political and economic interests.

Because of this, the protection of defenders requires affirming communities' collective capacity, practices and values to prevent and respond to threats, rather than relying solely on individual security measures.

Collective protection is relational, as the protection of one defender depends on the protection of others. It recognises that defenders are safest when their communities are strong, organised and able to exercise their collective rights without intimidation or criminalisation.

Collective protection is mostly preventive and life-affirming. It is a political commitment and approach that shifts the focus from reacting to attacks towards reducing the structural conditions that enable violence.

This approach is grounded in community leadership, self-determination and solidarity. It builds on the knowledge, governance systems and practices that communities have developed over generations, while reinforcing their ability to organise, act collectively, monitor risks, document abuses, maintain social cohesion and engage in collective advocacy.

Effective collective protection depends on securing the conditions that allow communities to exercise their rights, including recognition of land tenure, respect for local communities' governance, meaningful participation in decision-making and protection of civic space.

It also includes the recognition of existing communities' practices and the establishment of safe spaces that protect communities' resources and infrastructure, including schools, crops and houses. It contributes to the wellbeing and psychosocial care of the collective.

Indigenous Guards are an example of a collective protection mechanism created to defend Indigenous territories.

Instead of stigmatising collective protection, states should recognise it, fund it when appropriate and integrate it as core practice in state protection mechanisms and policies for defenders, including in Escazú Agreement route plans.

As attacks against defenders increasingly target entire communities through displacement, judicial harassment, militarisation and violence, collective protection has become an essential component of their prevention.

Supporting community-led protection strategies is not only a means to protect individual defenders, but also to safeguard the people and movements working to defend land, forests, biodiversity and the climate.



A dirt road built by pulpwood company PT Mayawana Persada goes through the Sabar Bubu hill in Ketapang Regency, West Kalimantan, Indonesia. Adi Renaldi / Global Witness

Resisting corporate land grabs



Left: Tarsisius Fendy Sesupi, a Dayak Indigenous customary leader and farmer, performs a ritual at the Sabar Bubu sacred hill. Adi Renaldi / Global Witness

Left bottom: Sutalion Combeng (centre), a Dayak Indigenous customary leader and a farmer, sits in front of an offering during a ritual at the Sabar Bubu sacred hill. Adi Renaldi / Global Witness



Indonesia

When Tarsisius Fendy Sesupi signed an agreement with a pulpwood company that had razed thousands of hectares of tropical forest in Indonesia, he hoped it would help resolve a bitter land dispute.¹¹⁸

A customary leader of the Indigenous Dayak people in West Kalimantan, Fendy travelled to the local office of PT Mayawana Persada in December 2023.¹¹⁹ The company had cleared farmland claimed by his community, Lelayang, replacing crops and rubber groves with industrial monocultures.¹²⁰

The new plantations – principally of eucalyptus and acacia – contaminated water sources, residents told Global Witness, killing fish and polluting drinking water.¹²¹

Tensions reached a flashpoint in November 2022, when Mayawana burned a rice barn and eight agricultural huts on disputed land.¹²²

Fendy laid out these complaints to Mayawana managers. “We sat at the same table in the office, chatting and negotiating,” he recalls.¹²³

Drawing on the Dayak’s traditional justice system, he proposed a customary sanction to compensate for the harms.

Company officials agreed to pay a fine and attend a ritual ceremony intended to restore spiritual and social balance.¹²⁴

The ceremony was scheduled for a few days later. The Dayak maintained an escalating series of customary sanctions, part of community-based dispute resolution systems that have been passed down between generations and are recognised by Indonesia’s legal system.¹²⁵

Fendy chose to apply one named *Ngongkat Tariu*: “Ngongkat Tariu means summoning human spirits, summoning the spirits of burned rice, summoning the spirits of wood that had been forcibly removed and destroyed, and summoning the spirits of the land.”¹²⁶

The customary practice required the company to pay the equivalent of 16 million Rupiah (around \$900) to the community. Normally, this would take the form of ritual objects that are used in Dayak ceremonies: “Ceramic vessels, gongs or even animals, rather than money.”

These objects mediate relationships between the living, ancestors and the spirit world, all of whom are affected by damage to nature and community life.¹²⁷

As the company didn’t have the ritual items available, it transferred the money to Fendy to cover the costs. It agreed to send a representative to attend the ceremony where the ritual would be performed.¹²⁸

But when the morning came, no one showed.

Instead, Fendy received a police summons. A criminal complaint had been filed alleging he extorted Mayawana employees – with police citing the 16 million Rupiah payment as evidence.¹²⁹

In August 2025, Fendy was officially accused of extortion and violent coercion, offences carrying a maximum jail term of nine years. Four months later, in December, police tried to arrest him as he left a media briefing in Pontianak, the capital of West Kalimantan.¹³⁰

“We’ve never extorted anything, we’ve never done anything unpleasant,” Fendy says.

In early 2026, he lodged a pre-trial motion to have the charge thrown out, but a judge rejected his petition.¹³¹ He remains a suspect, accused of violence and extortion for using the Dayak’s traditional justice system to defend his community and its lands, forests and waterways.

Land invasions put pressure on the Dayak

The extortion charges against Fendy were only the latest in a series of criminal allegations brought against Dayak leaders by Mayawana.

The dispute began in 2010, when Indonesia’s Ministry of Forestry granted the firm a 136,710-hectare concession.¹³²

At the time, more than 88,000 hectares (ha) of the concession was forested.¹³³ In 2016, Mayawana began clearing it. Over the next 10 years, it demolished 35,000 ha,¹³⁴ an area half the size of Singapore, including 19,000 ha of orangutan habitat.¹³⁵

As well as forest, Mayawana converted 30,000 ha of peatland into pulpwood plantation, according to analysis by a coalition of NGOs, likely emitting more than 500,000 tons of CO₂.¹³⁶

Dayak communities opposed the clearances from the outset. Nine Dayak villages lay within the concession, placing community farmland, customary forests and sacred sites at risk.¹³⁷

Among them was Bukit Sabar Bubu, a forested hill revered as the resting place of Dayak ancestors.

