

# The Silent War : Violence Against Environmental Activists Across the Globe



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## **A Decade of Escalating Violence**

From 2012 through 2023, violence against environmental defenders has risen steadily. Each year brings new records in activist killings, with 2023 seeing at least 196 confirmed deaths. These numbers, however, likely underrepresent the full extent of the violence. In countries with restricted press freedom, authoritarian governance, or active conflict zones, many cases remain unreported or deliberately hidden. Independent monitoring is scarce, and fear of reprisal silences communities.

This increase in killings is driven by the collision of economic ambitions and ecological limits. As governments and corporations push aggressively for extractive projects—mining, logging, agriculture, fossil fuel extraction—they frequently encounter resistance from those who live on or depend on the threatened land. These defenders are not only safeguarding biodiversity; they are protecting cultural heritage, food security, and the rights of future generations.

## **The Global Geography of Danger**

### **Latin America: The Epicentre of Environmental Murders**

Latin America consistently records the highest number of killings of environmental defenders. In 2023, the region accounted for 85% of such murders.

**Colombia** stands as the most dangerous country, with 79 activists killed in 2023 alone—more than any country has ever recorded in a single year. Since 2012, Colombia has lost 461 environmental defenders. The roots of this violence lie in the country's complex web of armed conflict, illegal mining, land grabs, and systemic corruption. While the peace process with the FARC raised hopes for reduced



violence, it inadvertently created a vacuum filled by criminal organizations vying for control over lucrative natural resources.

**Brazil**, with its vast Amazon rainforest, remains a deadly battleground. In 2023, 25 activists were killed, many of them indigenous leaders and local community members. Brazil's environmental defenders often confront illegal loggers, cattle ranchers, and agribusiness conglomerates. The assassination of indigenous leader Paulo Paulino Guajajara in 2019, a member of the "Guardians of the Forest," highlighted the lethal consequences of defending nature against powerful economic interests.

**Honduras**, despite its small size, has the highest per capita rate of environmental activist killings. In 2023, 18 murders were reported. The case of Berta Cáceres, an indigenous Lenca woman and winner of the Goldman Environmental Prize, remains emblematic. She was assassinated in 2016 for opposing the Agua Zarca hydroelectric dam. Investigations later revealed links between the hitmen, military officers, and executives of the dam's parent company.

**Mexico** also recorded 18 killings in 2023. Activists there face threats from both organized crime and state forces. Many of the defenders killed were opposing illegal logging, mining projects, and water privatization efforts. In regions like Guerrero and Oaxaca, environmental activism often overlaps with indigenous autonomy movements, making activists doubly vulnerable.

## Asia: A Rising Tide of Repression

Asia, while historically less affected than Latin America, is rapidly becoming a hotspot of environmental violence.

In the **Philippines**, 2023 saw an alarming increase in targeted violence against activists. Environmental

defenders—many from indigenous communities—have been subjected to extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, and red-tagging, where activists are falsely labeled as terrorists or communist insurgents. The 2016 assassination of Gloria Capitan, an anti-coal campaigner shot in front of her grandchildren, remains one of the most harrowing examples.

**India** has witnessed growing repression against environmental and tribal activists. Large-scale infrastructure and mining projects frequently clash with local communities, particularly in tribal regions like Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, and the Northeast. Activists opposing these projects often face false charges, police brutality, and social ostracism. The controversial death of PhD scholar **Muthu Krishnan**, who campaigned against caste discrimination and resource extraction, sparked national outrage and highlighted the risks faced by activists from marginalized communities.

In **Indonesia**, environmental defenders opposing palm oil plantations and mining concessions often encounter threats, arrests, and violence. The Indonesian government's expansionist resource agenda has led to the displacement of indigenous communities and deforestation of critical habitats like Kalimantan and Papua.

## Africa: Underreported and Underprotected

In **Africa**, data on violence against environmental defenders is less comprehensive, but the threats are real and growing. In countries like the **Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)**, conservation workers in national parks face armed militias and poachers. The 2020 killing of 12 rangers in Virunga National Park drew international condemnation and shed light on the dangers facing those protecting biodiversity hotspots.



In **Kenya**, members of indigenous communities like the Sengwer and Ogiek have been evicted, beaten, and in some cases killed for resisting land grabs and deforestation under the guise of conservation. Activists also face criminal charges for opposing water privatization, mining operations, or large dam projects such as the Gibe III in Ethiopia.

### **Indigenous Communities: Frontline Defenders**

Though indigenous peoples make up only around 5% of the global population, they accounted for 43% of environmental defender killings in 2023. These communities often have a spiritual and cultural connection to their lands, which makes them particularly active in resisting environmental degradation. Unfortunately, this also makes them frequent targets.

