Environmental Human Rights Defenders are Facing a Crisis

The environment

The wrongful use of criminal law and justice systems by governments and companies to obstruct the work of environmental and land defenders has become an increasingly common threat.

Criminalisation

The faces of criminalisation:

- Enforced disappearance
- Threats and attacks on family
- Use of force in peaceful protests
- Interrogation and torture
- Internment of peaceful protesters
- Violation of due process
- Denial of adequate time and means for legal defense
- Arbitrary use of preventative pretrial detention
- Unreasonably lengthy legal proceedings
- Misuse of anti-terrorism laws to deter and punish environmental defense activities
- Baseless accusations, evidentiary problems and bogus criminal lawsuits
- Politically motivated application of criminal law
- Violation of human rights
- Arbitrary detention
- Denial of a fair trial
- Unfounded statements of government officials

Stigmatisation

- Smear campaigns are used to portray defenders of being ‘anti-development’, criminals and even terrorists.
- False accusations in social networks and the media are increasingly common ways to defame defenders.
- Smear campaigns, baseless accusations, evidentiary problems and unfounded statements of government officials are most dangerous.

Motive for killing:
- Agribusiness
- Logging
- Water & dam projects
- Other threats faced by defenders
- Forcible removal from participatory spaces
- Forcible displacement and eviction
- Rights violations from participatory activities
- Violations of property and revenues
- Unjust accusations
- Harassment and intimidation
- Vandalism of property
- Death threats
- Forcible removal from participatory spaces
- Forced displacement and eviction
- Attacks on property
- Attacks on land
- Attacks on natural resources
- Attacks on livelihoods
- Attacks on food chains
- Attacks on physical integrity
- Threats and attacks to their children
- Sexual violence
- Economic and social violence
- Social rejection for not conforming to gender stereotypes
- Domestic violence
- Differentiated risks and threats

Women defenders

Women face gender-specific threats and tend to be at a distinct disadvantage. Exclusion from the labour market and exclusion from land ownership and leadership positions increase their vulnerabilities. The double role of caregivers and defenders places increased burdens with a huge physical and psychological impact.

Enforced disappearances

Between 2014-2018, almost 900 indigenous leaders were killed.

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164 killings

2018

51%

39%

9%

Regional distribution of killings

Indigenous peoples

The most dangerous regions were:

- Asia
- Africa
- Latin America

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Global Witness documented in 2018, on average, over three per week.