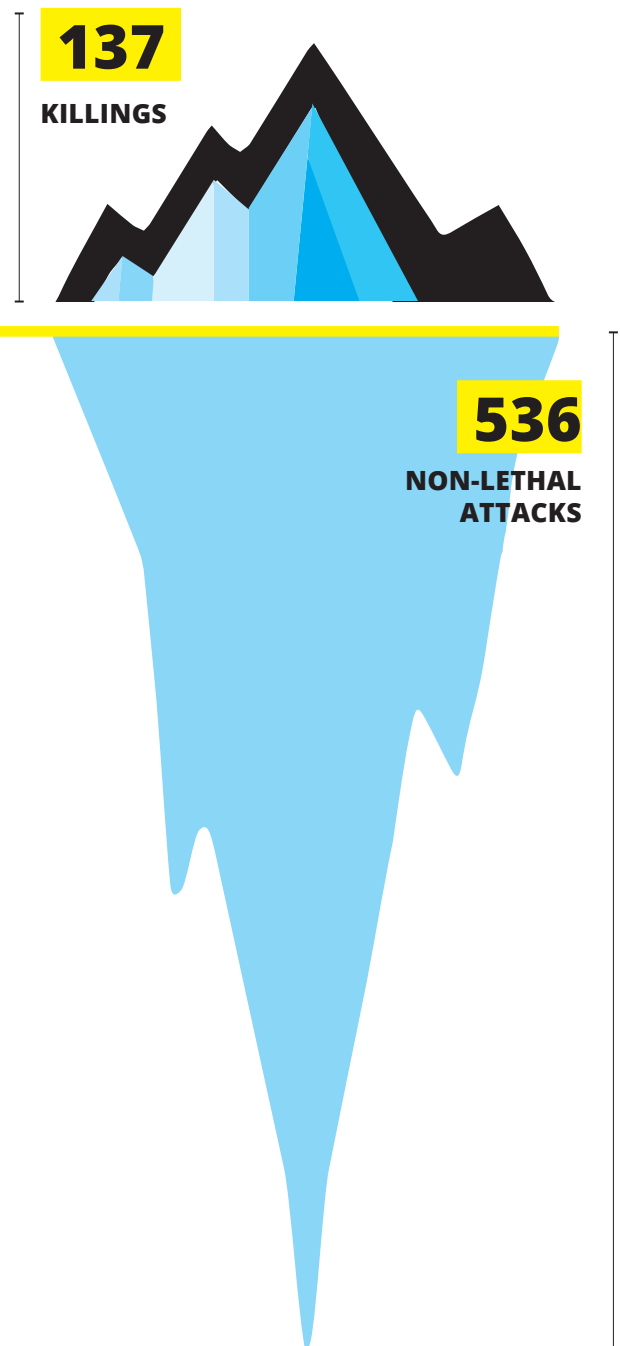


# UNCOVERING THE HIDDEN ICEBERG



## NEW DATA SHOWS ALARMING PATTERN OF NON-LETHAL ATTACKS AGAINST INDIGENOUS PEOPLES, LAND AND ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENDERS

Patterns of lethal violence against indigenous peoples, land and environmental defenders have long been globally documented and recognised. But a new dataset from the [ALLIED Data Working Group](#)<sup>1</sup> has, for the first time, documented the widespread presence of non-lethal attacks – often a precursor to lethal violence – which indicates that the situation of these defenders is much more concerning than previously known.

