

FRONT LINE DEFENDERS

# GLOBAL ANALYSIS

2023/24





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**Cover image:** Indigenous HRDs from Eastern Africa participating in a Front Line Defenders Indigenous Peoples Training Project in May 2023.

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# FOREWORD

## “THEY RESIST, THEY INSIST TO FIGHT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS”

Twenty years ago, I came out of prison (in October 2004), after being detained for exposing the gross violations of human rights in Sudan’s Darfur region. Like many other human rights defenders around the world, I was detained because I saw people – women, children, being displaced, being mistreated, killed and their properties looted and homes set on fire – and I reported on all of the human rights abuses that I saw. It would never have crossed my mind that human beings were capable of doing the harm that I witnessed, to others.

And yet, still today, all over the world, while we have come a long way, as this report will show, the space for human rights continues to shrink globally, and the work of human rights defenders has become even more important, and harder. Years later in Sudan, my home country, militia are committing war crimes reflective of genocide, in the name of power. The human rights defenders who are opposing this, and who are reporting on this, are being severely targeted. They are being detained, forcibly disappeared, tortured, and killed in front of their families. And the world is not talking about it enough.

Sadly, Sudan is only a reflection of the deteriorating situation of human rights across the world. What is happening in Ukraine, Yemen, Libya, Palestine, and many other places, is devastating. Human rights defenders are being left with a heavy load to ensure human rights remains on the agenda of governments. The poor responses from leading governments to the war in Gaza, bring a feeling that we are in a global moral crisis. The outcries of human rights defenders are being ignored. The torture, killing and labelling of human rights defenders in Palestine as “terrorists”, and the lack of response to this by the same leading governments, demonstrates how the moral standard of the free world has decayed. Refugees and asylum seekers seeking protection from such contexts are pushed away, sold out, or taken advantage of.



**Dr. Mudawi Ibrahim Adam**

© AFP Contributor/ Getty Images

There is therefore no doubt that what we are seeing once again is the rise of right-wing governments, and dictatorships, becoming stronger. Human rights violations are now not being stopped by governments, but rather in some spaces, such as China, they are approving them, and conducting them. It is becoming harder for HRDs to resist these power structures without facing dire consequences. The “Right to Protect” has ultimately been betrayed. It feels then, perhaps, such an oxymoron that 2023 marked the 25th anniversary of the adoption of the UN declaration of HRDs.

However, despite all the human rights violations and targeting of us defenders, the recognition of human rights defenders over these 25 years has meant that we have found spaces where we can talk, share, and find solidarity with each other, so that we can work more effectively than before. When I reflect on my hardest times so many years ago when I was first arrested, it is organisations like Front Line Defenders that gave me life and hope. Over these 25 years, this kind of support is a great achievement. One of my fondest memories as a defender is when I was released over 20 years ago. After months of detention, and harrowing conditions such as enduring hunger strikes, isolation, and mistreatment, I was met in my home town with celebrations and crowds of people who were overjoyed to tell me that I was selected and recognised as the first winner of

the Front Line Defenders award for human rights defenders. The people reflected my own feelings of happiness and relief that someone recognised me as a human rights defender, and that I receive some kind of protection. This kind of support, protection, and recognition, is crucial for human rights defenders to advance their work.

As we have noted the continuing rise of the right, we must work together to achieve global solidarity in our spaces. Human rights defenders and organisations who have the privilege of operating in countries where there is more respect for human rights, and functioning democracies, must work harder to assist those struggling against dictatorships and human rights abuse. It is important to elect to their governments persons who have respect for human rights, which can translate in the global political sphere by making sure those who come to power are committed to advance human rights globally. We have to push to protect the Responsibility to Protect – with the UN, with governments who have neglected this responsibility, and with lawmakers, policymakers and international institutions. It is a crucial time to support the work of HRDs in order to empower them in their own societies through laws and practises that protect human rights. This is what is needed with global solidarity.

I continue to find inspiration through the dedication and the commitment of HRDs all over the world; their plea for society to be free from violations; and their dedication to upholding the values of human rights. I am inspired by HRDs who are fighting for the rights of their own people, in their own land, at great costs to themselves. Those who face torture and mistreatment as a result of their resistance but still continue. I am inspired by HRDs who are fighting for equality, fighting against discrimination, slavery, in difficult situations. I'm inspired by those who are facing dangers day to day, and still decide to stay. I see these defenders all over the world – in China, Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and even Europe. Most especially, those who have lost their lives on the frontlines. Despite all the difficulties, despite the shrinking space for human rights, and despite the consequences, amidst the moral decay, what HRDs are doing are morally conquering their oppressors, and that is something which cannot be taken away, ever.

### **Dr. Mudawi Ibrahim Adam**

*Dr. Mudawi Ibrahim Adam is a Sudanese human rights defender and engineer known for his role in exposing human rights violations in Darfur. He is the founder and Chairperson of the Sudan Social Development Organization (SUDO), which works on human rights as well as water, sanitation and health. In recognition of his perseverance in promoting and defending human rights in Sudan, Dr. Mudawi Ibrahim Adam received the inaugural Front Line Defenders Award for Human Rights Defenders at Risk in 2005. At the time of the presentation, Dr Mudawi was in detention in Khartoum having been arrested for the third time in 18 months on 9 May 2005. In 2012, he was awarded the Jonas Weiss prize for his work against the abuse, killings and displacement of peoples in Darfur and other human rights violations in Sudan.*



At least **300 human rights defenders** from **28 countries** were killed in 2023 in an attempt to silence them and stop their work. The Human Rights Defenders Memorial pays tribute to all of them:

### **Afghanistan**

Nasser Khalid  
Toryali Rustam Khel

### **Bangladesh**

Golam Rabbani Nadim  
Shahidul Islam

### **Brazil**

Nawir Brito de Jesus  
Samuel Cristiano do Amor Divino  
José Inácio Guajajara  
Valdemar Marciano Guajajara  
Raniel Barbosa Laurindo  
Rodrigo Hawerth  
Raimundo Ribeiro da Silva  
Luis Fernando de Jesus Santana  
Gilson Silva da Rosa  
Lindomar Dias de Souza  
Ilson Xiriana  
Angelita Prororita Yanomami  
Bernadete Pacífico  
Venâncio Xirixana  
Nhandesy Sebastiana Gautó  
Nhanderu Rufino Velasque  
Tymbektodem Arara  
José Carlos dos Santos  
José Alberto Moreno Mendes  
Josimar da Silva Pereira  
Agnaldo da Silva  
Ana Paula Costa Silva  
Aldecy Vitorino Barros  
Lucas Santos de Oliveira

### **Cameroon**

Martinez Zogo  
Jean-Jacques Ola Bebe

### **China**

Sun Lin "Jie Mu"

### **Colombia**

Mariela Reyes Montenegro  
Cristian Fernández Salinas Chocué  
Jaime Álvarez Romero  
José Humberto Sierra Soto "La Gata"  
Samuel Sabi Dorado  
José Isaías Yandi Pacho  
Alfredo Arrieta Vitola  
Arley Jaramillo Monsalve  
Berna Nastascuás Paí  
Edilsan Andrade Avirama  
José Antonio Santiago Pérez  
Jorge Adolfo Cárdenas Fajardo  
Yeisson Jácome Jácome  
Milton Rocha Peña  
Shaina Vanessa Pretel  
Rosa Elena Celix Guañarita  
Abelardo Duarte Moncada  
Marlon Hernando García Pascal  
Néstor Enriquez Martínez Brito  
Wilson Andrés Bomba Piamba  
Weimar Possú Díaz  
José Eduardo Cárdenas Mosquera  
Albert Camilo Mendoza Corzo  
Diego Jair Orbes Mecha  
Raúl Antonio Nastacuás  
Gonzalo de Jesús Parra Forero  
Mariela Marínes Gaviria  
Línder Stiven Rodríguez Sepúlveda  
Lenis Yaneth Salazar Vera  
Jaime León López Carmona  
Herney Muñoz Muñoz  
Luis Alberto Quiñones Cortés  
Juan Hilario Banguero Colorado  
Rodolfo de Jesús Holguín Martínez  
Alfonso Hernando Medina  
Diana Carolina Rodríguez Madrigal

Gustavo Muñoz Mojomboy  
Reinel Ospina Delgado  
Luisa Isabel Moreno Guataquirá  
Hernando Montoya Melo  
Jairo de Jesús Zuleta Álvarez  
Sorelsi Johana Echevarría Cañas  
José Isaías Quiguanás Musicué  
Gilberto Antonio Rivera López  
Mary Cruz Petro Villalba  
Carlos Andrés Torres Gutiérrez  
Diego Fernando Papamija Chillito  
Jhon William Vargas Peña  
Gustavo Rafael González Salgado  
Carlos Osorio Jaramillo  
Johan Marcelo Montaña Montaña  
Jhon Freddy Rueda Rodríguez  
Dania Sharith Polo Solorzano "La Pola"  
Herinsol Libardo Mora Rodríguez  
Libia Quiguanás  
Wladimiro Tirado Bega  
Hugo Horacio Burgos Ramírez  
Guido Idelber Gómez Hoyos  
Hegils Edimer Escorcía Carranza  
Jairo Enrique Tombé  
Luis Gabriel Martínez Pérez  
Custodio Yucuna Tanimuca  
Marcelino Martínez Cuadros  
Francisco Javier López Parra  
Emiro Nel Sánchez Medrano  
Marcelino Dagua Baicué  
Blanca Ligia Marín Velásquez  
Juan Alexander Chocué Peña  
Sebastian Lucumí Mina  
Armando Mosquera Trujillo  
Gonzalo Bocanegra Botache  
Nelson Medina Muñoz  
Pablo Enrique Rodríguez

José Hernán Tenorio Mestizo  
Albán Mestizo Yosando  
Yonnís Orfilio García Nastacuas  
Helmer Luligo Restrepo  
Ludís Esther García Jaramillo  
Hever Gamboa Gamboa  
Rigoberto Mendoza Ospina  
Alex Germán García Guanga  
Franklin Elías Pabón Camacho  
Salomón Durán  
Camilo Guanga Nastacuás  
Tiberio Chepe Zeti  
Carlos Mario Roldán Díaz  
Yecid Humberto Pechené Musicué  
Pedro Chocué Poche  
Mauricio Contreras  
José Rubiel Güetia  
Herney Antonio Arrieta Mesa  
Martín Darys Escobar Barón  
Marcos Fidel Jiménez Bohórquez  
Luis Miguel Echavarría  
Ferley Fernández Rojas  
John Kevin Taicús Guanga  
Edwin Manuel Tapia Gaviria  
William Alberto Álvarez Domínguez  
Jhon Freddy Castillo Gutiérrez  
Alba Karina Velasco  
Steven Chalarca Marulanda  
José Arley Cruz Chocué  
Héctor Enrique Rodríguez Torres  
Omar Antonio Hernández Simanca  
Samuel Avendaño  
Gerardo Efraín Chávez Chistial  
Rubén Darío Patiño Cuervo  
Gustavo Adolfo Ortiz Murillo  
Yamili Bernal García  
Miller Silva Rosero  
Felipe Castro Pinillo  
Juan David Chávez Yoino  
Daniel Andrés Rivas Prieto  
José Luis Alape  
José Antonio Fondí Otero  
Hermilson Layton Forero  
Hugo Arley Muñoz Palacio  
Jhair Fernando Rivera Pérez  
Elkin Jesús Díaz  
Leniz Rojas Silva  
Luis Miguel Mendoza Aléan  
Rogelio Chate Peña

Luis Alberto Quintero Díaz  
María Isabel Ramos Alzate  
Phanor Guazaquillo Peña  
Pedro Pablo Salas Sánchez  
Robiro Rojas Benavides  
Bryan Camilo Osuna Gómez  
Robert Fernández  
Henry Acero Parra  
Luis Eberto Pineda Peña  
Tulia Carrillo Lizarazo  
Rozanna Delgado Trujillo  
Diego Antonio Arrieta López  
Marino Pavi Julicue  
Carlos Alberto Romero Martínez  
Fabio Alonso Palacio Romero  
Carlos Arturo Quijano Velasco  
John Freiman Ramos Ocaña  
Eliecer Puyo Chocué  
Martha Yolanda Benavidez Segura  
Luis Parra Toroca

#### **Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)**

Obedí Karafuru

#### **Ecuador**

Eduardo Mendúa

#### **El Salvador**

Marleni del Carmen Reyes

#### **Eswatini (fmr. "Swaziland")**

Thulani Rudolf Maseko

#### **Guatemala**

Nicolasa Lopez Méndez  
Victoria Méndez Agustín  
Sonia Janeth Guevara  
Doris Aldana  
Francisco Gonzalo Velásquez Gómez  
Noe Gómez Barrera

#### **Honduras**

Aly Domínguez  
Jairo Bonilla  
Omar Cruz Tomé  
Ricardo Arnául Montero  
Santos Hipólito Rivas  
Javier Rivas  
Benigno Maldonado  
José Gilberto Martínez Cardona  
Amílcar Vieda  
Naún Ismael Chacón

Jacinto Adonay Meza  
Martín Morales Martínez  
Óscar Oqueli Domínguez  
Mónica Alondra Santos Munguía  
Soraya Álvarez  
Juana María Martínez  
José David Fortín  
Gabriela Rodríguez Rodríguez  
Kevin Meza

#### **India**

Ramakrishna  
Shashikant Warishe  
Washim Sajad  
Sarbuddeen  
Sendhu Munda  
Nalla Ramakrishnaiah  
Mohammad Haroun Mian

#### **Indonesia**

Gijik

#### **Iran**

Mohabbat Mozaffari  
Maryam Arvin  
Ebrahim Rigi

#### **Lebanon**

Issam Abdallah

#### **Mauritania**

Souvi Ould Jibril Ould Cheine

#### **México**

Remigio de la Cruz López  
Isaúl Nemesio Zambrano  
Miguel Estrada Reyes  
Rolando Mauno Zambrano  
Anonymous  
Constantino Silvestre Pacheco Luis  
Abisai Pérez Romero  
Alfredo Cisneros Madrigal  
Gustavo Robles Taboada  
Eustacio Alcalá Díaz  
Félix Vicente Cruz  
Juan Medina  
Teresa Magueyal  
Hortensia Felipe Santiago  
Esthela Guadalupe Estrada Ávila  
Álvaro Arvizu Aguiñiga  
Ivanna Divina Jhons  
Manuel Flores Reyes  
Román Flores Hernández



Noel López Gallegos  
Ulises Salvador Nava Juárez  
Gregorio de la Cruz  
Lorenzo Froylán de la Cruz  
Gloria Cañez Chávez  
Norberto Márquez Molina  
Jesús Toral García  
Ociel Baena Saucedo  
Adolfo Enríquez Vanderkam  
Higinio Trinidad de la Cruz  
Karina Dominguez Rubio

### **Mozambique**

João Fernando Chamusse

### **Nicaragua**

Yesmin Jacobo Lázaro  
Lenin Vilchez Patrón Flores  
Alberto Castillo Palacios  
Jorge Enor Palacios Samuel  
Manuel Morgan Díaz Palacios  
Bernabé Palacios Hernández  
Sergio Julián Juan  
Serato Juwith Charly  
Clen Dixon Fernández

### **Palestine**

Mohammad Al-Salhi  
Ibrahim Mohammad Lafi  
Saeed Al-Taweel  
Mohammed Sobh  
Bilal Jadallah  
Mahmoud Abu Nujaila  
Ahmad Al Sahar  
Zeyad Tatari  
Samer Abu Daqqa

### **Paraguay**

Arnaldo Benítez Vargas

### **Peru**

Cristino Melchor Flores  
Santiago Contoricón Antúnez  
Quinto Inuma Alvarado  
Benjamín Flores Ríos

### **Philippines**

Danny Malinao  
Arije Velasco Salvador  
Alex Dolorosa  
Crispin Tingal Jr.  
Cresenciano Bundoquin "Cris"  
Roly Fausto  
Emelda Fausto  
Rey Almario Belan  
Maria Saniata Liwliwa Gonzales  
Alzate  
Jude Thaddeus Fernandez

### **Rwanda**

John Williams Ntwali

### **Sudan**

Mohammed Ahmed Kudia  
Khamis Arabab  
Khidir Sulieman Abdelmageed  
Abd Elrazeg Adam Mohammed  
Tareg Hassan Yagoub Elmalik  
El Sadeg Mohammed Ahmed Haroun  
Ahmed Mohamed Abdella  
Bahjaa Abdelaa Abdelaa

### **Thailand**

Bounsuan Kitiyano

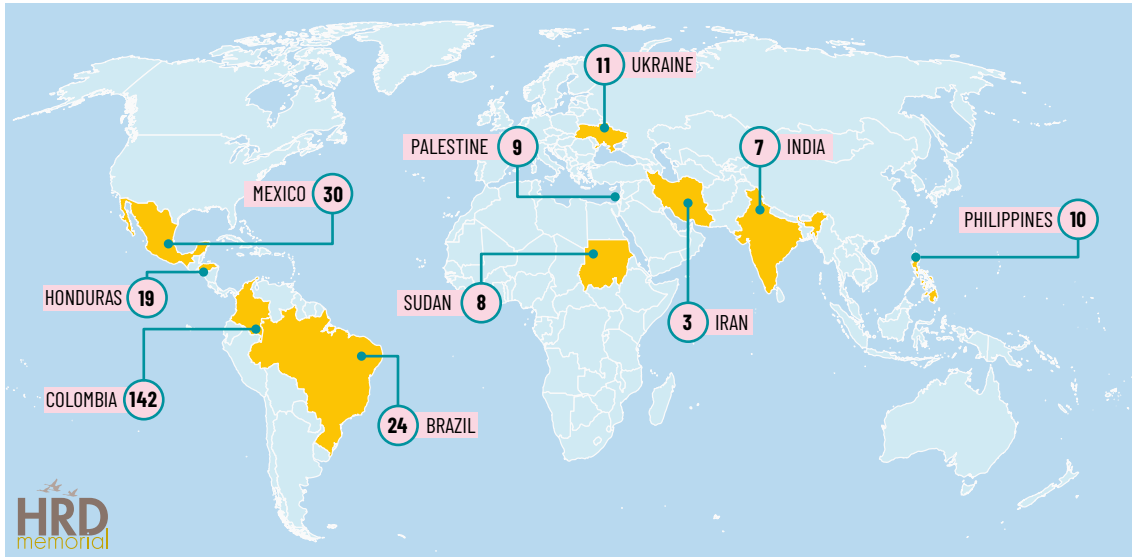
### **Ukraine**

Denys Sosnenko  
Pete Reed  
Bodgan Bitik  
Arman Soldin  
Svitlana Klymenko  
Yuriy Holovin  
Victoria Amelina  
Olha Ochkas  
Anthony Ihnat "Tonko"  
Emma Igual  
Serhiy Shalyhin

# HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS MEMORIAL



<https://hrdmemorial.org>



**In 2023, the HRD Memorial documented the killings of 300 HRDs in 28 countries.**

Colombia:	142 <sup>1</sup>	Guatemala:	6	El Salvador:	1
Mexico:	30	Peru:	4	Eswatini (fmr. "Swaziland"):	1
Brazil:	24	Iran:	3	Indonesia:	1
Honduras:	19	Afghanistan:	2	Lebanon:	1
Ukraine:	11	Bangladesh:	2	Mauritania:	1
Philippines:	10	Cameroon:	2	Mozambique:	1
Nicaragua:	9	China:	1	Paraguay:	1
Palestine:	9	Democratic Republic of		Rwanda:	1
Sudan:	8	Congo (DRC):	1	Thailand:	1
India:	7	Ecuador:	1		

<sup>1</sup> In Colombia in 2023, at least 18 social and community leaders were killed in the context of an increase in political violence ahead of the October 2023 regional elections. Based on the HRD Memorial verifications conducted by Programa Somos Defensores, their targeting seems to be directly related to either their involvement in political campaigns, their participation in pre-electoral political activity, or their candidacy to the local level government administrations and not to their human rights work. These cases have not been included in the list of killings perpetrated against HRDs in Colombia in 2023.

**At least 300 HRDs were killed in 2023** in an attempt to silence their peaceful, vital human rights work, and suffocate communities who stand up for their rights.

