Travelling to Colombia in November 2018, I met ordinary people doing extraordinary things. Mothers and fathers ensuring their families’ drinking water isn’t polluted, indigenous communities protecting their homes and livelihoods, workers safeguarding their dignity.

But they all faced grave consequences for speaking up. During my visit I received dozens of testimonies of widespread and extreme violence against social leaders, community leaders, and farmers, most often indigenous peoples, Afro-Colombians, and women human rights defenders.

In a country turning the page on decades of armed violence, those working for the realisation of human rights and peace building are under persistent attack whilst the culprits enjoy impunity.

Weak state institutions, armed gangs and illegal economies contribute to making Colombia a dangerous place for human rights defenders. But what is often missed by this analysis is the role of legitimate business in aggravating attacks on defenders, the scale and range of attacks defenders face because of raising concerns about these businesses, and businesses’ potential to contribute meaningfully to the protection of defenders, including enabling an environment for human rights protection. This research makes this link clear. Companies doing business in Colombia must realise that their mere presence can be enough to ignite a chain of events that leads to a human rights defender being killed, tortured, raped or threatened. Doing business without due care for communities and workers - including by not consulting communities or having accessible grievance mechanisms - only makes brutal silencing of their representatives more likely.

In some instances, companies may even feel they benefit from crackdowns on activists and weakened protection mechanisms. This is short-sighted thinking. Human rights defenders and businesses occupy a shared space and face common threats. Businesses can and should act now to listen to and address the concerns of human rights defenders, commit to having zero-tolerance to violence against them in their supply chains, and speak up to protect defenders when they are attacked.

The Colombian Government has taken the positive step of approving the process of building a Comprehensive Public Policy of Respect and Guarantees for the Work of the Defense of Human Rights in May 2019. Given the new evidence in this report, it would be remiss not to remind the Government to give special attention to the role of business in its efforts to stop killings and attacks against human rights defenders.
Introduction

Colombia’s economy is dominated by land-intensive industries where operations often bring significant human rights risks. This makes the work of human rights defenders (HRDs) and civil society in the country critical to bringing shared prosperity, freedom and sustainability. But our analysis shows that defenders who seek to prevent or expose abuse by businesses face concerted and sometimes deadly attacks.

This report examines the relationship of business to attacks on human rights defenders in Colombia between January 2015 and October 2019. Our data shows Colombia to be the second most dangerous country in the world for attacks on HRDs working on business issues, hosting 9% of all cases globally. At least 72 defenders have been killed because they were raising business-related human rights concerns. Ninety percent of attacks were on defenders working on either mining, fossil fuels, agriculture and livestock, or hydroelectric plants and dams. Districts with high investment in these industries, as per government data, were also more dangerous for defenders.

Colombia has suffered from a systemic climate of intimidation against social leaders, unionists and activists for years, if not decades. Attacks on HRDs in Colombia have been documented by the Ombudsman’s Office of Colombia and numerous civil society organisations, showing a worrying increase in the criminalisation and killings of HRDs, particularly those working on business issues. HRDs face death threats upon themselves and their families, physical attacks and intimidation, and strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) to silence or bankrupt them. These attacks are often designed to also have a chilling effect on many other people that might otherwise help highlight risks and abuse in operations and supply chains.

This is not to say that companies are always responsible for these attacks, only that the HRDs have been attacked because they raised concerns about business activities. However, companies do not operate in a vacuum. They are aware – or should be aware – that critics of their business or industry are at risk and they should work to prevent and mitigate these attacks.

The UN Guiding Principles on business and human rights (UNGPs) say companies should “[s]eek to prevent or mitigate adverse human rights impacts that are directly linked to their operations, products or services by their business relationships, even if they have not contributed to those impacts.” They also expect companies to learn from failures and blind spots, and to push the envelope about what’s possible through innovative approaches and collaborations to increase the company’s leverage to try to prevent harms, especially when confronted with systemic human rights abuses that they cannot fix alone.

There have been some welcome efforts to protect HRDs in Colombia, but while government policies and statements prioritise industry over protecting human rights, attacks on HRDs are likely to continue. This is a serious problem that businesses can help fix. Human rights due diligence by companies should identify and monitor risks to and attacks on HRDs – especially those who are critical of their operations.

