PROTECTING OUR FUTURE

ENVIRONMENTAL HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS POWERING JUST TRANSITIONS

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Amnesty International is a movement of 10 million people which mobilizes the humanity in everyone and campaigns for change so we can all enjoy our human rights. Our vision is of a world where those in power keep their promises, respect international law and are held to account. We are independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion and are funded mainly by our membership and individual donations. We believe that acting in solidarity and compassion with people everywhere can change our societies for the better.

© Amnesty International 2026

Except where otherwise noted, content in this document is licensed under a Creative Commons (attribution, non-commercial, no derivatives, international 4.0) licence.

https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode

For more information please visit the permissions page on our website: www.amnesty.org

Where material is attributed to a copyright owner other than Amnesty International this material is not subject to the Creative Commons licence.

First published in 2026 by Amnesty International Ltd,

Peter Benenson House, 1 Easton Street, London WC1X 0DW, UK

Cover Image:
Design by Barbara Vil.

Cover Photos:
From left to right: Anna Marie Holland © Amnesty International; Alexandre Anderson de Souza © Matias Maxx / Amnesty International; Antonia Burke © Tamati Smith/Getty Images; Deniz Gümüşel © Private; and Leonela Moncayo © Private; Environmental and atmospheric pollution © Getty Images/iStockphoto

Index Number: ACT 30/1437/2026

Original language: English

amnesty.org

CONTENTS

Environmental and atmospheric pollution ©Getty Images/iStockphoto

INTRODUCTION **4**

Key terms explained 5

Australia – First Nations defending Sea Country **6**

Protecting our future 6

Brazil – Every boat is an act of resistance **9**

Water defenders 10

Canada – Wet'suwet'en Nation defending the Yin'tah **12**

Resisting now for a future with dignity 12

Ecuador – Guerreras por la Amazonía putting down the "Fire monsters" **15**

Our futures are burning 16

Defending nature has consequences 16

Türkiye - The collective struggle to protect the Akbelen Forest **18**

Paying the price for speaking out 19

PROTECTING DEFENDERS **21**

RECOMMENDATIONS **22**

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES **25**

INTRODUCTION

Around the world, people are resisting harms to their rights and land and are standing firmly against the governments and corporations that are collectively and individually responsible for the climate crisis. These are people who simply want to live with dignity and safety. These environmental human rights defenders (EHRDs) are fighting for the right to live in a healthy environment, which has been recognized as a human right.

These defenders include people from many walks of life: artisanal fishers and Indigenous Peoples whose understanding and knowledge is built on a relationship with the land and water going back generations; children and young students pursuing their dreams; mothers, fathers, sons and daughters, all seeking to protect our rights. They are on the frontlines of the multiple crises that are shaping the world. In 1998, through the adoption of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, the international community acknowledged the key role that defenders play in advancing our human rights. The Declaration is clear: human rights defenders need to be protected if governments are serious about advancing human rights.

From a polluted bay in Brazil, to threatened Indigenous territories in Australia and Canada, from gas flares in Ecuador and coal mining in Türkiye, the defenders featured in this briefing are resisting fossil fuel infrastructure and fighting other root causes of the climate crisis. The burning of coal, gas and oil – which emits heat-trapping greenhouse gases – is the primary driver of climate change. It also severely erodes the integrity of the nearby land, air and waters on which people live and rely.[1] Fossil fuel infrastructure itself poses risks for the health and livelihoods of **at least 2 billion people globally who live near fossil fuel infrastructure – roughly a quarter of the world's population.**[2]

Despite promises and commitments, defending human rights and the environment, including by opposing fossil fuel projects, continues to be a dangerous activity that carries personal risks in many countries. As their demands clash with the powerful interests of those who profit from fossil fuels and the climate crisis, many defenders have been stigmatized, threatened, attacked and criminalized. Some have even been killed.

Despite the risks and losses they face, defenders continue to organize, mobilize and act against the threats to their rights, livelihoods and territories and for a better future.

This briefing weaves together inspiring stories of resistance and commitment across five countries on the frontlines of the climate crisis. Three defenders from Brazil, Canada and Ecuador were featured in Amnesty International's *Extraction Extinction* report.[3] They are presented here alongside two new stories from Australia and Türkiye, the COP31 negotiations' presidency and host country, respectively. The individuals featured in this briefing do not act alone; each represents a growing movement of people who are taking action to achieve a more just and sustainable future. To succeed, their human rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly must be respected, protected and fulfilled.

[1] Amnesty International, "Global: Fossil Fuel Infrastructure is Putting Rights of 2 Billion People and Critical Ecosystems at Risk", 12 November 2025, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/11/fossil-fuel-infrastructure-rights-critical-ecosystems-at-risk/

[2] Amnesty International, "Global: Fossil Fuel Infrastructure is Putting Rights of 2 Billion People and Critical Ecosystems at Risk" (previously cited).

[3] Amnesty International, "Global: Fossil Fuel Infrastructure is Putting Rights of 2 Billion People and Critical Ecosystems at Risk" (previously cited).

KEY TERMS EXPLAINED

Environmental human rights defenders (EHRDs) – people who, by themselves or together with others, stand up for human rights by protecting the environment. They peacefully promote and protect climate justice, including by campaigning for clean air and water, biodiversity, and land rights,[4] and the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment.[5]

Fenceline communities – communities that live near industrial infrastructure, including that which produces or transforms fossil fuels. Fenceline communities directly experience the adverse impacts of pollution and environmental degradation emanating from extractive projects and tend to live in so-called "sacrifice zones".

Frontline communities – people who bear the brunt of the harms caused by climate change, many of whom are marginalized and experience intersecting forms of discrimination, often compounded by cultural, economic and social exclusion.

Sacrifice zone – a heavily contaminated area where low-income and marginalized groups bear the disproportionate burden of exposure to pollution and toxic substances.[6]

[4] UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Report, 3 August 2016, UN Doc. A/71/281.