“Since ancient times, passed down from our grandfathers and fathers to us, this hill has been designated as a sacred and protected place,” says Sution Combeng, customary leader of Sabar Bubu village.¹³⁸

Over time, Dayak people here have developed a range of practices to protect the sacred forest. Resources can only be harvested after rituals seeking permission from the spirits believed to inhabit it. Community members patrol the area three times a week to deter illegal loggers and other intruders.¹³⁹

At the height of planting season, however, these patrols often pause, as residents are occupied with agricultural work. This was the case in June 2020.

“That was the opportunity for the company to encroach on Bukit Sabar Bubu,” Combeng says. “When we patrolled again, we saw that part of the hill had been cleared.”

Mayawana then transformed the surrounding landscape, building roads and establishing acacia plantations.¹⁴⁰

As the forest disappeared, so too did many of the natural resources the community depended on, including fruit, resin and rattan. Sediment and herbicide pollution contaminated local rivers, Combeng says, devastating fish populations.¹⁴¹

About 5km south of Sabar Bubu, another Dayak hamlet, Selimbung, has also been engulfed by Mayawana’s expansion. Petrus Pecun, now 54, moved to Selimbung with his parents as a child. By the 2010s, he had established a 50-hectare farm, cultivating rubber alongside subsistence crops such as rice.¹⁴²

Today, nearly all that land is gone, Petrus says – turned into pulpwood monocultures by Mayawana.

“Our rubber plantation, which we depended on for our daily lives, was completely destroyed,” he says. “Many residents have given up. They’ve left the village. Many work for palm oil companies, mining companies.”¹⁴³

Emiliana, another Selimbung resident, used to grow pineapple, cempedak, durian, ginger and rubber on community land. In 2022, Mayawana swallowed all of it.

“For two to three years, my body trembled with fear of the people from Mayawana,” Emiliana says. “For days, my husband and I didn’t eat because we were guarding the rubber plantation.”

The loss extends beyond farmland. Emiliana learned weaving from her parents and crafted baskets made from rattan and bamboo gathered from the community forest. “Now it’s gone. Even finding rattan is hard.”

Today, she picks oil palm fruit to earn enough to send her child to high school: “There are no jobs in this village anymore.”¹⁴⁴

For days, my husband and I didn’t eat because we were guarding the rubber plantation

Emiliana,
Dayak Indigenous farmer



Emiliana, a Dayak Indigenous farmer, holds a winnowing basket she made. Emiliana says she used to weave bamboo and rattan sourced from nearby jungle to make winnowing baskets and various storage items for her own use and for sale. Adi Renaldi / Global Witness

Turning defenders into defendants

With their forests and farmland vanishing into sterile monocultures, Dayak communities mobilised to resist the land grabs.

In 2023, Dayak leaders in Sabar Bubu installed customary markers, named *Mandoh Adat*, across the disputed land, prohibiting further Mayawana activity. When this failed to halt the clearances, community members detained 13 pieces of Mayawana's heavy excavation machinery, notifying police beforehand.¹⁴⁵

A few months later, Fendy made his trip to the firm's office to impose customary sanctions.

In response to this resistance, Mayawana has repeatedly threatened Dayak leaders with criminal charges.

In 2022, Daniel Ariyanto, the son of a customary leader, was arrested and jailed for six months after uprooting acacia trees he says Mayawana planted on his family's land.¹⁴⁶

The same year, Abel, secretary of Kualan Hilir village, which included Lelayang and Sabar Bubu, was reported to police by Mayawana's legal team after joining protests against the company's operations.¹⁴⁷

In September 2023, Fendy and two other Dayak leaders, Andreas Ratus and Fransiskus Sima, received a witness summons over allegations of criminal vandalism.¹⁴⁸

"Why were the people fighting for their rights summoned, while those who did the vandalism weren't?" Sima asks.¹⁴⁹

In total, Fendy says he has received 28 police summonses since standing up to Mayawana.¹⁵⁰

"Each time the community takes action to defend its right to land, an attempt at criminalisation follows against the figure leading that struggle," says Ahmad Syukri, Executive Director at Link-AR Borneo, a West Kalimantan-based civil society organisation that supports Indigenous communities in land conflicts.¹⁵¹

A rising tide of criminalisation in Asia

The Dayak's experience reflects what we have identified as a rising tide of criminalisation in Asia. Such allegations, often amplified via smear campaigns on social media, seek to discredit environmental defenders, casting them as criminals and instigators of disputes rather than a frontline defence against climate breakdown.¹⁵²

"Criminalisation is one of the most common repressive tactics used to silence environmental defenders in Indonesia," says Andi Muttaqien, Executive Director of the human rights group Satya Bumi.¹⁵³

In 2025, Satya Bumi documented 35 cases of criminalisation – more than half of the 64 attacks on environmental defenders it recorded that year – affecting 191 individuals.¹⁵⁴

These tactics also aim to delegitimise the collective protection mechanisms that Indigenous communities rely upon to defend their lands, such as the customary sanctions invoked by Fendy.

This stigmatisation "creates a chilling effect," Muttaqien says, "narrowing civic space, weakening community solidarity, and ultimately increasing the risk of human rights violations against environmental defenders."

This heightened vulnerability extends to deadly attacks, according to the Alliance for Land, Indigenous and Environmental Defenders (ALLIED).

"Once a defender is formally accused, their killing becomes politically less costly, reinforcing patterns of impunity," ALLIED wrote in its 2025 report *Hidden Iceberg*.¹⁵⁵

Since 2012, Global Witness has documented 26 killings of defenders in Indonesia – with agribusiness projects like Mayawana's pulpwood plantations the single biggest driver of lethal attacks.



Petrus Pecun, a Dayak Indigenous farmer, sits at his home in Ketapang Regency. Adi Renaldi / Global Witness

International business standards put scrutiny on Indonesia's human rights record

While Dayak leaders were facing criminal accusations for defending their land and resources, the Indonesian government was pursuing membership of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Accession requires Indonesia to align its laws and policies with OECD standards, including those on responsible business conduct and human rights.

