Global Letter on the Protection of Environmental Human Rights Defenders, Indigenous People, and Land Rights Activists

To:

The Executive Secretary, United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)
The COP31 Presidency, Republic of Türkiye,
States Parties to the UNFCCC and the Paris Agreement.

Cc:

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights; UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders; UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples; UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights in the context of climate change; UN Special Rapporteur on the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment; bilateral and multilateral donors; the Green Climate Fund and Global Environment Facility; and civil society partners worldwide.

Subject: **Urgent Call for Global Action to Protect Environmental Human Rights Defenders, Indigenous People and Land Rights Activists in Climate Decision-Making**

Excellencies, colleagues and partners,

CIVICUS, the global alliance of civil society organisations and activists, together with its members and partners write to draw urgent attention to the escalating threats confronting environmental human rights defenders (EHRDs), Indigenous People, and land rights activists worldwide as the world convenes in Antalya, Türkiye for the annual UNFCCC COP sessions. As Parties prepare for COP31 in Antalya, Türkiye, building on the outcomes of COP30 in Belém, we call on the UNFCCC Secretariat, Governments, donors, UN agencies and civil society to jointly recognise that climate ambition cannot be separated from the protection of the people who defend the forests, rivers, lands and territories on which climate solutions depend.

Member States and institutions already possess the normative tools required to act. These include the Paris Agreement's preambular recognition of human rights obligations in climate action; the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP); the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders; the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights; the Aarhus Convention on access to information, public participation, and justice in environmental matters; and the Escazú Agreement, the first binding international treaty to contain explicit provisions, under Article 9, obligating States Parties to guarantee a safe and enabling environment for environmental human rights defenders. The gap is not one of law, but of implementation, funding, and political will.

The Widening Protection Gap

Civic space for those who defend land, forests and climate justice is narrowing at an alarming rate. According to the CIVICUS Monitor's People Power Under Attack 2025 report, civil society is now under severe attack in 122 of 198 countries and territories, with only 7 percent of the world's population living in countries with

open or narrowed civic space, down from around 13 percent in 2020[1]. Detention of protesters was the most common violation documented globally in 2025, recorded in at least 82 countries[2]. Against this backdrop, violence against those defending land and the environment continues largely unabated: Global Witness documented 146 killings or enforced disappearances of land and environmental defenders in 2024 alone, bringing the total documented since 2012 to at least 2,253, with Indigenous Peoples accounting for around one third of these lethal attacks despite representing roughly six per cent of the global population[3]. Events at COP30 itself in November 2025, when Indigenous Peoples' protests inside the Blue Zone were met with calls to escalate security responses, further demonstrated that these risks are not confined to remote frontlines but extend into the very multilateral spaces meant to safeguard participation[4].

Challenges Facing Marginalised and Vulnerable Actors

a) Environmental Human Rights Defenders

Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs) face reported threats, intimidation, and physical violence, while accountability remains a concern. EHRDs face killings, enforced disappearance, torture, sexual violence, and long-term disappearance for opposing extractive, agribusiness and infrastructure projects. Beyond lethal violence, defenders are increasingly criminalised through the misuse of anti-terrorism, public order and defamation laws, and are targeted by Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) designed to exhaust them financially and psychologically. In Uganda, Human rights defenders and activists reporting on land disputes or environmental risks have been subjected to police intimidation, surveillance, and judicial harassment, prompting concerns from UN mandates and the European Parliament regarding the deteriorating civic space around the project.[5] Furthermore, arbitrary arrest and mass detention of peaceful protesters, often charged under vague offences like common nuisance, with bail frequently denied to deter dissent, are employed to harass EHRDs.[6] In Sierra Leone, the state is using section 44 of the Cyber Security and Crime Act, 2021 to restrict EHRDs' legitimate public-interest advocacy. Latin America remains the deadliest region, accounting for the large majority of documented killings, with Colombia, Honduras, Mexico and Brazil consistently among the highest-risk countries.[7]

In Colombia, half of the activists killed between 2025 and 2025 are members of indigenous communities. For instance, on 10 September 2026, Jacob Guachetá Zambrano, an indigenous leader and land activist in Colombia's Cauca region, was found tortured and killed,[8] and on 5 September, another environmental and

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[1]CIVICUS Monitor, People Power Under Attack 2025: Global Findings (Johannesburg: CIVICUS, December 2025), available at https://monitor.civicus.org/globalfindings_2025.

