



CLIMATE: REPRESSION AS DENIAL





Activists lay on the dry ground during a Global Climate Action demonstration in La Vinuela reservoir, in the province of Malaga, Spain on 22 March 2023.

Photo by Jorge Guerrero/AFP via Getty Images.

The need to act on the climate crisis has never been clearer. 2023 was the **hottest year ever** – and brought with it the clearest possible evidence of what living with climate change means. Seemingly every week brought news of another extreme weather event, imperilling countless lives, affecting the most vulnerable people the worst. In July, United Nations (UN) Secretary-General António Guterres grimly **announced** ‘the era of global boiling has arrived’.

What states and the private sector are doing in response is nowhere near enough. Current plans to cut greenhouse gas emissions fall far short of what’s required to achieve the Paris Agreement’s aim of limiting the global temperature rise to 1.5 degrees above pre-industrial levels. Fossil fuel firms are banking soaring profits and spending very little on renewable energies, while governments keep approving new extractive projects. International climate funding continues to be grossly insufficient.

Calls to break the destructive cycle are coming loudest from

civil society, which has long sounded the alarm and raised public awareness of the need for climate action. In 2023, those calls were as loud as ever – but they faced growing pushback. Even in countries that broadly respect civic freedoms, it’s getting harder to protest to demand climate action. In the global south, climate and environmental activists working close to the sites of extraction face extensive violence.

It’s getting harder for civil society to demand climate action, and the window for action that will make a difference is closing. The restriction of climate activism must be acknowledged as a form of climate denial.

Outright climate denial is becoming rare, increasingly taking more subtle forms such as states and companies delaying action, playing up the risks of changes required and promoting limited symbolic actions. Civil society calls this denial what it is and demands it ends – and this is a key reason it’s being targeted.



2023 WAS THE HOTTEST YEAR ON RECORD – 1.48 DEGREES WARMER THAN THE LONG-TERM AVERAGE



AROUND 7% OF GLOBAL GDP WAS INVESTED IN ACTIVITIES WITH DIRECT NEGATIVE ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS



GLOBAL WILDFIRE CARBON EMISSIONS INCREASED BY 30%



MILITARY FORCES ACCOUNTED FOR 5.5% OF GREENHOUSE GAS EMISSIONS



AT LEAST 2,456 FOSSIL FUEL LOBBYISTS WERE PRESENT AT COP28

COP28: A STEP FORWARD, BUT SO MUCH FURTHER TO GO

Climate denial also comes when major fossil fuel states and companies are allowed undue influence on political processes. When climate summits are held in countries with major fossil fuel industries and closed civic space, it prevents civil society playing its legitimate role. And this keeps happening.

As the record-breaking year came to an end, all eyes fell on the COP28 climate summit, hosted for the second year in a row by a state with closed civic space. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) followed in the footsteps of Egypt, the COP27 host. Oil and gas extraction is the cornerstone of the UAE's economy. And it's happening again in 2024: COP29 is being hosted by Azerbaijan, yet another petrostate with closed civic space.

Civic space at COPs matters because these meetings are key annual rallying points for advocacy. Representatives of every state are forced to sit around the table and confront the reality of climate change. Civil society needs to be in the room and able to speak out and hold states to account on the agreements they've signed up to.

What made COP28 more important than most was that it centred on the **global stocktake** – the first comprehensive assessment of the state of play since the 2015 Paris Agreement. This made clear just how far off-track efforts are: if implemented, under current commitments temperatures will rise by between 2.4 and 2.6 degrees. This would subject **many more millions** to catastrophes and potentially trigger **tipping points** for runaway climate change. There's no way to prevent this without much further and faster cuts to greenhouse gas emissions, and no way to make these without keeping fossil fuels in the ground.

As a direct result of civil society's advocacy, states at COP28 were finally forced to acknowledge the elephant in the room. Incredibly, almost three decades after the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) was agreed in 1992, for the first time the summit's final declaration acknowledged the need to move away from fossil fuels.

The biggest influence of civil society was in agenda setting. Fossil fuel phase out was never an official agenda item at this COP, but we managed to make it the number one topic for the global stocktake, and the main benchmark for success. Civil society played a crucial role setting the agenda at COP28, successfully steering the focus of world governments towards the urgent need for a fossil fuel phase out aligned with the Paris Agreement’s 1.5 degrees warming limit. This shift in attention, sustained for almost two weeks, marked an unprecedented achievement during a UN climate summit. There’s no way back now. Despite its weak language, the declaration sent a clear signal that the fossil fuel era will come to an end.



KAISA KOSONEN
Greenpeace Nordic

Agreement awash with qualifications

As ever, the devil was in the details. Decisions at COPs are made by consensus rather than voting, something that tends to produce lowest-common-denominator agreements, since any state can insist on watering down the language. Petrostates – notoriously Saudi Arabia – have taken great advantage of this over the years. This meant that even though civil society’s advocacy paid off with 130 out of UNFCCC 198 parties backing a commitment to ‘phase out’ fossil fuels, the weaker **final text** only commits to ‘transition away from’ them.

