



Killings of Environmental Defenders in Latin America

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Abstract: Latin America and the Caribbean is the most insecure region for land and environmental defenders. States must be prepared to protect human rights defenders and implement public policies tackling the root causes of violence, including rethinking the extractive matrix.

Violence against land and environmental defenders in Latin America and the Caribbean is endemic. As a response, 24 States from the region gathered in Costa Rica in 2018 to adopt the Escazú Agreement. So far, 12 countries have ratified the Agreement and it entered into force on 22 April 2021, World Earth Day. Escazú is based on the implementation of Principle 10 of the [Rio Declaration](#); it promotes the administration of justice in environmental issues; and it is the first treaty in the world to create mechanisms for the protection and security of environmental defenders.

The Escazú Agreement was adopted to deal with a growing worldwide problem: [Global Witness](#) has pointed out that in recent years, along with the climate crisis, threats against and assassinations of land and environmental defenders have accelerated worldwide. In 2018, 164 activists were murdered; in 2019 the number reached 212—a 30 per cent increase; and in 2020, at the height of the pandemic, the death toll rose to 227.

However, it is in Latin America where the danger faced by environmental activists is most acute, mainly due to conflicts derived from neo-extractivism. The particularity of [this development model](#) is that it is based on the overexploitation of natural resources, largely non-renewable, and on the expansion of the

exploitation frontiers into territories previously considered as unproductive from the point of view of capital. The numbers speak for themselves: three out of every four murders are perpetrated in the Americas and seven of the 10 countries with the [highest number of recorded attacks](#) are in Latin America. The [2021 Report](#) by the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Mary Lawlor, highlights these alarming figures. As from the beginning of her mandate in 2020, Lawlor has written to the authorities of more than 30 countries around the world, nine of them in Latin America, expressing concern for these human rights violations. This concern is also evident in the work of previous Rapporteurs. Lawlor began her term in office with a trip to Peru while her predecessor Michael Frost made [another three visits](#) to Latin America: Mexico, Honduras and Colombia.

Causes, actors, contexts

The Latin American and Caribbean region is as vast as it is complex, and it has marked hotspots of conflict. The triangle of Colombia, Brazil and Peru marks an area of intense conflict: in 2020 alone, 65 environmental defenders were murdered in Colombia, 20 in Brazil and 6 in Peru. Colombia recorded the highest number of murders in 2020 while almost three-quarters of the attacks recorded in Brazil and Peru occurred in the Amazon region. In Central America, there were also significant numbers of killings in Mexico (30), Honduras (17), Guatemala (13) and Nicaragua (12).

One of the common themes in these countries is impunity: [the Tierra de Resistentes project](#) highlights that only 20 per cent of the cases perpetrated during the last decade in Latin America have been investigated. Another common theme is the involvement of *sicarios*, criminal gangs and private security guards as perpetrators as well as—in some cases—the direct or indirect involvement of members of the security forces.

More than a third of the attacks were related to natural resource exploitation: logging, mining and large-scale agribusiness. Since 2015, agribusiness and mining have been linked to [more than 30 per cent of all murders](#). [Various experts](#) have pointed out that this violence is perpetrated with the complicity of public officials and companies. The assassination of environmental defenders has gone hand in hand with the expansion of the extractive frontier. In a continent where concentration of land ownership and the absence of redistribution policies have historically prevailed, the dispute over territory and access to natural resources is one of the critical knots that ostensibly challenges the Rule of Law and damages democracies.

It must be observed that the neo-extractive matrix that predominates in the continent has a particular impact on the territories ancestrally inhabited by indigenous peoples. According to the latest report from [Frontline Defenders](#), 26 per cent of human rights defenders assassinated worldwide, were working on indigenous peoples' claims. In Latin America, that number [rises to 40 per cent](#).

The organisation Survival [has also documented](#) these attacks: in 2020 they reported 56 murders and 11 disappearances of indigenous land and human rights defenders in the region.

The [Global Witness](#) report indicates that one in every 10 murder victims are women, a percentage similar to that of previous years, though three clarifications are in order. First, women are affected by different types of violence: the one perpetrated to silence their work as human rights defenders to protect their territories; and gender-based violence rooted in inequality, including sexual assault, defamation campaigns, questioning of their morals and persecution of their children. Secondly, when their partners are attacked or murdered, women face challenges that increase their vulnerability. Thirdly, indigenous women face particular threats. For example, Bertha Cáceres—founder and leader of the Council of Popular and Indigenous Organisations of Honduras (COPINH) involving 200 indigenous communities in Honduras—representing the most resistant environmental movement in her country. In 2015 she received the Goldman Prize for her work. Berta Cáceres was assassinated in Honduras in 2016 for defending the rights of her community against the construction of a hydroelectric dam. The same day Berta Cáceres was killed, Global Witness denounced Honduras as the most dangerous country in the world for environmental activists.

What can be done

The UN Programme for the Environment and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights have stated in the [document 'Human Rights, the Environment and Covid-19'](#) that 'Environmental human rights advocates are indispensable allies in efforts to protect the environment and, by extension, human health during the COVID-19 crisis'. Combatting the upward spiral of violence against environmental defenders in the region requires comprehensive measures from all sectors involved. As the [report by Rapporteur Lawlor](#) indicates, States must grant 'protection of human rights defenders from a public policy perspective to tackle root causes and exclusion'. States should guarantee land tenure and access to land for peasant communities and indigenous peoples. They should also grant legal security over land, [rethinking the extractive matrix as the only model](#), and set clear limits to police and military action in environmental conflicts. On the other hand, companies should recognise, as [Lawlor recommends](#), 'that land and environmental defenders and those defending the rights of indigenous peoples are at specific risk' and ensure that their own security mechanisms and measures do not cause or heighten dangers. In the face of mounting violence, lack of action on the part of the various actors involved can only increase hostility and impunity while weakening justice and democracy.