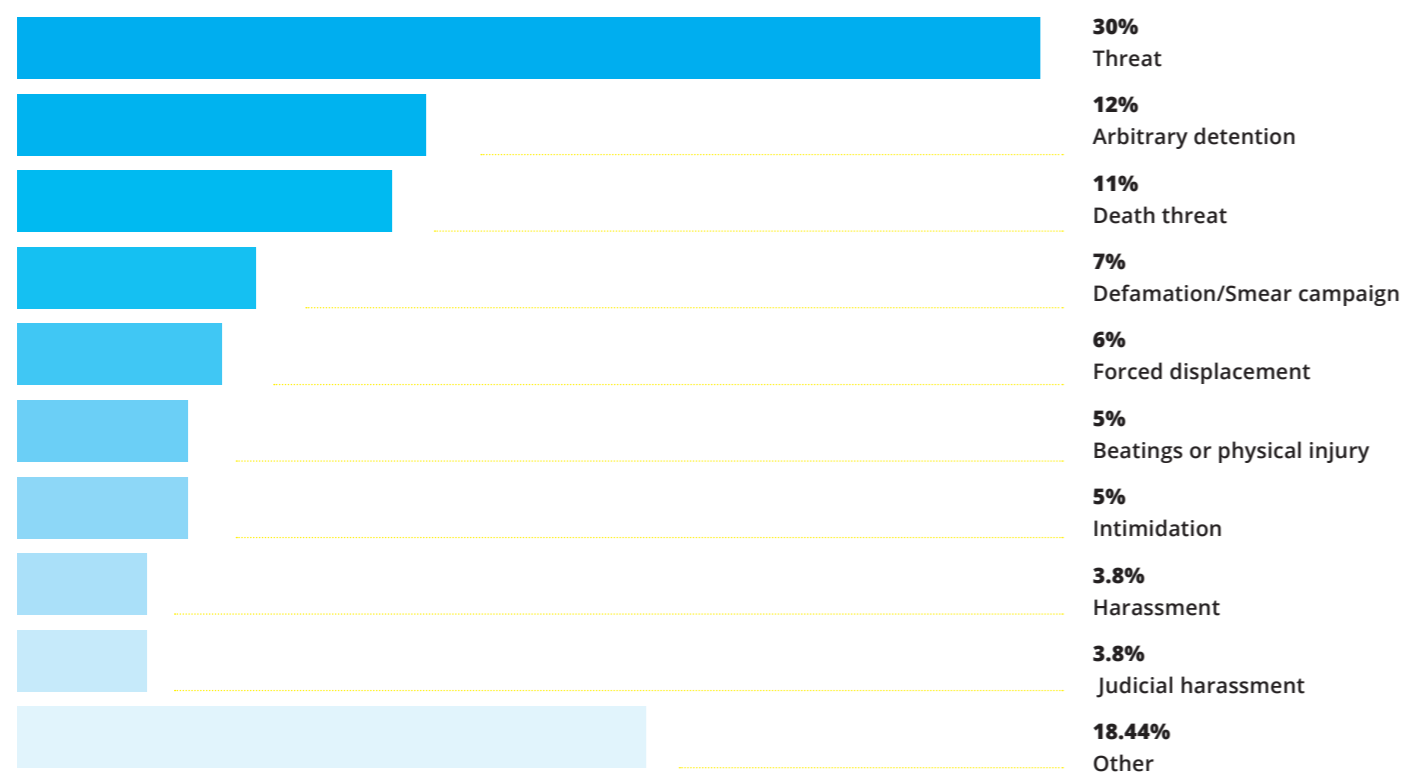
In 2020, Global Witness<sup>2</sup> registered the **killings of 137 land and environmental defenders (LED)** in Colombia, Guatemala, Kenya, Mexico and the Philippines - some of the most dangerous countries for these defenders. In the same year - through a collaborative effort, merging local, regional and international datasets from these same countries - the *Data Working Group (DWG)* documented **355 non-lethal attacks against 536 distinct individuals, communities, organisations and unaffiliated groups** - such as people participating in a protest.

Analysing the merged dataset, a higher level of violence is captured than analysis done on any single dataset alone. This indicates a **previously undocumented prevalence of non-lethal attacks** that could foreshadow an escalation of violence against these defenders.

1 A coalition of more than 20 local, regional and international civil society data collectors working to collect attacks on indigenous peoples, land and environmental defenders, belonging to the broader ALLIED coalition.

