

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

DEFENDING THE AMAZON UNDER THREAT



Violence, Criminalization, and Inadequate Protection
for Defenders of Human Rights, Collective Rights,
and the Rights of Nature in the Colombian,
Ecuadorian, and Peruvian Amazon





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Implementation and Impact Report for Amazon Frontlines' Defending Defenders Program

ANALYSIS PERIOD: JULY 2024–MAY 2026

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Geographic scope: The ancestral territories of Indigenous peoples and nations across the borders of Ecuador, Colombia, and Peru.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Overview: The Defending Defenders Program

The Amazon region is facing a structural crisis that threatens both global biodiversity and the fundamental rights of those who live in and protect their territories. In the three countries covered by the report—Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru—defending human, territorial, and environmental rights has become a high-risk activity.

These are not isolated incidents. The crisis stems from a combination of illicit economies, extractive expansion, weak state presence, and an alarming erosion of civic space. In this environment, attacks are used to undermine community governance, fracture the social fabric, and neutralize resistance to powerful economic and criminal interests.



The Community Guards (Tayak Runakuna) of the Kichwa Nation of Pastaza (PAKKIRU) are expected to have a deep understanding of their worldview (origins/history), territory, customary law, and the legality and legitimacy of the indigenous guard. Photo: David Díaz / Amazon Frontlines.

Given the critical gap between the urgency of the threats and the failure of government response mechanisms to address them effectively, Amazon Frontlines implemented a rapid-response mechanism between July 2024 and May 2026 that supported 39 urgent situations of risk.

The organization officially established the Defending Defenders Program in the final quarter of 2024. The documented experience confirms that effective protection cannot be limited to individual physical security measures, which are often technocratic, centralized, and disconnected from the realities of the Amazon. Instead, protection must

be understood as a comprehensive, collective process that brings together legal, psychosocial, spiritual, digital, and community dimensions, recognizing that defending rights is, at its core, a form of organizing.

- **Scope:** Between July 2024 and May 2026, the Program supported 39 urgent cases.
- **Results:** 95% of cases (37 of 39) reported continuing their advocacy work without interruption.

Program indicator	Documented result
Scope of support	39 grants and support initiatives between July 2024 and May 2026
Implementation status	33 measures fully implemented and 6 currently being implemented
Continuity of advocacy work	37 cases reported full continuity, and 2 reported partial continuity
Risk level	25 high-risk cases, 9 medium-risk cases, and 5 low-risk cases

Regional Context: The Amazon Under Dispute

The report identifies criminalization as the primary means of persecution, accounting for nearly 40% of documented cases. By using criminal and administrative systems against defenders, States subject them to financial and emotional strain, forcing them to divert resources, time, and energy away from defending their territories and toward their own legal survival. The impact extends beyond those directly targeted: these actions weaken social organizations, Indigenous Guards, self-governance structures, and territorial monitoring networks. When an Indigenous authority or environmental defender is threatened or prosecuted, social cohesion is also fractured, and fear is instilled to paralyze efforts to defend collective rights.

The Amazon regions of Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru are under unprecedented pressure. The report identifies three key drivers of the crisis that shape the risks defenders face:

1. **Illicit Economies and Extractivism:** The overlap of legal and illegal mining, oil extraction, logging, drug trafficking, and land grabbing.
2. **Democratic Backsliding:** The CIVICUS Monitor rates civic space in Colombia and Peru as “repressed” and in Ecuador as “obstructed.” At the same time, governments are increasingly relying on states of emergency and militarisation.
3. **Structural Violence:** Defending human rights in these territories is a high-risk undertaking due to systemic impunity and institutional weakness. The violence is not a series of isolated incidents, but a deliberate mechanism to dismantle territorial governance.



Country-by-Country Analysis: Distinct Patterns of Risk

A comparative analysis of the three countries reveals important differences in risk patterns.

Colombia: The Paradox of Formal Protection

Despite having one of the strongest legal frameworks—including the Constitutional Court’s declaration of an Unconstitutional State of Affairs—Colombia continues to face critical levels of violence.

- Violence is linked to non-state armed groups and illicit economies.
- The National Protection Unit (UNP) is overwhelmed, and its individual protection measures are insufficient to safeguard the social fabric and Indigenous governance.

Ecuador: Criminalization as a Strategy of Attrition

Criminal law and administrative controls are increasingly being used to restrict public participation and criminalize environmental activism. Criminalization is the predominant risk, accounting for 53.1% of reported cases.

