



COP29 Media Brief by Climate Action Network (CAN), Publish What You Pay (PWYP) and Global Campaign to Demand Climate Justice (DCJ)

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Climate Talks and the Chilling Effect: Repression on the Rise



IMAGE BY: KonradSkotnicki COP28

The world is in the throes of unprecedented repression regarding climate activists, human rights defenders, journalists, academics and others who express opposing views to their government. The problem is widespread and three leading civil society networks - Climate Action Network, Publish What You Pay and Global Campaign to Demand Climate Justice assert this as an epidemic impeding crucial climate action and violating human rights laws across the world. Without these voices of civil society, the fight for climate justice cannot succeed, jeopardising the integrity of climate summits themselves.

[Mary Lawlor, the UN special rapporteur on human rights defenders](#), said in 2023 how all over the world, “thousands of human rights defenders continue the peaceful struggle for the rights of others. Their reward is intimidation, unfair trials on spurious charges, physical and digital attacks, torture, imprisonment and killings.” While Dunja Mijatović, the Council of Europe’s commissioner for human rights, [said in a statement](#) in 2023 that activists “are increasingly being met with repression, criminalisation, and stigmatisation,” and called for this repression to stop. While Repression doesn’t just silence individuals; it weakens our collective power to secure a sustainable, just future.

Yet, the repression continues unabated. More than [1,500 climate and human rights defenders have been murdered since the adoption of the Paris Agreement in 2015](#). In 2023 alone, 196 defenders were murdered after exercising their right to protect their lands and the environment from harm, with Latin America having the highest number of recorded killings worldwide. Though the amount is likely to be higher, Global Witness estimates that the total number of killings since they started reporting in 2012 now stands at 2,106 murders.

Murders of this nature often occur alongside wider repression and retaliations against people who are being targeted by government, business and other non-state actors with violence, intimidation, smear campaigns and criminalisation. The Americas is the [world’s deadliest region](#) for those defending land, territory and the environment, with [43% being Indigenous Peoples](#), while [across Europe](#), the right of peaceful assembly is coming under severe attack as states increasingly stigmatise, criminalise and crack down on peaceful protesters, imposing unjustified and punitive restrictions and resorting to ever more repressive means to stifle dissent.

In April 2024, German police cracked down on peaceful pro-Palestinian protestors, with numerous incidents of excessive force and arbitrary detentions reported during demonstrations across major cities like Berlin. Even the world’s most famous climate activist is not safe: police in Denmark arrested [Greta Thunberg](#) in Copenhagen at a peaceful pro-Palestinian protest, while a [German politician](#) called for the Swedish activist to be banned from such gatherings. In June, [dozens of delegates from Africa and Asia experienced trouble getting visas](#) to attend the annual UN climate talks in Bonn, leading to many participants from the Global South being excluded from the climate negotiations. While in [the UK](#), there are currently [41 political prisoners](#), among which are campaigners who received what is thought to be [the longest ever sentences](#) for non-violent protest after being convicted of conspiracy to cause public nuisance.

Kenya is home to the [Nairobi Declaration](#), a key pillar for climate action on the African continent, which has seen a recent marked increase in the number of deaths, arbitrary arrests and enforced disappearances of those who criticise the government. [Kenyan security forces](#) are no strangers to using unlawful and brutal tactics in responding to peaceful protests. In June 2024, police targeted unarmed [#RejectFinanceBill2024](#) protesters using water cannons, tear gas and live ammunition, as well as medical personnel, lawyers, journalists, and on safe spaces such as churches. Several peaceful protesters, many of whom were Generations Z and Y (millennials) youth, were injured and killed, with reports emerging that some were shot by [snipers](#). For the Africa Climate Summit in 2023, more than 500 civil society organisations signed an [open letter to Kenya's President Ruto](#) stating the summit agenda had been hijacked and was promoting “the position and interests of the West, namely, carbon markets, carbon sequestration and ‘climate positive’ approaches.

People who are vocal in defence of peace, justice, equality, human rights, sustainable development, climate justice, and democracy are [being increasingly targeted](#) and this costs lives. Alongside increased draconian laws and murders, a trend has emerged of [concerted weaponisation of stigmatising rhetoric and political discourse](#), sustained through disinformation and smear campaigns, targeting civil society and peaceful civic activism. These narratives, often promoted in the name of protection of national security, state sovereignty, and moral values, are in fact being used to silence and repress dissent, public activism, diversity, and political participation.