[2]CIVICUS Monitor, People Power Under Attack 2025, Global Press Release (9 December 2025), available at https://monitor.civicus.org/press_release/2025/global-press-realease/.

[3]Global Witness, Roots of Resistance: Land and Environmental Defenders (London: Global Witness, 17 September 2025), reporting 146 documented killings or disappearances in 2024 and 2,253 since 2012, available at https://globalwitness.org/en/press-releases/at-least-146-land-and-environmental-defenders-killed-or-disappeared-globally-in-2024.

[4]International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) and World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), 'COP30: Defend Indigenous Peoples & Protest Rights', Open Letter to UNFCCC Executive Secretary Simon Stiell (Belém, 17 November 2025), available at https://www.omct.org/en/resources/statements/cop30-defend-indigenous-peoples-protest-rights.

[5] FDIH 'Uganda: Alarming crackdown on environment and human rights defenders' (2024) https://www.fidh.org/en/issues/human-rights-defenders/uganda-alarming-crackdown-on-environment-and-human-rights-defenders.

[6]ABA 'Fair Trial Violations in Uganda's Crackdown on Environmental and Climate Activism Against the EACOP Pipeline and Other Oil and Gas Projects' (2026) https://www.americanbar.org/groups/human_rights/reports/uganda-fair-trial-violations-environmental-climate-activism/.

[7]Global Witness, Roots of Resistance (2025), noting that 82 per cent of 2024 killings occurred in Latin America, with Colombia, Guatemala, Mexico, Brazil and Honduras among the highest-risk countries, available at https://globalwitness.org/en/press-releases/at-least-146-land-and-environmental-defenders-killed-or-disappeared-globally-in-2024.

[8] BBC, 'Colombia and Brazil deadliest countries for environmental activists' (16 September 2026) available at https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c6kgxjl35822o

community activist, Ernesto Gómez, was murdered in Mongua, Boyacá. He campaigned for community access to clean water and social development.[9]
While in Mexico, indigenous leader Kenia Hernández has been in prison for 6 years for protesting against projects that affected the rights of her community. In Ecuador, the state, which is leading the implementation of the EHRD protection framework of the Escazu Agreement, has been criminalising EHRD and communities, implementing extractivist projects with no Free, Prior and Informed Consent and avoiding recognising judicial rulings that recognise indigenous land limits.

In Asia, there has been an increase in the criminalisation of EHRDs using repressive laws. Five EHRDs from Mother Nature Cambodia are imprisoned for their work on environmental rights. In the MENA region, environmental defenders also face increasing criminalisation and judicial harassment. For instance, in Tunisia, environmental activists and local communities in Gabès have been arrested and prosecuted for protesting against industrial pollution caused by the phosphate industry. In June 2026, UN Special Procedures raised concerns about the criminalisation of environmental protesters and human rights defenders following serious pollution incidents affecting local communities. In Iran, environmental conservationists working to protect the endangered Asiatic cheetah were arrested on espionage charges and sentenced to lengthy prison terms, while their foundation's founder, Kavous Seyed-Emami, died in custody under suspicious circumstances. In Morocco, Amazigh environmental defenders from the Imider movement, campaigning against the depletion of local water resources by a silver mining operation, have faced intimidation, arbitrary arrests and imprisonment for demanding environmental protection and access to water.