The agreement ended up offering a shopping list, with states being called on to ‘contribute to’ transitioning away from fossil fuels as one of eight possible methods of cutting greenhouse gas emissions. The Alliance of Small Islands States – many of

which face an existential threat from sea-level rise – denounced a **‘litany of loopholes’**.

The agreement makes a welcome commitment to ‘accelerating action in this critical decade’, since to make a big difference, emissions cuts are needed as soon as possible. But the reference to fossil fuels focuses only on their role in ‘energy systems’, a formulation that appears to leave scope to retain them in anything else, including agriculture, industry and transport, as well as in defence, with military emissions, vast in scale given today’s many conflicts, exempt from the Paris Agreement.

Then there’s the agreement’s reference to the potential for carbon capture and storage, something pushed by the oil and gas elite, with the UAE to the fore, even though scientists say the technology is unproven, likely unscalable and potentially only ever partly effective. It’s just a fantasy to enable continuing extraction.

There are many more problems. Although the agreement commits to tripling renewable energy capacity and doubling energy efficiency, crucial detail is undefined. A reference to ‘transitional fuels’ could be used to justify expanded gas extraction. The text on coal, the dirtiest fossil fuel, goes no further than at **COP26**. On the huge problem of fossil fuel subsidies, the wording is awash with qualifications, referring to ‘inefficient’ subsidies, with states free to interpret what this means.

Flawed process

Ultimately the text, while making some advances, reveals the limits of COPs. On their own they won’t break down the fierce resistance of petrostates and fossil fuel corporations, determined to continue their lethal and lucrative business for as long as possible.



Photo by Giuseppe Cacace/AFP via Getty Images.

Climate activists demand an end to fossil fuel subsidies at COP28 on 12 December 2023.

The power of the fossil fuel industry was reflected in the presence of **at least 2,456 fossil fuel lobbyists** at COP28, many as part of state delegations – an almost fourfold increase on the previous high, set just a year before at COP27. Clearly, global temperatures aren't the only records being shattered. The desperation to prevent change was revealed in **leaked letters** from the OPEC cartel urging its members to reject any text targeting fossil fuels.

Representatives of oil and gas companies are unofficially involved in climate negotiations. They have no title, they do not appear as such on attendees' lists, but we know they are there because we have seen them take advantage of COPs and pre-COPs to request informal meetings with heads of delegations or with the secretariat of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change.

 **MARÍA REYES**
Indigenous Futures, Mexico

With the summit concluded, plans for a **massive expansion** of fossil fuel extraction continue. At the forefront of such plans is Adnoc, the UAE's state-owned oil and gas company. When the summit ended, COP28 leader Sultan al-Jaber returned to his day job as head of Adnoc, **confirming** the corporation's plan to boost its investments in oil and gas extraction.

While some praised al-Jaber for his diplomatic efforts, for many in civil society putting an oil head in charge of the summit made a mockery of the climate crisis. Ahead of the meeting al-Jaber **faced accusations** that the UAE planned to use the summit to strike oil deals, and during COP28 he **appeared** to let the greenwashing mask slip and indulge in denial of climate science.

Money matters

Ahead of the summit, states struck a deal on the fund to compensate global south countries for the loss and damage caused by climate change, agreed in principle at COP27. Civil society pushed for this for years, but is concerned about the fact that the fund will, at least in its early years, be hosted by the World Bank. Civil society had argued against this, not least because the World Bank has a track record of supporting

environmentally destructive initiatives with poor human rights protections. Civil society has also pointed to the high cost the World Bank charges for managing funds – on one fund it charged 17 per cent – which amounts to a lot of money that should be going to global south countries.

The biggest problem is that contributions to the fund are voluntary. With total pledges of **around US\$662 million** to date, it's far short of the billions needed.

Beyond this, one of the major demands of civil society and global south states going into COP28 was for much more funding for adaptation, to help countries cope with the realities of climate change. But no real progress was made here.

The hypocrisy of global north states perpetuates a great injustice. Their present-day wealth is the result of early industrialisation, in many cases underpinned by colonial exploitation, and they're the major contributors of accumulated greenhouse gases. Although many are still falling short of emissions cuts targets and have delayed phase-out plans, at COP28 they mostly pushed for language on fossil fuel withdrawal. They expect global south countries to skip a stage of development and switch to renewables straight away, but without ensuring they have enough funding to do so. Current levels of climate financing are **grossly overstated** and much of what is on offer is in the form of loans that pile on top of already high debt levels.

There's long been a particular shortfall on funding for adaptation, despite that fact that many global south states with historically low greenhouse gas emissions are expected to adapt rapidly to a problem they largely haven't caused, but that disproportionately affects them.

The system is broken – and that didn't change at COP28. The text of the agreement recognises that trillions of dollars are needed,



Activists from the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law, and Development network protest during COP28 on 4 December 2023.

but doesn't say where they'll come from. It urges global north states to compile a report on their progress towards the target of doubling adaptation financing by 2025 but notes that, even if this were achieved, much more would be needed.

Civil society's role denied

COP28 processes also reflected the growing trend of repression of climate activism.

Many of the COP28 draft agreement's references to human rights and justice **never made** it into the final statement. The text contains no mention of environmental and land rights defenders. Clearly the summit's host had no interest in pushing for strong human rights recognition. The UAE criminalises dissent and routinely detains activists. The authorities commit widespread **torture** in jails and detention centres and hold at least 58 prisoners of conscience **in prison** despite them having completed their sentences. Brazenly, during COP28, they launched a **mass trial** of over 80 people on trumped-up terrorism charges.

