

# PEACE BRIGADES INTERNATIONAL IRELAND

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2020 ANNUAL REPORT



# CHAIRPERSON'S STATEMENT

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As Peace Brigades International celebrates its 40-year anniversary in 2021, we feel that it is an apt time to reflect on the triumphs and challenges of the past year. 2020 was truly a year like no other, yet with the help of our volunteers, supporters, and board, we were not only able to maintain our operations, but also bring human rights defenders into the core of our work like never before.

More than anything, 2020 taught us the importance of solidarity. Although we were unable to reach out directly to our supporters, or host at-risk human rights defenders in person, virtual events and meetings sent a clear message that PBI Ireland remains committed to defending those who defend human rights.

As an organisation based on the direct personal accompaniment of human rights defenders, social distancing measures presented a unique challenge to our way of making space for peace. Nevertheless, while our projects found creative and innovative ways to continue supporting peace-builders through communications, advocacy, and increasingly-important trainings in digital security, for many defenders, our continued personal connection and psychosocial support in spite of the necessary distance was our most important impact by far.

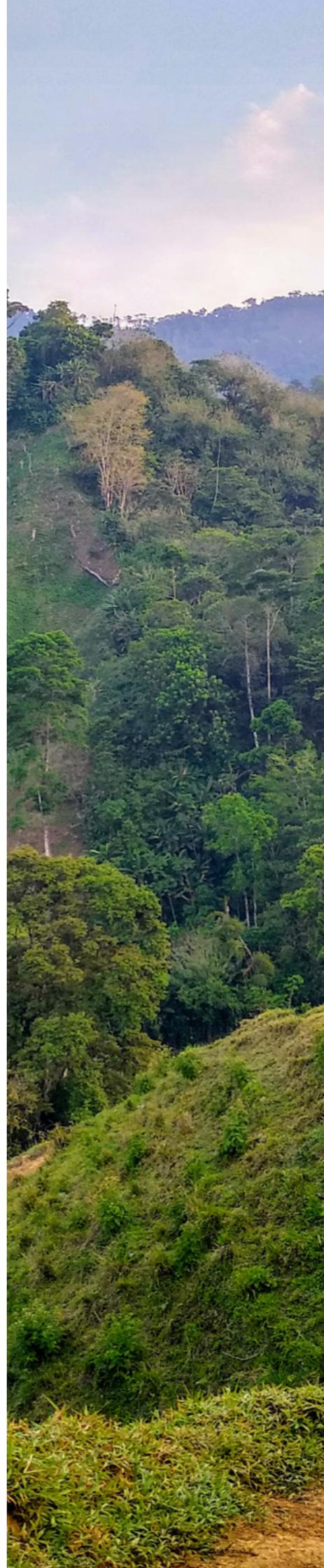
From across our project countries of Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua/Costa Rica, Colombia, Kenya, Nepal, and Indonesia, we in Ireland heard stories of the worsening situation for human rights defenders, from indigenous activists whose lands were at risk of seizure at a time when protest was forbidden, to Colombian human rights lawyers facing illegal military surveillance over their peace activism. Yet as always, there were also stories of hope and resilience. We also heard from LGBTQI+ defenders who banded together to ensure vital supplies of food and medicine reached the most vulnerable, and from communities fighting armed conflict not with violence, but with peace.

In this report, which follows from our 2019-2020 report "Making Space for Peace In the New Normal", we have gathered together just some of the stories of the defenders PBI accompanies, and our actions in support of them and their work. We hope you find them as inspiring as we do.



**DR IAIN ATACK**

PBI Ireland Chairperson (2020)





# ABOUT US

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PBI Ireland is the youngest of Peace Brigades International's 13 Country Groups, which are distributed throughout Europe, North America, and Oceania. As a Country Group, our activities are focussed on supporting PBI Field Projects as they accompany at-risk human rights defenders through national, international, and local **advocacy, communications, training,** and the **accompaniment of human rights defenders** facing harassment, threats and violence for their legitimate peace-building work. We support this work from Ireland through **advocacy, education, communications, and volunteer recruitment.**

We conduct this work based on our core principles of **non-violence, non-partisanship, and non-interference.** We always work with direct requests from human rights defenders, and strategically employ our international character to amplify their voices and concerns.

