



global witness

2015 sees unprecedented killings of environmental activists

Global Witness report shines spotlight on the most murderous countries, Brazil and the Philippines

More than three people were killed a week in 2015 defending their land, forests and rivers against destructive industries, according to Global Witness. The organisation's new report, *On Dangerous Ground*, documents 185 known deaths worldwide last year – by far the highest annual death toll on record and a 59% increase from 2014. Severe limits on information mean the true numbers are undoubtedly higher.

The deadliest countries for land and environmental defenders in 2015 were Brazil (50 deaths) and the Philippines (33) - record numbers in both countries - followed by Colombia (26), Peru (12), Nicaragua (12) and Democratic Republic of Congo (11). Major drivers were mining (42 deaths), agribusiness (20), logging (15) and hydropower (15).

“As demand for products like minerals, timber and palm oil continues, governments, companies and criminal gangs are seizing land in defiance of the people who live on it,” said Global Witness campaign leader Billy Kyte. “Communities that take a stand are increasingly finding themselves in the firing line of companies’ private security, state forces and a thriving market for contract killers. For every killing we document, many others go unreported. Governments must urgently intervene to stop this spiralling violence.”

On Dangerous Ground sheds light on the particular vulnerability of indigenous people, whose weak land rights and geographic isolation make them frequent targets of land and resource grabbing. In 2015, almost 40% of victims were from indigenous groups.

The father and grandfather of Filipino activist Michelle Campos were publicly executed for defending their ancestral land against mining, for example, in an attack that drove 3,000 indigenous Lumad people from their homes. Rich in coal, nickel and gold, their region of Mindanao is one of the most dangerous in the world for land and environmental activists, with 25 deaths in 2015 alone.

“We get threatened, vilified and killed for standing up to the mining companies on our land and the paramilitaries that protect them,” said Michelle Campos. “My father, grandfather and school teacher were just three of countless victims. We know the murderers – they are still walking free in our community. We are dying and our government does nothing to help us.”

In Brazil meanwhile, the fight to save the Amazon is increasingly a fight against criminal gangs who terrorise local populations at the behest of timber companies and the officials they have corrupted. Isídio Antonio was one of the latest victims. The leader of a smallholder farming community in the state of Maranhão, Isídio had suffered years of death threats for denouncing illegal logging on his land. Police have never investigated his murder.

Thousands of illegal logging camps have sprung up across Brazil's Amazon, where men armed with machetes and chainsaws cut down valuable Brazilian hardwoods like mahogany, ebony and teak. It's estimated that 80 % of timber from Brazil is illegalⁱ, and accounts for 25% of illegal wood on global marketsⁱⁱ. Much of this is being sold on to buyers in the UK, US, Europe and Chinaⁱⁱⁱ, and is contributing to one of the world's highest rates of forest loss.

"The murders that are going unpunished in remote mining villages or deep within rainforests are fuelled by the choices consumers are making on the other side of the world," said Kyte. "Companies and investors must cut ties with projects that trample over communities' rights to their land. Our warming climate and growing population mean that pressures on land and natural resources are set to increase. Without urgent intervention the numbers of deaths we're seeing now will be dwarfed by those in the future."

Global Witness is calling on governments in affected countries to:

- Increase protection for land and environmental activists at risk of violence, intimidation or threats
- Investigate crimes, including their corporate and political masterminds as well as the triggermen, and bring perpetrators to justice
- Support activists' right to say no to projects on their land, and ensure that companies are proactively seeking their consent
- Resolve the underlying causes of violence against defenders, by formally recognising communities' rights to their land, and tackling the corruption and illegalities that blight natural resource sectors

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Notes to editors:

ⁱ BBC News (9 July 2015), Brazil's Amazon wilderness at risk from organised crime. Available from: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-33449810> (accessed 5 May 2016)

ⁱⁱ Chatham House (July 2015), Tackling Illegal Logging and the Related Trade What Progress and Where Next?. Available from: https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/field/field_document/20150715IllegalLoggingHoare.pdf (accessed 4 May 2016)

ⁱⁱⁱ Chatham House (October 2014), Illegal Logging and Related Trade The Response in Brazil. Available from: https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/field/field_document/20141029IllegalLoggingBrazilWellesleyFinal.pdf (accessed 4 May 2016)