IN MEMORIAM 2025

DEFENDING THE LAND, PAYING WITH LIFE: SYSTEMATIC VIOLENCE AGAINST INDIGENOUS DEFENDERS CONTINUES

Cultural Survival

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Every year, Cultural Survival documents the crisis of systemic violence against Indigenous defenders in Latin America in the ***In Memoriam*** project. Our goal is to show that this violence is not limited to isolated cases but is, rather, part of a pattern of persecution and silencing of defenders who confront extractive projects that threaten to destroy life itself.

Violence against Indigenous defenders has become an instrument used systematically by States, criminal groups, and companies to deter and punish Indigenous Peoples and communities who defend their rights and territories.

As indicated in various reports by United Nations Special Rapporteurs,[i] Indigenous defenders are on the front lines of defending territories, rights, and nature. As a result, they are generally subject to multiple forms of violence in contexts of structural discrimination, erosion of the rule of law, and powerful economic interests that act with the consent or complicity of State authorities.

The void that murdered Indigenous defenders leave in their communities and cultures cannot be filled: they were guardians of valuable knowledge about how to protect ecosystems and how to relate to the earth. But this void is just as important outside their communities. Besides defending their territories, these leaders fought to protect our planet from environmental collapse and the triple planetary crisis.

Each and every one of them was a beloved person, part of both a family and a community. Their murders have caused profound grief, not only because of the work they did but also because of who they were among their Peoples and communities.

"Each of these deaths brings grief to our communities and constitutes a serious threat to the physical and cultural survival of our Peoples (...) Defending our territories should not cost us our lives!"

- The National Commission for Indigenous Territories (CNTI) condemning the murder of Yeison Aizama Variaza (Colombia, Emberá)

I. LATIN AMERICA IS BLEEDING: A LETHAL CONTEXT FOR INDIGENOUS DEFENDERS

> **His legacy remains under the protection of the spirits of the territory. His passing is not an end: it is a seed that strengthens our struggle."**
>
> **- The Cauca Regional Indigenous Council (CRIC) regarding the murder of Eduardo Campo (Colombia, Nasa)**

Latin America remains the most dangerous region for defending land rights, accounting for 82% of murder cases. Indigenous defenders face a double threat: defending rights and being Indigenous. In 2024, 33% of defenders killed were Indigenous. Between 2012 and 2024, of a total of 2,253 documented murders of defenders, 799 were Indigenous people, a disproportionately high figure compared to other groups. In more than 95% of cases, the reason for the attacks on Indigenous defenders is the defense of their lands and territories and the right to a healthy environment. Colombia is the country with the greatest number of murders of human rights defenders globally. In the first half of 2025, 28% of human rights defenders murdered in Colombia were Indigenous.

> **Fernanda lived in resistance: in the face of rejection, discrimination, and oblivion. Her existence was an act of courage in a territory that still fears diversity."**
>
> **- Social organizations on the murder of Fernanda Domicó (Colombia, Emberá Katío)**

According to the non-exhaustive data collection conducted, **30 Indigenous defenders were killed throughout 2025 in Colombia.** Most of them took place in areas that historically coincide with strong presence of FARC dissidents, the National Liberation Army (ELN), and paramilitary and drug trafficking groups, who together are suspected to be responsible for the majority of the murders. However, law enforcement has also been responsible for a large number of violations against Indigenous Peoples.

In Ecuador, in September 2025, Indigenous Peoples peacefully protested against the economic and pro-extractive reforms enacted by the government of President Daniel Noboa.

During the protests, 473 people were injured, 206 were detained, and 16 temporarily disappeared. Tragically, four people were killed in this terrible context of brutal repression and excessive use of force by the Ecuadorian security forces.

