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NEWS
JUN 20 2016, 8:21 PM ET

185 Killings Made 2015 Deadliest Year Ever for Environmentalists: Report

by ALEX JOHNSON

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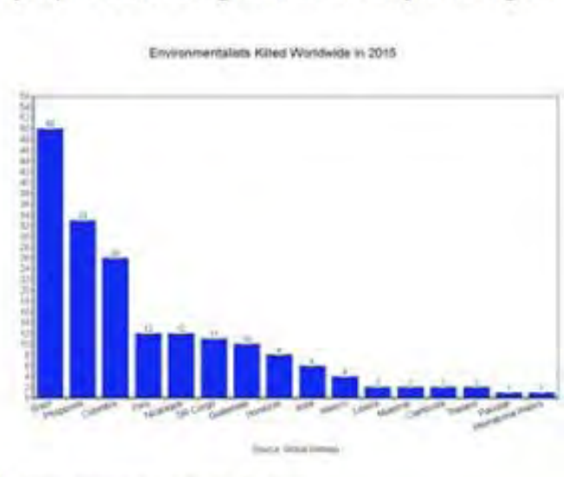
More environmental activists were killed around the world than in any other year on record, human rights advocates said Monday in denouncing what they called "the criminalization of protest."

The British organization Global Witness said 50 of the 185 environmentalists whose deaths it documented in 2015 were killed just in Brazil, where the Summer Olympic Games get under way in August.



Alex Johnson / NBC News

The group said the real death toll is likely higher because much of the violence against environmentalists occurs in remote areas in underdeveloped and developing nations.

"Across the world industry is pushing ever deeper into new territory, driven by consumer demand for products like timber, minerals and palm oil," it said. "Increasingly communities that take a stand are finding themselves in the firing line of companies' private security, state forces and a thriving market for contract killers."

The numbers don't include the killing of Goldman Environmental Prize winner Berta Cáceres, who was shot to death in her home in Honduras in March. Cáceres' killing has drawn recent attention to the danger activists say they face around the globe as they try to protect the world's resources and natural wonders.

Related: Gunmen Kill Honduran Indigenous Environmentalist Leader Berta Cáceres

Three of the four men suspected in Cáceres' death worked for a hydroelectric project she opposed, Honduran authorities said in May.

More than half of the killings in 2015 were in just three countries: Brazil (50), the Philippines (33) and Colombia (26), Global Witness reported.

It said activists in Brazil are targeted ranchers, agricultural plantation owners and illegal loggers, while Philippine and Colombian activists are threatened by large agribusiness corporations supported by police and paramilitary groups.

"Rapacious companies, many of them from the mining or agribusiness sectors, are encroaching more and more onto indigenous land rich in untapped natural resources. Until recently these remote areas may have been out of reach but, as commodity prices fall, companies are taking greater risks to secure larger profits," according to Global Witness.

The group blamed "collusion" between government and corporate interests for protecting killers, saying it documented 51 deaths last year that were tied to military, paramilitary, police or private security forces — more than a quarter of all killings.

"While impunity prevails, the criminalization of protest is on the rise," it said.

Global Witness called on governments to increase protection for land and environmental activists, investigate crimes against them, support opposition to unwanted projects and formally recognize "communities' rights to their land."

"This is a rapidly growing crisis that is showing no signs of abating," Global Witness said. "Our warming climate and growing population mean that pressures on land and natural resources are set to increase, which means that without urgent intervention the numbers of deaths we're seeing now will be dwarfed by those in the future."

ALEX JOHNSON

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World Refugee Day: A Look at the Crisis in 2015

by CASSANDRA VINOGRAD and CAROLINA REID

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A mounted policeman leads a group of migrants near Dobova, Slovenia, on Oct. 20, 2015. SRDJAN ZIVULOVIC / Reuters

The number of refugees last year hit the highest level in two decades, according to the U.N.

It released trend data on Monday — World Refugee Day — showing there were an estimated 16.1 million refugees worldwide at the end of 2015. Here's a look at the U.N.'s findings, by the numbers.

