

STANDING FIRM

THE LAND AND ENVIRONMENTAL
DEFENDERS ON THE FRONTLINES
OF THE CLIMATE CRISIS

SEPTEMBER—2023



global witness



This report, and our campaign, is dedicated to all those individuals, communities and organisations that are bravely taking a stand to defend human rights, their land, and our environment. Last year, 177 people were murdered for doing this work.

**WE REMEMBER THEIR NAMES
AND CELEBRATE THEIR ACTIVISM.**

We also 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.

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Cover: Kayapó indigenous community in Aldeia Baú, Pará, Brazil, 2023.

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DEFENDERS OF THE AMAZON: CONNECTED BY DETERMINATION

As guardians of the forest, land and environmental defenders are on the frontline of the Amazon's devastating exploitation.



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Dr Yesid Blanco is a Colombian paediatrician, now living in exile in the US after receiving death threats for speaking up against a toxic landfill site near his city. This is his story.

OUR INSPIRATION

NAMES OF THOSE MURDERED IN 2022

BRAZIL

Clebson Barra Portilho
José Lopes Rodrigues
Jonatas de Oliveira dos Santos
Ana Yanomami Xexana
Edvaldo Pereira Rocha
Moacir de Jesus dos Santos Correia
Vitorino Sanches
Arcelino Soares de Souza
Rafael Bini
Dom Phillips
Bruno Pereira
Cleomar Xirixana
José Gomes
Márcia Nunes Lisboa
Joane Nunes Lisboa
Elias Penha Gibson
Gedeão Dias de Oliveira
Eliseu Santos Cardoso
Alex Recarte Vasques Lopes
Normandes Mariano Barbosa
Jheilson Batista Pecla Cordeiro
Maria Aristides da Silva
Sebastião David Pereira
Ilma Rodrigues dos Santos
Edson Lima Rodrigues
Josias Vicente Mafra
Wesley Flávio da Silva
Márcio Moreira
Raimundo Nonato Silva Oliveira
Estela Verá Guarani
Jeferson Nunes de Souza
Vitor Fernandes
Gustavo Silva da Conceição
Janildo Oliveira Guajajara

COLOMBIA

Gustavo Antonio Torres
José Mauricio Sepúlveda Lozano
Edgar Quintero
Mario Óscar Solarte
Ferneý Morales
Rigo Alape
Libardo Castillo Ortiz
Teófilo Acuña
Jorge Alberto Tafur
Jorge Santofimio Yepes
Dilson Arbey Borja Roldán
José Pascual Quevedo Velásquez
Pablo Emilio Baquero Cárdenas
John Jairo Esquivel
Yesid Caña
Hery Olivero Vallesilla
Pedro Nel Sánchez Sanabria
Edison Gómez Ortiz
Jesuita Moreno Mosquera
Libardo Perdomo Molano
Julio César Buitrago Hernández
Jorge Eliecer Mejía
José Edilson Vargas Monroy
Mariton Jusayu Ipuana
William Pedraza
Diocelino García Bisbicús
Edinson Murillo Ararat
Fredy Mena Obregón
Adelmo Balanta
Juan Alberto Guejia Peteche
Arcelia Fernández
Filadelfo Anzola Padilla
Luis Antonio Tombé Menza
Guillermo Chicame Ipia

Breiner David Cucuñame López

José Albeiro Camayo Güetio
Luis Chamapuro Quiro
Julio Victoria Cárdenas
Sarcelino Lana
María José Arciniegas Salinas
Jancy Muñoz Avirama
Wilson Nixon Melón Robles
Juan Orlando Moreno
John Faver Nasatacuas
Carlos José García
Jonás Carabalí
Faustino Carabalí
Francisco Sarco Pipicay
Carlitos Uragama Cano
Juvencio Cerquera Manquillo
Luz Marina Arteaga
Julio César Bravo
José Miller Correa Vásquez
Larry Reinoso Sánchez
Yermi Chocué Camayo
José Luis Quiñones
Julián David Ochoa
Javier Usechi
Luis Eduardo Montoya Jaramillo
Neiber Pertuz

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

Mahomet Meddy Kengu
Benoit Hakizimana Ndamira

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

Orlando Jorge Mera

ECUADOR

Alba Bermeo Puin

GUATEMALA

Pablo Ramos
Tereso Cárcamo Flores

HONDURAS

Pablo Isabel Hernández Rivera
Melvin Geovany Mejía Rodríguez
Justo Benítez Sánchez
Alonso Salgado Cabalero
Francisco Ruiz
Marco Tulio Paredes Molina
Marlon Feliciano Montes Núñez
Marta Elizabeth Colindres
Marco Antonio Pineda
José Santos Godínez Ruiz
Wilmer Alexis Domínguez Madrid
Mauricio Ezquivel
Santiago Chacón
Donaldo Rosales Meza

INDIA

Mr Jeganathan
Narendra Balia

INDONESIA

Danil
Erni Pinem
Erfaldi Erwin Lahadado

MADAGASCAR

Henri Rakotoarisoa

MALAWI

Bendius Amasi

MEXICO

Antonio de la Cruz
Cynthia de la Cruz
Noé Godínez Arredondo
Francisco Vázquez Domínguez
Filogonio Martínez Merino
Patricia Rivera Reyes
Iván Merino Flores
Héctor Soto Rodríguez
Luis Donato Ortiz
Humberto Valdovinos Fuentes
Alberto Morales Sebastián
Crispín Reyes Pablo
Nicolás Pérez Xoyateco
Teófilo Barrera Herrera
Marcelo Carrera Reyes
Omar Herrera Raymundo
Marcos Campos Ahuejote
Lorena Chantzin Paxacuasingo
Adán Linares Silverio
Guillermo Hilario Morales
Moisés Cuapipistenco
Javier Campos Morales
Joaquín César Mora Salazar
Pedro Palma
José Trinidad Baldenegro
Pedro Pascual Cruz
Rosendo González Torres
Estanislao González Carrillo
Verónica Patricia Guerrero Vinueza
Jesús Bañuelos Acevedo
Jesús Manuel García Martínez

NICARAGUA

Tránsito Gutiérrez Melgara
Terlin Gutiérrez Medina
Salomón López Smith

PARAGUAY

Edgar Emiliano Centurión Almirón
Artemio Cabral López
Francisco Villalba Cubas

PERU

Genaro Comisario Bitap
Ulises Rumiche Quintimari
Juan Julio Fernández Hanco

PHILIPPINES

Richard Mendoza
Chad Errol Booc
Gelejurain Ngujo II
Elgyn Balonga
Robert Aragon
Tirso Añar
Joseph Jimenez
Ericson Acosta
Silvestre Fortades Jr
Rose Marie Galias
Eugene Lastrella

SOUTH AFRICA

Anton Mzimba

VENEZUELA

Wilmer Rodríguez Pérez
Divier Rodríguez Pérez
Jesús Dadure González
Virgilio Trujillo Arana



TOP FINDINGS 2022

INGS

For the past 11 years, Global Witness has documented and denounced waves of threats, violence and killings of land and environmental defenders across the world, and 2022 marks the beginning of our second decade documenting lethal attacks. The world has changed dramatically since we started documenting these in 2012. But one thing that has not changed is the relentlessness of the killings.

Last year, at least 177 defenders lost their lives for protecting our planet, bringing the total number of killings to 1,910 since 2012. At least 1,390 of these killings took place between the adoption of the Paris Agreement on 12 December 2015 and 31 December 2022.

On average, a defender was killed every other day in 2022, just as was the case in 2021. Although the overall figure is slightly lower last year than in 2021, when we recorded 200 killings, this does not mean that the situation has significantly improved. The worsening climate crisis and the ever-increasing demand for agricultural commodities, fuel and minerals will only intensify the pressure on the environment – and those who risk their lives to defend it. Increasingly, non-lethal strategies such as criminalisation, harassment and digital attacks are also being used to silence defenders.

The situation in **Latin America** remains particularly concerning. In 2022, the region accounted for 88% of killings – an ever-growing majority of the world's cases. A total of 11 of the 18 countries where we documented cases in 2022 were in Latin America.

Top Findings 2022 continues →

COLOMBIA
Colombia tops the global ranking with 60 murders in yet another dire year for the country. This is almost double the number of killings compared to 2021, when 33 defenders lost their lives. Once again, Indigenous peoples, Afro-descendant communities, small-scale farmers and environmental activists have been viciously targeted. Yet there is hope; when Gustavo Petro, the first leftist president in contemporary Colombia, took office in August 2022, he promised social transformation and enhanced protection for defenders. No government had committed to that before.¹

BRAZIL
In Brazil, 34 defenders lost their lives, compared to 26 in 2021. Defenders in Brazil faced relentless hostility from former president Jair Bolsonaro's government, whose policies have opened up the Amazon to exploitation and destruction, have undermined environmental institutions² and have fuelled illegal invasions of indigenous lands.^{3,4,5}

MEXICO
Mexico, the country with the highest number of killings in 2021, saw a significant drop from 54 murders in 2021 to 31 in 2022. At least 16 of those killed were Indigenous peoples, and four were lawyers. The overall situation in Mexico remained dire for land and environmental defenders, and non-lethal attacks – including intimidation, threats, forced displacement, harassment and criminalisation – continued to seriously hamper their work.⁶

HONDURAS
With 14 murders in 2022, Honduras has the world's highest per-capita killings. The country's first-ever female president, Xiomara Castro, has committed to protecting defenders.^{7,8} Yet early trends from 2023 point to ongoing rifle violence, with reports of killings and non-lethal attacks across the country.

PHILIPPINES
Overall, Global Witness documented 16 killings in Asia, 11 of which took place in the Philippines, which has topped the ranking in the region every year without exception. Ferdinand Marcos Jr., who took office in June 2022 as the new president, has so far failed to address human rights violations. Instead, he has focused his agenda on business and economic interests, raising continued concerns amongst civil society about an increase in mining and other resource exploitation at the cost of human rights and the safety of defenders.⁹

It remains difficult to identify the exact drivers behind the killings, or to connect killings to specific sectors. We could, however, link agribusiness to 10 killings in 2022 – more than in any other sector – half of them in Mexico. Mining was linked with eight cases, followed by logging with four. All three industries are also major contributors to global carbon emissions.¹⁰

Female defenders were subjected to 11% of the total number of lethal attacks. A relatively small percentage at first sight, this figure hides a much more complex reality. Many forms of gender-specific violence – ranging from sexual violence to rejection by their families and communities – are inflicted on women. Women defenders therefore face attacks on two fronts – as well as being targeted for their activism, they also face gender-specific rights violations.¹¹

More than a third (36%) of the defenders murdered were Indigenous peoples and 7% were Afro-descendants. More than a fifth (22%) were small-scale farmers. All relied on their lands and natural resources for a living.

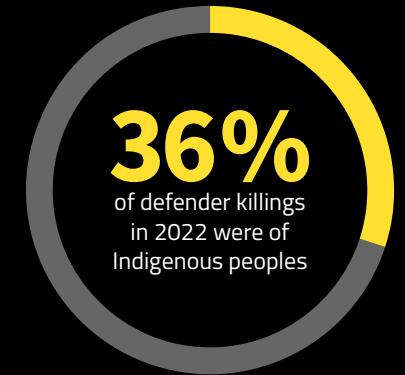
Some of those killed were not even the target of attacks, but happened to be with the murdered defender at the time of the killing. This illustrates the wider impact of attacks on families and communities.

Those murdered in 2022 also include state officials, demonstrators, park rangers, lawyers and journalists. All of them shared a commitment to defend their rights and keep the planet healthy. All of them paid for their courage and commitment with their lives.