- Criminal offenses such as “attack and resistance” and “financing of terrorism” are used to harass social leaders.
- Institutional Facade: Although the Ombudsman’s Office exists, it lacks a binding interagency system and an independent budget to prevent risks. Recent legislation (the Social Transparency Law) restricts organizational autonomy.

Peru: Protection Gap Amid Illicit Economies

Peru faces a particularly precarious situation in which illicit economies—including the expansion of drug trafficking, mining, and logging—are spreading into areas where the State is virtually absent, leaving defenders completely exposed to actors who operate with impunity.

- There is a disconnect between the Intersectoral Protection Mechanism and realities on the ground.
- The failure to ratify the Escazú Agreement reflects a lack of political will to address the crisis faced by environmental defenders, who are often treated as criminals or as victims of domestic violence rather than as rights defenders.

Cases documented in Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru reveal common challenges for defenders of human rights, collective rights, and the rights of nature. Across all three countries, the presence of mining, oil, and agribusiness projects, along with other natural resource-intensive activities, coincides with threats, criminalization, community fragmentation, and various forms of violence. However, these patterns vary by context, depending on the actors involved, the types of aggression, and the protection mechanisms available.

Regulatory Framework vs. Reality

The report highlights a pattern of “institutional facade” across all three countries: States put forward formal protocols and policies to meet international standards but lack the political will, funding, and capacity on the ground to provide meaningful protection.

- State Obligations: States have a duty to prevent, protect, and investigate.
- The Shortcoming: Current protection mechanisms are centralized, technocratic, and disconnected from the realities of the Amazon. They fail to account for the needs of women—including caregiving responsibilities, the *chakra* (an ancient polyculture and agroforestry farming system), and family—and of Indigenous peoples, including autonomy and self-governance.
- Legal Conclusion: Protection is a comprehensive State obligation, not solely the responsibility of specialized institutions; it requires the involvement of the entire public sector, including prosecutors’ offices, ministries, and local governments.

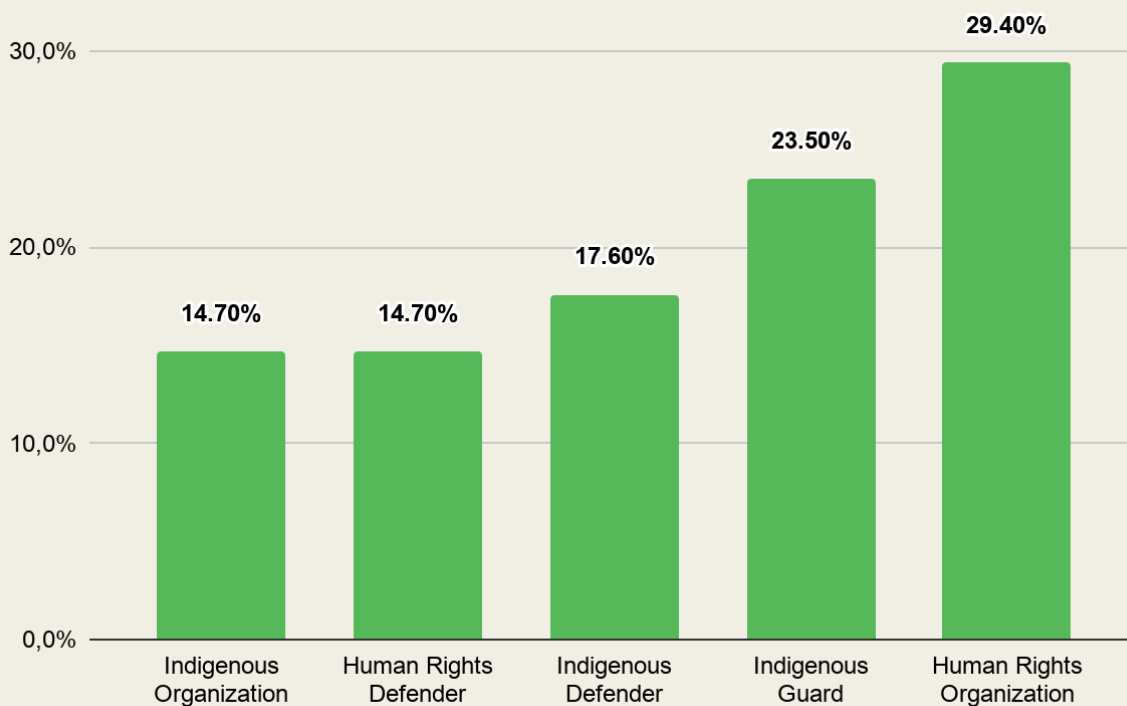
Profile of Defenders

The Program plays a strategic role in documenting the situation of those who defend the Amazon and gathering evidence about the risks they face. Each grant provides an opportunity to document affected individuals, the actors behind the risks they face, the types of threats involved, the protection measures implemented, and the outcomes achieved.