*****

By the end of last year there were **65.3 million** forcibly displaced people worldwide — nearly twice the population of California — and **16.1 million** refugees.

"If these 65.3 million persons were a nation, they would make up the 21st largest in the world," the U.N. report said.

That's a **55 percent** rise in just four years, largely driven by the conflicts in Syria and Afghanistan.

A long exposure photo shows thousands of lifejackets left by migrants and refugees piled up on the Greek island of Lesbos on Nov. 9, 2015. ALKIS KONSTANTINIDIS / Reuters

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An estimated **12.4 million people** were newly displaced due to conflict or persecution in 2015 — including **8.6 million people** displaced within their own country's borders.

A woman stands in front of a makeshift tent in Niger's village of Kidjendi on June 19, 2016, as displaced families fled from Boko Haram attacks. ISSOUF SANOGO / AFP - Getty Images

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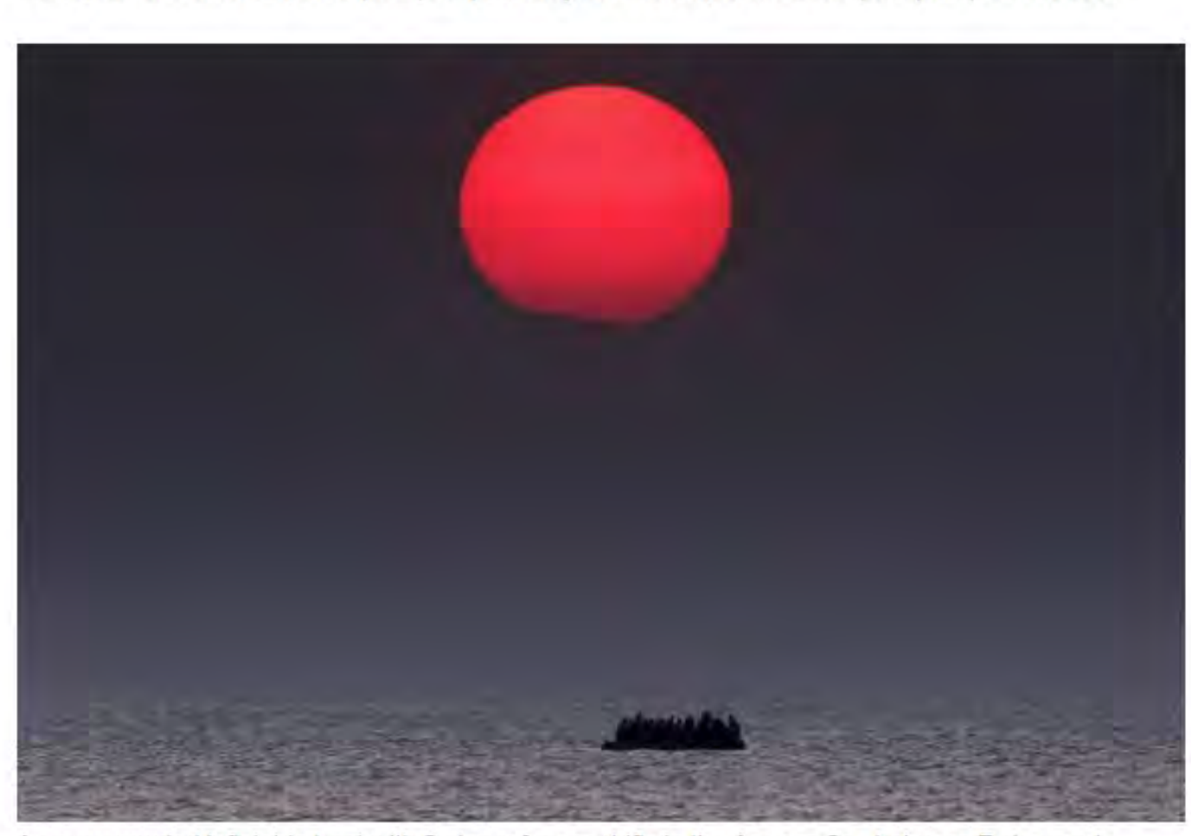
The rate of displacement was provided in stark detail. The U.N. said that **24 people worldwide** were displaced from their homes **every minute of every day** in 2015, or around 34,000 people per day. In 2005, it was six people per minute.