> **We will never forget him; we will always carry him in our minds and hearts. His death is not in vain: he fought for everyone and has left us with a greater desire to fight, with more strength."**
>
> **- The community of Cachiviro regarding the murder of José Alberto Guamán (Ecuador, Kichwa)**

In October 2025, Cultural Survival sent letters to the United Nations Special Rapporteurs on the rights of Indigenous Peoples, on human rights defenders, on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, and on the independence of judges and lawyers, in order to express our concern about the events that had taken place and the serious rights violations of Indigenous Peoples in Ecuador. In addition, we issued a public statement highlighting the situation in the country and calling for an end to the criminalization of Indigenous territorial defenders in Ecuador.

For human rights defenders in Guatemala, 2024 was the deadliest year on record, according to the Guatemalan Unit for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders (UDEFEGUA), with 29 murders, most of their victims belonging to Indigenous Peoples.

Mexico continues to be one of the most dangerous countries in the world for human rights defenders. From 2019 to 2023, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights recorded 46 cases of murders or disappearances of Indigenous defenders. In 2024, the situation worsened, with attacks and murders of environmental defenders increasing by 25% in Oaxaca, Chiapas, Michoacán, Puebla, and Veracruz—states where Indigenous people make up a higher proportion of the overall population than in other states. The Mexican state is the main aggressor against land defenders. Although authorities have spoken out in support of caring for the environment and protecting Indigenous rights, data show that efforts have not been sufficient to guarantee the protection of those who defend their territories from the many forms of extractivism that pollute, displace, disappear, and murder. Data also show that the State has been complicit in these attacks.

In 2024, Cultural Survival submitted an alternative report to the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) highlighting the rights violations suffered by Indigenous defenders.

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In the profiles presented in Cultural Survival's In Memoriam, we remember with great sorrow 46 Indigenous defenders who were murdered in 2025, a high percentage of whom were young people.

We also acknowledge and condemn the other attacks, disappearances, criminalization, and other forms of violence against Indigenous defenders around the world.

Read it here:

II.THE RIGHT TO DEFEND RIGHTS: INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS AND STATE OBLIGATIONS

Under international human rights law, the primary guarantor of respect for and fulfillment of Indigenous Peoples' rights is the State: Indigenous Peoples are holders of individual and collective rights, and the State is the holder of the legal duty corresponding to those rights. For these reasons, States must respect and guarantee the provisions of both ILO Convention 169 and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Likewise, States must adapt their domestic law and comply with the highest standards established by the regional system and the universal human rights system.[ii]

In light of Cultural Survival's findings for the **2025 In Memoriam**, it is important to emphasize that, under international human rights law, States have a responsibility to promote, protect, and enforce all provisions related to the defense and promotion of the rights of human rights defenders, as well as environmental and land defenders. Furthermore, they have an obligation to take all necessary and reasonable measures to guarantee the right to life, liberty, and security of person of defenders, and even more so for those who are in a particularly vulnerable situation, such as those who are Indigenous.[iii]

States of the Americas have the obligation "to protect human rights defenders when they are threatened and to investigate violations committed against them."[iv] Facing threats and violations is unfortunately a constant condition for Indigenous defenders, their families, and their communities.

Under established international standards on the rights and protection of human rights defenders, when the State is aware of a real and immediate risk to human rights defenders, and whenever there is a reasonable possibility of preventing or averting that risk,[v] it has a duty to provide the necessary means to ensure that human rights defenders who "report human rights violations can freely carry out their activities; protect them when they are threatened in order to prevent attacks on their lives and integrity; create the conditions for the eradication of violations by state agents or private individuals; refrain from imposing obstacles that hinder the performance of their work; and seriously and effectively investigate violations committed against them, combating impunity."[vi]

Violent actions carried out by the State or by individuals against Indigenous defenders who are exercising their rights to peaceful protest, freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and association, as well as specific human rights of Indigenous Peoples and communities such as the right to self-determination, autonomy, and participation, access to justice, due process, legal representation, and communication, constitute serious human rights violations. These violations are exacerbated when fundamental human rights such as the right to life, liberty, and security of person are violated because of the exercise of the right to defend their territories and cultures.