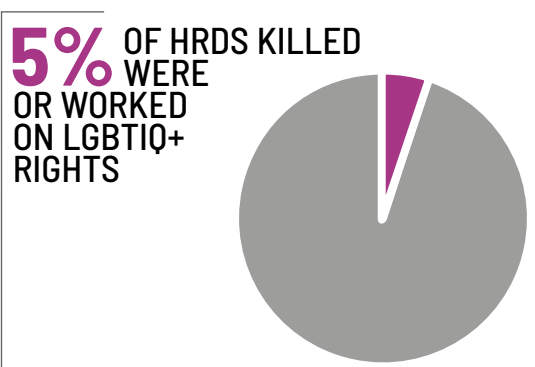
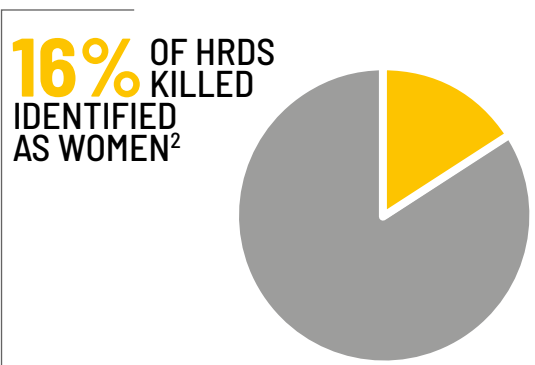
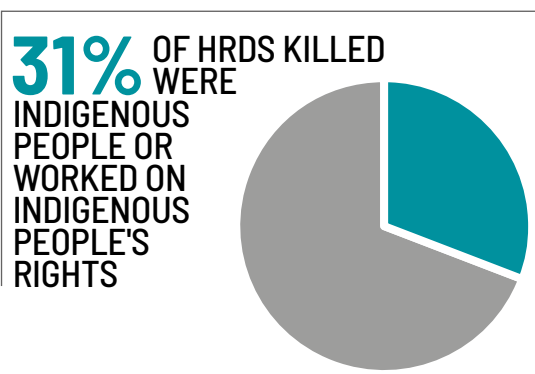
**79% of killings** registered by HRD Memorial partners were perpetrated **in the Americas**, with Colombia leading the infamous ranking followed by Mexico, Brazil and Honduras. Asia accounted for 8% of the killings and Africa, MENA and ECA for 5%, 4,3% and 3,7% respectively. It is likely that more human rights defenders were killed in 2023. However, the dismantlement of local human rights groups, death threats, mass surveillance, foreign funding restrictions and armed conflicts prevented the documentation of these cases in several countries and regions, particularly in Asia, Africa and MENA.

**49** of the defenders killed identified as **women**, including transwomen, and **14** were members of the **LGBTIQ+** community and defended its rights.

**Indigenous peoples' rights defenders** were the most targeted group in 2023, with a total of **92 killings** registered in Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, Indonesia, Mexico, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Peru and the Philippines. A total of **64** people who defended environmental and land rights were killed in Brazil, Colombia, Guatemala, Honduras, India, Mexico, Peru and the Philippines.

**11** human rights defenders were killed as a result of **torture and ill-treatment**,

and **7** died in suspicious circumstances, including suspicious suicides. Despite the enormous difficulties to document human rights violations in contexts of conflict, HRD Memorial partners verified the direct targeting and killing of **19** human rights defenders by the military in the context of armed conflicts. **199** human rights defenders were shot to death either by state or non-state actors, including paramilitary and criminal groups.



Source: HRD Memorial (2023)

<sup>2</sup> Including Transwomen.

The HRD Memorial is a joint, global initiative by a network of human rights organisations including: ACI-Participa (Honduras); Amnesty International; Comité Cerezo (Mexico); FIDH; Front Line Defenders; Global Witness; Human Rights Defenders' Alert- India; Karapatan (the Philippines); OMCT; El Programa Somos Defensores (Colombia); Red TDT (Mexico); and UDEFEGUA (Guatemala).

The HRD Memorial data shown here is a presentation of the cases of verified killings of HRDs that have taken place between 1 January – 31 December 2023. It is likely that this dataset is incomplete as partners continue to gather and verify cases. In some regions and countries, including Afghanistan, China, Ethiopia, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Myanmar, Libya, Palestine<sup>3</sup> or Sudan, the documentation of cases is highly challenging, if not virtually impossible. Documentation challenges include: armed conflicts<sup>4</sup>; killings in remote areas having gone unreported; self-censorship by and trauma within

communities, organisations and individuals at risks of reprisals; restrictions on the right to freedom of expression and association; suppression of information by vested state and non-state interest groups; and total closure of civic space.

The HRD Memorial acknowledges the risks individuals and organisations take to document and verify cases of killings of HRDs in areas, regions and countries affected by conflicts, mass displacement, under repressive regimes and dictatorships. They often put their own lives at risk to make sure the truth is known and the legacy of hundreds of human rights defenders killed every year is not forgotten.

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3 In Gaza, Occupied Palestinian Territory, since 7 October 2023, over 300 Palestinian health workers were killed either through direct targeting by the Israeli forces or as a result of indiscriminate shelling against civilians and civilian infrastructure. At least 23 independent journalists were killed under Israeli airstrikes. The verification of these cases was ongoing at the time of publication of the Global Analysis and this is why they have not been included in the 2023 dataset.

4 In conflict areas, the HRD Memorial counted as killings of HRDs instances of direct targeting of defenders, including journalists documenting the conflict, as well as humanitarian personnel and medical personnel providing access to health care and support to civilians, respectively, at the time of the targeting. Direct targeting of medical personnel included deliberate and indiscriminate attacks against health care facilities

# GLOBAL STATISTICS

## HOW HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS ARE TARGETED AROUND THE WORLD

The following statistics are derived from Front Line Defenders' casework and approved grant applications between 1 January and 31 December 2023. The statistics are based on 1,538 reported violations in 105 countries. Front Line Defenders documents multiple violations per case or grant, as this is the reality of the situation for human rights defenders.

The information Front Line Defenders receives is dependent on HRDs being aware of the organisation; as such, this data can not be seen as wholly representative for all HRDs in all countries. Therefore, this data should serve as an indicator – but not a comprehensive report – of the scope of the violations that human rights defenders face on a daily basis. The data are not exhaustive but reflect key trends reported through these two programme areas. Furthermore, incidents of killings have been removed and are addressed in the HRD Memorial data.

The following tables show the breakdown of the most common violations as reported to Front Line Defenders in 2023. The percentages shown reflect the violations experienced as a proportion of the total number of violations to which each group was exposed.

All the data in the Global Chapter exclude Afghanistan, as Front Line Defenders has specific funding that provided 241 protection grants for Afghan HRDs and including this data in the annual statistics would skew the results, in a way that would not be helpful to understanding the situation of HRDs on a global scale. Nevertheless, the data on most reported violations and most targeted areas of human rights defence for Afghan HRDs is reflected in the Asia-Pacific chapter in a separate table.

## GLOBAL VIOLATIONS

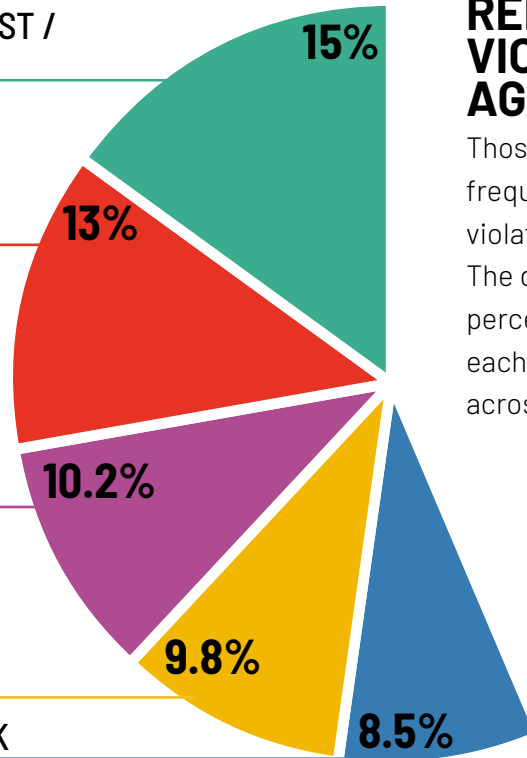
ARBITRARY ARREST /  
DETENTION

LEGAL ACTION

DEATH THREAT

SURVEILLANCE

PHYSICAL ATTACK

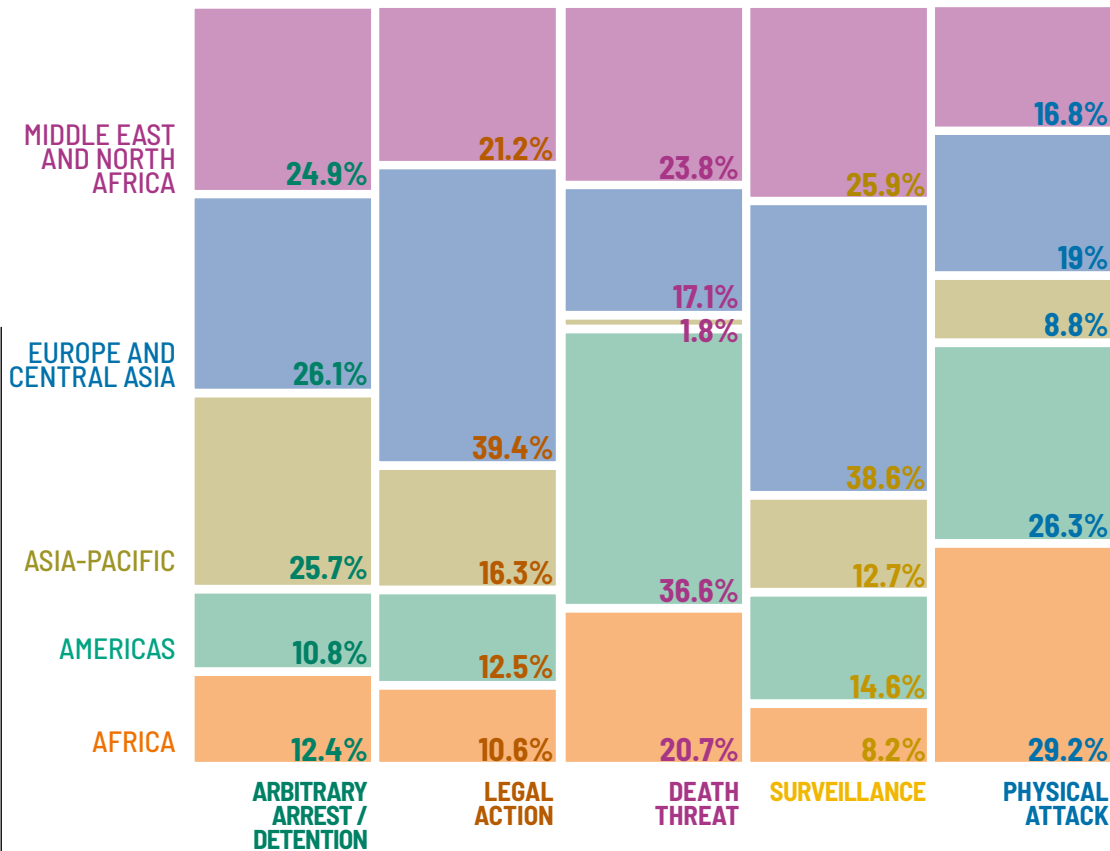


## MOST REPORTED VIOLATIONS AGAINST HRDS

Those are the 5 most frequently reported violations by HRDs globally. The data below indicates the percentage breakdown of each of those violations across the five regions.

Source: Front Line Defenders (2023)

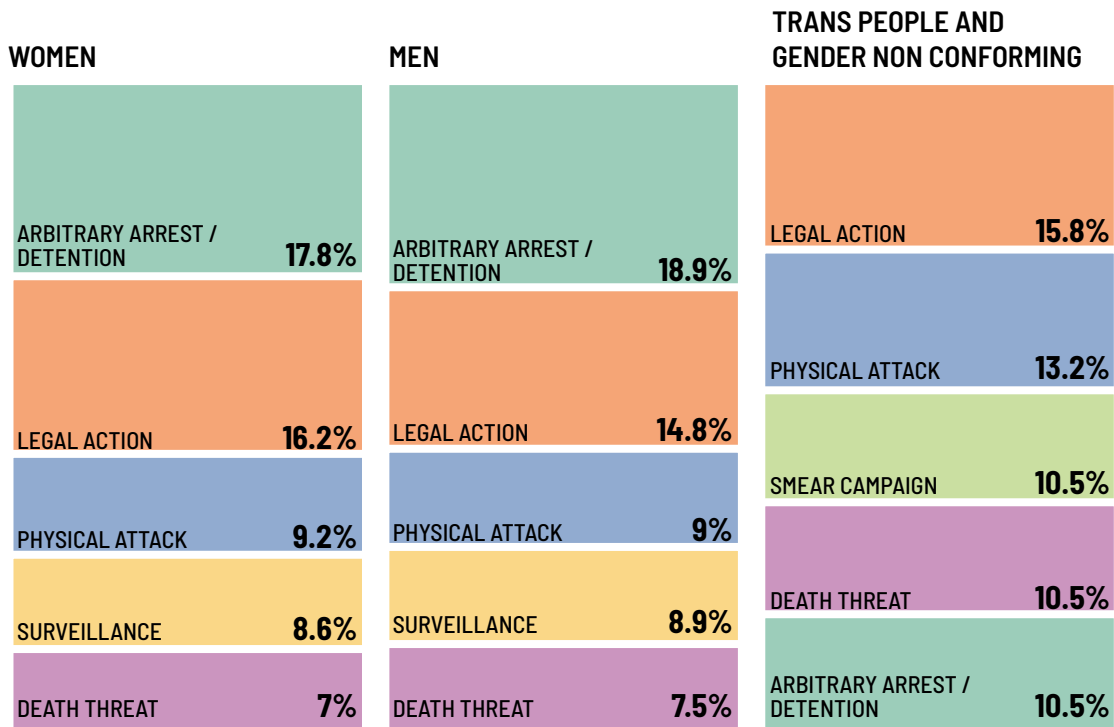
## % OF VIOLATIONS PER REGION



Source: Front Line Defenders (2023)

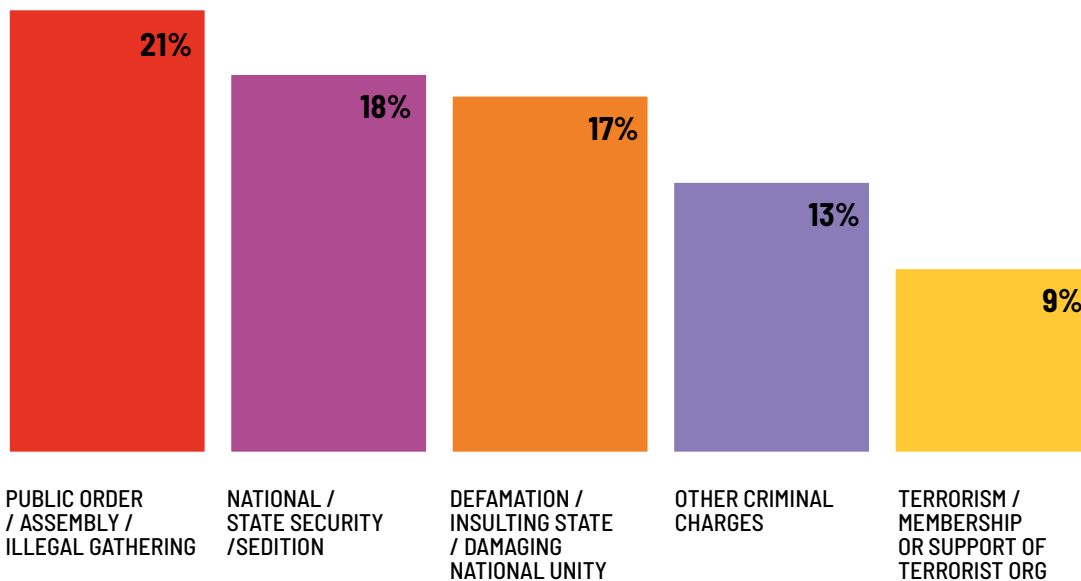
# MOST REPORTED VIOLATIONS AGAINST HRDS BY GENDER

The tables below indicate the most common threats HRDs face based on gender.



Source: Front Line Defenders (2023)

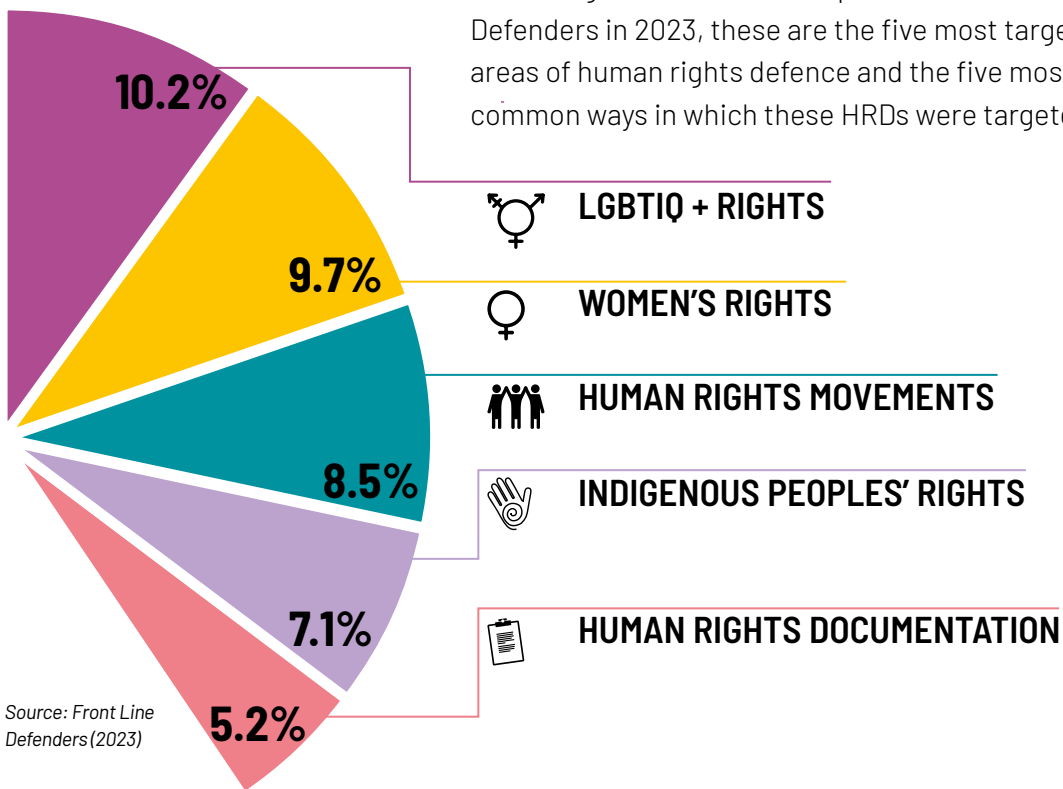
# 5 MOST COMMONLY CITED LEGAL CHARGES RECORDED AGAINST HRDS, BASED ON 163 CHARGES FILED IN 121 CASES



Source: Front Line Defenders (2023)

# AREAS OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENCE

According to the violations reported to Front Line Defenders in 2023, these are the five most targeted areas of human rights defence and the five most common ways in which these HRDs were targeted.



