



RAFTO

The Collegiate Body of Guardians of the Atrato River: Securing Human Rights through Environmental Protection

The Rafto Prize 2026 is awarded to the Collegiate Body of Guardians of the Atrato River (CCGA) for their courageous fight against environmental destruction and for the protection of human rights in Colombia. The Atrato River Basin is exposed to high levels of violence as the region is dominated by armed groups and organized criminal networks engaged in widespread, environmentally destructive illegal mining. In these challenging conditions and at significant personal risk, the Guardians have stood firm on the front lines. Through monitoring ecological destruction, educating affected communities, and holding authorities to account, the Collegiate Body of Guardians powerfully demonstrate a community-grounded approach to protection of nature and fundamental human rights.

The Atrato River and Human Rights Crisis

The Atrato river, running from the Andes Mountains to the Caribbean Sea in north-west Colombia, flows through one of the most biodiverse areas in the world¹, but also through one of country's most conflict-affected regions. Rich natural resources of the region have attracted armed groups, cartels and organized crime networks, which use the area for trafficking of arms, drugs, and illegal extraction of resources. The resulting militarization of the region, widespread violence and destruction of Atrato river's ecosystem have left local communities facing unprecedented environmental and humanitarian crises.

The Atrato riverbeds are ancestral home to Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities, and for these communities the river is their lifeline – an indispensable source of drinking water, the basis of food systems and a vital means of transport.

Illegal resource extraction and gold mining have caused severe environmental devastation and pollution in the area. For example, the use of mercury in the mining process has led to accumulation of toxic substances in the soil, river water and aquatic life, threatening biodiversity, damaging ecosystems and endangering human health². Toxic pollution is a major health concern as it can cause severe health problems, including

¹ [River Guardians: from Colombia to Ireland | An Taisce - The National Trust For Ireland](#)

² [AL COL \(4.2025\)](#)

such serious conditions as neurological damage, particularly in young children³. This poisoned environment undermines the fundamental human rights of local communities, including their rights to a healthy environment, water, food security, and the right to life⁴.

The Collective Approach of the Guardians

The backdrop for this prize is the landmark ruling of Colombian Constitutional Court in 2016 designating the Atrato River as a legal entity worthy of protection⁵. The ruling acknowledged the interdependency between the physical environment and people, highlighting how environmental destruction can lead to human rights violations.

Along with the ruling, the Constitutional Court appointed one representative from the State and one from the affected communities as guardians to monitor its implementation. But, considering that one person could not represent the diversity of communities along the river, the communities chose another approach, based on principles of democratic representation, collective decision making and environmental justice. They established a collective structure of fourteen community guardians – one man and one woman from seven different ethno-territorial and social organisations in the region, creating a Collegiate Body of Guardians of the Atrato River (CCGA).

Over the last decade, the Guardians have worked tirelessly and at great personal risk in a complex, violent and unpredictable social and political context. Despite minimal resources, the Guardians have continued to monitor and report on areas exposed to illegal mining activities and environmental degradation, ensuring the documentation of the ongoing ecological crises in the region. Through outreach and education activities, they inform local communities about environmental degradation, pollution risks, the river's rights and their rights. Their work with the local communities is essential in ensuring the long-term protection of the environment as it trains the next generation of guardians and supports young people to avoid recruitment by armed groups. They also actively work towards government and other stakeholders to ensure that the ruling does

³ [A human health risk assessment of methylmercury, arsenic and metals in a tropical river basin impacted by gold mining in the Colombian Pacific region - ScienceDirect; Mercury](#)

⁴ [AL COL \(4.2025\)](#)

⁵ https://www.climatecasechart.com/document/atrato-river-decision-t-622-16-of-november-10-2016_976c;

not remain in words only by advocating for its implementation, keeping attention on it and pressuring authorities to act.

The importance of the Guardians' work stretches far beyond the Atrato River Basin. The Collegiate Body of Guardians have created a unique community-driven approach to protect the environment and human rights, inspiring similar work both throughout Colombia and across the world. As the global demand for gold and other minerals is expected only to grow for decades to come, placing communities and ecosystems under growing pressure from resource exploitation⁶, their work provides valuable lessons in environmental protection and protection of human rights.

Armed Groups, Violence and Illegal Economies

In a country marked by five decade long armed conflict, the fight for environmental justice is complex. Since the historic peace agreement between the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the government was signed in 2016, many armed groups have emerged engaging in a range of illegal economies including drug trade, trafficking, illegal mining, deforestation and extortions. Over 9 million people in Colombia live in areas controlled by armed groups⁷ that impose high levels of control on communities⁸. Illegal gold mining is one of the largest, fastest growing and most lucrative illicit economic activities⁹ and it is particularly widespread across South America.