The government carried its hostility towards civil society into the summit, just as Egypt did at COP27. Summit organisers made sure spaces for civil society events were isolated from the rest of the meeting. They **imposed** strict limits on protests, forcing people planning them to clear tremendous hurdles on threat of expulsion if they didn't comply. Due to heat levels, the organisers didn't permit protests at **lunch breaks** – normally a key opportunity to interact with delegates. They **banned** national flags at protests, hindering people wanting to show solidarity with Palestinians. They used extensive video surveillance. Unusually, civil society organised no protests outside the sole UN-administered official protest zone, so sure it was of the punishments that would follow.

Many in civil society judged this to be the most restrictive COP ever. And shockingly, it's set to happen again when Azerbaijan hosts COP29 this November. In 2023, underpinned by its vast oil wealth, Azerbaijan decisively triumphed in its long-running conflict with Armenia over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh territory through forced migration and ethnic cleansing ► [GO TO CHAPTER](#). It followed this with yet another wave of **domestic restrictions** against civil society and the media. Azerbaijan has long sought to launder its international reputation by hosting prestigious international events. COP29 threatens to be just another of these.

Reform needed

While inadequate and insufficient, COPs are still the only annual opportunity for all states to get round the table and negotiate on climate change. They need to be made better.

One obvious flaw is the requirement to work by consensus. UN General Assembly resolutions can be passed by a majority, and the same rule should apply to COPs so that regressive states like Iran, Russia and Saudi Arabia can no longer force lowest-common-denominator agreements.

Fossil fuel lobbyists must be kept away from COPs and instead those on the frontlines, living with the impacts of climate change, should be given privileged access. At the very least much more clarity is needed about who's involved and whose interests they represent.

COPs should no longer be held in petrostates, but in states that show climate leadership. Nor should they be held in states with highly restricted civic space – something **characteristic** of many countries with major extractive industries – so that civil society

can't be denied the chance to mobilise fully. COP hosts should have to commit to respecting human rights and enabling full and diverse participation from domestic and international civil society, and be held accountable if they fail to do so.

Ambitious agreements won't result unless civil society is free to act as the world's conscience and voice demands for the climate action humanity needs.



- COP28: ONE STEP FURTHER
- COP28: ANOTHER CLIMATE SUMMIT IN CLOSED CIVIC SPACE

CIVIC SPACE UNDER PRESSURE

Civil society is taking action at every level – not just at COPs. It is active on the frontlines of resistance against extraction, in protests and direct action and in national-level and transnational advocacy. And climate denial, in the form of repression of civic space, is coming in backlash to all these actions.

Activists are being made targets because of the focus of their work. They're being penalised for defending the environment and demanding climate action because this puts them on a collision course with powerful economic and political interests.

In contexts where civic space is heavily restricted, repression is long-established. But climate activists are increasingly experiencing backlash from states, politicians and companies

in countries where civic space is otherwise broadly respected – and where political and corporate leaders publicly acknowledge the need for transition. Mainstream politicians and the private sector pay lip service to climate action, but their words are often betrayed by a reality of restriction. This growing trend became impossible to ignore in 2023.

While climate change is a collective reality, the experience of repression is personal. States, politicians and companies are targeting activists with the aim of raising the costs of activism, deterring people from speaking out and making it harder for people to protest in numbers. Common tactics of restriction include harassment, threats, physical aggression – a tactic particularly used against Indigenous activists –, public vilification, the criminalisation of protest tactics and the violent suppression of protests.

Backlash in the global north

One of the most alarming current trends is the growing criminalisation of climate activists in global north countries that are home to vibrant protest movements.

This trend has intensified as states have backtracked on their commitments to reduce fossil fuel use in response to the impacts on energy costs and supplies of Russia's war on Ukraine. Some, such as Germany, have fallen back on coal use, while some with oil and gas reserves, such as the UK and USA, are pursuing increased extraction. Climate activists are being silenced for pointing to the contradiction between statements and practice.

On top of this, in many global north countries right-wing populist and nationalist politicians are on the rise ► **GO TO CHAPTER**. These

politicians vilify climate campaigners just as they demonise activists for women’s and LGBTQI+ people’s rights, accusing them of being part of a shadowy elite **engaged in a global conspiracy**. They spread disinformation, claiming climate policies have the aim of controlling the public. Once-fringe views are entering the mainstream, and the restrictions that democratic states impose on climate activists can have the effect of legitimising extremist attacks.

Climate activists face growing restrictions in Germany, Europe’s now-struggling economic powerhouse, where a far-right party, Alternative for Germany, has surged in the polls. Government restrictions on climate activists are one of the main reasons the CIVICUS Monitor **downgraded** Germany’s civic space rating from open to narrowed in 2023, signalling a clear regression in Germany’s decades-long practices of broadly respecting protest freedoms.

Through direct action, such as disrupting traffic through street blockades, Germany’s Last Generation movement has raised awareness and started conversations. It has gathered growing numbers to demand climate action while making practical recommendations, such as proposals to cut food waste and make public transport more affordable. Its actions have sparked constructive discussions with local government bodies.

