

# PROTECTING TERRITORIES, A RISK TO LIFE

VIOLENCE AGAINST INDIGENOUS  
PEOPLES IN COLOMBIA (2023–2024)

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

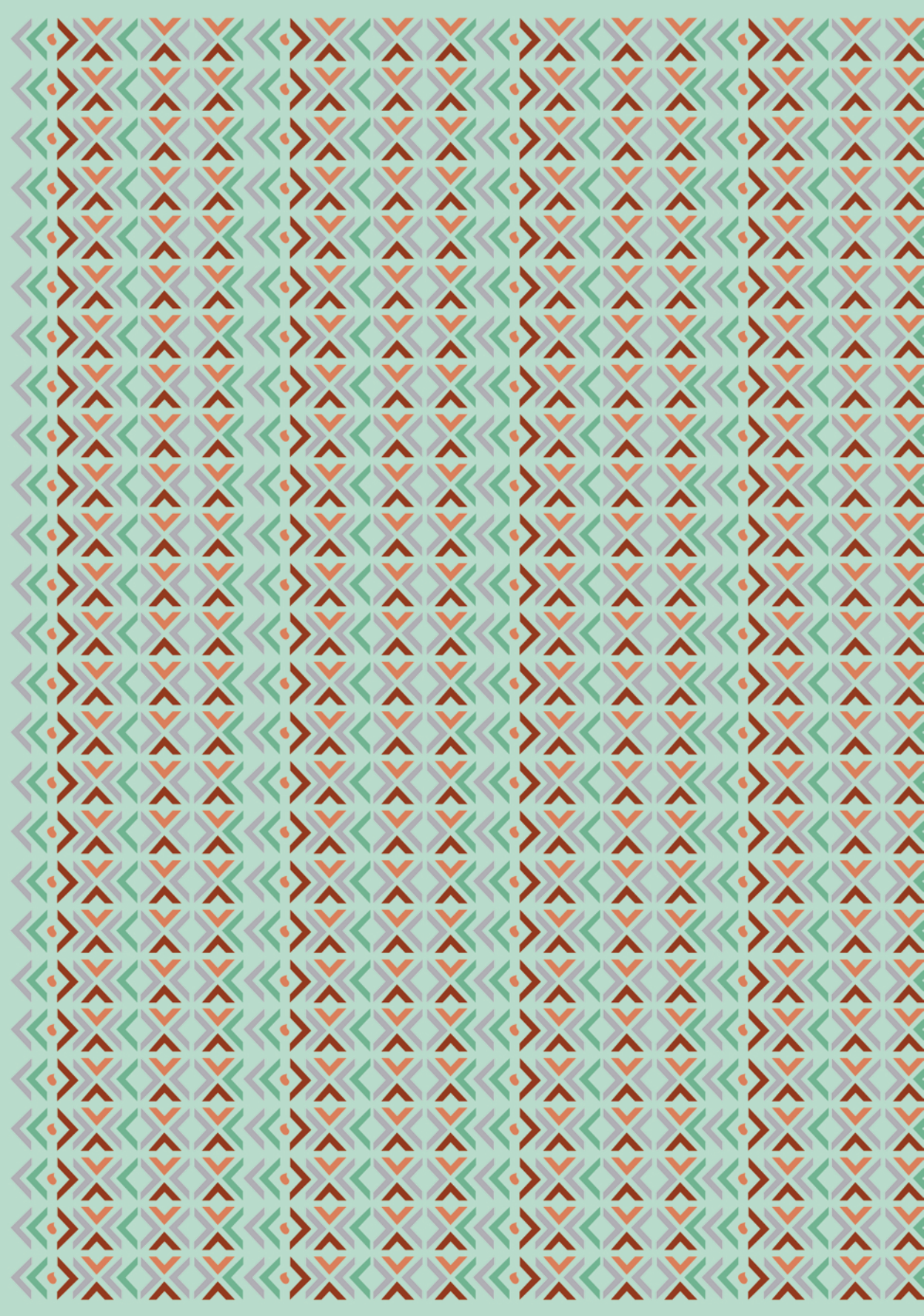


**CNTI**  
Comisión Nacional de Territorios Indígenas  
Pueblos y Organizaciones Indígenas



**OBSERVATORIO**  
de Derechos Territoriales  
de los Pueblos Indígenas







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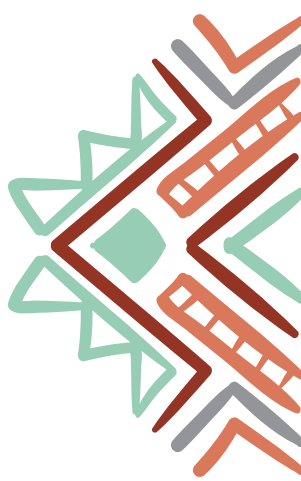








## INDIGENOUS DELEGATES-CNTI



|                                                                    |                                 |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Tayrona Indigenous Confederation (CIT)                             | José Vicente Villafañe Chaparro |
| Organization of Indigenous Peoples of the Colombian Amazon (OPIAC) | Carlos Alberto Gaitán           |
| National Indigenous Organization of Colombia (ONIC)                | Arlenys Alvarado Epieyu         |
| Northern Macro Region                                              | Juan Francisco Campos Chima     |
| Central Eastern Macro Region                                       | José Ely Dora Gómez             |
| Western Macro Region                                               | Jaiber Alejandro Sánchez Cruz   |
| Orinoquía Macro Region                                             | Pedro Cortés Sosa               |
| Amazon Macro Region                                                | Dani Fernando Teteve            |
| Former Indigenous Constituent Assembly Member                      | Alfonso Peña Chepe              |
| Former Indigenous Constituent Assembly Member                      | Francisco Rojas Birry           |
| Senator of the Republic                                            | Aida Marina Quilcue Vivas       |
| Senator of the Republic                                            | Julio Cesar Estrada             |
| Indigenous Authorities of Colombia for Pacha Mama (AICO)           | Jairo Alberto Guerrero Dávila   |
| Traditional Indigenous Authorities of Colombia – Senior Government | Miller Gómez Figueredo          |
| Regional Indigenous Council of Cauca (CRIC)                        | Miguel Yace                     |

### OBSERVATORY OF TERRITORIAL RIGHTS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES (ODTPI)

#### INDIGENOUS TECHNICAL SECRETARIAT NATIONAL COMMISSION FOR INDIGENOUS TERRITORIES (CNTI)

|                                                                             |                               |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
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| Coordinator of the Observatory for Territorial Rights of Indigenous Peoples | Juan Pablo Muñoz Onofre       |
| Coordinator of the Report and the Area Nature and Territory of ODTPI        | Laura Alejandra Parra         |

