

OPINION-EDITORIAL

Land is life: Indigenous Peoples across the world are risking their lives and freedoms to protect their lands

Approximately 20 percent of the earth's territory are Indigenous lands. These lands are home to about 476 million Indigenous Peoples worldwide, in over 90 countries. Indigenous lands and territories are at the core of Indigenous Peoples' culture, spirituality, and identity. To them, land is life.

Across the world, Indigenous Peoples are risking their lives and freedoms to protect their lands and territories. As a result, they are relentlessly subjected to wide range of violence and attacks – from criminalization, harassment and militarization to land grabbing, arbitrary detentions, and killings. Criminalization of Indigenous Peoples is increasing at an alarming rate. To clearly define the term, criminalization is the misuse of criminal laws that involves the manipulation of the punitive power of the State and non-state actors. This is done to control, punish or prevent the exercise of the right to defend human rights. It results in negative, and often times, irreparable damage on both indigenous individuals and peoples. Instances of criminalization include the filing of trumped-up charges of terrorism, murder, trespassing, robbery, illegal logging, and vilification of rights defenders.

As in the case of killings, criminalization is often preceded by threats and attacks aimed either at instilling fear or delegitimizing efforts to defend rights. Several cases of criminalization and killing of Indigenous Peoples indicate a link to the defense of their lands and resources against mining, agri-business, energy projects and other extractive industries. Likewise, States utilize the military and paramilitary groups to “clear” areas of any resistance by Indigenous peoples and to facilitate unhampered operations of companies provided with contracts by the government.

Worse, there are even more arrests and detentions of Indigenous Peoples while the world grapples with the lingering impacts of COVID-19 pandemic.

The [2021 annual criminalization report](#) of Indigenous Peoples Rights International (IPRI) noted that amid the pandemic, state actors, in partnership with businesses, exacerbated killings and criminalization of Indigenous Peoples. It was also noted in the report that many states have implemented lockdowns and loosened their environmental and social safeguards as means of economic recovery. As a result, these states made it easier for some companies and syndicates to grab the lands and resource of Indigenous Peoples for agribusiness, mining or illegal activities while sending Indigenous Peoples to jail for their resistance.

Similarly, Frontline Defenders reported, at the end of 2020, that 69 percent of the 330 human rights defenders killed in 25 countries were working on land, Indigenous, and environment rights, while 26 percent worked on Indigenous Peoples' rights. It added that often, these Indigenous rights and lands defenders were gunned down by State actors or hired assassins of big businesses. In killings and illegal arrests of Indigenous Peoples, state actors violate the rights to liberty and security, and their right against arbitrary arrest and detention which are stipulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The protection of these fundamental rights is integral to the protection of Indigenous Peoples' rights to their land, territories and resources and to self-determination as provided in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

As we commemorate the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples (August 9), which bears the theme "Leaving no one behind: Indigenous peoples and the call for a new social contract" this year, it is imperative to hold States and businesses accountable for the human rights violations against world's Indigenous Peoples and ensure the safety and security of Indigenous Peoples. As it has become more profoundly concerning that many crimes take place with impunity the States need to address the impacts of discrimination and impunity particularly in relation to the rights of Indigenous Peoples to their lands, territories, and resources, and to self-determination.

Finally, Indigenous Peoples, advocates and other sectors need to strengthen solidarity and cooperation to put an end to the impunity in the crimes against indigenous peoples, and the criminalization of and violence against Indigenous Peoples across the world.