Indonesia entered the technical review phase of this process in December 2025 – the same month Fendy was arrested for extortion.¹⁵⁶

Other international frameworks reinforce the OECD's expectations of business standards.

The UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights call on companies to respect human rights and provide for or cooperate in remediation for harms.¹⁵⁷

The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples affirms Indigenous Peoples' right to "just and fair redress" if "the lands, territories and resources which they have traditionally owned or otherwise occupied or used" are "confiscated, taken, occupied, used or damaged" without their Free, Prior and Informed consent (FPIC).¹⁵⁸

The criminalisation of Dayak resistance highlights a wider failure in Indonesia to uphold these international standards, says Agung Wardana, an expert in environmental law and Indigenous rights at Gadjah Mada University.

"The Indonesian legal system fails to protect the customary land rights of Indigenous people," Wardana says. Despite a 2013 Constitutional Court ruling that customary forests are not state forests,¹⁵⁹ recognition of customary use involves a "long, frustrating bureaucratic process" that excludes many Indigenous communities, he explains.

"In practice, from the government's perspective, customary land occupied by Indigenous people without official title is state forest," Wardana says. "So it assumes it can give a concession to any company it wishes."¹⁶⁰

These shortcomings have been compounded by development policies under presidents Joko Widodo and Prabowo Subianto that have prioritised natural resource-based investment, Muttaqien adds.

"This investment-driven approach has not been accompanied by adequate safeguards for the rights of Indigenous Peoples and local communities," Muttaqien says, allowing permits to be issued over lands that Indigenous communities have managed for generations.¹⁶¹



Criminalisation is one of the most common repressive tactics used to silence environmental defenders in Indonesia

Andi Muttaqien,
Executive Director, Satya Bumi



**I farmed for
14 years, and
the company
cleared it in
just one night**

Tarsieius Fendy Sesupi,
customary leader of the Dayak Indigenous People

The struggle continues

In June 2026, Indonesia's government had an opportunity to demonstrate its commitment to upholding Indigenous rights when Dayak leaders appeared before the House of Representatives' Human Rights Commission.

They called on police to drop the criminal investigations and urged lawmakers to establish a fact-finding team to investigate alleged abuses.¹⁶²

The Commission endorsed those requests, calling on the Ministry of Human Rights to investigate and urging police and prosecutors to halt criminal proceedings.¹⁶³

Despite renewed scrutiny, however, the dispute remains unresolved. The same month, pulp and paper giant APRIL announced plans to begin sourcing from Mayawana¹⁶⁴ – allowing the company to continue profiting from plantations established on contested land.

APRIL told Global Witness that it conducted due diligence before finalising the relationship, including reviews of conservation, land use and human rights issues. APRIL also said it had been advised that Fendy's case was resolved through mediation, with Mayawana submitting a formal request to police to drop the charges.¹⁶⁵

Fendy's legal team disputes that the case has been resolved, saying an agreement to withdraw the charges – signed in April 2026 – has yet to be fulfilled, meaning proceedings could be reactivated at any time.

Mayawana didn't respond to our request for comment.

Meanwhile, Mayawana continues operating on the sacred hill of Sabar Bubu. Emiliana, Fendy, Petrus Pecun and dozens of other Dayak people still cannot access their customary lands and have received no redress for the loss of their livelihoods.¹⁶⁶

"I farmed for 14 years, and the company cleared it in just one night," Fendy says. "It's very sad for us ... for the future of our grandchildren. That is lost now."¹⁶⁷



Left: A recently cleared plot of land belonging to PT Mayawana Persada in Ketapang Regency, West Kalimantan. Adi Renaldi / Global Witness

From Indonesian human rights organisation Satya Bumi

The Indonesian government should:

- End all forms of criminalisation of the Dayak Indigenous community, including dropping the extortion charge against Tarsisius Fendy Sesupi through the issuance of a formal termination of investigation (SP3).
- Recognise customary sanctions as a legitimate exercise of Indigenous customary law and sovereignty.
- Apply Indonesia's anti-SLAPP (Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation) protections at the investigation stage, so cases like Fendy's are screened out before anyone is named a suspect.
- Establish a dedicated fact-finding taskforce to investigate alleged human rights violations that may have occurred in the conflict between PT Mayawana Persada and the Dayak Indigenous community, oversee the restitution of customary lands, and guarantee reparations for the destruction of sacred sites.
- Conduct a comprehensive evaluation of PT Mayawana Persada's licences (PBPH/IUPHHK-HTI), revoke permits and impose sanctions for documented violations, including the destruction of over 27,000 ha of peatland in breach of Government Regulation No. 57/2016 on the Protection and Management of Peat Ecosystem.

- Ensure land and environmental defenders who experience reprisals have access to effective remedies – including legal aid, compensation, restitution, psychosocial support and guarantees of non-repetition – in line with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs Principles).
- Recognise Bukit Sabar Bubu as an Indigenous Territory of the Dayak Indigenous community to protect their spiritual identity and connection with their ancestors.

PT Mayawana Persada should:

- Withdraw all criminalisation reports and cease all intimidation and retaliation against Dayak Indigenous community members who defend their land rights.
- Provide full remedy for harms caused, including the restoration and rehabilitation of desecrated sacred and burial sites as well as degraded peatland and forest.
- Compensate for crop failures, water contamination, declining fisheries and the loss of medicinal plants.
- Carry out meaningful Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) and human rights due diligence before and throughout operations in line with the OECD Due Diligence Guidance for Responsible Business Conduct and UNGPs Principles.



Tarsisius Fendy Sesupi stands near his home in Ketapang Regency. Adi Renaldi / Global Witness

Case updates

The disappearance of Ricardo Lagunes Gasca and Antonio Díaz Valencia in Mexico

Last reported: 2024

Ricardo Lagunes Gasca, a prominent human rights lawyer, and Antonio Díaz Valencia, a teacher and leader of the Nahua Indigenous community of San Miguel de Aquila, disappeared over three years ago on 15 January 2023 between the states of Michoacán and Colima, Mexico.