This repression, en masse, is happening in every region of the world and in almost every sector, and [Climate Action Network](#), [Publish What You Pay](#) and [Global Campaign to Demand Climate Justice](#) reveal, at the most recent UN climate negotiations from Katowice to Baku. Without urgent action from governments and the UN, COP30 in Brazil could fall victim too.

Policing the Climate Talks

[Azerbaijan is the leading fossil fuel supplier to Israel](#), providing 28% of the crude oil supply via the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline, majority owned and operated by BP. The Azeri oil is loaded onto tankers in the Turkish port of Ceyhan for export to Israel. In November 2024, diplomatic and media spotlights will be on Azerbaijan, which is hosting the 29th Conference of Parties (COP) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), known as COP29.

This is against a backdrop of documented human rights violations by the country's government led by Ilham Aliyev. [In 2024, Azerbaijan witnessed its most severe repression yet](#), with a sharp rise in political prisoners, targeting of academics, and the harshest media restrictions in its 23 year history as a member of the Council of Europe. As of September 2024, Azerbaijan had 319 political prisoners, many of whom face fabricated charges and harsh detention conditions, including ill-treatment, torture, and the withholding of medical care. Political prisoners in Azerbaijan are subjected to mistreatment at every stage: from arbitrary arrests and abuse during initial interrogations to torture and inhumane conditions in detention.

For example, prominent human rights defender and climate advocate [Anar Mammadli](#) has been in pre-trial detention since 30 April 2024 on bogus charges of conspiracy to bring illegal foreign currency into the country. Economist and political activist [Gubad Ibadoghlu](#) was moved to house arrest on 22 April 2024 after 274 days in detention. Opposition figure [Tofiq Yagublu](#) has been in pre-trial detention since 15 December 2023 on spurious fraud and forgery charges. Also among the [detained](#) are: Nazim Baydamirli, Ulvi Hasanli, Ilhamiz Guliyev, Sevinj Vagifgizi, Elnara Gasimova, Nargiz Absalamova, Hafiz Babali, Aziz Orujov, Shamo Eminov, Alasgar Mammadli, Mushfig Jabbar, Akif Gurbanov, Ruslan Izzatli, Ramil Babayev, Ali Zeynalov, Afiaddin Mammadov, Emin Ibrahimov, Farid Mehralizade and Bakhtiyar Hajiyev.

Another tactic of intimidation and exclusion geared towards climate and human rights defenders is the high cost of travel and accommodation in Baku for COP29, with hotel bookings being cancelled and [price gouging reported](#) of a 379% increase on overall average rates for 2024, which impacts representatives and climate activists from developing countries the most.

But Azerbaijan is not alone in this.

From Baku to Dubai

The last UN climate talks in 2023, COP28, took place in the United Arab Emirates. Ahead of the climate talks, in February 2023, the [UAE hosted the International Defence Exhibition & Conference at which states, including Israel, Russia and the USA](#), gathered to sell weapons, while leaked documents revealed Emirati plans to discuss fossil fuel deals with 15 nations during the climate talks.

During COP28, on 7 December 2023, [Emirati officials began a mass trial, prosecuting more than 80 people](#), including renowned human rights defenders and prisoners of conscience – some of whom had already spent a decade behind bars, due to a previous mass trial.

These people included Mohamed al-Siddiq, father of the late, exiled Emirati human rights defender Alaa al-Siddiq; prisoners of conscience such as Khalid al-Nuaimi, Hadeef al-Owais, Nasser bin Ghaith, and Sultan al-Qasimi; and long-time Emirati human rights defenders such as Ahmed Mansoor and Mohamed al-Roken.

With the UAE billing the climate talks as '[the most inclusive COP ever](#)', the timing appeared to be deliberately intended to send a clear message to the world that it will not tolerate the slightest dissent and that the authorities have no intention of reforming the country's dire rights record.

On hotels and accommodation, prices sky-rocketed with the Canadian delegation for example spending [CAD\\$500,000](#) on accommodation, double the amount budgeted.

From Dubai to Sharm-el-Sheikh

Egypt played host to COP27, despite the country's president [Abdel Fatah al-Sisi relentlessly cracking down on dissent through arrests and persecution](#) for years. Nearly all independent and critical voices have been silenced in the country. It also took place amid concerns over the Egyptian authorities and UNFCCC's failure to accredit independent Egyptian human rights groups for the climate talks.

