

# Environmental Defenders in Mexico Face Deadly Threats From Organized Crime

by *Liza Schmidt*  
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Environmental defenders in Mexico are facing increasingly lethal attacks as organized crime deepens its role in land conflicts, often with the backing of public and private actors, according to a recent report.

Criminal groups in Mexico have become central players in disputes over land and natural resources — not just through illegal economies like mining and logging, but also by exerting territorial control in regions where the state is weak or complicit. In many cases, organized crime does not act alone; it operates alongside — or with the support of — public officials, private companies, and local authorities.

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InSight Crime spoke with Felipe Romero and Itzel Arteaga, authors of the recent “2024 Report on the Situation of Individuals and Communities Defending Environmental Human Rights in Mexico” from the Mexican Center of Environmental Rights (Centro Mexicano de Derecho Ambiental – CEMDA), an organization that documents and denounces violence against environmental defenders in Mexico. Their

work sheds light on a grim and persistent reality: As organized crime expands its reach across Mexico's resource-rich territories, those who protect land, forests, and water are increasingly in the crosshairs.

**InSight Crime (IC): Although 2024 saw fewer violent incidents than 2023, the number of deadly attacks increased. What does this say about how threats against environmental defenders in Mexico are evolving?**

**Felipe Romero (FR):** We've always recorded a significant number of attacks. In 2014, we documented 78 incidents, including four lethal attacks — a high number. While those figures were already worrying, they are not as high as they are now. We've identified over 100 attacks or aggression-related events [in 2024]. Of course, this is not an exhaustive analysis, but it does reflect what's happening in Mexico.

**IC: Are there areas in the country that repeatedly emerge as hotspots for organized crime-related violence?**

**FR:** We've spoken with many people who have received threats from organized crime, but we believe the data we collect fails to capture the true severity of the problem.

Last year, people from the states of Mexico, Chihuahua, Sinaloa, Sonora, and Baja California told us, "I don't want to share information — it would put me at greater risk." We've also identified organized crime involvement in other states, including Michoacán, Colima, Jalisco, Sonora, and both Baja Californias.

**Itzel Arteaga (IA):** In Chiapas, various criminal groups are vying for territory, which has triggered a wave of attacks, many of which go undocumented due to lack of information or fear. In Chihuahua, for instance, organized crime has become so entrenched that the state is effectively absent. We're advising on a case in the Sierra Tarahumara, where people have been displaced from their communities. There are no teachers, doctors, lawyers left — no one. The presence of organized crime is overwhelming.

**IC: Many attacks are aimed at "protecting" megaprojects. What role does organized crime play in these projects, and how has that role changed?**

**IA:** There are many megaprojects underway in Mexico. Who are the actors behind these projects? The state, private companies, and organized crime.

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Every year, the main victims of violence are Indigenous communities — the people who protect the land and territory according to their worldview. It's no coincidence that they are the most heavily targeted. They are the guardians of the land where these megaprojects are meant to be built.

**IC: What patterns are emerging in regions where criminal groups act as de facto territorial powers? How do these dynamics affect the ability of defenders to organize and resist?**

**FR:** A clear example is the community of Ostula, in Michoacán, where there's a strong fight to defend the land. In places where the state is absent, communities have formed their own local police forces or even self-defense groups to combat organized crime. Disappearances are a key indicator — they reflect the presence of criminal groups, the absence of the state, and the fact that communities have had no choice but to take up arms.

**IC: Some of the most alarming cases involve both criminal groups and state security forces — sometimes working together. What does this say about the permeability between the state and organized crime in Mexico?**

**FR:** One case is that of Higinio Cruz in Guadalajara. He was a prominent environmental defender who opposed deforestation, illegal logging, and mining in his region. A local official summoned him to a meeting. He showed up, had the meeting, and according to available information, was taken out the back of the building by organized crime. It appears the municipal government handed him over. Higinio was later found dead.

Cases like this lay bare the gravity of the problem: Indigenous communities, natural resource-rich territories, organized crime, extractive corporate interests, a weak state — and a pattern of lethal and non-lethal attacks against defenders and their communities.

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**IC: The report mentions a rise in criminalization tactics. How does this criminalization happen?**

**IA:** The people being criminalized are usually the leaders of movements opposing these projects. Criminalization itself is a form of aggression carried out by the state — state institutions are used to file false charges. Sometimes companies themselves drive the process. That is, companies file complaints against defenders, and the state then opens investigations, without taking into account the broader context.

**FR:** One case that really stands out to me is that of a lawyer in Quintana Roo. He filed a lawsuit against a real estate project that lacked environmental permits, and the full force of the state came down on him. Authorities raided his home, froze his bank accounts, and charged him with various crimes. I remember reading a news story saying the lawyer had filed the suit “without cause.” It was absurd.

**IC:** Since CEMDA began publishing these reports over a decade ago, have you seen any change in the state’s response? Has any reform, institution, or policy made a difference?

**FR:** The Escazú Agreement is worth highlighting — it’s an important opportunity. Article 9 of the Escazú Agreement outlines the state’s duty to guarantee safe and enabling conditions for environmental defenders, and other sections speak of the need for preventive measures.

Within that framework, there is room for strong public policy that addresses the root causes of environmental violence in Mexico. States must also implement response measures — when an attack does occur, there should be a protection mechanism for defenders.

**IA:** The state’s response also depends on political will. At one point, there was a clear effort to stigmatize the work of environmental defenders. That led to what was likely an implicit policy of not collaborating with defenders or civil society organizations.

*Featured image: Huge infrastructure projects, like the Tren Maya project seen here, often provoke attacks on environmental defenders in Mexico. Credit: BBC*