




PRESS RELEASE | SEPT. 13, 2021

Global Witness reports 227 land and environmental activists murdered in a single year, the worst figure on record


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 [LAND AND ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENDERS \(/EN/CAMPAIGNS/ENVIRONMENTAL-ACTIVISTS/\)](/en/campaigns/environmental-activists/)

As the climate crisis intensifies, violence against defenders of the earth is escalating.

Monday 13 September, 2021 – A report (</en/campaigns/environmental-activists/last-line-defence/>) released today reveals that 227 land and environmental activists were murdered in 2020 for defending their land and the planet. That constitutes the highest number ever recorded for a second consecutive year.

As the climate crisis deepens, forest fires rampage across swathes of the planet, drought destroys farmland, and floods leave thousands dead, the situation for frontline communities and defenders of the earth is getting worse.

On average, our data shows that four defenders have been killed every week since the signing of the Paris Climate agreement – but this shocking figure is almost certainly an underestimate, with growing restrictions on journalism and other civic freedoms meaning cases are likely being unreported.

The figures show the human cost of the destruction wrought by exploitative industries and



corporations. At least 30% of recorded attacks were reportedly linked to resource exploitation – across logging, hydroelectric dams and other infrastructure, mining, and large-scale agribusiness. Logging was the industry linked to the most murders with 23 cases ([4](#)) with attacks in Brazil, Nicaragua, Peru and the Philippines.



The killings include the murder of Óscar Eyraud Adams, Kumiai water defender murdered in Mexico after opposing the extractive industries contributing to water scarcity in Baja California. Óscar was one of many Indigenous people killed in 2020, asserting their right to self-determination and protecting ancestral lands from those looking to exploit their natural resources.

Chris Madden, Senior Campaigner with Global Witness said:

“One day, we hope to report an end to the violence against those defending our planet and their land, but until governments get serious about protecting defenders, and companies start putting people and planet before profit, both climate breakdown and the killings will continue. This dataset is another stark reminder that fighting the climate crisis carries an unbearably heavy burden for some, who risk their lives to save the forests, rivers and biospheres that are essential to counteract unsustainable global warming. This must stop”.

Activists still under threat include communities in Guapinol in Honduras, where dozens of land and water defenders have been arrested in recent years for peacefully protesting an iron oxide mining concession which was granted by the central government in a protected area. Many community members remain incarcerated.

Total number of documented killings per country				Highest countries per capita	
Colombia	65	South Africa	2	Nicaragua	12 / 6.6m
Mexico	30	Thailand	2	Honduras	17 / 9.7 m
Philippines	29	Saudi Arabia	1	Colombia	65 / 50.3m
Brazil	20	Sri Lanka	1	Guatemala	13 / 16.6m
Honduras	17	Nepal	1	Philippines	29 /108.1m
D.R. Congo	15	Canada	1		
Guatemala	13	Costa Rica	1		
Nicaragua	12	Uganda	1		
Peru	6	Iraq	1		
India	4	Argentina	1		
Indonesia	3	Kiribati	1		

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Key findings

- Colombia was once again the country with the highest recorded attacks, with 65



defenders killed in 2020. A third of these attacks targeted indigenous and afro-descendant people, and almost half were against small-scale farmers.

- In 2020 the disproportionate number of attacks against **indigenous communities** ([link](#)) continued – with **over a third of all fatal attacks** targeting indigenous people. Attacks against indigenous defenders were reported in Mexico, Central and South America, the Philippines, Saudi Arabia and Indonesia.
- **Nicaragua** saw 12 killings – rising from 5 in 2019, making it the most dangerous country **per capita** for land and environmental defenders in 2020.
- Where reports indicate that defenders were attacked for **protecting specific ecosystems**, the majority – 70% - were working to defend the world's forests from deforestation and industrial development, efforts vital to curbing the climate crisis. Others died for their work protecting rivers, coastal areas and the oceans.
- Almost 3 in 4 of the attacks took place in the **Americas** – with 7 out of the 10 highest countries located in Latin America. In **Brazil** and **Peru**, nearly three quarters of recorded attacks took place in the Amazon region of each country.
- We documented **18 killings across Africa** in 2020, compared to 7 in 2019. Most of these took place in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), with two in South Africa and one in Uganda. In the DRC, 12 park rangers and a driver were killed in an attack by militia groups in the Virunga National Park. Verifying cases from across the continent continues to be difficult and it is possible cases are widely unreported.

Report recommendations

The **United Nations** through its member states should:

- Formally recognise the **human right to a safe, healthy, and sustainable environment**.
- Ensure that commitments and actions made at COP26 to implement the Paris Agreement **integrate human rights protections**.


Governments have the primary duty to guarantee that defenders' human rights are protected and that they can carry out their activism safely, and should:

- Ensure national policies **protect land and environmental defenders** – and scrap any legislation used to criminalise them
- Require companies and financial institutions to **carry out mandatory due diligence**, that provides accountability for violence and other harm to land and environmental defenders throughout their global operations and supply chains.
- Ensure **access to justice** by investigating and pursuing prosecutions of all relevant actors, including implicated corporate actors, for violence committed against land and environmental defenders.

The **European Commission** is currently preparing two important pieces of legislation: an initiative on Sustainable Corporate Governance, and a Regulation on forest-risk commodities. The EU must ensure that:

- The Sustainable Corporate Governance initiative requires all companies doing business in the EU to undertake steps to **prevent, identify, address and account for human rights and environmental harms along their value chains** as part of their due diligence and includes a **strong enforcement mechanism with robust liability regimes and penalties** to hold companies accountable;
- The proposed due diligence Regulation on Forest-risk Commodities explicitly requires



companies and financiers doing business in the EU to **only source from or finance operations that have obtained the Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC)** of **global witness** 
Indigenous peoples and local communities. [\(L\)](#)

Businesses need to do everything in their power to ensure that they are not causing, contributing to, or benefiting from these attacks, whatever the costs. In particular they must:

- Publish and implement robust **due diligence systems to identify, assess, prevent and mitigate human rights and environmental harms** throughout their supply chains and operations.
- Adopt and implement a **zero-tolerance stance on reprisals and attacks** on land and environmental defenders
- Provide for and facilitate **effective remedy processes** when adverse human rights and environmental impacts occur.

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Contacts

General/out of hours media enquiries

media@globalwitness.org (<mailto:media@globalwitness.org>)
[+44 \(0\) 7912517127](tel:+44207912517127) ([tel:+44 \(0\) 7912517127](tel:+44207912517127))

Louis Wilson

Senior Communications Advisor

lwilson@globalwitness.org (<mailto:lwilson@globalwitness.org>)

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