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## THE NATIONAL COMMISSION FOR INDIGENOUS TERRITORIES

The National Commission on Indigenous Territories (CNTI), created by Executive Order 1397 of 1996, is a framework for dialogue and agreement between indigenous peoples and the National Government on territorial rights. On the one hand, it is composed of the Indigenous Government, represented by delegates from the following organisations: the Tayrona Indigenous Confederation (CIT), the National Organisation of Indigenous Peoples of the Colombian Amazon (OPIAC) and the National Indigenous Organisation of Colombia (ONIC). On the other hand, it is composed of five representatives of indigenous peoples from the country's macro-regions: Northern, Central-Eastern, Western, Orinoquia and Amazonian regions. Incumbent indigenous representatives and former indigenous constituents are also included, as well as permanent guest organisations, including the Traditional Indigenous Authorities of Colombia (Gobierno Mayor), the Indigenous Authorities of Colombia for Pacha Mama (AICO) and the Regional Indigenous Council of Cauca (CRIC).

Representatives of national government entities that participate in its composition are: the Deputy Minister of Agriculture, the general directors of Ethnic Affairs and the Director of the Planning Office of the National Land Agency (ANT); a delegate from the Ministry of the Interior, the Director of Agricultural Development of the National Planning Department (DNP) and the general director of budget of the Ministry of Finance. In addition, representatives of the Land Restitution Unit, the Superintendency of Notaries and Registries, and the Geographical Institute Agustín Codazzi (IGAC), as well as other entities related to land entitlement for indigenous peoples, attend as permanent guests. Finally, oversight bodies such as the Ombudsman's Office, the Attorney General's Office, and the Comptroller General's Office also participate.

To foster the execution of the CNTI's functions, Executive Order 1397 provided for the creation of an Operational Secretariat (or Indigenous Technical Secretariat, STI-CNTI), made up of an indigenous delegate, a delegate from the Ministry of Agriculture, and a delegate from the other government entities that comprise it. It should be noted that, since its



creation, and in keeping with its autonomy, the national indigenous organizations represented in the CNTI have agreed that the CIT will be responsible for coordinating and promoting the STI-CNTI.

Among other issues, the CNTI addresses matters relating to the guarantee and exercise of indigenous people's territorial rights, including procedures for protecting ancestral territories and formally recognising indigenous territories (i.e. constitution, expansion, restructuring and reorganisation of reserves). The CNTI is mandated to monitor public policy and make recommendations and amendments to national legislation on agrarian matters pertaining to indigenous peoples.

## **OBSERVATORY FOR TERRITORIAL RIGHTS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES**

The Observatory for Territorial Rights of Indigenous Peoples (ODTPI) of the STI-CNTI arose in response to a historical claim by Indigenous Peoples and considering the absence of a baseline and accurate information for decision-making by the State. It was created to provide documentation and technical analysis in support of the political commitments of the Indigenous Government, to monitor the legal responsibilities of CNTI, and as a tool to support its policy advocacy.

The Observatory was created in the second half of 2017, in response to the political direction of the Indigenous delegates, after which a process of collective construction was undertaken. The Observatory has been working jointly with indigenous delegates in the phases of inception, goal setting, determination of work parameters, policy commitments, adjustment, feedback, evaluation, and dissemination of results within the framework of the self-governing bodies of the CNTI sessions.

Given that it is a technical tool, part of the work has focused on generating spatial, quantitative and qualitative data in order to produce context analyses, diagnoses and analytical documents. The aim is to identify progress, setbacks, risks and problems related to safeguarding and exercising the territorial rights of indigenous peoples.

The ODTPI seeks to reinforce the production of relevant inputs to support decision-making. It also focuses on developing proposals for public policy formulation within the framework of the CNTI's political work and on providing inputs for the analysis of the various issues related to the territorial rights of indigenous peoples. Its function prioritizes a rights-based and cultural approach based on the worldviews, belief systems, and traditional knowledge of indigenous peoples.





## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The defense of life and territory by indigenous peoples has become one of the most high-risk activities in Colombia, and today it can be considered one of the most dangerous pursuits worldwide. According to Global Witness, for three consecutive years Colombia has been ranked as the most murderous country for those who defend nature and territory. Between 2012 and 2024, 2,253 rights defenders were assassinated, including 789 indigenous peoples, or 36% of total victims. Indigenous peoples are the hardest hit by this violence, which seeks to silence our voices and dispossess us of our territories. In Colombia, defending our land means paying with our lives.



...Between 2012 and 2024, 2,253 rights defenders were assassinated, including 789 indigenous peoples, or 36% of the total victims...

During 2023 and 2024, the safety and security of Indigenous Peoples in Colombia deteriorated significantly. Communities faced an escalation of systematic violence associated with the intensification of the armed conflict and the reconfiguration of alliances between illegal armed actors and local economic powers vying for territorial control. These dynamics added to the legal and material insecurity of indigenous territories, which historically has enabled dispossession and has increased the risks for those who defend life and territory.





...The cases show a progressive pattern of violence, in which multiple acts of violence precede murders, serving as mechanisms of pressure and territorial control to weaken the resistance of the communities...

Between 2023 and 2024, the Information System on Sociopolitical Violence against Indigenous Peoples (SIVOSPI) of the Observatory for Territorial Rights for Indigenous Peoples (ODTPI) of the CNTI recorded 282 attacks on 2,372 indigenous rights defenders.<sup>1</sup> Of these, 186 involved criminal acts resulting in 218 fatalities, while 96 targeted 2,154 individuals through threats, kidnappings, forced displacement and the recruitment of children and adolescents. It must be noted that SIVOSPI has been recording the murders of rights defenders since 2016.

The cases show a progressive pattern in which various types of violence precede the murders, operating as mechanisms of pressure and territorial control to weaken the resistance of communities.

According to SIVOSPI data, murder continues to be the most recurrent and brutal strategy used to silence indigenous defenders of life and territory. Between 2023 and 2024, 150 assassinations of indigenous leaders, community members, and authorities were recorded, reflecting the existence of systematic persecution against those who play an essential role in community unity and the defense of territories. Of the total number of victims, 81.3% (122) were men, 13.1% were women, and in 5.2% of cases, no information is available. It should be noted that this data is in addition to the 539 murders recorded between 2026 and 2022 by SIVOSPI.