In this report, you can find out more about how PBI Ireland worked to support these values and advance our mission in 2020.

## VISION AND MISSION

PBI envisions a world in which people address conflicts **non-violently,** where **human rights are universally upheld** and **social justice and intercultural respect** have become a reality.

PBI works to **open a space for peace** in which conflicts can be dealt with non-violently. We use a strategy of international presence and concern that supports local initiatives and contributes to developing a culture of peace and justice. We act on request of local non-violent groups working for human rights and social change in regions where there is oppression and conflict.

The aim of PBI's international presence is to accompany both political and social processes through a joint strategy of **detering violence and promoting active non-violence.** Our international teams of volunteers use methods such as **protective accompaniment, peace education, independent observation and analysis of the conflict situation.** In addition, PBI learns about, develops, and models forms of non-violent intervention. Where possible, we initiate contacts with all the parties to a conflict in order to inform of our presence.

**PBI supports this work through a broad international network of organizations and individuals.** Our identity is built upon non-hierarchical structures and consensus-based processes.

# ADVOCACY, ACTIVATIONS AND ALERTS

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One of the most important aspects of our work is raising the concerns of our accompanied human rights defenders with **decision-makers, like-minded organisations, and the diplomatic corps**. As a country group of Peace Brigades International, we form a vital part of these defenders' support network. At times of particular risk, such as death threats or other serious violations of human rights, our field projects can choose to activate this network. At these times, we spring into action, meeting with government departments and taking whatever actions the affected defenders feel is necessary.

Oftentimes, raising the profiles of these defenders with national and international authorities or simply expressing concern through official channels is enough to drastically reduce this risk. In 2020 alone, we responded to **seven** such activations in support of the safety of human rights defenders, which led to important actions from the Irish diplomatic corps, including **meeting with affected defenders and visiting their communities and organisations**. Building on the proliferation of virtual communications platforms, we were also able to **invite affected defenders directly into meetings with the Irish diplomatic corps**, allowing them to share their powerful stories of the threats they face with those with the power to make an impact.

We also maintain a **constant focus on advocacy** in order to ensure that human rights remain at the top of the agenda in Ireland's foreign affairs. In addition to emergency activations, our field projects also periodically publish **alerts** on concerning human rights situations in their countries of operations. You can find more information and read some of these alerts on our field projects' websites.

## ADVOCACY IN ACTION: THE GUAPINOL RIVER DEFENDERS

The Guapinol River Defenders are **eight land and territory defenders** from Honduras's Bajo Aguán region, one of the country's hotspots for social conflict. In 2018, the Defenders helped to establish the **Guapinol Encampment**, a peaceful protest against **illegal deforestation and pollution** throughout the Botadero Mountain Protected Area caused by iron mining. Mere weeks later, the encampment was **violently dispersed** by private security guards hired by the mining company.



In a criminalisation process marked by **serious irregularities**, eight defenders were singled out and charged with **unjust deprivation of liberty, arson, and illicit association**. Although they have yet to be found guilty on any charge, they have been held in pre-trial detention since **September 2019**.

PBI Ireland has been a vocal part of the international opposition to this **unjust and arbitrary detention** since members of our organisation observed the hearings against them in September 2019. As COVID-19 ravaged Honduran prisons in 2020, their situation became even more serious. As part of a wide range of actions, PBI Ireland advocated that Irish MEPs nominate the

defenders to the **Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought**, an international human rights award that would draw the world's attention to the defenders' legitimate struggle for the environment. As a result of this campaign, the eight defenders were **one of three finalists** for this award, raising international awareness to their plight. As part of our commitment to support land and territory defenders around the world, PBI Ireland will continue to support the Guapinol River Defenders until they are released.