Source: Front Line Defenders (2023)

## MOST REPORTED VIOLATIONS AGAINST EACH AREA OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENCE



LGBTIQ+ RIGHTS

PHYSICAL ATTACK	16%
SURVEILLANCE	10.5%
DEATH THREAT	9.8%
LEGAL ACTION	9.2%
ARBITRARY ARREST / DETENTION	7.4%



WOMEN'S RIGHTS

SURVEILLANCE	12.8%
DEATH THREAT	12.1%
LEGAL ACTION	10.2%
THREATS / OTHER HARASSMENT	10.2%
ARBITRARY ARREST / DETENTION	9.6%



HUMAN RIGHTS DOCUMENTATION

ARBITRARY ARREST / DETENTION	19.7%
LEGAL ACTION	17.2%
DEATH THREAT	12.3%
RESTRICTIONS TO FREEDOM*	7.4%
RAID / BREAK-IN / THEFT	6.1%



INDIGENOUS PEOPLES' RIGHTS

DEATH THREAT	19.6%
PHYSICAL ATTACK	13.7%
LEGAL ACTION	12.7%
ARBITRARY ARREST / DETENTION	11.7%
SURVEILLANCE	7.8%



HUMAN RIGHTS MOVEMENTS

ARBITRARY ARREST / DETENTION	23.1%
SURVEILLANCE	16.4%
LEGAL ACTION	11.1%
DEATH THREAT	6.7%
THREATS / OTHER HARASSMENT	5.9%

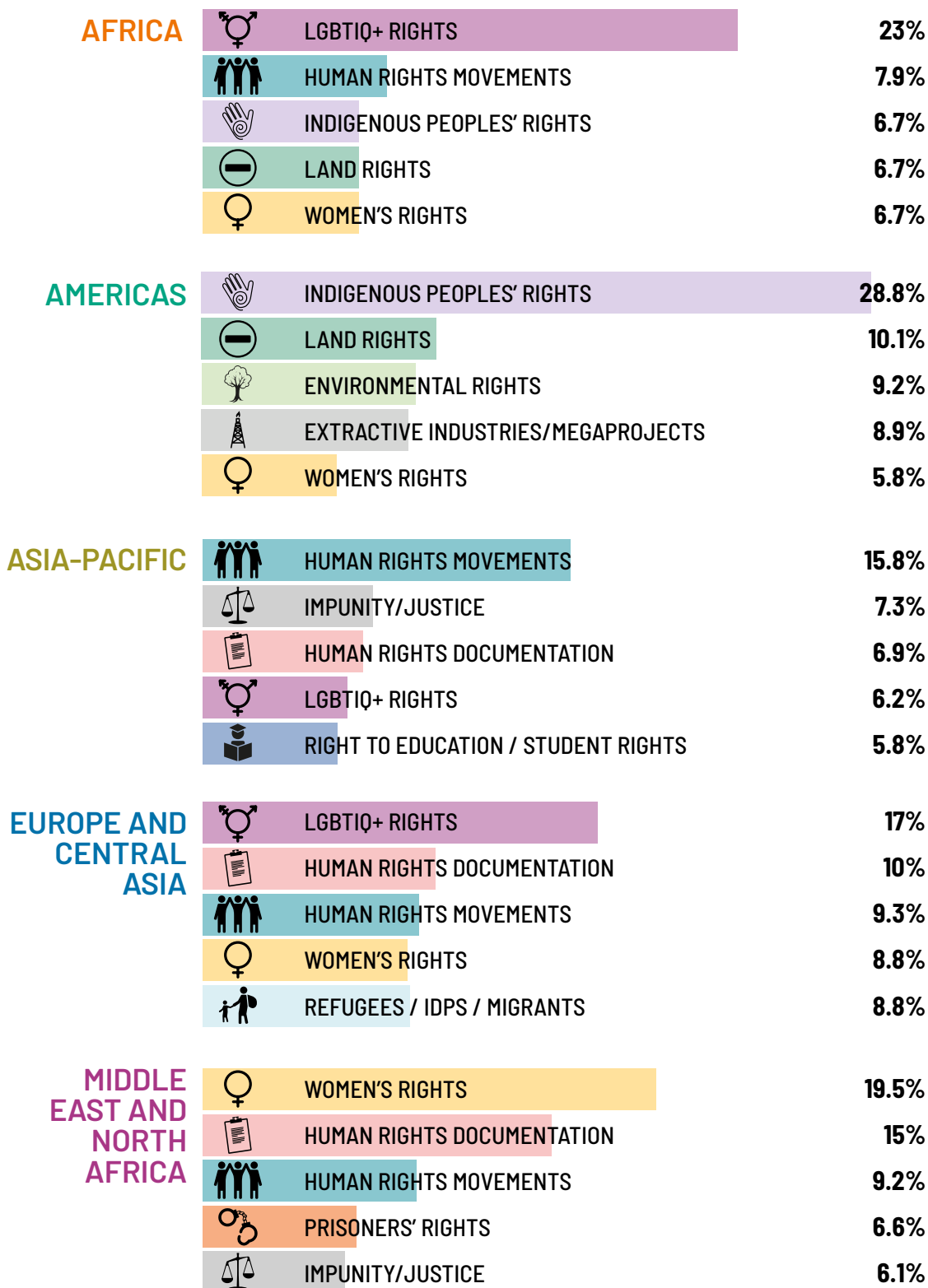
\*Dissolution/liquidation of NGO and other restrictions to freedom of association

Source: Front Line Defenders (2023)



# TRENDS ACROSS THE REGIONS

## FIVE MOST TARGETED AREAS OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENCE BY REGION

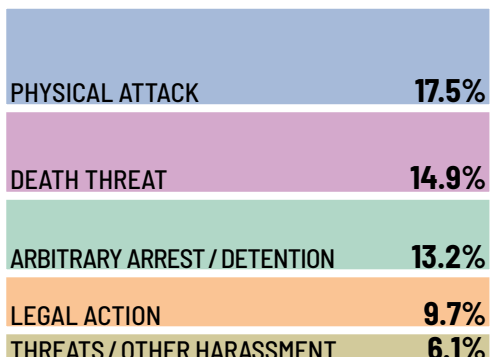


Source: Front Line Defenders (2023)

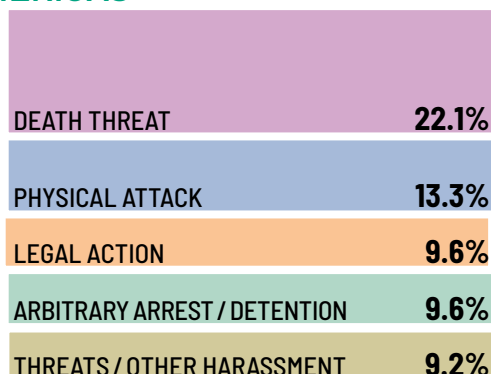
# TRENDS ACROSS THE REGIONS

## MOST REPORTED VIOLATIONS BY REGION

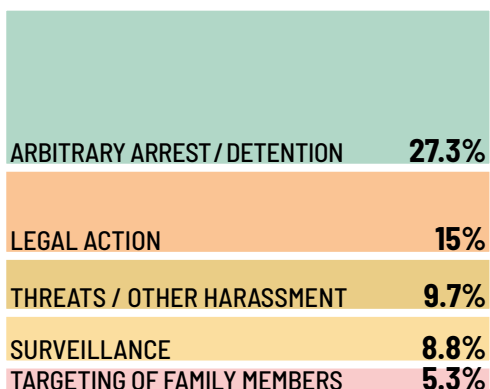
### AFRICA



### AMERICAS



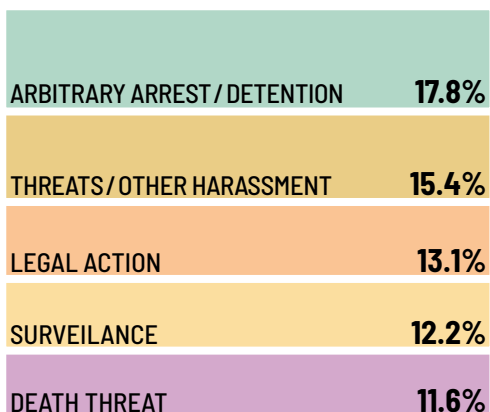
### ASIA-PACIFIC



### EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA



### MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA



Source: Front Line Defenders (2023)

# GLOBAL

The year 2023 marked 75 years since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was adopted, laying the foundations for the international human rights architecture, and 25 years since the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders was adopted. It was a year in which there was much reflection on the global state of human rights and human rights defenders (HRDs). Over the past quarter century, a framework relating to the protection of HRDs has been developed and, in many jurisdictions, the roles of defenders have been normalised, promoted and supported.

HRDs themselves have been vital to this progress. By demonstrating their effectiveness, they have made a strong argument for the need for greater protection. Through their actions, defenders have delivered on the promise of the UDHR to millions of people by successfully claiming and protecting rights that should never have been contested in the first place. They have fought often unpopular and lonely battles for those rights, developed bottom-up proposals and, by imagining new languages around human rights, have expanded the concepts of justice and fairness. This has been particularly [noticeable](#) in the areas of **women's rights** and **LGBTIQ+ rights** where, although much remains to be done, there has been extraordinary progress since 1998. Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) have led movements for equality in the workplace and recognition of unpaid work, to introduce bans on child marriage, and outlaw female genital mutilation, to decriminalise abortion, and criminalise sexual violence in marriage. LGBTIQ+ defenders have been at the forefront of the push to secure equal rights – at the time of the adoption of the HRD Declaration, same-sex marriage was [not permitted](#) in any country. Today it is legal in [35 countries](#) in four regions of the world, albeit mostly in Europe and the Americas. Trade Unionists, indigenous and environmental rights defenders have also helped to propel the climate crisis onto the international agenda.

As the data from the HRD Memorial highlight once again this year, HRDs continue to pay with their lives for this work, articulating the gap between the HRD protection framework described below and the everyday realities faced by defenders.

Biennial resolutions have been adopted at the UN General Assembly and the UN Human Rights Council, with most passing by consensus, further cementing the place of HRDs within the normative human rights standards. Several states in Latin America have established (flawed) protection mechanisms for defenders while in west Africa, HRD Protection Laws have become [increasingly common](#). Rapporteurships on Human Rights Defenders have been created at the UN, the African Commission on Human and People's Rights and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. **The Escazú Agreement** in Latin America specifically recognises the role of environmental defenders and obliges States Parties to protect them, while in 2022 States Parties to the Aarhus Convention established the position of Special Rapporteur on Environmental Defenders to promote their protection under the legally binding Convention.

Some governments and institutions in the Global North, including the EU, have developed guidelines for their diplomatic missions abroad to support HRDs in third countries and, more recently, businesses have also begun to recognise the legitimacy of and risks faced by defenders in the context of business and human rights.<sup>1</sup>

With all of these positive developments, it would seem that the international environment for human rights defenders has never been more encouraging or better supported. Yet the experiences of defenders prove otherwise, exemplified by the documented killing of nearly 3000 defenders in the last decade.<sup>2</sup> In 2023, the HRD Memorial recorded the killing of 300 HRDs. Furthermore, the distance between the rhetorical support for human rights defenders and the political and practical support they needed was so badly exposed in 2023. This was manifested most bluntly in the international response to Israel's savage assault on Gaza, following Hamas' heinous crimes on 7 October. The much vaunted principle of universality of human rights was nowhere to be seen.

## ISRAEL'S WAR ON GAZA AND THE INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE

Although it rapidly became clear that Israel's military response would not be within the parameters of international law, and that civilians, including HRDs and their families, were overwhelmingly bearing the brunt of the attacks, many Western countries failed to support, or vetoed, calls for a ceasefire for over two months, and only then without unanimity.

On 8 December the US [vetoed](#) a Security Council resolution calling for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire on the same day that the UN Secretary General [warned](#) of "the total collapse of the humanitarian support system" in **Gaza**. Two days later, on 10 December to

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1 Canada, the EU, Finland, Ireland, Norway, Switzerland, the UK and the US have diplomatic guidelines on the protection of human rights defenders.

2 See at : <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/global-analysis>.

mark International Human Rights Day and the 75th anniversary of the UN Declaration of Human Rights, the US Ambassador to the UN [remarked](#) that the Declaration “represents our shared aspirations that all human beings are considered equal in rights and dignity, *no matter where they live or who they are.*”

By the time of the Security Council vote in December, over 17,000 Palestinians had already been [reported](#) killed. Two thirds of those killed were women and children. In an October [statement](#) to the Security Council on the theme of Women, Peace and Security, the UK Ambassador spoke about the “impact of conflict on women’s lives”, how this was particularly true for WHRDs and finished by saying in relation to the protection of women in conflict, “(l)et’s commit to moving from words to action.” Six weeks later, the same Ambassador abstained on behalf of the UK in the Security Council vote on a ceasefire on 8 December.

HRDs were among those killed, including journalist and cameraman **Samer Abu Daqqa** who was killed in Khan Yunis by an Israeli strike in December. He had been covering the aftermath of an Israeli attack on a United Nations-run school sheltering displaced people in the city.<sup>3</sup> He is one of dozens of journalists killed in Gaza since 7 October in what [appears](#) to be a concerted effort on behalf of the Israeli military to silence reporting on the scale of the devastation.

While the **UK** and **German** Foreign Ministers [called](#) for a ‘sustainable ceasefire’ on 16 December, three days earlier both States had [abstained](#) in a UN General Assembly resolution calling for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire, while **the US, Austria** and **Czechia** voted against. Around the same time, efforts by a handful of EU Member States to push the EU Council to support a ceasefire [failed](#), with Austria and Czechia voting against. Six months previously, at an event to mark the 30th anniversary of the Vienna World Conference on Human Rights, Austrian Foreign Minister Alexander Schallenberg [stated](#) that “[o]nly through the universal application of human rights can we achieve lasting peace and security... At a time of permacrisis, we have to make sure that our joint commitment to the universality of human rights and rule of law remains a top priority.”

These promises, followed by actions which totally negated the sentiments expressed, epitomise for human rights defenders the hypocrisy at the heart of the human rights project in the Global North. These complaints of course are not new; HRDs have for years called on the US, the EU and others to match their words with actions on defenders in States where they have geopolitical or strategic interests, including for example in **India, Rwanda** and **Saudi Arabia**. Yet it is the scale of the disconnect between the values stated and the actions undertaken, the scale of the suffering endured and its real-time reporting by Palestinian HRDs, that has caused a further rupturing of trust between human rights

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3 Documented by the HRD Memorial.

defenders and many Western countries. These States are held to a higher standard because it is they who have repeatedly pledged support for and to human rights defenders.

And this support is provided, though inconsistently; some States in the Global North provide the overwhelming majority of government funding for the protection of human rights defenders, albeit that funding is still far less than what it needs to be.<sup>4</sup> These States also create political space for HRDs, invite them to events, promote their legitimacy and give them visibility. In certain countries, they raise cases of detained human rights defenders while also facilitating temporary relocation programmes for those who are at immediate risk. Given all this, the breakdown in trust, partially as a result of the West's response on Gaza, may make HRDs less willing to turn to States in the Global North for support or partner with them on human rights initiatives.

Double standards on human rights and international law are not confined to the Global North. While some states in the Global South, including **Algeria** and **South Africa**, have been prominent in their promotion of international humanitarian law in Gaza, that same adherence was absent earlier in the year when they [abstained](#) in a vote at the UN General Assembly calling for an immediate end to the war in Ukraine, a war in which Russian forces have killed [at least](#) 10,000 civilians. Furthermore, it has proved challenging for HRDs in both States to do their work safely, with the documented killing of numerous HRDs in South Africa in recent years, while in Algeria, defenders [remain](#) at risk of criminalisation.

Amidst all the rhetoric and the horse-trading at the UN, it is HRDs who are protecting the human rights of others - often at great risk - and they are doing so without consistent, reliable and steadfast support. This was exemplified by the [decision](#) of several EU member states and Switzerland to suspend or review funding to Palestinian and Israeli civil society organisations at a time of their greatest need, in what was seen by HRDs as a devastating betrayal of trust. **Austria, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Sweden** and **Switzerland**, as well as the European Commission, took this decision in the aftermath of 7 October Hamas atrocities, apparently justified on the basis of unsubstantiated and discriminatory allegations relating to risks of funding being diverted to terrorist organisations. Several of the donors including the EU, Finland and Austria quickly completed their reviews and found no credible evidence of funding being channelled to terrorist groups. Switzerland [resumed](#) funding eight of the 11 NGOs it had suspended funding, cutting ties with three.

## HRDS IN CONFLICT AND CRISIS SITUATIONS

The risks faced and support needed, by HRDs extends far beyond Gaza. In the wars and crisis situations including in **Sudan, Ukraine, Myanmar, Ethiopia, DRC, Kashmir,**

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<sup>4</sup> In 2019, the last year for which data were available, the top ten government funders of HRDs were Sweden, EU, US, Norway, UK, Germany, Canada, Switzerland, Finland and the Netherlands <https://humanrightsfunding.org/populations/defenders/>

**Afghanistan, Colombia, Mexico** and **Syria** had a devastating impact on defenders. At a time when there are more violent conflicts occurring than at any stage since the Second World War, it has become increasingly clear that HRDs are frequently targeted as a result of the vital work they do in conflict situations, as was the case last year in Sudan where Front Line Defenders documented the killing of eight HRDs. Two of them, [Tareg Hassan Yagoub Elmalik](#) and [El Sadeg Mohammed Ahmed Haroun](#), were part of a group of lawyers who had filed cases against the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) paramilitary group for its atrocities in **West Darfur**. Although HRDs are often at a higher risk of violence from warring factions when compared to the general population, and as a result sometimes in greater need of relocation, there are few dedicated avenues that facilitate this. Most often, defenders are forced to flee to neighbouring countries, where they can remain at risk, as was the case with the thousands of Afghans who fled to **Pakistan** in 2021 only to be forcibly returned to Afghanistan last year.

The presence of non-state armed actors is also a key factor in the deteriorating security environment for defenders in a number of countries, including **Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, Central African Republic, Mali, Haiti, Venezuela, Colombia, Guatemala**, and **Peru**, while their cross-border reach further compounded risks to HRDs in **Ecuador** and **Paraguay**. Defenders reported being targeted with violent intimidation, repeated death threats and attempted killings by criminal gangs, drug-traffickers, paramilitary groups or other non-state armed actors.

## **WHRDS INSIST, PERSIST, RESIST AND EXIST**

In the hyper-masculinised environment that accompanies conflict, the risks faced by WHRDs and those advocating for gender justice are exacerbated. According to Front Line Defenders' data for 2023, defenders promoting and protecting women's rights in the Middle East and North Africa, where multiple conflicts are ongoing, were the single most at-risk group of HRDs in the region. These challenges ranged from targeted killing, physical attacks and disappearances to criminalisation, threats and online smearing. In her 2023 [report](#) to the UN General Assembly, the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders notes, for example, that "women human rights defenders in **Libya** are routinely subjected to attacks, which have effectively forced them out of public life. These have included sexual and gender-based violence in the form of both physical and online violence, including threats, physical assault, abduction and murder, as well as gender-related slurs and smear campaigns, causing them reputational damage to undermine the legitimacy of their work".

Online abuse and defamation campaigns were deployed widely against WHRDs in all regions, the intensity of which seems designed to erase women's voices from the public sphere. As outlined below, after denouncing gender-based violence on her social media platforms, **Ukrainian** doctor and WHRD [Daryna Dmytrievska](#) received a deluge of rape threats, death threats and videos of executions via email, Facebook and Instagram. The coordinated attack was instigated by far-right Ukrainian Telegram users who alleged that

because Dmytrievska had highlighted the fact that the vast majority of perpetrators of gender-based violence were men, she had denigrated soldiers in the Ukrainian army. In Iran, in a [case](#) which exemplifies the rage that often greets WHRDs who show excellence in their field, student activist **Leila Hossein Zadeh** was targeted for posting about her viva-defence for her postgraduate studies in anthropology. She published several pictures of herself on social media, together with snippets of her dissertation which focussed on the question of national identity versus ethnic identity. In response, she was subjected to a social media smear campaign, that attacked her for the focus of her research, and for appearing without veil and in what appeared to be a Kurdish outfit. As is often the case with coordinated smear campaigns, criminal charges against the WHRD followed. The charges she faces include “gathering and collusion with the intention of acting against national and external security of the country.”

## TARGETING OF FAMILY MEMBERS

Front Line Defenders received dozens of reports from HRDs regarding retaliation taken against their family members due to the defender’s work. This trend was particularly marked in Afghanistan where, when the Taliban was unable to locate a HRD, their siblings or parents were subjected to detention, threats, beatings or killings. It is notable that in the vast majority of these cases, the HRDs being pursued by the Taliban worked on the promotion and protection of women’s rights. In one such case, the home of a WHRD advocating for education rights for girls – and who had attended protests denouncing the ban on schooling – was raided. When the WHRD escaped through a neighbour’s house, the Taliban tortured her husband and brother-in-law who were at home at the time.<sup>5</sup>

The growing prevalence of this form of targeting was demonstrated in the violations against defenders recorded in 2023, where the targeting of family members was among the top five most reported violations in Asia and was widely documented elsewhere. For example, in Egypt, the father of HRD **Ahmed Gamal Ziada** was arrested without a warrant in August and questioned about his son’s work. That same month the home of the parents of Crimean Tatar HRD and civic journalist **Kulamet Ibraimov** was [raided](#) in Russian-occupied Crimea by armed men in black clothes. Such targeting has exacerbated the psychosocial strain on defenders who, while they may be willing to endure abuse and mistreatment themselves, are often forced to bend when their loved ones are being persecuted as a result of their actions.

HRD Memorial partners registered the killing of at least 21 relatives of human rights defenders, including minors, in **Afghanistan, Colombia, Honduras, Sudan** and the **Philippines** in 2023. Family members of human rights defenders were either killed indiscriminately with their HRD relative because they were together at the time of the

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<sup>5</sup> These cases were reported confidentially to Front Line Defenders by Afghan HRDs who feared further retaliation if their identities were made public.



targeting, or proxy-killed, that is, killed to instigate deep fear on the perpetrator's main target – the HRDs themselves.

## DEFENDING LGBTIQ+ RIGHTS

Defenders of the rights of LGBTIQ+ persons remained at risk to a greater or lesser extent in each of the world's regions. Any progress made in the legalisation of same-sex marriage in **Andorra, Estonia** or **Slovenia** was largely overshadowed by the [passing](#) into law in **Uganda** of the Anti-Homosexuality Bill which prescribes the death penalty for anyone found guilty of "aggravated homosexuality" and up to 20 years' imprisonment for those who "promote" homosexuality, which will also impact of HRDs and organisations who protect and support the rights of LGBTIQ+ communities. Front Line Defenders received multiple requests for assistance from LGBTIQ+ defenders in Uganda related to intimidation, physical attack, mob raids on homes and offices and criminalisation.

With other governments in Africa, as described below, also moving towards severely restricting the rights of LGBTIQ+ persons, the general environment facing HRDs working on these issues has become even more hostile. Front Line Defenders recorded a dramatic increase in reported violations against LGBTIQ+ rights' defenders. While in 2022, these violations accounted for 7% of all violations in Africa reported to the organisation, in 2023, this figure jumped to over 22%, making LGBTIQ+ defenders the group which reported by far the highest number of violations in the region. For those facing severe threats and in need of temporary relocation, the widespread hostility to LGBTIQ+ persons in the region has made it much more challenging practically, logistically and financially to provide that support, where neighbouring countries are not an option for the defender to move to. Here, the issue of access to visas as a vital tool of protection of HRDs rises again, and the disconnect between States who say they support the work of HRDs globally yet who do not have in place visa schemes to allow for temporary emergency relocation. There was some movement on this at the EU level under the Presidency of **Spain** in the second half of 2023 when a high-level conference was [hosted](#) with a focus on EU visas as a protection tool for HRDs. It is hoped that there will be some concrete progress in 2024, including through an update by the European Commission of the Visa Code Handbook which could allow for specific provisions to be made for HRDs.