**1** SIVOSPI was created by the ODTPI, part of the CNTI, to systematically and rigorously record and analyze incidents of sociopolitical violence against Indigenous Peoples following the signing of the Final Peace Agreement, with the aim of monitoring, alerting Indigenous organizations, and highlighting the lack of protective measures by the competent state entities responsible for guaranteeing the human and territorial rights of Indigenous Peoples.



Defending the territory means resisting a model that seeks to exterminate us. The defense of life and territory stems from the spiritual, cultural, and political ties that bind us to Mother Earth, rooted in our systems of life, knowledge, and sovereignty. For us indigenous peoples, territory is not a space delimited for the exploitation or conservation of so-called resources; it is a living being with memory, a fabric where we coexist with nature in relationships of reciprocity and balance.



PHOTOGRAPH: ODTPI ARCHIVE

The aggressions we face cannot be understood solely as material damage or individual deaths; they are comprehensive attacks that wound the vital network that sustains our spiritualities, identities, and forms of sovereignty. When a river is polluted, when a forest is destroyed, when a leader or spiritual authority is murdered, it is not just one person or one ecosystem that is affected; it is the very life of the community that is struck, and the balance that guarantees our survival is broken. Without territory, we are nothing, and when the territory is wounded, we too are wounded. Defending it means defending the lives of those who inhabit it today and all future generations.

Defense of life and territory for us is not limited to traditional activism or formal leadership; it stems from a collective commitment to life and is expressed in multiple forms of community service. Defending the territory means caring for our relationship with Mother Earth and all the beings that inhabit her, and it requires an ethic of respect, reciprocity, and coexistence. Resistance is integral—physical, political, intellectual, spiritual, and emotional—and it is built daily from the knowledge and practices that honor life. Indigenous defense cannot be understood as an isolated act, but rather as an ethical, political, and spiritual project rooted in the relationship with Mother Earth.



The research report presented here aims to highlight and denounce the structural violence faced by indigenous peoples between 2023 and 2024. It analyzes the attacks, political violence, and criminalization against First Nation people from an Indigenous perspective of human and territorial rights, in which territory is understood as a living being and in which violence, in addition to being sociopolitical concept, constitutes a comprehensive aggression that affects bodies, territories, and spirits.

Our approach goes beyond merely documenting cases. We aim to highlight the structural and cultural dimensions of violence, as well as the practices of care, healing and resistance that communities have historically relied on to survive. Understanding this approach is essential to recognising that indigenous security requires responses beyond the military, developed through dialogue with our knowledge systems and based on full autonomy and self-determination.

This report is based on the work accumulated by the CNTI's Observatory for Territorial Rights of Indigenous Peoples (ODTPI) and the Information System on Sociopolitical Violence against Indigenous Peoples (SIVOSPI), a human rights information and monitoring mechanism that was created in 2021 in response to a political and technical call of Indigenous Peoples. SIVOSPI collects information directly from the territories and indigenous organizations that make up the CNTI, which is supplemented by secondary sources, including media and interviews.

The analysis reflects limitations stemming from the context of risk, underreporting in monitoring systems, and the absence of official, unified information on risks, attacks, and protection measures aimed at indigenous peoples. It nevertheless manages to articulate a narrative that combines denunciation, memory, and proposals for peace, with the aim of raising awareness of indigenous territorial defense and positioning ancestral knowledge as the foundation of sovereignty and environmental justice.





# TERRITORIAL THREATS: AGGRESSION AND RISKS AGAINST INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AND TERRITORIES

## Who is being killed?

The systematic violence we face has been directed primarily against leaders, activists, and members of indigenous civil defense groups (Figure 1). These actors play fundamental roles in defending the territory, transmitting ancestral memory, and maintaining community cohesion. The attacks they suffer seek to dismantle the social fabric and weaken the capacity for collective response.

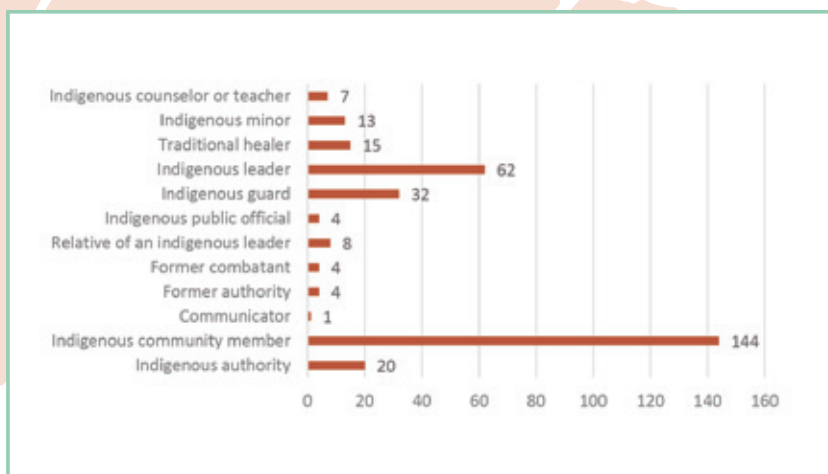
The murder of leaders not only represents the loss of human lives, but also the silencing of collective memories, struggles, and knowledge. Each indigenous leader who is murdered represents a deep fracture in the spiritual, political, and organizational structure of their community.

The formation of leaders is not a continuous process; leaders are born. We are not training many leaders. And when they kill an indigenous leader, they silence indigenous peoples, their struggles, their memory. Leaders have different perspectives: there are political leaders, our spokespersons are in different settings, but there are also spiritual leaders in different regions. So, by killing the voice of a leader, they are also silencing the memory of a community and, of course, knowledge is being lost (Niño, 2024).



...The murder of leaders not only represents the loss of human lives, but also the silencing of memories, struggles, and collective knowledge...

**Figure 1. Number of indigenous victims of attacks, by profile (2023-2024)**



ODTPI, 2025. Based on SIVOSPI from the ODTPI of the STI-CNTI, as of 02/28/2025.

## Violence against indigenous women

Analysis by victim's gender shows that men are the most frequently attacked (246 of the 314 people identified), due to the leadership roles and public exposure they often assume. However, the increase in attacks against indigenous women is a cause for concern; the number rose from 30 cases in 2023 to 35 in 2024.



PHOTOGRAPH: ODTP/ARCHIVE

Gender-based violence, which is often invisible, including sexual and psychological violence, to a greater extent affects women leaders, elders, and guardians of ancestral processes and knowledge. Such violence is used as a weapon of war by armed actors seeking to destroy the spirituality, culture, and dignity of indigenous women. It constitutes a direct threat to the cultural survival of indigenous peoples.