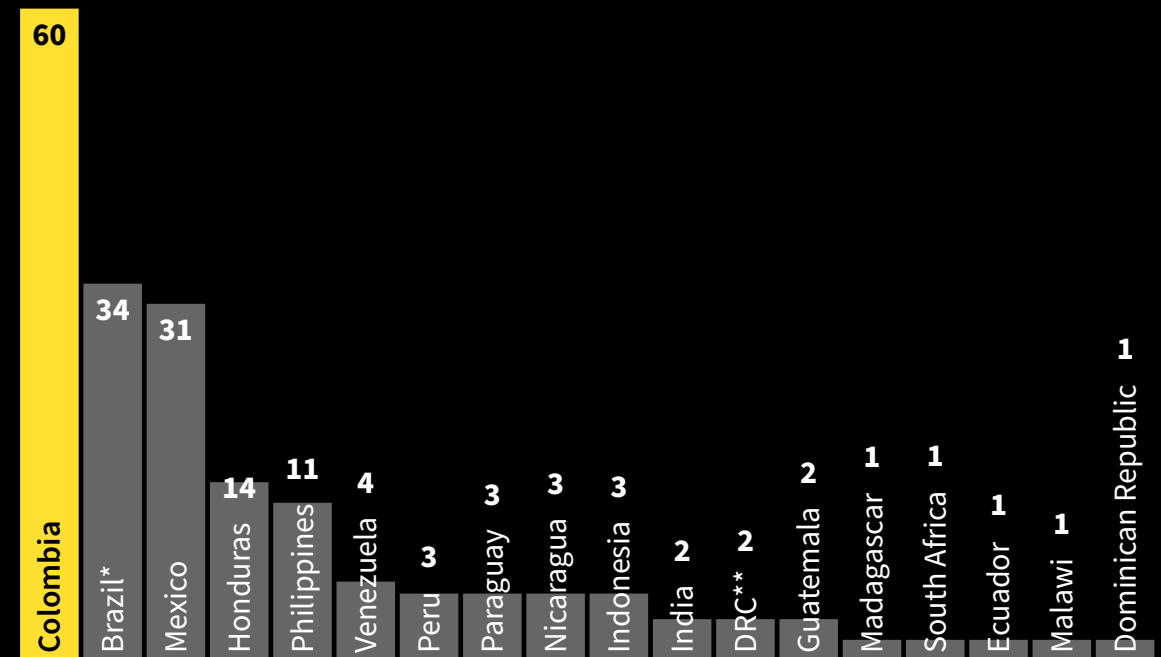
But that's not all. At least five children were murdered last year – three in Brazil, one in Colombia and one in Mexico. Three of them were Indigenous, including nine-year-old Jonatas Oliveira, the son of a rural leader in Brazil.

We are also witnessing an emerging pattern of killings in the Amazon, with 39 defenders killed in the rainforest last year. 11 of those killed were from Indigenous communities. These figures are particularly tragic in a context of the worsening climate emergency; protecting the Amazon is one of the most urgent actions we must take to avert the worst consequences of our planetary crisis.¹² And while the role of Indigenous peoples in protecting the world's forests – regardless of the country – is increasingly being recognised, they still lack adequate protection and are excluded from decision making.

Across the many borders of the vast Amazon basin, defenders of this precious ecosystem are united by shared stories of violence, fear and defiance.



DEATHS BY COUNTRY 2022



DEFENDER KILLINGS 2022



DRIVERS OF DEATHS 2022



*Global Witness' main source of data from Brazil is the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT) which uses a different methodology for documenting killings. The CPT monitors rural conflicts affecting small-scale farmers, landless communities, Indigenous peoples and traditional communities, as well as rural trade unionists, many of which overlap with Global Witness' definition of land and environmental defenders.

** Democratic Republic of Congo.



LATIN AMERICA

DEFENDERS OF THE AMAZON

CONNECTED
BY
DETERMINATION

THE ONSLAUGHT OF ILLEGAL
MINING IN INDIGENOUS
LANDS IN BRAZIL

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THE RECKLESS SEARCH FOR GOLD,
COLTAN, DIAMONDS AND OTHER
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DEFENDERS OF THE AMAZON:

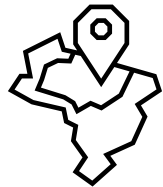
Connected by Determination

THE AMAZON RAINFOREST

The largest forest in the world, the Amazon rainforest encompasses approximately 6.9 million km² – roughly the size of the 48 contiguous states of the USA.¹³ It spans eight countries in South America, including Brazil, Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela, Guyana and Suriname, as well as the overseas territory of French Guiana.

The Amazon is one of the Earth's most precious ecosystems and has a critical role to play in counteracting the global climate emergency.¹⁴ The habitats of millions of species of wildlife and thousands of plant species depend on keeping the forest standing.¹⁵ It is also home to more than 40 million people, including more than 500 Indigenous and ethnic groups.¹⁶ But the Amazon – and its inhabitants – are under threat. Deforestation driven by cattle ranching, gold mining, logging and other extractive activities is rife,¹⁷ while oil spills contaminate rivers and impact local ecosystems.¹⁸

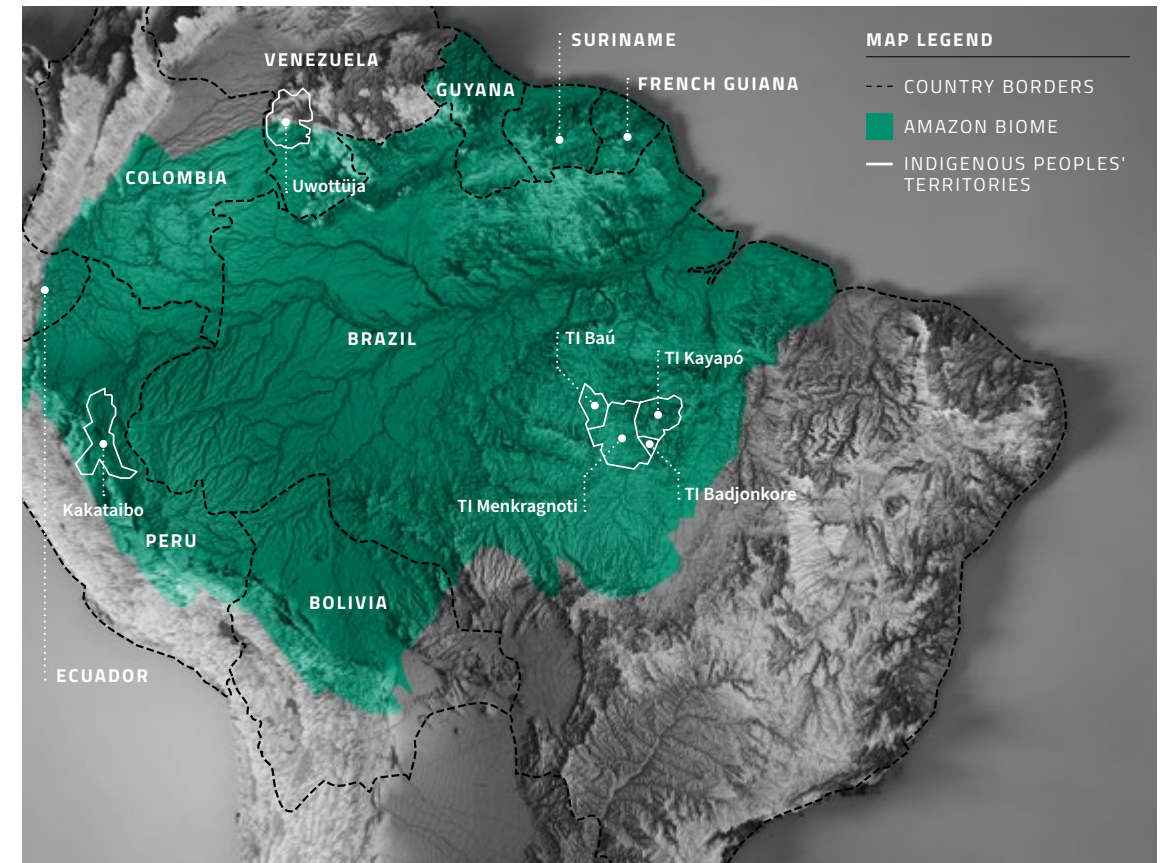
More than **1 IN 5** of the 177 killings recorded globally in 2022 happened in the Amazon.



At least **40M** people live in the Amazon rainforest.



Left: Logging, mining, and other destructive activities threaten the rainforest and Indigenous Kayapó territory in Pará, Brazil.



PAYING WITH THEIR LIVES

As guardians of the forest, land and environmental defenders are on the frontline of the Amazon's devastating exploitation. They face dangerous companies acting with impunity, ruthless state security forces and contracted killers.

As they stand up against powerful agribusiness, mining and logging interests, defenders are systematically intimidated, criminalised, attacked and murdered. Every year, defenders of this priceless biome pay with their lives for protecting their homes, livelihoods and the health of our planet.

SHARED STORIES OF FEAR, VIOLENCE AND DEFIANCE

In 2022, more than one in five of the 177 killings recorded globally happened in the Amazon.

Last year, the murders of Brazilian Indigenous expert Bruno Pereira and British Guardian journalist Dom Phillips in the Brazilian Amazon sent shockwaves around the world. They had been reporting on and defending Indigenous communities against land and environmental rights abuses in Brazil.¹⁹

Tragically though, stories of violence, torture and threats are a shared reality for Amazonian communities across the region.²⁰

Approximately 1,000km away from where Bruno and Dom were killed,²¹ in another area of the Amazon, the activities of illegal gold miners have almost entirely wiped out the Yanomami Indigenous community.²² It is these Indigenous communities across the Amazon who are disproportionately targeted, threatened and killed.

The Kayapó Indigenous peoples in Brazil, the Uwottüja Indigenous peoples in Venezuela and the Kakataibo and Shipibo-Konibo Indigenous peoples in Peru are from distant corners of the Amazon, and yet they are connected by shared experiences of abuse and destruction inflicted by those who see the rainforest as merely an opportunity to line their pockets. They are also connected by their determination, against all odds, to protect their territories and the Amazon rainforest.

On the following pages, we explore a set of stories from three different countries that highlight the challenges and aspirations of communities on the frontline of safeguarding the Amazon and helping the world avoid crossing the climate tipping point.



“WE HAVE TO FIGHT BY OURSELVES”²³


THE ONSLAUGHT OF ILLEGAL MINING IN INDIGENOUS LANDS IN BRAZIL

 **INDIGENOUS PEOPLES**
Kayapó

 **COUNTRY**
Brazil 

 **TERRITORIES**



 **Left:** Cacique Bepdjo, a leader from the Indigenous Kayapó community, in Baú Indigenous territory, 2023.

In the south of the Amazon state of Pará, Brazil, along tributaries of the Xingu River, live the Kayapó Indigenous²⁴ – including the Pu’rô, the Mebengokre Kayapó and the Mebêngókre Kayapó Mekrãgnotí.²⁵ They inhabit four Indigenous territories: TI Kayapó, TI Baú, TI Badjonkore and TI Menkragnoti.²⁶

Pará is considered to be one of the most violent states for land defenders in Brazil²⁷ – itself one of the deadliest countries in the world for environmental activists.²⁸

These communities have been dealing with the fall out of destructive mining since the late 1970s.²⁹ Illegal mining on Indigenous lands in the Brazilian Amazon alone has increased by 1,271% over the last 35 years. From 1985 to 2020, illegally mined areas increased from 7.45km² to 102.16km².³⁰ Three Indigenous lands – the Yanomami, Munduruku and Kayapó territories – were the scene of 95% of this activity in 2020.³¹

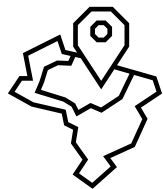
Since 2019, however, the former Brazilian federal government began indirectly incentivising and promoting illegal mining activities in the Amazon, including within Indigenous territories.^{32,33} Environmental inspection bodies were weakened, opening the floodgates for the exploitation and destruction of the Amazon, and former Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro sent a bill to Congress legalising mining activities inside Indigenous territories.³⁴

“WE ARE USED TO THE THREATS, BUT THE FEAR NEVER GOES AWAY”³⁵

TARNISHED GOLD FROM THE BRAZILIAN AMAZON SOLD TO SILICON VALLEY AND BEYOND

Gold is the main target of illegal miners in the Kayapó's territories³⁶ – and with the rise of gold mining has come rising pollution, deforestation and violent crime against Indigenous defenders.³⁷ Illegal mining proved so profitable that improvised airports were built in mining areas, and miners were flown in on small airplanes.³⁸ International companies from Switzerland,³⁹ Italy,⁴⁰ South Korea,⁴¹ the US⁴² and the UK⁴³ have been exposed for extracting or acquiring the area's gold, or for selling machinery to the miners.

