

[The deadly environment for human rights defenders](#)

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By Alice Harrison, Global Witness

'I live from the forest, I'll protect it at any cost. And that's why I live with the constant threat of a bullet to my head, because I denounce the loggers and charcoal producers,' said rubber tapper José Cláudio Ribeiro da Silva at his TEDx talk in the Brazilian state of Amazonas. 'I'm here talking to you today, but a month from now I might have disappeared.' He was wrong, but not by much. Six months after warning that he was in danger of being 'disappeared,' José Cláudio and his wife Maria were murdered by masked gunmen. José Cláudio's ear was ripped out as proof of execution.

The da Silvas died because they placed themselves between the forest they inhabited and corporate interests. New research by [Global Witness](#) shows that they belong to a large but little known group of people - environmental and land defenders - whose rising death toll is escaping international attention. Our recent report exposing this reality, [Deadly Environment](#), found that on average two such defenders are being killed every week. Between 2002 and 2012 the annual number of killings more than trebled, culminating in 147 deaths in 2012, the highest ever. This spiralling figure prompts two questions - if it is so big then why is no one talking about it? And if no one is talking about it then is it in fact bigger?

The UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders recognises the importance and legitimacy of people who promote and defend human rights, as well as their need for better protection. What makes environmental defenders distinctive is how they link issues of health, life and freedom from oppression to the protection of the natural environment that sustains them.

The environment is emerging as a new battleground for human rights. As soaring demand for products like beef, timber and oil drive industrialisation into new territories, companies are striking deals with state officials without the consent of local communities. Increasingly those communities are finding themselves in the firing line of an unaccountable corporate machinery, state forces and a thriving market for contract killers. As over-consumption by the world's wealthy rises, pushing us further toward and beyond key planetary boundaries,

resource tensions are likely to intensify.

This is a global problem, but particularly acute in Latin America and Asia Pacific. Low levels of reporting in some parts of the world complicate country-by-country comparisons, but existing data suggests that Brazil is the deadliest place to be an environmental defender, accounting for 448 (nearly half) of total deaths between 2002 and 2013. Honduras figured second, with 109 killings, and the Philippines third with 67. Some, like José Cláudio and Maria da Silva, are targeted by assassins and henchmen, others die in fatal crackdowns on protest actions. One thing that 99 per cent of documented victims shared is that their deaths went unpunished – only ten perpetrators are known to have been convicted and punished between 2002 and 2013.

The meagre conviction rate in defender killings can be explained by a number of factors, including the geographic isolation of defenders, limited knowledge of their rights or how to exercise them, and the inadequacy of state judicial systems to process cases. Often, however, more sinister forces are at play, with defenders' deaths hushed up amid a powerful nexus of vested interests. State forces – the very people who should be protecting and seeking justice for environment defenders – are in many cases complicit in their deaths.

Impunity is at once a symptom and driver of this hidden crisis. A number of local NGOs are working courageously and doggedly to catalogue violence against environmental defenders and to mobilise counter action. Yet in the absence of a more joined-up approach at national, regional and international levels to track and monitor abuses systematically, the contours of this phenomenon remain nebulous and its violence unpunished. Paulo Adario of Greenpeace International, who we consulted for our research, stressed the grave implications of this blind spot. 'Violence is very much related to impunity. If you don't punish crimes, you give a strong signal for future ones. You create what Gabriel Garcia Marquez termed "a death foretold" – future events are announced in the present. The future is one of more conflict based on disputes over forest resources and land.'

Deadly Environment is the most comprehensive global analysis of this problem to date. All of the 908 killings included in the report were drawn from credible, published and publicly available sources of information, where the victim's name, location and manner of death were specified. This left a number of countries more or less blank on [our map](#), most notably in Africa. Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Central African Republic and Zimbabwe suffer fresh scars of resource conflict yet environmental defender deaths are practically invisible in public records. There is also significant under-reporting in Myanmar, Central Asian countries and China, where human rights monitoring is prohibited or restricted. This signals that the problem could be far greater than we are currently in a position to comprehend.

The rising incidence of environmental defender killings needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency and in its own right – not as a sub-category of wider human rights abuses but as a specific problem with distinct causes. In *Deadly Environment* we call for the UN's Human Rights Council to pass a resolution specifically addressing the heightened threat posed to environmental defenders, and for regional human rights bodies to establish mechanisms that provide effective emergency protection for activists. National governments need to monitor abuses and ensure that perpetrators are brought to justice, and recognise that the short-term proceeds of natural resource exploitation do not outweigh the social and environmental costs that they exact. Companies meanwhile need to ensure that they gain the consent of communities living on land before developing it, and carry out checks on their supply chains to make sure they are not sponsoring violence or intimidation.

Speaking of the plundering of his forests on stage in November 2010, José Cláudio Ribeiro da Silva said, 'This happens due to people that only think of money, only of themselves, forgetting about the next generation. It is a shame that we can't find any courageous action to solve this problem.' Not even the limelight could save José Cláudio, whose own bravery ultimately cost him his life. His death was one of the rare cases that saw a conviction. Whilst his assassins now face 50 year jail terms, however, the landowner accused of contracting his killing was acquitted and went free.

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