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Deliberations to Give People a Stronger Voice in Environmental Matters go on Despite of COVID-19

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COVID-19 has disrupted our daily lives, however, mechanisms still have to be put in place as our environment continues to be affected by unbalanced development, climate change, pollution and deforestation among other ills. To exacerbate the matter, environmental defenders have not been spared and are still being victimized and killed during the pandemic. Considering this, it is a critical juncture to stage the Second Meeting of the Signatory Countries to the [Escazú Agreement](#) being held under the auspices of the government of Antigua and Barbuda and the technical secretariat for the Agreement, the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (UN ECLAC).

The Agreement is an environmental treaty with a focus on human rights. It is the only agreement in Latin America and the Caribbean with provisions to protect environmental defenders. It also acknowledges the right of people to live in a healthy environment. To this end, the meeting also coincided with International Day for Human Rights Defenders on December 9th and International Human Rights Day on December 10th.

Simply put, the Escazú Agreement promotes access to information, public participation and access to justice in environmental matters and this significant meeting will allow the 24 countries that have signed on to continue discussing the issues to be addressed at the first meeting of the Conference of the Parties, possibilities for cooperation and strategies for the Escazú Agreement's prompt entry into force, and its effective implementation. The Agreement enters into force upon ratification by 11 countries, 10 have already ratified while a few others are finalizing their ratification process.

As is customary, the Elected Representatives of the Public were invited to address the gathering. Danielle Andrade-Goffe, Main Elected Representatives of the Public from Jamaica, said "The region has rich biodiversity supporting 60% of the world's terrestrial life. At the cross section of decision making around the use of these natural resources, are the local communities, often indigenous people, farmers and fishers, who are



dependent on these resources for their livelihood. A worrying trend in the region is the high rate of threats, attacks and arrests they face in their efforts to protect the environment and their land rights. Latin America has one of the highest number of recorded killings of environmental defenders globally. Last year, 212 land and environmental defenders were killed, roughly an average of more than four per week making it what some have dubbed: the deadliest year on record for activists. And this year the trend appears to be that those numbers will be far surpassed. One of those killed this year, environmental leader Harlin Rivas Opsina, a young Colombian engineering student and member of the National Youth Environmental Network. It is heartbreaking and frustrating to note that even in the midst of a pandemic, environmental defenders are still being threatened and attacked. Until everyone is free to stand up for their fundamental human rights without fear, we can never achieve the sustainable development goals, or our highest ambitions as a society.”

Meanwhile, Andrés Nápoli, Alternate Elected Representative from Argentina said, “The Escazú Agreement does not deal with the regulation of natural resources or the territory of any country. It seeks to achieve the full implementation of access rights, to lay the foundations for an environmental democracy and a model of sustainable and inclusive development in Latin America and the Caribbean”. He went on to issue a call for more



countries to become actively involved in the process, “We continue to wait for those countries that for years led the negotiations to join this challenging regional process, sooner rather than later. We need as many countries as possible to become part of the Escazú Agreement, so that the people of our region have greater and enhanced rights and can, through them, improve their lives.”

The meeting was preceded by two sessions on December 8th: an in-person meeting in Antigua dubbed “The Escazú Agreement: Empowering Societies for Sustainable Development”, and the second a virtual meeting entitled ‘Youth for Escazú’.

The sessions can be seen on ECLAC’s website, www.cepal.org, on its social media accounts on Twitter (@cepal_onu) and Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/cepal.onu>), and on YouTube (Day 1: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KLlGo5t6HcI> and Day 2: <https://youtu.be/UUmumq7tIJY>).