## EVENTS

PBI Ireland aims to host **at least one human rights defender** in the country per year, to meet with decision-makers, share their work with the Irish public, and get some well-earned respite from the threats they face at home. Due to COVID-19, we were unable to host a defender in 2020. Nevertheless, recognising the importance of this exchange of **experiences, hopes and challenges** to both the public and the defenders themselves, we decided to prioritise this area and instead hold **two virtual events in 2020**, bringing defenders' stories to the homes of our supporters like never before, in spite of the distance separating us. We also held a **Think-In Day** with our supporters at the start of the year, to share our progress so far and brainstorm ways we could improve.

### BLOOD OF THE EARTH FILM SCREENING AND DISCUSSION

Defenders of land rights, the environment, and indigenous territory face particular threats for their legitimate activism in the defence of the natural world and their traditional way of life. For those living in Central America and Mexico, one issue of pressing concern is that of the ever-decreasing supply of fresh, clean water.

Filmed in **Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras** amidst the historic drought of 2019, ***Blood of the Earth*** tells the story of water defenders fighting against fierce opposition to ensure that future generations will have access to this vital natural good.



In June 2020, in collaboration with our friends at the Latin America Solidarity Centre – LASC, we held a virtual screening of this film, followed by spaces for learning and exchange with two defenders. From Mexico, we were joined by **Diana Pérez**, a member of the Mexican Institute for Community Development, an independent civil society organisation working to defend land and build democracy and human rights through education and popular communication. We also heard from **Julio González**, a Guatemalan ecologist from Colectivo Madreselva, an activist group committed to the defence of nature from a political and social perspective.

### THE PEOPLE VS. THE PANDEMIC

As the COVID-19 pandemic continued to seriously impact human rights around the world, we decided to share a message of hope and resilience from **Honduras and Colombia**, where local human rights defenders stepped in to protect their communities when their governments could not.

From a country still reeling from the impacts of **Hurricanes Eta and Iota**, **Esdra Sosa**, Director of **Arcoiris LGBT Association in Honduras**, called in to tell us of the courage of trans activists braving the military-enforced lockdown to provide their community with essential food and medicine. From a Gender Identity Law to a Law for Equality and Equity with wide-reaching implications for all marginalised communities in Honduras, Esdra also spoke of the unrelenting work of Arcoiris in striving for structural change.

From **Colombia**, **Luis Miguel** told the fascinating story of the **San José de Apartadó Peace Community**, which has stood firm in the face of a raging armed conflict for over 23 years. In doing so, they have set a living example of the power of an active peace to radically transform conflict. Already well-accustomed to fending for themselves, COVID-19 was another challenge the community faced with solidarity and mutual support, even in the face of criminalisation and land-grabbing from surrounding forces.



## DEFENDERS' SPOTLIGHT: THE SAN JOSÉ DE APARTADÓ PEACE COMMUNITY

For many years, the people of the **Urabá region** lived in the midst of armed conflict, as **guerrilla armies, paramilitaries, and state security forces** vied for control of this strategic area and its natural goods. On **March 23, 1997**, peasants from surrounding villages declared themselves neutral in the face of the violence and established the **San José de Apartadó Peace Community**.

Almost immediately after its establishment, the community came under attack from paramilitary forces, who launched a **lengthy and brutal intimidation campaign**, which included **threats, harassment, violence, and even massacres**. By July 2018, **320 members** of the Peace Community had lost their lives in the



violence. The situation deteriorated even further in 2020, when armed groups set up roadblocks and harassed peasants under the guise of COVID-19 controls.

Nevertheless, the Peace Community continues to courageously struggle for **non-violence, food sovereignty, popular education and community self-management** in the face of fierce opposition. To this end, the community depends on international support and solidarity, including the accompaniment of **PBI Colombia field volunteers**.

## THINK-IN DAY

In February, PBI supporters, board members, and volunteers gathered together in Trinity College Dublin to share **ideas and expectations** for PBI Ireland. This allowed us to discuss our activities with our supporters, while also bringing fresh ideas to the table. Together, we **brainstormed future actions, prioritised areas of work, planned succession possibilities, and developed contingency strategies** to minimise risks to our organisation due to unforeseen circumstances. As you can imagine, these inputs were very helpful in 2020!

