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**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,  
political, economic, social and cultural rights, including  
the right to development**

## **Out of sight: human rights defenders working in isolated, remote and rural contexts**

### **Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Mary Lawlor**

#### *Summary*

In the present report, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Mary Lawlor, analyses the situation of human rights defenders working in isolated, remote and rural areas, with a particular focus on the existing gaps in their protection as well as the specific risks and challenges they face and the intersecting identities that may contribute to them. The Special Rapporteur concludes, among other findings, that many of the attacks and threats, as well as the practical hurdles, that impede the work of human rights defenders, are linked to their location.



## I. Introduction

1. In November 2023, Quinto Inuma Alvarado, an indigenous Kichwa human rights defender from Santa Rosillo de Yanayacu, in the Peruvian Amazon, was murdered as he travelled by boat back to his remote community after a workshop with environmental and land rights defenders in the San Martín region of the Amazon.<sup>1</sup>
2. His son said that the attackers had blocked the river with a tree trunk and that, when the boat carrying Quino and five others stopped, he was shot three times in the back and once in the head.<sup>2</sup>
3. Quinto Inuma had been campaigning against loggers and drug traffickers in the area for 25 years and had received many death threats prior to his murder. Although the Government of Peru had taken some measures to protect him, they were insufficient. Following a national and international outcry, several suspects were charged with his murder, with four in pretrial detention as of the finalization of the present report.<sup>3</sup>
4. Hundreds of human rights defenders are killed every year for their peaceful advocacy on behalf of others. Many, like Quinto Inuma, who work in isolated, remote or rural contexts, face particular dangers. The Special Rapporteur applauds the remarkable successes that many defenders have achieved despite such difficulties.
5. The Special Rapporteur notes that killings are not the sole issue affecting human rights defenders in isolated, remote and rural contexts. In her first report,<sup>4</sup> she identified the issue of defenders working in isolated and remote areas as a priority, as some human rights defenders most at risk of physical attack and other violations were the most marginalized. She highlighted their complaint that they were often neglected by the authorities, United Nations mechanisms and national and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) because they were based in remote, rural areas. She noted that some were at enormous risk, working far from the protection of national human rights institutions and foreign embassies. She asserted that she intended to make engagement with them central to her work.
6. Since first outlining her priorities, the Special Rapporteur has raised the issue of attacks on isolated, remote and rural human rights defenders dozens of times in communications to States. She notes with some regret and frustration that States do not always respond to communications raising that vital issue. In fact, 45 per cent of communications sent by the Special Rapporteur since she took up her mandate remain unaddressed.
7. The Special Rapporteur has also held regular online meetings with human rights defenders working in isolated, remote and rural areas on every continent and visited many in person. During official country or informal visits, she makes a special effort to meet with defenders outside of cities.
8. She also notes that, while some States try to protect those at risk, human rights defenders frequently tell her that existing protection mechanisms are better in theory than in practice, are too weak or underresourced or don't meet the needs of those working in isolated, remote or rural contexts.

### A. Normative framework

9. Human rights defenders working in isolated, remote or rural areas are covered by the same human rights standards as human rights defenders in general, including the Universal

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<sup>1</sup> See communication PER 10/2023. All communications mentioned in the present report are available from <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/Tmsearch/TMDocuments>.

<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/peruvian-rainforest-defender-quinto-inuma-alvarado-killed>.

<sup>3</sup> See <https://www.forestpeoples.org/en/the-jackals-of-santa-rosillo-murder-of-apu-quinto-inuma>; and <https://convoca.pe/agenda-propia/quinto-inuma-asi-fue-la-captura-del-presunto-autor-intelectual-del-asesinato-del> (in Spanish).

<sup>4</sup> [A/75/165](#).

Declaration of Human Rights, the most relevant human rights document for Governments with regard to the protection of human rights defenders, along with the Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (Declaration on Human Rights Defenders).

10. Some other international and regional human rights instruments may be particularly relevant to human rights defenders working in isolated, remote and rural areas, including the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas, the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, the Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-Making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (Aarhus Convention) and the Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean (Escazú Agreement).

11. The Special Rapporteur is encouraged by the growing recognition of those defending the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment, who are often in remote and rural areas. She understands the term “environmental human rights defender” to include a wide range of individuals, organizations and informal movements focusing on many issues. She welcomes the creation of the Special Rapporteur on environmental defenders under the Aarhus Convention, the first international mechanism aimed specifically at safeguarding environmental defenders to be established under a legally binding framework within the United Nations system or any other intergovernmental structure.<sup>5</sup>

12. She also recognizes the importance of international and regional law and standards, including the landmark Escazú Agreement. She notes that such initiatives are only as strong as the political will to implement them.

13. Many Indigenous human rights defenders work in isolated, remote or rural areas. Important advances have been made regarding their right to give or withhold their free, prior and informed consent for projects affecting their rights and territories, although many Indigenous defenders report that States fail to uphold that right, with authorities and businesses routinely violating or ignoring it.<sup>6</sup>

## **B. Data and methodology**

14. The Special Rapporteur issued an open call for input in preparation of the present report. Altogether, 50 replies were received, including 9 from Governments, 33 from civil society organizations, 5 from individual human rights defenders and 3 from academic institutions. The Special Rapporteur wishes to thank all those who contributed to the present report.

15. In the report, the Special Rapporteur also builds on information contained in relevant communications sent by the mandate holders since May 2020 and information received through online hearings organized with human rights defenders (46 hearings with 400 human rights defenders between 2020 and 2024). Also reflected in the report are testimonies gathered by the Special Rapporteur during the Southern Africa Human Rights Defenders Summit, held in Johannesburg in November 2024, and the 2024 Africa Women Human Rights Defenders Convention, held in Accra.

## **C. Overview of challenges linked to location**

16. Like other intersecting elements of their identity, being based in a rural, remote or isolated area can be a risk multiplier for human rights defenders. They often suffer from a lack of support mechanisms, transportation links, media coverage, local police presence, Internet access and appropriate service providers. Their rural identity can also lead to

<sup>5</sup> See <https://unece.org/env/pp/aarhus-convention/special-rapporteur>.

<sup>6</sup> See <https://www.ohchr.org/en/indigenous-peoples/consultation-and-free-prior-and-informed-consent-fpic>.

discrimination. One woman human rights defender from Indonesia noted that she was regarded as inferior because she was considered a village person, not from a big city.<sup>7</sup>

17. Isolated, remote and rural human rights defenders often face difficulties in being recognized as legitimate human rights actors and defending their credibility in the face of misinformation and disinformation campaigns. State and corporate actors sometimes exploit that situation, attacking their credibility and creating tensions in the communities where the defenders live and work. Some defenders face challenges whenever they need to travel to the capital or major towns to defend themselves against criminalization and strategic lawsuits against public participation, which often go hand in hand with such smear campaigns.