On the spiritual side, we had many women who were also sexually abused during the conflict, which also affected us greatly because for us, a woman who is training to become a Saga is sacred, since we are from the Sierra and we have wise women on the same level as the mamos. (Truth Commission, 2022)

**Figure 2. Attacks against indigenous peoples, their members, and authorities, broken down by gender (2023–2024)**

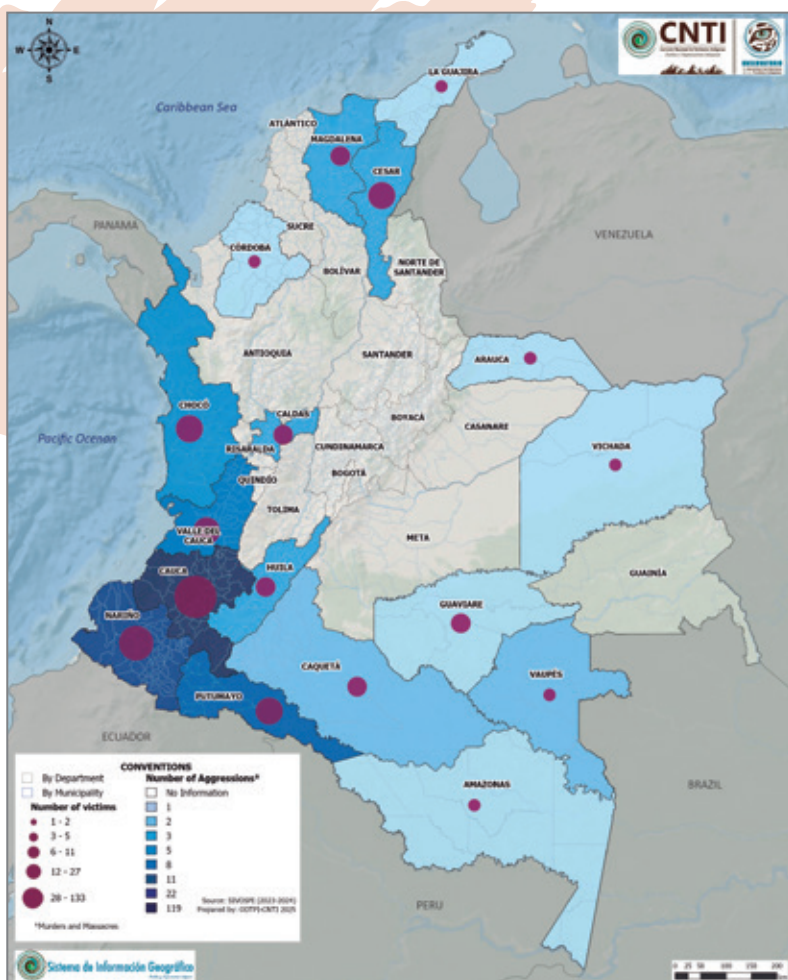


ODTPI, 2025. Based on SIVOSPI from the ODTP/ of the STI-CNTI, as of 02/28/2025.

## Territorial concentration of attacks

The departments of Cauca, Nariño, Putumayo, and Valle del Cauca have the highest levels of violence. In addition to having a significant indigenous presence, these territories have historically been coveted for their natural wealth and strategic location. For example, northern Cauca is a geostrategic corridor connecting the illicit economies of southeastern Colombia with export routes via the Pacific Ocean, which partly explains the persistence of the conflict and the presence of illegal armed actors in the region.

**Figure 3. Number of attacks and fatalities in Colombia 2023-2024**

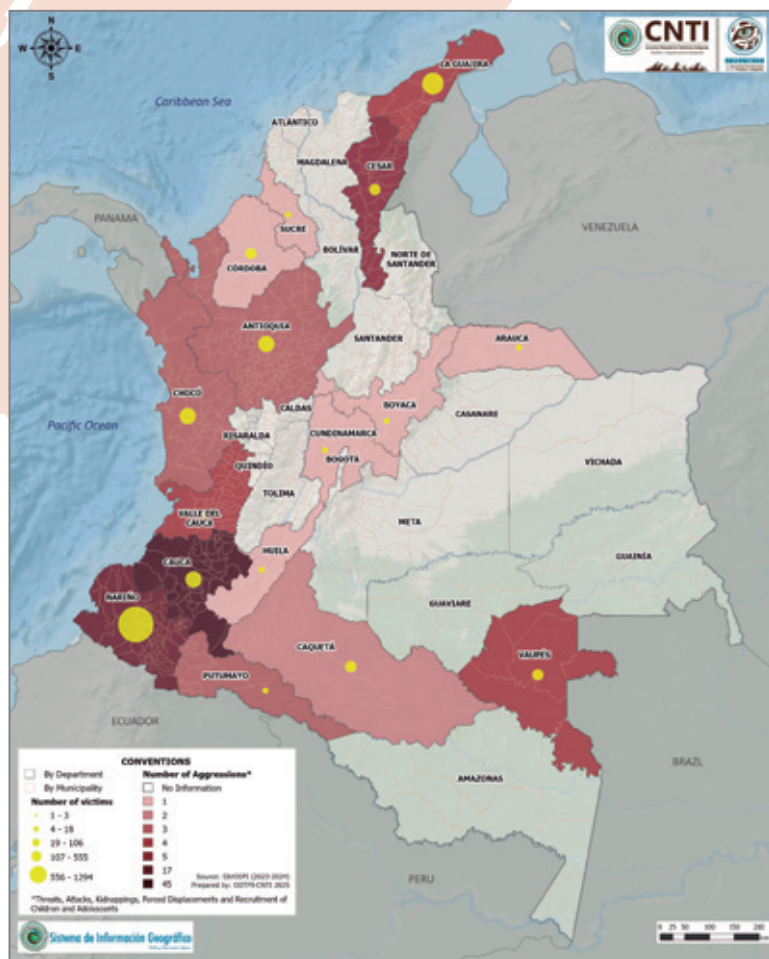


ODTPI. (2025). Based on SIVOSPI from the ODTPI of the STI-CNTI, as of 02/28/2025.

Map 1. Observatory for Territorial Rights of Indigenous Peoples.