LGBTIQ+ rights defenders were also the most at risk group in Europe and Central Asia where they accounted for 13% of the violations against HRDs reported to Front Line Defenders in 2023. In **Russia** they faced an existential threat after the Supreme Court [ruled](#) to list the "international LGBT movement" as extremist and to ban the movement from operating in the state. Given that the term "international LGBT movement" is not clearly defined, and is open to interpretation, this ruling exposes all LGBTIQ+ defenders in Russia to the potential of criminal sanction. It will likely also further encourage vigilante attacks on LGBTIQ+ defenders, building as it does on years of legal and physical assaults on such HRDs. Physical attacks on defenders were also recorded last year in **Armenia, Bosnia** and

**Herzegovina** and **Georgia**. Globally, trans women and men human rights defenders were proportionately more likely to be subjected to physical attack, smear campaigns and death threats than their cis-gender colleagues. In one such case reported to Front Line Defenders in **Malawi**, a trans man HRD was attacked by members of his community as a result of his work providing gay men with access to healthcare. In 2023, HRD Memorial recorded the killing of 14 LGBTIQ+ HRDs in three countries.

## **CRIMINALISATION – MOST REPORTED VIOLATION AGAINST HRDS**

Criminalisation remains the most common risk faced by HRDs, as reported to Front Line Defenders by defenders in Asia-Pacific, Europe and Central Asia and the Middle East and North Africa, and is one of the top five risks reported by HRDs in the Americas and Sub-Saharan Africa. The continued use of national security charges and anti-terrorism legislation against defenders, and the smearing of defenders as terrorists or spies, not only opens the door to lengthy prison sentences but also undermines their support base, as highlighted above in relation to the suspension of funding to **Palestinian** and **Israeli** NGOs. New foreign agent-type laws were introduced in **Hungary**, **Kazakhstan** and **Kyrgyzstan** while in **Sri Lanka** an Anti-Terrorism Act was tabled which, [according](#) to the UN High Commissioner on Human Rights, if passed would “grant excessive powers to the executive to restrict rights, with limited or no safeguards against abuse of such powers”. Such abuse of power was evident in the **UAE**, which continued to detain a number of HRDs, including [Mohammed Al-Roken](#), beyond the completion of their prison sentences. The authorities charged the defenders anew with terrorism offences, despite their having spent the previous ten years in prison for those same alleged offences in a case known as UAE94. State security charges were also widely used in **China**, including against WHRD [Huang Xueqin](#) and labour rights defender [Wang Jianbing](#) who were both [tried](#) in September on charges of “inciting subversion of state power”. This charge is believed to be related to gatherings Wang Jianbing hosted to discuss the challenges HRDs face in the ever-shrinking space for activism in China.

Defenders who were imprisoned in States that severely constrict civil and political rights were much more likely to suffer mistreatment in prison, including denial of adequate medical treatment. Kyrgyz WHRD [Rita Karasatrova](#), who was detained for eight months for defending access to water rights, [received](#) no medical care for existing health problems while being detained in a cell with nine other people where there was space for only two to stand up at time. The harsh conditions in prisons in China and the failure of authorities to ensure regular access to adequate health care took its toll on several HRDs supported by Front Line Defenders. In September, the family of the defender [Guo Feixiong](#) reported that his health had severely deteriorated. WHRD and citizen journalist [Zhang Zhan](#) was hospitalised in a prison-run medical facility in July. Detained since 2020, her health has severely deteriorated due to torture and periodic hunger strikes that she had undertaken during her detention. Repeated requests by her family for medical parole have been

refused by the authorities. Multiple **Ukrainian** HRDs serving sentences in **Russian** penal colonies were denied access to medical assistance, including [Iryna Danylovysh](#), whose pain-relief medicine for a constant ringing in her ear was confiscated on arrival at the prison colony. She was reportedly told by prison officials that her pain would disappear once she “turns deaf”. For yet another year there was no apparent movement towards the release of [Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja](#), a **Danish-Bahraini** HRD who was sentenced to life imprisonment in 2011. His daughter, Danish-Bahraini WHRD [Maryam Al-Khawaja](#), attempted a high-profile visit to Bahrain but was [prevented from boarding](#) her flight in London. The attempted visit was prompted by concerns for his deteriorating health as a sustained hunger strike in protest of prison conditions compounded the ill-effects of years of persistent denial of adequate medical treatment.

A trend of criminalisation of environmental rights defenders, indigenous people’s rights defenders and those defending access to land rights was notable across all regions. In March, Front Line Defenders conducted a [joint visit](#) to Chiapas in **Mexico** to assess repeated and sustained allegations of judicial harassment and attacks against indigenous defenders and communities in the state. A clear pattern of criminalisation was observed, manifested by a growing number of cases, fabrication of crimes and violations of due process, including in the case of [Father Marcelo Pérez Pérez](#) from San Cristóbal. Defenders who have [opposed](#) the militarisation of their communities appear to have been singled out for targeting. In **Indonesia**, HRDs from the civil society organisation KontraS, [Haris Azhar](#) and [Fatia Maulidiyanti](#), faced criminal [defamation charges](#) stemming from a video posted on Haris Azhar’s Youtube channel on 20 August 2021, expressing concerns on mining actions affecting human rights in Blok Wabu, Intan Jaya Regency, Papua. The video argued that the ongoing military operations in West Papua were seeking to protect mining businesses in the province.<sup>6</sup>

## BUSINESS THREATS TO HRDS

HRDs denouncing business-related human rights abuses continued to be subjected to numerous attacks, both online and offline, perpetrated by multiple actors, including State forces, company staff and company-linked individuals. Agribusiness, extractive industry and energy and development projects are amongst the most dangerous sectors for HRDs to work on, putting environmental, indigenous people’s and land rights defenders at particular risk.

The enduring failure of States and businesses to conduct consultations and secure free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) from indigenous and local communities whose lives and livelihoods are impacted by corporate activity often leads to violations of the rights of those who have lived on and worked the land for generations, and who have deep-rooted

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<sup>6</sup> The two HRDs were acquitted on 8 January 2024 by the East Jakarta District Court after two years of judicial harassment.

spiritual connections to it. The scale of risk faced by indigenous peoples' rights defenders in the Americas was particularly striking; they accounted for nearly 29% of all violations recorded by Front Line Defenders in the region in 2023 .

In **Ecuador**, prominent A'i Cofán indigenous people's rights defender **Eduardo Mendúa** was killed in February. A member of the Confederation of Indigenous Nations of Ecuador (CONAIE), he was an outspoken critic of the social and environmental impacts that oil exploration activities conducted by the state-owned company PetroEcuador and its contractors had had on the community. Two days before his killing, he had participated in a CONAIE council where members adopted a resolution to demand the end of the companies' illegal and divisive activities in the communities. In **Brazil**, Turiwara indigenous leader **Agnaldo da Silva** was killed in Pará state allegedly by an Agropalma oil company security guard as he was travelling with a group of people in search of food. In **India**, journalist **Shashikant Warishe** was killed in the state of Maharashtra for reporting on illegal land grabs connected to the construction of an oil refinery.<sup>7</sup>

The complicity of businesses in attacks or the failure of businesses and financial institutions to tackle abuses linked to their operations, value chains and investments, create an enabling environment for reprisals against HRDs. In addition, state security forces are often deployed to secure and protect corporate interests rather than to protect the rights of citizens. In September, **Jonila Castro** and **Jhed Tamano**, two Filipino WHRDs opposing land reclamation projects in Manila Bay, [were abducted and illegally detained](#) for 17 days by State forces. In November, police in Maharashtra state in **India** brutally [suppressed](#) a nine-month long peaceful protest movement led by indigenous **Madia-Gond Adivasis** against corporate mining. The protesters opposed the continuation of iron ore mining, a licence for which was granted without any public consultation and which had posed an existential threat to their lands, livelihood, culture and environment. Despite their ongoing protest, in June 2023, [six new mines](#) spanning 4,684 hectares were leased to five companies. If allowed to operate, these mines could potentially displace at least 40,900 people.

The nature and climate crisis and the urgent need for alternative energy solutions has created a high demand for transition minerals, which is projected to increase exponentially in the coming decades. This critical minerals rush heightens the risks of perpetuating and expanding the irresponsible and abusive practices historically present in the extractive sector, exposing HRDs to grave risks. More than [half](#) of resource areas of transition minerals and metals are located on or near rural communities and indigenous peoples' lands. If the current extractive models continue to be used for transition minerals, powerful States will drive the transition to 'green' energy and private companies will profit at the expense of indigenous and local communities, and commodity-exporting

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<sup>7</sup> All three cases were documented by the HRD Memorial.

countries. In this context, immediately addressing concerns raised by HRDs and their communities related to security risks they face is paramount. This would mean business actors establishing a trusted relationship with communities and using mediation to solve conflicts which arise rather than reverting to the judicial system where the imbalance of power puts the rights of communities at a disadvantage. The evidence so far, however, suggests that HRDs and communities face similar risks in the context of clean energy projects as they have done with extractive projects.

During 2023 some progress was seen in relation to corporate accountability with the advance of an EU Directive on Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence (CSDDD) to its final stages. Although the latest agreed text is significantly weaker than what many HRDs had hoped for, if adopted, the CSDDD will establish a legal obligation on the largest EU-based companies and foreign companies operating in the EU to identify and prevent – or at least mitigate – adverse human rights and environmental impacts of their operations and those of their subsidiaries. However, the directive missed the opportunity to include HRDs as affected stakeholders; at the time of writing references to defenders have been included in the agreed text in relation to notification and complaint mechanisms.

If adopted, HRDs will be crucial to the success of the CSDDD given their role in raising concerns and warning of potential and existing adverse human rights and environmental impacts in companies' operations. Yet much must change in order for them to be able to do this safely, including the introduction of binding legislation in other jurisdictions with specific reference to HRD protection and zero-tolerance of reprisals. Any State which prioritises the importance of HRDs must push for this legislation and effectively support a binding UN treaty on business and human rights. Although the EU initiative does appear to be staggering towards the finish line, States elsewhere, including the UK, the US and Canada, all host companies whose activities or investments in third countries are alleged to have impacted negatively on HRDs on multiple occasions. In **Colombia** the presence of several multinational mining companies causes adverse environmental and human rights impacts on local communities and creates a dangerous environment for HRDs. In 2019, HRDs and members of environmental rights organisations COSAJUCA, Comité Ambiental en Defensa de la Vida, Conciencia Campesina and UCAT, [received](#) death threats because of their work around a public consultation concerning the implementation of a mining project in Cajamarca, Tolima. The La Colosa gold mining project belongs to AngloGold Ashanti Plc, a UK-incorporated company with its headquarters in the US.

As outlined above, HRDs working in the context of business and human rights are among those most likely to be murdered. **Canada** is [home](#) to almost “half of the world’s publicly listed mining and mineral exploration companies” and Canadian mining companies have been linked to attacks against HRDs. In 2020, HRD [Adán Vez Lira](#) was killed in Actopan, **Mexico**. Adán was a vocal opponent of human rights violations caused by mining in the Veracruz region, including by mining projects owned by Canadian companies Almaden Minerals and Candelaria Mining. With the [track record](#) of risk posed by the extractive

industry to HRDs, it was disappointing that in Canada's Universal Periodic Review at the UN Human Rights Council in November, none of the States most vocal on HRDs internationally – including the **US**, the **UK**, the **EU**, or **Norway** – made recommendations in relation to Canadian companies abroad and the safety of defenders. The only recommendations it [received](#) relating to the conduct of its companies in third countries were from **Chile**, **Colombia**, **Ecuador** and **Japan**.

## HOLDING GOVERNMENTS TO ACCOUNT

As they were frequently targeted in their attempts to hold business to account, so too were defenders at risk for trying to hold their governments to account. Across all regions of the world, Front Line Defenders received multiple reports of criminalisation, physical attack and smearing of HRDs when they exercised their right to participate in the public life of their countries. This was particularly evident in a host of countries which held elections in 2023 or were due to hold them in 2024 and where there was a significant tightening of civil society space, including in **Madagascar**, **Gabon**, **Nigeria**, **Sierra Leone**, **Zimbabwe**, **Thailand**, **Bangladesh**, **Cambodia**, **India**, **Pakistan** and **Indonesia**. In such contexts, HRDs who championed reform or drew attention to human rights abuses under the ruling administration were automatically conflated with members of the political opposition or labelled as enemies of the State. **Maidul Islam**, an academic in Bangladesh, [faced](#) a sustained campaign of harassment, instigated by a member of the student wing of the ruling party, the Bangladesh Chhatra League, for voicing concern on social media about the transparency of the January 2024 elections in the country. In **Zimbabwe**, human rights lawyer **Obey Shava** was brutally [attacked](#) a day after two opposition political activists he represented were acquitted of 'publishing false statements prejudicial to the State' for reporting their abduction and ill-treatment after a protest in May 2020.

The unwillingness of governments to be independently assessed on their performance was evident by the widespread criminalisation of HRDs, including journalists, who documented, reported or commented on human rights abuses: **the act of engaging in freedom of expression was the single act which led to the highest number of cases of criminalisation, as reported to Front Line Defenders in 2023**. The extreme lengths to which some governments go to restrict freedom of expression was demonstrated in **Belarus**, where authorities [added](#) the website, social media accounts and logo of the human rights organisation the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) to the Republican List of Extremist Content. This exposes those who engage with the BAJ's website, social media or logo to risks of administrative persecution, ranging from fines to 15 days of detention. Earlier in the year, the Committee for State Security of Belarus labelled the BAJ as an "extremist organization".

## RESISTING ONLINE

Defenders, in particular those using social media for their human rights work, faced rapidly escalating and ever more sophisticated digital threats. Big tech companies have been largely immune to accountability for the negative human rights impact of their products and services. There is also a lack of transparency on how companies conduct their due diligence and how they consider the human rights impacts of their operations, if at all. Front Line Defenders' Digital Protection Team responded to scores of requests from HRDs who had been targeted by so called "NetCentres" in the form of smear campaigns, doxing and online harassment. The impact on HRDs was evident through elevated stress, paranoia and fear negatively affecting their mental, physical and financial well-being. Digital attacks had long-lasting effects, with HRDs who had previously been targeted with spyware still grappling with the lasting impacts in their day-to-day lives. During the year, media organisations' websites also suffered targeted censorship attacks, contributing to a sense of persecution and continuous surveillance. Yet HRDs continued to use social media to expose human rights violations and voice their stories at a time of growing mistrust in traditional media which many defenders believe does not, cannot or will not fairly represent them. It was local HRDs in **Palestine** and **Sudan**, for example, who revealed the scale of abuses occurring in those locations on social media even as those same platforms [censored](#) their voices. Such platforms have also been key to marginalised groups of HRDs who protect and defend the rights of trans people, indigenous peoples and other marginalised groups. **Weam Shawgi**, a researcher from Sudan who advocates for women's rights, has [used](#) social media platforms to highlight the struggles of women often overlooked by mainstream media outlets in a context where violence against women has [reached](#) unprecedented levels. She platforms the voice of survivors of violence who have been marginalised and ignored.

## RESTRICTIONS ON THE RIGHT TO PROTEST

Where public dissatisfaction with decisions made by ruling parties was expressed through protest, a violent police response was often the first resort. In October, **Sri Lankan** police [employed](#) excessive force against a gathering of peaceful protesters who had convened to express solidarity with minority Tamil livestock farmers protesting illegal encroachment on their land. Police resorted to indiscriminate beatings, specifically targeting peaceful protesters, including human rights defenders and families of disappeared persons. As outlined in the Africa regional chapter below, in **Angola** the daughter of a trade union leader who had organised strikes was [assaulted](#) and threatened with death, while in **Mozambique** a defender protesting government violence was himself [abducted](#), bound and badly beaten. In a statement following the conclusion of his visit to **Peru** last year, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Freedom of Assembly and Association highlighted the vital role that protests play for both government and citizens:

*"In any democratic society, protest is a tool at the disposal of people to express their grievances, to ask for political and social changes, and to foster their participation*

*within public spheres. Protests offer authorities an opportunity to foster the dialogue with communities and to acknowledge and address the challenges they face. Therefore, protests represent an essential component of any democratic society.*<sup>8</sup>

Yet there is a trend of governments failing to engage in good faith with peaceful protesters. Instead of protecting the right to protest, States are moving to restrict it and criminalise those involved in organising or leading protests. According to Front Line Defenders' 2023 data, where HRDs faced criminal charges, charges related to assembly or public order offences were among those most commonly used. In the year following the Woman Life Freedom protests in **Iran**, Front Line Defenders [monitored](#) the situation of 200 HRDs who were subjected to arrest, arbitrary detention and legal actions due to their involvement. Indigenous defenders were [routinely criminalised](#) in the context of their peaceful defence of ancestral territory, which often involves protest and occupation. Similarly, in **Brazil**, human rights defenders who peacefully occupy estates to push for land reform were subjected to attacks, including killings. A member of Landless Workers' Movement/Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST) in Brazil, **Josimar da Silva Pereira** was murdered in such a context in November.<sup>9</sup>

The right to protest is at risk in Europe, a fact which has been increasingly apparent in the treatment of climate defenders. This was reflected in the proliferation of laws used to [restrict freedom of assembly and the heavy handed policing of peaceful protests](#) including in **Austria, France, Finland, Germany, Netherlands, Spain** and the **UK**. With the introduction of its [draconian](#) Public Order Act in May, the UK led the way with anti-protest legislation designed to criminalise civic disobedience with harsh prison sentences. In just one week in November, the Metropolitan Police [arrested](#) 219 climate activists during Just Stop Oil protests, of whom 98 were charged, including for "interfering with the use or operation of any key national infrastructure". Shortly before the Public Order Act came into effect, two HRDs from the Just Stop Oil collective were [sentenced](#) to three years and two years and seven months, respectively, for scaling a bridge in October 2022 and causing a traffic jam for 40 hours. They lost their appeal in October and the judges refused the defenders' requests to submit their case to the Supreme Court.

In such an uncertain environment for defending human rights, it is increasingly clear that HRDs' last line of defence are alliances and the networks that they form with other defenders and how rooted they are in their own communities. Where governments cannot be trusted to be steadfast in their support and where the limits of what is permissible often depends on whose rights are being violated, HRDs developing their own mechanisms for documentation, monitoring, reporting and protection is more important than ever. And this is occurring in different forms across all regions, even as laws restricting civil society continue to be introduced. While formal organisations, especially those that

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8 <https://spinternet.ohchr.org/Download.aspx?DocId=26854&Lang=en>

9 Documented by the HRD Memorial



receive funding from abroad, may not be viable now in many countries, autonomous social movements and loosely organised networks are coalescing to resist State and corporate overreach and to expose injustice on their own terms. Although the international human rights framework has been weakened over the past year, the willingness of individuals around the world to promote and protect the human rights of others has been strengthened, and this demonstrates the enduring value and promise of human rights. As one WHRD remarked to Front Line Defenders, “in many ways human rights is like water. It is indivisible from the lives we live because we cannot live without it. It flows because we need it to survive. So you can try to build a dam but water will find a crack and still manage to flow, much like the thirst for human rights will always exist.”

# RESTRICTIVE LEGISLATION IN 2023

## **In 2023, governments around the world continued to adopt and enforce restrictive legislation which negatively impacted civic space, and HRDs' work and protection:**

- ▶ In Burkina Faso, the government adopted an emergency decree in April 2023 allowing for the requisition of citizens into the armed forces, which has been used to target and forcibly recruit perceived opponents of the government, including HRDs.
- ▶ The proposed Anti-Terrorism Bill to replace the existing Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) in Sri Lanka, includes vague language on terrorism which can be used against HRDs, and provisions allowing for excessive arbitrary deprivation of liberty, not addressing some of the more serious defects of the existing legislation affecting defenders.
- ▶ Ahead of elections in the country, the government of Zimbabwe enacted into law the Criminal Law Amendment Act, which features deliberately vague language to allow for arbitrary interpretation and application against a wide range of actors, including HRDs.
- ▶ In 2023, the Iraqi parliament considered a law on Freedom of Expression and Peaceful Assembly which would allow the authorities to prosecute anyone seen to violate "public morals" or "public order".
- ▶ In Algeria, the rights to organise and strike for those working in so-called "sensitive" sectors, including education and health, have been subjected to authorisation from the Ministry of the Interior since March 2023. This has further limited the scope for actions of HRDs working on economic and social rights.
- ▶ In Iran, the "Bill to Support the Culture of Chastity and Hijab" was passed in the parliament in September 2023. The bill was then amended by Iran's Guardian Council and sent back to the parliament in December. If the bill is enacted, those who do not comply with the country's discriminatory veiling rules will face up to 10 years in prison, heavy fines and lashes.
- ▶ In September 2023, the Kazakh authorities publicly listed nine human rights organisations in their first so-called "foreign funding register". This list contributes to further discrediting and stigmatising human rights organisations.
- ▶ The European Commission introduced a proposal for a Directive on Transparency of Interest Representation on behalf of Third Countries. Civil society has expressed concerns that this directive could be used by EU Member States to silence dissent, stigmatise HRDs' work and provide cover to repressive regimes to introduce similar laws in their jurisdictions.