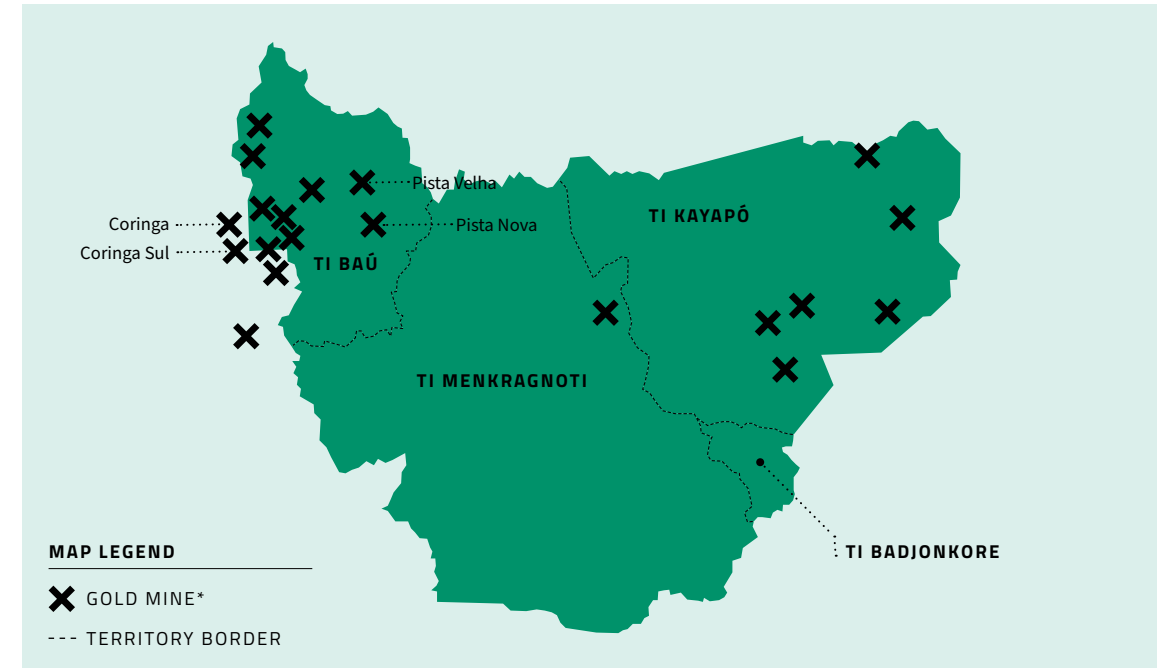
At least **296** defenders were killed in the Amazon between 2014 and 2022.



Top: Illegal gold mining in Kayapó Indigenous land, 2023.
Bottom: Cacique Bepdjo (left) and Pajé Atoget (right) from the Kayapó community, in Baú territory, 2023.

KNOWN GOLD MINING LOCATIONS* IN TI KAYAPÓ, TI BAÚ, TI BADJONKORE AND TI MENKRAGNOTI:

*Gold mine locations are marked as accurately as possible. There are many more gold mines which are unaccounted for.



According to Doto Takak Ire, president⁴⁴ of the KABU Institute⁴⁵ – a Kayapó Indigenous peoples' association – illegal gold mining is creating “all sorts of problems”⁴⁶ including:

- ⇒ contaminating the land and its streams with mercury⁴⁷
- ⇒ increasing people's risk of cancer and other serious diseases⁴⁸
- ⇒ escalating violence and threats against Indigenous communities, with illegal miners inciting violence and infighting among the communities⁴⁹
- ⇒ illegal miners luring some Indigenous community members into supporting the mines with the false promise of large profits as the forest that sustains them is destroyed.⁵⁰

Tired of being ignored by local authorities, including the public prosecution and the federal police, the Kayapó peoples decided to act alone.⁵¹ In 2021, Indigenous leaders and community members from the Baú Indigenous territory came together to try to reoccupy the illegal mining area of 'Pista Velha' located on their lands. The Indigenous group made the long journey to the area and demanded that the illegal miners leave immediately – which they ultimately agreed to do. They then built a temporary monitoring camp and watched the area for weeks after the reoccupation.⁵²

A year later, however, illegal miners returned and resumed exploration.⁵³ In May 2022, the Kayapó from Baú Indigenous territory, led by Cacique Bepdjo Mekrãgnotire, a renowned Indigenous leader who opposed illegal mining, travelled for several days on foot to shut down the operation.⁵⁴ Only after the Kayapós reoccupied the land and built a monitoring camp once again,⁵⁵ did the federal police intervene to help prevent the illegal mining.⁵⁶

Soon afterwards, another illegal mining field called 'Pista Nova' on Kayapó land was shut down by government authorities.⁵⁷

The now-defunct mining areas of 'Pista Velha' and 'Pista Nova' will need constant monitoring because of the potential riches they still promise.⁵⁸ Yet several other mining areas on Indigenous territory are still active, and continue to threaten the rights and livelihoods of Indigenous communities across the Amazon.

Arson intended to clear land and destroy Indigenous villages, altercations over land use, physical attacks and death threats have all been reported to Global Witness by Kayapó Indigenous community members and the KABU Institute.⁵⁹

Story continues →

In September 2022, a few weeks after the illegal mining fields were shut down, the KABU Institute received an anonymous letter containing death threats to its members.⁶⁰ It also received anonymous WhatsApp audio messages demanding the Institute stop its actions and protests against gold mining.⁶¹

“We are used to the threats, but the fear never goes away...,” says a representative of the KABU Institute. **“Living near illegal mining areas is living with fear... We do it for the entire planet... We will keep the forest standing.”**⁶²

Cacique Bepdjo Mekrãgnotire has faced frequent and serious threats from illegal miners. He told Global Witness about his people’s willingness to continue protecting the forest.

“Why do we want to protect the territory and risk our lives for it? We are not the only ones who need the forest to survive, we have to fight alone, but we do it for the entire planet, we do it for our children and for our grandchildren, so they can live in peace. We will keep the forest standing, we will protect the air, the rivers, the fishes, the animals. This is what we fight for.”⁶³

Within this violent context, companies based in the UK, the EU and the US have been linked to human rights violations committed against the Kayapós. The gold illegally extracted from Kayapó lands has been found in the supply chains of several international companies, including:

- ⇒ the Italian refiner Chimetl⁶⁴
- ⇒ the London-listed gold-mining company Serabi Gold⁶⁵
- ⇒ tech giants such as Apple, Google, Microsoft and Amazon, who have previously purchased illegal gold from Chimet and the Brazilian refinery Marsam, the latter of

“
GOLD MINED IN INDIGENOUS LANDS IS ESPECIALLY LIKELY TO BE MINED ILLEGALLY, VIOLENTLY AND DESTRUCTIVELY.
”

which has sourced gold from a mining outfit currently investigated for extracting gold illegally from Kayapo land⁶⁶

It is not suggested that any refiner or any manufacturing company has directly commissioned human rights abuses in Brazilian gold mining regions.

A Kayapó representative, who prefers to remain unidentified for security reasons, considers these companies to be **“directly strengthening criminal activities and contributing to the violence against Indigenous peoples, land invasions, pollution and deforestation.”**⁶⁷

The lack of transparency in the gold business, associated with high levels of gold-laundering in Brazil, makes the country a risky market for buyers globally and gold mined in Indigenous lands is especially likely to be mined illegally, violently and destructively.⁶⁸

A federal police investigation found that Chimet was acquiring gold illegally obtained from Kayapó territory by the Brazilian company Cooperouri (Cooperativa de Garimpeiros e Mineradores de Ourilândia e Região).⁶⁹ US tech-giants may have then bought this gold.⁷⁰

According to an investigation conducted by Uearthed, Greenpeace’s investigative journalism unit in the UK, in partnership with SUMAÚMA and the Guardian, Serabi

Gold was operating an illegal gold mine called ‘Coringa’, located in a disputed area that belonged to and is now neighbouring⁷¹ Baú Indigenous territory in the Amazon.⁷²

A Brazilian Federal Court decision issued in December 2021 ruled that Serabi Gold should not be granted any government licences or authorisations to mine until it has completed a consultation process with the Kayapó.⁷³ Despite the court decision, and a relevant government authority clarifying that Serabi’s licence has expired,⁷⁴ the company stated it intends to continue its mining operations in Coringa field.⁷⁵

Serabi told Global Witness that the company is respecting the Court decision and operating with valid licenses that have been granted by Brazilian agencies before the decision and which the court decision did not annul. According to them, one of these licenses is valid until February 2024. The company states that it has completed a study on Indigenous communities in April 2023 which concluded that Coringa field does not present any direct impacts to the Indigenous communities who live in the Baú Indigenous territory. The study has allegedly been presented to the Indigenous communities and is being updated to include their feedback. Serabi said that it has confirmed support for its operations from members of the indigenous community.



“OUR TERRITORY IS THE LIFE WE LEAVE FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS”

THE RECKLESS SEARCH FOR GOLD, COLTAN, DIAMONDS AND OTHER MINERALS IN THE VENEZUELAN AMAZON




 **INDIGENOUS PEOPLES**
Uwottüja

 **COUNTRY**
Venezuela 

 **TERRITORIES**



 **Left:** The Uwottüja Indigenous peoples have faced violence linked to the expansion of illegal mining along the tributaries of the Orinoco Medio River in the Venezuelan Amazon.

Top right: A processing facility owned by state gold company Minerven at El Callao, Bolivar State, Venezuela. Tambopata National Reserve, Peru.

Approximately 2,000km from the Kayapó’s territory are the Uwottüja Indigenous peoples, who live along tributaries of the Orinoco Medio River in the Venezuelan Amazon. They too have faced violence, land invasions and death threats connected to the expansion of illegal mining on their territory.⁷⁶

In 2022, one of the community’s most prominent leaders was killed for defending their ancestral lands and resisting illegal mining and criminal groups.⁷⁷

Virgilio Trujillo Arana was one of the leaders of the Uwottüja Indigenous community ‘guard’ – the Guardia Indígena Ayose Huyunami. The guard was originally created to warn communities about impending natural disasters, such as flooding. However, in the absence of adequate state protection, the community started deploying the guard to protect their lands against what they call a “silent invasion” of criminal groups and illegal miners.⁷⁸

In 2016, the Venezuelan government demarcated the Orinoco Mining Arc south of the Orinoco River as an exclusively government-controlled strategic development zone for the mining of gold and other metals.⁷⁹ The Uwottüja Indigenous lands fall outside the Arc and mining is not allowed within their territories.⁸⁰ But dissidents from the former Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN), as well as other armed criminal and paramilitary groups, have been encroaching on new areas near the Arc – including Uwottüja territory – in search of precious metals.⁸¹

Most of the gold extracted from illegal mining areas in Venezuela is allegedly smuggled into Colombia, Brazil and Guyana. There it is reportedly laundered and exported to Africa, the Middle East and the EU.⁸²

This extraction and trade have led to appalling consequences for ecosystems and communities’ livelihoods. For instance, the UN Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela has denounced the systemic human rights abuses because of the mining exploitation of gold and other “strategic resources” stating that: **“These (violations) include unlawful deprivation of life, disappearances, extortion, corporal punishment, and sexual and gender-based violence.”**⁸³

The damage in Orinoco also represents an ecocide manifested through water pollution, deforestation, soil degradation, loss of biodiversity, among other environmental issues.⁸⁴ Indigenous community members who attempt to resist illegal mining on their land are often violently repressed or forced to flee their ancestral homes.

