

PRESS RELEASE

On the occasion of 22 April, International Mother Earth Day

IACHR and UN Human Rights celebrate the entry into force of the Escazú Agreement

Bogotá / Guatemala City / Mexico City / Panama City / Santiago de Chile / Tegucigalpa / La Paz / Washington DC, 21 April, 2021 - In the framework of the Joint Action Mechanism to contribute to the protection of human rights defenders in America and on the occasion of International Mother Earth Day, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), its Special Rapporteur on Economic, **Social**, Cultural and Environmental Rights (REDESCA) and the presences in Latin America of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UN Human Rights) celebrate the entry into force of the Escazú Agreement. The IACHR and UN Human Rights highlight the essential role of land, territory and environmental defenders in the consolidation of democracy, the rule of law and in sustainable development and call on States to protect their work.

On 22 April 2021, the Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean, the Escazú Agreement - the first environmental treaty with specific provisions for the promotion and protection of environmental human rights defenders - enters into force.

The entry into force of the Escazú Agreement is a relevant advance for the protection of those who defend the environment and the land, since Latin America is considered one of the most dangerous regions for their essential work. In this sense, the IACHR, its REDESCA and UN Human Rights congratulate the countries that have ratified this agreement, encourage the countries that have not yet done to do so promptly, and urge all the States in the region to develop participatory processes, through national action plans, for its effective implementation.

The defense of human rights and the environment is a legitimate and necessary activity, the promotion and protection of which must be guaranteed by the States. Despite the importance of their work, the IACHR, its REDESCA and UN Human Rights have observed the risks and attacks that people who defend and promote the rights to land, territory and the environment in the region continuously face: acts of harassment, threats, criminalization and stigmatization, attacks on their life and personal integrity and on their families.

The risks that land, territory and environmental defenders face have a chilling effect that goes beyond the direct victims, as it threatens to paralyze defense activities that are crucial for the future of the planet and humanity.

In Latin America, a large number of attacks against environmental defenders occur in the context of mining, tourism, hydroelectric and agro-industrial projects approved and implemented without the due respect for the right to consultation and the prior, free and informed consent of indigenous peoples and Afro-descendant communities.

The handling of the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in limitations of the right to participation of human rights defenders, including environmental activists, and to the effective access to information and justice. There has been a reduced capacity and will of the States to inspect environmental crimes,

protect nature, indigenous lands and territories, and an erosion of the mechanisms to guarantee that individuals and civil society organizations can fully participate in decision making.

The IACHR, its REDESCA and UN Human Rights urge States to fulfill their duty to protect the life and personal integrity of those who defend human rights and the environment. For this, it is crucial to publicly and unequivocally recognize the importance of their work, strengthen the investigation and prosecution of the crimes of which they are victims, avoid the misuse of criminal law against them, and adopt comprehensive public protection policies, including specific measures to protect women defenders.

The IACHR, its REDESCA and UN Human Rights also encourage the States of the region to seek alternatives for their public institutions to have an active presence in the territories most affected by violence, particularly through institutional, civil, development and environmental response, to promote the rights and protect land, territory and environmental defenders.

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The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) is the main United Nations entity in the field of human rights. The General Assembly entrusted the High Commissioner and her Office with the mission of promoting and protecting all human rights of all people. UN Human Rights provides assistance in the form of technical expertise and capacity-development in order to support the implementation of international human rights standards on the ground. UN Human Rights assists governments, which bear the primary responsibility for the protection of human rights, to fulfil their obligations and supports individuals to claim their rights. It also speaks out objectively on human rights violations.

The IACHR is a principal and autonomous body of the Organization of American States (OAS), whose mandate arises from the OAS Charter and the American Convention on Human Rights. The Inter-American Commission has a mandate to promote respect for and to defend human rights in the region and acts as a consultative body to the OAS in this area. The IACHR is composed of seven independent members who are elected in an individual capacity by the OAS General Assembly and who do not represent their countries of origin or residence.

REDESCA is an IACHR Office with functional independence and specially created to support the Commission in fulfilling its mandate to promote and protect economic, social, cultural, and environmental rights in the American continent.

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