There is some better practice emerging where companies are beginning to speak out against attacks, but far more needs to be done to address worsening violence. The state, meanwhile, should address the economic incentives fuelling this situation, provide guidance to companies and hold perpetrators accountable.

Attacks are more likely in regions with weak civilian state institutions, armed actors and illegal economies, and land disputes related to business projects. However, these aggravating factors do not absolve the state of its duty to protect the rights of HRDs focusing on business, or companies from their responsibility to respect HRDs, and to make sure they are not causing, contributing or directly linked to these attacks.
Evidence & Analysis of the Problem

The relationship between business and attacks on HRDs has been identified as important in recent reports on this issue, particularly in relation to the attacks on HRDs protecting land and the environment.

The Ombudsman’s Office of Colombia has identified private agents with economic interests as a type of actor linked to attacks against leaders and HRDs; for example, in a recent warning, the Ombudsman said:

“…Violence against leaders and HRDs is not exercised exclusively by armed groups outside the law. The confluence of violence factors in the territory, and the instrumentalisation that other agents make of it, when their interests are threatened, creates a high-risk scenario for the work carried out by the people and organisations that organise the defence of human rights and the claim of economic, social, cultural and environmental rights. In particular, these have been situations where private agents defend economic interests (land, extractive activities, agribusiness, etc.) of individuals or […] consider their interests have been threatened in the restitution processes of land, protests for the implementation of extractive projects (hydrocarbons and mining) or by the reporting of abuses against communities and people.”

The Business & Human Rights Resource Centre has been recording attacks on HRDs who raise concerns about companies and business sectors since 2015. Analysing the correlation between the type of activism of the victims and the economic sectors they were working on makes it possible to identify some specific trends. Colombia ranks second in such attacks in the world, with 9% of all reported incidents (181 cases) between 2015 and 2019. This is part of a broader problem: the largest number of cases worldwide are in Latin America. Since we started recording attacks in 2015, the most incidents in Colombia occurred in 2017 and 2018. This coincides with the general increase in attacks against all HRDs – whether related to business or not – throughout the country, as reported by several organisations. While there are numerous reasons for this, it is noteworthy that there has been a significant increase since the signing of the Peace Agreement in November 2016. This trend may continue, as the 2019 data is incomplete (January to October) and there have been new incidents reported since national protests began in Colombia in November 2019.

The main economic sectors involved, representing 90% of attacks on business-related HRDs in Colombia between 2015 and 2019, are mining, fossil fuels, agriculture and livestock, and hydroelectric plants and dams. The most commonly documented type of attack were killings, followed by death threats and beatings and violence. Most of the HRDs under attack were leaders and members of affected communities, unionists, and Afro-Colombian and indigenous people - far exceeding the numbers of judges, lawyers and members of urban NGOs.

Of these attacks, at least eight were related to “illegal” mining. This type of mining should not be disregarded in a business and human rights analysis, because its products make it into formal supply chains and markets.

In a few cases, companies have allegedly contributed to the attacks. In the majority of others, HRDs have been attacked because of their work raising concerns about companies’ operations, but these attacks are thought to be carried out by actors not directly linked to companies.

According to our data, the companies that were most often the subject of advocacy by HRDs who were attacked were AngloGold Ashanti, Big Group Salinas (BG Salinas), Cerrejón Coal (Non-Operated Joint Venture of Anglo American, BHP and Glencore), Ecopetrol & EPM. Company responses to this report are available here.
The following cases illustrate how human rights defence related to companies can lead to attacks and threats on HRDs:

Renewable Energy
In 2019, the leaders of the Ríos Vivos Antioquia Movement denounced a smear campaign allegedly paid for by EPM (Public Companies of Medellín), because of their activism in opposition to the hydroelectric project “Hidroituango”. Their spokesperson Isabel Cristina Zuleta was especially at risk. In September 2018, two members of the movement were shot dead. The Ríos Vivos Antioquia Movement (MRV) is a human rights movement composed of 15 associations and families in the West, North, and Lower Cauca as well as Antioquia, affected by the alleged negative environmental and human rights impact of Hidroituango. The project under construction on the Cauca River is one of the largest embankment dams in Latin America. It is carried out by the EPM and reportedly impacts more than 300,000 people in 27 municipalities in the region. The region in question has historically been affected by violence and armed conflict. Response by the company is available here (in Spanish).