Their disappearance, which we covered in our 2024 report, followed their participation in a community assembly in Aquila over longstanding problems with a mining project managed by the steel manufacturer Ternium-México.¹⁶⁸

Their relatives are still searching for them and seeking justice.¹⁶⁹

The official investigation into their disappearance has been marred by judicial conflicts and delays. The families' lawyers solicited international assistance to address these shortcomings, but the Mexican government rejected the request.¹⁷⁰

Four days after the pair's disappearance, Ternium issued a statement expressing concern but without naming the defenders or demanding their safe return.¹⁷¹

Throughout the case, Ternium has maintained that it bears no responsibility for any conflict within the community related to its operations. It has emphasised its cooperation with authorities, while community members continue to press for a full investigation into any possible involvement by the company.¹⁷²



An important step towards determining the company's possible responsibility for the disappearances was made in 2025, when a Specific Instance complaint was filed under the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises on Responsible Business Conduct.¹⁷³

International human rights bodies have also addressed the case. In January 2023, the UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights issued urgent actions and precautionary measures, demanding the Mexican government intensify efforts to find the defenders.¹⁷⁴

Six UN Special Procedures mandate holders have sent formal communications to the Mexican and other governments, as well as to Ternium.

The establishment in 2025 of the Independent Mechanism for the Humanitarian Recovery of Antonio and Ricardo, led by Global Rights Advocacy, is a reflection of the courage of Antonio and Ricardo's families and legal representatives in continuing to advance search and investigation efforts, despite the failings of both the Mexican authorities and Ternium.¹⁷⁵



A member of Ricardo Lagunes Gasca's family looks through photos of the human rights lawyer in Mexico. Luis Rojas / Panos Pictures / Global Witness

The abduction of Jhed Tamano and Jonila Castro in the Philippines

Last reported: 2024

Jhed Tamano and Jonila Castro are youth environmental defenders from the Philippines who were abducted in 2023 while opposing the construction of an airport in Manila. The airport project has displaced hundreds of families and destroyed climate-critical habitats, as we reported in 2023.

On 2 September 2023, after meeting a community affected by the airport's development, Jhed and Jonila were violently abducted by armed men suspected to be related to the military.

Following their release in September, Jhed and Jonila filed petitions for legal remedy before the Philippine Supreme Court. The Court initially allowed the case to proceed, referring it to the Court of Appeals for summary hearings.

During those hearings, however, the respondents used the proceedings to red-tag and vilify Jhed and Jonila, before the Court denied their request for judicial protection.¹⁷⁶

Jhed and Jonila have since appealed to the Supreme Court, where the case has now been pending for nearly a year.

After their release, the Philippine Armed Forces also filed perjury charges against them, which were later dismissed.

The Department of Justice additionally recommended they face separate oral defamation charges, but these too were dismissed after nearly two years of legal proceedings.¹⁷⁷

Despite these developments, accountability remains elusive. In December 2024, Jhed and Jonila filed a complaint under the Anti-Enforced or Involuntary Disappearance Act with the Philippine Ombudsperson, where the case is still pending.

Meanwhile, conditions in affected communities have deteriorated. The New Manila International Airport project is moving forward in an endangered biodiversity hotspot, threatening irreversible environmental and social harms.

Residents across Bulacan and beyond have denounced worsening floods since the reclamation began.

Jhed and Jonila remain active both on the ground and through advocacy campaigns. They continue to educate, organise and mobilise communities and advocates in support of people's rights to a healthy environment and genuinely inclusive development in Manila Bay.¹⁷⁸



Jonila Castro (left) and Jhed Tamano (right) in Manila, the Philippines. Raffy Lerma / Global Witness



Pablo San Martín Chuñil, Mapuche Indigenous activist and son of Julia Chuñil, holds a banner saying "Where is Julia Chuñil?" during the COP30 climate march in Belém, Brazil. Javier Garate / Global Witness

The disappearance of Julia Chuñil in Chile

Last reported: 2025

Almost two years after the disappearance of Mapuche environmental defender, Julia Chuñil Catricura, President of the Putreguel de Máfil Indigenous community in southern Chile, her family are still searching for answers and justice.

Julia disappeared on 8 November 2024 while defending native forest from encroaching deforestation, as documented in our 2025 report. Despite sustained national and international calls for a thorough investigation, her whereabouts remain unknown.

Rather than effectively pursuing investigative leads related to a businessman's interest in the land stewarded by Julia, the authorities have increasingly targeted her relatives.¹⁷⁹ In January 2026, Julia's children – Pablo San Martín Chuñil, Javier Troncoso Chuñil and Jeannette Troncoso Chuñil – were arrested and criminalised.

The arrests came shortly after the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights issued precautionary measures in Julia's case and immediately before the family was due to participate in an admissibility hearing with the Escazú Agreement's Committee to Support Implementation and Compliance, which activated its rapid response mechanism in relation to the case.¹⁸⁰

Soon after their detention, Pablo and Jeannette were transferred to house arrest due to a lack of evidence against them and subsequently released.¹⁸¹ More recently,

the legal team of Karina Riquelme, who is the Chuñil family's lawyer, had to request a court hearing to establish whether a case had been opened against her in relation to the Julia Chuñil investigation. At the hearing, held on 7 August 2026, the prosecutor requested that their own identity be withheld from the court – an unusual procedure under Chilean law, typically reserved for the most serious cases or personal threats against a prosecutor, not low-level hearings like this one. The prosecution ultimately confirmed that no case is currently open against Riquelme in relation to the investigation.¹⁸²

The case's trajectory reflects a deeply troubling pattern: instead of locating Julia Chuñil and making those responsible for her disappearance accountable, authorities have sought to criminalise her relatives and legal representatives.

Despite this pressure, Julia's family continues to fight for truth and justice. They are still searching for their mother, organising protests, pursuing legal challenges and bringing international attention to the case – including through Pablo San Martín's participation in the People's Tribunal at COP30 in Brazil.

Throughout these efforts, they continue to ask the question that remains unanswered: Where is Julia Chuñil?

