

Shields Up: Peru's New Effort to Defend the Defenders

Mark Worth

Peru has long been one of the world's most dangerous countries for activists and indigenous leaders. At least 57 environmental activists were murdered there from 2002-14, according to Global Witness, punctuated by the shooting deaths of four indigenous Ashaninka leaders in the Ucayal rainforest.

Three indigenous activists have been murdered in Peru this year: Herasmo García Grau and Yenes Ríos Bonsano from Ucayali, and Estela Casanto Mauricio from Junín, according to the Coordinating Committee of Amazon Indigenous Organizations. They are among 19 indigenous people killed in the region in 2021.

Activists everywhere are still grieving over the [murder of Roberto Pacheco](#). The 34-year-old son of prominent forest activist Demetrio Pacheco was gunned down in September 2020 in the woods that he and his family protect from loggers. His father is a leader of Comité Gestión Tambopata, which works to oppose illegal gold mining in the Madre de Dios region.

“For years Roberto helped his father protect the forest,” said Liliana Jauregui of the Netherlands National Committee of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). “They both brought up the problem of intruders for years, but the authorities didn’t take action.”

The latest official step to protect activists in Peru was taken this past April. A new Supreme Decree established a whistleblower protection-type system known as the Intersectoral Mechanism for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders. The Justice and Human Rights Ministry and seven other federal agencies oversee a program to prevent retaliation, rapidly intervene if someone is in danger, and provide access to justice. People at risk can be given personal security and be placed in safehouses.

Already through July, the Justice Ministry had received 15 requests for protection, more than half coming from environmental defenders or indigenous people. Four requests were approved, the details of which are being withheld to protect the activists.

“The tools are there. Now we need to make them operate effectively with resources and capacities, so we don’t have to lament any more deaths,” Silvana Baldovino of the Peruvian Society of Environmental Law said in the news portal [Actualidad Ambiental](#). “This mechanism gives us hope and strength to continue working together to protect and safeguard activists’ lives and rights.”

Daniel Sánchez, a former Justice Ministry official now with the Debate and Development Institute, told [Actualidad Ambiental](#) that the Decree obliges the police to intervene promptly when a human rights defender is at risk. Under the Decree, environmental activists and conservationists – including indigenous people protecting their lands – are considered human rights defenders.

The Decree was presented in September at the IUCN’s quadrennial World Conservation Congress in Marseilles. At the event, which was attended by 6,000 people and 3,500 more online, IUCN members approved a resolution on [protecting whistleblowers, and environmental and human right defenders](#). This followed [four IUCN resolutions](#) approved in January in support of whistleblower reward programs, and protecting, enfranchising and incentivizing wildlife and natural resource whistleblowers.

The growing problem of threats to activists was highlighted at the IUCN Congress by University of Geneva Professor Peter Larsen. According to Larson’s global survey of 249 IUCN members, one-third of respondents said conservation work has become less safe. Half of NGO respondents in Eastern Europe and North/Central Asia said they have been attacked, threatened or intimidated, the survey found.

Read:

[Environmental Whistleblowers are Key Human Rights Defenders, According to Comments to UN](#)

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