

Environmental human rights defenders and the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment

International Press Institute submission in response to the call for input by the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to a healthy environment to inform the preparation of the Special Rapporteur's thematic report to the 64th session of the United Nations Human Rights Council.

Introduction

The International Press Institute (IPI) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Special Rapporteur's [call for input](#) on environmental human rights defenders (EHRDs) and the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment. This submission draws on IPI's work through its ongoing [programme](#) that seeks to support and protect climate and environmental journalism in Africa.

IPI's monitoring demonstrates that journalists covering climate and environmental issues face a range of serious violations and reprisals, including physical attacks, threats, arrest and detention and judicial harassment. Between [March 2025 and March 2026](#), IPI documented 45 press freedom threats and violations affecting 58 journalists covering climate and environmental issues in Africa as noted in IPI's [bi-annual reports](#) on attacks against climate and environmental journalists. These incidents demonstrate recurring patterns of risk, particularly for journalists reporting on resource exploitation, [illegal mining](#), land disputes, pollution, environmental degradation and other issues involving powerful political or economic interests.

This is particularly relevant to the Special Rapporteur's examination of the situation of environmental human rights defenders. Journalists reporting on climate and environmental issues occupy a distinctive position within the broader ecosystem of environmental human rights defenders by documenting environmental harm, informing affected communities, exposing abuses by state and private actors, and facilitating public participation and accountability. Access to environmental information and the safety of these journalists and their ability to work independently is fundamental for the protection of the environment and the realisation of the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment.

IPI's monitoring of attacks against environmental journalists provides important insights into these risks and their implications for the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment.

1. Risks faced by journalists covering climate and environmental issues

IPI's [monitoring](#) indicates that environmental and climate journalists face heightened risks because their reporting frequently scrutinises powerful interests and exposes activities that may have significant environmental, economic or political consequences. These risks are not limited to one type of perpetrator although state actors have been responsible for the highest cases of attacks that IPI documented. Journalists have faced reprisals from state security forces, regulatory authorities, private companies and other actors including illegal mining groups and armed groups. State actors were responsible for approximately 62 percent of the

attacks against environmental journalists documented by IPI between March 2025 and March 2026. This demonstrates the need for regional and international mechanisms including the office of the Special Rapporteur to ensure protection against both direct state abuses and threats originating from non-state actors.

- **Physical attacks and security threats**

Between March 2025 and March 2026, IPI documented 25 cases of physical attacks and threats to the safety of climate and environmental journalists as noted in the above referenced monitoring reports. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, journalist [Fiston Wilondja Mazambi](#) was abducted, tortured and killed in August 2025 while investigating allegations concerning illegal gold mining and collaboration between rebel groups and government authorities.

In Mozambique, journalist [Carlitos Cadangue](#) was shot-at in February 2026 in an attack believed to be connected to his reporting on illegal mining and pollution. Cadangue had previously received threats.

Other journalists have been physically assaulted while covering illegal mining and its environmental impacts for example in Ghana on 7 November 2025- illegal miners attacked at least [five journalists](#) covering an operation to shut down illegal mining facilities in Obuasi, Ashanti Region. While fleeing the attack, the journalists were involved in an accident, with two sustaining serious injuries. On 19 January 2026, illegal miners again [assaulted](#) other journalists- Daily Graphic reporter Timothy Ngnenbe and his cameraperson while they were covering an official investigation into illegal mining in the Offin Shelterbelt Forest Reserve. The journalists were forced to delete photographs and video footage they had taken.

Threats and intimidation are also widespread. In the DRC, freelance journalist [Pacifique Muliri](#) received death threats while investigating a mine and subsequently went into hiding after his home was raided and his reporting equipment stolen.

- **Arrest and detention**

Journalists also face arrest and detention in connection with environmental reporting and between March 2025 and March 2026, IPI documented 13 cases of arrest and detention. For example, In the DRC, journalist [Stephane Shisso](#) was arrested following a broadcast on land degradation and erosion linked to coltan mining. He remained in military detention for more than four months without being formally charged. In Somalia, journalists reporting on sanitation, flooding and forced evictions have been arrested, assaulted and had their equipment confiscated.

On July 22, 2025 Mauritanian environmental activist Ali Ould Bakkar was [arrested](#) at his home in Nouadhibou by state security forces. Authorities accused Bakkar of publishing false information about illegal fishing activities carried out by Turkish foreign vessels in a restricted maritime area, claiming his reporting harmed Mauritania's foreign relations. Bakkar was unconditionally released after two months of detention.

Burundian journalist Norbert Rucabihari was also [arrested](#) on April 3, 2025 while taking photos on a bridge in Bujumbura for a story on waste dumping in Lake Tanganyika. He were

also reportedly threatened by the Imbonerakure – a political youth movement affiliated to Burundi's ruling party.

- **Legal and judicial harassment**

IPI has also documented cases bearing the hallmarks of Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs), as well as the use of criminal and civil laws to intimidate journalists . [IPI's research on SLAPPs](#) against environmental and climate journalists in Africa published in May 2026, highlighted several cases involving journalists in Ghana, Nigeria, Cameroon, Kenya, Somalia, Mozambique and South Africa. The report found that weak legal safeguards, vague or restrictive laws and the absence of dedicated anti-SLAPP protections leave journalists vulnerable to litigation intended to burden, intimidate or silence them.

For example, in [Ghana](#), a journalist received a permanent injunction following an investigation into alleged irregular land deals and tax compliance involving a politically connected businessperson. In Mozambique, investigative journalist [Estácio Valoi](#) faced legal threats and subsequently a criminal defamation complaint following reporting on environmental crime and alleged corruption involving a private company and authorities.

