

Global Witness response to criticisms of its reporting on Nicaragua in 'Defenders of the Earth', published in July 2017

The evidence we put forward to gauge how dangerous a country is for land and environmental defenders is based on the amount of killings we document. We are not able to empirically measure other factors, such as amount of threats defenders receive or how many cases of criminalized activists exist in any given country. But we do try and complement the figures of how many killed with contextual information and analysis.

In 2016, in the case of Nicaragua we found 11 killings of people that fitted our definition of land and environmental defenders. This made Nicaragua the most dangerous place per capita to be a land and environmental defender according to our statistics. We used a range of credible public sources to back up the fact that these people were working peacefully to defend their land or environmental rights. These sources also strongly suggest that they were killed to hinder their activism in defence of their land or environment. The sources include: international news agencies (EFE), local press (Hoy, La Prensa, El Nuevo Diario), local human rights organisations (CENIDH) and regional human rights bodies (Inter-American Commission on Human Rights).

Of the 11 cases we documented in 2016 one was a park ranger whilst the other ten were members of indigenous communities. Much of the evidence for the cases of these indigenous community members came from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) – a widely-respected regional body of human rights experts whose rulings are legally binding for all members of the OAS (Organisation of American States) of which Nicaragua is a member. Please find [here](#) a link to an IACHR press release detailing the very real dangers for these Miskitu communities where a four month period is cited in which 6 members were killed, dozens wounded, 10 kidnapped, 3 women sexually assaulted, houses and crops were burnt and community members suffered intimidation, harassment and death threats. The United Nations Special Rapporteur on Indigenous Peoples also expressed her grave concern for the situation.

As well as the murders of eleven land and environmental defenders last year, there is additional evidence to demonstrate that the Nicaraguan state needs to do more to protect defenders and indigenous communities. In October 2015 the IACHR ordered the Nicaraguan government to grant emergency protection to four Miskitu communities because of 'a constant cycle of violence, murders, threats and intimidation' suffered by the communities (see [here](#)). In January 2016, after receiving no response from the Nicaraguan government, the IACHR widened their call for emergency protection to more communities and human rights organisations who had received further threats. These calls were also echoed by respected international human rights organisations like CEJIL. Despite reiterating the urgent need for their protection, more community members have since been killed whilst the Nicaraguan government has not complied with the IACHR's decision to guarantee the communities' security (as of IACHR's press release in February 2017, see [here](#)).

The IACHR also points to an underlying factor facilitating this violence: the lack of implementation by the Nicaraguan government of official recognition of the rights of indigenous people to their ancestral lands (see [here](#)). Other contextual information on the challenging climate for human rights defence in the country also has a strong evidence base.

The weakening of civil liberties has been documented by the Guardian (see [here](#)), by Civicus (see [here](#)) and by the European Parliament (see [here](#))

Amnesty International's overview of Nicaragua also backs up many of our claims (see [here](#)):

“Conflict over land in the North Atlantic Autonomous Region sparked violent attacks against Miskitu Indigenous Peoples. Human rights defenders continued to experience threats and intimidation because of their work. Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities denounced violations of their rights to consultation and free, prior and informed consent in the context of the development of the Grand Interoceanic Canal. Communities and human rights organizations expressed concern at the potential negative impact of the Canal on their lives.”

Plans for the inter-oceanic canal, although a separate issue to the killings of Miskitu members, is also emblematic of the threats facing land and environmental defenders in Nicaragua, and the lack of consultation of local communities about their land. We are careful to point out in our report that the two issues are separate but that we believe both are important in understanding the very real threats faced by land and environmental defenders in the country. We state:

“10 of those murdered were indigenous people, with most killed in conflicts with settler communities over land. Meanwhile rural ‘campesino’ defenders faced threats, harassment and attacks, including for opposing the construction of an inter-oceanic canal.”

There is widespread evidence that both the government's plans for the canal violate the land rights of campesino communities and also that activists opposing the canal are suffering threats, intimidation and, importantly, the state is not guaranteeing their protection. In February this year the European Parliament adopted a resolution on the situation of human rights and democracy in Nicaragua regarding the case of Francisca Ramirez – an opponent of the canal who we profile in our report. The resolution (see [here](#)) states:

“Members expressed their concern at the steadily deteriorating human rights situation in Nicaragua and deplored the attacks and acts of harassment committed by individuals, political forces and bodies linked to the State. They urged the government to refrain from harassing and using acts of reprisal against Francisca Ramirez (Coordinator of the National Council for the Defence of Land, Lake and Sovereignty) and other human rights defenders for carrying out their legitimate work.”

Amnesty International have also stated (see [here](#)):

“The fact that Nicaragua is planning to go ahead with a mega project that will destroy the lives of many communities without even properly taking their views into consideration is outrageous.”

The threats and intimidation against Francisca Ramirez because of her opposition to the government's plans to build the inter-oceanic canal are also very real. They are backed up by respected international human rights organisations like Front Line Defenders (see [here](#)) who state that Francisca faces ‘constant harassment by government officials and political figures’ and by Amnesty International (see [here](#)).

In our report, we are careful to report both the news emanating from our 2016 statistics, and trends observed over longer periods of time. We make it clear that, whilst Nicaragua was the deadliest country per capita in 2016, Honduras has consistently been so over the last decade. We are passionate about campaigning for change in Honduras, and have published two reports over the past two and a half years focusing on the reality there, including an in-depth investigation this January. We have dedicated most of our energies this year to advocating on Honduras, notably in Washington, where we worked to ensure that almost 80 legislators signed letters to the Secretary of State regarding the need for a change in US policy in the country.

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