18. Many human rights defenders in isolated, remote or rural regions do not have access to reliable banking systems, making it difficult to receive and send money, including for emergencies, and they complain of a lack of access to communication systems, including the Internet. That digital divide hits many human rights defenders very hard, as does a lack of legal support, which is often inaccessible in remote areas.

19. In some cases, LGBTIQI+ defenders in remote areas are unable to live openly without risk.<sup>8</sup> They are without communities of support and, when they do need assistance, it does not arrive quickly.

20. Speakers of minority languages often live in isolated, remote or rural areas and, in such cases, language also becomes a significant hurdle if the human rights defenders speak a different language from those officially recognized, reducing their opportunities to apply for funding or bring their issues before a broader audience. The use of specialized human rights terminology can also be an impediment.

21. Such challenges can be compounded for defenders in isolated, remote or rural areas living with disabilities, who may have greater difficulty travelling long distances for advocacy or to report rights violations and who may not have the same level of access to necessary technologies as defenders living with disabilities in cities.<sup>9</sup>

22. Governments frequently imprison defenders in remote jails or use other methods to isolate them from their networks, both familial and legal.

23. Many rural and remote defenders are also isolated from the spaces of solidarity created by national civil society and social movements in their countries. Some say that the authorities simply ignore them and the concerns they raise.<sup>10</sup> Many remain unaware of the term “human rights defender” and do not identify themselves as such and, therefore, do not have access to resources and support that might otherwise be available to them.<sup>11</sup>

#### **D. Protection gaps**

24. Approaches to protection require a more careful response for defenders in isolated, remote and rural areas, including collective rather than individual protection strategies. Effective support for such defenders cannot be based in capitals or major towns and urban areas. To meet practical and immediate protection needs, any support must be as close as possible to where the defenders live and work.<sup>12</sup>

25. The Special Rapporteur and her predecessors have repeatedly raised those specific concerns with States over the course of many years, with reminders of States’ obligation to

<sup>7</sup> A/78/131, p.16.

<sup>8</sup> See submission from Colombia Diversa. See also <https://www.protectioninternational.org/researchpublications/collective-protection>. All submissions referenced in the present document are available at <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-human-rights-defenders/annual-thematic-reports>.

<sup>9</sup> See <https://srdefenders.org/disability>.

<sup>10</sup> See submission from Julio Pereyra.

<sup>11</sup> See submission from Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development.

<sup>12</sup> See submission from Front Line: International Foundation for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders (Front Line Defenders).

protect defenders working in isolated, remote or rural contexts.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, attacks on defenders have continued, including by State actors, resulting in the necessity for the present report.

## II. Attacks linked to location

26. The Special Rapporteur frequently hears of threats against human rights defenders working in isolated, remote or rural contexts and the ways in which they are targeted, criminalized and attacked, often for who they are as well as for what they do. Year after year, many are killed.

27. In 2023, the NGO Global Witness reported the killings of 196 land and environmental defenders, who often worked in rural, isolated or remote areas.<sup>14</sup> In *Front Line Defenders Global Analysis 2023/24*, the killings of at least 300 defenders in 28 countries in 2023 were documented; almost a third of those killed were Indigenous People's rights defenders. In a study of attacks on defenders from 2020 through 2024, Front Line: International Foundation for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders (Front Line Defenders) recorded 389 such incidents targeting human rights defenders that it had classified as rural defenders, including arrests, threats, physical attacks and killings, out of a total 5,982 recorded attacks, amounting to about 7 per cent.<sup>15</sup> The Special Rapporteur notes that those numbers highlight the challenges in collecting data on attacks against isolated, remote, rural and grass-roots human rights defenders.

28. It is not possible in the present report to cite all of the cases of defenders working in isolated, remote or rural contexts that the Special Rapporteur has raised with States since she took up her mandate nearly five years ago, but she does offer emblematic examples that represent many more.

29. In November 2024, the Special Rapporteur raised the case of Antônio Francisco de Sousa Araújo,<sup>16</sup> a defender from the remote Vergel community, 51 km from the town of Codó in Maranhão, Brazil. He is a long-time activist against land-grabbing by farmers and loggers in his community. Four members of his family have been murdered since 2007, including, in 2021, his brother. The killings remain unpunished. Despite the serious human rights violations against his family members, the human rights defender did not receive adequate protection.

30. According to information received, his July 2023 request to be included in the National Programme for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, was rejected. In October 2024, he and his family hid in their home as an armed man attempted to break in but, within days, a second attempt was made to break in, reportedly by the same man. It was only following that attack that he was included in the protection programme.

31. In many cases, attacks on human rights defenders in rural areas remain uninvestigated and unprosecuted. According to one organization, law enforcement agencies often lack the capacity or will to investigate and most rural areas are inaccessible and lack the necessary means of communication, such as robust Internet connections and infrastructure.<sup>17</sup> That lack of capacity is epitomized by an example shared with the Special Rapporteur during a consultation with women human rights defenders from rural Sierra Leone, held in Accra on 29 November 2024, namely, that a woman human rights defender, upon going to a police station to report a violation, was told that the police could not take her statement because they did not have pens or pencils with which to record it.

32. Even when rural defenders are forced to take their peaceful advocacy to capitals, they are not safe. Following the Special Rapporteur's country visit to Georgia in 2023, 11 people,

<sup>13</sup> A/70/217, para. 96 (e); A/71/281, para. 102 (g); A/74/159, para. 147 (d); and A/75/165, para. 91 (f).

<sup>14</sup> See <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/environmental-activists/missing-voices>.

<sup>15</sup> See <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/resource-publication/global-analysis-202324> and email from Front Line Defenders.

<sup>16</sup> See communication BRA 6/2024.

<sup>17</sup> See submission from Coalition of Somali Human Rights Defenders.

including environmental defenders from the Save Rioni Valley movement and a journalist, were arrested in Tbilisi during a peaceful protest at the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Agriculture.<sup>18</sup> The protest concerned the lease of 104,712 ha of forest to a private individual for a hunting range. Those attending the protest had travelled to the Ministry to seek a meeting with the Minister and information about the future of the forest.

33. For many rural communities, where access to the Internet is difficult, unreliable and expensive, radio provides vital connections. In 2024, the Special Rapporteur raised the case of Abelardo Liz with the Colombian authorities. Mr. Liz was an Indigenous journalist and human rights defender who belonged to the Communications Network of the Indigenous Council of Corinto. He was covering a land rights protest for the Nación Nasa Estéreo radio station when he was killed by members of the armed forces of Colombia.<sup>19</sup>

34. ALL RISE Attorneys for Climate and Environmental Justice is a women-led legal centre based in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. They work with directly affected communities, including the Mfolozi community, which they have represented since November 2018 in litigation against the expansion of the Somkhele Coal Mine. The former Vice-Chairperson of the Mfolozi Community Environmental Justice Organization, Fikile Ntshangase, was assassinated in October 2020. The Special Rapporteur has raised the killing of Ms. Ntshangase with the Government of South Africa.<sup>20</sup> Regrettably, she has yet to receive response. In a consultation on the sidelines of the Southern African Human Rights Defenders Network Summit, held in Johannesburg on 25 and 26 November 2024, with the participation of Ms. Ntshangase's daughter, the Special Rapporteur was informed that the daughter continued to receive threats related to her mother's case.