[5] United Nations, *Guidance Note For United Nations Resident Coordinators & Country Teams: Supporting Governments To Better Respect, Promote And Protect Environmental Human Rights Defenders*, November 2023, https://wedocs.unep.org/rest/api/core/bitstreams/72257ff9-fd23-44ef-93f4-297d1e125653/content

[6] UN Special Rapporteur on the issue of human rights obligations relating to the enjoyment of a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment, Report on the Right to a Clean, Healthy and Sustainable Environment: Non-Toxic Environment, 12 January 2022, UN Doc. A/HRC/49/53.

Australia

First Nations defending Sea Country

> **“The sicker the land or the country, the water, the air, the environment, the sicker the people are. The healthier the environment is, the healthier the people are.”**
>
> – Antonia Burke[7]

For more than a decade, **Antonia Burke** travelled across Australia listening to First Nations people speak about the impacts of government decisions on their communities. Over the years, she heard stories of oppression, injustice and intergenerational trauma. As she listened, she noticed a pattern: the sicker the environment, the sicker the people were.

Her commitment to defending human rights is deeply personal. As a First Nations woman from the Yanyuwa and Garrwa people from Australia’s Northern Territory, Antonia grew up knowing how government policies had shaped her own family’s life, an awareness that made her stand up against injustice.

One day, Antonia came across a map showing the Timor and Arafura Seas off the coast of Australia’s Northern Territory. The map showed that the seas were covered with offshore oil and gas leases. Through her work she learnt that, for decades, the government had approved offshore oil and gas projects without adequately consulting with or seeking the consent of First Nations and coastal communities whose lives are intertwined with these waters.

Antonia shared the map with her community. Some people felt anxious and overwhelmed. Others felt a familiar sense of powerlessness. For many, the situation echoed older experiences of dispossession and exclusion. In her words, “it felt like a new wave of colonization”.

Protecting our future

The Timor and Arafura Seas connect coastal communities across four countries: Australia, Timor-Leste, Papua New Guinea and Indonesia. They are home to diverse marine life including fish, whales, turtles, dugongs and many other species that provide food and livelihood opportunities and sustain cultural traditions for the communities living along their shores.

[7] Telephone interview with Antonia Burke, Australia, July 2026.

First Nations people in Australia call these waters “Sea Country”.[8] Sea Country is a source of identity that holds stories and songlines that have guided people for generations.[9]

Antonia’s home, the Tiwi Islands, lies in the Arafura Sea where it meets the Timor Sea. Antonia describes how people on the islands feel everything that happens in the sea around them. Their homes, livelihood, right to health, food security, culture and identity depend on the health of the sea. The cultural practices of the Tiwi People – their dances, songs, values and stories – are also deeply connected to the sea.

Today, coastal communities in the Timor and Arafura Seas face a double threat. Offshore oil and gas projects put pressure on marine ecosystems, fisheries, and community livelihoods and cultural practices.[10] Since 1967, some 758 petroleum wells have been drilled in the Australian waters of the Timor and Arafura Seas.[11] At the same time, human-induced climate change is increasingly affecting their daily life through rising temperatures, marine heatwaves, increased salination and ocean acidification, sea level rise, and more frequent and intense weather events.[12] Antonia observes that coastal communities are concerned about food security, biodiversity and preservation of cultural heritage.

Antonia Burke addresses the media and crowd in front of the Federal Court of Australia, 15 November 2022, Melbourne. © Tamati Smith/Getty Images

[8] “Country” is a term used by First Nations peoples to refer to the lands, waters and skies to which they are connected through ancestral ties, community, culture, family origins and spiritual connections. Gemma Pol, “What is Country,” Common Ground, 2026, https://www.commonground.org.au/article/what-is-country

[9] See: https://www.seaofnations.org/sea-country

[10] Sea of Nations, *The Cumulative Impacts of Oil and Gas Production in the Arafura and Timor Seas*, July 2026, https://068b7bb8-f566-4578-978a-b6900584fd20.filesusr.com/ugd/663e7f_3d9613212f984891ab1856c50026ecd8.pdf

[11] Sea of Nations, *The Cumulative Impacts of Oil and Gas Production in the Arafura and Timor Seas* (previously cited), p. 7.

[12] Judy Lawrence and others, “Australasia”. In *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, 2022, https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/chapter/chapter-11/ sections 11.2, 11.3 & 11.4.

Antonia fears that continued fossil fuel expansion could weaken the connection of future generations with the Sea Country. For example, drilling oil and gas wells causes noise pollution and they can leak, harming the marine ecosystem, threatening artisanal fishers and seaweed farmers' livelihoods and disrupting songlines and culture.[13]

Rather than accepting this future, Antonia has helped to build a collective response to the threats faced by coastal communities of the Sea Country. As Director of Sea of Nations, an organization working with coastal and Indigenous Peoples across the Timor and Arafura Seas, Antonia has brought together community leaders to hold the Australian government accountable for upholding its obligation to ensure the right to meaningful consultation/consent prior to decisions that directly affect them.

For decades, the Australian government largely overlooked coastal communities and First Nations when approving fossil fuel projects. Through joint work, these communities achieved an important victory. They successfully challenged the government in court to comply with its own laws, such that the government must directly consult First Nations and coastal communities in Australia before approving offshore oil and gas projects that will affect them.

Their advocacy continues, so that affected communities have a say before authorities grant offshore exploration licences or approve fossil fuel projects. They are also calling for Australia to transition away from fossil fuels towards renewable sources of energy.

Antonia believes that protecting the Sea Country means ensuring that future generations inherit a clean, healthy and sustainable environment, thriving cultures, and the right to decide what happens in the places they call home.