## **New laws and bills were specifically designed to regulate, control or curtail civil society organisations:**

- ▶ The National Assembly of Angola approved a bill titled "Law on the Status of Non-Governmental Organizations" in May 2023, which if adopted, would allow significant government regulation of NGO activity, including in deciding where they would be permitted to operate.

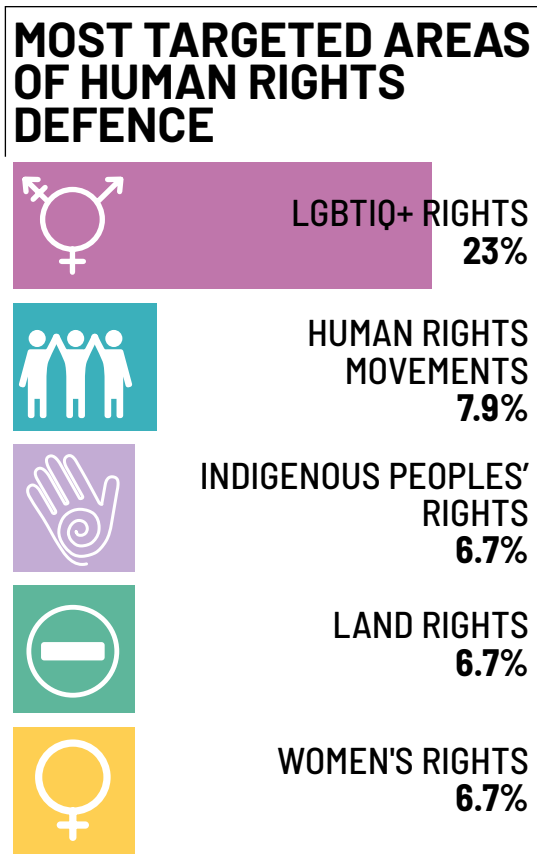
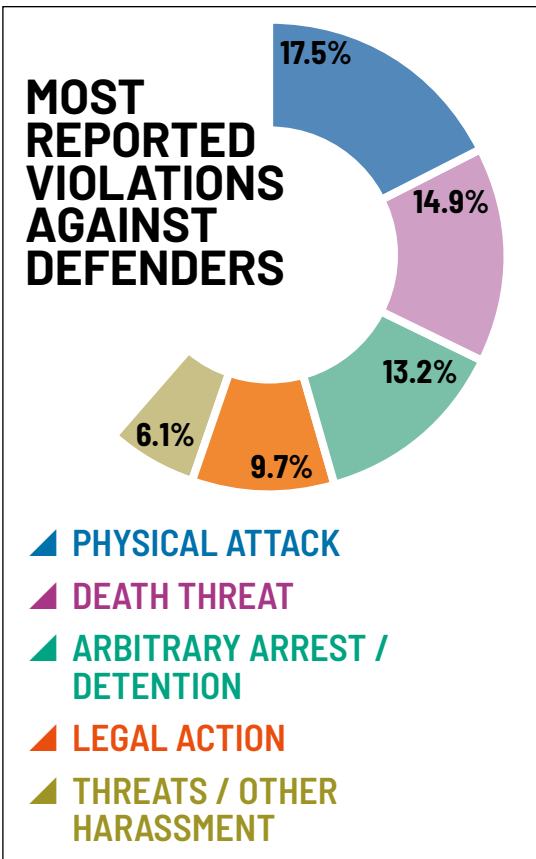
- ▶ Hungary adopted the Defence of National Sovereignty Act which gives authorities far-reaching investigative powers, allowing them to target human rights and civil society organisations which receive foreign funding.
- ▶ Mozambique's parliament approved a bill entitled "Law on the Creation, Organization, and Operation of Nonprofit Organizations", which affords authorities under powers to interfere in NGOs' operations and curtailment of freedoms of association. This NGO law is a further example that the destructive ramifications of the FATF Recommendation 8 persist .

### **An increasing number of homophobic legislations targeted LGBTIQ+ persons and fuelled severe backlash against HRDs:**

- ▶ The Ugandan Anti-Homosexuality Act was adopted in March 2023, and similar bills have been proposed in Kenya, Ghana, Malawi, Mali and Tanzania.
- ▶ In November 2023, the Russian Supreme Court ruled to list the "international LGBT movement" as extremist and to ban it within the state. The Criminal Code of the Russian Federation stipulates that financing or participating in an extremist movement is punishable by up to 10 years in prison. Similarly, one could face up to 15 days in detention simply for displaying symbols of a banned movement and up to four years for a repeated offence. Organisations and individuals may be placed on the "registry of extremist organisations" which will result in their assets being frozen.
- ▶ In Kyrgyzstan, a new law was adopted in August 2023 amending several existing legal texts to expand the definition of what is considered information harmful to children to include information that "denies family values" and "promotes non-traditional sexual relationships". Those found disseminating "harmful information" can be fined.
- ▶ In Lebanon, two separate bills were introduced in August 2023 to criminalise same-sex relations between consenting adults and punish anyone who promotes homosexuality with up to three years imprisonment.

### **Governments continued to pass and consider laws which are then used to target HRDs for their online activities:**

- ▶ The Jordanian Cybercrime Law came into force in September 2023, and has been used to justify many arrests of HRDs for their online posts since then, particularly in relation to protests against the Israel's War on Gaza since the events of 7 October 2023. A similar bill is being considered in Iraq.
- ▶ The Sri Lankan government announced a new Online Safety Law in September 2023 which will further restrict online freedom of speech, and ignoring recommendations from the Supreme Court to amend the bill, it was adopted in early 2024.
- ▶ In Bangladesh, a new Cyber Security Act was passed in September which replaced the Digital Security Act (DSA), but which kept many of the draconian provisions of the DSA.
- ▶ In India, the government introduced the Information Technology Amendment Rules 2023 as a means to censor any online content relating to criticism of the central government.
- ▶ In Tunisia, the enforcement of Decree law No. 54 of 2022 on combating crimes related to information and communication systems was dramatically increased in 2023.



Source: Front Line Defenders (2023)

# AFRICA (SUB-SAHARAN)

Several clear trends emerged from the work of Front Line Defenders in Sub-Saharan Africa in 2023. Those facing the greatest risks included HRDs working on civil and political rights, women's rights and the rights of LGBTIQ+ individuals, as well as those defending environmental and indigenous peoples' rights and those monitoring violations in conflict situations.

Defenders working on corruption, rule of law, impunity and public participation in civic life reported risks in several countries, including **Cameroon, Chad, Guinea, Liberia, Madagascar, Niger, Senegal, Sierra Leone** and **The Gambia**. In some contexts, these risks were exacerbated by elections, as in the case of **Liberia**, where a defender who had exposed human rights violations was forced to temporarily relocate in advance of that country's election due to threats he was receiving from actors linked to the ruling party.

In **Zimbabwe**, once the election was scheduled for August, repression of human rights defenders – including student union leaders and lawyers – increased. In July, human rights lawyer **Obey Shava** sustained severe injuries in a physical attack by assailants believed to be linked to the ruling Zanu-PF party. Obey had legally represented members of Zimbabwe's opposition party, Citizens' Coalition for Change, who were facing charges of crimes against the state. Two of the Coalition activists he was representing were acquitted the day before he was attacked. The following day, Obey was lured to an isolated area of Harare where he was assaulted by three men and beaten severely.

In **Kenya**, widespread protests marked the first year of President William Ruto's term in office. Demonstrations organised between March and July to denounce the increase in citizen taxes, which had led to a rise in the costs of housing and fuel, were met with violence from the police. HRDs exposed police brutality, [including arbitrary arrests and the beating](#) and fatal shooting of protestors.

## ESWATINI: THULANI RUDOLF MASEKO



Activists in Nakuru, Kenya, hold candles and posters on 30 Jan. 2023 as they pay their tributes to Thulani Rudolf Maseko, a prominent human rights lawyer who was killed in Eswatini.

© SOPA Images Limited/Alamy Live News

The risks inherent in demanding greater civil and political rights in Africa's last absolute monarchy were highlighted in January, when human rights lawyer [Thulani Rudolf Maseko](#) was [shot dead](#) in front of his wife and children. Thulani was a member of Lawyers for Human Rights Swaziland and Chairperson of the Multi-Stakeholder Forum, a convergence of various stakeholders calling for constitutional reforms in Eswatini. He was also one of the founding members of the Southern Africa Defenders Human Rights Network (SouthernDefenders).

During a period of incarceration in 2015, Thulani smuggled an open letter out of prison, in which he [articulated](#) what motivated him to defend human rights:

*Please allow us to say that we are in prison because we are very fit to live. We are not ashamed, for there is nothing to be ashamed of for standing up for what is right, what is high, what is noble. There is nothing to be ashamed of for standing up for good against an evil system. There is absolutely nothing to be ashamed of for standing up for something great. We are not broken because these, our teachers, these our mentors, tell us that if some ideals are worth living for, then they are equally worth sacrificing for, and if need be, are worth dying for.*

After his murder, the government of Eswatini acknowledged Thulani as a human rights defender and lawyer, but [stated](#) that his killing had taken place in the context of a "wave of unprecedented violence the country has witnessed recently, where criminality has been disguised as calls for democracy". It pledged to "leave no stone unturned in finding his killers". At the time of writing, no suspects have been arrested.

Thulani's wife, [Tanele Maseko](#), expressed criticism of the king and [launched](#) an international campaign – Justice for Thulani – in her efforts to seek justice for her husband. In retaliation, she was publicly smeared by the Eswatini government. In a [statement](#) posted on X in December, an Eswatini government spokesperson criticised her for not conforming to the gendered stereotype of a "good widow", writing that "her conduct in the country is further from a widow seeking justice for her husband but a woman on a global charade to cash in on her husband's death".

The campaign can be followed on social media at [#JusticeforThulani](#)

In **Angola**, trade union leaders and HRDs worked on issues related to free and fair elections and continued their documentation of violations committed during the 2022 elections. Those leading strike actions were targeted with surveillance, judicial harassment and arbitrary arrest and detention; some received death threats repeatedly throughout the year. In one particularly severe [case](#), the daughter of trade union leader Eduardo Peres Alberto was physically attacked with tear gas, after a death threat was written on a photograph of her and slid under his door, and his house was broken into and vandalised. This [campaign of intimidation](#) began in March following Eduardo Peres Alberto's involvement with organising teachers and professors in industrial action to demand better working conditions. That month he received a text message that stated, "You better stop the strike, otherwise what will happen to you, you will see".

In **Mozambique**, the National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) [reported](#) that the death of **Azagaia** – a high-profile rapper who had challenged the ruling FRELIMO party in his songs – due to health complications triggered protests that were met with excessive use of force by police. HRD **Gamito dos Santos Carlos**, an organiser for a protest march for which permission had been obtained from the city, was abducted, bound, blindfolded, badly beaten, denied water and detained overnight, before being released without his belongings. Later in the year, he was targeted again when over a dozen men forced their way into his home and threatened his family. They pointed a gun at his seven-year-old daughter and took his computer, mobile phone and other equipment used for his work. HRDs fear a similar response will be used to silence dissent ahead of the 2024 elections

## FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Threats to freedom of expression and press freedoms were prevalent elsewhere in the region, with HRDs who exposed corruption, criticised poor governance or promoted transparency experiencing heightened risks. Journalists reporting on human rights abuses in **Cameroon** were subjected to repeated summonses, arrests and intimidation. On 22 January, the body of HRD and journalist [Martinez Zogo](#) was found in Yaoundé after he had been kidnapped by unknown persons on 17 January. Martinez was head of the radio station Amplitude FM. Prior to his killing, he had publicly denounced the embezzlement of public funds relating to the Cameroonian state budget.

Dozens of HRDs and journalists met with the Minister of Communication the day after the murder of Martinez Zogo to demand justice for the death of the human rights defender, that the results of the investigations be made public, and that those responsible be formally identified and held accountable. In an unusual response, the government established a mixed investigation commission – consisting of the police and the Gendarmerie – to investigate the killing. This led to the arrests of several suspects, including foreign intelligence chief **Léopold Maxine Eko Eko**, who was charged with torture. In February, further arrests were made, which included businessman and owner of newspaper L'Anecdote and TV channel Vision 4, **Jean-Pierre Amougou Belinga**. In his radio

show reporting, Martinez Zogo had alleged that Jean-Pierre Amougou Belinga was involved in a public embezzlement scheme. Two weeks after Martinez was murdered, journalist and Catholic priest, **Jean-Jacques Ola Bebe**, was [found](#) dead after he had denounced Martinez's killing during a radio show. The journalist had been investigating Martinez's murder and had reportedly received death threats two days prior to his own death.

Elsewhere, HRDs were targeted with malicious lawsuits and trumped-up charges for their human rights work. In **Senegal**, journalist **Pape Alé Niang** was arrested in July and detained for over a week after calling for public demonstrations to protest the arrest of an opposition politician. He had also been arrested in 2022 for criticising what he believed to be politically motivated legal proceedings against the same politician.

In recent years, authorities in West and Central Africa have relied increasingly on internet shutdowns to curtail peaceful mobilisation around elections and silence dissenting voices. In **Gabon**, shortly after the elections, the government announced a series of measures intended, ostensibly, to prevent electoral violence. These included internet shutdowns, which prevented journalists and HRDs from documenting violations and exchanging information. In **Senegal**, in the aftermath of the detention of the main opposition leader, **Ousmane Sonko**, the authorities shut down the Internet on four occasions from June to August. Similarly, in **Guinea**, the military transitional authorities frequently shut down the Internet and blocked social media networks, limiting the ability of human rights defenders to work and to organise their security.

## DEFENDING PUBLIC PARTICIPATION, ACCOUNTABILITY AND THE RULE OF LAW

Promoting public participation and civilian oversight has become particularly risky – while even more important – in a region that has seen multiple military coups or attempted military coups in the past four years. The fallout of coups in **Burkina Faso**, **Chad**, **Gabon**, **Guinea**, **Mali** and **Niger** and attempted coups in **Guinea-Bissau**, **The Gambia** and **Sierra Leone** led to increased restrictions on the freedom of HRDs to speak out, protest and organise.

In **The Gambia**, **Madi Jobarteh** was charged with 'seditious incitement to violence' for his peaceful campaign in support of accountability and respect of democratic laws by the government. In Madagascar, a country where HRDs have been advocating for a new HRD Protection Law, **Thomas Razafindremaka** was sentenced to two years in prison on charges of "fraud" and "usurpation of title" after he criticised corruption in the courts related to land grabbing.

Defenders in **Burkina Faso** operated in a much-reduced space in a securitised context where they faced risks from terrorist groups, government defence and security forces and self-defence militias that supported the regular army. Despite the passing of the HRD Protection Law in 2017, HRDs were effectively silenced by the introduction of emergency legislation by the military junta which allowed for the "[requisition of citizens](#)" into the



armed forces. This law was used to forcibly recruit individuals perceived to be opponents of the regime for the country's fight against jihadists. Among those targeted were trade unionists, who had planned peaceful demonstrations in October, and HRDs, including 2022 Martin Ennals [awardee Dr Daouda Diallo](#), and investigative journalist [Ladj Bama](#). A picture of Diallo in the back of an army truck wearing military clothing was [posted](#) on social media four days after he was abducted in Ouagadougou by unidentified men. The militarisation of governance further enabled attacks on freedom of the press: several journalists who had reported on accountability issues were arrested, and later released, without any valid justification, and media houses were shut down.



Daouda Diallo, one of Burkina Faso's most prominent human rights defenders pictured in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, on 3 Feb. 2022.

© Associated Press / Alamy Stock Photo

Following the 2021 military coup in [Guinea](#), the military transitional authorities continued to harass and intimidate dissident voices across the country, including those of HRDs. [Mamadou Billo Bah](#), a leader in the Front National pour la Défense de la Constitution (National Front for the Defense of the Constitution-FNDC), an organisation which had mobilised thousands of protesters in 2020 to demonstrate against the then-president's attempt to run for an unconstitutional third term in office, was violently arrested by heavily armed and hooded men. He joined two other FNDC leaders, [Oumar Sylla](#) and [Ibrahima Diallo](#), in prison. The three FNDC leaders were subsequently [released](#) on the evening of 10 May 2023, without having been charged.

Those pursuing accountability for military actors responsible for serious human rights violations in the [DRC](#), [Côte d'Ivoire](#), [Guinea](#), [Mali](#) and [Niger](#) were particularly at risk of threats and attacks. An WHRD who was a member of an NGO documenting violations committed by the Armed Forces in Côte d'Ivoire was targeted and her home burned down.<sup>10</sup> [Abdoulaye Seydou](#), coordinator of Movement M62, a citizen-led initiative focussing on good government in Niger, was [imprisoned](#) in a high-security prison in January 2023 on charges of "publication of information likely to undermine public order", for which he was brought before a judge. His detention [followed](#) his efforts to investigate the circumstances under which a Nigerian military operation reportedly had led to the deaths of several civilians and the wounding of dozens more near a gold mine in Tamou, where a police station had previously been attacked by non-state armed groups. In April, Seydou was

10 Analysis of Front Line Defenders Protection Grants during 2023

sentenced to nine months' imprisonment. HRDs documenting abuses by armed actors in Mali also faced threats, while some were targeted in direct reprisal for their collaboration with the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA).

## COUPS, POST-COUP AND CONFLICT

HRDs – including journalists – in states under military transition in West and Central Africa (**Burkina Faso, Chad, Guinea, Mali** and **Niger**) were regularly summoned, judicially harassed, arrested or forced into exile. The military leadership in these countries routinely banned peaceful protests, invoking counter-terrorism legislation and imposing states of emergency. Several HRDs from Mali and Burkina Faso temporarily relocated outside of their countries to avoid detention, following threats they had received in response to their work monitoring and documenting human rights violations.

In September, **Nigerian** WHRD and journalist **Samira Sabou** was [abducted](#) from her mother's home by three unidentified men. She was held incommunicado in police custody for eight days. On 11 October, she was brought before a judge on charges of supplying intelligence to a foreign power and dissemination of data likely to disturb public order, before being released provisionally. Samira is president of the Association des Blogueurs pour une Citoyenneté Active (Association of Bloggers for Active Citizenship – ABCA), which organises awareness-raising campaigns in collaboration with other organisations to promote the role of women in the public arena and guarantee their right to freedom of expression in the media. She has long been targeted as a result of this work.

The added elements of risk experienced by HRDs in conflict situations was evident in **Ethiopia**, where, in addition to the risks related to general violence, defenders documenting human rights abuses committed by either party to the conflict were accused by the other party of collaboration with their opponent. Front Line Defenders was informed that at least 40 journalists engaging in this type of reporting had fled the country, while others were routinely subjected to surveillance, threats and hacking of online accounts. Others reported prolonged detention, torture and death threats from both federal and regional government officials. The involuntary exile and widespread repression of HRDs has had a noticeable impact on the level and quality of information relating to human rights violations coming out of Ethiopia, making it more difficult to hold the perpetrators to account.

In the **Democratic Republic of Congo**, HRDs also found themselves caught between various militias and government forces, where their impartial documentation of the violence was viewed as hostile by these actors. In an address to the UN Human Rights Council in March, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights [noted](#) that “there appear to be systematic efforts to prevent journalists and civil society actors from investigating allegations involving the security forces, particularly in conflict areas.” The [increase](#) in conflict-related gender-based violence, particularly in eastern DRC, combined with the weakness of the state to offer support to victims, meant that it has fallen largely to WHRDs, women-led

NGOs and international actors to provide assistance. Forced displacement on a massive scale has led to desperate circumstances where, [according](#) to the UNHCR, “men risking death to feed starving children and women risking rape to collect firewood.” The intersectional nature of the risks faced by WHRDs in conflict situations was demonstrated by the security grant requests that Front Line Defenders received from WHRDs in eastern DRC. Numerous defenders who supported victims of sexual and gender-based violence and documented cases were subjected to surveillance, physical attacks, sexual assault, abduction (including abduction of family members) and threats of rape or death. In an environment where few strategies for protecting HRDs can be implemented effectively, the only option available is often temporary relocation to a safe location within the country. While the DRC passed the HRD Protection Law (which has several weaknesses) in June, the state is not in a position to adequately protect defenders in areas held by militias – while in state-held areas, defenders continue to be targeted for their work.

It was not only WHRDs working on gender-based violence who were at risk. Defenders working on peacebuilding, land rights and accountability for human rights violations by the warring sides were targeted. In one case, two WHRDs in the Sahel who were leading a campaign against a militia leader who had ordered killings, the burning of houses and gang rape were detained and tortured and members of their families were physically assaulted. Upon their release, they continued to receive death threats. In a separate case, two WHRDs were physically assaulted after documenting abuses against children allegedly carried out by the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

HRDs promoting fair working conditions and the land rights of local communities were often silenced, highlighting the reality that one of the primary factors contributing to the instability of the DRC over the past decades is the struggle for control of its abundant natural resources – largely to satisfy consumer demand in the Global North.