But the national-level response has been criminalisation – including through laws intended to tackle organised crime. In 2023, Last Generation activists had their homes raided, laptops and phones confiscated and bank accounts frozen.

Violent policing of protests is also a problem. In January, German police **used violence** to evict activists occupying land to try to prevent a coalmine expansion and then against a protest at the police’s actions. There are, however, signs that this heavy-handed approach is backfiring, helping rally support for the movement.



A Just Stop Oil activist lies on the ground in handcuffs after being arrested in Parliament Square in London, UK on 30 October 2023.

Photo by Daniel Leal/AFP via Getty Images.

The criminalisation of peaceful protests organised by people who aren't trying to hurt anyone but who want to protect lives elicits instant solidarity. Thousands of people have joined Last Generation's protest marches. Frozen funds have been almost fully replaced by donations pouring in. People contact us to ask how they can play their part in climate activism.



ZOE RUGE
Last Generation, Germany

Last Generation is also active in Italy, where it too embraces non-violent civil disobedience to demand the government stop its funding for fossil fuels, cut emissions, increase renewable energy use and improve energy efficiency. But Italy's **far-right government** is in no mood to listen and is criminalising protesters.

The Italian government criminalises climate activists because by doing so it can continue avoiding its responsibilities regarding the wellbeing of its citizens. It introduced a new law specifically to punish climate actions seen as damaging monuments or cultural sites with fines and possible imprisonment for those caught in the act. It also uses indictments for 'criminal conspiracy', a charge historically used against the mafia.



GABRIELLA ABBATE
Last Generation, Italy

Things could be about to get worse in the Netherlands, which took a rightwards turn at its **November general election**. Negotiations to form a government continue at the time of writing, but right-wing populist Geert Wilders won the most seats and he's promised to rip up environmental regulations, retreat from international agreements and increase oil and gas extraction.

The backdrop is a vociferous campaign by climate activists to demand an end to government fossil fuel subsidies, which **amount** to around US\$39.9 billion a year. The Dutch government committed to ending them in 2020 but hasn't done so. Campaigners have communicated this demand through non-violent direct action, repeatedly blocking a major highway in The Hague, the country's administrative centre. Protests grew during 2023 with many thousands taking part in a march on 9 September. Police used water cannon and **detained** around 2,400 people.

As in Germany, attempts to limit the protests backfired, causing even bigger numbers to turn out.

The right to protest is a fundamental right that should be protected, respected and fulfilled. The authorities should take the peacefulness of protesters as a starting point and facilitate protests as much as possible. Restrictions should be the exception rather than the rule.



SIEGER SLOOT Extinction Rebellion, The Netherlands
MARJOLEIN KUIJERS Amnesty International, The Netherlands

In the UK, direct action groups have also sought to keep climate in the headlines through **nonviolent direct action** and civil disobedience. The government's reaction has been to **pass** restrictive laws that criminalise disruptive protests.

In January 2024, the UN special rapporteur on environmental defenders, Michael Forst, **condemned** the government's 'regressive new laws'. Numerous climate activists have been jailed for peaceful actions that, until recently, wouldn't have attracted prison sentences. People have been banned from citing the climate crisis as a justification for their actions in court, and **found** in contempt of court for doing so.

Among those criminalised are activists from Just Stop Oil, one of the UK's highest-profile direct-action groups, demanding that the government stop licensing fossil fuel projects.

I was arrested on 19 July for slow marching in Parliament Square. I was only on the road for a matter of seconds before my arms were forcibly yanked behind my back, and handcuffs put on. I was detained in a police cell for 13 hours. The UK legal system is allowing big polluting companies, such as oil giant Valero, to buy the law in the form of high court injunctions. I'm one of several people who face spiralling costs and potential bankruptcy because civil injunctions are being bought to stop peaceful protests at oil terminals and on roads. Many of us have already spent time in prison and paid fines in criminal courts, and now civil courts also want to convict us all over again and get us to pay their legal costs.



MITCH ROSE
Just Stop Oil, UK

Criminalisation and top-down political vilification of climate activists have come at the same time as the government **announced** it will grant over 100 new oil and gas drilling licences. Activists point out that the ruling party has received sizeable donations from fossil fuel interests, and the anti-protest laws adopted have been influenced by a **right-wing think tank** that also receives such donations.

Several Australian states have also passed anti-protest laws to target and jail climate activists. Among them is New South Wales, home to activist Deanna 'Violet' Coco of the Fireproof Australia group. Her sentence was overturned on appeal in March; she'd faced 15 months in jail for blocking a lane of traffic on Sydney Harbour Bridge. Several others **have been**

jailed under this law. Some welcome news came in December, when parts of the law were **ruled** unconstitutional in response to a civil society lawsuit.

The harm caused by the climate crisis staggeringly outweighs the inconvenience of one climate protester blocking one lane of traffic for 25 minutes. The right to peaceful protest is fundamental to democracy, and many of the freedoms and rights we cherish were won and defended through peaceful protest.