Criminalisation of the Ekuri people in Nigeria

Last reported: 2025

Since we highlighted the struggle of the Ekuri community in our 2025 report, threats against the forest defenders in Ekuri Forest, Cross River State, Nigeria, have continued.

Shortly after our report's publication, community leaders and forest defenders – including Dr Martins Egot, Executive Director of PADIC-Africa and a community leader in New Ekuri – were subjected to intimidation, arrest and detention, following complaints linked to illegal logging interests.¹⁸³

The arrests were widely viewed as an attempt to silence efforts to defend tropical forests and community forest rights. The defenders' release was secured through the intervention of local environmental NGOs and legal practitioners in Cross River State, who mobilised to provide legal support and advocate for their rights.¹⁸⁴

Despite these challenges, the Ekuri communities and PADIC-Africa have continued their efforts to protect one of Nigeria's most important remaining tropical forests. Community eco-guards monitor forest activities, biodiversity conservation initiatives remain active and local advocacy for community forest rights has intensified.

The case has underscored the risks faced by forest defenders who challenge powerful economic interests while working to protect vital ecosystems.

While international attention has helped to raise awareness of the Ekuri struggle, defenders on the ground continue to face significant security, legal and financial challenges. Their experience demonstrates the urgent need for stronger protection mechanisms and rapid response systems to support forest defenders in Nigeria.



Chief Vioent Akamo is an Indigenous leader of New Ekuri village. Taiwo Aina / Global Witness

How to *better protect* land and environmental defenders



A member of the Kakataibo
Indigenous Guard, pictured in
Yamino, Peru. Leslie Searles /
Global Witness

Address the *structural drivers* of violence against defenders



Right: Residents sit beside a “No To Mining” sign inside a camp in Sibuyan Island, Romblon province, central Philippines. Basilio Sepe / Global Witness

Secure collective land, territorial and resource rights

States must recognise and protect the collective land, territorial and resource rights of Indigenous and Afro-descendant people, peasants and other traditional communities.¹⁸⁵ Governments should undertake land reforms, accelerate land titling and demarcation processes, ensure legal recognition of customary governance systems and prevent land grabbing.¹⁸⁶

Particular attention should be given to collective ownership models and community-based management systems, which often provide stronger protection against land grabbing and environmentally destructive activities than individual titling approaches.



Guarantee Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) and the right to say no

States and businesses must ensure that all projects affecting Indigenous Peoples and traditional communities are subject to meaningful consultation processes and obtain FPIC.¹⁸⁷ FPIC should be understood as an ongoing process rather than a one-time consultation.

Governments should establish independent oversight mechanisms to monitor compliance with FPIC obligations, while businesses should publicly disclose consultation processes, agreements reached and measures adopted to address community concerns.

Furthermore, states and businesses must recognise that meaningful participation in decision-making includes the right of Indigenous Peoples, local communities and other affected groups to withhold consent to projects that may affect their lands, territories, resources, livelihoods, cultures, health or environment.¹⁸⁸ While the implementation of FPIC remains essential, governments and companies should move beyond a procedural understanding of consultation and recognise communities as rights-holders with agency to determine their own futures.

States should establish legal and policy frameworks that ensure communities can reject extractive, infrastructure, energy, agribusiness and conservation projects without fear of coercion, retaliation, criminalisation or violence. Decisions to oppose projects must be respected and should trigger the suspension or cancellation of permits where community consent has not been obtained or has been withdrawn.

Businesses should commit not to pursue projects where there is clear and sustained community opposition, regardless of whether legal permits have been granted. Corporate respect for human rights requires recognising that social legitimacy cannot be replaced by regulatory approval. Companies should publicly commit not to use state security forces, private security providers, legal actions or political influence to override community decisions.

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Strengthen *collective protection* for defenders and communities



Right: The Eco Guards of Ekuri Forest, Nigeria, out on patrol to protect the land from illegal logging. Taiwo Aina / Global Witness

Systematically document attacks

States should meet the commitments of Target 22 of the Global Biodiversity Framework, making the indicator on trends in the number of environmental human rights defenders killed annually a component indicator instead of a complementary one to give it more strength. States should establish comprehensive systems for collecting and publishing data on attacks against defenders.

Data should be disaggregated by gender, ethnicity, sector, location and type of attack and developed in consultation with civil society organisations.

Create national observatories and early warning mechanisms

Governments should establish independent observatories capable of identifying emerging patterns of violence and triggering preventive responses before attacks occur, as well as coordinating different state institutions to work together in the early warning system.

These systems should involve defenders, national human rights institutions, ombudspersons, multilateral institutions and civil society organisations.



Move beyond individual protection models to support collective protection initiatives

State protection mechanisms should shift from a narrow focus on individual defenders towards collective protection approaches that recognise that in most cases entire communities, organisations and social movements are targeted.

States should establish protection mechanisms that address the security needs of communities, including territorial protection measures, collective risk assessments, community-led early warning systems, communications infrastructure and emergency response mechanisms.¹⁸⁹

States should ensure that protection mechanisms for defenders are civilian-led, rights-based and grounded in local cultural contexts. These mechanisms should avoid military or securitised approaches that can increase fear, undermine trust and, in some contexts, exacerbate risks for defenders and communities.

States, multilateral institutions, businesses and donors should recognise and support Indigenous, Afro-descendant, peasant and community-led governance systems, territorial monitoring initiatives including Indigenous

Guards, collective decision-making spaces, cultural practices, and mechanisms for preserving historical memory and community cohesion.

International donors and cooperation agencies should increase direct, flexible and long-term funding for community-led protection initiatives, recognising that the most sustainable forms of protection are often those rooted in self-determination, territorial control, collective care and the capacity of communities to define and implement their own strategies for defending life, land and the environment.

Combat impunity and ensure access to justice



Right: An Indigenous activist at the Free Land Camp, which brings together thousands of Indigenous people each year in Brasília, Brazil, to demand recognition of their land rights. Cicero Pedrosa Neto / Global Witness

Establish specialised investigative units

States should create specialised prosecutorial and investigative units dedicated to crimes against land and environmental defenders, trained in human rights and with sufficient resources, independence and expertise to investigate both direct perpetrators and intellectual authors.