### III. Women and LGBTIQ+ human rights defenders in isolated, remote or rural areas

35. Some defenders in isolated, remote or rural areas are also targeted on the basis of their gender, attacked not only for what they do but for who they are. That is particularly true for vocal, visible women and girls in rural areas where, in accordance with tradition, they may be expected to remain in the private sphere. In a consultation with human rights defenders in Accra on 28 November 2024, one Ghanaian woman human rights defender related that women in rural areas in the north of her country were expected to be silent in spaces where men were present and that young women who wanted to do human rights work had to separate themselves from their families since they were not permitted to remain within the traditional fold while, at the same time, calling for women's rights.

36. Women who do stand up for the rights of others in remote areas often do so in isolation, where, due to the prevailing social and cultural norms, they struggle to find support, especially if they are working on difficult or unpopular issues.

37. Submissions for the Special Rapporteur's 2023 report entitled "Pathways to peace: women human rights defenders in conflict, post-conflict and crisis-affected settings" included information on the high level of gender-based violence against women human rights defenders in rural areas.<sup>21</sup> When such violence occurs, support services are frequently unavailable, while the possibility of accountability can remain distant, given that, in many rural areas, there are no prosecutors specialized in gender to respond to complaints that women defenders or the women that they assist may make.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, as noted by Jane Meriwas, an Indigenous woman from Kenya, in a consultation in Accra held on 28 November 2024, when women defenders report gender-based violence in rural areas to the police, it depends on the individual police officer as to whether or not to take a statement. A common response from the police in such situations is to classify gender-based violence as merely a "family issue".

<sup>18</sup> A/HRC/55/50/Add.2, paras. 68 and 69.

<sup>19</sup> See communication COL 1/2024.

<sup>20</sup> See communications ZAF 3/2020 and ZAF 4/2023.

<sup>21</sup> A/78/131, para. 71.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., para. 72.

38. In Sierra Leone, women human rights defenders have reported high levels of gender-based violence, including forced marriage, forced prostitution, rape, economic exploitation, domestic violence and female genital mutilation. Women on Mining and Extractives in Sierra Leone, a partner organization of WoMin African Alliance, has worked with women rape survivors in Tongo Fields, Kenema District, and other rural parts of the country. Those women are now human rights defenders and are helping other women who have been raped to seek justice.

39. The main point of contact with the authorities for victims of gender-based violence and abuse is the Family Support Unit of the Sierra Leone Police, which is mandated to investigate and provide support to them. The Unit is not equipped with sufficient resources, however, and the women human rights defenders report that, in most cases, the Unit requests financial support from victims to carry out investigations, especially in remote and hard-to-reach communities. An example of one such a case occurred in Tongo Fields, where a woman who had been raped dropped her case because the Unit demanded money, which neither she nor her supporters were able to provide.<sup>23</sup>

40. In consultations for the report, the Special Rapporteur repeatedly heard from women human rights defenders that, because traditional values, customs and beliefs were more pervasive in rural areas, women human rights defenders promoting the rights of minorities in such areas could face greater discrimination than in cities. For example, in Nepal, a women's rights organization, established in a rural area to support local Dalit communities, was targeted by the landlord of the building where it operates.<sup>24</sup>

41. In May 2024, the landlord reportedly entered the organization's office and violently threw their equipment out to protest the recruitment of a Dalit staff member. The landlord's wife also verbally abused the staff members, threatening to slander them as "impure" and demanding that access to the building be denied to the Dalit staff member. They also threatened to raise the rent and forced the staff members to leave the premises immediately.<sup>25</sup>

42. In June 2024, as the organization planned to move offices due to their feeling unsafe, the police intervened in a rare positive outcome for the women human rights defenders. The case was settled informally when police officers brought the landlord and his wife before the community to publicly apologize and seek forgiveness. Since then, the Nepali police have been using loudspeakers throughout the community to spread messages against caste-based discrimination.<sup>26</sup>

43. Elsewhere in the same province, when five young men physically attacked a centre set up by women human rights defenders to provide emergency response to a landless community after they were affected by a fire, the police once again intervened, along with local community members. When, however, the women defenders wanted to register the case under the offence of sexual harassment, relating to rape threats made against them, the police advised them to register it under "indecent conduct" instead, in accordance with section 118 of the National Penal Code, 2017. The human rights defenders were told that the police had more important priorities, which caused them further distress.<sup>27</sup>

44. Zehida Bihorac is a woman human rights defender and teacher in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In 2018, she began providing humanitarian assistance to refugees and migrants around her remote hometown of Velika Kladuša, close to the border with Croatia. In 2020, after the police filmed her visiting a refugee camp and accused her of aiding illegal immigration, online attacks against her intensified. A newly created Facebook group featured sexual smears, claims that she was an "immoral woman" and unfit to teach children, a detailed description of how refugees and those providing them with aid should be killed and threats of physical violence against those providing them with assistance. She filed a complaint at her local police station against those making the statements but no action was taken. She also filed a complaint with the police after an incident in which she was followed

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> See communication NPL 3/2024.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

in her car by several men, one of which physically threatened her. When she later returned to the police station to inquire about the status of the complaint, she was told that she was lucky that the police on duty had even listened to her.<sup>28</sup>

45. During a consultation with LGBTQI+ defenders in Accra on 28 November 2024, the Special Rapporteur was told by a transgender non-binary intersex participant about some of the difficulties they had faced in advocating for the rights of intersex persons in rural areas of the country. They spoke about the ways in which cultural and traditional values and religious beliefs, common in Oti and Volta provinces, had led to widespread discrimination against and shocking cruelty to intersex persons. They, along with 20 other LGBTQI+ rights defenders, had been arrested in the rural Volta region in 2021 as they conducted a paralegal training course on the protection of the human rights of sexual minorities. The 21 defenders had been charged with unlawful assembly after the police and members of the media raided the meeting, following a local tip.<sup>29</sup> The names of those arrested had been provided to the local community, which had reacted with great hostility, and the daughter of one such human rights defender had been forced to change schools.

## IV. Legal challenges

46. The Special Rapporteur notes that defenders working in remote regions face extra layers of difficulty in gaining access to their legal rights. They include prohibitively expensive fees for lawyers, long distances from courts and vulnerability to costly strategic lawsuits against public participation and other judicial harassment. In remote areas, it is difficult, if not impossible, to find a human rights lawyer. That issue was raised with the Special Rapporteur during her country visit to Greece in 2022, in the context of the criminalization of migrants' rights defenders. Similarly, during her visit to Tajikistan that same year, the Special Rapporteur was informed about the low number or lack of lawyers in certain regions of the country. While impunity for attacks against human rights defenders is notoriously high, those far from legal networks face particular difficulties.