In July, [Obedi Karafuru](#) was shot and killed by unidentified men at his home in North Kivu, a region controlled by M23 rebels. Obedi was president of a committee of former workers of the forest exploitation logging concession SICIA LUBOGA axe KITSHANGA Masisi-Rutshuru (International Society of Agricultural Trades and Industries). He was playing a key role in a long-running land dispute involving more than 30,000 former workers from the company and its concessionaires. He was also known for his commitment to the defence of land rights. No investigation was launched to find those responsible for Obedi’s death. His family were forced to flee the region in order to protect themselves from possible retaliation.

## **LGBTIQ+ DEFENDERS’ RESISTANCE IN THE FACE OF UNPRECEDENTED VIOLENCE**

Against a backdrop of increasing hostility, LGBTIQ+ defenders continued mobilising and supporting their communities in Sub-Saharan Africa despite pervasive insecurity. Homophobic laws (re)emerged in [Uganda](#) and [Kenya](#), while others were under discussion

in Ghana, Malawi, Mali and Tanzania. LGBTIQ+ rights were also under pressure in Botswana, where in 2019 the High Court had [ruled](#) in favour of a challenge to the criminalisation of same sex relations brought by [Letsweletse Motshidiemang](#), a young LGBTIQ+ defender. The LGBTIQ+ community in Uganda remains at high risk, as evidenced by the number of grant applications for security measures that Front Line Defenders received from HRDs in the country. The promulgation of the [Anti-Homosexuality Act](#) (AHA) passed in 2023 fuelled a severe backlash against LGBTIQ+ individuals.

This sustained onslaught against LGBTIQ+ communities and defenders, fomented to a large degree by national and local authorities and bolstered by the discriminatory discourse of religious leaders, had devastating effects on the safety and cohesion of the LGBTIQ+ movement and their allies. The criminalisation of LGBTIQ+ defenders in law and public discourse emboldened social expressions of violence and discrimination, from which little protection was offered by the authorities. LGBTIQ+ HRDs in **Ghana, Kenya, Senegal, Benin, Togo, Uganda, Tanzania, Cameroon, Malawi** and **Zambia** reported being forcibly evicted from their homes and targeted with break-ins, robberies, violent online and offline attacks, death threats and criminalisation.<sup>11</sup> In Kenya, HRD [Kenneth Thethe](#), who works to address gender-based violence against LGBTIQ+ individuals, was verbally and physically attacked on 13 August near his home by three unidentified men. In Uganda, members of organisations on the Ugandan government's National Bureau for NGOs list were targeted, threatened and intimidated. The Ministry for Commerce, Industry and Trade in **Eswatini** [refused](#) to register Eswatini Sexual and Gender Minorities, an organisation advancing LGBTIQ+ rights in the country. According to the Minister, the aims of the organisation went against "Swazi law and custom that a man and a woman shall start and maintain a love relationship".

Women's organisations and other allies of LGBTIQ+ communities in **Kenya, Uganda** and **South Africa** also experienced violent threats and attacks for their work in solidarity with the LGBTIQ+ community. Many defenders in the region relocated for their own safety, while HRDs and HROs also reported that they felt overwhelmed by the trauma and mental strain of living in such hostile contexts. Defenders supporting and defending survivors of domestic and gender-based violence and LGBTIQ+ communities reported increased well-being and mental health support needs to Front Line Defenders.

The anti-gender fundamentalism that prevailed in several countries spurred growing intolerance for the work of WHRDs, especially those promoting gender equality and sexual and reproductive rights. This manifested in discrimination, threats of attack, online defamation, surveillance, criminalisation and assault in Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya and Malawi, among other countries.

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11 Analysis of Front Line Defenders Protection Grants in 2023

## HRD PROTECTION NETWORKS

Given the lack of protection afforded by their governments, HRDs in Sub-Saharan Africa have begun to develop their own protection networks, which are playing an increasingly important role in response to the shrinking civic spaces and anti-rights tendencies in their countries. Operating at national and regional levels, many of them have become well-established formal protection networks and offer a range of emergency protection, capacity building and advocacy support to HRDs. Well-established networks exist in **Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda** and **South Sudan**, while networks in **Malawi, Zambia** and **Mozambique** have been consolidated over the past couple years. Newer initiatives have also been developed in **Ethiopia** and **Somalia**. Front Line Defenders worked with HRDs last year in **Eswatini** to help materialise a defenders' coalition in the country which had been under discussion for a number of years. These networks have the potential to play a crucial role both in strengthening HRD protection in the region and, eventually, in increasing the amount of documentation taking place relating to violations against defenders in Sub-Saharan Africa. As reflected in the statistics from Memorial HRD and Front Line Defenders' own Urgent Appeals, the numbers of violations against HRDs in Sub-Saharan Africa are under-reported by human rights organisations when compared to other regions.

In recent years, networks focussing on the specific protection needs of WHRDs have taken root. [The Women Human Rights Defenders Network Uganda \(WHRDN-U\)](#), established in 2017, provides crucial support for, and builds collaboration with, [women defenders and activists working across different sectors](#) in Uganda. These include defenders working on LGBTIQ+ rights, sex worker rights, and indigenous WHRDs, as well as women defending sexual health and reproductive rights, and those addressing corporate abuses. As the environment for LGBTIQ+ communities worsened in 2023 in Uganda, the WHRDN-U was targeted with raids and harassment due to the protection, support and solidarity it showed to trans women in the face of widespread persecution and prejudice. WHRD networks have also recently emerged in Tanzania and Malawi; they collaborate with other networks in the region to deliver training to women defenders in Sub-Saharan Africa.



Historic meeting between WHRDN-U and Uganda Human Rights Commission on 21 September 2023.

© WHRDN-U

## RESTRICTIVE LEGISLATION

As the network of HRDs and civil society institutions continues to grow, coordinate and collaborate in Sub-Saharan Africa, governments continue to draft legislation designed to contain these actors. In May, the National Assembly of **Angola** [approved](#) the ‘Law on the Status of Non-Governmental Organizations’ Bill, which would allow significant government regulation of NGO activity, including regulating where NGOs would be allowed to operate. NGOs would also be prohibited from engaging in “subversive” actions and would be obliged to preserve “traditional customs” – although the bill does not define what constitutes “subversive” or “traditional customs”.

Ahead of the elections, the Zimbabwean parliament and president [enacted](#) the Criminal Law Amendment Act in July. The Act criminalises any organisation engaged in “willfully injuring the sovereignty and national interest of **Zimbabwe**”, “subverting, upsetting, overthrowing or overturning the constitutional government in Zimbabwe” or calling for sanctions or a boycott against “any individual or official or class of individual or official”. Vague language used in the drafting of such laws allow for their arbitrary interpretation and application against a wide range of actors, including HRDs. The principle of legal certainty under international law, as outlined in the ICCPR and UDHR, requires that criminal law be precise enough that citizens can determine clearly what constitutes a criminal offence and what is the penalty for such an offence. Zimbabwe’s Criminal Law Amendment Act does not meet this criterion.

In August, the parliament of **Mozambique** approved the Law on the Creation, Organization, and Operation of Nonprofit Organizations, which has been widely [criticised](#) by human rights organisations and UN Special Procedures for the undue powers it will afford authorities to curtail freedom of association and interfere with the operations of NGOs. The draft law came about after the Financial Activities Task Force (FATF), an intergovernmental organisation that monitors money laundering and the financing of terrorism, placed Mozambique under “increased monitoring” and on the [“grey list”](#), which brings with it an increased risk of economic sanctions for countries deemed to have deficiencies in their anti-money-laundering and counter-terrorism financing regimes. This NGO law provides another example of how the destructive ramifications of FATF Recommendation 8<sup>12</sup> persist, despite reforms in recent years, and how continues to be used as a pretext by different states to suffocate civic space.

## ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENDERS

A [report](#) released in September by the World Meteorological Association, the African Union Commission and Africa Climate Policy Centre of United Nations Economic Commission for Africa warned that Africa was being disproportionately impacted by climate change.

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<sup>12</sup> See Front Line Defenders, Global Analysis 2022 for further analysis of the FATF Recommendation 8 and implications for the protection of HRDs, [https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/sites/default/files/1535\\_fld\\_ga23\\_web.pdf](https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/sites/default/files/1535_fld_ga23_web.pdf)

State and non-state actors continued to target those defending environmental rights. In January, [Bob Barigye](#) attempted to convene a public meeting to discuss the environmental and human rights impacts of the East African Crude Oil Pipeline in **Uganda**, which would run over 1400 kilometres from oil fields in Lake Albert in Uganda to the port of Tanga in Tanzania and which would traverse a number of protected areas of biodiversity. Before the event could even begin, police blocked the entrance to the venue and [arrested](#) Bob Barigye, physically assaulting him when he refused to stand up. He has been detained several times as a result of his role leading peaceful opposition to the Pipeline. Dozens of other HRDs have also been arrested in the context of protests against the project. Total Energies, the Uganda National Oil Company, Tanzania Petroleum Development Corporation and the Chinese CNOOC limited are shareholders in the project.

In **Kenya**, a training organised in September by the [Centre for Justice, Governance and Environment Action](#) on environmental rights and protection for marginalised communities in Kilifi County – an area which has been designated as the location for Kenya’s first ever nuclear reactor – was interrupted and dispersed by the local police. The HRDs involved were not deterred: in December, the training took place without incident.

Across the region, HRDs who promote environmental rights and fight against corruption in extractive industries have been subjected to retaliation, death threats and judicial harassment. In **Madagascar**, in July WHRD [Angelique Decampe](#) reported having received death threats in reprisal for her quest for justice from a local authority allegedly involved in the murder of an eco-guard from the Vohibola natural reserve.

## DEFENDING INDIGENOUS PEOPLES’ RIGHTS

Indigenous peoples’ rights defenders were targeted for their legitimate work defending their communities’ rights to access natural resources and advocating for the recognition of customary land ownership in contexts characterised by weak or non-existent legal protections and an absence of political will to protect these rights. Indigenous defenders from the Maasai, Sengwer, Batwa and Benet peoples faced persistent and devastating attacks in **Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda**. These frequently included violent dispossession of their land, placing their culture, livelihoods and systems of governance at increasing risk of extinction.

Some of the most serious threats to defenders of indigenous rights occurred around conservation projects linked to clean energy, animal conservation and environmental protection initiatives. Rather than being consulted as the historic guardians of forests and other ecosystems, indigenous defenders and communities were subjected to violent evictions, destruction of property and livelihoods, criminalisation and stigmatisation. During 2023, Maasai defenders resisting eviction or demanding the reinstatement of healthcare and education services in Loliondo were arbitrarily arrested. Leaders of the Ogiek of Mau indigenous peoples in Kenya who are demanding state compliance with the

2017 and 2022 [rulings](#) of the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights, which include the return of their stolen land and reparations, continued to be targeted with threats of arrest and death. In one such incident, an Ogiek HRD received an envelope addressed to him that appeared to have been sent from the National Land Commission. It contained an unidentified substance. He was subsequently hospitalised.

## WELCOME DEVELOPMENTS

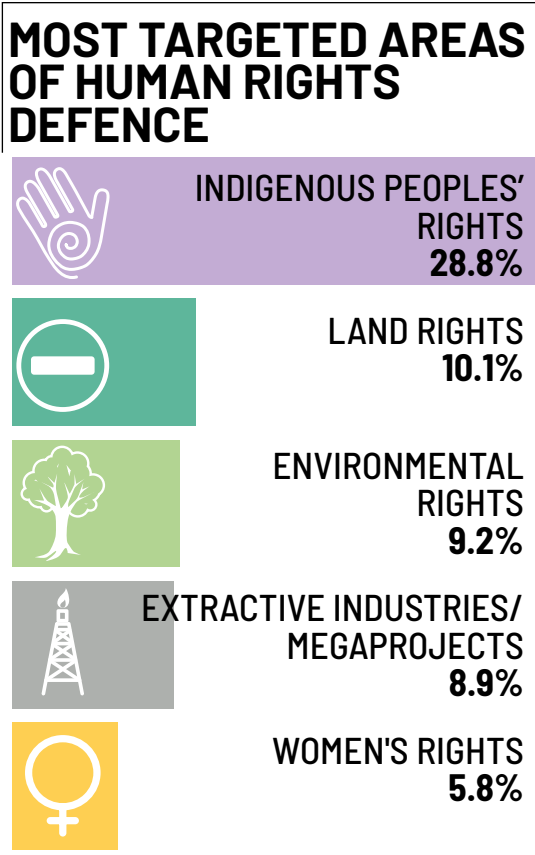
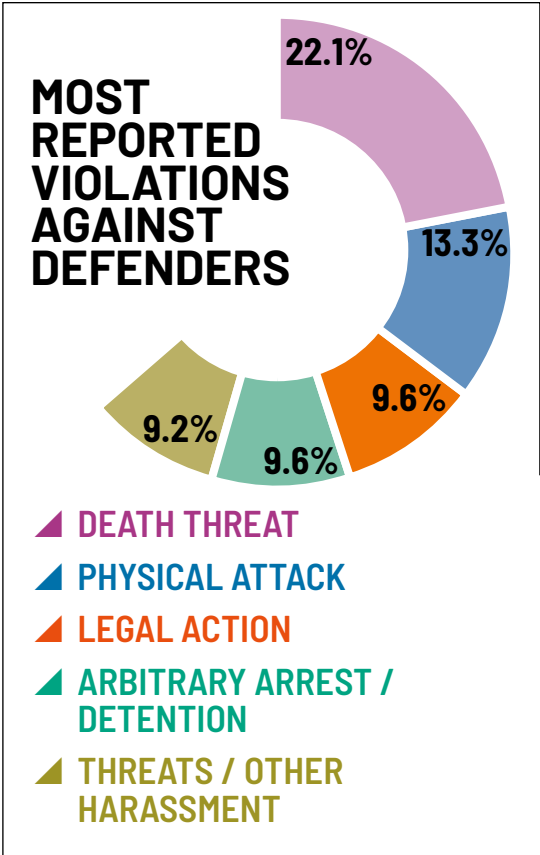
1. In February, the **Kenyan** Supreme Court ruled that the **National Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (NGLHRC)** must be allowed to register. Members of parliament and religious leaders reacted to the ruling with inflammatory and reckless statements, questioning the legality and existence of LGBTIQ+ people in the country. The Court's ruling was affirmed later in February following an appeal brought by a member of parliament.
2. On 15 June 2023, the **DRC** adopted **law 23/027**, which addresses the protection of human rights defenders. This development has been widely applauded by civil society and international organisations despite some concerning provisions contained in the law, including the requirement that all HRDs register administratively (Article 7) and report on their activities every year (Article 11).



Njeri Gateru, a human rights lawyer and defender working for the National Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission in Kenya (NGLHRC)(C) speaks during the Defenders Coalition Human Rights Awards Ceremony at the Danish Embassy in Nairobi, in December, 2023.

© SOPA Images Limited / Alamy Stock Photo





Source: Front Line Defenders (2023)

# AMERICAS

Front Line Defenders data from this region reflected that the HRDs that were most widely targeted were those promoting and defending the rights of the environment and of indigenous, Afro-descendant, and *campesino*<sup>13</sup> communities, along with the protection of their lands and territories.

The role of business in the threats faced by HRDs who raise business-related issues, violations, and impacts was particularly prominent in the region. With the acquiescence, support and often protection of national and local authorities, extractive, agro-industrial and other megaprojects continued to expand, leaving a trail of destruction in their wake, eviscerating natural resources, livelihoods and culture and condemning communities to further impoverishment. The failure of states to ensure any meaningful regulation and oversight of corporate activities and adequate human rights and environmental due diligence contributed to an environment where corporate abuses were committed with near impunity. Negligent and irresponsible state and business practices included the failure to consult or engage meaningfully with communities, implement or abide by environmental assessments, or carry out project monitoring, and the complete absence of any form of corporate accountability.

## **LACK OF FREE, PRIOR AND INFORMED CONSENT AND THE RISKS FOR HRDS**

The historical disregard for Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) continues to lead to conflict in the present day. HRDs who peacefully give voice to their communities' rights are subjected to criminalisation, judicial harassment and violence from state and non-state actors. This was exemplified in June in a case in **Colombia**, where criminal charges were brought against the [indigenous Minga of the Zenú People](#) from Córdoba and Sucre and the Wayuu indigenous WHRD, [Meilyn Zendaya Gámez Mendoza](#), who was advising communities impacted by the construction of the state road project "Ruta al Mar Variante UF 7.2". The HRDs were falsely accused of illegally retaining the company's machinery and

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<sup>13</sup> The use of the term *campesino* refers to smallholder farmers in Latin America and the Caribbean.

kidnapping one of their workers. The judicial harassment of the indigenous Minga appears to be in retaliation for protests denouncing the failure of the state to ensure due diligence and FPIC of communities affected by the project. The 2014 impact study conducted by the company did not even acknowledge the presence of the indigenous Zenú people, while the new certificate reissued by the State in 2018 continues to ignore the presence of two indigenous communities and one Afro-descendant community in the area.

Failure to conduct adequate due diligence and to obtain FPIC in May 2021 has led to a similar situation in **Mexico**. In Puente Madera, Oaxaca, the **Binniza indigenous community** is objecting the construction of “Polo de Desarrollo para el Bienestar” Industrial Park, as part of the Interoceanic Corridor of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec project, in their collective territory. In retaliation for his leadership role in the protests, the indigenous leader and defender **David Hernández Salazar** faces fabricated criminal charges of arson and attacks on critical infrastructure. This criminal case includes 17 arrest warrants against Binniza indigenous women and men from Puente Madera. In July, an international monitoring mission representing 23 national and international organisations, including Front Line Defenders, [denounced](#) the escalating attacks against the affected indigenous communities and those who defend their collective rights, including the failure to ensure FPIC in accordance with national and international standards.

The impact of a historical lack of FPIC, community consultation and engagement are rendered no less severe by the passing of time. In such cases, indigenous, Afro-descendant and local communities continue to resist the expropriation of their land and HRDs continue to organise and give voice to this resistance. And they continue to be targeted. In **Ecuador**, a Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation (SLAPP) case against Afro-descendant leaders **Nestor Caicedo, Andrés Arce, Luis Quintero** and **Samir Mina** of the **Barranquilla San Javier Commune** was initiated by the company Energy & Palma in 2020 for alleged [financial loss](#).<sup>14</sup> The defenders are being SLAPPED for their peaceful and legitimate protest against the appropriation and contamination of part of their territory. As efforts to date to demand the protection of their collective territorial rights [via local courts and the Constitutional Court](#) have failed, on 6 December 2023 they made a submission to the International Labour Organisation Convention 169 complaint mechanism, arguing that the company had begun operations in their territory without consulting the communities and guaranteeing their right to FPIC

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14 In 2020, the company opened a case against seven leaders, claiming damage and financial loss resulting from allegedly being unable to transport its produce due to a peaceful protest in 2019, for which they demanded the leaders pay USD 351,000. For further information, see letter submitted by the UN Working Group on Business and Human Rights and various UN Special Rapporteurs to the Government of Ecuador, 29 July 2022, <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gld=27458>

## CRIMINALISATION AND JUDICIAL HARASSMENT

In addition to the cases cited above, reports to Front Line Defenders indicated that defenders were criminalised and drawn into lengthy and resource-intensive legal proceedings in **Antigua and Barbuda, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru** and **the US**. Legal persecution was based on a range of false – and often very serious – accusations, including damage to company property, equipment or profits, violence, kidnapping and abduction of personnel, disappearances and attempted murder. In many cases, the judicial harassment of defenders was preceded by smear campaigns against them, ranging from the community level to the highest levels of government. Central to the systematic criminalisation and judicial harassment of defenders was the complicity of judicial systems and their legitimisation of the repression, silencing and institutional violence instigated against HRDs. This was compounded by the use of abusive corporate tactics to weaken community cohesion, such as the co-option of leaders and division of communities. For example, instances have been reported to Front Line Defenders where businesses have exploited disagreements within the community by engaging expensive lawyers to represent individuals in the community to bring cases against community leaders or other HRDs opposed to the businesses' ventures in the community.

Tara Houska protesting against the Mountain Valley Pipeline in the US state of Virginia in October 2023. Tara Houska is a citizen of Couchiching First Nation, a tribal attorney, land defender, environmental and Indigenous rights defender.

© Tara Houska



## “NEW” OR “OLD” EXTRACTIVISM, SAME RISKS FOR HRDS

Clean energy projects, mainly driven by investments from the Global North, are being developed to overcome the challenges and limitations of unsustainable forms of energy. However “sustainable” energy projects, including solar and wind energy, are being developed across Latin America and elsewhere in the Global South using the same extractivist models that trample on the rights of local communities that have been used in the past. They continue to reproduce violent and conflictual dynamics with local communities where these projects are planned for implementation, imposing themselves on communities’ territories and threatening and criminalising the HRDs who oppose them or who advocate for communities to be placed at the centre of the processes to develop energy projects in their areas. In **Brazil, Ecuador, Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras**, and **Colombia**, HRDs impacted by “green” energy projects have been subjected to the same violations as those objecting to “dirty” energy projects.

HRDs who threatened to disrupt corporate interests through their unionising activities were also at risk of facing opposition. In one such case, in Ecuador, three WHRDs from the trade union **Asociación Sindical de Trabajadores Agrícolas y Campesinos - ASTAC** received anonymous death threats. In messages sent to them via WhatsApp, they were explicitly warned to stop their work defending the rights of workers on banana plantations and to not interfere in the operations of banana companies. The senders of these messages revealed that they had collected detailed information about the defenders’ family members, including their home addresses.