NELLI STEVENSON
Greenpeace Australia Pacific

In the USA, violence has been the response of authorities to protests defending forested lands in Atlanta against the construction of a huge police facility branded 'Cop City'. In January, Indigenous activist Manuel Paez Terán, known as 'Tortuguita', was shot dead by police. Tortuguita had been camping in the forest to protest against the development, which on top of having environmental impacts represents an extension of police presence in a predominantly Black and low-income area. In October, the state's district attorney **announced** that no charges would be brought against the police responsible. Protesters have also faced terrorism and money laundering charges. In November, journalists were **teargassed** while reporting on a Stop Cop City march in Atlanta.

 READ MORE

- AUSTRALIA: STILL SILENCING THE CLIMATE ALARM
- THE NETHERLANDS: CLIMATE ACTION FACES BACKLASH
- UK BACKTRACKS ON CLIMATE COMMITMENTS

Deadly danger in Latin America

While the direction of travel in the global north is alarming, the greatest dangers continue to be faced by people who defend environmental, Indigenous and land rights in global south countries blessed with abundant natural resources – and cursed with rapacious interests determined to plunder them.

Activists have long been on the frontlines of resistance to fossil fuel extraction and projects that cause climate and environmental harm – and have long been targeted with deadly repression. Aggressors view and target people regardless of whether they define themselves as climate activists or defenders of the local environment and the rights of communities. No matter how they characterise themselves, activists confront powerful economic and political interests, often closely linked through corruption, that support exploitation and extraction, and are on the receiving end of violence. The repression of environmental, land and Indigenous rights defenders should be understood as part of the global pattern of climate denial through civic space restriction.

Indigenous rights defenders, for example, often stand in the way of powerful state and private sector forces that want to exploit land. When Indigenous rights are attacked, the climate suffers. When the rights of Indigenous people are recognised and they're free to manage Indigenous territories, the climate benefits. The best-preserved areas of the Amazon rainforest – limiting the deforestation that's a key source of carbon dioxide emissions – are those legally recognised and protected as Indigenous lands.

According to **Global Witness**, around the world almost 2,000 land and environmental defenders were killed in retaliation for their work between 2012 and 2022: one every two days. Indigenous



Guarani Indigenous people and climate activists protest against the murders of environmental activists in Sao Paulo, Brazil in June 2022.

people account for 34 per cent of deaths, even though they make up around five per cent of the world's population.

Latin America is the most lethal region, home to 88 per cent of killings in 2022, the last full year for which information is available. Things may be getting worse: the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights **reported** that between January and April 2023, at least 33 human rights defenders were killed in the region, most of them Indigenous, environmental and rights defenders, up from 27 over the same period in 2022.

In Brazil, which contains the largest part of the Amazon rainforest, deforestation dramatically increased and violence and threats towards Indigenous people mushroomed under the four-year rule of climate-denying far-right President Jair Bolsonaro. Brazil saw **34 killings** in 2022, and at least **eight** in the first four months of 2023 after Bolsonaro was gone.

The progressive government that **came to office** in January has restored and strengthened institutions that protect Indigenous rights and expelled thousands of miners illegally operating in Indigenous areas. The pace of deforestation has dramatically decreased.

But powerful economic interests, well represented in politics, are pushing back. When Brazil's Supreme Court ruled in September against a principle that limited the demarcation and titling of Indigenous lands to a specific occupancy date – a rule that denied the reality of past evictions – it was an important step forward. But members of congress, many of them linked to agribusiness, responded by passing a law defying the court's ruling. President Lula da Silva partly vetoed it, but Congress overturned the veto and the restrictive new law **came into force** in December.

Civil society saw some success in 2023 in another Amazonian country, Ecuador, where people voted in **two referendums** to halt two extractive projects: oil exploitation in Yasuní National Park – a key Indigenous territory – and metal mining in the Andean Chocó.

This was a historic outcome, with the Yasuní result said to be the first in the world where people have voted to keep fossil fuels in the ground, dealing a significant blow to extractive industries. But it remains to be seen whether people's wishes are respected, given that successive Ecuadorian governments have embraced extraction.

Participation by Indigenous people in conservation and development decision-making in Ecuador remains insufficient and inadequate. In June, Indigenous and environmental groups submitted a Constitutional Court complaint over a **presidential decree** passed the month before that changed the rules on environmental consultation, making it easier to grant mining licences. At a protest against this the following month police reportedly **fired teargas** and rocks at protesters.

In Ecuador as elsewhere, the lack of recognition of Indigenous land rights remains a key enabler of mining, oil extraction and deforestation, destroying ecosystems that people rely on. Resistance is dangerous, bringing threats, harassment, physical aggression and lethal violence.

For some time now we have been living in conflict with an oil company that invaded our territory. We experience threats and harassment from both the company and the state. Every day more and more of our leaders and social activists are being threatened. Many have been kidnapped and some have been killed. But none of this silences or stops us, as we fight to save our territories, our living space.



FAUSTO DANIEL SANTI GUALINA
Sarayaku people of the Ecuadorian Amazon

Violence is also commonplace in several Central American countries. In Honduras, two land rights activists were **found dead** in the Gama River in 2023. Unidentified assailants **shot dead** two more, Jairo Bonilla and Aly Domínguez. They were part of the Guapinol community, whose people have been criminalised, attacked and harassed for resisting a polluting mining project. Afro-Indigenous Garifuna people have also reported systematic violence.