[Egypt remains one of the world's top executioners](#), executing 107 people in 2020 and 83 in 2021, with at least 356 people sentenced to death in 2021, many following grossly unfair trials including by emergency courts. The crisis of impunity has emboldened Egyptian security forces to carry out extra-judicial executions and other unlawful killings, enforced disappearances and torture with no fear of consequences.

According to Human Rights Watch, since the 2013 military coup, Egyptian authorities have arrested or charged probably [at least 60,000 people](#), [forcibly disappeared hundreds](#) for months at a time, handed down [preliminary death sentences](#) to hundreds more, tried thousands of [civilians in military courts](#), and created at least 19 new prisons or jails to hold this influx.

[Alaa Abdel Fattah is Egypt's best-known political prisoner](#). A blogger, writer and outspoken pro-democracy activist, he has been in jail for most of the past decade. He went on hunger strike during COP27 and became the focus of attention of climate activists at the COP calling for his immediate release under the banner that there is ["No Climate Justice without Human Rights."](#) He has still not been released and [Laila Sueif, his mother, went on hunger strike in September 2024](#) when his latest release date passed.

Regarding costs for accommodation, and the treatment of people in hotels, [climate activists reported intimidation](#) by staff, passports temporarily confiscated, bookings suddenly cancelled, and prices being increased after reservations were made.

From Sharm-el-Sheikh to Glasgow

In the lead up to COP26 in Glasgow in November 2021, police in [Scotland](#) committed to taking a 'human rights based approach' to policing protests, however a disproportionately high number of officers were deployed, who used intrusive police surveillance that created an atmosphere of fear and intimidation, and as Amnesty International reported, [a chilling effect on the right to protest](#). Concerning reports of police containing protestors using the tactic of 'kettling', employing excessive force, cracking down on peaceful direct action, and abusing stop and search powers, were reported. In addition, seemingly bogus reasons regarding insurance and regulations were used to try to obstruct the [march and rally](#).

Women, people of colour, children and young people, people with disabilities, those under immigration control, and those with multiple intersecting characteristics, faced additional barriers in accessing the right to protest in Glasgow.

COP26 took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, and attendees faced significant challenges travelling to and engaging in the negotiations. Citing constantly changing COVID-19 restrictions, lack of access to vaccines, increased travel costs, and the substantial barriers to getting UK visas for those travelling from the Global South, [around two-thirds of civil society organisations that usually participate in the COP had to postpone their trips](#). Meanwhile, accommodation rates soared in Glasgow, marking the start of the price gouging related to the UN climate talks. Dubbed a “gold rush,” media reported about [landlords in Glasgow asking for as much as £36,000 to rent a flat for the duration of the climate talks](#): this led to many delegates, particularly from the Global South, being unable to attend at all or commuting from Edinburgh.

From Glasgow to Madrid via Santiago

In 2019, the security forces, under the command of President Sebastián Piñera, carried out widespread attacks using [unnecessary and excessive force with the intention of injuring and punishing protesters](#). These attacks resulted in the deaths of five people and the torture, ill-treatment and serious injury of thousands of others. The demonstrations in Chile began in October 2019 in response to a fare increase on public transport. In the context of the extreme levels of inequality in the country, the protests expanded to include demands for a more just society in which the state guarantees rights such as the rights to health, water, quality education and social security. Due to the turmoil, the climate talks in Chile were moved to Madrid, where [hundreds of climate advocates and other representatives from civil society were physically pushed and barred from the negotiations](#) after staging a protest inside the conference venue.

From Madrid to Katowice

In 2018, ahead of COP24, [the Polish government adopted a bill that prevented activists, NGOs and the general public from holding spontaneous assemblies](#) outside the climate talks. Demonstrators had to notify the city authorities in advance or risk prosecution, while police were granted extra powers to put conference participants under enhanced surveillance without their knowledge.

The bill came in the context of an [escalating crackdown](#) on freedom of expression and peaceful assembly in Poland, characterised by a raft of legislation aimed at curbing women’s rights and undermining the independence of the judiciary.

The bill initiated by Poland set a dangerous precedent that undermined basic human rights and fundamental freedoms, particularly including the right to freedom of peaceful assembly, association and of speech, and the right to privacy in the context of digital technologies, multilateral process, and the role and importance of peoples’ organisations in fighting climate change.