Virgilio was one of those who vocally denounced illegal mining and accompanying violations in the Venezuelan Amazon. He was shot in the head three times by an unidentified hitman. His death raised serious concerns about the security of Amazon defenders in Venezuela.⁸⁵ Since 2014, 20 of the country’s land and environmental defenders have been killed, of which 17 were murdered in the Amazon.⁸⁶

The Observatory for the Defence of Life (ODEVIDA), a coalition of human rights organisations from Venezuela, Colombia and Peru, expressed great concern regarding his killing stating that Virgilio was **“fighting to keep their territory free from illegal mining and the presence of Colombian guerrilla forces operating in the region.”**⁸⁷

Kapé Kapé Association is a civil society group which works with human rights defenders in Venezuela. According to María



Alejandra (also known as Mariela) Molero, the legal representative of the Association,⁸⁸ **“Virgilio was a great defender of the environment. He interacted with state officials representing the community’s interests. He was killed minutes after meeting government authorities.”**

Virgilio’s death has been perceived by land and environmental defenders as an attack against an entire community and its efforts to protect a way of life, and the environment that sustains it.⁸⁹

The accelerating exploitation of the Venezuelan Amazon is causing irreversible damage to its delicate biodiversity,⁹⁰ mining and agribusiness have played a devastating role in the loss of 140,000 hectares of primary forest.

In a video recorded before his murder, Virgilio said the community would continue to defend their land because without it they would disappear: **“Whatever happens, happens. (...) [But] without land, we disappear. That’s why we defend our territories.”**⁹¹

Defenders of the Amazon continues →

“WE ARE A LIVING CULTURE, AS ALIVE AS THE AMAZON”

THE DEADLY COST OF FIGHTING DEFORESTATION IN THE PERUVIAN AMAZON

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

Kakataibo

COUNTRY

Peru 🇵🇪

TERRITORIES



The Kakataibos,⁹² the Shipibo-Konibos⁹³ and other Indigenous communities live along the Aguaytia, San Alejandro and Sungaroyacu rivers in the Ucayali and Huánuco regions, in the Peruvian Amazon. Their stories are similar to that of Indigenous communities in Brazil and Venezuela. For years, they have repeatedly denounced the invasions of their ancestral lands and the illegal exploitation of their natural resources, including timber extraction.⁹⁴

They have also seen their forests disappear to make way for coca crops – the main ingredient for the illegal drug cocaine. Cocaine production and trafficking are an increasing concern in Peru. Land devoted to the cultivation of coca leaves is reported at a record high compared to the prior two decades, with cultivation on Indigenous land almost doubling since 2020.⁹⁵

According to Global Witness’ data, at least three land and environmental defenders from the Ucayali region have been killed in the last two years alone. Santiago Vega Chota, Yenes Ríos Bonsano and Herasmo García Grau all died after defending their lands and forests. Other Indigenous leaders have faced violence and other non-lethal attacks including intimidation and harassment. Some have been forced to flee their homes and live clandestinely.

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) has acknowledged the threats Indigenous communities have been subjected to. This is echoed by UN experts on human rights defenders, who have also called on the Peruvian government to ensure it complies with international rules and standards, and protects defenders and their families.⁹⁶

An Indigenous community member, who prefers to remain anonymous, spoke to Global Witness about the ongoing risks they face, and expressed serious concern about the lives, health and livelihoods of their community: **“We are an Indigenous community, and without our territory, we do not exist. We have seen other people disappear. We do not exist separately from this land because we are one. For our people, the Amazon is alive: it is our market, our pharmacy, and a fundamental part of our lives. We are a living culture, as alive as the Amazon.”**⁹⁷

Peru has the fourth largest area of tropical forests in the world after Brazil, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Indonesia. It is also among the 10 most dangerous countries in the world for land and environmental defenders according to Global Witness data – with 42 people killed between 2014 and 2022. Of these, more than half were killed in the Amazon.



DEFENDERS’ RECOMMENDATIONS:

Illegal mining, logging and other extractive activities are having a devastating impact on the people, communities and eco-system of the Amazon. Without meaningful and urgent action from governments and the private sector, the destruction of the Amazon will continue.

Community members contacted by Global Witness listed the following measures required to address the violence against land and environmental defenders and the Amazon biome:

- 1 Local governments should meaningfully consult with the defenders of the Amazon, including Indigenous communities, in relevant decision – and policy-making forums, and seek their free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) on matters affecting their lives, rights and territories.
- 2 Local governments should improve the monitoring of illegal mining areas – lands that are being invaded by narco-trafficking agents as well as other exploitative activities in the Amazon – and enforce the law to protect those areas.
- 3 Local governments should enhance the protection of and support to land and environmental defenders and prevent reprisals against them.
- 4 Governments should hold companies based in their jurisdictions accountable for contributing to illegal mining, human rights abuses and/or other illegal activities and should ensure that companies comply with stronger transparency requirements to enable the tracing of illegally mined metals and minerals in supply chains.
- 5 Countries that are part of the Amazon region must sign and ratify the Escazú Agreement, and use its framework as a roadmap for transparency, access to information and environmental justice. The challenges and importance of protecting defenders of the Amazon must be recognised, and action urgently implemented to eradicate impunity.



Left: Tambopata National Reserve, Peru.

Above: Activists gather in front of the Peruvian Foreign Affairs Ministry to demand ratification of the Escazú Agreement in August 2022.



IN FOCUS

GLOBAL ANALYSIS

THE PICTURE
FOR DEFENDERS
AROUND THE WORLD

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GLOBAL ANALYSIS:
The Picture for Defenders
Around the World

A total of 177 people lost their lives in 2022 for defending their land and the environment. The figure is slightly lower than that of the previous year, when 200 people were murdered – but still paints a grim picture.

Overall, at least 1,910 land and environmental defenders globally have lost their lives since we started documenting killings in 2012. Of these, at least 1,390 defenders have been killed since the Paris Agreement was adopted in 2015. These are lives we simply cannot afford to lose.

It's also important to note that these figures represent killings that we are made aware of – with underreporting being a major issue, many more lives will sadly have been lost that are not included in our data.



Below: Students protest against the theft of Indigenous lands by big business emboldened by the anti-environment administration of President Jair Bolsonaro.



**CUMULATIVE KILLINGS
BETWEEN 2012-2022**

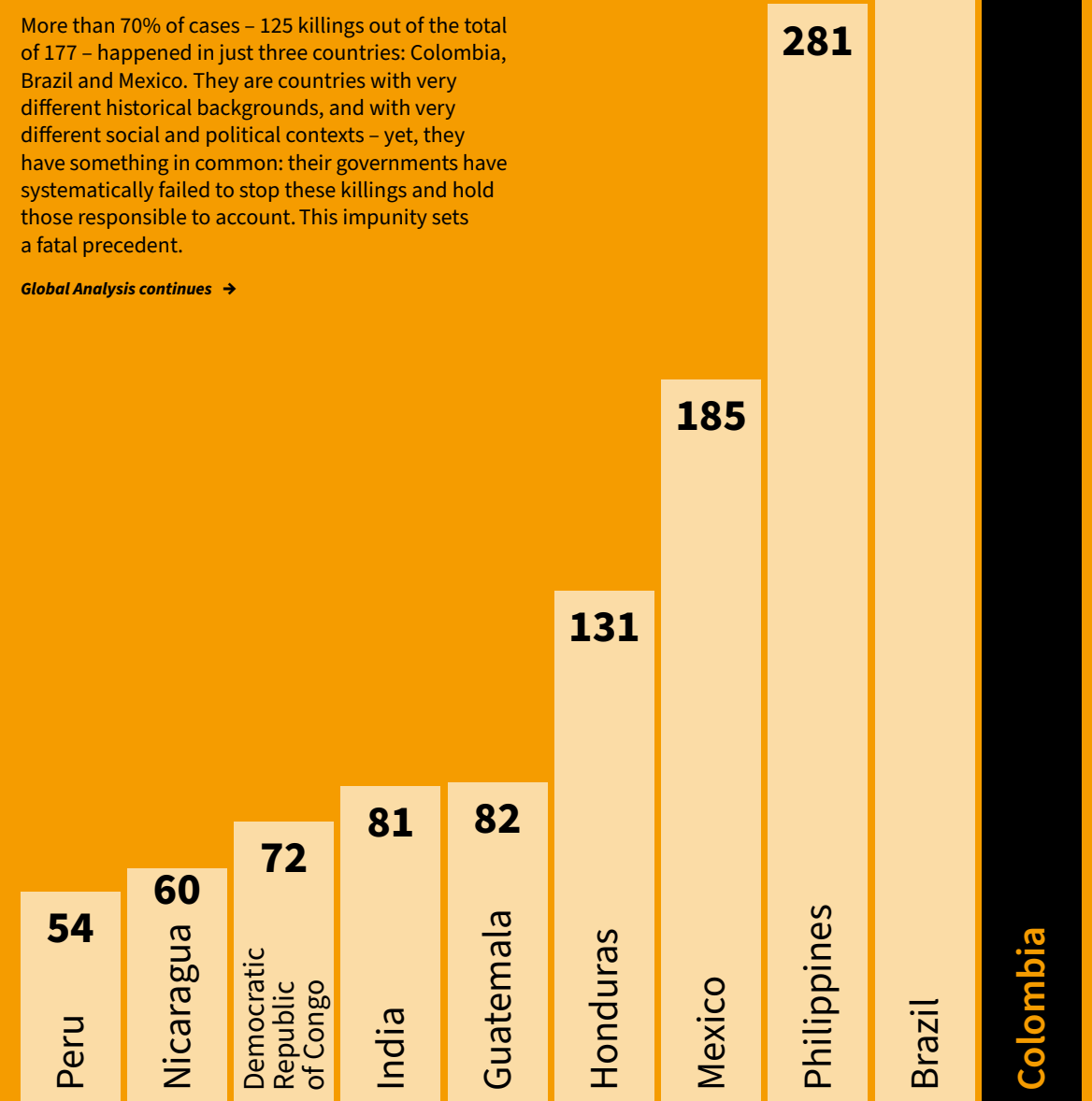
376 **382**

Indigenous peoples continue to be targeted. With 64 killings last year, Indigenous peoples were victims of more than a third of lethal attacks, despite making up just 6% of the world's population.

While defenders across the world face many of the same issues, the pattern of fatal attacks is far from uniform. But year after year, the majority of murders are concentrated in the same countries.⁹⁸

More than 70% of cases – 125 killings out of the total of 177 – happened in just three countries: Colombia, Brazil and Mexico. They are countries with very different historical backgrounds, and with very different social and political contexts – yet, they have something in common: their governments have systematically failed to stop these killings and hold those responsible to account. This impunity sets a fatal precedent.

Global Analysis continues →



LATIN AMERICA

Since we started collecting data in 2012, 1,335 defenders across Latin America have lost their lives – 70% of all deaths. Yet very few families have seen justice for these killings.

A recent analysis by the Colombian civil society network Programa Somos Defensores, which documents and reports attacks against defenders, exposes how the Colombian state has failed defenders by leaving practically every attack unpunished – only 5.2% of the killings of human rights defenders, including land and environmental defenders, have been legally resolved.⁹⁹ In Mexico, 90% of attacks against activists and journalists have gone unpunished.¹⁰⁰

Last year was a particularly tragic year for **Colombia**, with almost twice as many killing as either Brazil or Mexico. With a staggering 60 killings – almost double that of 2021 – this takes the country’s total number of deaths up to 382 since 2012, making it the country with the highest number of reported killings overall.

It was a year of political transition in the country. The government of Iván Duque – heavily criticised for inaction and the resulting so-called ‘genocide’ of social leaders – gave way to that of Gustavo Petro, who took office in August 2022, alongside the first-ever Afro-Colombian vice-president, Francia Márquez.¹⁰¹ Their political agenda is the first in Colombia’s history to specifically include the need to protect defenders and address the drivers behind the attacks against them.¹⁰² This is a welcome and much-needed shift away from previous governments, which have dismissed violence against defenders and refused to act.¹⁰³

In October 2022, Colombia ratified the Escazú Agreement,¹⁰⁴ the first regional environmental agreement in Latin America and the Caribbean, and the first in the world containing specific provisions on environmental human rights defenders. It also aims to improve citizens’ access to environmental information and uphold their participation in decision-making processes.¹⁰⁵ These commitments must be matched by action. The 2022 figures for Colombia are a sobering reminder of the amount of work that urgently needs to be done.

The situation in **Brazil** remains concerning. With 34 killings last year, 376 defenders have lost their lives in the country since 2012.