2 An observer and contributor to the Data Working Group.

## PRIMARY TYPES OF ATTACKS DOCUMENTED



Of the **355 non-lethal attacks** reported to the DWG, 44% took place in Guatemala, 23.4% took place in the Philippines, 22% in Colombia, 6.5% in Mexico and 4.2% in Kenya.<sup>3</sup>

These were the incidents reported to the DWG by data collectors, but the numbers – even if they better reflect widespread non-lethal violence – do not come close to capturing the full scale of violence perpetrated against these defenders on the ground. This is especially the case in Mexico and Kenya, where fewer cases were reported.

While the killing of indigenous peoples, land and environmental defenders represents the most egregious, visible and verifiable type of attack, by working with local data collectors, the DWG was able to better document the **pervasive presence of threats, stigmatization, judicial harassment and other non-lethal attacks**. These are more difficult to verify, and less likely to be published by the media.

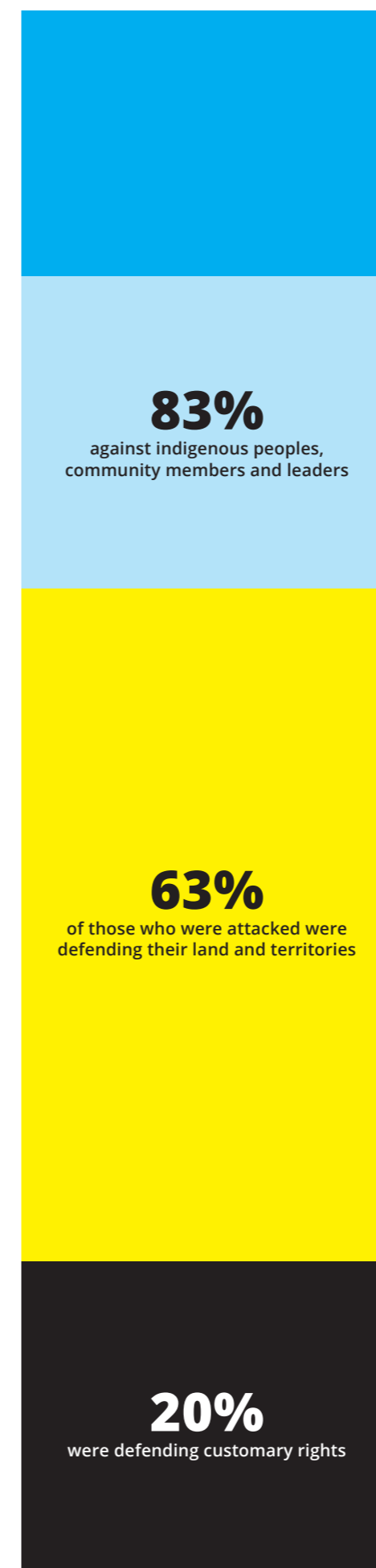
Although these attacks are more difficult to verify, **it is crucial to monitor them as they often precede lethal attacks** on these defenders.

The findings echo and confirm concerns raised by DWG member Front Line Defenders, which found that in 2019, **75% of all human rights defenders killed had previously been victims of non-lethal attacks**.

Within the types of violence monitored by the DWG, **threats were most commonly reported, accounting for 30% of all attacks**. Arbitrary detention, often part of larger patterns of criminalisation and judicial harassment, was the second most reported type of attack (12%), followed by death threats (11%), defamations or smear campaigns (7%) and forced displacement of individuals or communities (6%).

Of the non-lethal attacks reported by the DWG, 69.3% were carried out against individuals, 29.6% against entire communities and 3.7% against organisations. While most attacks were reported against individuals, it is important to recognise the often collective nature of the work of these defenders, with communities coming together to defend a joint cause.

## NON-LETHAL ATTACKS DOCUMENTED IN 2020



Among the individuals where information on sex or gender were made available, 70.8% identified as men or male and 29.2% as women or female. Despite representing a smaller number of attacks, human rights bodies have acknowledged that **female defenders often face less-public threats**, such as those coming from within their own families or communities. Their situation requires special attention, as they face distinct, gender-specific threats and violence.