Investigations should examine potential links between attacks and business activities, land disputes, organised crime, corruption and state actors.

Prioritise accountability for those who order attacks

Governments should focus not only on prosecuting material perpetrators but also those who finance, organise or benefit from attacks.

Investigative authorities should systematically examine corporate actors, political officials, security forces and organised criminal groups that may be connected to violence against defenders.



Strengthen access to remedy

Defenders and affected communities should have access to legal aid, psychosocial support, witness protection and culturally appropriate justice mechanisms.

States should ensure that victims and their families can participate meaningfully in investigations and judicial processes and receive effective reparations.

Integrate defenders into human rights due diligence

Human rights and environmental due diligence processes should explicitly assess risks to defenders and affected communities.

Companies should identify situations where defenders face heightened risks and take proactive measures to prevent harm, including suspension of activities where meaningful consultation has not occurred or where violence and intimidation are present.

Due diligence should be continuous and participatory, involving direct engagement with affected communities and defenders.

Establish safe and accessible grievance mechanisms

Businesses should create grievance mechanisms that are independent, accessible, culturally appropriate and safe for defenders to use.

Mechanisms should include guarantees against retaliation and allow communities to raise concerns collectively.

Companies should publicly report on complaints received and measures taken to address them.

Protect civic space and the right to defend land

Repeal laws used to silence defenders

Governments should review and repeal legislation that is routinely misused to criminalise defenders and peaceful activism, including overly broad provisions related to terrorism, public order, national security, defamation and unlawful assembly.

States should create or empower independent national bodies – such as national human rights institutions or ombudspersons – with a clear mandate to monitor cases of criminalisation, provide defenders with legal assistance and issue public recommendations to relevant authorities.

Adopt robust anti-SLAPP protections

Governments should enact legislation to prevent and dismiss Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) intended to intimidate defenders, journalists and civil society organisations.

Such legislation should include early dismissal procedures, sanctions for abusive litigants, compensation for defendants and protection against cross-border legal harassment.

Counter stigmatisation and toxic narratives

Public authorities and businesses should avoid using rhetoric that portrays defenders as anti-development, criminals, terrorists or threats to national interests.

Governments should publicly recognise the legitimacy and value of defenders' work, ideally through laws in support of defenders, and adopt policies to counter disinformation campaigns, hate speech and online harassment directed at defenders.



A nickel mine in Surigao del Sur, the Philippines. Erwin Mascariñas /Global Witness

Advance rights-based solutions to organised crime, including drug policy reform

States must adopt a specialised approach to addressing organised crime that provides differentiated measures for the protection of Indigenous Peoples, local communities, women and other groups vulnerable to its impacts, as set out by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. Accordingly, working with defenders, states should implement comprehensive prevention and protection measures that guarantee they can carry out their activities safely.¹⁹⁰

This approach includes ensuring Indigenous Peoples and local communities are part of the process of strategic planning for attempts at drug trafficking interdiction and policing organised crime, particularly where these operations impact their territory.

States must move away from drug policies based on prohibition, as these policies empower organised crime and drive encroachment into sensitive ecosystems, Indigenous territories and community lands. Instead, they should support efforts to design health and rights-based alternatives and advocate for this approach at a multilateral level, including through the UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs.

Prevent and respond to digital attacks against defenders

States, businesses, social media and AI platforms should recognise digital attacks against defenders – including harassment, disinformation, hate speech and doxxing – as a serious threat to human rights, civic space and environmental protection.

Governments should investigate and sanction individuals and groups responsible for orchestrating digital attacks, including public officials and private actors, while ensuring that measures to address harmful content do not restrict legitimate freedom of expression. Protection mechanisms should incorporate digital security and rapid response measures to address online threats before they escalate into offline violence.

Technology companies and social media platforms should strengthen policies and practices to prevent the misuse of their services to target defenders. This includes improving transparency around coordinated influence campaigns, removing content that incites violence against defenders, strengthening safeguards against harassment and doxxing, and ensuring that defenders and civil society organisations have access to effective reporting and remedy mechanisms.

Put defenders at the centre of climate and biodiversity policy



Right: Indigenous people participate in the Solemn Session at the Brazilian National Congress in April 2023 in Brasília, Brazil. Thousands of Indigenous people from 200 communities gathered to address issues such as land demarcation, climate change and diversity and inclusion. Activists marched to the Brazilian congress to demand action. Andressa Anholete / Getty Images

Ensure the CSDDD delivers meaningful protection for land and environmental defenders

EU institutions and Member States must ensure that the transposition and implementation of the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD) explicitly strengthens the protection of land and environmental defenders throughout corporate value chains.

Companies covered by the CSDDD must identify, prevent and address risks to defenders – including reprisals, criminalisation and digital attacks – as part of their human rights and environmental due diligence processes.

Meaningful engagement with defenders, Indigenous Peoples and local communities must be conducted throughout the due diligence process, with safeguards to protect them from retaliation.

While the final CSDDD was significantly weakened following sustained corporate pressure, it remains a significant tool for holding companies accountable.

EU Member States should therefore use national transposition processes to maximise protections for rights-holders, strengthen access to remedy, and ensure that defenders can raise concerns without fear of reprisals.



Effective implementation of the CSDDD should recognise that defenders are not merely external stakeholders, but are in fact essential actors in the identification of risks, prevention of abuses and to ensure corporate accountability.

Strengthen the EUDR and UK forest-risk commodity law as a tool for protecting forest communities and land and environmental defenders

The EU Deforestation Regulation (EUDR) and UK forest-risk commodity regulation (Schedule 17 of the Environment Act) are critical opportunities to reduce the role of EU and UK markets in driving deforestation, land grabbing and associated human rights abuses. Although neither has yet entered into force, both have helped to rapidly advance corporate action on deforestation, including traceability and related human rights protections.

Yet delays, loopholes and efforts to dilute these due diligence requirements risk undermining their effectiveness. The EU and its Member States must ensure that the EUDR enters into application for large companies by

the end of 2026. Its implementation and any future revision of the EUDR must strengthen, rather than weaken, protections for Indigenous Peoples, local communities and defenders who are on the front lines of protecting forests.

