

# The 3rd ASIA PACIFIC ENVIRONMENTAL HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS FORUM

## Strengthening Protection through Data Collection

CONVENED BY:

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH:

SUPPORTED BY:



20<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> September 2023 EHRDs Forum

22<sup>nd</sup> September 2023 Workshop on Procedural Environmental Rights

### Background

Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs) are individuals and groups who, in their personal or professional capacity and in a peaceful manner, strive to protect and promote human rights relating to the environment, including water, air, land, flora and fauna<sup>1</sup>. It is globally recognized that EHRDs play a vital role in protecting the environment and standing up for communities and individuals who are disproportionately impacted by environmental harm.<sup>2</sup> EHRDs are critical partners for addressing the triple planetary crisis of biodiversity loss, pollution and climate change and realizing the universally recognized right to a healthy environment.<sup>3</sup>

While there is increasing global momentum acknowledging the link between human rights and environment, including in the outcomes of the global biodiversity (COP15 of the CBD) and climate (COP27 of the UNFCCC) conferences, there remain significant challenges for EHRDs regionally and nationally, both in the recognition of their legitimate and vital role and in providing an enabling environment for their essential work. In 2022 democracy, rule of law and civic space declined across a majority of countries for the fifth year in a row.<sup>4</sup> On average, three people were killed every week while trying to protect their right to land and the environment.<sup>5</sup> According to the violations reported to Front Line Defenders in 2022, land, Indigenous Peoples' and environmental rights defenders were the most targeted groups, with arrest and detention, and legal action recorded as the most prominent forms of violations.<sup>6</sup> While comprehensive data of the attacks against EHRDs in Asia-Pacific is limited, Forum Asia documented 1,217 violations committed

<sup>1</sup> United Nations Environmental Programme (2023). *Who are Environmental Defenders?* Available at: <https://www.unep.org/explore-topics/environmental-rights-and-governance/what-we-do/advancing-environmental-rights/who>. (Accessed 15 May 2023). This terminology was proposed by the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders in his 2016 report to UN General Assembly A/71/281.

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Environmental Programme (2022). *Protecting the frontline: Good practices for supporting environmental human rights defenders*. Available at: <https://www.genevaenvironmentnetwork.org/events/hrc51-side-event-good-practices-to-support-environmental-human-rights-defenders-across-the-world/>. (Accessed 15 May 2023).

<sup>3</sup> UN General Assembly Resolution on the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment (A/RES/76/300).

<sup>4</sup> World Justice Project (2022). *Rule of Law Index*. Available at: <https://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index/>. (Accessed 15 July 2023).

<sup>5</sup> Global Witness (2023). *Decade of defiance*. Available at: <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/environmental-activists/decade-defiance/>. (Accessed 15 May 2023).

<sup>6</sup> Front Line Defenders (2023). *Global Analysis 2022*. Available at: [https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/sites/default/files/1535\\_fld\\_ga23\\_web.pdf](https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/sites/default/files/1535_fld_ga23_web.pdf). (Accessed 15 May 2023).

against HRDs in 21 monitored Asian countries from 1 January 2021 to 30 June 2022 and recorded 112 violations against EHRDs in the South-East Asia subregion.<sup>7</sup>

Recognizing the risks faced by EHRDs and the importance of supporting them, the 1<sup>st</sup> Asia Pacific Environmental Human Rights Defenders Forum was organized in November 2021, followed by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Asia Pacific Environmental Human Rights Defenders Forum in October 2022. These meetings successfully connected hundreds of EHRDs from the region and facilitated peer-to-peer learning on a variety of topics such as advocacy and security.

2023 marks the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) – one of the most important documents adopted by the United Nations. The triple planetary crisis, coupled with unsustainable development, threatens the ability of present and future generations to enjoy these rights first enshrined in the UDHR almost 75 years ago. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Asia Pacific EHRDs Forum will reflect on the important role of EHRDs in advancing the right to a healthy environment, provide a dedicated space for EHRDs to come together and safely discuss and learn from each other's experiences and successes, and build awareness and capacity. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Asia Pacific EHRDs Forum will also focus on capacity building sessions that will equip EHRDs with additional knowledge and skills.

This year's Forum will specifically focus on data collection for the purpose of monitoring the situation of EHRDs in the region. Attacks against Human Rights Defenders, including EHRDs, are significantly under-reported, with the ALLIED Data Working Group having found that between 2015-2019, 95% of countries that submitted Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) did not report on HRDs at all.<sup>8</sup> Where information is reported, it often fails to reflect the full extent of the issue. Likewise, while much of the focus remains on lethal attacks, non-lethal attacks are also of significant prevalence and concern, often preceding killings.