This has been repeatedly upheld by the Inter-American Human Rights System, which has declared that "the defense of human rights can only be exercised freely when those who do so are not victims of threats or any kind of physical, psychological, or moral aggression or other acts of harassment."[vii] Article 9 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights establishes that no one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest or detention and that no one shall be deprived of their freedom except on grounds established by law.

With regard to the rights to life, liberty, and security of person, the Inter-American Court has been unequivocal since its first precedent-setting decision—as well as in relevant cases concerning the rights of Indigenous Peoples—in declaring that States have a duty to prevent violations of the rights to life and personal integrity (negative and positive obligation).[viii] To this end, the obligation to prevent "encompasses all legal, political, administrative, and cultural measures that promote the safeguarding of human rights and ensure that any violations of those rights are effectively considered and treated as an unlawful act that, as such, is liable to result in sanctions for those who commit them, as well as the obligation to compensate victims for the harmful consequences."[ix]

III.THE COST OF DEFENDING LAND AND LIFE IN LATIN AMERICA: DOCUMENTED CASES

Mexico: The Hypocrisy of "Development" Through Megaprojects

IN MEMORIAM

ARNOLDO NICOLÁS ROMERO
(AYUUJK)

Arnoldo Nicolás Romero (Ayuujk) was a land defender and commissioner of communal property in Buena Vista, San Juan Guichicovi, Oaxaca. He had been reported missing since January 17, and several days later, on the 22nd of the same month, he was found dead by his relatives, after having been shot several times.

Arnoldo led the resistance against the Interoceanic Train, part of the Interoceanic Corridor of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec megaproject. This project is being promoted by the Mexican government to connect the ports of strategic locations such as Coatzacoalcos, Salina Cruz, Dos Bocas, and Puerto Chiapas by road and rail, thereby improving their connectivity to boost the regional economy through investment and trade.

This project was imposed on the Indigenous communities living in that territory, as there was no Free, Prior and Informed consultation or Consent, nor were there any environmental impact studies in several areas.

Arnoldo's murder should not be considered an isolated incident, but rather an attempt to silence several communities resisting on behalf of their rights. Since 2022, other defenders from the same region have suffered repression, intimidation, arrests, and criminalization for opposing the megaproject. Activists in the region say that since more companies and organized crime began entering the territory in 2018, violence and insecurity have been on the rise, making Indigenous defenders more vulnerable.

Colombia: Collective Defense as a Constant Target for Attacks

Mayora Aída Damaris Flor Camayo (Nasa)

Mayora Aída Damaris Flor Camayo (Nasa) was shot and killed in her own home on July 18, 2025. Aída Damaris was a leader of the Honduras Reserve in the municipality of Morales, Cauca, as well as a member of the Indigenous Guard.

The Indigenous Guard is an ancestral institution responsible for the collective territorial defense of Indigenous communities. It is an instrument of resistance and self-determination that protects not only the territory but also the culture and cosmovision of Indigenous Peoples.

A few weeks before Aída's murder, two other women, Edilma Cruz and Celmira Camayo, had been murdered in the same municipality.

The Cauca region suffers from extremely high levels of violence due to systematic violence perpetrated by dissidents from the FARC and the National Liberation Army (ELN) against the Indigenous Guard for territorial control. In addition, the government is failing to protect the Indigenous communities that inhabit these territories and to enforce their rights as recognized in ratified international instruments such as ILO Convention 169 and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Bolivia: The Risks of Defending National Parks

Francisco Marupa (Leco) was a leader recognized for his work defending the territory belonging to Madidi National Park, a protected area located in northwestern Bolivia and recognized as one of the most biodiverse places in the world. The park is also home and an ancestral territory to some 60 Indigenous and peasant communities.

Francisco was murdered on February 11, 2025, in his own home, because of his defense of the territory.

This case of an Indigenous leader being attacked for his defense of a national park is not unique in Bolivia, where several parks are threatened by mining, logging, or infrastructure projects such as roads. This is the case despite these being protected areas inhabited by Indigenous Peoples, who have the right to give or withhold their Free, Prior and Informed Consent on decisions affecting the territories they inhabit. The Bolivian government has historically fomented divisions among the Indigenous communities that inhabit these territories, establishing parallel leadership structures to those that oppose its extractive projects.