After coming to power in 2019, former far-right president Jair Bolsonaro pushed through his anti-environment and anti-human rights agenda. Early on in his administration he made it clear he would not give Indigenous peoples titles to any additional lands – not entirely surprising given he once described them as living in poverty “like animals in zoos.”¹⁰⁶ Attacks against Indigenous peoples and their lands tripled during his presidency,¹⁰⁷ and in 2022, 10 out of the 34 killings we recorded in Brazil were of Indigenous peoples. This led to calls to try Bolsonaro for crimes against humanity.¹⁰⁸

The Bolsonaro government treated the environment with just as much disdain as human rights, opening up the Amazon to destructive industries. It slashed the Ministry of the Environment’s budget – in 2022 it was only marginally higher than in 2021, its lowest budget for the last two decades.¹⁰⁹ Other key agencies also saw their budgets cut. The world also witnessed the worst day for Amazon fires in 15 years in 2022.¹¹⁰



On 1 January 2023, Luiz Inácio ‘Lula’ da Silva took office as Brazil’s new president after defeating Bolsonaro’s bid for re-election. President Lula and Marina Silva, whom he appointed as the Minister of the Environment, face the phenomenal challenge of reverting the social and environmental damage spearheaded by Bolsonaro. This will need to include, first and foremost, the effective protection of Indigenous peoples and their lands. With conservative forces having a majority in Congress, this will be all the more complex.

Mexico was the country with the highest number of killings in the world in 2021 – a staggering 54. In 2022, the figure has come down significantly to 31, and the total since 2012 stands at 185. At least 16 of those killed last year were Indigenous peoples, and four were lawyers.

Mexico also witnessed the way in which defenders from the same family are relentlessly attacked: the father of Rarámuri Indigenous leader José Trinidad Baldenegro was murdered when José was only 11. Years later, in 2017, José’s brother, Isidro Baldenegro – recipient of the Goldman Environmental Prize in 2005 – was also murdered. José was one of the defenders murdered in 2022.¹¹¹

With 14 murders in 2022, **Honduras** was the country with the world’s highest per-capita killings. Xiomara Castro became the first-ever female president in the country’s history in early 2022 and committed to protecting defenders.¹¹² Fulfilling this pledge will be a huge challenge, yet urgent action is needed to guarantee the safety of human rights defenders.¹¹³



Left: Grave of Mexican defender Óscar Eyraud at the cemetery in Juntas de Nejí, July 2021.

Right: An illegal mining operation in the Yanomami Indigenous territory, Brazil, 2023.

THE EXPLOITATION OF THE AMAZON AND ATTACKS ON ITS PROTECTORS

For the first time since 2012 when Global Witness started documenting attacks against defenders, we have analysed killings that took place in a specific biome, and found that the **Amazon** was the site of more than a fifth of all killings last year – with 39 of 177 (22%). At least 11 Indigenous peoples were killed for defending their home. Many of these killings are linked to mining.

Since 2014, we’ve recorded a total of 296 deaths in the Amazon, making it one of the most dangerous places to be a defender. Indigenous communities are disproportionately targeted, yet they play a pivotal role in protecting the rainforest – acting as stewards of ecosystems upon which life on Earth depends, protecting 80% of its biodiversity.¹¹⁴ Justice for attacks in the Amazon is incredibly rare, and impunity reigns.

While protecting defenders in the depths of the forest remains a challenge, a united effort across the countries the Amazon spans is crucial for the future of our planet. Although some progress has been made towards greater protection for defenders in Latin America via the Escazú Regional Agreement, most of these countries the have not yet ratified this treaty.¹¹⁵



ASIA

Underreporting of attacks is a significant challenge in both Asia and Africa. Since 2012, Global Witness has documented 443 killings of land and environmental defenders across the Asian continent – spanning a total of 18 countries, the majority of which are rated as ‘closed’ or ‘repressed’ environments according to the watchdog CIVICUS Monitor.¹¹⁶ Defenders are often prevented from speaking out – or are criminalised for doing so.

Of the 16 cases we recorded in Asia in 2022, 11 were in the Philippines, with three taking place in Indonesia and two in India.

The Philippines has consistently ranked as the worst place in Asia for land and environmental defenders, with 281 people killed since 2012.¹¹⁷ Of these, a third were linked to defenders speaking out against company operations linked to the mining sector.¹¹⁸ President Ferdinand ‘Bongbong’ Marcos, elected to office in 2022, has announced that mineral exploration and extraction are essential to his administration’s economic plan to move towards green technology and renewables.¹¹⁹ His predecessor, President Rodrigo Duterte lifted a ban on new mining operations in the Philippines in 2021.¹²⁰

The criminalisation of defenders and rights advocates is widespread, with ‘red-tagging’ – the government practice of accusing activists of communist insurgency – commonly used to silence critics and communities.¹²¹ At the time of writing, a bill seeking to protect human rights defenders and punish acts of intimidation or violence against them has just been approved at the committee level at the House of Representatives¹²² – marking a positive step for the protection of defenders; however, a government statement called the bill “dangerous and destructive” for the country.¹²³



Right: Communities oppose mining projects on the Philippines island of Sibuyan, known as the ‘Galapagos of Asia’.

SCRAMBLE FOR RARE EARTH MINERALS IN SOUTH EAST ASIA

South East Asia is already a top global producer of metals such as nickel and copper – vital components of ‘green transition technologies’ like wind turbines and electric cars.¹²⁴

China currently accounts for 63% of the world’s rare earth mining, while the Philippines, Vietnam and Indonesia possess untapped mineral reserves crucial for green technologies.¹²⁵ As demand outstrips supply, governments and companies move to take advantage of ‘new frontiers’ of opportunity in mining across the region – often without cleaning up problems at the root of the supply chain. Increasingly, Myanmar has become one of the largest producers of heavy rare earth minerals and the key source of supply for Chinese manufacturers. Global Witness research shows that supply chains for rare earth minerals are poorly understood and rife with environmental abuse and human exploitation in the country.¹²⁶

The response is increased investment in Asia – both domestically and via international partnership agreements.¹²⁷ But for defenders whose communities are under threat, the impacts of competitive global markets at the local level invokes legacies of colonial extraction across the region.¹²⁸



AFRICA

We recorded five killings in Africa in 2022. Of these, four were park rangers, two in the Democratic Republic of Congo, one in Malawi and one in South Africa.

Park rangers have consistently been the target of attacks through the years. Virunga National Park, Africa’s most biodiverse protected area,¹²⁹ has seen over 200 rangers killed on duty.¹³⁰ They, too, are at the frontline of the climate crisis. They, too, are being murdered for doing their job.

Elsewhere in Africa, the proposed \$3.5bn, almost 900-mile East African Crude Oil Pipeline (EACOP) that would run through both Uganda and Tanzania is already devastating local communities. Four anti-EACOP activists were arrested in Uganda in July 2023 after protesting against environmental and social impacts linked to the project.



Below: Climate protesters at COP27 highlight the devastating impact of proposed gas pipelines in East Africa.



WEST AFRICAN DEFENDERS WORK TIRELESSLY TO SHED LIGHT ON REPRISALS

In West Africa, data collection is a significant challenge, making it difficult to build a knowledge and evidence base on the situation faced by human rights defenders. This has led to the under-reporting or non-reporting of attacks against defenders and the under-representation of defenders and their realities in this region.

To address this challenge, in 2020, civil society groups Green Advocates International and the Mano River Union Civil Society National Resources Rights and Governance Platform (MRU-CSO Platform) with support from Global Witness, embarked upon an assessment of the experiences and situation of frontline grassroots defenders across West Africa and Equatorial Guinea.¹³¹

In 2022 Green Advocates set up a new regional data collection system and trained focal points in over eight countries to gather data and analyse the trends in reprisals against grassroots communities, activists and other defenders.

This initial research and pilot programme will serve as building blocks to start gathering evidence in West Africa and will contribute towards a better understanding of the situation of land and environmental defenders in the region.



ASIA

TURNING THE TIDE

DEFENDING
AGAINST ASIA'S
MINERAL BOOM

FOR ALMOST TWO DECADES SIBUYAN'S
PEOPLE HAVE BEEN TRYING TO PREVENT
MINING EXPLORATION ON THEIR ISLAND

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THE ARREST OF CLIMATE
DEFENDERS AMID VIETNAM'S
CLEAN ENERGY TRANSITION

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TURNING THE TIDE:
Defending Against Asia's
Mineral Boom

Residents of Sibuyan, a small crescent-shaped island in the Philippines, first heard about a mineral ore export permit held by Altai Philippines Mining Company in January 2023. It was a “slip of the tongue” by a government representative that started it all, recalls rights advocate Rodne Galicha, who was present at the community meeting.¹³²



DEFENDERS
Sibuyan community

COUNTRY
Philippines

TERRITORIES



Left: Mining operation near Mount Guiting-Guiting in Sibuyan, the Philippines, 2023.

Above: Rodne Galicha is Executive Director of Living Laudito Si!, an environmental and climate group in the Philippines.

According to the mining company, the permit means that more than 50,000 metric tons of nickel ore can be mined and exported from the island.¹³³ And this is not just any island – known as the ‘Galapagos of Asia’, it has 81% forest cover and is home to several endangered species.¹³⁴

A few days after the meeting and the official’s verbal slip, residents alarmed at the operation’s potential to devastate the island’s precious biodiversity had set up makeshift tents in front of the company’s stockyard.¹³⁵ Sibuyan’s people have been trying to prevent mining exploration on their island for almost two decades – they aren’t about to give up now.¹³⁶

Rodne describes the arrival of riot police, as community opposition grew: “**They said that they were sent [to maintain] peace and order... They were all lined up on the highway and then attempted to guide the company’s trucks through.**”¹³⁷

In an attempt to hinder the mining company’s operations, a wall of people barred the road. Environmental youth leader Charles Rocil describes the company’s first

attempt to transport mined nickel ore and the resulting confrontation initiated by the police: “**It was a mix of anxiety and fear that someone might die anytime because of the [advancing] trucks...but it turned out the police were the ones who tried to hurt us. And actually, they did hurt us.**”¹³⁸ Footage shows mining trucks successfully passing through the barricade as police forcefully disperse residents and anti-mining protesters.¹³⁹

Rodne is all too familiar with attempts to silence the voices of environmental activists. The long-time defender of Sibuyan’s biodiversity has faced a barrage of online threats, anonymous phone calls and suspected surveillance. An anonymous complaint has been filed against him with the National Bureau of Investigation regarding his environmental activism.¹⁴¹

“**It’s not only about the output or the product, but the whole value chain... but also the context of where you get your minerals. Is it ‘just’? Did it affect the lives of the people? But not only of the people. Were endangered species of flora and fauna and some other [species] yet to be discovered affected, or impacted?**”¹⁴²

“

IT WAS TRULY DO OR DIE AT THAT TIME... IT REALLY HURTS US A LOT BECAUSE THIS ISLAND IS OURS. THEY DON'T OWN IT AND YET THEY ARE DESTROYING IT. THOSE WHO WERE WITH ME WERE SOBBING WHILE OTHERS WERE VISIBLY ANGRY.¹⁴⁰

Charles Rocil — *Nature Ambassador of Sibuyan Island*

”



“FORESTS, CLEAN WATERS, RICH SOIL”

AND A STRUGGLE THAT CONCERNS THE WHOLE WORLD¹⁴³

In Sibuyan, defenders seem to have scored a momentary success against large corporate interests. The Philippine government ordered Altai Philippines to suspend its operations in February 2023, following alleged violations of environmental regulations. The company did not have the required documents to construct the causeway used to transport nickel ore.¹⁴⁴ A government inspection also confirmed community allegations that trees had been illegally felled to build the port.¹⁴⁵ Residents also maintain that the approval of Altai’s permit did not go through the appropriate due process – with local community consultations bypassed.¹⁴⁶ In June 2023, the Supreme Court issued a writ of *kalikasan* – legal remedy for the protection of the right to a healthy environment – against government agencies and the mining firm.¹⁴⁷

In 2010, Altai Philippines was sold to a subsidiary of Pelican Resources, an Australian company, for over \$1.2 million Canadian dollars. Pelican later entered into a Memorandum of Understanding with Dynamo Atlantic Limited – the beneficial owner of the mining project located on Sibuyan Island. Dynamo is reportedly linked to Kenneth Gatchalian, the son of sitting Senator William Gatchalian and brother of Senator Sherwin Gatchalian, the Secretary of Social Welfare and Development. According to company documents the sale was completed in 2020.