> **"That's my hope for the future: that whales feel safe to swim through these waters with their babies and have enough to eat; that turtles can lay their eggs and crawl back into the water and swim across the sea to the next beach without worrying about industrialization; that people who live on the coastline of the sea can maintain the wilderness, the wilderness of it."**
>
> – Antonia

Antonia Burke © Tamati Smith/Getty Images

[13] For example, in 2009 the Montara oil spill in the Timor Sea caused damage to marine and coastal environments, and the communities that depend on them. See: The Guardian, "'Very hard life now': 12 years after the Montara oil spill, Indonesians are still fighting to be heard", 15 January 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/jan/16/very-hard-life-now-12-years-after-the-montara-oil-spill-indonesians-are-still-fighting-to-be-heard

Photo of artisanal fisher using a fishing net, February 2025. © Amnesty International

Brazil

Every boat is an act of resistance

> **"Every little boat here, every fisherman who still bravely wakes up early or arrives late from the sea, is an act of resistance. As long as there are boats like these, they cannot take over Guanabara Bay."**
>
> – Alexandre Anderson de Souza, February 2025

Every morning, **Alexandre Anderson de Souza** and his fellow artisanal fishers take their boats out into Guanabara Bay in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Most days, they observe the water and the moon before they fish. Sometimes they navigate near pipelines, refineries and other oil and gas infrastructure, observing, documenting and protesting its impact on the bay.

> **"Protecting artisanal fishing territories means ensuring that rivers and seas continue to be a source of life and dignity, and not just profit."**
>
> – Alexandre

For Alexandre, fishing is not just work, it is his inheritance. His grandfather and father fished here too. And today, for thousands of artisanal fishers in Guanabara Bay, fishing is both a means of subsistence and a way of life that intertwines with community identity, culture and spirituality.[14]

> **"Guanabara Bay, in reality, it represents everything, it's our livelihood, and our struggle is with large companies. Sometimes we don't have any more space to fish, it's something we always tell them. We are not after money, we only want what is ours, we just want to fish in Guanabara Bay, it's our right. And they are taking our rights."**
>
> – An artisanal fisher and EHRD, February 2025[15]

Pollution in Guanabara Bay is widespread and comes from multiple sources including the oil and gas industry, solid waste from other industrial activity and untreated sewage.[16] Pollution and economic marginalization have turned Guanabara Bay into a sacrifice zone –

[14] Amnesty International, *Extraction Extinction*, p. 68, available at Amnesty International, "Global: Fossil Fuel Infrastructure is Putting Rights of 2 Billion People and Critical Ecosystems at Risk" (previously cited).

[15] Name has been anonymized due to security concerns.

[16] See Alexandra S. Fries and others, "Guanabara Bay ecosystem health report card: science, management, and governance implications", January 2019, *Regional Studies in Marine Science*, Volume 25, https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S235248551830238X

a contaminated area where artisanal fishing communities are bearing the cost of pollution and toxic substances, including declining fish stocks, contaminated water and soil, eroded mangrove forests and shrinking fishing areas, while the companies themselves profit and do not pay for the pollution they cause.

Routes have become more dangerous. Some artisanal fishers report needing to make "frantic zigzags" to avoid large vessels. Others describe being forced out of traditional fishing areas altogether, faced with an impossible choice: leave their territory or abandon their way of life.

Water defenders

Alexandre is one of the founders of the Associação Homens e Mulheres do Mar (Association of Men and Women of the Sea – AHOMAR), a network of artisanal fishers that for nearly two decades has been mobilizing and organizing to defend the bay against the impacts of oil and gas infrastructure.

Despite their growing marginalization, limited support, and the well-documented dangers that EHRDs face in Brazil, many fishers voluntarily become water defenders, documenting and reporting oil spills to fill a gap in monitoring by environmental agencies. Patrolling the bay on a daily basis, they often witness environmental crimes that the authorities are ill equipped to detect.

> **"We are resilient, but we didn't ask for this. We have to resist or we die."**
>
> – Alexandre

In response to these gaps in environmental monitoring, in July 2024, with the support of the Brazilian branch of the NGO 350.org, members of AHOMAR launched an app called *De Olho na Guanabara* (Eye on Guanabara) that allowed fishers to record oil spills, sharing information with federal and state authorities in real time.[17] Yet these actions also bring them into conflict with industrial interests in the bay.

Alexandre Anderson de Souza © Matias Maxx / Amnesty International

Members of AHOMAR have received frequent death threats, and four were killed between 2009 and 2012.[18] In March 2020, the artisanal fisher Anísio Souza was shot dead outside his house. Anísio was Alexandre Anderson's brother and an active member of AHOMAR.[19] The people responsible for these assassinations remain at large.

The tension persists. In 2025, several EHRDs told Amnesty International that they feared for their safety, some facing intimidation and harassment. Among them, Alexandre and his wife, Daize Menezes de Souza, have been repeatedly threatened, and Alexandre himself has survived several attempts on his life.

Despite many years of living with restrictions to his freedom due to security risks, Alexandre always carries a smile and the hope for a better future for the generations to come. He said:

> **"We transformed our tears into struggle. This revolt, this sadness that is part of our history, we transformed into organization."**

Smoke rises from a fire at an oil and lubricant factory in the Ilha do Governador neighborhood in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil on February 8, 2025 © Photo by IVAN PISARENKO/AFP via Getty Images

The struggle in Guanabara Bay reflects a reality observed all over the world: fossil fuel projects benefit a few at the expense of nearby individuals and groups. But it also tells the story of community power: artisanal fishers leading the fight for environmental and climate justice. Their stories cannot be erased.

17 Renato Spyrro, "Fishermen in Rio de Janeiro use app to record, report water pollution", 6 September 2024, Reuters, https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/fishermen-rio-de-janeiro-use-app-record-report-water-pollution-2024-09-06/

18 Amnesty International, "Brazil: Activists at risk in Brazil after others killed", 2 July 2012, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/amr19/009/2012/en/

19 350.org, *Nota à Imprensa: Execução de defensor ambiental da Baía de Guanabara exige investigação séria*, 17 March 2020, https://350.org/pt/press-release/nota-de-imprensa-execucao-de-defensor-ambiental-da-baia-de-guanabara-exige-investigacao-seria-aponta-350-org/?r=BR&c=SA

Canada

Wet’suwet’en Nation defending the Yin’tah

For the Wet’suwet’en Nation, “Yin’tah” means more than territory. Yin’tah is life. It is the physical environment, the animals, plants, water and geography, and the people who are part of it, recognizing their deep interconnectedness. The Yin’tah is a vital source of cultural continuity; it ensures the Nation’s survival as an Indigenous People.

