FACTSHEET
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"Todos los derechos, todas las personas" ('All Rights, All People'), mural by Mexican artist Eva Bracamontes for the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, photo (detail): UN Mexico.

Deutsche Menschenrechtskoordination Mexiko

Coordinación Alemana por los Derechos Humanos en México

AT RISK: HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS IN MEXICO

In a country with one of the highest rates of violence worldwide, Mexico's human rights defenders do crucial work: They drive forward and continuously fight for the search for over 130,000 disappeared persons, they expose links between politics and organized crime, and they bring to light serious human rights violations that might otherwise never be known by the general public.

Nevertheless, those who openly name human rights abuses and demand justice often become targets of the very perpetrators and responsible parties who seek to obstruct investigations and escape legal accountability. Since 2016, according to the civil society network *Espacio OSC*, at least 177 human rights defenders in Mexico have allegedly been murdered in connection with their work, and 37 have been victims of enforced disappearances. These grave violent crimes are often preceded by death threats, physical attacks, defamation, or attempts to criminalize them. A persistent problem is that human rights defenders, facing threats and violence, are forced to leave their homes and become victims of forced displacement.

Land and resource conflicts fuel violence

Currently, Mexico is among the most dangerous countries in the world for human rights defenders. The threat is nationwide, with human rights defenders in rural areas, members of Indigenous communities, activists fighting for the rights of sexual minorities, and women particularly at risk. A significant portion of the violence against defenders is linked to conflicts over land, resource extraction, and environmental protection: According to *Espacio OSC*, since January 2016, 104 of the 177 murdered defenders had been working to protect their lands, environment and livelihoods. These are often Indigenous community members or activists that defend communal land ownership (*ejidos* and *tierras comunales*). In 2024 alone, the non-governmental organization *Centro Mexicano de Derecho Ambiental* (CEMDA) documented 25 murders of environmental defenders.

Violent attacks against environmental and land defenders frequently occur in connection with conflicts over illegal resource extraction, such as illegal logging or mining by criminal groups. Opponents of major government infrastructure pro-

> **"Everyone has the right,** *individually and in association with others, to promote and strive for the protection and fulfillment of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the national and international levels."*
>
> **Article 1 – UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders**

The German Coordination for Human Rights in Mexico is a network formed by: Amnesty International Germany, Brot für die Welt, CAREA e.V., Episcopal Action Adveniat, Franziskaner Helfen, Initiative Menschenrechte Mexiko Köln, Initiative Mexiko (INIMEX), jesuiten-*weltweit*, Kindermissionswerk ‚Die Sternsinger' e.V. (Pontifical Missionary Childhood of Germany), Mexico via Berlin e.V., Mexiko-Initiative Köln-Bonn, Misereor, Ökumenisches Büro für Frieden und Gerechtigkeit e.V., Pacta Servanda e.V., Partner Südmexikos e.V., pax christi Kommission Solidarität Eine Welt, Promovio e.V., Welthaus Bielefeld e.V., Zapapres e.V.

jects and activists who criticize environmentally damaging practices conducted by private companies are also frequently targeted in these attacks. These defenders are also often victims of unlawful prosecutions by authorities aimed at discrediting, intimidating, and obstructing their work. This includes arbitrary arrests and detentions, which can lead to further human rights violations such as abuse and torture. Confessions made under torture have resulted in defenders spending years unjustly imprisoned. Their cases are delayed, and they are denied access to their files and to legal counsel.

The right to defend rights

How can human rights defenders be better protected from these attacks? The 1998 UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders reaffirms everyone's right to defend human rights and obliges states to provide special protection for these activists. After the launch of the "war on drugs" by the then President Felipe Calderón in 2006, violence in Mexico has increased sharply. The growing violence against defenders and journalists has led to increasing pressure from civil society and the international community on the government to implement protective measures.

In 2012, Mexico's government passed the "Law for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders and Journalists." Since then, threatened defenders can apply for inclusion in a Protection Mechanism, which can order or provide protective measures such as technical alarms, communication devices, personal protective equipment, increased police patrols, bodyguards, or relocation to safer areas.

A key part of the Protection Mechanism is the Consejo Consultivo, an advisory board made up of civil society representatives. For Mexico's civil society, the enactment of the law is considered a major achievement. However, the effectiveness of such a progressive law depends on the government's willingness to implement it in coordination with the federal and local authorities, as well as to allocate sufficient resources. For example, a 2019 report by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights praised the law, although it also criticized a "lack of financial and material resources". As a result of the 2019 report, a working group comprising government officials, UN representatives, and NGOs was established in 2022 to discuss strengthening the mechanism. Members of civil society expressed their desire to continue this dialogue with Sheinbaum's 2024 administration.

As of September 2025, according to official figures, 2,000 human rights defenders and journalists were protected under the mechanism. However, protective measures do not always prevent deadly attacks. According to the UN High Commissioner's Office in Mexico, since 2016, 27 people under protection have been murdered and three forcibly disappeared.