Anti-mining sentiment remains strong: “The fight to preserve a place like Sibuyan cannot be accomplished by a single person or group. It’s a collective effort by citizens... all the people here, from grandchildren to grandparents, would come to participate,” says community leader, Elizabeth Ibañez.¹⁴⁸ Defenders are pushing back strongly against powerful corporate interests in Sibuyan. There is so much at stake. “Abundant forests, clean waters, and rich soil”, says Elizabeth, “this has become an issue of climate change.”¹⁴⁹ That is why it is a struggle that should concern the whole world.

DEFENDERS’ RECOMMENDATIONS:
LIVING LAUDATO SI AND SIBUYANONS AGAINST MINING
The government of the Philippines should:

- 1** Declare Sibuyan Island a protected zone through national legislation and work with the UNESCO World Heritage Committee to inscribe it to the World Heritage List to better protect its unique biodiversity.
- 2** Cancel the Mineral Production Sharing Agreement with Altai Philippines Mining Company and institute a moratorium on all mining projects across Sibuyan.
- 3** Repeal the Philippines Mining Act (1995) and replace it with the Alternative Mineral Management Bill which outlines greater protections and respect for human rights and the environment while addressing climate change risks.

Turning The Tide continues →

JUST ENERGY TRANSITION PARTNERSHIP (JETP)

Global commitments to reach ‘net zero’ by 2050 are hampered by the unequal impacts of the climate crisis.

A shift to green economies is central to global efforts to transition away from fossil fuel-based and carbon-intensive industries. Nations that contributed more to the climate emergency, and reaped the benefits, bear greater responsibilities to aid global ‘just’ transitions.¹⁵⁰

Just Energy Transition Partnerships (JETP) are funding models that aim to bridge that gap, with developed countries already pledging a total of \$44 billion to climate vulnerable nations South Africa, Indonesia and Vietnam.¹⁵¹ The Philippines and India are reportedly in negotiations with JETP donor countries for similar pledges with a new deal announced recently with Senegal.^{152, 153}

Now more than ever, governments and companies must identify, prevent and mitigate risks to defenders. In June 2023, Hoang Thi Minh Hong became the fifth prominent climate activist to be arrested in Vietnam for alleged tax evasion in the past two years.¹⁵⁴ Her arrest came days after human rights groups welcomed the early release of Vietnamese environment defender Nguy Thi Khanh, who was detained and sentenced to two years in prison for tax evasion – a charge believed to be politically motivated.¹⁵⁵



Three other Vietnamese environmental activists – Dang Dinh Bach, Mai Phan Loi and Bach Hung Duong – are still imprisoned.¹⁵⁶ They all advocated for the development of clean energy and less dependence on thermal coal-fuelled projects.¹⁵⁷ Climate justice organisations globally announced an unprecedented month-long hunger strike in solidarity with Dang Dinh Bach, who began a hunger strike to the death ahead of the second anniversary of his arrest in "defence of his innocence".¹⁵⁸

Despite the silencing of land and environmental defenders in Vietnam, the G7 and other world governments have since entered into a \$15.5 billion JETP with Vietnam to help the country reduce emissions.¹⁵⁹ But with environmental defenders and rights activists being criminalised in Vietnam there are serious concerns that civil society are effectively being excluded from deliberations around the energy transition.¹⁶⁰ Instead, the announcement appears to pay lip service to a ‘just’ energy transition. Until decision-makers ensure civil society’s meaningful participation – without fear of arrest – in the development and implementation of this deal, the ambitious targets of the JETP could be jeopardised.



Environmental lawyer, Dang Dinh Bach (*above*) and environmental activist Hoang Thi Minh Hong (*left*), are amongst five climate activists detained by the Vietnamese government in the last two years.

DEFENDERS’ RECOMMENDATIONS: STAND WITH BACH COALITION

Parties to the JETP with Vietnam should:

- 1 Ensure that no financing for the JETP is released to Vietnam until Bach, Hong, and other climate leaders are released and charges dropped.
- 2 Ensure that the JETP identifies, prevents, mitigates and remedies any retaliation and reprisals against environmental and human rights defenders, together with effective measures that enable civil society to participate meaningfully in decision-making and monitoring of the deal.
- 3 Call for Vietnam to legislate and enact laws that are in line with international standards and treaties aimed at creating and maintaining a safe environment for civil society to freely operate. Safeguards should be introduced to legislation that could be misused to criminalise defenders, while laws that target or criminalise protesters should be revoked.



Below: Demonstration during global climate strike week, Hanoi, 2019.





SPOTLIGHT ON

STRATEGIES FOR SILENCING

JAILING
THE
MESSENGER

WHEN DEFENDERS ARE
TREATED LIKE CRIMINALS

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STRATEGIES FOR SILENCING: Jailing the Messenger

In 2022, the murder of land and environmental defenders often made the local – and sometimes national – news. A handful even made headlines around the world.

But killings are just the tip of the iceberg. Beneath that, and largely unreported, are innumerable attacks that, while not taking a defender's life, do radically transform them. This is the case with criminalisation.

Defenders are being forced to confront the very legal system that should be protecting them. According to the international human rights organisation Front Line Defenders, criminalisation of human rights defenders – including arrest, detention and legal action – was the most prominent form of attack in 2022, accounting for more than a third (34%) of the year's recorded violations.¹⁶¹

The prevailing narrative everywhere presents defenders as a threat to a country's development. They are portrayed as troublemakers, terrorists or rebels that need to be kept on a short leash. Legal systems that take forever to investigate and charge defenders' murderers are strikingly speedy when it comes to taking legal action against defenders. Confronting charges that turn them into criminals is a full-time burden for defenders, and it can last for years.

In some cases, criminalisation precedes murders of defenders. Take the case of Teófilo Acuña, a renowned Colombian social leader

“
**THEY ARE PORTRAYED AS
TROUBLEMAKERS, TERRORISTS
OR REBELS THAT NEED TO BE
KEPT ON A SHORT LEASH.**
”

and the voice of thousands of small-scale peasants who depend on agriculture and gold mining. He was murdered in February 2022 alongside fellow defender Jorge Alberto Tafur. Both had reported threats only days before their deaths.¹⁶²

Before all of this, Teófilo had been repeatedly criminalised. He had been beaten and then arbitrarily arrested in 2007¹⁶³ as part of a legal case that was later dismissed.¹⁶⁴ He was arbitrarily arrested again in 2020 on fabricated charges of aggravated rebellion. This happened soon after Congreso de los Pueblos, a local movement Teófilo co-founded, had submitted complaints to the authorities about arbitrary prosecutions and judicial harassment against members of peasant movements.¹⁶⁵

Those who choose to support local and Indigenous communities can also become targets of criminalisation. Chad Booc was a computer science graduate in the Philippines.¹⁶⁶ He volunteered to teach Lumad Indigenous peoples and became an advocate for their struggles. The police and military arrested him and six other people in 2021, charging them with kidnapping and trafficking. The authorities argued that they were holding the Lumad children captive and training them as ‘future armed

combatants’.¹⁶⁷ Chad and other teachers and Lumad students spent three months in prison before the case was dismissed due to insufficient evidence.¹⁶⁸ He was murdered in February 2022 while on the road with another volunteer teacher, a community health worker and two volunteer drivers.¹⁶⁹ He was 27.

Criminalisation is not the only type of non-lethal attack defenders face, and it does not always lead to the murder of defenders – but it is a ruthless and effective way to silence them. Defenders must bear the cost of defending themselves, including legal fees and the expense of traveling to courts that are often far from their homes.

Being criminalised poses huge risks for the family and community of a defender, because it singles the defender out, increasing their visibility and making it easier to identify – and attack – their family and community. It can also prevent defenders from earning a living, disrupting their ability to work. And criminalisation can have a profound psychological impact on the people it targets. It is worrying, though perhaps not surprising, that criminalisation of land and environmental defenders across the world is on the rise.¹⁷⁰



Protesters call for justice for the murder of Filipino defender Chad Booc in 2022.



A wide variety of national laws are invoked in order to bring charges against defenders including trespassing, illegal assembly and terrorism.





COLOMBIA

EXILED FOR DEFENDING

THE CHILDREN
OF GARBAGE

*DR YESID BLANCO IS A COLOMBIAN PAEDIATRICIAN
NOW LIVING IN EXILE IN THE US*

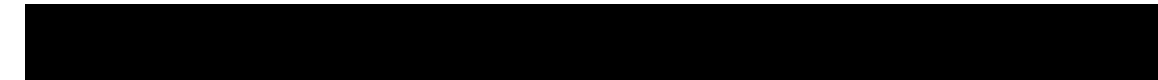
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Veolia-owned landfill site next to Patio Bonito village, Colombia, 2023.



Garbage floating in a stream near the Patio Bonito village, 2023.



EXILED FOR DEFENDING:
"The Children of Garbage"

Dr Yesid Blanco is a Colombian paediatrician, now living in exile in the US after receiving death threats for speaking up against a toxic landfill site near his city – which has reportedly had devastating health impacts on a neighbouring community – and spelled disaster for the environment. This is his story.

"I first knew something was seriously wrong shortly after 2015. As a paediatrician and head of the only intensive care unit in my city, Barrancabermeja, Colombia, I was used to treating vulnerable, very unwell children. But the cases that started being presented to me from 2016 were unlike anything I had ever seen before.

In particular, babies from a rural community named Patio Bonito were being born with a range of peculiar and horrifying issues, including some who came into the world without having developed a brain in the womb and died shortly after birth. They had a deadly disease known as anencephaly. Some babies were born with deformities, while others were scarred with rashes and boils across their bodies.

The suffering wasn't limited to babies. Children also began coming into my clinic with very rare diseases, displaying a range of distressing symptoms. Others in Patio Bonito began experiencing respiratory issues and gastrointestinal problems – and even cancer.

It became clear to me that these myriad health problems were being caused by pollution in the local area. The birth defects and DNA damage were consistent with the ingestion of certain heavy metals, including mercury and arsenic. They also coincided with the construction of an enormous landfill site near Patio Bonito – in the middle of protected wetlands – which began operating in January 2015. There was no other explanation for it. Patio Bonito had become a human sacrifice zone.

SCARRED BY A LANDFILL

Situated on a river that flows into the wetland of the Ciénaga de San Silvestre – the only water source for a city of 200,000 people – the Yerbabuena landfill site takes trash from Barrancabermeja, as well as domestic waste from a nearby oil refinery.

It was evident to me at the time that the chemicals from the rubbish would end up contaminating the community's food and water, with the toxic runoff from the landfill eventually finding its way into people's homes and bodies. Not only this, but the site is also located in a precious ecosystem – home to jaguars and a range of other species – with devastating consequences for the region's profound biodiversity.

Before it began operating, I knew the landfill was going to be a huge problem for the local Patio Bonito community. And it was. For me, it also became a living nightmare.

“
IT'S DIFFICULT TO FIND A CHILD IN PATIO BONITO WHO WAS BORN AFTER 2015 AND DOES NOT HAVE RESPIRATORY PROBLEMS AND SKIN CONDITIONS. THEY ARE THE GENERATION WHO HAVE BEEN NICKNAMED 'THE CHILDREN OF GARBAGE'.
”

Dr Yesid Blanco — Colombian Paediatrician



LIVING IN LIMBO

I knew it was my responsibility to look after the health of those living in the region, beyond the walls of my clinic. I had to make the link between the landfill and its health impacts public.

In September 2018, after speaking out about water pollution and damage to endangered species caused by the landfill, I began receiving death threats. I became aware of attempts to imprison me, and even of a plan for hitmen to attack me and my family. Facing persecution and criminal proceedings on trumped up charges – including terrorism and fraud – I was forced to flee, fearing for my life.

The landfill and all the horrors it brought had taken over my entire life. I now live in exile – turning into something that I am not, and someone I no longer recognise. I am living in limbo.