47. On the basis of information received, it appears that the general weakness of the authorities in responding to attacks is most pronounced for rural and Indigenous communities, whose regions tend to have the lightest government presence and whose human rights defenders receive little protection.

### A. Access to lawyers

48. The exposure of human rights defenders in rural, remote and isolated areas is amplified by the difficulties they face when trying to gain access to lawyers.

49. In the Russian Federation, for example, human rights defenders note that, as a general rule, legislation requires attorney status for the defence counsel in criminal cases. That status is crucial not only for criminal proceedings but also for protecting the rights of defenders in detention, such as their right to medical care.<sup>30</sup>

50. NGOs report, however, that finding a lawyer for human rights defenders can be very difficult and expensive, in particular in rural areas, as each regional bar association in the Russian Federation sets its own admittance fee, often making it prohibitively high. For example, the Bar Association in the Altai Republic, a predominantly remote area of Russia, is over \$5,000, 20 times higher than the monthly minimum wage.<sup>31</sup> The fees are passed on to clients, making legal representation less affordable. While a lawyer in Moscow, despite having a higher income, spends less money on obtaining accreditation to handle criminal cases, such lawyers are prohibited from regularly travelling to remote regions to represent a client's interests without accreditation from the local bar association.

<sup>28</sup> See communication BIH 2/2020.

<sup>29</sup> See communication GHA 2/2021.

<sup>30</sup> See submission from OVD-Info.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

51. As a result, lawyers from distant regions often do not have the opportunity to become criminal defence attorneys. Many of those attorneys are also human rights defenders. According to the independent human rights organization OVD-Info, on average, there is one lawyer for every 2,000 persons in the Russian Federation. In remote areas, however, there are far fewer. In 2023, for example, while there was one lawyer for every 3,800 persons in the Russian Federation, the Nenets Autonomous Okrug had only eight lawyers in a population of about 42,000, or about one lawyer for every 5,250 persons.<sup>32</sup>

52. In order to protect and defend citizens' legal rights in more rural locations, the Law and Policy of Sustainable Development Research Centre, in Viet Nam, was founded to conduct legal advocacy on environmental, land-grab and industrial pollution cases. It developed programmes to work with local communities to ensure the implementation of existing laws regarding the above areas. Those programmes were disrupted in June 2021 when the centre's director, Dang Dinh Bach, was arrested on tax-evasion charges relating to foreign funding the Centre had received.<sup>33</sup> Mr. Bach denied the allegations. In January 2022, he was sentenced to five years in prison.

53. The Chanakya Initiative, in the United States of America, reports that law enforcement efforts for the protection of human rights defence work are centred in the largest cities and that the state and local resources upon which human rights defenders depend vary significantly in quality. While some states, including California and New York, have their own specific programmes that provide grant funding and attorneys to organizations based in or working within their borders, generally such programmes exist only in cities, and human rights defenders operating in rural parts of Montana and North Dakota report struggling to gain access to such benefits.<sup>34</sup>

## **B. Challenges linked to court appearances**

54. The judicial harassment of human rights defenders working in remote regions appears to be a global issue. Such harassment encompasses the misuse of criminal law by the State or strategic lawsuits against public participation by private entities with the support of public institutions.

55. Human rights defenders living in remote areas who face such criminalization or lawsuits typically encounter several challenges linked to court appearances. They include the difficulty of finding legal support close to their communities and the distance between the courts and their home territories and the cost of travel between them, which exposes them to severe financial stress and makes it difficult to ensure community accompaniment. Those constraints reinforce the isolation of rural defenders. An insufficient number of interpreters and, for Indigenous defenders, a lack of public officials with expertise in Indigenous matters, serve to further isolate those standing trial.<sup>35</sup>

56. Many human rights defenders emphasize the importance of support from international, regional and national organizations and institutions, which can contact the authorities and pressure them to ensure access to justice for defenders. They note that strategic lawsuits against public participation and other harassment usually attract attention only when they reach the national or federal courts but that advocacy efforts with local judges and courts are most effective and helpful in the initial phases of a case. Such early action may have the power to significantly reduce the time period during which defenders are subjected to those processes and also have an impact on the sentence.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> See communication VNM 2/2022.

<sup>34</sup> See submission from Chanakya Initiative.

<sup>35</sup> See submission from Front Line Defenders.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

### C. Strategic lawsuits against public participation

57. Some human rights defenders report that private companies, supported in some cases by State authorities, are behind strategic lawsuits against public participation aimed at silencing and intimidating those organizing peaceful campaigns for human rights. Such judicial harassment often leads to self-censorship because it intimidates communities and makes them vulnerable to economic powers trying to gain control over their territories; it also increases inequalities. Given the challenges linked to the criminalization of rural, remote and isolated defenders, such targeting weighs particularly heavily on defenders in such situations.

58. In 2022, in Malaysia, two subsidiary companies from the Samling Group filed a strategic lawsuit against public participation against SAVE Rivers, a grass-roots NGO based in Sarawak, Borneo. The NGO works with Indigenous communities to protect land, rivers and watersheds from environmental damage, preserve biodiversity and support Indigenous Peoples in defending their rights. The companies requested general damages of 5,000,000 ringgit (approx. \$1.12 million) for loss and damage resulting from alleged defamatory statements made against them by SAVE Rivers. The lawsuit followed a series of articles published on the SAVE Rivers website that drew attention to the concerns of Indigenous communities affected by the granting of a logging certification. It was alleged in the articles that any consultation undertaken with the affected communities had been inadequate in terms of offering an authentic opportunity for the Indigenous communities to give or withhold their free, prior and informed consent.<sup>37</sup> SAVE Rivers was successful in having the case settled out of court after the company withdrew the lawsuit following, among other efforts, a global solidarity campaign entitled #StoptheSLAPP. The long legal process, however, drained the NGO of time, effort and resources that could have been used to support its work.

### V. Digital divide and Internet shutdowns

59. Inadequate Internet service in remote areas is harming the ability of human rights defenders to protect the rights of others and increases the risks they face.<sup>38</sup> The digital divide between those who have access to Internet connectivity and Internet-enabled devices and those who do not is particularly acute in remote areas.<sup>39</sup> The Special Rapporteur recalls an Indigenous woman human rights defender who stressed that issue with her during her country visit to Brazil in 2024.

60. One positive response has been the opening up of access by some Governments to satellite connections, allowing human rights defenders to communicate and monitor risks more effectively. For example, human rights defenders in Colombia report that the authorities have provided Internet access centres, such as booths and digital kiosks, that have gone some distance in responding to the needs.<sup>40</sup>

61. A yawning gap still exists, however. While the Special Rapporteur has held many online meetings with human rights defenders based in remote areas, they often have had to travel many hours to secure an Internet connection.