This legal and judicial harassment is tied to the growing weaponisation of laws to target journalists exposing environmental harm or corruption related to environmental reporting. Laws relating to cybercrime, criminal defamation, penal codes, false information provisions and other forms of speech regulation are increasingly being abused to criminalise journalistic work.

2. Impacts on journalists, communities and environmental protection

Attacks against environmental journalists have consequences that extend beyond the individual journalists targeted. For journalists, the reprisals can result in physical and psychological harm, financial and legal burdens and self-censorship among others. These pressures can prevent journalists from pursuing investigations, accessing affected communities and reporting on environmental issues involving powerful political or economic interests.

The resulting information gaps have wider consequences. Environmental journalism plays a critical role in ensuring that credible environmental information reaches communities in a timely, accessible and comprehensible form. Journalists inform the public about environmental risks, bridge gaps between authorities and affected communities, amplify local perspectives, expose environmental harm and failures in governance, and help counter misinformation and disinformation. When these journalists are attacked or prevented from reporting, these functions are undermined, limiting the public's ability to understand environmental risks and participate meaningfully in decisions affecting their health, livelihoods, land and natural resources.

Attacks against environmental journalists also undermine states' abilities to fulfill their regional and international commitments for example the African Union Agenda 2063 and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. These frameworks rely, in practice, on the availability, dissemination and use of timely and reliable environmental information.

3. Policies, legislation and other measures for the protection of environmental human rights defenders

- **Legal safeguards and accountability at national levels**

In response to the above highlighted risks, there is a need for stronger legal and institutional safeguards to protect environmental journalists and other environmental human rights defenders. Recently, several African countries have taken positive steps by invalidating legal provisions that had been used to restrict freedom of expression and journalism. In [Kenya](#), courts struck down provisions of the Computer Misuse and Cybercrimes Act concerning false news, cyber harassment and website blocking. In [Uganda](#), the Constitutional Court nullified several provisions of the Computer Misuse Act and criminal libel provisions. In [Malawi](#), the High Court declared criminal defamation unconstitutional.

These decisions demonstrate the importance of independent courts in reviewing and limiting laws that are incompatible with freedom of expression and media freedom and subsequently undermine public access to environmental and other information that is critical for the promotion of the right to a healthy and sustainable environment.

- **Regional mechanisms**

Regional mechanisms in Africa have also begun to recognise the relationship between media freedom, access to information, environmental rights and protection of public-interest actors.

In March 2026, the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights adopted [Resolution 657 on Access to Information and the Right to a Healthy Environment](#). This resolution recognises access to climate and environmental information as fundamental to environmental protection, sustainable development and meaningful public participation, while linking such access to the effective enjoyment of existing human rights, including the right to a healthy and sustainable environment. It also provides practical guidance to States on strengthening transparency and proactive disclosure of environmental information, and acknowledges the essential role of climate and environmental journalists in informing the public and promoting accountability. The resolution also extends expectations of transparency to the private sector, particularly businesses operating in high-impact sectors such as mining, energy, agribusiness and infrastructure, through an emphasis on environmental and human rights due diligence.

The African Commission also adopted [Resolution 667](#) in July 2026 on the need to conduct a study on Strategic Litigation Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) in Africa. The Resolution calls on states to investigate and address the misuse of litigation targeting journalists and human rights defenders among others. It also urges states to ensure that victims of SLAPPs particularly vulnerable and financially disadvantaged groups- have access to legal aid and support. The Commission also tasks its Special Rapporteurs on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information and on Human Rights Defenders with conducting a study on the scale and nature of SLAPPs in Africa and identifying effective responses.

Also in the pipeline is a [General Comment on the Right to Environment](#) that seeks to enhance support and protections for EHRDs.

These developments provide an important regional foundation for strengthening protections for journalists and other environmental defenders.

4. Recommendations

IPI recommends that States:

- Recognize the essential role of environmental journalists in environmental protection, accountability and the public's right to know.
- Prevent and protect against attacks on environmental journalists, including physical and online threats, harassment, surveillance and arbitrary detention, and ensure access to effective protection mechanisms.
- End impunity by promptly, independently and effectively investigating attacks and threats, including those involving state and private actors.
- Prevent SLAPPs and legal harassment through comprehensive anti-SLAPP legislation, early dismissal mechanisms and effective remedies.
- Guarantee access to environmental information, including proactive disclosure before, during and after environmental emergencies, access to affected sites, and protection of confidential journalistic sources.
- Decriminalize defamation and ensure civil remedies are proportionate and cannot be used to suppress public-interest environmental reporting.
- End the misuse of restrictive legislation, including cybercrime, national security, public-order and false-information laws, to silence legitimate environmental journalism.

Conclusion

As noted in this submission, journalists reporting on climate and environmental issues face serious and recurring risks across Africa. These include physical attacks, threats, arrest and detention, equipment confiscation, restrictive legislation and judicial harassment. These attacks suppress public-interest reporting, limit access to environmental information, discourage public participation and weaken accountability for environmental harm.

A safe and enabling environment for environmental human rights defenders therefore requires meaningful protection for journalists who document and report on environmental issues. Ensuring that journalists can work safely and independently is an essential component of ensuring that communities have access to the environmental information they need to participate in environmental decision-making and to hold states and private actors accountable.

IPI encourages the Special Rapporteur to recognise the protection of environmental journalists and access to environmental information as integral to the broader protection of environmental human rights defenders and to the effective realisation of the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment.

About IPI

The International Press Institute (IPI) is a 75-year-old global network of editors, media executives and leading journalists who share a common dedication to quality, independent

journalism. Together, we promote the conditions that allow journalism to fulfil its public function, the most important of which is the media's ability to operate free from interference and without fear of retaliation. Our mission is to defend media freedom and the free flow of news wherever they are threatened.