An overcrowded inflatable boat with Syrian refugees drifts in the Aegean Sea between Turkey and Greece after its motor broke down on Aug. 11, 2015. Yannis Behrakis / Reuters

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Fifty-four percent of all refugees worldwide came from just three countries — Syria, Afghanistan and Somalia. More than **1 million Syrian refugees** were newly registered during 2015, bringing their total refugee population to **4.9 million**. That compares to 3.9 million a year earlier and 2.5 million at the end of 2013.

A Syrian refugee holds onto his children as he struggles to walk off a dinghy on the Greek island of Lesbos on Sept. 24, 2015. Yannis Behrakis / Reuters

There were around 2.7 million Afghan refugees and around 1.1 million Somali refugees in 2015, according to the U.N.

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The world's least developed countries gave asylum to 26 percent of the global refugees total. Lebanon hosted the most in relation to its population — or **183 refugees per 1,000 inhabitants**. Jordan and Nauru ranked second and third, respectively.

A photo taken on April 17 shows an aerial view of an informal refugee camp in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley. STEPHANE DE SAKUTIN / AFP - Getty Images

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Children below the age of 18 made up about half of the refugee population in 2015, largely unchanged from a year earlier. However, there were around **98,4000 asylum applications** filed by unaccompanied children in 2015 — the highest number on record since the U.N. refugee agency started collecting such data nearly 10 years ago.

Syrian refugees upon arriving to the Greek island of Lesbos after crossing the Aegean Sea from Turkey on Sept. 28, 2015. ARIS MESSINIS / AFP - Getty Images

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Last year also saw a record-high **2 million applications** for asylum or refugee status. Germany was the country with the most applications — **441,900** — followed by the U.S. with 172,700 and Sweden with 156,400. Russia, meanwhile, received 152,500.

Participants attend a demonstration calling for tolerance in Berlin on June 19. Adam Berry / Getty Images

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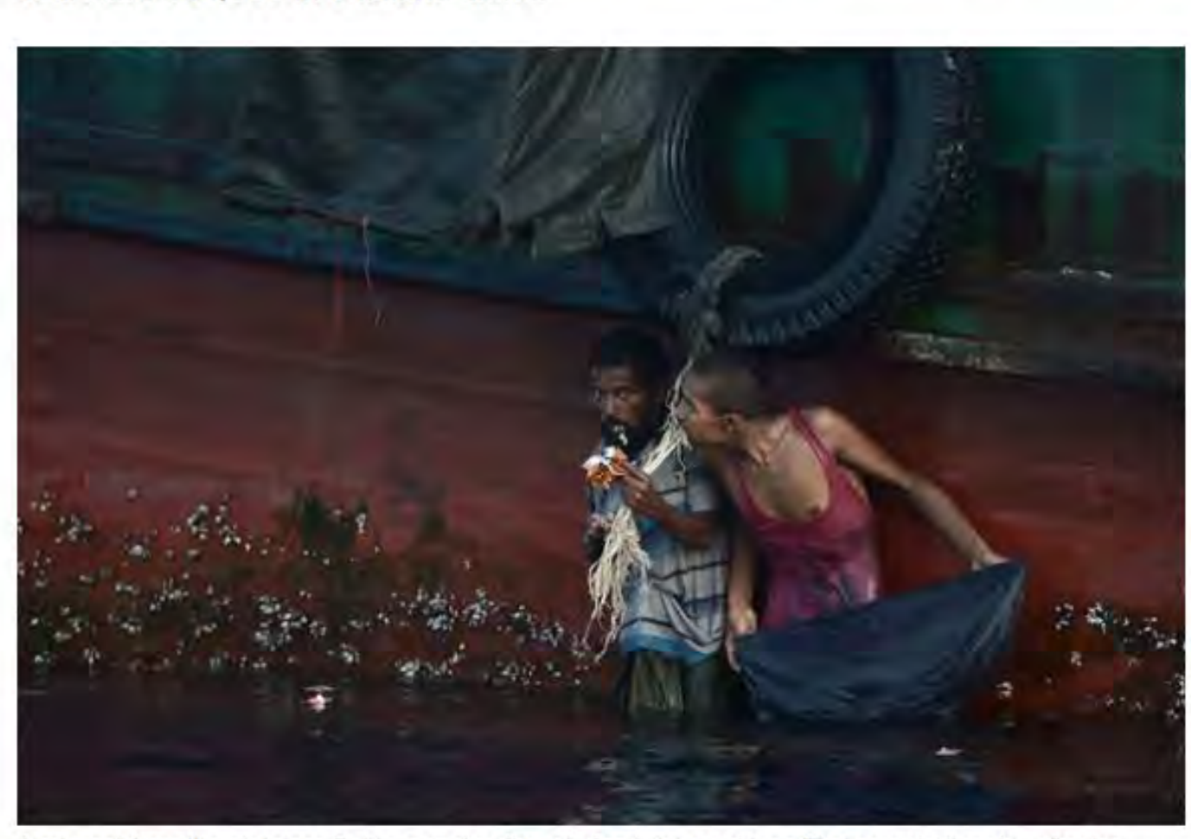
UNHCR also estimates that at least **10 million people** globally were stateless at the end of 2015, but the numbers recorded by governments and given to the agency put the number far lower.