Now, the Wet’suwet’en Nation’s source of life is under threat.

Anna Marie Holland is part of the Gidimt’en Clan, one of the five clans that comprise the Wet’suwet’en Nation.[20] Anna works alongside Chief Woos and many other members of the Nation to protect the Wedzin Kwa (the sacred headwaters running through their land), and their Yin’tah from the construction of gas pipeline infrastructure by the Canadian companies TC Energy and Coastal Gaslink Pipeline Ltd (CGL).

Phase one of the pipeline construction has now been completed. CGL is now pushing for the construction of six compressor stations[21] – two of which would be built on the Yin’tah – as part of phase two of the project.[22] These compressor stations are not needed for the pipeline to function; they would just allow it to move more gas through the mountains, increasing profit while also increasing pollution and other unwelcome intrusions on the Yin’tah. Anna and other Wet’suwet’en land defenders have vowed to resist the construction of the compressor stations to uphold their responsibilities to their land and waters.

Resisting now for a future with dignity

Anna knows that the future of the children and grandchildren of the Wet’suwet’en are at stake.

> **“If we lose our Yin’tah, and our Wedzin Kwa, what are my children and my grandchildren going to look forward to? How will they survive? We need the river and the land for fishing, hunting, medicines, berries, it’s our livelihood,”**
>
> – Anna Marie Holland

[20] The positionality and hierarchy of a Wet’suwet’en person within the Nation is important to them for identification purposes. Anna Marie Holland is part of the Gidimt’en Clan, in the C’asyikh house, one of the five clans that comprise the Nation. The Chief of the Clan is Hereditary Chief Woos, whose English name is Frank Alec. He is the House Chief of C’asyikh, one of the three House Chiefs in the Gidimt’en Clan.

[21] See CGL, “Phase 2”, https://www.coastalgaslink.com/phase2/ (accessed 7 September 2026).

[22] CGL, Notice for Proposed Facility Application – Proposed Project: Coastal GasLink Phase 2 – Titanium Peak Compressor Station, 1 August 2023, https://www.rdbn.bc.ca/application/files/1016/9117/4126/CGP-012694_Titanium_Peak_documents.pdf

Environmental destruction of ancestral land is just one of the issues Anna is fighting. She grew up in what is known today as the country of Canada, a place in which Indigenous Peoples are much more likely to be killed by the police or imprisoned than non-Indigenous people.[23] She wants her children and future grandchildren to live freely and safely on the land. She wants them to learn how to hunt, preserve, work on the trap lines and make medicines with freedom, life and dignity. This is what Anna and other Wet’suwet’en land defenders are fighting for.

The governments of Canada and the Canadian province of British Columbia have repeatedly dismissed Indigenous Peoples and their rights, for instance by approving several major industrial projects without their consent.[24] They use many tactics including working with companies to incentivize Indigenous Band Councils[25] to sign partnership or benefit agreements, failing to respect Nations’ traditional governance structure and right to self-determination. This puts the lands and waters at risk, leads to the introduction of militarized policing and an increased presence of private security, results in “man camps” being built on Indigenous land, and opens the door to drugs, alcohol and violence from workers who harm Indigenous women and girls.[26]

To resist, Anna and her comrades stand together, alongside other Indigenous Nations, to stop Canada, British Columbia and CGL from destroying the Yin’tah and bringing harm to their people. They host delegations from around the world to experience the beauty of the Yin’tah first-hand and witness all that is at stake. Anna acts as a bridge between Indigenous Nations to connect them so they can share tactics and strategies to stop pipelines being built across multiple territories. She feels passionately about educating people in this way to counter the pro-pipeline and anti-Indigenous fearmongering that is perpetuated by the governments of Canada and British Columbia.

Anna Marie Holland © Amnesty International

[23] UN Special Rapporteur on the rights of Indigenous Peoples, Report: Visit to Canada, 24 July 2023, UN Doc. A/HRC/54/31/Add.2, paras 31, 42 & 43.

[24] Amnesty International, *“Removed from Our Land for Defending It”: Criminalization, Intimidation and Harassment of Wet’suwet’en Land Defenders* (Index: AMR 20/7132/2023), 9 December 2023, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/amr20/7132/2023/en/

[25] In 1876, the Canadian government passed the Indian Act, the purpose of which was to remove Indigenous Peoples from their territories and assimilate them into white settler society. The Act created the “reserve system” to control Indigenous Peoples’ territories and contain them to specific pieces of land. It also created band councils to administer reserves and replace Indigenous Peoples’ ancestral, hereditary governance structures with a system forcibly imposed by the Canadian state. Band council authority is limited to on-reserve matters, whereas hereditary chiefs continue to hold authority under Indigenous legal systems over the broader unceded, ancestral territories of their Nations.

[26] National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, *Reclaiming Power and Place: The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls*, 2019, https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/final-report/

In 2025, Anna played an important role in supporting three Indigenous land defenders who were on trial for defending the Yin'tah.[27] While they were ultimately handed suspended sentences and 150 hours of community service, Anna is proud that their solidarity organizing helped keep the three land defenders out of prison.[28]

Anna also knows that their work matters globally. She's had the opportunity to meet people, particularly women, from all over the world who are suffering from the same abuses and are engaged in the same struggles as the Wet'suwet'en – fighting for land, water, their children, and their future. Anna uses these opportunities to educate and mobilize new people in the struggle. She hopes more people around the world will join them.

Building alliances and sharing solidarity is important because it shows that, even when short term outcomes are partial or unjust, collective action can still protect people, build momentum and sustain the movement over the long term.