# COMMUNICATIONS

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At a time when we were unable to communicate in person, online communications were more important than ever. Throughout our project countries, we witnessed a worrying trend of perpetrators of human rights abuses taking advantage of lockdowns to increase their repression unseen. Our field projects shone a light on these abuses, helping to ensure that perpetrators could not continue to act with impunity. Each week, PBI Ireland aimed to gather together the **most important stories** from across our projects to share with our supporters on our social media. In 2020, we not only achieved this goal, but also **diversified our communications strategy**, developing new ways to increase our newsletter's readability and decrease its production time, and launching new videos based on our events and the experiences of the defenders we accompany in order to amplify their voices even further.

One focal point of our communications in 2020 was a spotlight series on **human rights under lockdown**. In collaboration with the **Latin America Solidarity Centre**, we published three articles examining the impacts of COVID-19 on **freedom of expression, the LGBTQI+ community, and peasant farmers**.

# VOLUNTEERS

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Life in a field project is a challenging but immensely rewarding experience, and as a PBI Country Group, one of our objectives is to encourage Irish volunteers to take part. Not only do volunteers provide invaluable support to defenders while in the field, they also join a growing community of peace ambassadors upon their return. Like other PBI Country Groups, PBI Ireland was founded by one such returned volunteer, **Karen Jeffares**, who stepped down as coordinator in 2020. Karen had volunteered with PBI in Guatemala and Colombia, and brought her passionate support for human rights defenders home to Ireland with her, when she established our organisation in 2014. We thank her for her dedication, and wish her the best of luck in her environmental restoration project, ***Síolta Chroí***. Continuing this tradition, our current coordinator is also a returned PBI field volunteer (PBI Honduras), and long-time PBI Ireland volunteer, **Eimhin O'Reilly**.

Each year, we aim to ensure that **at least one Irish volunteer** takes part in a PBI field project. In spite of lockdowns and travel restrictions around the world, **PBI Ireland was able to meet this goal** and guarantee a constant presence of Irish volunteers in the field. This helped to ensure that Ireland would continue to exceed expectations in human rights volunteering, despite our small size.



## VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT

In 2015, **Sinéad Nolan** joined **PBI Mexico** to accompany and support human rights defenders working on such issues as **land rights, migration, and forced disappearances**. Since her return, Sinéad continued to work in the area of human rights, with such organisations as **Front Line Defenders**, the **Caravana Colombiana**, and currently with the **Irish Council for Civil Liberties**. In addition to volunteering and supporting PBI Ireland, she has also **voluntary experience** working in **homeless services** and with **sex workers** in Dublin. In 2021, Sinéad hopes to continue to deepen her collaboration with PBI Ireland even further.

# TREASURER'S REPORT

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Unfortunately, much of PBI Ireland's fundraising typically centres on in-person activities, such as our annual **pub quiz** and the work of our **volunteers at concerts** throughout the country. As a result, like many other organisations, 2020 was a **particularly difficult year** in terms of fundraising for PBI Ireland. We faced additional challenges when funders were forced to cancel their funding due to COVID-19.

These circumstances forced us to **radically shift our fundraising strategy**. In recognition of the financial hardships our supporters were also facing, we adopted a pay-what-you-can approach in our virtual events, encouraging donations from those who felt able to give, while also allowing anyone with an interest in human rights to tune in free of charge. Thanks to these events, and donations received through an **emergency appeal campaign**, our supporters were instrumental in ensuring PBI Ireland's continued operations throughout 2020.

We also received additional support when our Annual Report was shortlisted for the **2020 Good Governance Awards**, not only providing us with much-needed funds, but also demonstrating our adherence to best practice in good governance. These funds allowed us to maintain a **part-time consultant coordinator** to plan and manage all activities listed in this report.