It's hard to describe the pain of being forced to leave everything and everyone behind. What makes it harder is knowing that the landfill site is still there, causing catastrophic harm to its neighbours and the environment. It's both incredibly frustrating and heart-breaking to see so much suffering in the community and knowing that the cause is entirely preventable.

But I know that the pain and frustration I feel are not mine alone. The people of Patio Bonito have also endured this hardship, and this rage, for more than eight years. They are emotionally exhausted.

They have seen that nobody has stood up to address their health concerns. They too are living in limbo, waiting for someone to

take responsibility. But no one has come. They have little choice but to leave, if they can.

To speak of my home from a place so far away is the worst possible punishment. In Colombia, your punishment for speaking out is to be destroyed physically or economically, but also morally and emotionally. It is a war in which activists and environmental leaders face various forms of attack.

We must teach our children about the activists who have given their lives and made great sacrifices to try and give them a better planet. This is the best example for future generations.

We must also continue to stand up for what is right and stand up to those who value profit over people, especially for the most vulnerable among us – the unborn – and for the environment upon which people depend. Those who seek to silence us cannot and will not win.

PROFIT OVER PEOPLE

In 2018, I was contacted by a lawyer who said that he belonged to the French waste-management company Veolia. He wanted to

know more about the landfill site. Along with other activists, we repeatedly warned him and Veolia about all the environmental and human rights concerns. Nearly all of our correspondence was ignored.

A year later, in July 2019, Veolia bought the landfill from its previous owners, Rediba – a company linked to paramilitary groups.

“Veolia bought blood with European people’s money.”

We never imagined that a European company would buy this landfill site, and it was truly shocking to me that a company like Veolia was able to purchase the landfill despite our warnings.

They have completely denied the effects on the water, on the community and on the thousands of people who are affected by the site today.

The European Union must act and apply pressure so that companies like Veolia do not purchase assets like this landfill – and that environmental, economic and social organisations also have the power to stop this from happening.”

“

**I LOST MY LAND, MY CITY,
MY JOB AS A DOCTOR, AND MY
FINANCIAL STABILITY. I WAS
BANISHED AND FORCED INTO EXILE,
THOUSANDS OF KILOMETRES
AWAY FROM MY HOME.**

”



Global March for the climate in Bogotá, in 2021.

NEW EU LAW POTENTIAL GAMECHANGER FOR CORPORATE ACCOUNTABILITY

The European Union (EU) is currently negotiating a new law that has the potential to be a gamechanger for corporate accountability worldwide. If passed, the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD) will require large companies operating in the EU to conduct due diligence. This involves identifying the risks associated with their activities, and taking action to prevent and mitigate negative human rights and environmental impacts linked to their activities.¹⁷¹

Crucially, under the proposed law, victims of corporate abuse would be able to hold large companies accountable in European courts for harms they cause. Given the EU's economic power, this regional initiative could have a significant impact on the way business is done globally.¹⁷²

Preventing growing trends of violence and attacks against defenders and their communities must be a priority for EU lawmakers. Meaningful engagement with affected and potentially affected communities – not least Indigenous peoples – should be a vital part of companies' ongoing due diligence processes. The law must ensure companies identify and mitigate potential risks to communities who speak out, implementing measures to guarantee their safety and prevent reprisals.¹⁷³ Companies must fully respect the rights of Indigenous peoples in line with international standards, including the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

In a positive development in June 2023, the European Parliament acknowledged the significance of engagement with impacted or potentially impacted communities.¹⁷⁴ The Parliament incorporated mandatory stakeholder engagement that considers the vulnerabilities of defenders and communities, into its negotiating position. Now this key part of the legislation must be prioritised as negotiations continue with between the Parliament and the 27 Member States of the European Union.

EU lawmakers must strengthen several other parts of the proposed law to better protect those most vulnerable to corporate harms. For example, financial institutions are unjustifiably given preferential treatment in the current proposal. The current text only requires investors, insurers and banks, to conduct a very limited form of due diligence and is likely to exclude them from liability under the new law in contrast to other companies. This needs to change: Global Witness has revealed several instances of EU-based financiers supporting projects linked to human rights and environmental harms.¹⁷⁵ The law must centre the rights and protection of defenders and communities, rather than granting special privileges to parts of the financial sector.

Lastly, the legislation must protect people most at risk from climate change and the irresponsible business projects driving the climate crisis. Defenders and the communities where they live pay a disproportionate price for global climate change – and the lack of action to tackle it. For years, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and leading scientists have repeatedly warned of the narrow window to address the climate crisis.¹⁷⁶ There is a growing recognition that action is needed now more than ever – in 2023 YouGov polling, 74% of Europeans were in favour of a law to make EU companies act on climate.¹⁷⁷ After decades of asking business to take voluntary action, it is clear that this approach has failed to ensure the necessary changes. A law obliging companies to conduct climate due diligence could not only be transformative for people and defenders on the frontline of the climate crisis, but also help to make the necessary transition to sustainable business models and bring emissions in line with the world's 1.5°C target.¹⁷⁸

The new law is on track to be approved by the end of 2023 before being transposed into the national legal systems of the 27 EU member states. EU lawmakers must ensure that the final text meets the needs of defenders globally.



IN FOCUS

PROGRESS FOR PEOPLE AND THE PLANET

10 SUCCESSES FROM
THE PAST YEAR

*DESPITE FACING SIGNIFICANT DANGERS AND CHALLENGES, DEFENDERS HAVE
BEEN AT THE FOREFRONT OF SEVERAL SUCCESSES OVER THE PAST YEAR*

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PROGRESS FOR PEOPLE AND THE PLANET:

10 Successes From the Past Year

The clock is ticking. Activists from all over the world are working tirelessly to halt the climate crisis. Despite facing significant dangers and challenges, defenders have been at the forefront of several successes over the past year.

We mark the 25th anniversary of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights by celebrating some of these achievements, acknowledging the progress that has been made towards greater protections for defenders, and steps towards justice for those who have lost their lives. We also celebrate the growing recognition of the role of defenders in addressing the climate emergency.

🌐 1. EUROPEAN UNION

Groundbreaking EU proposal on corporate due diligence: In February 2022, the European Commission published a long-awaited proposal for a new law which promotes corporate accountability – the first regional framework obliging companies to act sustainably.¹⁷⁹ The Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD) – if passed – will require large companies operating in the EU to conduct due diligence to identify, prevent and mitigate human rights and environmental risks associated with their activities, and remedy harms that they have caused.

🌐 2. LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

First Escazú Agreement Conference of the Parties (COP Escazu): One year after coming into force, the first annual meeting of the Escazú Agreement – the first regional environmental agreement in Latin America and the Caribbean, and the first in the world containing specific provisions on environmental human rights defenders – was held in Chile in April 2022.¹⁸⁰ Indeed, following the election via an open online vote of six public representatives, Escazú became the only international environmental agreement with direct participation from elected representatives of the public.¹⁸¹ This group is responsible for monitoring public participation in the agreement. A compliance committee has also been established to advise on the implementation of the agreement.¹⁸²

🌐 3. GLOBAL

World's first Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders: In June 2022, Michel Forst was appointed the world's first Special Rapporteur on environmental defenders under the UNECE Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-Making, and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (also known as the Aarhus Convention), which obliges states to protect activists who speak out to protect environmental rights.¹⁸³ Any member of the public, party to the Aarhus Convention, or the secretariat can submit a complaint to the Special Rapporteur. The Rapporteur can deploy various tools to resolve complaints, including issuing protection measures, using diplomatic channels, issuing public statements, or bringing the matter to the attention of other relevant human rights bodies and concerned governments.

🌐 4. GLOBAL

UN affirms universal right to a clean and healthy environment: In July 2022, the United Nations passed a resolution recognising the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment as a human right. As the world faces a triple crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution, the resolution calls on “States, international organizations, business enterprises and other relevant stakeholders” to scale up efforts to uphold this right.¹⁸⁴

🌐 5. INDONESIA AND BRAZIL

Major international companies suspend local palm-oil suppliers: In Indonesia, in September 2022, Nestlé announced plans to stop sourcing from subsidiaries of Astro Agro Lestari, a major Indonesian palm-oil producer linked to reported land grabs and human rights abuses.¹⁸⁵ Several consumer-goods companies – Hershey's, P&G and Colgate Palmolive: makers of well-known household brands from chocolate to toothpaste – swiftly followed the suspension.¹⁸⁶ In Brazil, in December 2022, following a Global Witness investigation, Cargill, Nestlé, Hershey's, General Mills and Kellogg informed Global Witness that they have suspended Brasil BioFuels, a major Brazilian palm-oil producer linked to reported human rights abuses in the Amazon, from their palm-oil supply chains.¹⁸⁷

🌐 6. GLOBAL

Landmark loss and damage fund agreed at COP27: A historic resolution was adopted at COP27 in Egypt in October 2022, when parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) agreed to establish a loss and damage fund for countries worst-affected by the climate crisis.¹⁸⁸ This decision was a major win for climate-vulnerable countries and civil

society, who had been demanding such a fund for decades. It paves the way for developed countries to pay for the loss and damage caused by climate change. Urgent action is still needed to operationalise the fund, with meaningful participation from civil society and frontline communities.

🌐 7. SIERRA LEONE

Sierra Leone sets precedents on land rights, climate and sustainable development: The Sierra Leone government passed the Mines and Mineral Development Act, which aims to protect communities affected by future mining projects in the country. The new law will require companies to secure free, prior and informed consent from affected communities and increase the rights of local landowners to veto projects – including affirming equal land rights for women.¹⁸⁹

🌐 8. PERU

Justice for families of Peruvian defenders: After eight years of relentless advocacy and calls for justice, the Ucayali Supreme Court of Justice in Peru sentenced five illegal loggers to more than 28 years each in prison for the murder of four Ashéninka Indigenous leaders: Edwin Chota Varela, Leoncio Quintísima Meléndez, Jorge Ríos Pérez and Francisco Pinedo Ramírez.¹⁹⁰

🌐 9. MEXICO

Judicial support for due diligence and public consultation: A federal high court in Mexico revoked the permits issued by federal authorities for the construction of the Veracruz port. Residents of the state of Veracruz and the Mexican Centre for Environmental Law (CEMDA) celebrated a decision that “underpins the protection of the right to a healthy environment, and it sets a new precedent that will change the way officials determine how projects are assessed by their environmental impact.”¹⁹¹ The judgement also requires the relevant authorities to strengthen environmental impact assessments using the best science available and ensuring public participation in decision-making.¹⁹²

🌐 10. AUSTRALIA

Indigenous community recover their land from a massive gas company: The Munupi community filed a complaint against the Australian government for its lack of consultation when it approved fossil-fuel exploration along over 300km of the coastline of Tiwi Island. Senior community member Dennis Tipakalippa alleged that nobody consulted them before they decided that the project (owned by Santos, Australia's second-largest independent gas producer) could go ahead. As a result of the complaint, the Australian Federal Court issued a verdict revoking the project licence and the operations halted.¹⁹³

RECOMMENDATIONS

TO GOVERNMENTS AND BUSINESSES

Urgent action is needed to hold companies and governments to account for the violence, criminalisation and other attacks faced by land and environmental defenders as they seek to protect their land, their communities and our planet. Governments and businesses must take the following actions to tackle the key drivers and enablers of attacks against defenders:

GOVERNMENTS SHOULD:

- 1 Create a safe environment for defenders and civic space to thrive:** Existing laws that protect and recognise the rights of defenders and their communities, and Indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples, must be enforced. Where such laws do not exist, new frameworks must be established. Safeguards should be introduced to legislation that could be misused to criminalise defenders, while laws that target or criminalise protesters should be revoked. Governments must protect defender rights, including universal rights to free, prior and informed consent; Indigenous peoples' rights to their livelihood and culture; the right to life, liberty and freedom of expression; and the right to a safe, healthy and sustainable environment.¹⁹⁴ These are basic human rights, which are already embodied in various national and regional laws, and non-binding international resolutions.¹⁹⁵ Relevant existing mechanisms and tools should be used to better protect defenders and promote civic space, including the Escazú Agreement, the UN Special Rapporteur procedures, and the Esperanza Protocol. Where applicable, states should agree to and fully implement these key international and regional standards, including those raising concerns about harmful business practices.¹⁹⁶
- 2 Demonstrate leadership to report, investigate and seek accountability for reprisals against defenders:** International leadership is needed to help secure the safe and meaningful participation of defenders in national, regional and multilateral decision-making. Efforts to strengthen policies and law enforcement must be combined with monitoring of attacks against defenders as well as what happens after attacks to help prioritise actions to address impunity. Existing monitoring initiatives need to be brought into line with UN Sustainable Development Goal 16, which calls for increased protection for defenders. Data on attacks against rights defenders should disaggregate and differentiate between particularly vulnerable groups, including Indigenous peoples, women and girls, and land and environmental defenders.

