

Who are human rights defenders?

A human rights defender is a person who, individually or jointly with others, professionally or voluntarily, non-violently promotes and protects human rights (civil, political, economic, social, cultural and collective). Union leaders, members of NGOs and social movements, indigenous and Afro-Colombian leaders, activists for the rights of women and the LGBT community, lawyers, judges, journalists, are all human rights defenders. It is important to mention that overall responsibility for guaranteeing respect for human rights lies with the state.

Why are human rights defenders seriously threatened?

Through their work in the prevention of gross violations of human rights and in the struggle against impunity, as well as for their work monitoring and criticizing public policies on human rights, human rights defenders directly confront those who commit these crimes, whether armed groups, political authorities or economic sectors. Some defenders work to expand the recognition of human rights for sectors of the population that have been systematically discriminated against in their countries, including the rights of women and sexual and reproductive rights, the rights of the LGBT community, and indigenous peoples' rights. Over recent years, people who defend human rights have been and continue to be the victims of frequent murders and violent attacks, systematic smear campaigns and false accusations, threats, forced disappearances, sexual violence and unfounded criminal proceedings.



Diego Sandoval

What is their current situation in Colombia? Today, Colombia is one of the countries where the most attacks against human rights defenders are reported in the world. Examples of this include:

- In 2010, 32 human rights defenders were killed, most of them in the second half of the year. A recent report highlights the killings of 29 defenders during the first 6 months of 2011.

- There has been an increase of 126% in attacks on human rights defenders if we compare the first half of 2011 with the same period in 2010.

- In the first half of 2011, 18 leaders were killed who were struggling for the restitution of land that had been violently stolen from them and their communities.

- 24 trade unionists were murdered between January and August 2011.

- According to the International Campaign to Defend Human Rights in Colombia, between December 2009 and December 2010 at least 130 defenders were subject to arrests and criminal proceedings.



PBI Colombia

- In 2009 it was discovered that the Colombian State systematically carried out illegal acts of intelligence against defenders, sometimes using their own protection mechanisms to persecute them. For this reason, among others, in 2011, several defenders returned their State protection mechanisms; for fear that these mechanisms could be used against them.

What mechanisms exist for the protection of defenders?

The United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders (December 1998) establishes the right to defend human rights. Both the UN and the Organization of American States have created Special Rapporteurs who monitor fulfillment of the right to defend human rights, and issue recommendations to states for the protection of the life and work of defenders. The Inter-American Commission and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights have issued a series of precautionary and provisional measures in favor of human rights defenders, which order the Colombian government to take effective steps to protect them.



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The Colombian State has established the National Protection Program for Human Rights Defenders, coordinated by the Ministry of Interior and Justice. Nevertheless, the protection measures granted under this program are inadequate and ineffective. The program measures have been used illegally by the intelligence services to gain information that has since been used against defenders, which has led many organisations to reject these measures until there is a structural improvement in the program with the full participation of the defenders concerned.

In September 2009, Margaret Sekkagya, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders, made an official visit to Colombia, and concluded in her final report that "the patterns of harassment and persecution against defenders and their families persist in Colombia." She also identified serious deficiencies in the National Protection Program for Human Rights Defenders coordinated by the Ministry of Interior and Justice in Colombia.

In 2008, the European Union approved the EU Guidelines on human rights defenders, in order to establish a strategy to improve the actions of the EU in support of defenders.

What proposals have Colombian and international civil society made to support the work of defenders?

After the visit of the Special Rapporteur, and in response to the critical situation, more than 500 Colombian and international organizations gathered to subscribe to The International Campaign for the right to defend human rights. The campaign is still valid to date because in Colombia, defending human rights continues to be an extremely dangerous job.

The International Campaign raises 5 fundamental points that the State must urgently implement to change this dire situation:

1. Ending impunity for violations against defenders
2. Putting a stop to the misuse of state intelligence
3. Putting a stop to systemic smear campaigns against defenders
4. Putting a stop to unfounded criminal proceedings
5. Structurally improving protection programs for people at risk



The European Union and its Member States can play a decisive role in the protection and human rights defenders in Colombia and monitor compliance with the 5 campaign demands. It is essential to:

- Carry out ongoing assessments of the implementation of the European Union Guidelines on human rights defenders, in consultation with a wide and diverse range of organisations and human rights defenders, and develop with them a new local implementation plan in Colombia.
- Continue to permanently include in the Dialogues on Human Rights and Political Dialogue with Colombia, the issue of the situation of human rights defenders. Insist that the Colombian state demonstrate measurable progress in implementing the recommendations of the United Nations system including the Universal Periodic Review, and the five points of the defenders campaign (see above).
- Ensure that the focal point for human rights defenders is easily accessible to them, and that close relationships of trust are built with organisations to monitor the fulfillment of human rights.
- Take part in field missions, particularly those organized by human rights defenders, to verify the human rights situation in Colombia. The agenda of such missions should always include a sufficient period of time to permit an appropriate discussion with human rights organisations.
- Issue public statements of support for the fundamental and legitimate work of human rights defenders in Colombia.

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