

Can we defend the defenders? On the safety of front-line human rights workers

by [Thomas Antkowiak](#)

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The anniversary of human rights lawyer Ricardo Lagunes Gasca's disappearance in Mexico brings me sorrow and distress. It has also become a prism through which I view another commemoration, 75 years of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the modern international rights movement.

On January 15, 2023, my dear friend Ricardo and Antonio Díaz Valencia [were abducted](#) while advocating for the rights of an indigenous community in San Miguel de Aquila. Antonio was expected to be the next elected leader of the Nahua community, and Ricardo was his attorney. Their empty vehicle was encountered on the side of the road, riddled with bullets. Neither man has been found since.

[Current studies](#) show at least 93 environmental defenders have disappeared in Mexico over the last 15 years; 62 of them were defending indigenous land from mining and logging projects. [Both in Mexico and across Latin America](#), it can be a deadly proposition to oppose these projects and the ruthless cartels that have become involved. The Mexican government, for its part, [mainly looks the other way](#) rather than prosecuting these crimes.

Ricardo had faced threats before. The Mexican federal government, in recognition of his risk profile, had already placed him under the 'protection' of the [human rights defenders mechanism](#). [My colleagues](#) and I were not working with him on this particular case. Now that I've learned about the volatile situation in Aquila, the dangers seem much higher than in our [past collaborations](#).

Gentle, astute, self-deprecating with a dark humor that always made us laugh—Ricardo never sought the limelight, despite leading cases of [global significance](#). My [human rights clinic](#) certainly wouldn't have been able to accomplish anything in Mexico without his

[partnership](#), including his tenacity, insight, and compassion with clients. Only 41 years old, he represented the very best kind of lawyer and human rights advocate.

Which leads me back to the human rights movement at 75. Of course, this international campaign started before 1948, but I refer to a particular type of legal advocacy that has gained prominence in the last decades. Lawyers and legal clinics, many in the Global North, utilize human rights mechanisms created by the United Nations and regional government organizations, like the Council of Europe and the Organization of American States. (Other methods—more problematic, I believe—are the “fact-finding” fly-ins from North to South, followed by press releases and recommendations.)

Strategic use of the legal mechanisms—bolstered by the research and financial resources, political leverage, reputations, and media connections of Northern institutions—can be very [effective](#) to obtain [remedies for victims](#) of rights violations, and even to bring about [legal reform and structural change](#). But the methods are toothless, and even misguided, without partners like Ricardo, the expert local attorneys. Truly, without such counterparts, this kind of human rights project lacks legitimacy. Without sustained connections to the affected communities, it would become just another decree handed down from the ivory tower.

In our isolated and polarized world, virtual meetings may have increased productivity in international lawyering, but they can further insulate us—cutting off deeper engagements to our clients abroad and the communities we hope to work with. In contrast, frontline defenders are fully connected and, of course, face all the risks. [Authoritarian governments](#), criminal organizations, and complicit transnational corporations are all closing in. Can we still sense their peril?

If these human rights advocates are in more jeopardy than ever, so are the human rights themselves. Frontline defenders are the torchbearers of the international human rights movement. As such, they deserve the honors, the funding, and the protection. For the work to continue, we urgently need to do our part: the Global North’s human rights organizations, governments, universities, foundations, and businesses must coordinate to shield and support them.

Certainly, [some institutions](#) are already doing [good work](#). Where to redouble our efforts? First, let's ask the defenders themselves what they most need, recalling that their role is primary and their safety paramount. In the case of Mexico, there is [almost total impunity](#) for these types of cases. If the cartels, corrupt officials, and their accomplices cannot be held accountable, [the killings will continue](#) unabated (and thousands will keep fleeing from the violence to the southern U.S. border). When the defenders' work becomes too hazardous, asylum must be streamlined—and the opportunity forever preserved. U.S. legislation and political pressure on Mexico play key roles here. So does divestment from colluding transnational corporations.

Every day, I wish that we could have somehow prevented the disappearance of my cherished friend and long-time collaborator. Through various [channels](#), [Global Rights Advocacy](#), other colleagues, and my clinic continue [to push](#) the Mexican government to find Ricardo and Antonio, and to prosecute the case. The world cannot afford the loss of another Ricardo, [Berta Cáceres](#), [Thulani Maseko](#). Without such guiding lights, we won't be marking another 75 years of the international human rights movement.

IMAGE: Ricardo Lagunes Gasca on a visit to Seattle University. (Alejandra Gonza)

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