- 3 Promote companies' legal accountability:** Legislate and enact laws to require companies and financial institutions to carry out due diligence on human rights, and environmental and climate risks throughout their global operations (including supply chains and business relationships). This would make companies and financial institutions more transparent and accountable for violence and other harms perpetrated against land and environmental defenders. Such laws should protect defenders in their interaction with business, recognise their efforts to safeguard the planet, and set out companies' responsibility to identify, prevent, mitigate and remedy any harms against them. Corporate accountability laws must uphold the standards set out in the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights; the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises; and the OECD Due Diligence Guidance for Responsible Business Conduct.¹⁹⁷

BUSINESSES SHOULD:

- 1 Identify, prevent, mitigate and remedy any harms in their operations against defenders:** Implement robust due diligence procedures that seek to identify, prevent, mitigate and remedy human rights and environmental harms throughout their operations. Company policies must explicitly identify any contextual risks to defenders and safeguard their rights. This means identifying and mitigating the drivers behind threats and attacks like land inequality, corruption, violent conflict, high impunity rates and shrinking civic space. Businesses must swiftly provide remedies where human rights and environmental harms occur, deter future attacks and publicly recognise the positive role defenders play.
- 2 Ensure legal compliance and corporate responsibility at all levels:** Strictly implement a policy of zero-tolerance for attacks and reprisals against land and environmental defenders, illegal land acquisition, and violations of the right to free, prior and informed consent. This must apply at all levels of a business's operations, including its global operations, value chains and business relationships. These policies should state who at senior level is responsible for legal compliance, as well as how it will be implemented and monitored. The policies should also identify clear red lines for prompt suspension or termination of contracts for non-compliant suppliers.

GOVERNMENTS AND BUSINESSES SHOULD:

- 1 Implement a rights-based approach for addressing climate change:** Ensure commitments to implement the Paris Agreement align with existing international human rights obligations and standards and promote just and equitable solutions to climate change. This should include strengthening the land rights of Indigenous and traditional communities and enhancing their participation in decision-making in recognition of the key role they play in protecting the world's last remaining biodiverse areas.

Recommendations continues →

TO THE EUROPEAN UNION

As a major trading bloc with a global footprint, the European Union has the responsibility and opportunity to lead the way on corporate accountability. It is obliged to contribute to protecting human rights and the environment, particularly where EU member actions have an international impact.

SPECIFICALLY, EU LAWMAKERS SHOULD ENSURE THAT THE CORPORATE SUSTAINABILITY DUE DILIGENCE DIRECTIVE (CSDDD):

- 1 Protects defenders and their communities** by requiring companies to engage with affected local communities including Indigenous peoples, and other land and environmental defenders in a safe, meaningful and inclusive way. This includes requirements to identify, prevent and mitigate potential risks to communities who speak out, including by recognising the disproportionate and differentiated impacts for vulnerable groups, including Indigenous peoples, and between genders.
- 2 Ensures access to justice** for affected people and communities through legal redress when harms result from business activities. It is crucial that complaints can be filed, or legal proceedings initiated against companies in European courts, even where the harm occurs outside of the EU. The CSDDD must ensure access to justice, compensation, and means of halting harmful practices. To achieve this, key provisions include an extended period for bringing a legal action as well as injunctive measures.
- 3 Reflects international standards** which clearly state that companies have a responsibility to respect international human rights and environmental standards. This includes the universal right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment which was officially recognised by the UN General Assembly in July 2022. As part of their due diligence, companies are required to assess and address their risks and negative impacts which includes risks to defenders. Companies should also be required to align with the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders.
- 4 Ensures that financial institutions are required to conduct human rights and environmental due diligence** in line with international standards. The financial sector continues to bankroll harmful corporate projects and should not be granted an exemption under the new law. Instead, the CSDDD should require financial institutions to conduct ongoing due diligence throughout their value chains and investment portfolios and empower them to divest from harmful entities where appropriate.



Right: Climate strike march during COP26, Glasgow, Scotland, 2021.



METHODOLOGY

HOW WE WORK

The Global Witness Land and Environmental Defenders Campaign aims to stop the broad range of threats and attacks that land and environmental defenders and their communities face. It strives to raise awareness of these abuses and to amplify the voices of defenders in support of their work and that of their networks.

WE DEFINE ‘LAND AND ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENDERS’ AS PEOPLE WHO TAKE A STAND AND CARRY OUT PEACEFUL ACTION AGAINST THE UNJUST, DISCRIMINATORY, CORRUPT OR DAMAGING EXPLOITATION OF NATURAL RESOURCES OR THE ENVIRONMENT.

Land and environmental defenders are a specific type of human rights defender – and are often the most targeted for their work.

Our definition covers a broad range of people. Defenders often live in communities whose land, health and livelihoods are threatened by the operations of mining, logging and agribusiness companies or other industries. Others will be defending our biodiverse environment. Others will be supporting such efforts through their work – as human rights or environmental lawyers, politicians, park rangers, journalists, or members of campaigns or civil society organisations, for instance.

GLOBAL WITNESS HAS PRODUCED A YEARLY ACCOUNT OF MURDERED LAND AND ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENDERS SINCE 2012.

We maintain a database of these killings so that there is a record of these tragic events, and we can track trends and highlight the key issues behind them.

We produce statistics based on our own data and draw on other publicly available databases to produce additional statistics such as killings per biome (as featured in the Amazon case study) or per capita killings. The latter allows us to shine a light on countries in which absolute figures might be low but where killings become a lot more significant in relative terms when the size of the overall population is taken into account. We would emphasise that killings at any level taking place in any jurisdiction remain a concern.

RESEARCH INTO THE KILLINGS AND ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCES OF LAND AND ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENDERS BETWEEN 1 JANUARY 2022 AND 31 DECEMBER 2022: Global Witness identifies cases of killings by searching and reviewing reliable sources of publicly available online information, through the following process:

- ⇒ We identify datasets from international and national sources with details of named human rights defenders killed, such as the Front Line Defenders annual report and the Programa Somos Defensores annual report on Colombia, and then research each case.
- ⇒ We set up search-engine alerts using keywords and conduct other searches online to identify relevant cases across the world.
- ⇒ Where possible or necessary, we check with in-country or regional partners to gather further information on the cases. We work with approximately 30 different local, national and regional organisations across more than 20 countries to do this. We strive to expand our network each year, thus strengthening our data and global coverage.

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

- ⇒ Credible, published and current online sources of information.
- ⇒ 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 an environmental or land issue.

Sometimes we will include a case that does not meet the criteria outlined above, where a respected local organisation provides us with compelling evidence that is not available online, based on their own investigations.

Global Witness includes friends, colleagues and the family of murdered land and environmental defenders in its database if a) they appear to have been murdered as a reprisal for the defender’s work, or b) they were killed in an attack that also left the defender dead.

Global Witness also records forced disappearances of land and environmental defenders, checking each case for an update a minimum of six months after the disappearance. In cases where the individual remains disappeared, it is recorded as a killing.

Our data on killings is likely to be an underestimate, given that many murders go unreported, particularly in rural areas and in particular countries. Our set of criteria cannot always be met by a review of public information like newspaper reports or legal documents, nor through local contacts – having this strict methodology therefore means our figures do not represent the scale of the problem, and we are constantly working to improve this.

In summary, the figures presented in this report should be considered as only a partial picture of the extent of killings of land and environmental defenders across the world in 2022. We identified relevant cases in 18 countries in 2022, but it is likely that attacks affecting land and environmental defenders also occurred in other countries where human rights violations are widespread. Reasons why we may not have been able to document such cases in line with our methodology and criteria include:

- ⇒ The limited presence of civil society organisations, NGOs and other groups monitoring the situation.
- ⇒ Government suppression of the media and other information outlets.
- ⇒ Wider conflicts and/or political violence, including between communities, that make it difficult to identify specific cases.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We at Global Witness 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 keeping a healthy planet for this and future generations. Thank you.

Our work to document attacks against land and environmental defenders is only possible thanks to the generous assistance of organisations that diligently keep a record of attacks in their respective countries.

Thank you also to those that have assisted with the editing, design and images, and translation of this report.

The Global Witness Land and Environmental Defenders campaign team would like to recognise our amazing colleagues. Without the hard work of the Global Witness communications, development, facilities, finance, human resources, IT, legal and management departments – as well as everybody else who keeps the organisation running – Global Witness 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.



Right: Eliete Paraguassu, a quilombola fisherwoman and land and environmental defender from Brazil, 2022.

THIS YEAR, WE ARE PARTICULARLY GRATEFUL FOR THE ASSISTANCE OF:

- ACI-PARTICIPA, HONDURAS
- ALLIANCE FOR LAND, INDIGENOUS AND ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENDERS (ALLIED)
- AMAZÔNIA REAL, BRAZIL
- AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL
- ALYANSA TIGIL MINA (ATM), PHILIPPINES
- BASE-IS, PARAGUAY
- BUSINESS AND HUMAN RIGHTS RESOURCE CENTRE
- CENTRO DE ASISTENCIA LEGAL A PUEBLOS INDÍGENAS (CALPI), NICARAGUA
- CENTRO POR LA JUSTICIA Y DERECHOS HUMANOS DE LA COSTA ATLÁNTICA DE NICARAGUA, NICARAGUA
- CENTRO MEXICANO DE DERECHO AMBIENTAL (CEMDA), MEXICO
- COMISSÃO PASTORAL DA TERRA (CPT), BRAZIL
- COMITÉ CEREZO, MEXICO
- COORDINADORA NACIONAL DE DERECHOS HUMANOS, PERU
- CORPORACIÓN REGIONAL YARIGÜÉS – GRUPO DE ESTUDIOS SOCIALES EXTRACTIVOS Y AMBIENTALES DEL MAGDALENA MEDIO, COLOMBIA
- FRONT LINE DEFENDERS
- GREEN ADVOCATES INTERNATIONAL, LIBERIA
- HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS ALERT (HRDA), INDIA
- HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH
- DE INICIATIVA MESOAMERICANA DE MUJERES DEFENSORAS DE DERECHOS HUMANOS
- INSTITUTO NACIONAL DE DERECHOS HUMANOS, CHILE
- KALIKASAN PNE, PHILIPPINES
- KARAPATAN, PHILIPPINES
- LIVING LAUDATO SI' PHILIPPINES
- NATURAL JUSTICE, SOUTH AFRICA
- ODEVIDA, VENEZUELA
- ORGANIZACIÓN KAPÉ KAPÉ, VENEZUELA
- OFFICE OF THE UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS, COLOMBIA
- OFFICE OF THE UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS, MEXICO
- OFFICE OF THE UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS, REGIONAL OFFICE FOR SOUTH-EAST ASIA
- PROÉTICA, PERU
- PROGRAMA SOMOS DEFENSORES, COLOMBIA
- PROTECTION INTERNATIONAL, INDONESIA
- PROTECTION INTERNATIONAL, THAILAND
- REPÓRTER BRASIL
- SIBUYANONS AGAINST MINING (SAM)
- UNIDAD DE PROTECCIÓN A DEFENSORAS Y DEFENSORES DE DERECHOS HUMANOS (UDEFEQUA), GUATEMALA
- UNITED NATIONS ENVIRONMENTAL PROGRAMME (UNEP)
- VIRUNGA NATIONAL PARK, DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO



ENDNOTES

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