



GLOBAL CASE STUDY SHOWS INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AND OTHER LAND AND ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENDERS FACE HEIGHTENED RISKS IN CONTEXT OF COVID-19

August. 9, 2020 - On this International Day of the World's Indigenous People, five months after the WHO declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, we are calling for urgent attention to the disproportionate impact of the virus and the lockdown on indigenous peoples and other land and environmental defenders who are especially vulnerable in the current crisis.

The Defending Land and Environmental Defenders Coalition ([DDCoalition](#)), composed of organizations working in support of land and environmental defenders around the world, have been collecting reports of threats, harassment and attacks on land and environmental defenders since May. Collected via [LANDex](#) and public reports, verification of these cases is ongoing, but three overarching trends have emerged: threats against land and environmental defenders have not slowed during the pandemic; instead, new types of risks have emerged; and in the current context, indigenous peoples are particularly exposed to threats and attacks.

"Throughout this pandemic, particularly in the responses of governments and duty bearers, we are witnessing Indigenous Peoples Human Rights Defenders becoming more at risk of being targeted, harassed and even killed as movement is restricted and governments broaden laws," said Kathrin Wessendorf, executive director of the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA). "Initiatives are being taken forward under cover of the disarray caused by the pandemic or the scaling up of emergency measures."

The following reports showcase common elements that appeared across cases, highlighting the many ways that the pandemic is impacting indigenous communities. Apart from being uniquely vulnerable to the health risk posed by COVID-19 – with limited access to healthcare and other preventative measures – the ongoing loss (and lacking recognition) of traditional land has driven food insecurity and forced many indigenous people to leave their communities, seeking work in the informal sector or frontline positions, [further exposing them to COVID-19](#).

During the pandemic and ensuing lockdown, many governments have been less responsive and more absent in areas of land conflict. In many countries, the judiciary has been suspended, surveillance

heightened and emergency laws – enacted to contain the spread of the virus – have been used to detain dissidents. Activism has been limited at a crucial time, with protests and demonstrations often banned even though controversial activities – including evictions, demolitions, and extractive projects such as mining – are allowed to proceed. In some cases, these projects have benefitted from government incentives as areas of “priority interest” for national economies.

Among the cases collected by participating organizations, there were a startling number of **demolitions and evictions of indigenous, ethnic and local communities** at a time when new environmental permits were issued, concessions and new projects were granted and civil society – among them legal support, journalists and protestors – were forced to stay at home.

In **Kenya**, the government flouted a landmark 2017 ruling by the African Court that upheld the Ogiek peoples' right to their ancestral lands and on July 2, began a large-scale removal of at least [300 Ogiek families](#). The forced eviction has taken place despite a moratorium on evictions during COVID-19 and the evicted families, now homeless, will be further exposed to COVID-19.

In **Nepal**, the indigenous Chepang peoples face similar risks, as some [60 families had their homes allegedly burned](#) by park authorities in late July. In the midst of Monsoon season, these families find themselves homeless and further exposed to COVID-19. Two months earlier, 25 houses in a Dalit landless community [were demolished](#) in Mushar, Nepal to make way for a new road. In the second week of April, [two hotels](#) managed by indigenous Ogoni in the River State of **Nigeria** were demolished after authorities reportedly said that hoteliers had failed to cooperate with the state on contact tracing related to COVID-19.

The cases collected also highlighted the selective application of restrictions on movement and activity. While protests were banned, **controversial infrastructure and development projects were allowed to advance** and, in some cases, were protected by officials.

In late March, in central Mexico, an [indigenous activist was detained](#) for protesting a highway being built through forests claimed by the Otomí-Mexica. Despite the lockdown – and suspension orders from a local court – construction continued with protection from police and the National Guard. In Uganda, two weeks into the national lockdown, Witness Radio reported [violent land grabs from poor communities](#) and the arrest of those who opposed the violence. One of the companies allegedly involved has sent a [response](#) to the Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, but the situation is ongoing.

In April, in the **Philippines**, a [reported 100 police officers](#) forcibly dispersed an estimated 30 indigenous defenders and, according to this [civil society report](#), arrested an indigenous leader for preventing access to a mining operation that locals claim is contaminating their water supply in Didipio, Nueva Vizcaya. It has been [widely reported that the mining licence expired in June 2019](#), but project opponents say operations have continued. Activists point out that the company [is flouting the quarantine order](#), leaving locals with little choice but to return to the barricade to protest, albeit respecting social distancing.

