

Context: Since 2017, Ecuador has implemented policies aimed at reducing the role of the state, promoting extractivism, and increasing external debt. These measures have deepened social and economic inequality, leading to increased migration and two indigenous uprisings in 2019 and 2022. These policies have been enforced under states of emergency, restricting fundamental rights such as freedom of assembly and movement, and allowing for the deployment of armed forces.

12 Key Points to Understand the Situation of Human Rights Defenders in Ecuador

1. **Insecure Environment for Human Rights Defenders:** In Ecuador, human rights and environmental defenders face an unsafe environment, particularly Indigenous peoples, Afro-descendants, and women defenders, who are stigmatized and attacked by the State and Non-State actors. Retaliation against them includes threats to their safety and that of their families.
2. **Documented Cases Between 2011 and 2021:** The Human Rights Alliance report documented 22 cases of human rights violations between 2011 and 2021, affecting 449 human rights and nature defenders. From 2021 to 2024, at least 10 defenders have been murdered.
3. **Criminalization in the Context of Social Protests:** Defenders face the greatest risks during social protests, such as the uprisings in 2019 and 2022. In Cotopaxi, 137 people were criminalized in the parish of Palo Quemado for resisting mining projects.
4. **Frequent Use of the Crime of Terrorism:** The crime of terrorism is frequently used to criminalize defenders. In July 2024, the National Assembly increased the sentences for terrorism from 10 to 26 years in prison, without creating mechanisms to prevent the abusive use of these laws against defenders.
5. **Criminalization of Women Defenders:** Women defending sexual and reproductive rights have also been criminalized, adding to the already vulnerable situation they face in their struggles for equality and justice.
6. **Amnesties Granted in 2022:** The state acknowledged the misuse of criminal law by granting 268 amnesties in March 2022. Of these, 60 were for people prosecuted for participating in the 2019 protests, 153 for defenders of community territories, 12 for those administering Indigenous justice, and 43 for environmental defenders.
7. **Militarization in Indigenous Territories:** The deployment of military forces in territories such as Las Naves and Palo Quemado has led to the criminalization of 98 individuals (with 184 charges filed) and has resulted in at least 10 people being injured by firearms. Armed forces have even intimidated children. The militarization in Palo Quemado was driven by the Junta de Defensa del Campesinado (involved in human rights violations in the case of Nuñez Naranjo and others vs. Ecuador) and the Ministry of the Environment.
8. **Increase in Violence and Organized Crime:** The expansion of criminal gangs has led the government to promote the militarization of territories and prisons, with over 18,000 detainees, most of them arbitrarily, since the declaration of a Non-International Armed Conflict (NIAC). However, this has exacerbated human rights violations, such as torture and reprisals, especially against detainees.
9. **Limited Effectiveness in Combating Organized Crime:** Between 2019 and July 2024, of 365 cases related to money laundering, only 1 resulted in a conviction. During the same period, out of 43 complaints regarding the supply of machinery for illegal mining, there were no convictions, and of 1,519 complaints of illegal mining, only 114 convictions were obtained.

- 10. Increase in Attacks on Journalists:** In 2022, 8 death threats were reported against journalists, a number that increased to 30 in 2023, representing a 275% increase. The year 2023 ended with 289 attacks on journalists, and the protection mechanism remains unfunded.
- 11. State Control Over Civil Society:** In June 2024, the government issued the "Integrity Strategy for Civil Society Organizations," which includes monitoring and sanctions for organizations, raising concerns about increased state control over civil society, especially those defending human rights.
- 12. Weakening of the Ombudsman's Office:** The Ombudsman's Office is weakened, with temporary leadership that has lasted more than three years. Its current head, appointed in violation of the Paris Principles, lacks the required experience for the position, affecting its ability to protect human rights in Ecuador.

Recommendations:

- **Allocation of Funding for Protection:** It is essential that the U.S. government provide financial support for the creation of a specific fund aimed at protecting human rights leaders and defenders in Ecuador, who are facing threats from organized crime and environmental crimes. This fund should facilitate the development of protection protocols, early warning systems, and self-care strategies, with active participation from the Ecuadorian state.
- **Protection Programs for Defenders:** Collaborating on the development and implementation of specific protection programs for human rights and environmental defenders, particularly in areas most affected by organized violence and resource extraction. These programs should align with the commitments of the Escazú Agreement, and U.S. technical support would be

crucial in addressing the security challenges that threaten defenders.

- **Reform of Criminal Legislation:** Providing technical assistance to help Ecuador reform its criminal legislation, eliminating provisions that allow the criminalization of human rights defenders. It is crucial that these reforms protect defenders from unjust accusations, such as those related to terrorism.
- **Cleansing of Armed Forces and Justice Operators:** Providing technical and financial assistance to support a cleansing process within Ecuador's armed forces and justice system, removing those linked to organized crime. This process is critical for restoring trust in institutions and ensuring the safety of defenders.