Francisco Marupa (Leco)

RECOMMENDATIONS

To States in the Americas:

- Advance in the recognition, demarcation, and protection of Indigenous lands and territories as a structural measure to prevent violence against Indigenous defenders.

- Formally recognize, through legal instruments and public policies, the fundamental role of Indigenous defenders in protecting human rights, the environment, and mitigating climate change.

- Ratify the Escazú Agreement, for those States that have not yet done so, and effectively implement its provisions regarding the protection of Indigenous rights defenders.

- Implement awareness-raising campaigns targeting all relevant departments at all levels of government on the value of human rights defense work.

- Investigate cases of harassment and criminalization of Indigenous defenders impartially and with an intercultural and gender perspective.

- Stop stigmatizing Indigenous defenders as criminals by associating them with criminal acts such as land usurpation, terrorism, and sedition.

- Sanction the criminalization of Indigenous defenders by State officials, ensuring that the exercise of peaceful social protest is not criminalized.

- Ensure safe and effective reporting mechanisms for Indigenous defenders that protect their lives from possible subsequent reprisals.

- Strengthen the role of mechanisms for the protection of Indigenous defenders, allocating sufficient resources and encouraging the involvement of Indigenous Peoples and communities in their development.

- Adopt preventive measures to reduce risk factors that facilitate attacks against Indigenous defenders.

- Collaborate effectively with the UN Special Rapporteur Offices to promote visits and information exchange and implement their recommendations regarding the protection of Indigenous defenders.

To Companies:

- Respect the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights as a minimum mandatory framework, and implement continuous due diligence processes throughout the value chain to identify, prevent, and remedy adverse impacts on the rights of Indigenous Peoples and human rights defenders.

- Conduct the necessary consultations with Indigenous Peoples whose territories may be directly or indirectly affected by megaprojects, in a transparent and equitable manner and with respect for their self-determination, and consult and respect the protocols that the Indigenous communities themselves may present.

- Respect the right to Free, Prior, and Informed Consent of Indigenous Peoples as a substantive right, not a procedural formality, in accordance with international human rights law, and respect their right to say no.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Adopt internal human rights due diligence policies that include risk assessments.

- Integrate the standards of the Escazú Agreement into environmental due diligence processes, guaranteeing access to information, culturally appropriate participation of Indigenous Peoples and communities, as well as comprehensive redress mechanisms when their operations cause territorial and environmental damage.

- Implement human rights due diligence policies with differential risk assessments for Indigenous Peoples and Indigenous defenders that cover the entire value chain, include accessible redress mechanisms, and expressly prohibit the use of legal actions to criminalize territorial and environmental defense.

- Raise awareness among workers about human rights defense and the rights of those who engage in it, especially those who perform tasks with the potential to generate socio-environmental and human rights impacts.

To the International Community & International Organizations:

- Ensure direct financing mechanisms specifically designed to address the urgent needs of Indigenous defenders at risk, with flexible access criteria and processes adapted to community contexts.

- Promote effective coordination among international, national, and regional protection mechanisms to avoid gaps in response and ensure consistent follow-up on cases.

- Incorporate collective, community, and gender approaches into all instruments and programs for the protection of human rights defenders, recognizing the particular nature of Indigenous territorial defense.

- Support Indigenous grassroots organizations and organizations that support Indigenous Peoples in documenting and raising awareness of cases of violence against Indigenous defenders, including non-lethal forms of aggression such as criminalization, judicial harassment, forced displacement, stigmatization, and smear campaigns.

To the President of COP Escazú's Governing Board:

- Ensure the full and effective participation of Indigenous Peoples in all instances of the Conference of the Parties, beyond symbolic or consultative spaces with no real impact on decisions.

- Promote the effective use of the Rapid Response Mechanism of the Escazú Agreement in urgent situations affecting human rights defenders, providing it with the necessary resources and procedures to act with the speed that such cases require.