Lethal Violence and Systemic Impunity

Killings and disappearances of defenders are rarely investigated, let alone prosecuted. Perpetrators, ranging from state security forces to private militias linked to extractive companies and organised crime, act with near-total impunity, particularly in regions where weak state presence has been exploited by armed groups financing operations through illegal economies, as documented in post-conflict settings such as Colombia and Honduras. For instance, in Honduras, EHRD Juan López was murdered in 2023 in the context of the Carlos Escaleras conflict, with no justice against the perpetrators. In Uganda, defenders face reported threats, intimidation, and physical violence, while accountability remains a concern. In the Fridays for Future Uganda study, 59% of respondents who reported incidents to authorities said no action followed. This sample finding is not a national estimate, but it reinforces the need for independent investigations, effective remedies and protection against reprisals.[10]

b) Indigenous Peoples

Indigenous Peoples and local land rights holders are frequently excluded from decisions on projects and policies that directly affect their territories, including carbon offset schemes, renewable energy infrastructure, and conservation initiatives implemented in their name. Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC), enshrined in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, is inconsistently applied or ignored altogether, fuelling the very conflicts that place defenders at risk. The establishment of data centres in Indigenous peoples' territories without proper FPIC is also a violation of their rights.[11]

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[9]Justice for Colombia, 'Colombia human rights update September 2026' (6 Oct 2026) available at https://justiceforcolombia.org/colombia-human-rights-update-september-2026/

[10]Fridays for Future Uganda. (March 2026) Comparative study of intersectional vulnerabilities and challenges facing young environmental defenders in Uganda - https://www.newvision.co.ug/category/agriculture/study-exposes-risks-facing-young-environmenta-NV_242813_102026

[11] Civicus, PHILIPPINES: 'Development should serve people's needs, not foreign capital's demands' https://lens.civicus.org/interview/philippines-development-should-serve-peoples-needs-not-foreign-capitals-demands/

Vulnerable and marginalised communities, including women and Indigenous Peoples, continue to be dispossessed of ancestral lands in the name of conservation, extraction and infrastructure, frequently without free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) as required under the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and ILO Convention No. 169. Many Indigenous communities lack secure legal tenure over the very territories they have sustainably managed for generations, weakening their standing to resist encroachment and to access climate finance directly. Within the UNFCCC process itself, Indigenous Peoples continue to press for the Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples Platform (LCIPP) to move from consultative status toward meaningful, funded participation in decision-making[12]. Participation requires timely information and genuine influence over decisions. States and project actors should respect applicable safeguards, including free, prior and informed consent where required, and provide accessible grievance mechanisms.[13]

In the MENA region, Indigenous Peoples and traditional communities also face exclusion from decisions affecting their ancestral territories and natural resources. In Morocco, Amazigh communities continue to face challenges securing collective ownership and control over ancestral lands. In Imider, communities have mobilised against the depletion and pollution of local water resources by a silver mining operation, while broader changes to collective land laws have increased concerns about land dispossession and weakened customary rights. In the occupied Palestinian territory, Bedouin and herding communities face forced displacement, land confiscation and restrictions on access to grazing areas and water resources, particularly in the Jordan Valley and Area C of the West Bank. In Iraq, Marsh Arab communities face the erosion of traditional livelihoods and access to ancestral territories as a result of water diversion, drought and environmental degradation, often without meaningful participation in water management and restoration decisions.

c) Land Rights Activists and Local Communities

Local land rights defenders, including women and youth leaders, face reprisals from both state and corporate actors, often with limited access to legal aid, translation, or protective mechanisms suited to rural and remote contexts. Women defenders face distinct and compounding risks, including sexual violence and gendered smear campaigns, while youth and community-based organisations frequently lack the accreditation, resources or travel support needed to engage in international climate processes on an equal footing with better-resourced actors[14].