> **"The Wet'suwet'en struggle is a frontline to protect the inherent rights of Indigenous Peoples and to prevent climate change."**
>
> – Anna Marie Holland

Anna and other Wet'suwet'en land defenders are not only protecting their territory; they are defending a collective future where people can live with dignity, on their own land, in balance with nature, and aligned with their responsibilities as caretakers of the land and waters. Their fight matters beyond the Yin'tah. It matters for our future on a healthy planet.

Mountains in the Canadian province of British Columbia, June 2024. © Amnesty International

[27] BCSC, *Coastal GasLink Pipeline Ltd. v. Huson*, 2024 BCSC 1730, 12 January 2024, https://www.canlii.org/en/bc/bcsc/doc/2024/2024bcsc1730/2024bcsc1730.html

[28] Amnesty International, "Canada: Sentencing of land defenders sends 'chilling message' about Indigenous rights", 18 October 2025, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/10/canada-sentencing-of-land-defenders-sends-chilling-message-about-indigenous-rights/

Ecuador

Guerreras por la Amazonía putting down the "Fire monsters"

Gas flares in the Ecuadorian Amazon, January 2024. © Amnesty International

> **"While other girls grew up with a view of mountains or parks, I looked out at fiery monsters. Rather than the sunrise over the treetops, I saw the flame of a gas flare that never went out."**
>
> – Leonela Moncayo[29]

In the Ecuadorian Amazon, the forest does not go dark at night. Instead, flames rise into the sky, constant, bright and burning. For the girls and young women growing up in the provinces of Sucumbíos and Orellana, these flames are part of everyday life.

Routine gas flaring – burning off excess gas during oil extraction – is one of the most harmful and polluting practices of the oil industry, releasing greenhouse gases and other pollutants into the atmosphere. Flaring is avoidable; companies often do it in order to build and operate infrastructure on the cheap. It contributes to deadly global heating while causing serious harms to the environment and people living in nearby sacrifice zones.[30]

Leonela Moncayo © Private

Leonela Moncayo, a young climate defender who started her activism at around 11 years old, describes how:

> **"For as long as I can remember, the air has smelled of smoke. Sometimes, while playing, I smelled an odour of burnt plastic. My friends and I thought this was normal, that it was just how the jungle smelled. I later realized that it wasn't natural. It was pollution."[31]**

Another resident, Lourdes Jumbo, who lives near a gas flare, described the light and noise pollution from flaring:

[29] Amnesty International, "From an oil well to COP30", 12 November 2025, https://www.amnesty.org/en/atest/news/2025/11/oped-desde-un-pozo-petrolero-hasta-la-cop30/

[30] For a full discussion of the harms of gas flaring in Ecuador, see Amnesty International, *Extraction Extinction*, pp. 119-120, available at Amnesty International, "Global: Fossil Fuel Infrastructure is Putting Rights of 2 Billion People and Critical Ecosystems at Risk" (previously cited).

[31] Amnesty International, "From an oil well to COP30" (previously cited),

"They make so much noise. All day, all night... When we go to sleep, we have to cover the windows fully with thick curtains because some nights the flames from the flare are so bright that they look like the sun."[32]

Our futures are burning

For years, grassroots organizations such as Colectivo Eliminen los Mecheros, Enciendan la Vida (Remove the Flares, Ignite Life) have campaigned against routine gas flaring in the Amazon. In 2020 a group of 15 Amazonian girls and young women from the north-eastern provinces of Sucumbíos and Orellana – known as Guerreras por la Amazonía (Warriors for the Amazon, GxA), alongside the Unión de Afectados y Afectadas por Texaco (Union of People Affected by Texaco, UDAPT) – sued the government of Ecuador in a case that challenged the impacts of gas flaring.[33]

> **"I decided to participate in the legal action to safeguard my future and that of other girls and boys and young people like me. I have seen with my own eyes the damage that gas flares cause to the environment, to the Amazon and to the world because of the gas, the smoke, the fire. If I have to give my life for this cause, I will do so, because the gas flares are already slowly taking our lives away. Our lives and our futures are burning in the gas flares."**[34]
>
> – Leonela

In 2021 a landmark ruling ordered reparations including the gradual elimination of gas flares by December 2030, prioritizing flares near populated areas to be removed within 18 months; environmental restoration of flare-affected areas; health studies; the creation of a cancer care centre; and an official apology to the plaintiffs and the broader Amazonian population. Despite this, five years after the ruling, the flares continue to burn, and the sense of injustice remains.[35]

Defending nature has consequences

Instead of being fully protected, members of GxA have been stigmatized and intimidated for their activism. On 21 February 2024, four members of GxA, including Leonela, attended a session at the National Assembly to demand compliance with the 2021 ruling. During the session, government representatives insinuated that the children were manipulated and claimed that the removal of two gas flares constituted adequate compliance with the ruling.

The girls challenged these claims and bravely defended their right as children to participate and the rights of their communities.[36] A few days later, on 26 February, Leonela and her family discovered an improvised explosive device in the yard of their house. Leonela, her family and supporting organizations believe the incident was linked to her activism.[37] The authorities, instead of effectively investigating the incident, conditioned the protection of the members of GxA and their families on stopping their activism,[38] a condition which was refused by the *guerreras*.

The intimidation experienced by Leonela and her family reflects the broader risks faced by EHRDs across the Americas, the world's deadliest region for people defending land and the environment. According to Global Witness, 82% of cases of murder and disappearance of EHRDs documented in 2024 took place in Latin America.[39]

It also reflects the inadequate response of the State of Ecuador, which is failing to fulfil its duty to protect EHRDs, as well as its obligation to prevent, investigate and respond to attacks against defenders, particularly children and adolescents, as recognized by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights as part of states' obligations in the context of the climate emergency.[40]

Nevertheless, the young women and girls of GxA are determined to fight on, raise awareness and build power across communities, while advocating for the ruling to be implemented.