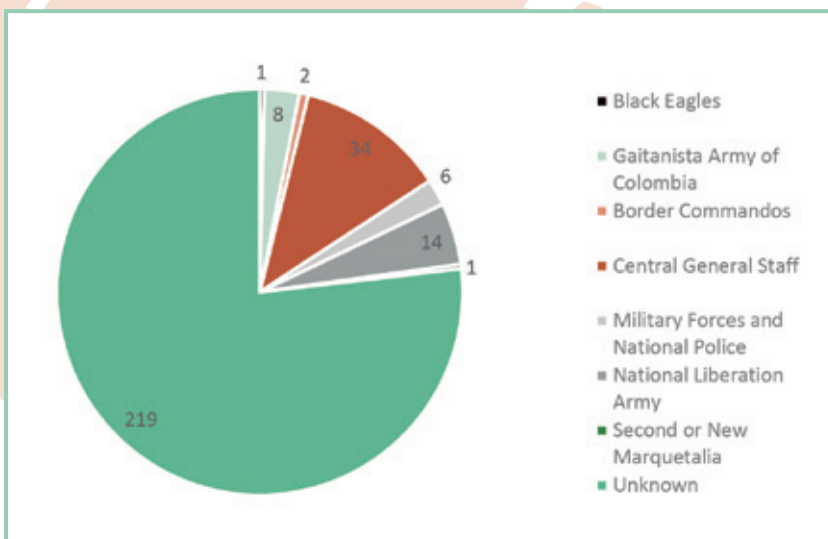
**Figure 4. Number of attacks and non-fatal victims in Colombia 2023-2024**



## Structural impunity

Impunity remains a structural challenge. Eighty percent of reported cases lack information on perpetrators and those responsible. In the few cases where the perpetrators are identified, they include the *Estado Mayor Central* (EMC), *el Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN) and, to a lesser degree State military and police forces. Lack of judicial clarification perpetuates the cycle of violence and revictimizes communities by denying them justice, reparation, and guarantees of non-recurrence.

**Figure 5. Possible perpetrators of attacks on  
rights defenders of life and territory, 2023-2024**



ODTPI, 2025. Based on SIVOSPI from the ODTPI of the STI-CNTI, as of 02/28/2025.

## Historical legacy and on-going violence

Attacks against Indigenous Peoples are not isolated incidents; they are part of a systematic strategy of territorial occupation and the dismantling of processes of autonomy and sovereignty. Understanding this requires a historical perspective: what we face today is the continuation of the dispossession, marginalization, and structural racism that have affected Indigenous Peoples for centuries.



...Understanding this [ongoing] violence requires a historical perspective: what we face today is the continuation of dispossession, marginalization, and structural racism that have affected Indigenous Peoples for centuries...



PHOTOGRAPH: ODTPI ARCHIVE



...Guaranteeing our protection is not only a legal and ethical duty of the Colombian State, but also an indispensable condition for peace, environmental justice, and the sustainability of life at the global level...

## Indigenous peoples as collective subjects of rights, actors of peace and environmental justice

Indigenous peoples are not merely victims. We are the collective subjects of rights, actors of peace, and defenders of life and our territories. Our struggles for cultural survival and the protection of nature constitute an invaluable contribution to the country and the planet. Guaranteeing our protection is not only a legal and ethical duty of the Colombian State, but also an indispensable condition for peace, environmental justice, and the sustainability of life at the global level.





## VIOLENCE AGAINST THE TERRITORY AND NATURE

For Indigenous Peoples, nature is made up of living beings with whom relationships of reciprocity, respect, and care are woven. Rivers, mountains, forests, and animals are considered relatives and guardians that sustain life in all its forms, guaranteeing spiritual, cultural, and physical balance. Damage to nature constitutes a direct threat to life and the balance of the territory, disrupting the natural and spiritual order that sustains the survival of communities.

Attacks are not collateral damage; they are direct forms of violence against nature. Every tree cut down, every river polluted, or every hill dynamited represents a loss of life, memory, and future. This is ecological and spiritual violence, which requires recognition, reparation, and guarantees of non-repetition.

Recognizing violence against the land and nature is an act of ecological and spiritual justice. It involves expanding the scope of rights and memories that must be restored and repaired. Protecting life cannot be limited to human beings; it must encompass nature and the relationships that sustain the fabric of the world.



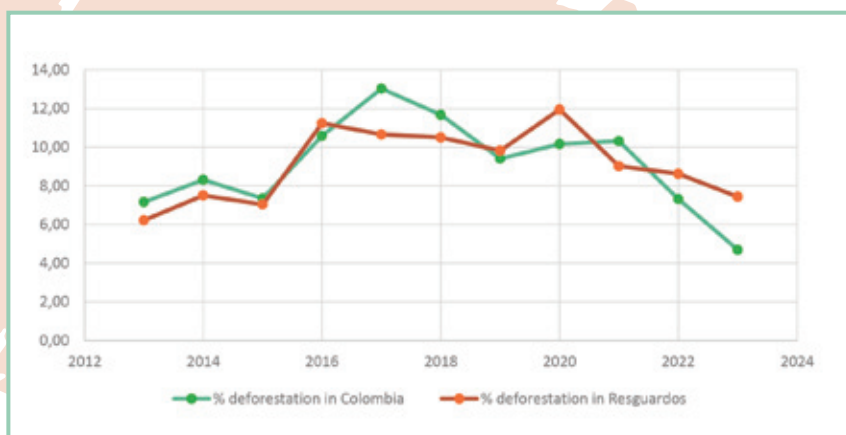


## Deforestation as a structural threat

In the last ten years, more than 162,000 hectares have been deforested in indigenous territories (9.66% of the total nationwide), with the Amazon being the most affected region. Although the proportion compared to the country may seem small, the loss is alarming given the ecological and cultural value of these territories, where the forest sustains the spiritual, food, and collective care practices of the communities who live there.

A comparative analysis between deforestation at the national level and that recorded in indigenous reserves shows that indigenous territories are comparable to national trends and in fact, in certain years, exceed national levels. In 2016 and 2020, forest loss in indigenous reserves was higher than the national average, revealing disproportionate pressure on these territories (Figure 6). Although a downward trend has been observed in recent years, the reduction in deforestation in reserves has been smaller than in the rest of the country, confirming their greater vulnerability.

**Figure 6. Percentage of deforestation in Colombia vs. indigenous reserves 2013-2023**



ODTPI. (2025). Based on IDEAM data 2013-2023.



...In the last ten years, more than 162,000 hectares have been deforested in indigenous territories (9.66% of the national total), with the Amazon being the most affected region...



PHOTOGRAPH: ODTPI ARCHIVE

The problem is not distributed evenly: as of March 2025, of the 914 reserves registered by the National Land Agency (ANT), 598 have been affected by deforestation, representing 65% of the total. Indigenous territories of the Colombian Amazon account for most of this loss, forming continuous corridors of deforestation within and around the reserves. The case of the Nükak community is shocking; more than 20,000 hectares of their territory have been ravaged by illicit crops, extensive cattle ranching, and land grabbing, which has fractured their traditional mobility, weakened their food security, and profoundly affected their spirituality.