The evidence is unambiguous and growing. In 2024 alone, at least 146 land and environmental defenders were killed or disappeared worldwide, bringing the documented total since 2012 to at least 2,253[15]. Indigenous Peoples, who make up less than 6 per cent of the global population, accounted for roughly one-third of all lethal attacks on land defenders[16]. Across the wider human rights defender community, Front Line Defenders documented 358 killings of human rights defenders in 2025, of which 84 (nearly one-quarter) were

[12]UNFCCC, 'Note on the Presidency's Consultations on the Enhanced Engagement of Local Communities in the Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples Platform', COP30, Belém (19 November 2025), Symbol IN.COP30.i2f.1, available at https://unfccc.int/documents/654824; Rights and Resources Initiative, 'RRI at COP30: Earth's #DefendersLeadTheWay on Climate Action' (2025), available at https://rightsandresources.org/cop30.

[13]Human Rights Watch. (2023, November 2). "Working on oil is forbidden": Crackdown against environmental defenders in Uganda. https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/11/02/working-oil-forbidden/crackdown-against-environmental-defenders-uganda.

[14]Al Jazeera, 'Thousands March for Climate Action Outside COP30 Summit in Brazil' (15 November 2025), available at https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/11/15/thousands-march-for-climate-action-outside-cop30-summit-in-brazil; CIVICUS Monitor, People Power Under Attack 2025 (2025) https://monitor.civicus.org/globalfindings_2025/.

[15]Global Witness, "Roots of Resistance": Annual Report on Land and Environmental Defenders, 17 September 2025, globalwitness.org.

[16]Ibid.

defenders of land and the environment[17]. The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has separately reported that 743 human rights defenders were killed and 202 forcibly disappeared in 2025 alone, meaning a defender, journalist, or trade unionist is killed or disappeared, on average, every ten hours[18].

3. Structural Drivers of the Protection Gap

Deteriorating Civic and Digital Space

Restrictive NGO laws, foreign funding restrictions, internet shutdowns, and digital surveillance increasingly limit defenders' and communities' ability to organise, document abuses, and communicate with international bodies, including the UNFCCC process itself. Environmental human rights defenders have reported surveillance, online harassment, intimidation and legal pressure which constrain their work.[19] Protecting civic space requires safeguarding expression, association and peaceful assembly, alongside digital-security support and protection against unlawful surveillance.

As COP31 takes place in Türkiye, civic freedoms in the host country remain fragile, with the CIVICUS Monitor rating Türkiye's civic space as "repressed" since 2018.[20] Türkiye has repeatedly violated the rights of human rights defenders, as confirmed by the European Court of Human Rights. Moreover, a fresh restriction by Turkish authorities on speakers and panellists taking part in COP31 to sign a declaration pledging that their presentations comply with the law and "public morality" is a sign of gagging speakers and restricting freedom of expression.

These violations are experienced in many countries, where Journalists who report critically on public issues often face abusive criminal investigations and prosecutions. They are also subjected to arbitrary detention using vague criminal legislation provisions such as the "disinformation law". Protests against authorities are often banned, and peaceful protesters face excessive police force and arbitrary detention. Civil society organisations also risk harsh audits and even closure for carrying out legitimate activities.[21] For instance, in Cambodia, a group of environmental human rights defenders were convicted in 2024 for their climate justice advocacy.

Weak legal framework and implementation gap

These challenges are underpinned by structural weaknesses: the non-binding character of key instruments such as UNDRIP; low rates of domestication of ratified human rights treaties into enforceable national law; the absence of a standing, funded UNFCCC mechanism dedicated to defender protection; climate finance architecture that channels only a small fraction of funds directly to Indigenous Peoples' and local communities' organisations; and impunity for attacks on defenders, which in most documented cases goes uninvestigated and unpunished. Left unaddressed, this gap between international commitment and domestic enforcement will continue to erode both human rights and the credibility and effectiveness of the multilateral climate process.

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[17]Front Line Defenders, Global Analysis 2025, as reported in Inside Climate News / Grist, "Environmental Defenders Remain Among World's Most Targeted Activists," 2025.