The Philippines, consistently one of the most dangerous countries for defenders, saw a rise from [30 killings in 2018 to 43 last year](#).

In **Indonesia**, a suspended judiciary left three indigenous farmers in Central Kalimantan waiting for a hearing after being arrested for stealing fruit from a plantation company they accuse of grabbing their land. The trial was postponed with police stating that their priority concern was COVID-19. The farmers noted that while the police had time to pursue the theft accusations in the midst of the pandemic, they were unable to find time for the pre-trial to take place.

The majority of cases received were from **Colombia**, a country that recorded the highest global number of social leaders, land and environmental defenders killed in 2019. Three social leaders were killed before the lockdown was imposed and one month after stay-at-home orders were announced, the Ombudsman's Office warned of a "violent attack" against vulnerable communities by non-state armed actors and organized crime groups. In just over a month, they had registered 40 incidents of intimidation and attacks against communities.

Throughout the lockdown, reports from Colombia documented how **armed groups threatened indigenous communities** who attempted to protect themselves. In Magdalena, Sierra Nevada's Kogui indigenous people denounced that armed individuals engaged in "illegal" mining on their lands without any action by the authorities. In Cauca, Colombia, armed groups threatened indigenous Nasa guards who had been posted to monitor movement into and out of the community, eventually forcing their entry and exposing the community to COVID-19.

"The conditions of confinement have made it easier to locate, find, attack and do away with these defenders, whether in their houses or at their sites of work" said Cristián Llanos, a researcher on the database team at the Human Rights and Political Violence Database at CINEP, a Colombian research and education organization. "In the Cauca region, two or three attacks have been reported every day, with indigenous people and farmers being the most impacted," he added, "but attacks against leaders throughout the country are widespread and during the lockdown, the actual figure may exceed 100 attacks on defenders."

In several cases from **Brazil**, government policies and practices exposed indigenous peoples to an unnecessarily high risk of contracting COVID-19. In Amazonas State, local authorities forced members of the Kokoma tribe to leave their communities and travel long distances to receive federal assistance, exposing them to the virus during travel on public transportation and in crowded waiting areas. High rates of infection and several deaths in the community have been attributed to these trips. Elsewhere in the Amazon, evidence suggests that health workers with the virus infected members of the Kanamari tribe.

In April, the military reportedly undertook a widespread search of homes in the indigenous area of Chittagong Hill Tracts, a region of **Bangladesh**. According to the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA), actors seem to be "utilising the crisis to suppress their people and hunt down the rights defenders and activists who speak up against them."

"The reported cases serve as a sobering example of the many ways that the COVID-19 crisis has been used against land and environmental defenders, especially those belonging to indigenous communities," said Ward Anseeuw, senior technical specialist at the International Land Coalition. "The case collection

also underlines the importance of closely and systematically monitoring these incidents, as most killings of defenders are preceded by the kind of non-lethal attacks documented here."

With the pandemic far from over, the DDCoalition stands in solidarity with indigenous peoples and other land and environmental defenders and calls for urgent action from private and state actors.

As a first step, both governments and companies need to put land and environmental rights, as well as the rights of the people who protect them, at the centre of their response to COVID-19. They must support the struggles of local land users and communities to own, control and manage their land and natural resources as a long-term effort to build back better.

Additionally, they should dedicate resources to identifying increased risk to these defenders across companies' investment, operations and supply chains to prevent and mitigate risks identified. Furthermore, the potential environmental or human rights impacts of projects should be clearly and safely communicated to those affected and these communities and individuals should be able to meaningfully participate in decision-making processes.

More generally, this is an opportunity for state and private actors to formalize their commitment to a zero-tolerance approach to violence against defenders in their operations. This means allocating a budget and personnel to implement these policies and creating systems that would ensure regular impact assessments and mechanisms that would report and act on these findings.

Protecting indigenous peoples and other land and environmental defenders must be part of the urgent task of mitigating the COVID-19 crisis and moving toward sustainable recovery.

Signed,

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