

Colombia: Urgent action needed to end widespread violence against human rights defenders – UN report

GENEVA (19 March 2026) – Human rights defenders in Colombia have been subjected to unrelenting violence over the past decade, with on average just under 100 killed every year, a report issued by the UN Human Rights Office finds, calling for urgent measures by the authorities to address policy and structural issues contributing to this toll.

“It is heartbreaking that Colombia remains one of the deadliest places on earth to be a human rights defender,” said UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk.

“The current Government has implemented several important measures to address violence against human rights defenders, but, as this report shows, much more needs to be done,” Türk added.

The report acknowledges that the Colombian authorities have taken steps to address the situation, including publicly recognizing the grave dimensions of the problem, opening a high-level dialogue process with civil society organizations, adopting preventive and immediate actions in urgent situations, and developing a national policy on human rights defenders. They have also cooperated closely with the UN Human Rights Office in Colombia.

Nevertheless, the report also states that “state institutions in general have not been able to reverse the trends and patterns of violence against human rights defenders, nor to overcome the structural challenges that hinder the effort to provide sustained and comprehensive protection to human rights defenders”.

“The country is at a turning point. Unless effective measures are taken to make this a state priority, with a clear agenda for prevention, protection, investigation, and addressing the structural causes, violence against human rights defenders will continue,” the report states.

Between 2016 and 2025, the UN Human Rights Office documented 972 killings of human rights defenders.

Following the signing of the Peace Agreement in 2016, there has been a gradual rise in the number of killings of human rights defenders, the report states. This trend is primarily linked to conflicts involving non-state armed actors in areas previously controlled by the FARC-EP guerrilla group, where the State has struggled to establish a consistent presence.

In recent years, the report finds, there has been a rise in violence against human rights defenders from criminal interests linked notably to drug trafficking, illegal mining, illegal logging, and human trafficking. The report also points to weak and overwhelmed institutions, high impunity levels, and corruption as contributing factors to violence.

“Colombia remains a very dangerous country for those who defend human rights. The patterns and trends of homicides, threats, attacks, and forced displacement show that violence against defenders is not an isolated or temporary phenomenon, but a persistent reality closely linked to underlying structural causes,” says the report.

The report provides a detailed account of events between 1 January 2022 and 31 December 2025, when 410 human rights defenders were killed. In all, 23 percent of the victims were Indigenous Peoples, an extraordinarily high percentage considering that the Indigenous population represents only 4.7 percent of the country's total population, the report finds. Afro-descendant and peasant communities, community action boards, environmental leaders, women defenders, people with diverse sexual orientations and gender expressions and identities, and political leaders were also targeted.

More than 70 percent of the perpetrators were assessed as non-state armed actors.

Over the same period, there were 2,018 cases of threats and attacks against human rights defenders. This number represents only a fraction of the actual magnitude of the phenomenon, as there is no unified and comprehensive system in place for state entities to gather information on these attacks, the report states.

It recommends consolidating effective public policies, implementing essential institutional reforms, promoting criminal investigations to dismantle major perpetrators and prevent impunity, and developing protection mechanisms appropriate to on-the-ground realities.

“Alongside ensuring accountability for the killings that have occurred, addressing the structural causes of this human tragedy with a comprehensive and integrated approach must be the priority, for all relevant authorities in Colombia, to protect human rights defenders and to enable them to carry out their critical work safely,” added the UN Human Rights Chief.

Funding cuts to the UN Human Rights Office in Colombia in 2025 have severely hampered its ability to protect human rights defenders and carry out preventive measures. As a result of these cuts, the Office has been forced to significantly reduce

its missions to high-risk areas, impacting its capacity to monitor the killings of human rights defenders and respond to urgent requests from at-risk communities.

ENDS