[18]UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), report on attacks against human rights defenders, 2025, as reported by JURIST, "UN Rights Commissioner: Attacks on Rights Defenders Reached Alarming Levels in 2025."

[19]UN, 'A/79/263: Protecting the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association from stigmatization - Report of the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association' https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/ahrc6245-unmasking-chilling-effects-digital-surveillance-ecosystem.

[20]Civicus Monitor, Turkey, https://monitor.civicus.org/country/turkey/.

[21] CIEL, Briefing for UNFCCC COP31 on Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs), https://www.ciel.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/11/Briefing-for-UNFCCC-COP31-on-Environmental-Human-Rights-Defenders-EHRDs.pdf.

Extractive, agribusiness, and infrastructure companies are repeatedly implicated in attacks on defenders, whether through direct violence, the hiring of private security forces, or complicity with state and non-state armed actors. Existing accountability frameworks, including the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, remain largely voluntary and are inconsistently enforced by home and host states alike.

Recommendations

We respectfully call on each constituency to act within its sphere of responsibility:

To the UNFCCC Secretariat and COP Presidencies:

- Guarantee safe, unhindered space for peaceful protest and civil society participation at COP venues, and ensure that any security response is proportionate, is developed in consultation with affected groups, and does not replicate patterns of intimidation experienced in home countries.

To UNFCCC Member States and Parties:

- Ratify and fully domesticate ILO Convention No. 169 and align national law with UNDRIP, including statutory recognition of customary land tenure and mandatory FPIC processes for projects affecting Indigenous and local lands.
- Adopt or strengthen national and regional protection mechanisms for human rights and environmental defenders, including protocols for investigating attacks, ending impunity, and repealing or reforming laws misused to criminalise legitimate activism, including SLAPP-style litigation.
- Support the recognition of the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment in domestic law, consistent with UN General Assembly Resolution 76/300, and ensure access to justice and effective remedy for affected communities.

To Donors and Climate Finance Institutions:

- Increase the share of climate finance channelled directly to Indigenous Peoples' and local communities' organisations, moving beyond intermediary structures that dilute funds and delay access.
- Fund flexible, rapid-response grants for defenders facing imminent threats, including relocation support, legal defence, digital security and trauma-informed psychosocial support.
- Require human rights and FPIC due diligence, including defender-safety risk assessments, as a condition of financing for climate, conservation and land-use projects.

To UN Agencies and Special Procedures:

- Systematically integrate defender-protection reporting into climate-related mandates and the Universal Periodic Review, and continue joint communications to States on emblematic cases.
- Support the development of a UN system-wide protocol on the protection of environmental and land defenders operating in and around multilateral conferences, building on lessons from COP30.
- Expand technical assistance to States to support the domestication of international standards on Indigenous Peoples' rights and business and human rights, including the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.

To Civil Society Organisations:

- Continue to document, verify and publicise attacks on defenders through platforms such as the CIVICUS Monitor, ensuring data reaches national and international accountability mechanisms.
- Build solidarity networks that provide legal aid, emergency relocation support and psychosocial care to at-risk defenders, prioritising women, youth and Indigenous-led organisations.

- Support the capacity of grassroots and Indigenous-led organisations to engage directly in UNFCCC processes, including through mentorship, accreditation support and resource-sharing.

5. Call to Action

The credibility of the global climate response rests on the protection of those who defend the ecosystems and territories at its core. We urge the UNFCCC Secretariat, Parties, donors, UN agencies and fellow civil society actors to treat the protection of environmental human rights defenders, Indigenous Peoples and land rights activists not as a peripheral concern but as a precondition for effective, just and legitimate climate action ahead of and during COP31. CIVICUS and its partners stand ready to contribute evidence, testimony and technical support to advance these recommendations, and we welcome the opportunity for direct dialogue with all stakeholders in the lead-up to Antalya.