The first gathering of the Community Guards (Tayak Runakuna) of the Kichwa Nationality of Pastaza (PAKKIRU) was held in the community of Valle Hermoso, located in the Curaray River basin in the Amazon, in early June 2025. During the meeting, topics such as self-governance, worldview (origins/history), territory, indigenous law, and the legality and legitimacy of the indigenous guard were discussed. Photo: David Díaz / Amazon Frontlines.

Figure 1. Profiles of Defenders at Risk



Note: Percentages are based on 39 cases/grants; categories were coded by the Program team. Source: Amazon Frontlines' Defending Defenders Program, 2026.

Women defenders' participation is critical. They face specific risks at home and in the *Amazonian chakra*—spaces central to daily life and food sovereignty—requiring intersectional approaches to protection.

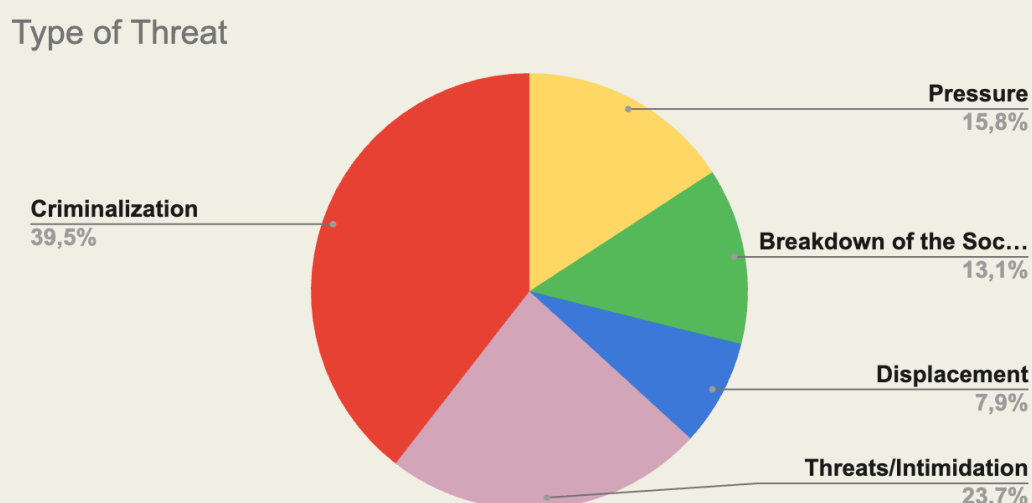


Women from the Siona Indigenous Guard Nation in Putumayo, Colombia. Photo: Nicolás Kingman / Alianza Ceibo

Types of Threats and Strategies

Defenders face recurring patterns of violence, ranging from direct attacks to structural mechanisms of control and restriction. The most common include threats, harassment, surveillance, intimidation, and other actions intended to instill fear and prevent defenders from continuing their work.