We have experienced reprisals for our work, which have included death threats, kidnapping attempts and criminalisation processes. In 2023, we counted 125 attacks against our organisation and its members. In August, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights granted precautionary measures in favour of 11 our members, but more than five months have passed and the government has yet to implement anything in response to these precautionary measures.



CHRISTOPHER CASTILLO
Alternative for Community and Environmental Vindication of Honduras

In El Salvador, **populist strongarm president** Nayib Bukele has led an all-out assault on dissent under sweeping state of emergency powers. Leaders of the Indigenous Nahua community are among those subjected to **intimidation** by security forces for protesting against construction on Indigenous land. Other Indigenous groups have complained of **military presence** in their territories. As part of a widespread campaign of mass detention, the state has harassed and arbitrarily detained environmental leaders. In January 2023, authorities **detained** five environmental activists from the Santa Marta community on concocted homicide charges after resisting a mining project. Protests followed calling for their release. People evidently connected with Bukele's party have harassed and stigmatised women environmental activists on social media.

The threats are real in Mexico too. Two environmental activists, Antonio Díaz Valencia and Ricardo Arturo Lagunes Gasca, **disappeared** in Colima state in January 2023. They'd been part of negotiations between the local community and a mining company. Their families accused the company of being involved in their apparent abductions. In June, unidentified assailants **killed** two

more environmental activists, Álvaro Arvizu and Cuahtémoc Márquez, in separate attacks that appeared premeditated. They're sadly among a long line of victims: **at least 93** environmental and land rights defenders, most of them from Indigenous communities, were victims of enforced disappearances between December 2006 and August 2023, with 58 coming under the current populist administration, in power since December 2018.



READ MORE

- BRAZIL: BACK ON THE GREEN TRACK
- BRAZIL: A STEP FORWARD FOR INDIGENOUS PEOPLE'S RIGHTS

On the frontlines in Africa

Activists face similar challenges in multiple African countries where there's a rush to extract fossil fuels and exploit forested areas. Threats come from state and private sector interests alike, with the two often tightly connected, resulting in corruption and impunity.

Throughout 2023, climate and environmental activists encountered a barrage of restrictions for opposing the construction of the 1,500 km-long East African Crude Oil Pipeline (EACOP) connecting Tanzania and Uganda. Activists believe the project, imposed without any real consultation with affected communities and at odds with the two governments' emissions cuts commitments, will have devastating impacts. State-owned corporations in both countries have a stake in the project, meaning the backlash is particularly fierce. Police have **beaten, detained and criminalised** protesters.



Ugandan police arrests an environmental activist at a protest against the East African Crude Oil Pipeline in Kampala, Uganda, on 15 September 2023.

But local activists haven't given up and continue working with international allies and mounting public campaigns to put pressure on potential financiers, raising the reputational costs of involvement with the project – and with some success. So far **27 banks**, including several in South Africa, have pledged not to support the project.

Just because we tried to make ourselves and the affected communities heard regarding the environmental and human rights consequences of the pipeline, the government has smeared us and called us 'anti-government' and 'anti-development'. As a result of this branding, we've been intimidated, threatened and arrested by the police. The kind of work we do has led us to clash with the powerful interests of government agencies and private companies. EACOP is a huge project in which powerful state and private forces have a lot at stake, so we are facing a lot of restrictions from both of them.



IREEN TWONGIRWE
Women for Green Economy Movement Uganda

Four of our activists were forcibly arrested on charges of 'inciting violence', transported in police vehicles and kept in jail overnight for protesting against the pipeline. The activists were protesting peacefully but their arrests were unnecessarily violent.

Several of our members maintain a fund to secure bail or engage lawyers whenever activists are arrested. We arrange legal representation and explore the possibility of anticipatory bail when possible. We've also partnered with organisations that specialise in security training so that we can provide tools for advocates to voice their concerns without jeopardising their personal safety.



ZAKI MAMDOO
Stop EACOP, Uganda

Elsewhere in Africa, environmental activists have come under attack for standing in the way of economic interests. In recent years several South African community leaders have been shot dead. In August, two men **shot dead** land rights defender Jomo Keromeng in front of his family. In January, the Amadiba Crisis Committee, which seeks to protect a coastal area, **received information** from a whistleblower of a plot to assassinate two of its leaders.

Violence is enabled by top-down vilification, which is becoming increasingly common. In a recent example, government minister Gwede Mantashe used his speech at an oil and gas conference to **accuse civil society organisations (CSOs)** of being foreign agents working to block development.

In Cameroon, one of the countries that share the Congo Basin, the world's second-biggest rainforest after the Amazon, powerful private corporations and organised criminal groups are targeting civil society working to protect the rainforest and resist deforestation.

Despite all the legal measures in place to protect Cameroon's forests, forest exploitation, often carried out in partnership with private companies, gives rise to numerous abuses, resulting in serious human rights violations fuelled by well-organised criminal networks, and generally leading to the dispossession of the lands of these peoples and communities.