In **El Salvador**, five prominent environmental defenders and members of ADES (La Asociación de Desarrollo Económico Social Santa Marta) who were part of a historic campaign to secure a mining ban in the country in 2017 were arrested in [January 2023](#) in a targeted attack as a result of their human rights work. [Antonio Pacheco](#), [Saul Agustín Rivas Ortega](#), [Miguel Ángel Gámez](#), [Alejandro Laínez García](#) and [Pedro Antonio Rivas Laínez](#) were placed under house arrest and face trumped-up charges in connection with the killing of an alleged army informant during El Salvador’s civil war in the 1980s.

In **Peru**, the Prosecutor’s Office issued a preliminary arrest order in September against the indigenous HRD [Angel Pedro Valerio](#), along with seven other leaders, for their alleged involvement in the disappearances of four individuals during protests denouncing the killing of the indigenous leader [Santiago Contorción](#), despite the fact that Pedro Valerio was participating in an indigenous congress 12 kilometres from where the disappearances took place. The subsequent criminalisation of the indigenous leader in retaliation for his leadership role defending the territories and rights of the Ashaninka people from drug-traffickers, and other illegal actors, was accompanied by the dissemination of racist messages on social and local media labelling the Ashaninka as “savage” and “uncivilised”.



Ángel Pedro Valerio is an Ashaninka indigenous leader who promotes the protection of the human rights of the Ashaninka indigenous communities of the Ene River basin, in the province of Satipo, Junín region.

© Musuk Nolte

## MILITARISATION AND TARGETING OF HRDS

Throughout 2023, there was a clear pattern of criminalisation of defenders denouncing the militarisation of their territories, while their legitimate defence of their land, environment and collective rights was frequently labelled as “terrorism”.<sup>15</sup> Under the pretext of national

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15 [In Impact of militarization on the rights of Indigenous Peoples](#), a study presented in August 2023 to the UN Human Rights Council, the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples defined “militarization” as “any type of military strategy or activity that impacts on the rights of Indigenous Peoples as articulated in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. This refers, for instance, to any strategy or activity of a military nature, including supply facilities, infrastructure, bases or any other actions necessary for the development of military strategies or activities with an aim to maintain control over Indigenous land and territories for national security reasons, for insurgency and counter-insurgency operations, for border control, for accessing natural resources, for conservation purposes, for development projects or for the protection of the interests of transnational corporations.”

security, the presence of military actors or infrastructure, or paramilitary actors, increased or continued in contested territories in **Chile, Colombia, El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico** and **the United States**, as well as in the Amazon regions of **Brazil, Ecuador** and **Peru**.

In **El Salvador**, the ongoing practice of smearing legitimate human rights work, combined with militarisation – as part of the prolonged “[state of emergency](#)” in force since March 2022 and the crisis in the judicial system – has created a permissive environment for human rights violations against HRDs, including journalists and *campesino* leaders across the country. In December 2023, the Legislative Assembly approved the 20th extension of the state of emergency with no debate, enabling the ongoing suspension of rights and guarantees. Since the onset of the state of emergency, wide-ranging human rights violations have been documented, including the arbitrary detention of over 70,000 people, – including HRDs.

In **Canada**, several **indigenous Wet’suwet’en HRDs** stood trial in 2023 for charges related to their peaceful opposition to the laying of a natural gas pipeline passing through unceded traditional territory of the Wet’suwet’en indigenous peoples in British Columbia. The project was implemented without FPIC. A number of defenders were [arrested](#) in a series of police raids carried out by the heavily armed Royal Canadian Mounted Police. The project is removing indigenous peoples from their homelands, damaging the natural environment and threatening the cultural heritage of the Wet’suwet’en. By the time this report was written the trials of three indigenous defenders were ongoing.

Digital technologies were also employed to intimidate and monitor HRDs. Drones were used to intimidate and surveil indigenous communities involved in rights defence in **Chile, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras** and **Mexico**, highlighting the increasingly securitised approach those states are taking to issues around contested land and the legitimate exercise of rights. Targeted surveillance of WHRDs who have played an active role in their communities’ struggles was also carried out and was sometimes followed by security forces establishing a physical presence in the communities and even entering the homes of defenders, where they took photos and intimidated family members.<sup>16</sup>

## PROTECTION MECHANISMS

In this immensely challenging and dangerous regional context in which HRDs operate, national protection mechanisms – burdened by structural challenges – are generally failing to provide effective protection to defenders facing severe risks, including threats to their lives. National protection mechanisms have been further compromised by lack of political commitment to human rights agendas, co-opted judiciaries, and endemic impunity for attacks against, and killings of, HRDs.

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<sup>16</sup> Documented as part of Front Line Defenders casework, consultations and grants to HRDs.

# ESCAZÚ AGREEMENT

The Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean (Escazú Agreement) is the first legally binding agreement in the world that includes provisions for the protection of environmental defenders and the rights to information, participation, and access to justice in relation to environmental matters. Of particular importance to defenders is the Action Plan on Human Rights Defenders that aims to operationalise Article 9 of the Agreement, which calls on State Parties to ensure a safe and enabling environment for defenders. The Plan went through a consultative process in 2023 and [will be presented in 2024](#). Implementing states, however, face considerable challenges to implement Article 9 and the Agreement's other core pillars given the extreme and often lethal threats facing defenders and the failure of national protection initiatives to date to offer effective protection to defenders of indigenous peoples', Afro-descendants' and campesino rights – defenders who, to date, have not been adequately recognised as assuming the greatest share of responsibility for protecting the environment – along with the severe risks this entails. Key among defenders' concerns are the urgency of ensuring their effective access and participation in the implementation of the Agreement, including through integrating gender and intersectional perspectives and by addressing entrenched impunity for violations against HRDs, explicitly referencing the role of businesses in abuses and recognising the fact that some of the countries where HRDs are most intensely targeted have yet to ratify the Agreement. These challenges, and the slow progress towards ratification<sup>17</sup> and implementation of the Agreement, increase the risk that it could ultimately fail in its purpose to ensure the protection of those who defend the environment.

National protection mechanisms exist in **Brazil**, **Colombia**, **Honduras** and **Mexico**, in addition to the ministerial level protection initiatives in place in **Ecuador**, **Guatemala** and **Peru**. These mechanisms have been plagued by problems including challenges around access, insufficient resources, weak political commitment, lack of approach to collectives of defenders and communities and significantly delayed responses to protection requests or failure to respond at all. Even when protection measures are approved, frequently they are not adapted to the specific protection needs of HRDs according to ethnic, gendered and geographical considerations. These inherent deficiencies have rendered protection measures largely ineffective and, in some cases, have even resulted in exposing HRDs to further risks. For example, Front Line Defenders has received multiple reports of instances where a police escort was provided to protect defenders and the police forces themselves subjected the defenders to further harassment or threats.

At least 15 HRDs who were killed in **Honduras** between 2019 and 2023 had [received](#) direct or indirect assistance from the National Protection System for Human Rights Defenders, Journalists, Social Communicators and Justice Actors. Prior to their killing, a number of the defenders had reported death threats and the high risk of lethal attacks to the police

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<sup>17</sup> To date, only 15 of 25 signatory states have ratified the Agreement. Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominica, Guatemala, Haiti, Jamaica, Paraguay, Peru and Dominican Republic have yet to ratify.



and authorities. Following a visit to Honduras in October 2023, the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression, Irene Khan, [noted](#) that HRDs had outlined numerous challenges with the System, including “long delays in response or no response at all, risk assessments that fail to take into account the context and environment in which the individuals live, work and are endangered, and the absence of gender considerations although many of those seeking support are women or LGBTQ+ individuals.”<sup>6</sup>

In **Colombia**, the National Protection Mechanism (UNP) faces a structural crisis which has meant that it has been largely unable to deliver effective protection measures to HRDs, who are consequently forced to seek alternatives to remain safe. This often involves leaving their territories, which may weaken the collective resistance of their communities. When they do receive support from the UNP, defenders have reported that they are required to pay for the costs of their bodyguards, including food, accommodation and transport, often making the protection offered unaffordable and unsustainable. The situation reached such a crisis that in December 2023 Colombia’s Constitutional Court declared it [an “unconstitutional state of affairs”](#). The Court emphasised the profound impacts that ongoing attacks have – not only on individual leaders, but also on their collectives and families – and called on the state to take effective measures to prevent attacks and other forms of violence. While the current government has made efforts to increase citizen participation in the implementation of the Peace Accords, the lack of protection guarantees continues to hamper the ability of HRDs to engage safely.

As states parties to the Escazú Agreement move ahead with the design of protection measures for those who preserve the environment, it is vital that the significant failures and lessons associated with protection responses to date are taken into account. Although, as they currently exist, the various protection mechanisms are substantially inadequate to meet the needs and expectations of HRDs, it remains the responsibility of the relevant governments to ensure their effectiveness, which they can do by taking into account and acting on the feedback of HRDs who have been beneficiaries of these mechanisms.

## **SHADOW POWERS**

The persistence and alarming frequency of death threats, physical attacks, disappearances, [attempted killings](#) and killings of defenders in the region do not occur in a vacuum. Systemic denial of indigenous, Afro-descendant and rural communities’ rights and failure to offer adequate legal protection in nearly all countries in the region have further emboldened violent actors. Throughout the year, HRDs reported attacks and killings committed by a range of actors, including private and public security forces, company employees, military and navy personnel, illegal armed actors and criminal gangs – as well as by colonos (settler communities).

Non-state groups that exercise their power through violence aggravated the risks faced by HRDs and their communities in numerous countries in the region. This manifested itself in conflict between armed actors, illegal activities carried out in Afro-descendant and indigenous territories, the presence of militias instead of law enforcement agencies in rural areas, and ongoing land conflicts. These often took place in a context where the presence of state authorities was very weak. In 2023, HRDs in **Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru** and **Venezuela** reported the blurring of lines between state authorities, business actors and non-state armed groups. This included cases where private companies hired the services of armed groups to threaten and intimidate HRDs, or where local authorities themselves were involved in illegal activities such as unauthorised logging or mining. Given the danger and challenges associated with providing evidence of such collusion, it remains immensely difficult to hold companies accountable for their role in threats and attacks. The lack of effective strategies to protect HRDs in these scenarios and to hold states accountable is a key challenge in Latin America.

Forced evictions and the threat of forced evictions of indigenous communities continued at a worrying rate in **Guatemala, Honduras** and **Nicaragua**. In late 2023, the eviction, or attempted eviction, of at least seven indigenous communities in Alta and Baja Verapaz in Guatemala was accompanied by the burning of community land, physical violence and threats. HRDs and community members, including the elderly and children, were forced to flee to the mountains. In September, 33 families of the indigenous **Maya Q'eqchi' community** of Nuevo Paraíso in Cobán, Alta Verapaz, were attacked during the night. Several armed individuals arrived, spraying their houses with gasoline and setting them on fire, destroying the galleys where they kept their heirloom seeds and harming their crops. The women were chased and threatened with sexual abuse; one was physically assaulted and had her arm broken in front of her children, and children were severely injured. These 33 families, which include several HRDs, have not been able to return to their land since. As eviction threats continued in some communities to year-end, other communities that had been forcibly evicted over a year ago remain in situations of high risk, facing threats and without any viable solution to their situation. Forced evictions not only violate the collective rights of indigenous communities defending their land, but also jeopardise their physical and cultural survival.

## **KILLINGS AND VIOLENCE AGAINST HRDS**

Lethal attacks against defenders have profound and lasting implications for communities' resistance and survival, including the decimation of traditional leadership, self-censorship within new leadership, fragmentation of community cohesion and a lasting legacy of pain and terror. In the majority of cases prior to the killings, formal complaints made to authorities of escalating intimidation, threats and violence against defenders and community members went unheeded.

In **Honduras**, 2023 was marked by deadly violence against defenders; according to HRD Memorial, 14 land, indigenous people's and environmental defenders were killed throughout the year. On 7 January, water rights defenders [Aly Dominguez](#) and [Jairo Bonilla](#) were killed by armed men in La Concepción, in Tocoa, in an attack believed to be in retaliation for their work to protect the Guapinol and San Pedro rivers from an illegally sanctioned iron-ore mine. Prior to his killing, [Aly Domínguez had been criminalised along with 31 other leaders](#). On 18 January, [Omar Cruz](#), another defender and member of the Plataforma Agraria del Valle del Aguán, was killed in his home in Tocoa. In October, [Arnaldo Benítez Vargas](#), an indigenous leader and HRD of the [Guaraní Pa'i Tavyterä indigenous people](#), was beaten to death in **Paraguay**, allegedly by a man linked to Brazilian agribusiness interests who had attempted to occupy Guaraní land on the Paraguay side of the border with Brazil a number of years previously. Following Benítez Vargas' murder, local police [stated](#) his killing was a result of a personal conflict, ignoring the multitude of complaints previously made by the community relating to human rights violations carried out by agribusiness, and Benítez Vargas' role as a community leader. This typifies the police response in many states when HRDs are killed, neglecting to take into account the human rights work of the victim as a possible motive for murder.

The criminalisation and killing of [Garifuna defenders](#) in **Honduras** persisted in 2023. Coalescing around the [Organización Fraternal Negra de Honduras \(OFRANEH\)](#), Garifuna HRDs work for the rights of the Garifuna people and other indigenous peoples of Honduras. Their defence of territory and collective rights, which is led mainly by women, has made them a target of the Honduran state, extractive companies, paramilitaries and criminal groups. The [National Network of Women Human Rights Defenders](#) in Honduras reported in 2021 that 50% of all alerts they issued were related to risks faced by the OFRANEH Garifuna defenders. The Honduran state has failed to implement decisions by the [Inter-American System in 2015 and 2023](#) in favour of the Triunfo de la Cruz Garifuna community, demanding their protection and recognition of their collective territorial rights. On 28 May, a HRD and leader of the Garifuna community in Triunfo de la Cruz, [Martín Morales Martínez](#), was found dead after having gone missing the previous day.

The context in which HRDs in Colombia work remained extremely dangerous, as they continued to be caught in power struggles with violent non-state actors who continue to exert social, economic, political and territorial control in rural areas, seeking to destroy or supplant Afro-descendant and indigenous leadership. Defenders resisting dispossession, forced illicit activities, confinement of communities, sexual violence, forced recruitment of children, killings, massacres and disappearances, and those who dared to denounce collusion between authorities and non-state armed groups were killed, or threatened with being killed. The regular practice of labelling HRDs as military targets by armed actors such as the AGC (*Autodefensa Gaitanistas de Colombia*) and dissidents from ELN (*Ejército de Liberación Nacional*) and FARC-EP (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia-Ejército del Pueblo*) completely undermined their protection. According to HRD Memorial Partner

“Programa Somos Defensores” at least 64 indigenous, *campesino* and Afro-descendant leaders were killed in 2023, including [Phanor Guazaquillo Peña](#) of the Nasa Kwesx Kiwe indigenous people.

Contempt by the State for the crucial role of indigenous, Afro-descendant and other defenders protecting their territories and the environment, often underpinned by deep-seated structural racism, is illustrated by the endemic impunity that follows these killings. Moreover, the deliberate failure of the courts to recognise the human rights work of slain HRDs during judicial proceedings is a common feature in cases supported by Front Line Defenders. This means that their human rights work may not be considered in the investigation into their murder (if there is one), shutting down what often should be a clear line of inquiry. As a consequence, it is unsurprising that so many cases of murdered defenders rest in impunity. In June, the Criminal Sentence Appeal Court of Cartago, in **Costa Rica**, [overruled](#) the 22-year sentence handed down to the murderer of Brörán indigenous leader [Jehry Rivera](#), ordering a re-trial with a new panel of judges.

In **Brazil**, the *quilombola*<sup>18</sup> [WHRD and spiritual leader Mãe Bernadete](#) was killed in August in Bahia, one of the states with the worst history of violence related to land issues in the country. Six years previously, Mãe Bernadete’s son, [Flávio Gabriel Pacífico dos Santos](#), also a *quilombola* leader, had been killed. The perpetrators of that killing have never been brought to justice. Mãe Bernadete had reported threats against her to the Brazilian Protection Mechanism for Human and Environmental Defenders but received no response. The Quilombola National Coalition (CONAQ) released a [report](#) in October highlighting that 32 *quilombola* were [killed](#) in different circumstances connected with their struggle for collective rights, between 2018 and 2022, with insufficient responses from different Brazilian states administrations.

## ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCES

The epidemic of disappearances that plagues **Mexico**, with more than [113,000 missing](#) persons, is an ever-present risk for defenders. Those defending indigenous peoples, environmental and land rights, and searching for the disappeared are particularly at risk. Disappearances represent an ongoing form of violence that has a permanent impact on the families, organisations and communities of the victims, as they continue to seek truth and justice.

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<sup>18</sup> *Quilombola* are those individuals who are part of the Quilombo, which is the denomination for communities of black slaves who resisted the slavery regime that prevailed in Brazil for over 300 years and was abolished in 1888. What characterized the *quilombo* was the resistance and the acquisition of autonomy. The *quilombos* continued to exist even after the end of slavery. The remaining *quilombo* communities or contemporary *quilombos* are social groups whose ethnic identity still distinguishes them from the rest of society. Such communities are found in Colombia, Ecuador, Suriname, Honduras, Belize and Nicaragua. Additionally, in many of these countries – as is the case in Brazil – the right to traditional lands is recognized in national law. The rights of *quilombola* communities are also ensured in the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention (No. 169, 1989) of the International Labour Organization, ratified by Brazil and several Latin American countries.



Hundreds of women walk through the main streets of the city to demand stop to gender violence during the commemoration of International Women's Day, Mexico City, 8 March, 2024.

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On 15 January, HRDs [Antonio Díaz Valencia](#) and [Ricardo Arturo Lagunes Gasca](#) disappeared in Cerro de Ortega, a city in the municipality of Tecomán, in the Colima region. The HRDs were returning to Tecomán after attending an assembly in the Aquila community where issues were discussed relating to the operations of the “Las Encinas” mine operated by Ternium, an iron-ore mining company. The mining activities have been a source of conflict since operations began in 1998 due to the company’s failure to comply with agreements it had made with the community, which has resulted in threats, detention, and deaths of members of the community. Antonio Díaz Valencia and Ricardo Arturo Lagunes Gasca are just two of a number of disappeared defenders that Front Line Defenders is aware of who had been working on these business-related issues. [Sergio Rivera Hernández](#) and [Irma Galindo](#), who disappeared in 2020 and 2021 respectively, are two others who remain unaccounted for.

Women defenders searching for their disappeared family members were also killed in attacks. These occurred in a context of widespread femicides, characterised by impunity and a prevailing lack of effective protection mechanisms for WHRDs who face ongoing reprisals for their work. In a 2022 [report](#), the [UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances](#)

noted that at least 13 people involved in searches had been killed, “allegedly in retaliation for their search activities”. On 2 May 2023, WHRD [Teresa Magueyal](#) was shot dead by a group of armed men in the state of Guanajuato. She was an active member of the collective [Una Promesa por Cumplir](#) established by family members of disappeared persons for the purpose of searching for their loved ones. She had been looking for her son who was disappeared in 2020. At the conclusion of a visit by the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances to Mexico in September, the [Working Group stated](#) that “the impunity level for the crime of enforced disappearances had reportedly reached 98%”.

## PERSECUTION OF DISSENTING VOICES

In [Argentina](#), [Costa Rica](#), [El Salvador](#), [Guatemala](#), [Honduras](#), [Nicaragua](#), [Mexico](#) and [Venezuela](#), local and national authorities were reported to have used violent rhetoric that stigmatised defenders, routinely labelling them as “traitors”, “adversaries” and “criminals” and inciting violence against them. The increasing stranglehold on civic space and escalation of witch-hunts against dissenting voices also contributed to a growing phenomenon of forced displacement of HRDs in the region. In particular, journalists reporting on human rights issues were forced to flee El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua.

By year end, at least 80 people working to uphold the rule of law, promote accountability and expose human rights violations in [Guatemala](#) had been criminalised, imprisoned or forced to relocate for their safety. WHRD [Claudia González Orellana](#), a lawyer and former prosecutor for the International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG), was detained and charged with the crime of abuse of authority, in connection to her work defending former members of the CICIG. Attacks and restrictions against [the Agencia de Noticias Km 169 news agency, which reports on human rights violations](#), intensified during the Guatemalan elections, with the media outlet recording 35 instances where its community journalists were targeted, including through criminalisation, defamation and surveillance, during 2023.

In [Nicaragua](#), where press freedoms and civic space have been all but dismantled, the Ortega regime has closed all news outlets critical of the dictatorship. The government’s criminalisation and punishment of dissenting voices became increasingly erratic during 2023. [At least 20 journalists were stripped of their citizenship](#) and HRDs were among the over 200 journalists, academics, opposition politicians and others who were freed from prison only to be involuntarily exiled to the USA in February. HRDs [María Esperanza Sánchez](#), [Freddy Navas](#) and [Medardo Mairena](#) were among those forced out of the country.