## Hydrocarbons and disease in the territory

The exploration and exploitation of hydrocarbons is a critical aggression. For indigenous peoples, these activities constitute an invasion that wounds the core of the earth by extracting “its blood.” As of 2025, of the 914 reserves registered by the ANT, 206 (22.5%) overlap with oil blocks, and at least 207 hydrocarbon wells are located within 26 reserves.

The Trans-Andean Pipeline (*El Oleoducto Trasandino*, OTA), which crosses the territories of the Awá community, recorded more than 447 spills between 2014 and 2023, contaminating rivers, killing fish, and displacing the protective spirits of the territory. For the Awá community, this impact is not limited to environmental damage; it is the loss of sacred places and the severing of the spiritual bond with Katsa Su (Big House or territory).

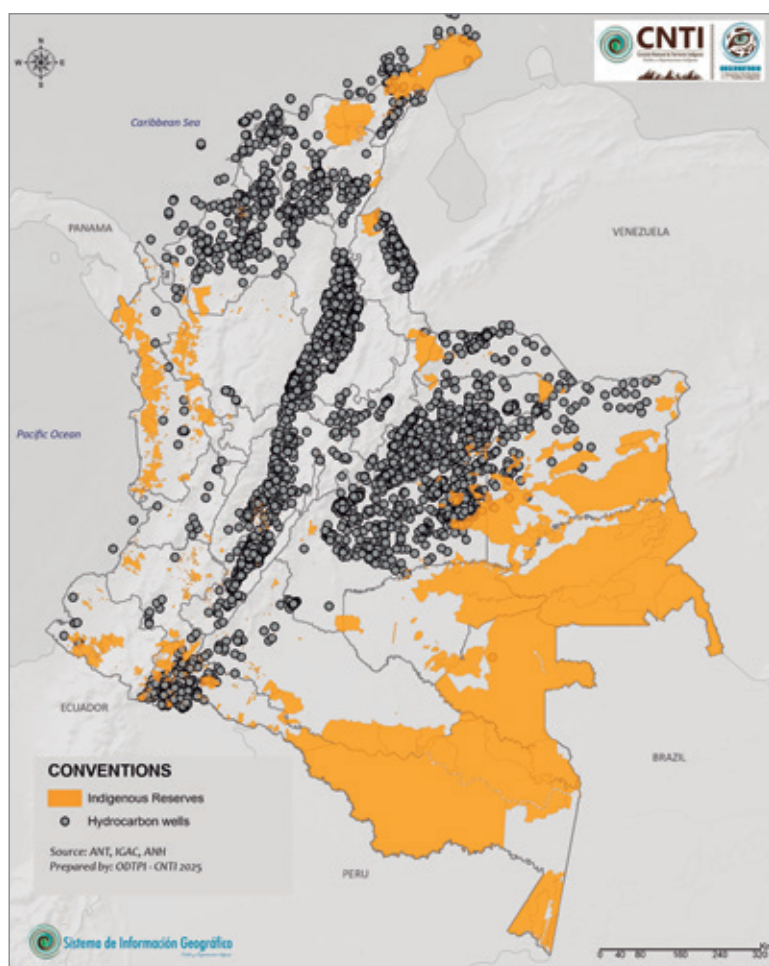
From the indigenous perspective, the contaminating impacts signify the sickness of the territory. Altering the layers of the earth disrupts its balance and results in disease, death, and disharmony for communities. On multiple occasions, communities have denounced



the contamination of sacred rivers, the disappearance of medicinal plants, and the displacement of wildlife, events that deeply affect the spiritual and physical health of indigenous peoples.

In the land below us, there are seven layers, each layer is a basket, each has a function, when that is touched, the territory is damaged, diseases arise, conflicts arise, people start to get sick, in recent years we have lost many elders... (Personal communication in 2022 with a community member of Monaide Jitoma; CNTI, 2023, p.148).

**Figure 7. Hydrocarbon wells in Colombia**



ODTPI. (2025). Based on information from ANT, IGAC, and ANH, as of 2025.  
Map 4. Observatory for Territorial Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

...[hydrocarbon] activities have caused the widespread die-off of fish, the disappearance of native species, and the contamination of medicinal plants. Its impacts are manifold: ecological, cultural, and spiritual...

## Illegal gold mining and mercury pollution

Illegal alluvial gold mining represents another serious threat. It contaminates water bodies with mercury, destroys vegetation, and affects aquatic and terrestrial life. This activity has caused the widespread die-off of fish, the disappearance of native species, and the contamination of medicinal plants. The impacts are manifold: ecological, cultural, and spiritual. According to the National Institute of Health (Instituto Nacional de Salud, INS), a person exposed to mercury should not exceed 15 micrograms per liter of the metal in their blood. Studies in the middle basin of the Caquetá River have shown mercury levels in fish and blood up to four times higher levels than permitted, posing serious neurological risks, especially for pregnant women and children. (PNN; Ministry of Environment; University of Cartagena; Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation, 2018)

According to numerous indigenous worldviews, the subsoil and its components are sacred and should not be disrupted. Their exploitation causes profound imbalances that manifest themselves in disease, loss of healing powers, and the breakdown of the spiritual fabric of communities. For many communities, every poisoned river is a wound in the body of Mother Earth:

(...) When [people] exploit and deplete mineral resources, [it is like] raping Mother Earth... In the past, our ancestors did not use minerals; they were conserved in the management and use of the territories at that time. When they are extracted, not only is Mother Earth harmed, but all the relationships that sustain life are thrown into imbalance, because everything that exists in the territory fulfills a function (OPIAC, 2022, p. 11).





## IMPLICATIONS OF AGGRESSION AND RISKS FOR INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

Indigenous peoples have experienced centuries of structural violence that began with colonization and continues today in new forms. The dispossession of territories, the imposition of foreign religions, and exploitation under different logics of power have been constant. Although the actors have changed—from colonizers to extractive companies and armed actors—the logic of domination remains. It is the continuation of a historical pattern of exclusion and dehumanization. This violence did not originate with the Colombian armed conflict; the conflict deepened centuries of racism, dispossession, and denial of our rights as communities with our own cultures, territories, and ways of life.



