

Urgent action needed to address business-related attacks against rights defenders

Human rights and environmental defenders face intimidation, trumped-up charges and violence for opposing business-related activities. In a new report, seven Swedish civil society organisations urge European companies to step up their efforts to address risks to defenders and call on the EU and Member States to adopt laws requiring companies to do so.

Human rights defenders play a key role in upholding democratic principles and in holding companies and states accountable for business-related human rights violations and environmental destruction. Still, many face severe reprisals for safeguarding workers' rights or opposing projects such as dams, mines or plantations: over 2,000 attacks on defenders were reported between 2015 and 2019. The number increased by more than 10 percent between 2017 and 2018.

The report ***Defenders at Risk: Attacks on Human Rights and Environmental Defenders and the Responsibility of Business*** provides an overview of the situation for defenders working on business-related rights violations in high-risk sectors. Based on interviews with 10 defenders and a survey of 22 Swedish and European companies, the report highlights the critical situation defenders face and the urgent need for companies and states to take effective action.

“The situation is alarming. People should not be threatened or killed for voicing concerns on businesses-related projects that destroy their environment or threaten their livelihoods,” said Swedwatch researcher Malena Wåhlin.

The defenders featured in the report are from some of the world's most dangerous countries in terms of business-related attacks on trade unionists, journalists, civil rights activists and smallholder farmers, including Colombia, Bangladesh and the Philippines.

“In my country, food companies work with the military who target community workers,” said Ryan Mendoza, a defender forced to leave the Philippines because of his work with indigenous peoples. “Many of my colleagues have been killed, only for defending human rights. These companies need to be held responsible.”

The organisations behind the report call on companies to consult with defenders as part of their human rights due diligence processes, and to implement a zero-tolerance policy towards attacks on defenders. They also urge states and the EU to adopt legislation on mandatory human rights due diligence to ensure that companies respect defenders throughout their value chains.

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The report was conducted by Swedwatch in cooperation with ACT Church of Sweden, The Swedish Society for Nature Conservation, Diakonia, Afrikagrupperna, Solidarity Sweden-Latin America and Fair Action.