Figure 2. Types of Threats Faced by Defenders

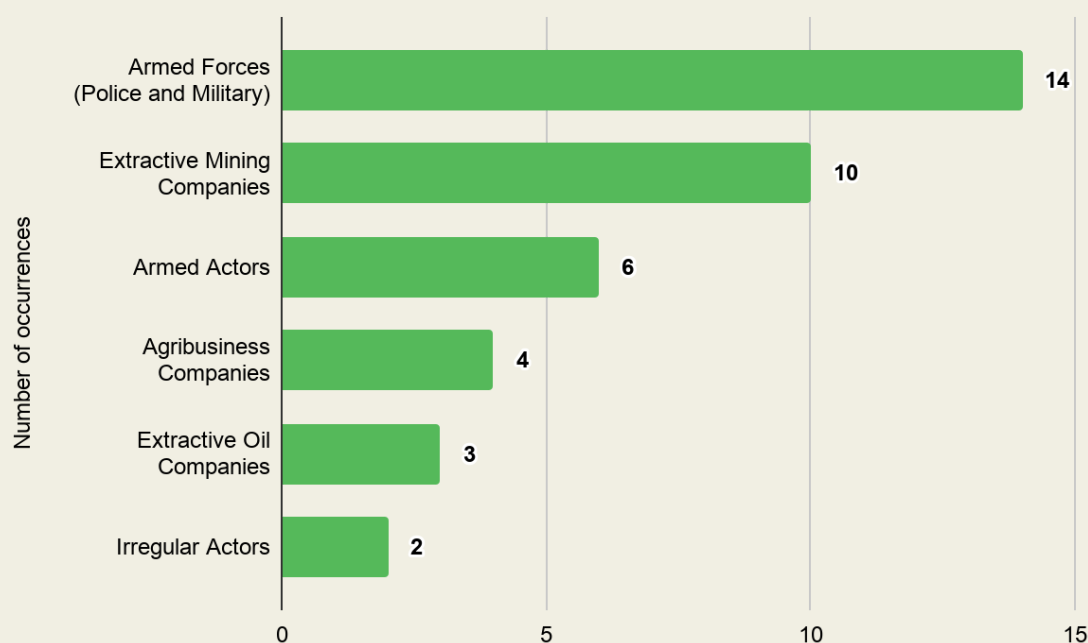


Source: Amazon Frontlines' Defending Defenders Program, 2026.

Methodological Note: This chart shows the types of threats documented, not the number of beneficiaries. Some defenders have faced multiple types of threats.

Extractive activities, particularly mining, hydrocarbons, and agribusiness expansion, repeatedly emerge as drivers of conflict and risk for individuals, communities, and organizations defending human rights, collective rights, and the rights of nature. In the cases analyzed, defenders have also reported that the actions and omissions of State actors contribute to the risks they face and, in some instances, reveal a bias toward corporate interests, further increasing their vulnerability.

Figure 3. Percentage of Actors Responsible for Threats Against Defenders

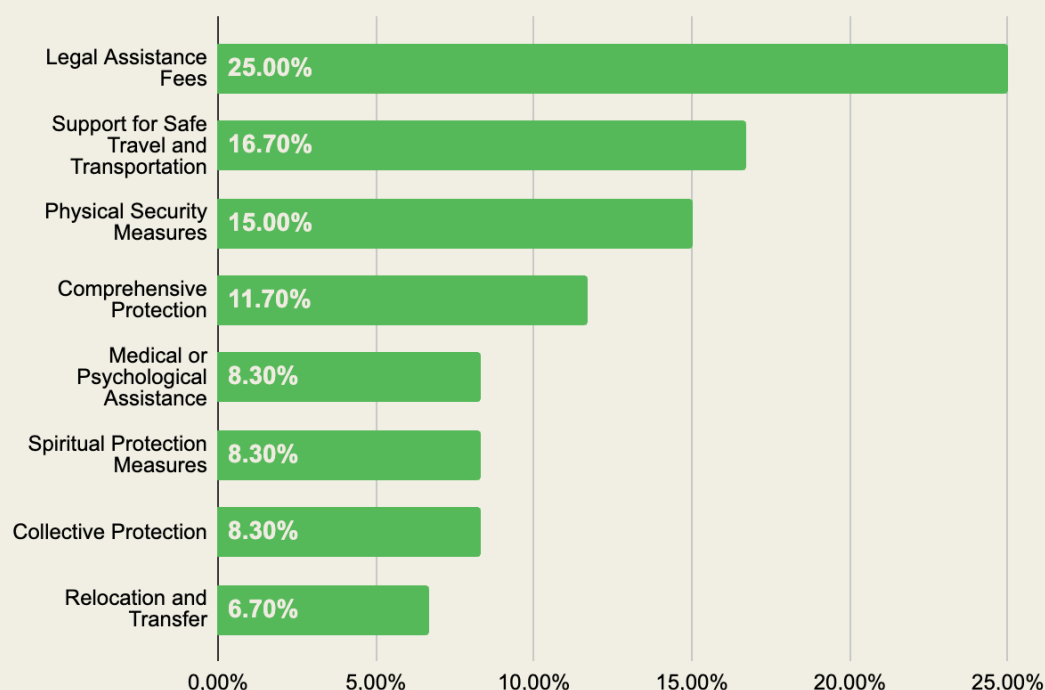


Source: Amazon Frontlines' Defending Defenders Program, 2026.

