Urgent action letter: Human rights risks to environmental human rights defenders ahead of COP31 in Türkiye

On 26 October, the Turkey Litigation Support Project and Human Rights Watch sent an urgent action letter to UN experts – the Special Rapporteurs on the human right to a healthy environment, on human rights and climate change, on human rights defenders, on freedom of opinion and expression, on freedom of peaceful assembly and association, and the Working Group on business and human rights – **regarding the situation of environmental human rights defenders (EHRDs) in Türkiye ahead of the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP31), scheduled to take place in Antalya between 9 and 20 November 2026**.

The letter highlights the worsening pattern of arbitrary prosecution and deprivation of liberty, attacks on physical integrity, unlawful restrictions on freedom of peaceful assembly, and other human rights violations faced by EHRDs in Türkiye for standing against projects and practices that enrich businesses at the cost of the environment.

These violations take place against the backdrop of Türkiye's systemic failure to respect and guarantee the right to a healthy environment and other human rights, and an increasingly hostile global environment for EHRDs.

This raises serious concern over the treatment of EHRDs before, during and after COP31, at a time when their ability to participate and advocate effectively on matters relating to protection of the environment is of critical importance.

As host of COP31, Türkiye has an obligation to ensure that EHRDs can advocate and participate freely, without risk of violations of their rights. Any attempt to criminalise, harm or harass EHRDs for their climate advocacy, including peaceful protest and speaking up against harmful environmental practices, is incompatible with the right to a healthy environment, including the rights to access information and to participate in decision-making.

Türkiye must respect the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly and ensure a safe and enabling environment in which EHRDs can advocate freely, without intimidation, harassment, or fear of reprisals.

Our letter urges the UN mandate holders to call on Türkiye, ahead of COP31, to:

1. Publicly recognise the legitimate work and role of EHRDs and **deepen channels of public consultation and participation in decision-making** around all public and private projects which impact the environment and are a matter of public interest.
2. **End abusive detention and prosecution** of individuals for expressing opposition to environmentally harmful practices and promoting the right to a healthy environment.
3. Ensure judicial authorities identify and recognise strategic litigation against public participation (SLAPPs) and **dismiss ongoing and future SLAPPs against EHRDs by private actors as abusive.**
4. Respect its obligation as COP31 host, and as an essential part of rights-respecting climate action, to **ensure that EHRDs and affected communities are able to participate in, advocate on and meaningfully shape climate decision-making** without undue interference or restrictions.
5. **Protect those participating in such events or advocating against environmentally harmful practices**, including through peaceful protests, against excessive use of force by police and acts of violence by private actors.
6. Secure an enabling environment for EHRDs and affected communities to effectively participate in and influence decision-making on environmental matters without fear of reprisals or punishment, including by **ensuring the effectiveness of proceedings against persons suspected of involvement in the killing or ill-treatment of EHRDs**.
7. Strengthen respect for access to information, participation and access to justice in environmental matters as an aspect of the right to a healthy environment by **acceding to the Aarhus Convention**.
8. Take visible steps to **improve the general situation of environmental human rights defenders** and increase civic space.