[At least 14 activists](#), including a member of the official Georgian delegation, Nugzar Kokhreidze, from the [Dialogue of Generations](#) organisation, were taken from Poland and/or deported, while

thirteen staff members and activists of environmental organisations were [refused entry to Poland](#) during COP24. In addition, three staff members of environmental organisations were questioned in their hotels about their IDs by border police in Katowice. Two of them were arrested and detained for 12 hours. In most cases, the police officers were unable to give them a reason for their detention or simply stated that the person was on the list of dangerous people. The activists were from different countries, including Germany, Belgium, Ukraine, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia. According to the Polish authorities, the people detained were on the alert list and represented a national threat.

From the past and the present to the future

In Brazil, [on average three defenders have been murdered](#) every month over the past four years. Two years after the murders of Bruno Pereira, a specialist on the protection of indigenous peoples, and journalist Dom Phillips, the Federal Justice [formally charged the alleged “mastermind”](#), while many other cases, such as the murder of Raimundo Nonato, an activist from the [Landless Rural Workers’ Movement](#) killed by three hooded men in 2022, remain unsolved.

More than [3.4 million allegations of human rights violations](#) in the country, including racism, physical and psychological violence and sexual harassment were reported in 2023. This was an increase of 41% compared with 2022. Due to systemic racism, police violence, unlawful killings, and arbitrary detentions against Black people and minorities such as indigenous peoples are common. Women, especially Black women, still experience barriers to access their rights.

Enforced disappearances are a particularly cruel form of assault on defenders, leaving families in a state of perpetual uncertainty and denial of justice.

Conclusion

COP21 took place in Paris weeks after terrorist attacks there. Although sporting events, trade fairs, and even Christmas markets were allowed to take place at the time, [France imposed a blanket ban on all demonstrations during the Paris Climate Conference](#), citing a state of emergency. [Twenty-four environmental activists were placed under house arrest](#) in the run up to the historic talks. Civil society was central to the Paris Agreement, despite the repression and restrictions, and it will remain defiant.

In the face of the worsening climate crisis, this epidemic of repression towards defenders has to stop.

Climate Action Network (CAN), Publish What You Pay (PWYP) and Global Campaign to Demand Climate Justice (DCJ) have the following demands:

- All Parties, in particular, Azerbaijan, Egypt, United Arab Emirates, Kenya, the European Union - notably Germany, and the UK, must end their crackdown on civil society and

journalists, and release all those arbitrarily detained and bring perpetrators to swift justice.

- States and the international community, including the United Nations through all its bodies, must take seriously the hostile narratives that are fast spreading worldwide, including in Western democracies, to [vilify and stigmatise people exercising their fundamental freedoms](#).
- Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change must recognise the legitimate work of people, groups and organisations that defend the environment and human rights, contributing to climate justice. We call on them to ensure a safe environment that provides favourable conditions for defenders' local and international efforts and for their meaningful engagement on environmental and climate issues.
- Parties to the UNFCCC should insist that human rights guarantees are included in all Host Country Agreements (HCAs), including for COP29, and that HCAs are made speedily and easily accessible to all, both by the host countries and proactively by the UNFCCC Secretariat.
- All host countries of UNFCCC-related meetings and events, including Azerbaijan, Brazil, and Germany, respectively the hosts of COP29, COP30, and of the sessions of the Subsidiary Bodies, should guarantee [open civic space before, during, and after the events and communicate around the steps taken to do so](#).
- All Parties must combat reprisals and acts of intimidation against Indigenous Peoples, defenders or climate activists for their engagement with the UNFCCC by publicly denouncing all cases of reprisals, and establishing an accessible focal point for reprisals, with a mandate to collect information, to share it with the UN Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights and facilitate redress.



Image by: Konrad Skotnicki COP28

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Notes to Editors

Climate Action Network (CAN) is the world's largest climate network made up of more than 2000 civil society organisations in over 130 countries, together fighting the climate crisis. Since its inception in the 1980s, CAN has grown into a strong, member-driven network with a membership spanning all six continents in over 130 countries.

Publish What You Pay is a group with over 1000 of civil society organisations in more than 50 countries. Founded in 2002, PWYP advocates for financial transparency in the extractive industry.

Global Campaign to Demand Climate Justice (DCJ) is a network of over 200 climate and human rights organisations working at international, regional and local level on issues of climate justice and just transition. Formed in 2012, DCJ campaigns on energy transformation and food, land, and water, as well as establishing itself as the convener of climate justice groups in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, where DCJ makes up one half of the Environmental NGO Constituency alongside Climate Action Network.

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