## **A sordid brutality (*de mala muerte*): the marks of political, physical, and spiritual violence**

Such violence affects spirituality, equilibrium, and our sacred connection with the land. Unnatural death is a form of domination that interrupts the natural cycle of life and disrupts our traditional practices of dying correctly. Unnatural death has political and spiritual dimensions; it seeks to weaken our social fabric, prevent rituals and offerings, disrupt the transmission of knowledge, and instill terror.

The exercise of terror has colonial roots, but over time it has grown more sophisticated, and has become part of a sustained genocide, in which authority is exerted through the power to decide who may live or die, under what conditions, and in what manner. In this sense, violent practices that instill terror have been established as mechanisms of control; among them, the most frequent and impactful are the following:

### **Selective assassinations of indigenous leaders**

Selective assassinations are one of the most devastating forms of violence against indigenous peoples. Perpetrators seek not only to eliminate a person, but also to interrupt their spiritual mission, disrupt political processes, and break the collective balance. Each leader carries an ancestral mandate, and their assassination implies the loss of an irreplaceable spiritual and political guide. It is as if a light that guides the collective body were to be extinguished.

The death of our brothers and sisters hurts us deeply. It is very difficult to explain; perhaps we do not even know why it hurts us so much. The reason must lie deep within our tradition. When a child is born, neither the mother nor the father can claim ownership of him or her. That spirit comes from a place, a being, a lake, or a



...Understanding this violence requires a historical perspective: what we face today is the continuation of the dispossession, marginalization, and structural racism that have affected indigenous peoples for centuries...



stone. That is where it belongs, and that is where it brings a mission. That is why, when baptizing them and choosing their names, the *mamos* must go to those sacred places that only they can see, and there they receive the powers that derive from that place (...). (CSJ-ONIC, 2006, p. 78, cited in: CNMH-ONIC, 2019, p. 197)

## Sexual violence against women

The physical bodies of Indigenous women, conceived as territories of life, memory, and spirituality, have historically been targeted for specific forms of violence that seek to destroy not only women's individual lives but also the social and cultural fabric. Sexual violence has been used as a strategy of war to sow fear, suppress leadership, and weaken organizational processes led by women. These attacks are symbolic assaults that break the connection between the female body and the sacred territory it represents. To violate an Indigenous woman is to harm the transmission of knowledge and the defense of Mother Earth.



PHOTOGRAPH: ODTPI ARCHIVE

Women have resisted through pain, reclaiming their bodies as spaces of dignity, healing, and collective reconstruction. Amid terror, fear, stigma, and misunderstanding, they have found ways to express their resistance in cooking, weaving, words, and rituals—ways of collective reconstruction. Protecting their lives and territories also means safeguarding the spiritual and cultural continuity of their communities.

Sexual violence against indigenous women, the impossibility of maintaining traditional practices that are led by women for the reproduction of culture in the communities—the violations committed against the *Sa-gas* (medicine women), *thé' walas*, *outs*, *tachinabes*, etc.—affect the collective identity of the commu-



nities, constituting a systematic attack on the spiritual and sacred symbols of indigenous peoples; in this sense, they are a manifestation of spiritual violence. (Ana Ochoa in ONIC, 2013, p. 20, cited in: CNMH-ONIC, 2019, p. 115)

...Killing a *mamo*, a *jaibaná*, not only implies the annihilation of an influential and powerful figure in the community, but also a genuine ecocide, since this person is the structurer of all the orders of the world, who balances and knows how to maintain equilibrium between forces, beginning with life and death...

## Assassinations of spiritual and traditional authorities

The assassination of spiritual and indigenous traditional leaders represents one of the most serious forms of violence, not only because of the harm caused to individuals, but also because of the devastating effect on the spiritual, cultural, and territorial balance of communities. Spiritual leaders (*mamos*, *jaibanás*, *thë' walas*, *sabedores*) are pillars and guides of collective life, mediators between the material and spiritual worlds, guardians of sacred sites, and custodians of ancestral knowledge. Their assassination implies a rupture in the cosmic order, a loss of connection with the Law of Origin, and a breakdown of the rituals that guarantee harmony in the territories. This form of violence is spiritual ecocide, interrupting the processes of harmonization and giving way to profound imbalances in the territories. Killing a wise person is “like burning a library” (Interview with Gustavo Ulcué, indigenous member of the Nasa community, May 12, 2025), as it means losing a universe of knowledge vital for survival, for the relationship with the territory and nature, and it constrains the self-determination of peoples. This form of terror seeks to erase the spiritual pillars that sustain collective existence:

The killing a *mamo*, a *jaibaná*, not only implies the annihilation of an influential and powerful figure in the community, but also a genuine ecocide, since this person is the structurer of all orders in the world, who balances and knows how to maintain equilibrium between forces, beginning with life and death. It is not uncommon, then, for the annihilation of a *sabedor* to be followed by terrible epidemics, colossal and unstoppable floods, plagues, environmental disorders of all kinds, and collective situations of psychic chaos. (CNMH-ONIC, 2019, p. 428)





# WHAT MAKES AGGRESSION POSSIBLE?

## Legal and material insecurity over indigenous territories

The lack of recognition of collective property, the failure to comply with formalization processes, and the state's refusal to recognize ancestral territories create an institutional and legal vacuum that enables the presence of armed actors and economic powers that fight for territorial control through violent methods. Without legal guarantees, our leaders are stigmatized, criminalized, and exposed to aggression, as our struggles are often perceived as an obstacle to "progress" or extractive development.



PHOTOGRAPH: ODTPI ARCHIVE

## **Territories rich in natural resources that are attractive to mining economies and/or permanent strategic corridors**

Our territories face increasing pressure due to their natural wealth and/or geopolitical location, leading to targeting attacks against our defenders of rights.<sup>2</sup> This violence not only affects people, but also nature, breaking the spiritual and community ties that sustain our own ways of life. There is an urgent need to guarantee legal security, regulate business activity, and fight impunity, to transform the development paradigm into one that respects and recognizes our systems.

## **Violent conflict: the presence of armed actors and illegal economies**

The presence of armed actors in our territories is a factor that encourages and exacerbates violence. Attacks are part of deliberate strategies that seek to dismantle systems of sovereignty, weaken indigenous resistance, and facilitate access to strategic resources.

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**2** For example, 50% of Colombia's forests are in indigenous reserves. In addition, of the 12 wetlands of international importance, 5 overlap with indigenous reserves, equivalent to 11.97% of the national total.



The militarization, targeting, and stigmatization of indigenous rights defenders intensify the risks and contribute to the legitimization of violence, often under the pretext of development or national security.