The protection needs defenders identify show that the State response cannot be limited to security measures that address immediate threats. The cases analyzed demonstrate the need for comprehensive, preventive, and culturally appropriate approaches that recognize both the individual and collective dimensions of defending rights. The support required by individuals, communities, and organizations engaged in defending rights therefore encompasses a broad range of measures to strengthen their security, ensure the continuity of their organizing efforts, and protect their territories and rights.

Figure 4. Actions Taken by Defenders to Mitigate Risks

Actions to Mitigate Risks



Source: Amazon Frontlines' Defending Defenders Program, 2026.

The experience of the Defending Defenders Program offers vital lessons for international cooperation and States:

- **Comprehensive Protection:** Legal assistance and specialized legal defense in criminalization proceedings (25% of resources) are the most sought-after form of support, confirming that criminalization is the primary weapon used against defenders.
- **Collective Protection:** More resources are invested in collective processes than in individual measures, demonstrating that protecting organizational structures is the most effective way to sustain efforts to defend rights.
- **Spiritual and Psychosocial Dimensions:** Protection measures must recognize emotional and cultural impacts. Support from elders and the strengthening of spirituality are essential to community resilience.

Scope and Impact of Amazon Frontlines' Defending Defenders Program

- **Reducing Immediate Risks:** The Program implemented physical security measures—including communication systems, alerts, and infrastructure—that reduced exposure to threats and prevented further escalation of attacks.
- **Continuity of Organizing Efforts:** Prevented disruptions to organizational and community activities and enabled advocacy work, territorial monitoring, and support activities to continue despite heightened risks.
- **Strengthening Legal Defense:** Facilitated access to specialized legal assistance and supported strategies to respond to criminalization, protecting defenders' freedom and reputation.
- **Sustaining Territorial Defense:** The Program enabled beneficiaries to continue participating in assemblies and decision-making spaces, while strengthening self-governance institutions and ancestral Indigenous authority.
- **Organizational Strengthening:** Improved organizations' alert, monitoring, and internal communication systems, creating a multiplier effect across communities and territories.
- **Comprehensive and Psychosocial Well-Being:** Broadened the approach to protection by incorporating mental health, emotional well-being, and the spiritual dimension—including ancestral medicine—all essential to resilience in Amazonian contexts.



In February 2020, the Waorani Resistance movement staged a demonstration outside Ecuador's Ministry of Non-Renewable Natural Resources, demanding respect for the historic landmark court ruling protecting their territories from the threat of oil extraction in Block 22. Photo: Jerónimo Zúñiga / Amazon Frontlines



Conclusions and Recommendations

Key Conclusions

1. Criminalization functions as a strategy of attrition. The aim is not always to secure a conviction, but rather to drain defenders' resources and time and drive them away from their territories.
2. Institutional facade perpetuates the lack of protection. Governments adopt protocols to formally comply with international standards, but these lack adequate funding, territorial reach, and meaningful response capacity.
3. Protection means sustaining collective resistance. Protecting an individual in a fractured territory is impossible: physical security is inseparable from territorial governance.

Recommendations

1. Decentralize Protection: Create rapid-response mechanisms that operate from within the territories rather than from national capitals.
2. Adopt a Collective Protection Approach: Fund and strengthen Indigenous Guards, community assemblies, and early warning networks.
3. Incorporate Gender and Generational Approaches: Recognize that women and young defenders face distinct risks that require tailored care and support measures.
4. Strengthen Legal Assistance: Prioritize legal support as the first line of defense against the misuse of criminal law.
5. International Accountability: Ensure that protection protocols are implemented under the oversight of civil society organizations, rather than allowing States to assess their own performance without external scrutiny.

The report "[Defending the Amazon Under Threat: Violence, Criminalization, and Inadequate Protection for Defenders of Human Rights, Collective Rights, and the Rights of Nature in the Colombian, Ecuadorian, and Peruvian Amazon](#)" reaffirms that defending the Amazon is essential to environmental democracy and global climate justice. Protecting those who do this work requires a profound shift in public policy toward preventive models that strengthen collective capacities for resistance.

The evidence gathered shows that, in the face of a State that is often absent or even hostile, the resilience of Amazonian peoples depends on their own organizational capacity. Protecting defenders therefore inevitably means also protecting Indigenous governance structures, the social fabric of their communities, and the territories that make defending life possible.

Those who protect dignity, nature, and rights should not have to do so alone, as their safety is a non-negotiable condition for preserving humanity's natural heritage.