Oil & Gas
On 27 November 2018, eight social leaders protesting the operations of the Frontera Energy oil company were arrested, allegedly for belonging to an organised crime group, and called to trial. NGOs have denounced this and requested international intervention, but the government said that they belonged to an organised crime group that used social protest as a “facade to harass the hydrocarbon companies”. NGOs stated that those captured in this case are “deprived of their freedom solely by participating in social organizations, holding meetings and promoting peaceful mobilizations”. Response by the company is available here.

Mining
On 30 April 2019, two defamatory and threatening pamphlets against the social organisation Force of Women Wayuu (FWW) were published on Facebook. One of the brochures also targeted other local organisations. Six members of FWW were named in the threats, including Karmen Ramírez, Miguel Ramírez, Deris Paz, Luis Misael Socarrás, Dulcy Cotes and their director, Jakeline Romero. The pamphlets included the symbol of “Águilas Negras - Bloque Capital D.C.*”, a paramilitary group active since 2006 which attacks HRDs, social leaders and journalists defending the rights to land and the environment. The FWW has been receiving threats since 2000. The organisation focuses on the alleged negative environmental and human rights impact of the mining company El Cerrejón, in the department of La Guajira. Cerrejón and other coal extraction and export companies in La Guajira and Cesar issued a public statement condemning the threats in May 2019.

Key Trends
Districts in which most attacks on HRDs occurred also have the highest concentration of business projects in the most dangerous sectors. 76.5% of cases in the four most dangerous sectors were recorded in areas with high business investment. This indicates that these attacks do not happen in forgotten areas – they happen in many of Colombia’s hubs of business activity, and therefore need to be made part of key business considerations.
Requirements & Compliance

The UNGPs already provide a clear framework to protect HRDs in the context of business. They are intrinsically linked to states’ international obligations and commitments to protect fundamental rights and freedoms and the goals of sustainable development. The UNGPs also specify that when states fail in their duty, companies nevertheless have a responsibility to avoid causing or contributing to attacks and seek to prevent and address attacks against HRDs linked to their operations and business relationships. This includes carrying out human rights due diligence that recognises the need to address risks to HRDs.

The Colombian state has taken some important steps to address this situation but has so far failed to quell rising attacks on HRDs who raise concerns about business operations.

In 2011, Colombia established the National Protection Unit (UNP, in Spanish) - a mechanism to protect HRDs. In recent years, the work of the unit has been overwhelmed by the increase in attacks and the high demand for protection. As the protection model prioritises highly expensive armed escorts and vehicles and body armour – measures which do not necessarily coincide with needs of HRDs – it is seen as untenable for the future.

Of great concern is the situation in rural areas, where Afro-descendant, indigenous and farming communities require more effective models of protection. Pablo Elías González, director of the National Protection Unit, says: “The capacity of the Unit in terms of collective protection capacity is overwhelmed. We have many requests from indigenous, black and rural communities.” …“Our offer is to individuals and, more than anything, to urban HRDs. At the rural level, we have a lot of weakness vis-à-vis armed actors. It is obvious that the only one who can confront them is the Army; we do not have that capacity.”

Despite these apparent difficulties, the Presidential Counsellor for Human Rights and International Affairs said: “The homicide rates of social leaders show a 47% reduction in 2019, according to the comparison with the data from the UN, the Attorney General’s Office and the National Police. The figure disclosed by the Director has its origin in the comparison of the 52 murders of social leaders that occurred between January 1 and October 22, 2019, with the 98 homicides registered in the same period of 2018.” Concerning the investigation and convictions in the cases of killings of HRDs, the Office of the Attorney General said that of the 302 cases reported by the United Nations, prosecutors have made progress in 58.6% of the alleged cases.

These reports have been criticised by social organisations and human rights platforms for the criteria they use for their measurement. The Somos Defensores Program, for example, which has been tracking killings of HRDs since 2012, called into question the reports of the Attorney General because they don’t recognise the political connection of these attacks and portray them as simply common crime cases.
Some companies have taken steps to address the situation

Some companies have publicly denounced attacks against HRDs in Colombia. In May 2019, four major carbon export companies – Colombian Natural Resources-CNR (part of Murray Energy), Drummond Ltd., Cerrejón (Non-Operated Joint Venture of Anglo American, BHP and Glencore) and Prodeco (part of Glencore) - jointly spoke in opposition to threats against members of trade unions and social leaders of Cesar and La Guajira.