Indigenous territories are often rich in untapped resources—timber, oil, minerals—which attract exploitative projects. Governments and corporations often bypass indigenous consent or use coercion and bribery to secure access to land. Those who resist are criminalized, stigmatized, or attacked.

Women in these communities face dual threats: violence stemming from both their activism and their gender. Female environmental defenders are frequently subject to sexual violence, defamation, and exclusion from decision-making processes.

### **India: Democracy and Development at Odds**

India's rise in the ranks of countries hostile to environmental activists is tied to its aggressive development agenda. Mega-projects such as coal-fired power plants, industrial corridors, dams, and urban expansion are frequently pushed through without transparent environmental impact assessments or proper community consultation.

Tribal communities—adivasis—often find themselves displaced without adequate compensation or resettlement. When they resist, they are branded as "anti-national" or Naxalite (Maoist rebels), and subjected to police action.

The **Sterlite protests in Tamil Nadu**, where local people opposed a copper smelting plant due to pollution concerns, culminated in police firing that killed 13 protesters in 2018. Similarly, ongoing resistance against coal projects in Hasdeo Aranya, Chhattisgarh, and deforestation in Goa and Uttarakhand illustrate the broad-based pushback against environmentally damaging projects.

Despite constitutional safeguards and laws like the Forest Rights Act, implementation remains poor. Activists like Soni Sori and Dayamani Barla continue to highlight the human cost of so-called development in tribal regions.

### **Impunity and Criminalization**

A major enabler of violence against environmental defenders is impunity. In most cases, perpetrators are never brought to justice. Investigations are either half-hearted or manipulated. Governments often side with corporations, particularly when projects are seen as engines of economic growth. As a result, activists are branded as enemies of progress.

This criminalization is not limited to violence. Activists are routinely subjected to:

- Surveillance and intimidation
- Legal harassment through strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs)
- Arbitrary arrests and prolonged detentions
- Propaganda campaigns labelling them as foreign agents or extremists

These tactics create a chilling effect, discouraging civic participation and silencing dissent.



## The Role of Corporations and Global Supply Chains

Multinational corporations—especially those involved in resource extraction, agriculture, and infrastructure—often play a direct or indirect role in violence against environmental defenders. Many projects are launched without the free, prior, and informed consent of affected communities.

- Industries linked to human rights abuses include:
- Palm oil in Indonesia and Malaysia
- Gold and coal mining in Latin America and Africa
- Logging in the Amazon and Southeast Asia
- Hydroelectric dams displacing indigenous peoples in Central America and Asia

Global Witness and other watchdogs have pushed for mandatory due diligence laws. These would require corporations to assess the human rights and environmental impacts of their operations and supply chains—and be held liable if violations occur.

## Toward Justice: Protecting Environmental Defenders

Addressing violence against environmental defenders demands coordinated global, national, and local action. Key strategies include:

### ❑ Strengthening Legal Protections

- Recognize environmental defenders as human rights defenders under national and international law.
- Enshrine the right to protest, organize, and protect one's land and resources.
- Implement and enforce laws like the Escazú Agreement in Latin America, which guarantees access to environmental information and justice.

### ❑ Ending Impunity

- Establish independent investigative bodies.
- Prosecute perpetrators and those who order or enable violence.
- Sanction government officials who fail to protect defenders.

### ❑ Corporate Accountability

- Enforce mandatory due diligence laws for corporations.
- Penalize companies whose operations or contractors are linked to violence.
- Increase transparency around land acquisitions and project funding.

### ❑ International Solidarity

- Support grassroots movements with funding, training, and media exposure.
- Apply diplomatic pressure on countries with high activist murder rates.
- Empower UN mechanisms and rapporteurs to monitor and intervene.

### ❑ Community Empowerment and Media Advocacy

- Train and protect citizen journalists and legal advocates.
- Highlight success stories of community conservation and resistance.
- Elevate the voices of women and indigenous defenders in policy-making spaces.

## A Fight for Our Shared Future

The rising death toll of environmental defenders is a brutal indictment of global inaction. These individuals are not radicals or rebels; they are teachers, farmers, tribal elders, mothers, and students. They fight not for profit but for preservation—for clean rivers, healthy forests, ancestral lands, and a liveable climate.

Every murdered defender is a voice silenced, a community weakened, and a step backward in the fight for ecological justice. But their deaths must not be in vain. Their stories remind us of the stakes and call us to action—not tomorrow, but today.

Protecting the planet cannot be separated from protecting the people who defend it.

Until governments, corporations, and international institutions recognize this truth, the war on environmental defenders will continue in silence.

We owe these brave individuals not only our gratitude but our commitment—to ensure that defending life on Earth is not a death sentence, but a right enshrined, respected, and celebrated by all.

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