62. Low Internet speeds, frequent signal drops and outdated equipment prevent human rights defenders from participating effectively in democratic spaces, such as public hearings and participation processes, which, after the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic have increasingly been held on digital platforms.

63. Local NGOs report that Indigenous communities in Southwestern Antioquia, a rural subregion in Colombia, have extremely limited access to digital resources, with an estimated

<sup>37</sup> See communication MYS 2/2022.

<sup>38</sup> United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), *Addressing the Digital Divide: Taking Action towards Digital Inclusion* (Nairobi, 2021), pp. 15 and 17.

<sup>39</sup> UN-Habitat, *Assessing the Digital Divide: Understanding Internet Connectivity and Digital Literacy in Cities and Communities* (Nairobi, 2021), pp. 8 and 15.

<sup>40</sup> See submission from Resguardos Embera Chamí of the Suroeste Antioqueño region and the organization Pensamiento y Acción Social.

38.8 per cent of households having Internet coverage, compared with 68 per cent of urban households.<sup>41</sup>

64. Others note that, in some isolated areas of Colombia, Internet coverage is less than 24 per cent of households and the resulting difficulties are compounded by a lack of banking and digital infrastructure, limiting the opportunities for human rights defenders to open bank accounts and obtain credit.<sup>42</sup>

65. Human rights defenders in remote areas of Libya report difficulties in access to digital communication, for which they blame the lack of infrastructure and the marginalization of those regions by successive Governments in the country. They also report deliberate shutdowns of the Internet.<sup>43</sup>

66. In 2021, the Special Rapporteur raised concerns with the Government of Thailand in relation to alleged attacks and harassment against human rights defenders from the Indigenous Karen peoples in the Kaeng Krachan Forest Complex by officials of the Department of National Park, Wildlife and Plant Conservation. The incidents occurred in the context of the nomination by the Government of the Kaeng Krachan Forest Complex to be designated a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization World Heritage site, including a lack of consultation with affected Indigenous Peoples and failure to seek their free, prior and informed consent.<sup>44</sup>

67. Having been moved from their traditional lands in Upper Bang Kloy village, in January and February 2021, members of the Karen community gradually moved back to the area, before being pressured by the authorities to return to Government-allocated land at Lower Bang Kloy. The mobile and Internet signals were cut off for several days, limiting the ability of the community to communicate and organize. Furthermore, restrictions were imposed that limited the ability of outsiders to send food provisions to the community in Upper Bang Kloy village. The restrictions were reportedly imposed by national park officers in an attempt to force the villagers back to Lower Bang Kloy village.<sup>45</sup>

68. The Amalgamated Rural Teachers Union of Zimbabwe states that, when human rights defenders in their network are at risk, rapid support is very difficult to secure. The organization notes that access to most support facilities is through online applications, which is a major challenge for defenders in rural areas of Zimbabwe. A lack of proper infrastructure, network challenges and power shortages make it almost impossible to secure immediate support.<sup>46</sup>

69. Other defenders say that, while secure messaging applications make it easier to coordinate rapid responses and to document incidents, the effectiveness of such tools depends on a constant power supply.<sup>47</sup>

## **VI. Corporate practices and their impact on isolated, remote and rural human rights defenders**

70. The Special Rapporteur has spoken with and met in person many human rights defenders who have been targeted in connection with their advocacy against harmful business projects, often in remote areas. She routinely hears from Indigenous defenders in such contexts that free, prior and informed consent is either manipulated or absent.

71. Some of the attacks against human rights defenders are committed by agents acting for businesses, others by government authorities acting together with business enterprises,

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> See submission from Red Universitaria Anticorrupcion.

<sup>43</sup> See submission from Libya Crimes Watch.

<sup>44</sup> See communication THA 4/2021.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> See submission from Amalgamated Rural Teachers Union of Zimbabwe.

<sup>47</sup> See submission from Instituto Internacional de Responsabilidad Social y Derechos Humanos.

others by organized crime groups pursuing economic activities and many others by some combination of those actors.

## A. Failure to consult and retaliation against local voices

72. The Special Rapporteur frequently hears from rural human rights defenders that they were not consulted on projects taking place in the vicinity of their homes or their lands. When consultation does take place, it is often viewed as exclusive, involving only a few previously selected leaders and leaving out defenders and a large part of the community. The information presented during consultations can be technical and complex and communities do not have adequate access to independent advice to help them to fully understand the impact of the projects.<sup>48</sup> When defenders insist on having their voices heard, they often face retaliation.

73. In January 2023, the Special Rapporteur joined a communication led by the Special Rapporteur on the rights of Indigenous Peoples raising concerns with the Government of Canada over allegations of ongoing violations and abuses against Wet'suwet'en Indigenous Peoples in the context of oil and gas projects in British Columbia. The Coastal GasLink liquified natural gas pipeline passes through the unceded traditional territory of the Wet'suwet'en Indigenous People, whose hereditary chiefs were allegedly sidelined in the consultation process prior to the decision to route the pipeline through their territory. The Wet'suwet'en people have been protesting against the construction of the pipeline since at least 2018, establishing blockades to prevent it from going ahead. In December 2019, an injunction was granted by the Supreme Court of British Columbia barring them from the sites identified for the fossil fuel infrastructure, despite those being on their Indigenous land. The injunction has been enforced aggressively by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Despite the 2019 decision of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination urging Canada to cease forced evictions of Wet'suwet'en people from their lands, in early February 2020,<sup>49</sup> the Royal Canadian Mounted Police conducted a series of raids on Wet'suwet'en encampments, reportedly deploying over 100 tactical officers armed with semi-automatic rifles and police dogs. Unarmed Wet'suwet'en land rights defenders and peaceful supporters were forcibly removed from the territory and jailed. During the raid, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police created an "exclusion zone" 17 km away from the injunction area, blocking public access. Hereditary chiefs, journalists and a member of Parliament were prohibited from entering the area to witness the arrests, while non-Indigenous people were allowed to pass through the blockade without showing identification.<sup>50</sup>

74. Since the Special Rapporteur raised her concerns with the Government of Canada about the case, dozens of Wet'suwet'en land defenders have been detained and charged with criminal contempt for allegedly violating the terms of the injunction.

## B. Violence and criminalization

75. Violence against human rights defenders who oppose extractive projects on their lands is often aggravated by State authorities' narratives that stigmatize and criminalize defenders, accusing them of being part of criminal groups. Such tactics are often used as a way to justify a military presence.

76. In May 2023, the Special Rapporteur raised with the Government of Liberia the case of attacks by the Liberian National Police on environmental and Indigenous human rights defenders working with the Kokoya community in Bong County. Local defenders had been demanding accountability for a 2017 toxic spill by MNG Gold Liberia Inc., when the company's tailing storage facility spilled 3 million gallons of toxic chemicals, including cyanide, mercury and lead, from its Kokoya mine in Bong County.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>48</sup> See submission from Resguardos Embera Chamí del Suroeste Antioqueño with the participation of Pensamiento y Acción Social.