The companies said:

“We believe that peace and business activity is fundamental in building relationships of mutual respect, in dialogue and in the collective search for the improvement and transformation of social and economic conditions. Therefore, any violent action against workers, communities and social leaders is an attack on the coexistence of all…”

These statements have received some positive feedback. For example, international NGO PAX said: “The unanimous and clear reaction to the threats by the [coal] mining companies is a good first step to break the cycle of violence in Cesar.”

Canadian energy company Isagen (part of Brookfields) also publicly advocated for the protection of HRDs and social leaders in 2017.

Isagen said:

“… ISAGEN expresses its strongest rejection of the acts of violence that have taken the lives of numerous human rights defenders and social leaders, or that keep them under threat in the national territory, and demands that the fundamental right to life prevails over any other interest…”

On International Human Rights Day in 2018, EPM took the opportunity to express a position on attacks on social leaders. EPM said:

“… The EPM Group strongly regrets and rejects any type of violence or stigmatization against those who lead social causes and processes. Respectfully, we urge the Colombian State to advance the corresponding actions in pursuit and guarantee of the rights of people and communities, particularly the leaders of the country, who continue to suffer the scourge of the armed conflict …”
Future Outlook

Institutions have begun to respond to rising attacks. More than 27 state institutions and several women’s networks signed the “Pact for the Guarantee of the Rights of Female Leaders and HRDs” in July 2019. The human rights platforms of the National Guarantees Board and the Agrarian, Peasant, Ethnic and Popular Summit, promoted by the Ministry of Interior, with the technical support of UN Human Rights and UNDP, are also currently working on the design and elaboration of a Comprehensive Policy of Respect and Guarantee for the Defence of HRDs17.

But the response to date has been insufficient. Specific actions in rural areas and for land, territory and environmental HRDs have not been effective, and the risk continues to be too high for them. The Office of the Ombudsman has pointed out that the proliferation of norms has not resulted in higher levels of commitment from the authorities, and, on the contrary, disperses the responsibilities of the state to protect the fundamental rights of community leaders and HRDs18.

Investment in dangerous sectors for HRDs is set to continue at current levels and in some cases expand. Colombia ranks 22nd in oil production globally and 6th in the Americas; it stood at 865,191 barrels per day in 201819 and investments are planned for expansion, which significant sections of the population see as threatening their traditional livelihoods20.

Due to the oil crisis, the country currently also has 7,711 mining titles granted, including coal open-pit and gold mining21. Mineral production recorded an increase between 2017 to 2018 for silver and nickel22. In the industrial agriculture sector, palm oil production has increased in recent years23. Sugarcane cultivation has remained stable, registering the highest figure in 201824. The country has 26 hydroelectric projects in operation, 66% of the country’s energy comes from reservoirs and dams, and in total, 140 hydroelectric plants are either in operation, under construction or planned 25.

The current president, Ivan Duque, was elected on a platform promising to foster private investments, foreign and national, in a context where internal armed conflict persists, with the presence of leftist guerrilla group and right-wing paramilitaries and intense response by armed forces, particularly in rural areas.

With such scale of investment in risky sectors for HRDs and the current levels of attacks, Colombia must act decisively to protect HRDs, focusing on businesses and the often-marginalised rural communities they speak up for. For these communities to be able to fully take part and determine their futures, the first step needs to be for their leaders and members to be able to express their opinions without fear of reprisals or attacks.

Recommendations

All companies operating in Colombia should:

- Adopt a zero-tolerance approach on reprisals and attacks on HRDs not only in their operations but also when they are linked to such attacks through their value chain and business relationships.

- Implement due diligence procedures for the prevention of harm and human rights abuse of individuals, communities and the environment which explicitly recognises the risks to HRDs. Companies that invest or work in districts and/or sectors with high levels of attack need to prioritise the risks to HRDs in their human rights due diligence and act consistently on their findings.

- Respect popular consultations, indigenous communities’ right to free, prior, and informed consent; and support community-led human rights and environmental assessments and consultations that reflect the aspirations of local communities.