## **Institutional weakness of the Colombian state**

The absence of justice, widespread impunity, and the ineffective implementation of protection mechanisms leave us exposed to multiple forms of violence, without timely or adequate responses from the state institutions responsible for guaranteeing our human rights. In addition, the lack of inter-institutional coordination, the scarcity of resources, and the limited focus of public policies, reinforce this situation. Impunity encourages new attacks and revictimizes communities by denying them access to justice and reparation. Meanwhile, the weakness of the state facilitates attacks, deactivates collective protection mechanisms, and deepens the vulnerability of our communities.



...Our territories face increasing pressure due to their natural wealth and/or geopolitical location, which has led to our rights defenders being targeted for attacks...

## **Corruption of institutions**

The imposition of economic interests—both legal and illegal—through institutional co-optation, the omission of controls, and the manipulation of processes such as prior consultation reveals that corruption operates not only through favors and power networks, but also through the creation and positioning of narratives that seek to delegitimize us and justify our displacement. Corruption is not an isolated phenomenon; it is a central part of the reproduction of violence, dispossession, and impunity.



## WHAT DO WE PROPOSE?

1. Ensure full legal and material security over our territories, accelerating the legalization processes.
2. Recognize ancestral territories without formal title as a fundamental basis for the exercise of autonomy and the defense of life.
3. Recognize our territories as living beings with identity and spiritual relationships, with public policies that integrate ecological, cultural, and spiritual dimensions based on our own systems of knowledge.
4. 14. Implement specific, collective, and culturally relevant mechanisms for prevention and protection, acknowledging our own ways of protection, struggle, and territorial organization.
5. Implement a strategy to investigate attacks, with an intercultural, territorial, and macro-criminality approach, developed in a participatory manner with the communities.





6. Recognize and strengthen the role of indigenous women as defenders of life and territory, guaranteeing their safe and full participation in organizational processes and decision-making spaces, as well as the prevention and attention to the differentiated forms of violence they face.
7. Reinforce the Indigenous Geographic Information System (SIG-I) and SIVOSPI. Its operation and results demonstrate that these are key instruments for monitoring, analyzing, and preventing violence, and therefore require technical continuity, an intercultural approach, and an adequate budget.
8. Provide legal and material protection to Indigenous civil defense groups, recognizing them as legitimate mechanisms for collective defense of the territory.
9. Develop and implement mechanisms for the comprehensive recognition and reparation of the territory as a victim, including spiritual and cultural restoration, and guaranteeing non-repetition of attacks.
10. Implement the Escazú Agreement with the effective participation of communities. This requires building the necessary institutional framework to guarantee the rights to information, participation, and protection of rights defenders of the territory and life.
11. Ensure effective mechanisms for truth, justice, reparation, and non-repetition that recognize the central role of indigenous peoples in building peace and defending life in Colombia.





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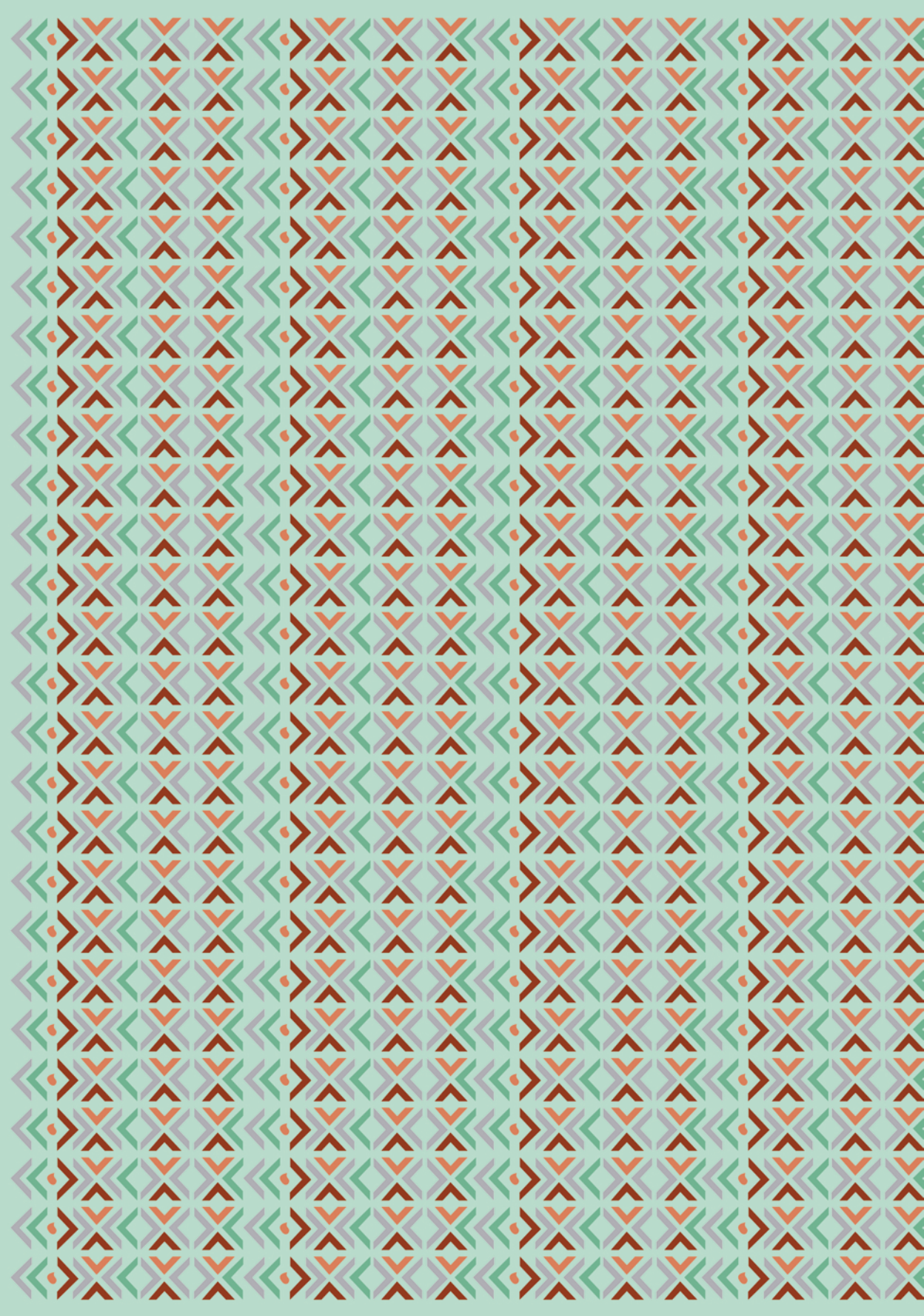
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