Moreover, not everyone who needs protection receives it: Civil society organizations criticize that rejection rates for applications have risen sharply in recent years, forcing activists to file appeals for admission. Another significant challenge is determining who qualifies as a human rights defender under the law—an issue that particularly affects family members searching for disappeared loved ones, who themselves face considerable risks. Since 2019, at least 17 family members in this situation have been murdered. Human rights or-

Father Marcelo Pérez Pérez — murdered on October 20, 2024

Father Marcelo leveraged his longstanding role as a priest *in the Chenalhó municipality, located in the state of Chiapas, to advocate for the rights of Indigenous peoples, farmworkers, and small-scale farmers. Guided by a deep sense of social justice and being from an Indigenous family and a Tsotsil speaker himself, he traveled to remote areas of the state of Chiapas to stand up for Indigenous communities facing oppression and displacement. He frequently led protest marches denouncing both organized crime violence and the corruption and impunity surrounding it. For his activism, he faced unlawful prosecution and was repeatedly threatened and attacked. In 2015, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights ordered Mexico to implement precautionary protection measures for Father Marcelo. After numerous threats, the diocese eventually relocated him to San Cristóbal de Las Casas. On October 20, 2024, Father Marcelo was shot dead there after a morning mass in the Cuxtitali neighborhood. The shooter was convicted in August 2025 following his confession in a shortened trial. Civil society in Chiapas insists that investigations continue until those who ordered the murder are also identified and held accountable.*

Father Marcelo Pérez, murdered on 20 October 2024, photo: UNHCHR Mexico.

Relatives searching for the disappeared face high risks and must be guaranteed access to protection.
Photo: Movimiento por Nuestros Desaparecidos en México / CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

ganizations emphasize that relatives of victims are themselves human rights defenders and must be guaranteed access to protection mechanisms.

Impunity encourages attacks

The Protection Mechanism is designed to address acute threats to defenders' lives and can be lifesaving in such situations. However, the mechanism in its current form does little to address the root causes of attacks.

Mexican civil society organizations emphasize that effective protection must start much earlier and include concrete prevention measures. A major problem is the high level of impunity for violent crimes against defenders. Perpetrators are rarely identified, prosecuted, or convicted. This leaves victims' families without justice and emboldens attackers to plan and carry out assaults with impunity.

Current state protection measures also fall short in adequately addressing the fact that many attacks originate from state officials themselves. A report by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights covering January 2019 to September 2023 revealed that around 43% of the attacks on defenders were allegedly carried out by state employees and officials.

Defamed and spied upon

Human rights defenders often receive little recognition from the government. On the contrary, those who publicly expose violations risk being discredited as political opponents or labeled as mouthpieces of foreign interests. There have been direct public smear campaigns against prominent human rights organizations, adding an extra layer of risk for defenders who are already in vulnerable situations.

A serious human rights violation is the secret surveillance of Mexican human rights organizations and investigative journalists' phones using the Pegasus spyware which was first uncovered in 2017. While most incidents occurred during the government of Peña Nieto (2012–2018), it emerged in 2023 that attacks on defenders' phones also took place during the López Obrador administration (2018–2024).

Towards a comprehensive protection of human rights defenders

Despite the progressive protection law, Mexico remains far from guaranteeing the "right to defend rights" as outlined in the UN declaration. More than twelve years after establishing the Protection Mechanism, violence against defenders has not yet declined. This demonstrates that reactive measures alone are insufficient. A genuine turnaround requires a comprehensive policy to end criminalization and defamation which includes prevention, fighting corruption and impunity within the authorities, and a fundamental shift in the political culture among officials towards defenders.

A program for initial necessary political steps could be guided by a 2021 ruling from the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, which condemned Mexico on September 3, 2021, for serious investigative failings in the case of human rights lawyer Digna Ochoa y Plácido, who was murdered in 2001. Authorities had initially dismissed the case as suicide. The court ordered Mexico to implement a total of eleven reparative measures, including strengthening the protection mechanism

and launching a state campaign recognizing defenders' work. Mexico must also establish binding investigation protocols for crimes against defenders. On the fourth anniversary of the court decision, Mexican civil society organizations reminded that Mexico has so far not sufficiently implemented a single one of these measures.

Given the context outlined above, the following recommendations are put forward by the German Coordination for Human Rights in Mexico:

To the German Federal Government:

- Raise the issue of attacks on human rights defenders and the impunity for these crimes with the Mexican government.
- Publicly recognize the work of Mexican defenders and provide support in cases of attacks, defamation, and criminalization.
- Implement EU guidelines on protecting defenders via the German Embassy in Mexico, including regular meetings with defenders, monitoring court cases, visiting imprisoned defenders, and issuing emergency visas.
- Ensure German companies and their supply chains in Mexico respect defenders' rights.

To the European Union:

- Systematically incorporate EU guidelines on defender protection into the Neighborhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI - Global Europe). Provide funding to strengthen federal and state protection mechanisms and support Mexican human rights organizations that support the defenders.
- Demand verifiable progress from Mexico in the implementation of preventive measures, fighting impunity, and protecting defenders.
- Publicly condemn attacks and smear campaigns against human rights defenders, visibly support those affected, and ensure that the EU Delegation and country embassies consistently monitor legal proceedings against criminalized human rights defenders.
- Develop, together with the Mexican civil society, a regularly reviewed joint EU protection strategy for human rights defenders that integrates dialogue, cooperation, and funding.

To the Mexican Government:

- Promote public recognition and awareness campaigns to showcase defenders' work and strengthen their safety.
- Deepen the dialogue with civil society organizations to strengthen the National Protection Mechanism by ensuring adequate funding, enhanced technical capacity, and an intersectional, gender-sensitive approach.
- Establish and enforce binding investigation protocols to ensure effective investigation into attacks on human rights defenders and to end impunity.

Commemoration on the anniversary of the murder of priest and human rights defender Marcelo Pérez in San Andrés Larráinzar, Chiapas, photo: Luis Enrique Aguilar / desinformémonos.

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