In May 2026, following a meeting between GxA, other partners and the Ministry of Environment and Energy, the government announced the creation of technical working groups to coordinate between government bodies and affected communities, with the aim to comply with the judgment, including the removal of flares and reparations to affected communities.[41]

> **"We will NOT falter, we will not give up, we will not be beaten. We will continue to fight for our future, for our life, for our land."**
>
> – GxA[42]

32 Amnesty International, Ecuador: The Amazon is Burning, the Future is Burning! (Index: AMR 28/8280/2024), 12 August 2024, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/amr28/8280/2024/en/ p. 48

33 Protection Action no. 21201202000170 was heard by the Family, Women, Children and Adolescents Judicial Unit of the canton of Lago Agrio in the province of Sucumbíos.

34 Amnesty International, *Ecuador: The Amazon is Burning, the Future is Burning!* (previously cited).

35 Amnesty International, "Ecuador: Guerreras por la Amazonía demand the elimination of gas flares five years after landmark ruling", 29 July 2026, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2026/07/ecuador-las-guerreras-por-la-amazonia-exigen-eliminar-los-mecheros-cinco-anos-despues-de-una-sentencia-historica/

36 Amnesty International, *Ecuador: Child Climate Justice Activist Intimidated in Her Home* (Index: AMR 28/7775/2024), 4 March 2024, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/amr28/7775/2024/en/

37 Amnesty International, *Ecuador: Child Climate Justice Activist Intimidated in Her Home* (previously cited).

38 Amnesty International, *Ecuador: Further Information: Protection Without Conditions Needed for Child Climate Activists* (Index: AMR 28/8024/2024), 6 May 2024, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/amr28/8024/2024/en/

39 Global Witness, *Roots of Resistance: Documenting the global struggles of defenders protecting land and environmental rights*, 17 September 2025, https://globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/land-and-environmental-defenders/roots-of-resistance/

40 Amnesty International, "Inter-American Court sets milestone in the fight for climate justice", 4 July 2025, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2025/07/corte-interamericana-marca-un-hito-en-la-lucha-por-la-justicia-climatica-en-el-mundo/

41 Amnesty International, *Ecuador: Global Support for Warriors for the Amazon Galvanizes Technical Working Groups on the Mecheros Judgment* (Index: AMR 28/0995/2026), 14 May 2026, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/amr28/0995/2026/en/

42 Amnesty International, "Ecuador: Justice has failed the Warriors for the Amazon, but their fight continues", 26 March 2025, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/03/ecuador-la-justicia-les-ha-fallado-a-guerreras-amazonia/

Türkiye

The collective struggle to protect the Akbelen Forest

Kurtuluş Park, Ankara, Turkiye, August 2026 © Kaltfilm / Amnesty International

> **“You carry out research, you write a report, you make policy recommendations, yet people continue to suffer. At some point you feel compelled to engage with them directly. Observing and reporting is not enough, you have to act to make a difference.”**
>
> – Deniz Gümüşel[43]

For more than 25 years **Deniz Gümüşel**, an environmental engineer by profession, has worked with civil society organizations documenting the environmental and human rights impacts of fossil fuels across Türkiye.

In the last seven years, Deniz joined local communities opposing the coal mining operations in Muğla province in south-western Türkiye, a region that hosts dozens of coal mines and three coal-fired power stations.[44] Led by villagers, particularly by women from Ikizköy, their struggle has sought to protection of the Akbelen Forest, a symbol of resistance against coal mining expansion,[45] and the region’s olive grove, which are vital to local livelihoods. Deniz contributed to their struggle through supporting legal interventions, campaigning and mobilization efforts.

The burning of fossil fuels pollutes the air, soil and water. Across Muğla province, Deniz has witnessed how open-pit mining has transformed the landscape and contributed to the displacement of communities whose lives are closely tied to the land.

The impacts of coal mining are visible across the region. Deniz describes a 15km-long scar stretching from Ören in Gökova Bay to the now largely destroyed Akbelen Forest. In the last 40 years at least eight villages in Muğla province have disappeared as mining operations expanded.[46] Generations who were born and raised here, living from and caring for the land, were suddenly forced to leave, with many rebuilding their lives in an urban setting.[47]

Deniz Gümüşel. © Private

For Deniz, the consequences go beyond loss of income. Villages shrink, communities and traditional ways of life disappear and generations of knowledge connected to the land are gradually lost:

> **“It leads to a psychological collapse in people because what is lost is not just the land and livelihoods, but the past and the future combined at the same time. This is what these power stations and coal mines have caused. Fossil fuel economy causes devastation in a chain reaction that impacts all of us in multiple and layered ways. Fighting against this destruction is a powerful way to advocate for climate justice for everyone.”**

Paying the price for speaking out

Like many other EHRDs, Deniz’s activism has come at a personal cost. Over the years, she has been subject to multiple criminal investigations and prosecutions for her peaceful environmental activism.

In January 2026 a court convicted her for allegedly “preventing a public official from performing their duty”. Her conviction and five-month prison sentence are currently being appealed. In August 2023, she was banned for 18 months from entering Milas district, where the Akbelen Forest is located. The restriction negatively affected her work and personal life.

Deniz recalls the summer of 2023 when law enforcement officials and private security personnel intervened to dismantle a two-year-long sit-in to prevent the destruction of the forest.[48] Dozens of people were detained and protesters reported serious injuries, including head trauma and broken fingers and feet.[49]

Despite the many challenges, Deniz remains hopeful:

> **“When you are alone, you can feel weak and small in the face of a huge system. By contrast, when you are in the collective struggle, even when you lose, you don’t lose hope – you say, ‘this time we lost but we will try again.’ What I hope for the future is that the thrill of being organized and acting together will overcome hopelessness.”**

43 Online interview with Deniz Gümüşel, 15 July 2026.

44 350.Org, *“Muğla and the Curse of Coal”*, July 2019, https://350.org/curseofcoal/?r=GB&c=EU
Deniz Gümüşel and Elif Gündüzyeli, The Real Costs of Coal: Muğla, 2019, https://old.caneurope.org/content/uploads/2019/08/The-Real-Costs-of-Coal-Mugla_Full-Report_Final.pdf