**Indigenous peoples and community members were found to be particularly at risk**. Of all the non-lethal attacks documented in 2020, 83% were against indigenous peoples and community members and leaders. More than 63% of those who were attacked were defending their land and territories and an additional 20.5% were defending customary rights, including long-standing community land and resource usage.

In the 84 attacks (23.4% of the total) where information on drivers was available, 95% of these cases linked the attack to opposition to business sectors, specifically agriculture and livestock, mining and construction. The findings confirm reports from several DWG members and observers, including the Business and Human Rights Resource Centre, Global Witness and Front Line Defenders, who have found that defenders raising concerns about human rights abuses and negative impacts by the private sector are at increased risk of threats and violence. Despite increasing expectations for businesses to respect human rights, and the **rights of defenders**, private companies continue to be involved in a concerning pattern of violence.

Among the attacks that included information on a probable perpetrator (80.5% of the total), **44% indicated private individuals or groups in a relative position of power**, in or outside the community, while the second most common suspected perpetrator was the **armed forces (12.6%), followed by the police (9%) and local government officials (6.33%)**. The perpetrators represented here are those listed by data collectors as the primary probable perpetrator, which could be either first-hand perpetrators or intellectual authors.

This first effort by the Data Working Group attempts to shed light on a reality that remains largely undocumented and invisible in government reporting. In the coming years, the effort will be built upon and replicated in additional countries as members work to build an integrated, participatory and comprehensive global dataset on non-lethal attacks against Land and Environmental Defenders.

Members of the Data Working Group rely on a joint incident reporting template, uploaded to the LANDex platform, that allows data from diverse sources to be visualised and analysed together while permitting duplicate identification and the strengthening of information available on individual cases. All attacks reported by the DWG undergo a process of member verification, ranging from direct engagement with the Land and Environmental Defenders or community in question to cross-checking between two or more public sources.

<sup>3</sup> Data collectors contributing to the dataset were La Unidad de Protección a Defensoras y Defensores de Derechos Humanos – Guatemala (UDEFEHUA), CINEP y El Banco de datos de derechos humanos y violencia política, Asian NGO Coalition for Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (ANGOC), Natural Justice, Consejo de Reacción, EJAtlas, the International Land Coalition (ILC), the Business and Human Rights Resource Centre (BHRRRC) and Front Line Defenders from the HRD Memorial.

The findings, while preliminary and limited to five pilot countries, are nevertheless concerning: defenders are being harassed, attacked and criminalised at rates much higher than previously thought. A fuller picture of the violence perpetrated against indigenous peoples, land and environmental defenders emerges when diverse data sources are combined and priority is given to local data collectors.

The findings underline recommendations given by the DWG in its 2021 *Crucial Gap report*. They further highlight the urgent need for states to monitor, collect data, report on the situation of these defenders, and address the root causes of the attacks on them.

Civil society data collectors are filling this gap, but it does not come without risk. It cannot act as a substitute for state action to protect the defenders that Data Working Group members have repeatedly shown are at elevated risk due to their work protecting the natural resources and environment on which we all depend.

Until these individuals, their communities and organisations are safe, able to work, and live in a secure, enabling environment, governments cannot claim that the societies they are building are peaceful, inclusive or contributing to a more sustainable planet.

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## ALLIED DATA WORKING GROUP

Asian NGO Coalition for Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (ANGOC)  
Business and Human Rights Resource Centre  
Center for Justice Governance and Environmental Action (CJGEA)  
Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular Programa Por la Paz (CINEP) y El Banco de datos de derechos humanos y violencia política  
Centro Mexicano de Derecho Ambiental (CEMDA)  
EJ Altas – Global Atlas of Environmental Justice  
Environmental Law Alliance Worldwide (ELAW)  
Front Line Defenders  
Global Witness (in observer role)  
Green Advocates  
Indigenous Peoples Rights International (IPRI)  
International Land Coalition (ILC)  
International Service for Human Rights (ISHR)  
International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA)  
La Unidad de Protección a Defensoras y Defensores de Derechos Humanos (UDEFEQUA)  
Natural Justice  
Técnicas Rudas  
World Resources Institute (WRI)  
Universal Rights Group (URG)

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