Similarly, the UK government should ensure its law enters into force as soon as possible.

Companies placing forest-risk commodities on the EU and UK market must be required to assess and address risks to defenders and affected communities throughout their supply chains, including of reprisals, violence, criminalisation and displacement linked to commodity production.

The EU and UK should resist further attempts to weaken their regulations, including through product exemptions or other measures to dilute its scope, and ensure that implementation prioritises meaningful human rights safeguards, transparency and accountability.

Authorities should proceed with a review essential to extending these laws to financial actors.

Protecting forests requires protecting the people who defend them. The EUDR and UK law should be implemented in a way that recognises Indigenous Peoples, local communities and defenders as essential partners in preventing deforestation and exposing environmental abuses.

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Left: Eduardo Mosqueda (left), human rights defender from Mexico, speaks at a defenders event at Cop do Povo (the People's COP House) during COP30 in Belém, Brazil. Fernanda Frazão / Global Witness

Right: Indigenous people stage a peaceful protest outside the main entrance to COP30 in Belém, Brazil. The protest was organised by Conselho Indígena Tapajós e Arapiuns. Fernanda Frazão / Global Witness



Accelerate ratification and implementation of the Escazú Agreement

Governments across Latin America and the Caribbean should accelerate the ratification and effective implementation of the Escazú Agreement, the world's first legally binding treaty to include specific protections for environmental defenders.

State parties should ensure that national implementation roadmaps include dedicated, adequately funded and participatory action plans for the protection of land and environmental defenders, developed in close consultation with civil society organisations.

These plans should include measures to prevent attacks, strengthen collective protection, address criminalisation and impunity, and guarantee access to information, public participation and environmental justice.

Effective implementation of Article 9 and the Action Plan on Human Rights Defenders in Environmental Matters offers a critical opportunity to move beyond reactive protection measures and address the structural conditions that place defenders at risk.

Countries that have not yet ratified the Agreement should do so without delay.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) should draw on the strengths of the Escazú Agreement to adopt an ASEAN Environmental Rights Declaration aligned with international human rights agreements.

Similarly, African states should develop and adopt a legally binding African regional framework for the protection of land and environmental rights defenders grounded in African human rights standards.

Land and environmental defenders as essential actors in climate and biodiversity COPs

Governments, UN agencies and international negotiators should formally recognise land and environmental defenders as essential actors in achieving global climate and biodiversity goals and ensure their meaningful, safe and effective participation in international environmental decision-making processes.

With COP31 scheduled to take place in Türkiye and CBD COP17 in Armenia, the host governments, the UNFCCC and the Convention on Biological Diversity should adopt proactive measures to guarantee the full participation, protection and inclusion of Indigenous and Afro-descendant people, campesino, and other local communities and defenders, including through safe access to accreditation processes, protection from reprisals, and dedicated spaces for dialogue with decision-makers.

Particular attention should be paid to ensuring that defenders from high-risk countries and conflict-affected regions can participate without fear of surveillance, intimidation or retaliation before, during or after these conferences.

International climate and biodiversity processes should move beyond viewing defenders solely as victims of environmental conflict and instead recognise their essential role in delivering conservation, climate mitigation and adaptation outcomes.

Governments and donors should expand support for initiatives such as the Leaders Network for Environmental Activists and Defenders (LEAD) and other mechanisms that strengthen protection, participation and access to resources for defenders.

Climate finance, biodiversity finance and nature-positive investment frameworks should include dedicated funding for defender protection, collective territorial governance and community-led conservation.

Achieving the goals of the Paris Agreement and the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework – in particular Target 22, which commits to “the full, equitable, inclusive, effective, and gender-responsive representation and participation” of defenders in decision-making – will depend not only on stronger environmental commitments, but also on ensuring that the people protecting ecosystems on the ground can exercise their rights safely and free from violence.



Methodology and acknowledgements

Every year, Global Witness documents killings and long-term disappearances of land and environmental defenders globally. We maintain a database so that there is a record of these crimes and to create a comprehensive worldwide picture of the systematic violence defenders face.

The data provides a snapshot of the underlying drivers behind reprisals and indicates how some defenders and their communities face increased risks.

Exposing these trends is the first of many steps to ensure that defenders and their communities are protected and can exercise their rights without fearing for their lives.

In partnership with over 30 local, national and regional organisations in more than 20 countries, we produce an annual report containing these figures, and we have done so since 2012. Focusing on killings and disappearances enables us to confidently verify the threats defenders face.

Over 2,375 killings or long-term disappearances of defenders since 2012 appear in our database – with 124 attacks documented in 2025. Our database includes disappearances of defenders where the individual has been missing for at least six months.

All reports prior to 2025 combined killings and long-term disappearances into one single headline figure. For greater clarity, our latest two reports indicate a distinction between these two types of attack, and we will continue to make this distinction in the future.

Cases from prior years or those already included in our database are not continuously monitored. Where we receive updated information on an attack, we may retrospectively include or remove cases.

Who are land and environmental defenders?

Land and environmental defenders are a specific type of human rights defender – individuals or groups of people who act to promote, protect or strive for the realisation of human rights through peaceful action. Their role as protectors of human rights is recognised by the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, a principle that is also enshrined in other legally binding international instruments.¹⁹¹

We define land and environmental defenders as people who take peaceful action against the unjust, discriminatory, corrupt or damaging exploitation of natural resources or the environment. In every region of the world, communities strive against systematic land dispossession and environmental destruction from extractive industries.

Land and environmental struggles take different forms and are shaped by local contexts. For some, the primary threat to territories is intimately connected to the degeneration of their sovereignty, culture, livelihoods and homes. Others are caught in wider conflicts that exacerbate land, environmental and climate injustices.¹⁹²

We document killings and disappearances where there is a reasonable and suspected link to an individual's activism in defence of the land or the environment.

As well as individuals who are directly involved in activism, we also document tangential attacks against families, community members or others caught up in violent attacks.

