



Geneva

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Item 3, General debate

Joint Statement on Environmental Human Rights Defenders  
March 16, 2022

Delivered by H.E. Ms Anna Jardfelt, Permanent Representative  
of Sweden to the UN in Geneva

Mr President,

I have the honour to deliver this statement on behalf of Costa Rica, the United States of America, and Sweden, as well as over 60 countries\*.

The world today faces multiple challenges - climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution, an inequality crisis, exacerbated by the socio-economic effects of the global pandemic, and a democracy crisis, with the global trend of weakened respect for human rights and democratic principles.

Human rights defenders play a crucial role in tackling and mitigating these challenges.

Human rights defenders, including those working in environmental matters, referred to as environmental human rights defenders, face increasing resistance for mobilizing to protect the environment and confront climate change, and for speaking out to address the adverse human rights impacts resulting from the unprincipled or otherwise flawed exploitation of land, water and natural resources.

According to reports, over 200 environmental human rights defenders, including members of indigenous peoples, were killed in 2020. This is unacceptable.

Accountability for all threats, harassment, attacks and killings – both by state and non-state actors – must be ensured and further threats, harassment, attacks and killings must be prevented. No country is immune from challenges in this area.

Women environmental human rights defenders often face additional obstacles, risks and reprisals, including sexual and gender-based violence – both online and offline. Women defenders, especially in rural and indigenous areas, are often at the forefront of these movements, but due to gender discrimination they often lack the resources, contacts, and power to mitigate attacks, which frequently go unreported. Support to security and safety measures for environmental human rights defenders must be gender-responsive and adapted to the specific gendered attacks, threats and harassments that they encounter.

Indigenous, Afro-descendent, and other minority environmental human rights defenders, in particular those who live in remote areas, are disproportionately subject to violence, comprising over 40 percent of the reported killings. Many of these defenders may have little formal education and may not speak the official language. Community leaders who raise concerns often become a target for violence to silence the broader community. Protection measures need to be adapted to reflect their specific circumstances, including connecting at-risk communities to networks that can protect them from violence and defend their rights.

When building back better from the pandemic, it is of paramount importance for states to protect and support environmental human rights defenders, as well as to acknowledge their role as agents of change to mitigate and adapt to climate change, protect the environment and improve conditions for food security. Environmental human rights defenders, including indigenous peoples and small-holder farmers, often have unique knowledge about local sustainable solutions that can help drive a just transition that leaves no one behind.

We call on all states to protect the rights of environmental human rights defenders, including their right to freedom of expression and to seek, receive and impart information, and their ability to participate freely, without fear of reprisals, and to effectively implement the procedural rights under national laws addressed in Rio Principle 10.

Further we call on states to ensure access to justice in environmental matters, to protect the defenders and to ensure their safety, and to acknowledge and address the specific threats to women, indigenous, Afro-

descendent, and other minority environmental human rights defenders, whether the threat comes from state or non-state actors.

We recall the steps set out in Council resolution 40/11 and reiterate the Council's call to implement them without delay. Council resolution 48/13 highlights the role of the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights as an important tool for businesses in this context.

We welcome the United Nations' efforts to protect environmental human rights defenders, and in particular efforts by UNEP, OHCHR and UNDP in relation to the SG's Call to Action for Human Rights.

We commit to continue working together to find effective ways to defend and support environmental human rights defenders.

Thank you.

\* Albania, Andorra, Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Canada, Cap Verde, Chile, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Ecuador, Estonia, Eswatini, Fiji, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Guatemala, Honduras, Iceland, India, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Latvia, Lichtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malawi, Malta, Marshall Islands, Mexico, Mongolia, Montenegro, Netherlands, New Zealand, North Macedonia, Norway, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Poland, Portugal, Republic of Korea, Republic of Moldova, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Switzerland, Tunisia, Ukraine, United Kingdom, Uruguay, and Vanuatu

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