For more information on our finances, please read our **annual financial statements**, available on our website.

- *Alexandra Capatina, PBI Ireland Treasurer (2020)*

## GOVERNANCE

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Ensuring that PBI Ireland continues to excel in the area of good governance is a top priority for our organisation. PBI Ireland is a **registered charity** (our **Registered Charity Number is 20142391**) and a **company limited by guarantee**.

In 2020, we held **six board meetings** to discuss our activities and ensure best practice in all areas. In addition to these meetings, the chairperson of our board held **fortnightly meetings** with our consultant coordinator to provide additional oversight and support our day-to-day operations. We also held a **virtual AGM**, in which our board roles and other relevant decisions were approved by our members. These actions help us guarantee that all our activities contribute to our strategic plan and overall objectives, and that we operate in compliance with the **Comhlámh Code of Good Practice, Dóchas Code of Conduct** and best practice more generally.

Moreover, as a Country Group of the wider PBI network, we also provided **operational plans and progress reports** on all our activities to the PBI International Office in Brussels, which supports the work of country groups and field projects. This helps us ensure that we are working to the best of our ability and in partnership with all other entities of PBI.

We also take part in several networks across PBI, including **advocacy, fundraising, and volunteer recruitment**, participating on periodic calls in each of these areas with other PBI groups and projects. As part of this network-building, we support the work of the **EU-LAT Network**, of which PBI is a member, and joined the **Irish Coalition for Business and Human Rights** in 2020 as an observer.

## PBI IRELAND BOARD MEMBERS IN 2020

- Iain Atack, **Chairperson** (Board member since 2015)
- Alexandra Capatina, **Treasurer** (Board member since 2020)
- Heidi Riley (Board member since 2019)
- Saoirse Brady (Board member since 2018)
- Robin Hanan (Board member since 2018)

We would also like to thank **Patty Abozaglo**, who stepped down from the board in November 2020, for her hard work and dedication as a board member of PBI Ireland for many years, and for her unwavering commitment to human rights, peace, and social justice.

Please note that our board members are also company directors, and registered as such with the Companies Registration Office.

## LOOKING AHEAD

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2020 was a challenging year in many ways, but it also provided us with valuable lessons for making space for peace under difficult circumstances. We plan to bring these lessons forward into 2021 and continue to find innovative solutions to the challenges we face. Here are just a few of our planned activities for 2021:

- Hold **at least one virtual event** with a human rights defender, and hold an **in-person event** as soon as circumstances allow.
- Launch a new **bilingual video series** in English and Spanish with highlights from interviews with accompanied defenders, for use both in Ireland and Latin America.
- Continue to develop our **social media presence**, with an average of **2.5 English-language updates** from field projects each week on diverse topics relating to human rights.
- Recruit **new board members** and review **all policies and procedures**, developing new ones where necessary, in order to remain at the forefront of good governance in the charity sector.
- Apply for **funding from diverse and new sources** in order to minimise disruption caused by COVID-19.
- Respond **quickly and effectively** to all calls for support from PBI projects.

After a challenging year for all of us, we hope to be able to see you in-person in 2021 as we continue to make space for peace, and celebrate 40 years of PBI. Thank you for your ongoing support.

Peace Brigades International (PBI) is an international NGO that has promoted nonviolence and protected human rights defenders since 1981. PBI provides protection, support and recognition to local human rights defenders who work in areas of repression and conflict and have requested our support.

PBI Ireland was founded in May 2014 at a public meeting in Dublin. We are the most recently-formed country group out of 13 active groups who are based in Europe, the Americas and Oceania.

PBI Ireland is part of a community of Country Groups around the world who are responsible for carrying out vital support work that allows the field programmes to operate smoothly. The work of the Country Groups is integral to the effectiveness of our protection of human rights defenders in the field.

Our registered charity number is 20142391.

Follow us on Facebook at /PBIireland, Twitter at @PBI\_IRELAND,  
and read more about us at [www.pbi-ireland.org](http://www.pbi-ireland.org)