In addition, several gaps persist in terms of data collection and the reporting of attacks against environmental human rights defenders in Asia and the Pacific. While recognizing that disaggregated data is increasingly available, the data often fails to reflect the intersectionality of discrimination and abuse faced by EHRDs. EHRDs often identify as belonging to several groups in marginalized and vulnerable situations, including women, Indigenous Peoples, and persons with disabilities, though this information is not reflected in the data.

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<sup>7</sup> FORUM-ASIA and KontraS (2022). *Joint analysis on the situation of defenders in Asia*. Available at: <https://forum-asia.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/EN-Joint-analysis-final-red-compressed.pdf>. (Accessed 15 July 2023).

<sup>8</sup> [a\\_crucial\\_gap\\_low\\_res.pdf \(d3o3cb4w253x5q.cloudfront.net\)](#), [2022\\_4\\_the\\_hidden\\_iceberg.pdf \(d3o3cb4w253x5q.cloudfront.net\)](#)

Finally, both traditional and social media can play a crucial role in bringing attention to the work of EHRDs as well as the challenges they face when protecting the environment. The media can also empower people to take action to promote human and environmental rights. However, the increasing number of media stakeholders and platforms, coupled with shrinking civic space, can make the modern media landscape difficult to navigate. Recognizing this, the Forum will include a session on media engagement to provide EHRDs with knowledge on how to safely, effectively and innovatively engage with media in their advocacy.

### Objectives of the Forum

The objectives of the Asia Pacific EHRD Forum are:

- To serve as a safe space for EHRDs to discuss ongoing challenges and regional trends in the promotion, protection and realization of environmental rights.
- To provide a platform for peer learning amongst EHRDs across Asia Pacific.
- To provide access to information on good practices, success stories and information on addressing violations of environmental rights.
- To encourage understanding amongst EHRDs of the benefits of data collection for advocacy.
- To build capacity on data collection on the situation of EHRDs in Asia and the Pacific by exploring existing opportunities, barriers, risks and interrogating the processes behind data collection in Asia and the Pacific.
- To provide networking spaces for EHRDs to strengthen their networks across sub-regions.
- To learn and understand how EHRDs can safely and effectively engage with the media.

### Format

The 3<sup>rd</sup> Asia-Pacific Environmental Human Rights Defenders Forum will be held *in-person* at the UN Conference Centre (UNCC) in Bangkok, Thailand.

### Language

The 3<sup>rd</sup> Asia-Pacific Environmental Human Rights Defenders Forum will be conducted in English, with opportunities for translation to other languages subject to available funding.

### Targeted audience

The target audience is EHRDs and those who support the work of EHRDs from Asia and the Pacific, with 150 to 200 participants. Limited sponsorship may be available for in-person participation.

The event aims to be gender balanced and inclusive, seeking the involvement of defenders who represent marginalized groups including Indigenous Peoples, LGBTI people, women, and youth.

Criteria for participation include:

- EHRDs: individuals who, in a peaceful manner, strive to protect and promote human rights relating to the environment, including water, air, land, forest, flora and fauna.
- Individuals who directly support the work of EHRDs through technical, legal or other assistance.
- English will be the working language of the Forum. The ability of participants to communicate in English is therefore desirable. Representative participation for those from marginalized groups, Indigenous Peoples, women and youth will be taken into consideration.
- Gender and geographical diversity will be taken into consideration.
- Priority will be given to creating a space of dialogue for the direct participation of environmental defenders in Asia and the Pacific.

### **Registration and Participation**

An expression of interest form has been created using a secure link.

Following an expression of interest, participation in the Forum will be subject to an approval and registration process to ensure the safety and security of EHRDs. Please note that while we will try to accommodate individuals and organizations that support environmental defenders, priority will be given to the direct participation of environmental defenders from Asia and the Pacific

### **Organisers and Partners**

The 3<sup>rd</sup> Asia Pacific Environmental Human Rights Defenders will be conducted by the UN Environment Programme, UN Human Rights, and UN ESCAP, together with the Asia Pacific Network of Environmental Defenders, Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact, EarthRights International, Asia Research Institute for Environmental Law, Diplomacy Training Programme, Global Witness Indigenous Peoples Rights International, Youth Empowerment in Climate Action Platform and World Wide Fund for Nature.