<sup>49</sup> Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, decision 1/100.

<sup>50</sup> See communication CAN 2/2022.

<sup>51</sup> See communication LBR 1/2023.

77. In response to protests demanding accountability, the State prosecuted 44 people, including environmental and Indigenous defenders, for crimes, including armed robbery, arson and terroristic threats. Witnesses who were allowed to testify faced challenges in getting to the Court due to its location far from Bong County and a lack of resources necessary to travel to the Court. Those held in custody reported being stripped naked, tied up and denied access to drinking water. Some also reported being beaten, including with sticks, resulting in severe injuries and, in some instances, permanent disability.<sup>52</sup>

78. In 2023, the Special Rapporteur received news about an attempt on the life of human rights defender Alirio Perdomo, an artisanal fisherman and one of the leaders of the Association of People Affected by the El Quimbo Hydroelectric Project in Colombia, into which the local populations had organized themselves to defend their rights in the face of the development of the El Quimbo dam. Mr. Perdomo is also President of the Association of Calandrereros Fisherfolk of the Magdalena River, which defends the rights of fisherfolk in the Huila Department affected by the El Quimbo project.<sup>53</sup>

79. According to information received in September 2019, Mr. Perdomo informed the Hobo municipal authorities that he and others in the Association of Calandrereros Fisherfolk of the Magdalena River had received threatening phone calls. In March 2023, a few hours after he reportedly recorded a video to document the fish mortality allegedly resulting from the operations of the Betania Dam and the El Quimbo project, he was shot at by two unknown individuals, leaving him wounded in the ear. He subsequently requested protection measures from the National Protection Unit but was not assessed to be at high risk.<sup>54</sup>

80. In July 2023, in a case that exemplifies the so-called red-tagging of many human rights defenders working in rural areas in the Philippines, environmental defenders Miguela Peniero and Rowena Dasig were arrested as they conducted research in the remote coastal community of Caridad Ibaba, Atimonan, in Quezon Province. They were assessing the impact that a planned cycle gas turbine power project and liquefied natural gas terminal plant would have on the health of coconut farmers and fisherfolk as well as on local biodiversity.

81. The area is heavily militarized, partially due to an ongoing insurgency by the New People's Army. Soldiers surrounded the house in which the two women were staying and, following a search, claimed to have found firearms and explosives owned by the women, accusations both women denied. Both were arrested by the 85th Infantry Battalion on charges of illegal possession of firearms and explosives and were eventually transferred to the Lucena City Jail. Family and friends were reportedly prevented from bringing medical supplies to them. Ms. Peniero had previously served eight years in prison before being acquitted on charges of illegal possession of weapons.<sup>55</sup> Shortly after their arrest, the 85th Infantry Battalion posted on social media that it had detained "two members of the terrorist New People's Army" and that Ms. Peniero had "led ambushes" and orchestrated the killing of soldiers.<sup>56</sup>

82. A lack of media and civil society oversight of human rights abuses in rural areas can allow attacks to take place virtually unnoticed. Desire Nkurunziza, an environmental rights defender in the village of Nyairongo in Kikuube District, Uganda, advocates against the deforestation of the Bugoma Central Forest Reserve, which is leased to Hoima Sugar Ltd., primarily for sugar cane cultivation. In July 2023, two men allegedly told him that two members of his village had been arrested in the forest, now a sugar cane plantation, and he agreed to go with the men to assist his constituents. When they arrived, he was reportedly handed over to two armed Hoima Sugar Ltd. personnel, who allegedly beat him before recording a video of him in which they accused him of illegally cutting down sugar cane. He

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> See communication COL 5/2023.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> See communication PHL 5/2023.

<sup>56</sup> See <https://www.altermidya.net/health-worker-volunteer-arrested-in-quezon>; and <https://www.facebook.com/Sandiwa85/posts/pfbid025jJa4ktesjqEcgBokNUErz8V6Lp5cFo8AQ5HhoRxsjatNb6Ainpm9yyWdvQ6WnVol> (in Filipino).

was then arbitrarily arrested on the grounds of “incitement of violence” and “criminal trespass” and held in Kikuube police station for two days before being released on bail.<sup>57</sup>

83. The Special Rapporteur urges States and businesses to live up to their duty and responsibility to protect and respect the rights of all defenders, including those based in isolated, remote or rural areas and those living in voluntary isolation.

## VII. Defenders working in conflict, post-conflict and crisis situations

84. The Special Rapporteur regularly hears from human rights defenders working in areas of conflict, post-conflict or crisis situations about specific challenges arising from the nature of their work. She notes a report of her predecessor, submitted to the Human Rights Council in 2020, which contained the observation that, in conflict and post-conflict situations, many people had become defenders as a result of circumstances or out of necessity but, because they were not formally attached to a particular organization or profession and were acting in the most isolated areas or in transitory settings, many of their contributions remained invisible.<sup>58</sup>

85. Conflicts are often characterized by a lack of access to regions in which fighting is occurring, further isolating human rights defenders from networks of support.

86. That situation is evident in the ongoing conflict in Gaza, where movement in or out of the territory is extremely difficult and Internet connections are unstable. International protection mechanisms have largely been ineffective, failing to prevent the killings of multiple human rights defenders. The Special Rapporteur pays tribute to the remarkable work of the Palestinian human rights defenders, including journalists, who continue to document human rights violations and alert the world to the scale of the atrocities unfolding in the absence of any protection.

87. The conflict in the Sudan remains chronically underreported and human rights defenders working in the country are subjected to appalling violations without any recourse to justice. In October 2023, the Special Rapporteur raised concerns with the Government of the Sudan about the killing of at least seven human rights defenders in El Geneina, West Darfur, in June and July of that year.<sup>59</sup> In their 2024 report to the Security Council, the Panel of Experts on the Sudan noted that interrupted communication networks had severely hampered the monitoring of the situation in Darfur in relation to aerial bombing carried out by the Rapid Support Forces.<sup>60</sup> According to lawyer Yousef Mahmoud, a months-long communication blackout in the region had plunged Nyala, the capital of South Darfur, into a medieval communications abyss.<sup>61</sup>

88. The work of defenders in other conflict situations is also often invisible to a wider national or international audience, making it harder for them to gain the attention needed to raise resources. Volunteers of the Rose on Hand evacuation team are based in Kharkiv, northeastern Ukraine. They rescue civilians from communities under fire and complain that international observers, claiming safety fears, rarely visit the region. This means that their work and the work of other local humanitarian defenders is often unreported and ignored, and they are forced to pay for vital resources, including gasoline and vehicle repairs, themselves.<sup>62</sup>

89. The Special Rapporteur has also received information that, in Sri Lanka, defenders working in the conflict-affected north and east face disproportionate violence, surveillance

<sup>57</sup> See communication UGA 3/2023.