ESTELLE EWOULE LOBÉ
Action for the Protection of Environmental Refugees and Internally Displaced People in Africa, Cameroon



READ MORE

- GAME NOT OVER: RESISTANCE AGAINST EAST AFRICAN CRUDE OIL PIPELINE

Intensifying repression in Asia

Several Asian states under authoritarian rule, including one-party regimes like Cambodia and Vietnam, are aggressively pursuing top-down policies of industrialisation and extraction and treating climate and environmental activists as threats to their interests.

Climate and environmental activists used to have relative freedom in Vietnam, but that's changed in recent years. In September, high-profile climate activist Hoàng Thị Minh Hồng received a **three-year jail sentence** on bogus tax evasion charges – a tactic the regime often uses to lock up dissenters. At least seven other climate and environmental activists have been jailed on the same pretext.

Some of those arrested had previously worked with the government. Ngo Thi To Nhien, **detained** in September, has worked on energy policy for over 20 years, including with the World Bank, and heads an independent think tank on energy transition. Her detention suggests that independent efforts on energy policy are no longer tolerated.

Climate and environmental organisations helped the government secure significant funding for environmental projects. But the government has continued emphasising coal-powered development, putting it at odds with its international commitments, including under the Paris Agreement and a Just Energy Transition Partnership signed with a group of global north states in 2022. Despite agreeing with international partners to involve civil society in climate transition, the state locks away those who expose inconvenient truths.

The authorities have benefited massively from the diverse activities of Vietnamese associations in the fields of development and environmental protection, as well as from the substantial contributions of international CSOs working in Vietnam.

But the Vietnamese government hates losing face. It tolerates activists when they support government development programmes but has zero tolerance for criticism, especially in the international arena, so it silences critical voices by any means. To avoid international condemnation, instead of charging people under national security laws, they have resorted to the old pretext of tax evasion charges.



PENELOPE FAULKNER
Quê Me: Vietnam Committee on Human Rights

In neighbouring Cambodia, where land-grabbing by state officials is common, environmental and land rights activists are

attacked for standing in the way of elite economic interests closely associated with the ruling family.

Among those targeted is the youth-led environmental group Mother Nature, which the state **calls** an illegal organisation. In September, three Mother Nature representatives serving suspended jail sentences in punishment for their activism were **denied permission** to travel to Sweden to receive the **Right Livelihood Award** – a prize recognising their activism.

The problems aren't limited to one-party states. In countries with a level of democratic competition such as India and the Philippines, the restriction of climate and environmental activism comes as part of elite efforts to consolidate power.

Enforced disappearances are a constant danger for environmental activists in the Philippines. In April, two Indigenous rights activists, Dexter Capuyan and Gene Roz Jamil 'Bazoo' de Jesus, went missing. State security forces were suspected. Their families and supporters continue to **protest** for their return. In June, the government **designated** five Indigenous leaders and activists as terrorists, a status that enables it to freeze their bank accounts. In September, two students active in environmental protests were **abducted** and missing for almost two weeks.

In India, the Hindu nationalist government is pursuing economic development at all costs, and stamping down on dissent in the process. Activists from the youth-led Fridays for Future climate movement are among those it has targeted.

The consequences can be fatal. Sendhu Munda, a campaigner against illegal tree-felling, died in detention in May, reportedly after being beaten by his captors. Munda was a member of a forest protection committee in Jharkhand state.

Indigenous people in Odisha state are also subject to a police **crackdown** that has included abductions, arbitrary arrests, torture and the use of force against protesters opposed to two mining projects. Activists say the projects – for which the national government granted permission after amending a law on forest management to remove consultation rights – will displace over 200,000 people from tribal groups.

Repression is sure to increase in the run-up to India's April-to-May 2024 general election.

Being an activist in India is scary. India is the sixth most dangerous country in the world for environmental activists. Traditionally, threats and prosecutions loomed over environmental defenders living in rural areas. However, the scope of these threats has evolved, now extending to encompass urban activists like me as well. The tide has shifted, and we are increasingly perceived as formidable adversaries to the government's agenda.



DISHA RAVI
Fridays for Future India

Even in countries like Mongolia, where respect for civic space has recently improved, environmental activists face risks. The government has attempted to silence criticism of mining operations, and environmental activists **have reported** that state and non-state sources have subjected them to judicial harassment, intimidation, threats and violence.

 READ MORE

> VIETNAM: ANOTHER TURN OF THE SCREW

SOUNDING THE ALARM

Climate change shot up the global agenda as a result of the wave of mass protests that unfolded **from 2019 onwards**. The speed at which the agenda changed proved the value of protest. Climate activists continue to use protests and non-violent direct action to keep climate in the headlines.

Recently, some groups, such as Extinction Rebellion in the UK, have **moved away** from disruptive tactics, fearing these might alienate the audiences they're trying to reach. Others, such as Just Stop Oil in the same country, continue to use them, seeing no evidence they reduce support for climate action. News coverage of stunts such as the disruption of high-level sporting events or the targeting of famous artworks – without causing damage – may be the only time climate change makes front-page news. And while they may cause public backlash, these actions can also have the effect of **legitimising** the more conventional actions of other activists advancing the same cause.

The climate movement is broad and offers a range of responses. What's crucial is that there be solidarity, constructive dialogue over tactical differences and a clear logic behind interventions. Activists need to refresh tactics as the struggle continues because repeated actions can lead to diminishing returns, as may now be the case with the targeting of artworks.