Our definition encompasses different types of land and environmental work. Crucially this involves people who work in any capacity to protect rights linked to the exploitation of land or the environment.

To meet our criteria, a case must be supported by the following available information:

- Credible sources of information. This can include online publications, official documentation on a case, or collating information from families, colleagues and civil society organisations linked to the case
- Details about the type of act and method of violence, including the date and location
- Name and biographical information about the victim
- Clear, proximate and documented connections to the protection and defence of environmental and land rights. This includes evaluating the various roles defenders play and the wider contexts and underlying conflicts that affect them

Our dataset is reviewed and updated annually. Before we publish our data, documented cases (from the previous year) go through a rigorous fact-checking process to ensure confidence in the data's veracity. This includes adding, reviewing or disqualifying historical cases if new information comes to light.

We do not proactively review historic cases in our database. If there are changes in the status of a case or if more information about an individual defender comes to light, we revise and amend our database accordingly.

Despite efforts to overcome the data access and verification challenges outlined above, our data is likely incomplete. The figures presented in Global Witness reports are therefore likely an underestimate and should be considered as only a partial picture of the extent of killings and disappearances of land and environmental defenders.

For a deeper dive into our methodology, and to learn more about partner organisations we work with, read: globalwitness.org/documenting-defenders

Who do we work with?

We are alerted to attacks through reliable sources of online reporting, tip-offs and wider documentation efforts from civil society organisations.

Since 2012, we have worked alongside over 30 organisations gathering data on attacks or documenting the wider contexts in which defenders operate. We then cross-reference details with additional sources, including by working closely with organisations globally to verify information.

This includes official UN sources of data collection, as well as civil society initiatives. With differing definitions and methodologies, collating this data into a global dataset on attacks against land and environmental defenders can be challenging. In some cases, existing datasets overlap with ours but often do not fully coincide. For every case documented, we research and evaluate whether it fits our own defender definition.

We would like to honour the crucial, courageous and often invisible work that land and environmental defenders do every day around the world. It is because of their determination that we stand a chance of having a healthy planet for this and future generations.

Finally, we'd like to graciously thank all those who have contributed over the years to the publication of our Annual Defenders Report. We extend a heartfelt thanks to all the defenders, their families and communities who have shared their stories with us, all while continuing to champion the rights of people and the planet.

A special thank you goes to:

- Amazon Watch, Peru
- Asociación Interétnica de Desarrollo de la Selva Peruana, Peru
- Comisión Episcopal de Acción Social, Peru
- Indigenous Peoples' Rights International (IPRI)
- Instituto de Defensa Legal, Peru
- Kakataibo Indigenous Guard, Peru
- Link-AR Borneo, Indonesia
- Satya Bumi, Indonesia
- Shipibo Konibo Indigenous Guard, Peru

Data organisations collect, systematise and analyse data on attacks against human rights defenders, including land and environmental defenders. They publish reports regularly and share data with Global Witness.

- Alliance for Land, Indigenous and Environmental Defenders (ALLIED)
- Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (Forum-Asia), Thailand
- Auriga Nusantara, Indonesia
- Business and Human Rights Resource Centre
- Centro de Documentación e Información Bolivia (CEDIB), Bolivia
- Centro Mexicano de Derecho Ambiental (CEMDA), Mexico
- Comissão Pastoral da Terra (CPT), Brazil
- Front Line Defenders
- HRD Memorial
- Human Rights Defenders Alert (HRDA)
- Kalikasan PNE, the Philippines
- Karapatan, the Philippines
- Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Colombia
- Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mexico
- Programa Somos Defensores, Colombia
- Unidad de Protección a Defensoras y Defensores de Derechos Humanos (UDEFEQUA), Guatemala

Verification organisations collaborate and share specific case or contextual information with Global Witness for our Annual Defenders Report on the killings and long-term disappearances of land and environmental defenders.

- Alianza por los Derechos Humanos de Ecuador, Ecuador
- Alyansa Tigil Mina (ATM), the Philippines
- Centro de Asistencia Legal a Pueblos Indígenas (CALPI), Nicaragua
- Centro de Derechos Humanos y Asesoría a Pueblos Indígenas A.C. (CEDHAPI A.C.), Mexico
- Centro de Estudio para la Democracia (CESPAD), Honduras
- CNT-Coalición Nacional por la Tierra, Argentina
- Conselho Indigenista Missionário (CIMI), Brazil
- Coordenação Nacional de Articulação das Comunidades Negras Rurais Quilombolas (CONAQ), Brazil
- Coordinadora Nacional de Derechos Humanos (CNDDHH), Peru

- Escazú Ahora, Chile
- Green Advocates International, Liberia
- Instituto Mexicano para el Desarrollo Comunitario (IMDEC), Mexico
- Instituto de Abogados para la Protección del Medio Ambiente (INSAPROMA), Dominican Republic
- Kené Instituto de Estudios Forestales y Ambientales, Peru
- LILAK (Purple Action for Indigenous Women's Rights), the Philippines
- Mano River Union Civil Society Natural Resource Rights and Governance Platform (MRU-CSO Platform), Liberia
- Mbororo Social and Cultural Development Association (MBOSCUA), Cameroon
- The Oakland Institute
- OPIA – Observatorio de Pueblos Indígenas y Afrodescendientes, Nicaragua
- Peace Brigades International, Guatemala
- Programa Venezolano de Educación Acción en Derechos Humanos (Provea), Venezuela
- ProPurús, Peru
- Red Nacional de Organismos Civiles de Derechos Humanos “Todos los Derechos para Todas, Todos y Todes” (Red TDT), Mexico
- Swedish Fellowship of Reconciliation (SweFOR), Mexico
- Upemba National Park, DRC
- Virunga National Park, DRC
- Wahana Lingkungan Hidup Indonesia (WALHI), South Kalimantan, Indonesia

The Land and Environmental Defenders team also recognises the momentous effort of our valued colleagues. Without the hard work of Global Witness's staff, we would not be able to support those brave defenders on the front line of the struggle for human rights and our planet's future.

Thank you.

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