<sup>58</sup> [A/HRC/43/51](#).

<sup>59</sup> See communication SDN 4/2023.

<sup>60</sup> [S/2024/65](#), pp. 31 and 32.

<sup>61</sup> See <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/war-plunges-south-darfur-communications-into-medieval-abyss>.

<sup>62</sup> See submission from Human Rights First and [https://humanrightsfirst.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Ukraine-HRD-report\\_June-2024\\_final.pdf](https://humanrightsfirst.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Ukraine-HRD-report_June-2024_final.pdf).

and labelling as terrorists and that many women human rights defenders have been labelled as anti-State and have faced violence, stigmatization and attacks during peaceful protests.<sup>63</sup>

90. Human rights defenders from a community-based organization in Myanmar highlight the scourge of enforced disappearances in the south-east of the country amid the ongoing conflict. During consultations, they discussed the various challenges that researchers from the organization faced when trying to uncover the number of disappeared persons. As a typical example, they recounted that, although field researchers had reported enforced disappearances occurring in a certain district, only two interviews with local villagers in that district were possible due to the escalation of fighting in the region, the proliferation of armed groups and the risk of documenting human rights abuses in the communities.

91. They went on to stress the difficulties that local human rights defenders had in reporting enforced disappearances when they did occur and the protection failings. Such difficulties include a fear of retaliation from armed actors, particularly the military junta and its affiliates, and the lack of mechanisms to hold perpetrators accountable or to seek justice. Relatives and members of the community are often forced to flee following the disappearance of a villager, making it harder for them to follow up on such incidents. With regard to seeking justice, support mechanisms offered by international organizations in Myanmar are failing to adequately reach those affected in south-east Myanmar and no formal support in any capacity is available to villagers there.

## VIII. Remote prisons

92. A notable trend in several countries has been the further punishment of jailed human rights defenders by incarcerating them in prisons far from their homes or severely restricting their contact with their families and legal teams. This isolates them from their support networks and poses logistical and financial difficulties for family, friends and supporters to visit them or even send supplies to them. The Special Rapporteur has heard from numerous family members of human rights defenders in such situations who tell her of the mental health impact on both themselves and the human rights defender.

93. China is notorious for engaging in that practice. Ilham Tohti has been imprisoned in Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region since 2014. The prison is 2,700 km away from his home in Beijing, where he had been living for 20 years before his arrest. His wife and two children live in Beijing while another daughter lives in exile in the United States. He is serving a life sentence and his family has not been allowed to visit him since 2017.

94. Yu Wensheng and Xu Yan are detained in Suzhou, Jiangsu Province, 1,100 km away from their home in Beijing. The mental health of their son, who turned 18 years old just before their detention, had deteriorated in recent years, a condition that has been aggravated by his parents' detention and imprisonment so far away from their home.<sup>64</sup> Xu and Yu were both arrested in 2023 and convicted of "inciting subversion" in October 2024, with Yu sentenced to three years in prison and Xu Yan to 21 months. Yu Wensheng previously spent four years in prison and was then held in Xuzhou City and Nanjing City, both also in Jiangsu Province, and Xu Yan was forced to travel hundreds of miles to visit him.

95. In the Russian Federation, many correctional facilities are situated far from populated areas. For example, each attorney's visit to the infamous IK-3 prison colony, in the remote Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug above the Arctic Circle, incurs significant costs, a burden that falls solely on the relatives of the human rights defenders imprisoned there.<sup>65</sup>

96. Western Saharan human rights defenders Al-Hussein al-Bashir Ibrahim and Khatri Dadda, serving 12 and 20 years in prison, respectively, were transferred in 2023 and 2022, respectively, from Ait Melloul prison to Moulay el-Bergui prison in Safi. The transfer means that Mr. Al-Bashir Ibrahim is now 600 km from his family home near the town of Tan-Tan, while Mr. Dadda is 850 km from his family home Smara. The distance has prevented

<sup>63</sup> See submission from Front Line Defenders.

<sup>64</sup> See communication CHN 6/2024.

<sup>65</sup> See submission from OVD-Info.

Mr. Dadda's parents from visiting him. Mr. Al-Bashir had requested to be transferred to a prison closer to his home, but his request was denied.<sup>66</sup>

97. Some States further isolate human rights defenders by holding them in solitary confinement, refusing them any contact with their families or lawyers.

98. Arrested in 2017, Ahmed Mansoor is serving 25 years' imprisonment in the United Arab Emirates. He has reportedly been held in solitary confinement since 2018 in poor detention conditions, which include a small cell measuring 4 m<sup>2</sup>, with no mattress and limited or no access to sunlight, shower and potable water, exercise or canteen services and no contact with the outside world. The conditions have exacerbated his health problems.<sup>67</sup>

99. Mohammad al-Qahtani completed a 10-year prison sentence in Saudi Arabia in 2022, which he received because of his role as a founding member of the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association. Instead of being released upon the completion of his sentence, however, he was forcibly disappeared and held incommunicado until he was permitted a brief phone call to his family in 2024.<sup>68</sup>

## IX. Self protection

100. The Special Rapporteur regularly hears from communities that have found creative ways to defend themselves in the absence of State protection, including through collective methods. In Colombia, the Indigenous Guards employ non-violent collective protection to provide first aid and defend Indigenous territories and their people against the impact of the armed conflict. They also help in the search for missing persons and in the liberation of kidnapped people. The Black Communities Process is a social movement of more than 140 Afrodescendent entities that collaborate with communities in the defence of their rights and the preservation of their culture.<sup>69</sup>

101. A woman human rights defender in Colombia suggests that good practices for protection include the creation of guards, which she defines as groups of people tasked with watching over territory, informing defenders of the presence of strangers and attending public events with them to detect any strange movement. She also recommends collective protection spaces, for example, community farms or other spaces where communities can go when they are being threatened. Community members can leave their territory and stay at the farm for a few days until the danger subsides, then return to their land once it is safe to do so.<sup>70</sup>

102. The Coalition of Somalia Human Rights Defenders focuses particularly on isolated and rural areas and has reported on grass-roots initiatives for protecting defenders. The organization has found that, in certain areas, such as Hiiraan, Puntland and Juba regions and Somaliland, defenders have formed local networks to provide mutual protection and share resources, offering a level of security and support in the absence of government intervention. Some defenders working in remote areas have established digital communication channels, including hotlines established by the Coalition for reporting violations and to quickly alert colleagues and partners of threats.<sup>71</sup>

103. In Indonesia, the NGO Inisiasi Masyarakat Adat points to the practice of several NGOs or national NGO coalitions forming complaint posts or focal points in isolated areas for the quick reporting of threats to national NGOs protecting human rights defenders.<sup>72</sup>

104. The Special Rapporteur notes that defenders are having to do for themselves what States should do and have committed to do in terms of making it safe for them to do their peaceful work in advocating for the rights of others.