The number of stateless people — individuals without a nationality — is estimated at around 500,000 in Thailand alone.


A migrant from the stateless Rohingya minority eats food dropped by a Thai army helicopter after he jumped to collect the supplies at sea from a boat drifting in Thai waters on May 14, 2015. CHRISTOPHE ARCHAMBAULT / AFP - Getty Images

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Faced with an influx of refugees and migrants, some European countries — including Germany — have advocated returning them to their home nations. According to the U.N. data, **only 201,400 refugees** returned to their countries of origin in 2015. Most of those — 61,400 — returned to Afghanistan. Nearly 40,000 returned to Sudan and 32,300 to Somalia.

Pakistani and Afghan migrants protest against deportation in Mytilene on the Greek island of Lesbos on April 5. ARIS MESSINIS / AFP - Getty Images

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For the second consecutive year, Turkey hosted the largest number of refugees — **2.5 million people**. A recent EU-Turkey deal that allows Greece to return Syrian asylum-seekers to Turkey without evaluation of their protection claims on the basis it is a "safe third country" has drawn staunch criticism.

A child sits at the Oncupinar camp for Syrian refugees at the border crossing with Syria near the town of Kilis in southeastern Turkey on Monday. Emrah Gurel / AP

CASSANDRA VINOGRAD

CAROLINA REID

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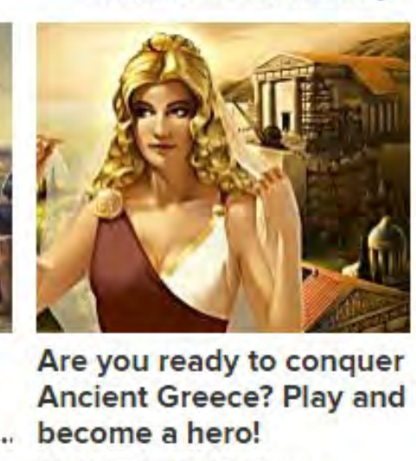