To the Colombian state:

- To the Office of the Ombudsman: Incorporate the business dimension in the monitoring and warning on attacks on HRDs by the Early Warning System so that recommendations on the subject can be made to the national government.

- To the Office of the Attorney General: Deepen investigation of attacks on HRDs beyond identification of material actors and establish the direct and indirect responsibility of the possibly related companies.

- To the National Protection Unit of the Ministry of the Interior: Recognise the differences in needs of HRDs, based on their ethnicities, genders, rural versus urban status, and other characteristics, and create collective and individual protection measures, on the basis of differentiated ethnic, gender and territorial approaches. By doing so, transcend the current securitisation-heavy and urban-focused approach, and create a comprehensive system that focuses on prevention of attacks.

- To the Presidential Advisory Office for Human Rights: Promote the effective incorporation of the recommendations made by the UN Special Rapporteur on HRDs and other human rights mechanisms into the National Action Plan on human rights and business. Respect and promote not only the mechanisms of the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, but also the mandatory instruments, which include explicit guarantees and effective protection measures for HRDs responding to the current context.
References

1. It should be clarified that where there is reference to companies or business sectors in this report, this is due to HRDs being attacked, allegedly because they raised concerns about specific business activities, or an analysis of the company’s presence in the context in which the aggressions occur. We are not affirming, nor is it our intention, to link certain companies directly with the victimising event, since that link can and should only be investigated and determined by the relevant State entities, according to their competence. The report seeks to provide contextual elements and look at relationships to business in order to highlight trends and possible additional research topics.

2. More information: Shared space under pressure; Defenders at Risk


4. We have cross-checked our cases with the information of the “Information System on attacks against human rights HRDs in Colombia SIADDHH“, of the “Somos Defensores” Program and the Ombudsman’s Risk Reports. Also, a dialogue was held with the Human Rights and IHL Data Bank of the Center for Popular Research and Education, CINEP / Program for Peace and used as reference, research reports from non-governmental organisations, as well as the monitoring of BHRRC press, which is reflected in the news that appears about Colombia on our website.

5. Six of the nine most dangerous countries for defenders focusing on businesses are in the region, according to our data.

6. Including metallurgical production.

7. Including salt production.

8. Though that is likely because killings get the most media attention, and intimidation and threats often don’t get reported or documented.

9. We use quotation marks when referring to this type of mining, since its products are sold in the legal market chain.

10. On the BHRRC website, we consider that this kind of mining, even if illegal, responds to the interests of as a specific economic sector, within the supply chain, since minerals extracted without a license eventually enter the legal economy and are formally transformed and commercialized by legally constituted companies.


12. More information: Shared space under pressure; Defenders at Risk


14. 17 Pacto por la Garantía de los Derechos de las Líderesas y Defensoras de Derechos Humanos; Source: Vicepresidencia. (July 2019). “Gobierno firmó pacto por la Garantía de los Derechos de las Líderes y Defensoras de Derechos Humanos”. Available at: https://mfr.vicepresidencia.gov.co/Paginas/prensa/2019/Gobierno-firmo-pacto-por-la-Garantia-de-los-Derechos-de-las-Lideres-y-Defensoras-de-Derechos-Humanos.aspx


19. 22 Agencia Nacional de Hidrocarburos. (2018). “Producción fiscalizada de petróleo por campo (Barriles por día calendario)”. Available at: http://www.anh.gov.co/estadisticas-del-sector/sistemas-integrados-de-operaciones/estadisticas-de-produccion


Company Responses

Business & Human Rights Resource Centre invited all of the companies mentioned in the report in relation to attacks on HRDs to provide their comments and gave deadline to respond. All the responses received by this deadline are linked in this report (p.1.). If any were received after the deadline or are received in the future, they will be made available on our website alongside the report. Here

Arts & Human Rights Defenders in Colombia


17 Pacto por la Garantía de los Derechos de las Líderes y Defensoras de Derechos Humanos; Source: Vicepresidencia. (July 2019). “Gobierno firmó pacto por la Garantía de los Derechos de las Líderes y Defensoras de Derechos Humanos”. Available at: https://mfr.vicepresidencia.gov.co/Paginas/prensa/2019/Gobierno-firmo-pacto-por-la-Garantia-de-los-Derechos-de-las-Lideres-y-Defensoras-de-Derechos-Humanos.aspx


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