Civil society knows that action can't be limited to protest and must encompass every available peaceful means to advance change, including advocacy and campaigns, calls for international solidarity, litigation and the growing field of shareholder activism.



Students take part in a Fridays for Future protest in New Delhi, India on 25 September 2020.

Photo by Jewel Samad/AFP via Getty Images.

Civil society plays critical roles in pushing for new laws, programmes, policies and strategies on climate change, holding governments accountable for their commitments, identifying the lack of coordinated government responses to climate change and ensuring that national policymaking does not forget the poor.



CAROLINE OWASHABA
Action for Youth Development Uganda

Legal action against states and companies offered one fruitful front for civil society action in 2023. In November, the Brussels Court of Appeal **imposed** a binding emissions cut target on the Belgian authorities. That same month, a German court **ruled** that the government must immediately adopt an action programme on emissions targets for construction and transport. In August, 16 young activists **won a case** in Montana, USA, with the court ruling that the state government's policies in support of fossil fuels violate their right to a healthy environment. Many other court cases are underway, including one brought by **six young Portuguese activists** against 32 European governments at the European Court of Human Rights.

Our case is part of a wider trend and sets an important legal precedent that is already today being used in other jurisdictions to try to impose similar climate targets. Steep national emission reduction targets are urgently needed for climate policies to have a chance of being effective. Our case is already being consulted and referenced by civil society in other countries.



SARAH TAK
Klimaatzaak, Belgium

Activists are also successfully using corporate annual general meetings (AGMs) to advance climate resolutions. In 2023,

major funders **supported resolutions** to cut emissions at the AGMs of some of the biggest oil and gas companies. Activists are also putting pressure on institutions to divest from fossil fuel investments. In response to sustained student advocacy, New York University **committed to divest** in September. In the UK, **72 per cent** of universities have so far pledged to divest. The pressure continues.

TIME TO RESPECT FREEDOMS

There's no doubt that repression is taking its toll in sapping the energies of the global climate movement. But climate denial through civic space restriction ultimately can't hold back the tide. Governments and companies are making short-term decisions, evidently deciding they can get round to addressing the crisis later. But there's no hiding the problem: people around the world are experiencing the impacts of climate change. And while political currents in many countries are presently unpromising, **opinion polls** in country after country also show that the climate crisis has become a major concern, particularly among young people prepared to use their voices and votes.

In many countries acts of repression have backfired, generating sympathy for climate activists, attracting support for the movement and fuelling further protests. Even amid repression, the global climate movement continues to grow.

The climate movement owes its resilience to its ability to make connections between different facets of the problem and productively combine a variety of networked responses, including building coalitions, producing knowledge, sharing information and advocating locally, nationally and internationally.

Last Generation is part of the **A22 coalition**, an international network of nonviolent civil disobedience campaigners. This network is a great source of support. We help each other increase the visibility of our campaigns. It has certainly helped us attract more people to **Non Paghiamo il Fossile** (We Don't Pay for Fossil) and other environmental campaigns in Italy and beyond.



GABRIELLA ABBATE
Last Generation, Italy

But the movement is increasingly having to focus on defensive strategies in response to repression. This implies an opportunity cost: much of the energy that could be invested in advancing creative climate solutions is instead spent on fending off restrictions. If all civil society can do is resist repression, no one will be left to keep the climate crisis on the agenda. And that will tell. In the absence of civil society pressure, for instance, COP28 wouldn't have been forced to reckon with fossil fuels.

Ultimately, states and the private sector need to recognise that people have a right to use every peaceful means possible, including protest. It's one of the fundamental freedoms guaranteed in international conventions that almost every state has signed up to. It must be understood that protests that cause disruption can still be peaceful protests, and should be treated as such. Protests are a key means by which recognition of fundamental rights has historically been won.

Last December, the new UN **human rights head**, Volker Türk, acknowledged the role of protest in driving climate action, expressing gratitude to the many young people who've mobilised. He **added** 'we should make sure that the civic space for them is protected and safeguarded, and not crack down in a way that we have seen in many parts of the world'.



A Greenpeace activist in the Spree river holds up a sign calling for more funding for climate protection at a protest during the parliamentary debate on the 2024 federal budget in Berlin, Germany on 30 January 2024.

States should heed his words. There's no hope of overcoming the powerful vested interests that prevent climate action unless civil society is able to play the full spectrum of its vital roles. Open and enabled civic space is essential to addressing the climate crisis and confining climate denial to history.



CONNECT WITH US



civicus.org



info@civicus.org



[/CIVICUS](https://www.facebook.com/CIVICUS)



[@CIVICUSalliance](https://twitter.com/CIVICUSalliance)

HEADQUARTERS

25 Owl Street, 6th Floor
Johannesburg, 2092
South Africa
Tel: +27 (0)11 833 5959
Fax: +27 (0)11 833 7997

UN HUB: NEW YORK

We Work
450 Lexington Avenue
New York, NY, 10017
United States

UN HUB: GENEVA

11 Avenue de la Paix
Geneva, CH-1202
Switzerland
Tel: +41 (0)22 733 3435