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Five Star Movement's Virginia Raggi: Outsider Is Now Rome Mayor

by CLAUDIO LAVANGA

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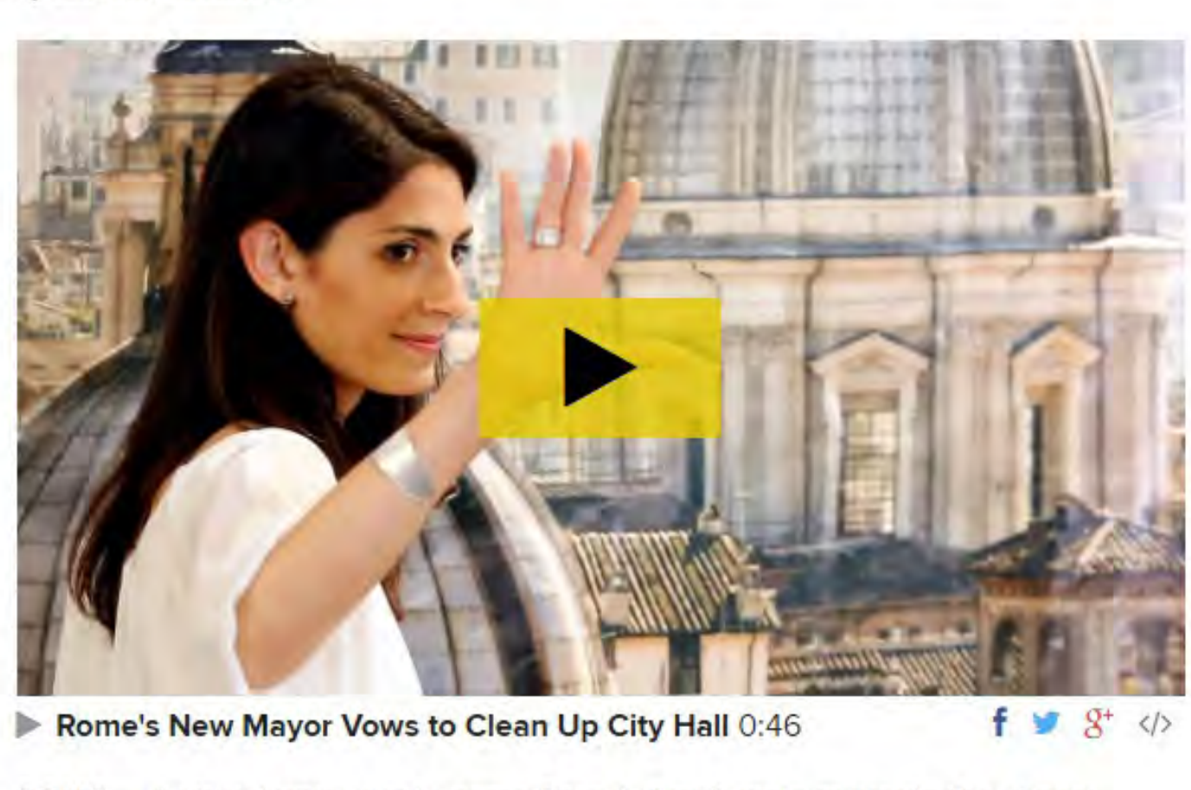
Rome's New Mayor Vows to Clean Up City Hall 0:46

ROME — A virtual unknown became Rome's first female mayor in the almost 3,000-year history of the so-called "Eternal City" on Sunday, giving Italy's anti-establishment Five Star Movement its biggest victory to date.

Virginia Raggi on June 3. FILIPPO MONTEFORTE / AFP - Getty Images file

Lawyer Virginia Raggi won around two-thirds of the vote, the Interior Ministry announced Monday.

The 37-year-old beat Roberto Giachetti, the candidate backed by Prime Minister Matteo Renzi. Another Five Star candidate also elected mayor in the northern industrial city of Turin.

"Finally Rome has a woman as mayor," the mother-of-one wrote on her Facebook page after her victory was announced. "This is a historic moment. At a time when equal opportunities are still a myth, this victory is of extraordinary value."

Detractors claim she is far too inexperienced to run the city of 3 million people. She had no political background until being elected as a councillor just three years ago.

Her public profile was also negligible before winning Five Star's online primary in February — a contest in which she received just 1,764 votes.

On Sunday, Raggi garnered the support of 770,564 people in the Italian capital — compared to 376,935 for rival Giachetti.

What does she stand for?

During her campaign, Raggi pledged to govern Rome honestly and transparently, fight widespread corruption, and improve the city's poor transport and trash collection systems.