45 Euro News, “’We will not give up’: How a Turkish forest became the site of fierce coal mine resistance”, 28 July 2023, https://www.euronews.com/2023/07/28/we-will-not-give-up-how-a-turkish-forest-became-the-site-of-fierce-coal-mine-resistance

46 Climate Action Network Europe, *The Social and Cultural Cost of Coal*, 2018, http://komurungercekbedeli.org/the-social-and-cultural-cost-of-coal.html

47 According to official statistics, 93% of the population in Türkiye live in urban settings. See: Veri Portali, “Address Based Population Registration System Results”, 2025, https://veriportali.tuik.gov.tr/tr/press/53899

48 Euro News, “’We will not give up’” (previously cited).

49 Business and Human Rights Centre, “40 environmental defenders protesting coal mining project”, July 2023, https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/40-environmental-defenders/

Protest in Akbelen Forest/Ikizkoy/Milas/Mugla, Türkiye © H. Batuhan Günşen

The İkizköy community's struggle to save the forest, of which Deniz was a part, succeeded in delaying the cutting down of Akbelen Forest for four years. In other parts of Türkiye, EHRDs have achieved important legal victories, including successfully challenging plans to expand the Afşin-Elbistan coal-fired power station.[50]

> **"Another source of hope for me is the fact that people are becoming more aware of the interconnectedness of the climate crisis and the other rights violations they are experiencing."**
>
> – Deniz

The future Deniz hopes for will not be built through more fossil fuel mines and power plants, but through collective action, coordination across communities, and refusing to give up.

[50] Euro News, "'Victory' as Türkiye ends major coal plant expansion – but still lacks phaseout plan", 14 July 2026, https://www.euronews.com/2026/07/14/victory-as-turkiye-ends-major-coal-plant-expansion-but-still-lacks-phaseout-plan

PROTECTING DEFENDERS

Write for Rights © Amnesty International Togo

Across Australia, Brazil, Canada, Ecuador and Türkiye, the defenders featured in this briefing are standing up for their communities and the future of our planet. Working within their communities, groups and associations, they are putting their own safety on the line to protect clean water, healthy ecosystems, ancestral territories and traditional ways of life.

EHRDs are leading the way towards a more sustainable, just and fossil-free future. They speak out against fossil fuel exploitation and other extractive activities that threaten people and the environment. They document environmental and human rights harms associated with fossil fuel production, mobilize communities, challenge powerful corporate interests, propose alternatives, demand that governments protect human rights and threatened ecosystems, and hold corporate actors to account. Through these actions, EHRDs are demonstrating true climate leadership.

Protecting EHRDs is therefore essential for effective climate action. To ensure that they can continue their vital work on behalf of humanity and the environment, their rights must be respected, protected and fulfilled. This includes their right to defend human rights, as well as the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly. Authorities must also guarantee their right to participate meaningfully in decision-making, and, for Indigenous Peoples, their right to free, prior and informed consent for projects that may impact their territories, livelihood and culture.

States must fulfil their duty to protect defenders from threats, attacks, intimidation, or any other form of retaliation, and guarantee their right to life and physical integrity. States must act to hold those responsible for any such attacks, whether state and non-state actors, to account. States must also ensure that defenders are protected from arbitrary detention, enforced disappearance and the misuse of the legal system to criminalize their activities.

Working to protect EHRDs also entails recognizing the intersecting factors that increase risks of threats and harassment for some defenders. This includes recognizing that peasant communities, Indigenous Peoples, children and youth as well as individuals from other marginalized and discriminated groups are more likely to experience various forms of repression when they engage in environmental activism.[51]

Despite these challenges, EHRDs continue to organize, mobilize and inspire others. They do not just defend nature – they defend dignity, survival and the right to shape our collective future. Their demands are the vanguard of climate action; their work deserves recognition, protection, solidarity and support. Without their vital efforts, climate justice and our human rights cannot be achieved.

[51] For more on the use of gender as a political tool to undermine rights and suppress dissent, see Amnesty International, *Humanity Must Win: And it Does When We Stand Together for Gender Justice* (Index: ACT 30/0678/2026), March 2026, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/act30/0678/2026/en/

RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATIONS TO GOVERNMENTS FEATURED IN THIS BRIEFING

Government of Australia

- Ensure the free, prior and informed consent of First Nations is obtained at all phases of fossil fuel projects that may impact their rights, territories, livelihood and culture.

- Suspend activities in the Timor and Arafura Seas where such consent has not been properly obtained and ensure that operations are not resumed without the free, prior and informed consent of the First Nations communities in the Northern Territory.

Government of Brazil

- Protect the rights of artisanal fishing communities in Rio de Janeiro, ensuring access to culturally recognized artisanal fishing spaces and safeguarding them from damage caused by the fossil fuel sector's expansion.

- Guarantee effective and comprehensive protection measures[52] that includes physical, psychosocial, and digital safety and security for artisanal fishers in Rio de Janeiro and other environmental human rights defenders who face threats, harassment or violence because of their human rights and environmental activism.

Government of Canada

- Immediately halt the construction of the proposed compressor stations on the Yin'tah and the operation of the Coastal GasLink pipeline. Suspend all permits and approvals for the CGL pipeline in the unceded territory of the Wet'suwet'en Nation and ensure that operations are not resumed without the free, prior and informed consent of the Wet'suwet'en Hereditary Chiefs and their clans.

- Carry out an independent cumulative health impacts assessment of the oil and gas industry, including LNG gas flaring and compressor stations, and publish the findings within a timely manner before approving and financing expanded or new LNG projects.

Government of Ecuador

- Fully and effectively implement the 2021 court ruling requiring the progressive elimination of gas flares in the Ecuadorian Amazon, including environmental restoration and health-related reparations for affected communities.

- Ensure the effective and comprehensive protection of the Guerreras por la Amazonía and other environmental human rights defenders, and bring to justice anyone responsible for threats, intimidation and attacks against them.