The armed groups use various strategies to control the population – violence, extortion, threats, displacement¹⁰ and forced confinement¹¹. During confinement the risk of gender-based violence or forced recruitment to these armed groups is acute, especially for women and children. Human Rights Watch (HRW) reports that armed groups are also directly forcing communities to engage in their activities, as they pressure residents to

⁶ [ECR25_P2b_Minerals_Crime.pdf](#)

⁷ [Colombia: Plan de Respuesta a Prioridades Comunitarias, enero 2025 - Colombia | ReliefWeb](#)

⁸ [Colombia: Ongoing conflict stalls progress towards peace | NRC](#)

⁹ [Illegal Gold Mining Has Become a Crisis Too Large for the U.S. to Ignore](#)

¹⁰ Colombia has the third largest number of internally displaced people globally - [Colombia: Trapped in their own territory | NRC](#)

¹¹ Controlling the movements of the people or not allowing them to move for longer periods of time,

cut down trees, promote coca crops to produce cocaine, extort farmers or threaten people who defend conservation¹².

“Colombia remains one of the deadliest places on earth to be a human rights defender,” UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk¹³.

The recent years mark a rise in violence against human rights defenders from armed groups and criminal networks, with at least 1,500 human rights defenders killed since 2016.¹⁴

Those at particularly high risk includes Indigenous, Afro-descendant and rural communities, as well as environmental leaders¹⁵. The Global Witness reports that in 2024 there were 120 environmental activists killed globally and 48 are from Colombia, which made it also the deadliest country for environmental activists¹⁶.

The violence by armed groups disproportionately affects indigenous and Afro-descendant people, their community councils and leaders, as these groups try to destroy the social fabric, to co-opt and to eliminate organizations with a historical presence in the territories¹⁷. UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in Colombia¹⁸, has pointed out that several indigenous communities in Colombia were facing “physical and cultural” extinction due to violence by armed groups.

Protecting Environments and Securing Human Rights

“The environment is the foundation for human life, upon which the health and well-being of both present and future generations depend”, has stated The International Court of Justice¹⁹. In other words - protection of nature is a precondition for the enjoyment of human rights.

¹² [World Report 2026: Colombia | Human Rights Watch](#)

¹³ [Colombia: Urgent action needed to end widespread violence against human rights defenders – UN report | OHCHR](#)

¹⁴ <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2026/country-chapters/colombia#bb52e4>

¹⁵ [Colombia: Urgent action needed to end widespread violence against human rights defenders – UN report | OHCHR](#)

¹⁶ <https://apnews.com/article/environmental-defenders-report-global-witness-latin-america-a1852340a1e5cb0b21da155eb3469981>

¹⁷ [02-24-2025-Ingles-Informe-Anual-Del-Alto-Comisionado-ONU-DDHH.pdf](#)

¹⁸ <https://www.aptnnews.ca/national-news/un-warns-of-ongoing-tragedy-as-indigenous-groups-in-colombia-face-extinction/>

¹⁹ [International Court of Justice \(ICJ\). 2025. Obligations of States in Respect of Climate Change, Advisory Opinion, 23 July 2025.](#)

The Rafto Prize 2026 to the Collegiate Body of Guardians of the Atrato River recognises and celebrates a courageous struggle of these community representatives for environmental justice and fundamental human rights.

Indeed, as the world faces environmental crises on an unprecedented scale²⁰, authorities and the international community are struggling to find ways to respond to the devastations of ecosystems that are vital for survival of communities.

The Atrato ruling represented legal innovation and has played an important role in changing modes of thinking about the intersection of human rights and nature's rights²¹. However, all principles need someone to fight for them. Through their work the Guardians are fighting to make the intentions of the law a reality.

We call for Colombian authorities to secure implementation of the Atrato ruling, to protect the river and the environment and ensure the human rights of affected communities.

We call the international community to implement regulations and better traceability systems for illegally extracted resources and accountability for criminal exploitation of environments.

We call on companies linked to resource extraction to be transparent about their supply chains and ensure that raw materials come from legal, responsibly managed mining operations.

We call for the protection of critical ecosystems, responsible natural resource management and protection of human rights of peoples inhabiting exposed spaces.

²⁰ United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). 2025. *We Are All in This Together: Annual Report 2024*.

²¹ McNeish, J. A., & Socha, J. M. (2024). Muddy waters: on the problematic political ecology of the Atrato ruling, Colombia. *The International Journal of Human Rights*, 1–21.