# Two activists face jail after 33-hour whaling protest on Icelandic vessel



Two environmental activists are facing potential prison sentences after a bold protest against whaling in Iceland. Elyssia Phillips, a British national from Lewes, and Anahita Babaei, an Iranian activist, made headlines when they climbed onto the masts of an active whaling vessel and remained there for 33 hours, aiming to disrupt operations and draw attention to the controversial practice of killing endangered fin whales.

Only Japan, Norway, and Iceland continue to defy the International Whaling Commission’s ban on commercial whaling, an issue that has kept conservationists mobilised for decades. Their protest comes at a particularly sensitive time as Iceland recently allowed whaling to resume after a temporary ban expired on August 31, a decision that has sparked international condemnation and raised alarms about the sustainability of whale populations.

Since their arrest in September 2023, Phillips and Babaei have been charged with three criminal offences, which could lead to six months in prison or substantial fines. Both activists insist that their actions constituted peaceful civil disobedience. Phillips stated, “It is civil disobedience, we didn’t hurt anybody or damage anything. It is us peacefully sitting up there saying we didn’t want the whales to be murdered.” They have accused the Icelandic authorities of making them scapegoats as part of a broader crackdown on dissent following a surge of anti-whaling and anti-fishery protests, as well as demonstrations on unrelated issues, such as immigration laws.

Mounting evidence suggests that whale hunting in Iceland poses significant animal welfare concerns. According to a report by Iceland’s Food and Veterinary Authority, the harpooning method currently in use can leave whales suffering for extended periods, with some animals taking up to two hours to die after being struck. Despite these findings, the Icelandic government, under pressure to respond to conservationist concerns, has issued permits allowing hunting until 2029, detailing restrictions that still permit the capture of hundreds of whales each season.

The aftermath of the protest has left Phillips and Babaei in legal limbo, unable to apply for travel visas, with Babaei particularly anxious about her inability to visit family in Iran. Their lawyer, Linda Emilsdóttir, stated that the prosecution's motivations appear driven more by a desire to suppress protests than by a genuine commitment to justice. Emilsdóttir argued that the prolonged investigation, which has lasted two years, is disproportionate given the nature of the women's actions—characterised as harmless and an integral part of public discourse.

As they await trial, scheduled for January 2026, the activists have taken to crowdfunding to help manage legal fees while voicing that the charges against them lack substantial evidence. Their case reflects a broader climate of rising opposition to whaling in Iceland, as public sentiment increasingly shifts against the practice.

The Icelandic police have yet to respond to inquiries regarding the arrests, and while the UK Foreign Office has not been approached for consular assistance, it has indicated readiness to offer support if necessary. The events surrounding this case have not only reignited discussions about the ethics of whaling but also about the rights of activists to freely express their opposition to practices they deem harmful to the environment.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/elyssia-phillips-whaling-protest-iceland-b2767185.html), [[4]](https://savedolphins.eii.org/news/iceland-returns-to-whaling-amid-protests)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/elyssia-phillips-whaling-protest-iceland-b2767185.html), [[3]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/aug/31/iceland-allows-whaling-to-resume-in-massive-step-backwards), [[7]](https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/ced896w96w3o)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/elyssia-phillips-whaling-protest-iceland-b2767185.html), [[2]](https://www.theargus.co.uk/news/23768526.sussex-woman-occupies-whaling-boat-reykjavik/), [[5]](https://news.mongabay.com/2023/10/icelands-whaling-paradox-commentary/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[6]](https://www.thealbanygazette.com/ThingsToKnow/160053-whaling-opposition-rises-in-iceland-as-govt-ban-looms.html)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/elyssia-phillips-whaling-protest-iceland-b2767185.html), [[4]](https://savedolphins.eii.org/news/iceland-returns-to-whaling-amid-protests)

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/elyssia-phillips-whaling-protest-iceland-b2767185.html> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.theargus.co.uk/news/23768526.sussex-woman-occupies-whaling-boat-reykjavik/> - A woman from Lewes, Elissa, climbed the crow's nest of a whaling boat in Reykjavik to protest against Iceland's decision to lift its whaling ban. She planned to remain there for a week, aiming to prevent the boats from going to sea and to raise awareness about the issue. Iceland had suspended whaling in June, but the ban expired on August 31, allowing whaling to resume. Elissa's protest was a personal statement against the resumption of whaling activities.
3. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/aug/31/iceland-allows-whaling-to-resume-in-massive-step-backwards> - Iceland's government allowed whaling to resume after a temporary ban expired, despite international criticism. The decision followed advice that improvements could reduce suffering, but conservationists argued that harpooning whales remains cruel. The move raised concerns about the future of whaling in Iceland and its impact on whale populations, especially fin whales, which are considered globally vulnerable to extinction.
4. <https://savedolphins.eii.org/news/iceland-returns-to-whaling-amid-protests> - Despite protests, Iceland's last whaling company, Hvalur, resumed hunting fin whales after the government lifted the ban. Activists Elissa Bijou and Anahita Babaei climbed the masts of Hvalur vessels to prevent them from leaving, successfully delaying the hunt for 33 hours. The resumption of whaling has sparked public demonstrations and legal actions against the practice, highlighting ongoing opposition to whaling in Iceland.
5. <https://news.mongabay.com/2023/10/icelands-whaling-paradox-commentary/> - Activists Elissa Bijou and Anahita Babaei climbed the masts of Hvalur 8 and 9 in Reykjavik harbor to prevent whaling vessels from leaving. They held their positions for two days, successfully delaying the hunt and potentially saving four whales. The protest highlighted the activists' commitment to preventing the killing of whales and drew attention to the ongoing whaling activities in Iceland.
6. <https://www.thealbanygazette.com/ThingsToKnow/160053-whaling-opposition-rises-in-iceland-as-govt-ban-looms.html> - As Iceland's government considered lifting its whaling ban, opposition to the practice intensified. Activists, including Elissa Bijou, climbed the masts of whaling boats in Reykjavik to prevent them from going to sea. The protest aimed to raise awareness about the resumption of whaling and to prevent the killing of whales, highlighting the growing public concern over the issue.
7. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/ced896w96w3o> - Iceland issued permits allowing whale hunting until 2029, despite welfare concerns. The permits allow 426 whales to be caught during each whaling season. Animal rights and environmental groups have denounced the move by Iceland's outgoing conservative government. The country is one of only three in the world that still allows whaling, along with Japan and Norway.