<sup>66</sup> See communication MAR 2/2023.

<sup>67</sup> See communication ARE 1/2021.

<sup>68</sup> See communication SAU 10/2022; and <https://alqst.org/en/politicalprisoners/mohammed-al-qahtani>.

<sup>69</sup> See submission from Red Universitaria Anticorrupcion.

<sup>70</sup> See submission from Marylen Serna Salinas, with Protection International.

<sup>71</sup> See submission from Coalition of Somalia Human Rights Defenders.

<sup>72</sup> See submission from Inisiasi Masyarakat Adat.

## X. Support to human rights defenders in isolated, remote or rural locations

105. Some actors have developed ways of offering support to human rights defenders in isolated, remote or rural locations.

106. Many human rights defenders in Mongolia, most of them community leaders and environmental advocates, are based in remote areas. The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development reports that Mongolia is the only Asian country with a national law for the protection of human rights defenders. The organization also reports that, since the law's adoption in 2021, it has witnessed a slow but encouraging increase in defenders' familiarity with the content of the law, including the provisions that set out their rights and define the protection mechanism. While there is still a long way to go for the full and effective implementation of the law, the case of Mongolia exemplifies the importance of national protection mechanisms.<sup>73</sup>

107. As documented by the Special Rapporteur in her 2021 report to the Human Rights Council, Government-run protection mechanisms for human rights defenders have been created in several Latin American countries, with varying degrees of success.<sup>74</sup> She notes that such protection mechanisms are sometimes better in theory than in practice, as defenders in isolated, remote and rural areas continue to be murdered and physically attacked, despite being included in their State's protection measures. She regularly receives reports of human rights defenders at risk in Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico and Peru, along with other States with protection mechanisms in place.

108. Knowledge of protection mechanisms can also be lacking in remote areas, where such protection is needed the most. While Peru has a protocol and a mechanism for addressing attacks on human rights defenders, local NGOs say that the police are not familiar with the protocol or the mechanism and are also logistically limited in their ability to go to the places where the victims are located, either due to distance or a lack of communication systems.<sup>75</sup>

109. Other actors have responded to the challenges faced by isolated, remote or rural human rights defenders. Rural defenders in the Pantanal wetlands of Brazil are using digital solutions that are functional even under conditions of poor Internet connectivity and low bandwidth, keeping data secure and widely accessible. Those defenders have used the information collected to combat climate change denialism and establish a credible record of environmental impact during a period when the Government was dismissing evidence of widespread wildfires.<sup>76</sup>

110. The Norwegian Human Rights Fund reports that one of its partners in Indonesia, the Indigenous youth-led environmental NGO Yayasan Kompas Peduli Hutan Foundation, uses drone technology and satellite imagery to assist local Indigenous communities in documenting and making claims for customary land and forest status. They share the data with the local office of the ombudsperson, local tax authorities and other local government agencies. One unexpected result was the opening of a tax evasion investigation into 70 local rock mining and 14 palm oil companies in the area. The local tax office estimated that the data of the NGO would allow the recuperation of around 680,000,000,000 rupiah (around \$46,310,000) in additional tax payments from the companies. The drone footage and satellite imagery produced by the NGO also documented that the companies were illegally encroaching on Indigenous Peoples' land and forests and were hiding that fact from the local governments.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>73</sup> See submission from Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development.

<sup>74</sup> [A/HRC/46/35](#).

<sup>75</sup> See submission from Derecho, Ambiente y Recursos Naturales.

<sup>76</sup> See submission from Starling Lab.

<sup>77</sup> See submission from Norwegian Human Rights Fund.

## **XI. Conclusions and recommendations**

111. Many Governments are failing in their moral and legal obligations to protect human rights defenders, including those in isolated, remote and rural areas. Although the Special Rapporteur understands that there are practical difficulties in protecting defenders working in such contexts, the failure is primarily because of a lack of political will. States can and should protect defenders who are doing their work, no matter where they are based.

### **A. The Special Rapporteur recommends that States:**

- (a) Publicly promote the life-saving work of human rights defenders working in isolated, remote or rural areas;
- (b) Strengthen support networks outside of capital cities to proactively reach defenders working in rural areas;
- (c) Strengthen and expand, if necessary, existing protection networks to ensure that they reach human rights defenders in isolated, remote and rural areas and set up such protection mechanisms where they do not yet exist;
- (d) Support the establishment of community support networks and early warning systems;
- (e) Expand access to the Internet and secure communication tools, including by increasing funding for such digital security resources as encrypted communication applications and secure reporting channels;
- (f) Support efforts to enable human rights defenders to store and safeguard their information securely, without fear of unlawful surveillance or data breaches, including putting in place robust legal safeguards to prevent the misuse of digital tools to suppress dissent or target defenders and ensure that their digital rights are protected;
- (g) Instruct their embassies and missions to visit defenders in remote areas, not just in major cities, to better understand their specific needs and enable genuine cooperation, including on their security and funding needs;
- (h) Establish safe corridors for the movement of human rights defenders working in conflict zones;
- (i) Adopt a more collective perspective on protection, including the strengthening of the capacity of grass-roots organizations and networks;
- (j) Develop protection mechanisms for environmental human rights defenders, taking into account the intersectional dimensions of violations against women and girl defenders, Indigenous Peoples and rural and marginalized communities;
- (k) Adopt public policies to protect the right to defend human rights in safe and enabling environments that also take into account the diversity of remote and rural defenders, including women, children and young people, LGBTIQ+ persons, Indigenous persons, persons of African descent, rural dwellers and persons with disabilities;
- (l) Extend an open invitation to the Special Rapporteur to allow her to conduct any visit that she wishes to undertake, without restricting its duration or scope, and enable her to move around the country, outside of the capital, particularly in countries with extensive territories, so that she can meet human rights defenders in remote locations who cannot travel;
- (m) Put in place legislation to ensure that businesses based or operating in their jurisdiction carry out ongoing human rights and environmental due diligence, including assessments of risks for human rights defenders;

(n) **Ensure that the right to free, prior and informed consent is respected in all applicable instances, following community-developed consultation models;**

(o) **Support capacity-building and skills development to enable human rights defenders to better protect themselves.**

**B. Businesses should:**

(a) **Adopt zero-tolerance policies for retaliation of any form against persons, groups or communities raising human rights or environmental concerns about their projects or operations, in accordance with the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights;**

(b) **Ensure that the right to free, prior and informed consent is respected in all applicable instances, following community-developed consultation models.**

**C. Civil society organizations and national human rights institutions should:**

**Develop strategies and expand resources to ensure that human rights defenders located in isolated, remote or rural areas are reached by their work, including by inviting them, particularly women defenders, to participate in events, training courses and consultations and establishing trusted communication methods with them to assist them in reporting violations of their rights.**

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