- Urge States Parties to report disaggregated information on the situation of Indigenous defenders in their territories as part of their transparency obligations under the Agreement.

- Work closely with the Committee to Support Implementation and Compliance of the Escazú Agreement to develop specific indicators on the protection of Indigenous defenders and compliance with Article 9 of the Agreement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues:

- Urge States to adopt concrete legislative and administrative measures to ensure safe environments for Indigenous defenders in their territories.

- Establish a systematic monitoring mechanism for cases of Indigenous defenders who have been killed, criminalized, or displaced for defending their territories, with special attention to those whose cases have been reported to this and other United Nations fora without obtaining an effective response.

- Issue urgent public statements in response to systematic patterns of violence against Indigenous defenders, naming the responsible States for action or omission and demanding independent investigations.

- Take measures to restrain and sanction those governments and other attendees who may use these spaces to threaten and attack human rights defenders, which may increase their risk scenarios.

- Provide comprehensive public support to Indigenous defenders who suffer reprisals after making their complaints public, such as intimidation, defamation, physical attacks and attacks on family members, and cyberattacks during and after the Forum's activities, recognizing that their international visibility may increase their exposure to risk in their territories.

END NOTES

[i] See: Special Rapporteur on the rights of Indigenous Peoples, Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, Thematic report on the rights of Indigenous peoples, A/HRC/39/17, August 10, 2018. See also: Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Michel Forst, Report on the situation of human rights defenders, A/71/281, August 3, 2016; Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, José Francisco Calí Tzay, Green Finance: A Just Transition to Protect the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, A/HRC/54/31, July 21, 2023; Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Mary Lawlor, Out of sight: human rights defenders working in isolated, remote, and rural contexts, A/HRC/58/53, March 5, 2025; Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Mary Lawlor, Turning points: human rights defenders in the face of climate change and a just transition, A/80/114, October 2025; and Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, Enforced disappearance in the context of the defense of land, natural resources, and the environment, A/HRC/60/35/Add.5, July 23, 2025.
[ii] Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Internationalpersons Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, and Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean (Escazú Agreement), among others.
[iii] Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 3; International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Articles 6 and 9; United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, Articles 2, 9, 12, 14, and 15; Escazú Agreement, Article 9; and United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Article 7
[iv] Inter-American Court of Human Rights. Case of the Inhabitants of La Oroya v. Peru. Preliminary Objections, Merits, Reparations, and Costs. Judgment of November 27, 2023. Series C No. 511.
[v] Inter-American Court of Human Rights. Valle Jaramillo et al. v. Colombia. Merits, Reparations, and Costs. Judgment of November 27, 2008. Series C. No. 192.
[vi] Inter-American Court of Human Rights. Human Rights Defender et al. v. Guatemala. Preliminary Objections, Merits, Reparations, and Costs. Judgment of August 28, 2014. Series C No. 283.
[vii] IACHR. Report on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders in the Americas. April 15, 2025. OAS. OEA/Ser.L/V/II. Doc. 119/25
[vii] Cifr. Inter-American Court of Human Rights. Case of the Sawhoyamaxa Indigenous Community v. Paraguay. Merits, Reparations, and Costs. Judgment of March 29, 2006. Series C No. 146 / Similarly: Inter-American Court of Human Rights. Case of the Kichwa Indigenous People of Sarayaku v. Ecuador. Merits and Reparations. Judgment of June 27, 2012. Series C No. 245
[ix] Inter-American Court of Human Rights. Case of Velásquez Rodríguez v. Honduras. Merits. Judgment of July 29, 1988. Series C No. 4.

Cultural Survival

Cultural Survival defiende los derechos de los Pueblos Indígenas y apoya la autodeterminación, las culturas y la resiliencia política de las comunidades Indígenas desde 1972. Imaginamos un futuro que respete y honre los derechos inherentes y las culturas dinámicas de los Pueblos Indígenas, profundamente entrelazadas en sus tierras, lenguas, tradiciones espirituales y expresiones artísticas, con raíces en la autodeterminación y el autogobierno. Para más información, visite www.cs.org