

UNEP calls on governments and business to promote, protect and respect environmental rights

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UN Environment is taking a stand against the ongoing threats, intimidation, harassment, and murder of environmental defenders around the world, with the launch of the UN Environmental Rights Initiative in Geneva on the 6th March 2018. By helping people to better understand their rights and how to defend them, and by assisting governments to better safeguard environmental rights, the Initiative will bring environmental protection nearer to the people. UN Environment is also calling upon the private sector to move beyond a culture of basic compliance to one where the business community champions the rights of everyone to a clean and healthy environment.

Since the 1970s, environmental rights have grown more rapidly than any other human right. And increasingly, these rights are being invoked and upheld. Courts in at least 44 nations have issued decisions enforcing the constitutional right to a healthy environment. "Those who struggle to protect planet and people should be celebrated as heroes, but the sad fact is that many are paying a heavy price with their safety and sometimes their lives. It's our duty to stand on the side of those who are on the right side of history. It means standing for the most fundamental and universal of human rights," Erik Solheim, Head of UN Environment said. Environmental rights are enshrined in over 100 constitutions, and yet in January 2018 Global Witness documented that almost four environmental defenders are being killed per week, with the true total likely far higher. Many more are harassed, intimidated and forced from their lands. Around 40-50% of the 197 environmental defenders killed in 2017 came from indigenous and local communities. "Violations of environmental rights have a profound impact on a wide variety of human rights, including the rights to life, self-determination, food, water, health, sanitation, housing, cultural, civil and political rights," UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein said. Two disturbing counter-trends are undermining both the environmental rule of law and human rights to participate and assemble. The first is the escalating harassment, intimidation, and murder of environmental defenders. Between 2002 and 2013, 908 people were killed in 35 countries defending the environment and land, and the pace of killing is increasing; 2017 was even worse. The second is the attempts by some countries to limit the activities of nongovernmental organizations. Between 1993 and 2016, 48 countries enacted laws that restricted the activities of local NGOs receiving foreign funding, and 63 countries adopted laws restricting activities of foreign NGOs.

UN Environment has been undertaking work on human rights and the environment for almost two decades, including the identification of good practices on human rights and the environment; the sensitization of the judiciary on constitutional environmental rights, and by providing support to regional negotiations on a Principle 10 instrument for the Latin American and Caribbean region. The Latin American and Caribbean Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Access to Justice in Environmental was adopted in San Jose, Costa Rica on March 4th. The historic agreement which will have a transformative impact on access to information and justice, public participation and human rights defenders on environmental matters in the region. "This is not just renewed commitment to environmental protection," Leo Heileman, director of UN Environment's office in Latin America and the Caribbean said. "It can be an opportunity to give environmental rights the same legal standing as human rights at the global level." The Environmental Rights Initiative will engage governments to strengthen institutional capacities to develop and implement policy and legal frameworks that protect environmental rights; assist businesses to better understand what their environmental rights obligations are and provide guidance on how to advance beyond a compliance culture; work with media to promote environmental rights, including through the development and implementation of a media training curriculum; support the wider dissemination of information on environmental rights through a new web-portal; and support the establishment of networks through which environmental defenders will connect, develop and implement strategies to promote environmental protection.

The Environmental Rights Initiative was officially launched at the Palais des Nations in Geneva during an event including; John Knox, UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and the Environment; Patrick Alley, Global Witness Co-Founder; Bianca Jagger, President and Chief Executive of the Bianca Jagger Human Rights Foundation; Jon Watts, Global Environment Editor at the Guardian; Kate Gilmore, UN Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights; and Elizabeth Maruma Mrema, the UN's leading expert on environmental law.

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