Government of Türkiye

- End the criminalization of environmental human rights defenders, including by dropping charges and overturning convictions arising solely from the peaceful exercise of the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly.

- Protect communities affected by coal mining and coal-fired power generation from health and environmental harm, displacement and other human rights impacts, and ensure their right to meaningful participation in decisions affecting their lives, livelihoods and environment.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO STATE AUTHORITIES IN ALL COUNTRIES

- Publicly recognize the important role of EHRDs in advancing our right to a healthy environment.

- Ensure that EHRDs can exercise their rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly, as well as their right to defend human rights, individually or in association with others, including in relation to climate change and environmental issues without discrimination or fear of reprisals.

- Ensure a safe and enabling environment for EHRDs (whether they are individuals or groups), including by repealing restrictive laws and policies, and refraining from unduly restricting the right of access to information, including about environmental and climate-related matters.

- Guarantee the comprehensive protection of EHRDs at risk, including physical, psycho-social and digital safety and security in accordance with their needs and wishes, adopting a gender sensitive, anti-racist, intersectional and collective approach.

- Cease the misuse of criminal, civil and administrative procedures against EHRDs, and immediately and unconditionally release all those arbitrarily detained simply for exercising their human rights.

- Protect EHRDs, including by adopting a preventative approach, against human rights abuses by companies, investigate allegations of corporate-related human rights abuses and hold companies accountable when abuses have occurred.

- Ensure meaningful consultation and participation of affected individuals and groups throughout the design and implementation of fossil fuel phase out and just transition policies.

- Respect, protect and fulfil the right of Indigenous Peoples to free, prior and informed consent in all decisions affecting their territories, livelihoods, rights, and cultures.

[52] International Service for Human Rights, Declaration on Human Rights Defenders +25, 19 June 2024, https://ishr.ch/toolbox/resources/declaration-25/

- Require companies to respect human rights throughout their global operations and value chains, including by conducting human rights and environmental due diligence that meets international standards, including respect for Indigenous Peoples' rights.

- Adopt and enforce regulations that hold transnational corporations accountable for human rights and environmental abuses in their home state and remove barriers that prevent affected communities from accessing effective remedy in home-state jurisdictions.

- Commit to a just transition away from fossil fuels, in line with each country's responsibility and capacity, including by endorsing the Fossil Fuel Treaty Initiative and engaging actively towards the speedy negotiation and implementation of a treaty and with the COP30 Presidency's Transition Away from Fossil Fuel Roadmap initiative.

- Prohibit new fossil fuel exploration and exploitation, as well as any expansion of existing fossil fuel infrastructure.

- End all subsidies for fossil fuels while ensuring an adequate standard of living for people with lower incomes.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO ALL COMPANIES

- Refrain from propagating harmful narratives and from threatening with or initiating strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) to punish or silence EHRDs. Companies must also refrain from reporting EHRDs to the authorities on groundless accusations, as a means of intimidation.

- Respect all human rights wherever they operate, including through their subsidiaries and value chains. To fulfil this responsibility, companies are required to develop and implement, in consultation with all affected people, a human rights and environmental due diligence process to identify, prevent, mitigate and account for how they address their impacts on human rights.

- Conduct genuine and meaningful consultations with all potentially affected rights-holders, including marginalized groups and traditional governance structures at critical phases of project planning, implementation, monitoring and rehabilitation.

- Ensure full respect for Indigenous Peoples' rights, including their right to self-determination and free, prior and informed consent in all project phases, and suspend activities where such consent has not been properly obtained or where dissent has led to violence.

- Expeditiously phase out the production and use of fossil fuels including by shifting investment portfolios towards renewable energy produced in a human rights-consistent manner.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Environmental and atmospheric pollution ©Getty Images/iStockphoto

Recommendations to Parties to the UNFCCC on Human Rights-Consistent Climate Action in 2026 (Index: IOR 40/0965/2026), 5 May 2026, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/ior40/0965/2026/en/

Extraction Extinction: Why the Lifecycle of Fossil Fuels Threatens Life, Nature, and Human Rights (Index: POL 30/0438/2025), 12 November 2025, https://www.amnesty.org/en/ documents/POL30/0438/2025/en/

Just and Equitable Fossil Fuel Phase-Out: Explainer and Facilitators Resource (Index: POL 32/0427/2025), 12 November 2025, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/POL32/0427/2025/en/

Civic Space and Environmental Human Rights Defenders: Essential for Achieving Climate Justice (Index: POL 32/0173/2025), 23 October 2025, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/ pol32/0173/2025/en/

Ecuador: The Amazon is Burning, the Future is Burning! (Index: AMR 28/8280/2024), 12 August 2024, https://www.amnesty.org/en/ documents/amr28/8280/2024/en/

Canada: "Removed from Our Land for Defending It": Criminalization, Intimidation and Harassment of Wet'suwet'en Land Defenders (Index: AMR 20/7132/2023), 11 December 2023, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/amr20/7132/2023/en/

No Future Without Courage: Human Rights Defenders in the Americas Speak up on the Climate Crisis (Index: AMR 01/7411/2023), 23 November 2023, https://www.amnesty.org/ en/documents/amr01/7411/2023/en/

Fatal Fuels: Why Human Rights Protection Requires a Full and Equitable Fossil Fuel Phase-Out (Index: POL 30/7382/20232023), 13 November 2023, https://www.amnesty.org/ en/documents/pol30/7382/2023/en/

PROTECTING OUR FUTURE

ENVIRONMENTAL HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS POWERING JUST TRANSITIONS

Amnesty International is a movement of 10 million people which mobilizes the humanity in everyone and campaigns for change so we can all enjoy our human rights. Our vision is of a world where those in power keep their promises, respect international law and are held to account. We are independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion and are funded mainly by our membership and individual donations. We believe that acting in solidarity and compassion with people everywhere can change our societies for the better.

Index Number: ACT 30/1437/2026
Original language: English

amnesty.org

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL