

Environmental campaigners filmed, threatened and harassed at Cop28

Indigenous campaigners, human rights defenders and climate activists say they are being silenced by fear of reprisals

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- Activists embrace after a protest against fossil fuels during the Cop28 climate summit in Dubai earlier this month. Photograph: Peter Dejong/AP

Incidents of harassment, surveillance, threats and intimidation are creating a climate of fear at UN events including the recent Cop28 climate conference in Dubai, experts have said.

Indigenous campaigners, human rights defenders and environmental activists say they are increasingly afraid to speak out on urgent issues because of concerns about reprisals from governments or fossil fuel industries.

“In the last few years, we’ve seen Indigenous representatives being filmed by people related to government institutions while giving statements about human rights at UN events, or photographed just for being present at a UN event,” said Lola García-Alix, the global governance senior adviser for the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs.

“We’ve witnessed people working closely with governments physically corner and encircle Indigenous representatives in UN meetings. Such acts of intimidation have drastic effects back home, where Indigenous people sometimes face reprisals, including being questioned, harassed or detained.

“While many of these incidents happened in UN human rights events, such as the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, this worrying trend is expanding,’ García-Alix said. “We recently saw intimidation tactics at Cop in Dubai, where several Indigenous people from one country were intimidated by people working closely with that country’s government.



A UN security officer on patrol during Cop28 in Dubai. Photograph: Thaier Al-Sudani/Reuters

“The brazenness of governments is spreading into international spaces to suppress any voice that goes against their narratives. Over the last decade, there has been increasing alarm over the severity and frequency of such acts. Governments now feel they can act without suffering consequences.”

Other Indigenous activists also reported an atmosphere of intimidation in Dubai. “There was a heavy presence of surveillance and harassment at Cop28,” said Mesiah Burciaga-Hameed, an afro-Indigenous activist with Native Land Digital. “On numerous occasions, we were stalled from entering events, with no explanation. The United Nations framework convention on climate change (UNFCCC) prides itself on being a peaceful space for self-expression when, in reality, it silences many people.”

Activists, Indigenous and otherwise, have reported being filmed and photographed by people connected to governments or fossil fuel industries as an intimidation tactic.

“Many individuals who made speeches during actions for Palestine or West Papua had reps from Israel and Indonesia taking closeup shots of them,” said Neeka Jun from the Climate Alliance for Palestine. “This intimidation causes extreme fear. There are many people who simply wouldn’t speak their truth publicly for fear of being targeted later.”

Marta Schaaf, Amnesty International’s programme director of climate, economic and social justice and corporate accountability, was at Cop28. Her delegation’s plans to highlight the link between human rights and climate action in Cop host countries, including the UAE and Egypt, resulted in demands for changes from the UNFCCC and UN security, including for text and photos to be removed.

“We were told our safety couldn’t be guaranteed if we didn’t comply with the requests,” said Schaaf. “We’re concerned about freedom of expression and the right to protest at Cop, including the UNFCCC’s commitment to ensuring safeguards are in place to protect participants.”

Other attenders were afraid to use sim cards or WhatsApp at Cop28, in case phones or messages were being monitored, or to speak openly in public areas because of the thousands of cameras installed, or to openly discuss or protest on wider issues, such as Russia and Ukraine or Israel and Gaza.

“I was stopped by a security guard for a watermelon pin [a sign of solidarity with Palestine] I was wearing,” Krishna, a climate campaigner from the Philippines, said. “He said I could be debadged.”

Official processes are in place for people to report incidents of harassment or intimidation to the UN, but they are seen by many as toothless.

Activists are concerned there will be a similarly repressive atmosphere at next year’s Cop29 in Azerbaijan, a petrostate with strong ties to Russia and where “violations of international humanitarian law” have been reported.

“The last two Cops and the next Cop on climate are in countries where freedom of speech and the right to protest are not upheld, so the UN has increasingly targeted activists,” said Big Wind Carpenter from the Northern Arapaho tribe,

part of the Wisdom Keepers delegation at Cop28. “It’s a growing problem. Many Indigenous activists are threatened and punished by their own governments, and can’t speak out against them or corporations. Instead, the UN would rather punish us for speaking the truth.

“But in the hottest year in human history, where we’re watching fossil fuel corporations lead backdoor deals at the UN conference on climate, where leaders can refute climate science as ‘false’ or ‘fringe’, you have to ask why isn’t this oppression happening to the industry responsible for climate change?”

Campaigners are calling for change. “The agreement between the UNFCCC and each Cop host country’s government should be made public,” said Schaaf.

“There is a lack of transparency. There should be stronger rules on conflicts of interests to minimise fossil fuel industry influence, and stronger safeguards for all civil society participants. Activists, researchers, and journalists need their rights to free expression to be respected.”

Activists are also hoping the UN will commit to protecting Indigenous peoples and other activists at events and afterwards, including taking action against states or organisations that intimidate campaigners.

“The reprisals faced by Indigenous leaders and defenders of human rights in the United Nations’ mechanisms is alarming – it’s at pandemic level,” said Anexa Alfred Cunningham, an Indigenous Miskitu lawyer from Nicaragua, who was blocked from returning home after participating at an Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (EMRIP) event in Switzerland in 2022. She now lives in Geneva, separated from family, friends and colleagues.

“The UN must take effective measures to ensure no one is subject to retaliation for their participation. The UN should operate free spaces where you can express yourself without fear.”

Activists say the suppression of free speech at Cops and other UN events is hampering progress on climate action and human rights. “If people, Indigenous or otherwise, know they will be intimidated, threatened, harassed or worse for bringing their situation to the attention of the UN and the international community, we’re all facing a serious problem,” García-Alix said.

“If this continues to be allowed, it will delegitimise the whole UN system, important voices will be lost, and environmental degradation and gross human rights violations will persist.”