Human rights lawyers working to uphold the rule of law and overturn long-standing impunity for serious violations of human rights in [Argentina](#) were judicially persecuted, arbitrarily arrested and detained as a means to prevent and punish their legitimate work. This continued to be the case for WHRD and human rights lawyer [Nadia Schujman](#). Throughout her career, she has worked to preserve the memory of, and seek justice for,



Woman waving a rainbow flag when thousands of activists from the LGBTIQ+ community took part in the Peru Pride Parade, 1 July 2023.

© Fotoholica Press Agency/Alamy Live News

crimes against humanity committed during Argentina's civil-military dictatorship. In more recent years, she has served as Director of the Police Control Agency, which investigates alleged police abuses of power and violations of human rights. She is currently under investigation, along with eight other employees of the Ministry of Security of Santa Fe, for alleged illegal surveillance and illegal association. The investigation has been characterised by a lack of transparency and has been marked by a series of irregularities.

## TARGETING OF WHRDS AND LGBTIQ+ DEFENDERS

WHRDs providing support to survivors of gender-based violence and advocating for sexual and reproductive rights were targeted with physical attacks, hate speech and death and rape threats in several countries, including El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Paraguay and Peru. In **El Salvador**, where the president has an explicit anti-feminist agenda, WHRDs and women's organisations advocating on the [Beatriz vs the State of El Salvador case](#) before the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights were subjected to hate speech, smear campaigns and violence, as well as harassment from anti-rights groups.

Since the 2009 coup d'état in **Honduras**, violence and discrimination against the LGBTIQ+ community, [including HRDs, has been on the rise](#). This has not only resulted in murders (HRD Memorial partner **ACI-Participa** recorded the murder of 3 LGBTIQ+ defenders in 2023), but also in discriminatory treatment at health centres, workplaces and media outlets. LGBTIQ+ organisations continue to point to state actors, particularly the military, as the main perpetrators of attacks. On 22 September, **Soraya Alvarez Portillo**, a transwoman defender and member of the collective Muñecas de Arcoiris (Rainbow Dolls) in Comayagüela, was murdered. She had previously been placed under protection measures by the Honduran National Protection Mechanism, but had later been removed. Rainbow Dolls stated that during the previous two years they had registered the murders of 135 LGBTIQ+ persons.

## DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

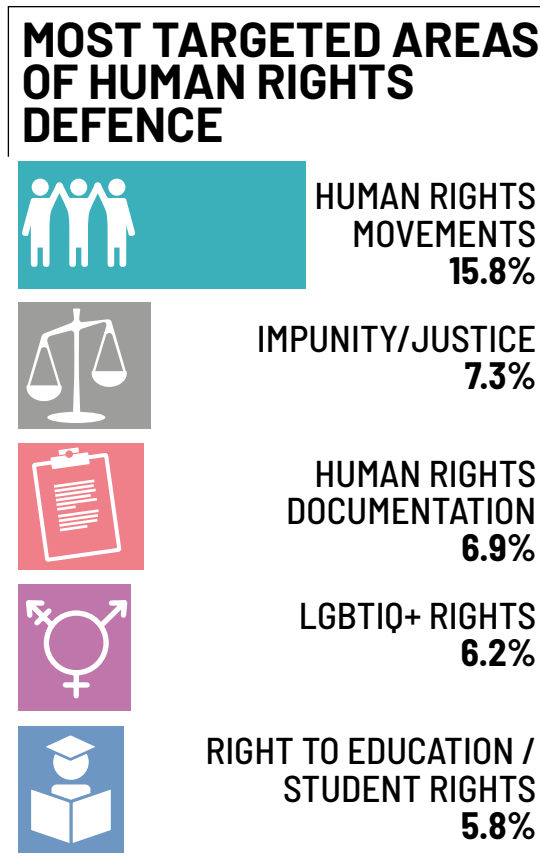
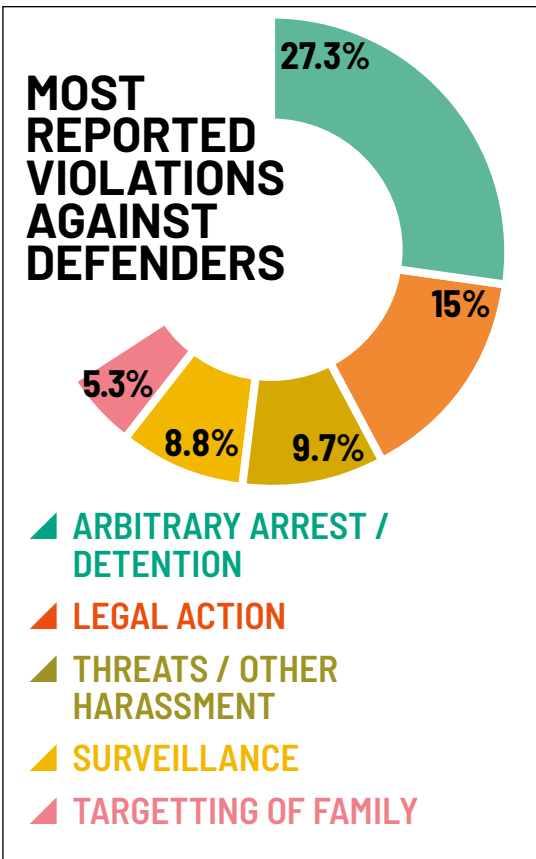
The **Dominican Republic** continued to be a hostile environment for HRDs – especially WHRDs, LGBTIQ+ defenders and those of Haitian nationality or descent. Despite the country's anti-rights agenda and the absence of effective anti-discrimination laws and public policies to ensure gender equality and migrants' rights, HRDs have continued to carry out exceptional work. Throughout 2023, WHRDs faced threats and smear campaigns with misogynistic, racist and xenophobic overtones. Of particular concern were smear campaigns and hate speech against Afro-descendant WHRDs defending the rights of women, LGBTIQ+ persons and migrants, while championing anti-colonialism, anti-racism and non-discrimination. On several occasions, defamation and attacks that began online progressed to offline threats and physical violence, resulting in arrests and the removal of WHRDs from cultural centres or workplaces. While many of the perpetrators who attacked WHRDs during this upsurge of violence were identified, the vast majority of attacks have gone unpunished, further perpetuating the risks faced by WHRDs.

In an example of how cyber-attacks led to material consequences, in November, WHRD **Lauristely Peña Solano** was [let go from her employment as a teacher](#) following a brutal campaign of defamation and harassment via social and traditional media. Solano is also a writer and a co-founder of **Proyecto Anticanon**, a cultural organisation that supports women writers and community outreach through art, culture and storytelling and seeks to raise awareness on issues of non-violence, gender equality, Afro-descendant identity and human rights. Solano experienced sexist, homophobic and racist harassment, including online smear campaigns. Several attempts were made to bring this campaign to her place of work; information was disseminated on social media about her private life and eventually she was removed from her position as a teacher. The smear campaign continued to snowball on social and via traditional media for weeks after her removal.



## WELCOME DEVELOPMENTS

1. After weeks of protests spearheaded by indigenous leaders in **Panama** to repeal Law 406, which would extend the mining concession of Canadian company First Quantum for a further 20 years, the Supreme Court ruled in December that the contract was “unconstitutional”. As part of their demands, protestors had denounced the lack of prior consultation with citizens, asserting that the Law is unconstitutional and is inconsistent with Panama’s obligations under the Escazú Agreement.
2. In an important development for justice and accountability for the human rights movement in the Amazon in **Brazil**, the case against grassroots lawyer and defender [José Vargas Sobrinho Junior](#) was dismissed on 24 July. His acquittal comes after over two years of criminal proceedings, which were seen by many as retaliation for his leadership in seeking justice for the survivors of the [Pau D’Arco massacre in Para](#).



Source: Front Line Defenders (2023)

# ASIA & THE PACIFIC

In a region where there is such little state support for HRDs, and in most cases outright hostility that brings varying levels of risk, the work that defenders do in Asia and the Pacific is remarkable. This ranges from seeking accountability for corporate human rights and environmental abuses in **Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Maldives, Sri Lanka, Pakistan** and **Thailand** to calling for an end to the scourge of enforced disappearances of Baloch persons in Pakistan to ferociously resisting the erasure of women and girls from civic life in Afghanistan. HRDs in **China** continue to document violations by the authorities and amplify the voices of the most vulnerable in a state that watches their every move. Meanwhile, across the border in **Myanmar**, defenders take enormous risks to report on war crimes committed by the military junta in the hope that evidence of such atrocities will garner the international attention that the civil war deserves. In the face of multiple and competing crises, this hope is not being met.

## CONFLICT, POST-CONFLICT AND CRISIS ENVIRONMENTS

Close to three years on from the unlawful attempted seizure of power by the Myanmar military, its escalating and savage brutality against the civilian population, particularly in ethnic states of the country, has failed to quell resistance. HRDs have provided important testimony regarding alleged [war crimes and crimes against humanity](#) carried out by the junta while the military has imprisoned and tortured thousands of civilians. This has included hundreds of people who have defended and promoted human rights through [acts](#) such as teaching in non-junta-aligned schools, providing medical care in independent hospitals and organising workers' strikes, and who, as a result, have been detained, beaten and imprisoned in the most awful conditions. Yet despite this, HRDs continue to work; WHRDs document sexual and gender-based violence, while groups of defenders secure and organise the delivery of humanitarian supplies to their communities. In his [report](#) to the 78th session of the Human Rights Council in October, the UN Special Rapporteur on the

situation of human rights in [Myanmar noted](#) how most internally displaced persons were now dependent on civil society organisations for support. Against this backdrop of mass unlawful detention, HRDs who have remained inside Myanmar face constant risk, forcing them to frequently change their location while they attempt to evade arrest, searches and raids.

Many HRDs in Myanmar have been forced into exile, where they continue to face numerous challenges. These range from the insecurity of living in refugee camps, to the fear of being tracked down, arrested and deported back to Myanmar due to their lack of legal documents, as well as the challenges of ongoing trauma. Those HRDs who have valid travel documents face the impossibility of renewing their passports or requesting visa extensions in neighbouring countries once they expire. Rohingya defenders in Bangladesh and elsewhere have faced risks within their refugee camps from armed Rohingya militias when they expose human rights violations and fear the possibility that they will be returned to Myanmar as part of the State Administration Council's ["repatriation pilot project"](#).

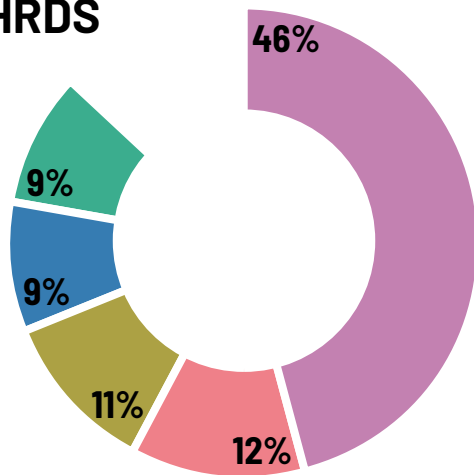
In [Afghanistan](#), the crisis following the Taliban takeover showed no signs of abating. Violations against defenders, particularly journalists, women and HRDs from religious and ethnic minorities, were widespread. Arbitrary arrest and detention, torture, killings, threats and attacks against family members, raids, seizure of documents and equipment and surveillance all took place against a backdrop of the growing risk of poverty and food insecurity. The situation for women and girls, which the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Afghanistan and the UN Working Group on Discrimination Against Women and Girls [concluded](#) may [amount](#) to gender apartheid, has remained desperate. Shelters providing protection for women from violence were forced to close down while others were placed under surveillance. Yet WHRDs have continued to protest against the Taliban's draconian policies. Of serious concern was the ongoing detention and well-being of many defenders, including WHRDs. In nearly all cases of arrest, defenders reported being subjected to severe torture, degrading treatment and threats to their families.

After having hosted a large Afghan refugee population for years with minimal support from the international community, [Pakistan announced on 3 October](#) that unregistered asylum-seekers had a month to leave the country, or face mass arrest and deportation. The forced return of people to Afghanistan, in violation of Pakistan's international obligations and the principle of non-refoulement, exposes HRDs to severe risks of persecution, including arbitrary detention, torture and killings by the Taliban if returned. According to the UN, [approximately 350,000 Afghans](#) have returned since the announcement. Following the announcement, Afghan HRDs in Pakistan reported being subjected to raids, arrest and extortion, while those who were forced to return to Afghanistan have faced renewed risk, including arrest warrants issued against them, threats against family and are compelled to live in hiding without a sustainable solution for their safety.

# TARGETING OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS IN AFGHANISTAN

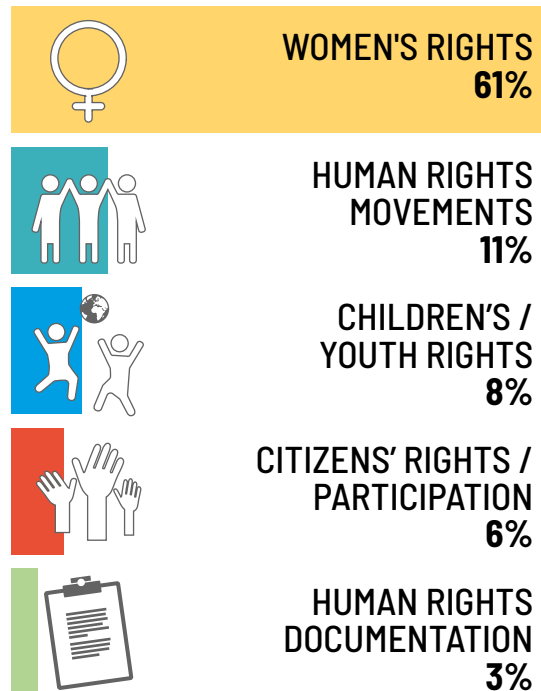
Cases reported to Front Line Defenders by HRDs from Afghanistan are reflected in the table below where the five most reported violations against defenders and the five most targeted areas of human rights defence are shown. The data was drawn from 319 violations recorded in 2023. The scale of the response to the risks of human rights defenders in Afghanistan has hugely impacted Front Line Defenders' work globally. By presenting these percentages below, Front Line Defenders aims to evidence the trends captured by its work.

## MOST REPORTED VIOLATIONS AGAINST HRDS



- ▲ DEATH THREAT
- ▲ TARGETTING OF FAMILY
- ▲ THREATS / OTHER HARASSMENT
- ▲ PHYSICAL ATTACK
- ▲ ARBITRARY ARREST / DETENTION

## MOST TARGETED AREAS OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENCE



HRDs living and working in localised crisis areas, often in highly militarised contexts, also face significant challenges to protection. Providing support to defenders operating within increasingly intractable crises, from Indian-administered Kashmir to Manipur for example, became ever more challenging, with militarisation, internet shutdowns, obstacles to transfer resources, bans on entry and surveillance. For instance, in India, HRDs across the country face heavy surveillance, threats and are prevented from safely accessing



Protesters mark International Human Rights Day in front of the National Press Club in Dhaka, Bangladesh on 10 December 2023.

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resources and support. This situation is compounded in Indian-administered Kashmir, where HRDs facing arrest, surveillance and criminalisation are denied access to critical support, isolated from national and international spaces of solidarity, and fear that safe communications are compromised, preventing the secure sharing of data and information regarding the challenges they face and broader violations.

## ELECTORAL PROCESSES

2023 coincided with election and pre-election periods for several countries in the region, bringing with them increased uncertainty and risk for HRDs. This is especially true when HRDs highlighting the human rights failures of the ruling parties are automatically conflated with the political opposition and denounced as traitors, subversives or enemies of the state. A spike in repression of HRDs was observed by Front Line Defenders in **Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, Mongolia,** and **Thailand**, all of which had elections in 2023 or will have in 2024.

Ahead of the January 2024 elections in **Bangladesh**, hostility towards HRDs intensified, spearheaded by the ruling forces of Awami League. Opposition parties' calls for a boycott of elections were responded to with an all-out crackdown on the political opposition,

HRDs, civil society leaders and journalists, with mass arbitrary detention, internet shutdowns, and excessive use of force during protests. In this volatile context, HRDs who were vocal on human rights and governance issues, including calling for free and fair elections, were subjected to [administrative](#) and [other forms](#) of harassment and smear campaigns. In September, [Adilur Rahman and A.S.M Nasiruddin Elan](#) of [Odhikar](#), a renowned human rights organisation in Bangladesh, were sentenced by the Cyber Tribunal of Dhaka to two years in prison, in retaliation for a 2013 report covering a police crackdown against the Hefazate Islam rally. Following an international outcry, on 15 October, they were released on bail.

In **Thailand**, the number of pro-democracy activists charged with lèse majesté under section 112 of the Thai Criminal Code - which has been [termed](#) as vague, overly broad and incompatible with the right to freedom of expression by the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention - increased during and after the election period. This was partially due to the fact that an opposition party had championed the cause of HRDs and had pledged to amend the relevant section of the Criminal Code. In **Laos**, the strangled state of civil society and civic participation was demonstrated by the [attempted killing](#) of a young pro-democracy advocate who had established Facebook pages to facilitate public discussion on democracy and to call for an end to authoritarian rule. [Anousa “Jack” Luangsouphom](#) survived being shot twice at an internet cafe in Vientiane.

## RESTRICTIVE LEGISLATION

Other states in the region sought to further limit freedom of expression in their jurisdictions through the introduction or amendment of restrictive legislation. The newly proposed Anti-Terrorism Act to replace the existing Prevention of Terrorism Act in **Sri Lanka**, was criticised by UN experts for not addressing some of the more serious defects of the existing legislation, which, they [wrote](#), “could be used against “HRDs, civil society, and those legitimately exercising their human rights and fundamental freedoms.” The Sri Lankan government also announced a new Online Safety Law in September which will further restrict online freedom of speech. Although the Supreme Court [found](#) provisions contained in the bill to be unconstitutional and that it should be amended, the Law was passed by parliament without the necessary amendments in 2024.

In **Bangladesh**, a new Cyber Security Act was passed in September which replaced the Digital Security Act (DSA), but which kept many of the draconian provisions of the DSA. The DSA had been widely used to subject HRDs [to severe repression and surveillance](#) and there are concerns that its replacement will be similarly deployed. In April, the Indian government introduced the [Information Technology Amendment Rules 2023](#) as a means to censor any online content relating to criticism of the central government. Contrary to India’s international obligations and in a clear assault on freedoms of expression and opinion, the amendments have afforded the government additional and unchecked censorship powers and will curtail the ability of HRDs and others to speak freely online.



Activists hold placards to protest against Hong Kong's new Article 23 national security law in Taipei, Taiwan, on 23 March 2024.

© Jameson Wu / Alamy Stock Photo

In **Hong Kong**, the authorities continued to use the 2020 National Security Law to intimidate and prosecute HRDs in and outside of Hong Kong. UN Special Procedures mandate holders [wrote](#) to the Hong Kong authorities raising concerns about the issuance of arrest warrants against overseas or exiled HRDs, and the on-going mass prosecution of 47 pro-democracy campaigners under the National Security Law, some of whom are also HRDs, including LGBTIQ+ rights defender **Jimmy Sham** and labour rights defenders **Carol Ng** and **Winnie Yu**.

Legislation to protect HRDs in the **Philippines** was introduced to the House Committee on Human Rights in the House of Representatives in February, following a sustained effort by HRDs in the country. Despite the Philippines being one of the most dangerous countries in the world to be a HRD, the 'Human Rights Defenders' Protection Act' was [described](#) as "a grave, vicious, and insidious threat against the Philippines' democratic way of life" by the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict, a government organised body created under the previous President. In criticising the bill, the Task



Force revealed both its ignorance of international law and its own practice of conflating HRDs with terrorists by stating: “The definition of ‘human rights defender’”, is vague and duplicitous such that in essence, it will include within the scope of the term any criminal, rebel, terrorist, or enemy of the state;”. The [definition](#) contained in the bill draws heavily on the UN HRD Declaration: “Human Rights Defender refers to any person who, by one’s self or in association with others, acts or seeks to act to protect, promote or strive for the protection and realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms and welfare of the people, at the local, national, regional, and international levels”.

## ABUSE OF COUNTER-TERROR MEASURES

Enabled by well-developed counter-terrorism and security ecosystems, criminalisation in its many forms continued to be the most prevalent violation affecting HRDs in the region. The frequent misuse and abuse of counter-terrorism-related laws and mechanisms increasingly encroached on the regulation of human rights organisations in **India**, **Sri Lanka**, **Pakistan** and the **Philippines**, while permitting the authorities to act above the law and without fear of sanction. Operating in increasingly securitised states, the looming spectre of being detained on counter-terrorism related charges in reprisal for their human rights work remained a very real threat for defenders. In January, **Jennifer Awingan-Taggaoo**, a WHRD and researcher at the [Cordillera People’s Alliance](#), an indigenous peoples’ rights organisation, was [arrested](#) in the Philippines on the charge of ‘rebellion’ and accused of involvement in an ambush on soldiers from the Philippine Army. Against the wishes of the prosecution, she was granted bail by the court, which found that the prosecution had yet to provide strong evidence of guilt. The Philippines’ Anti-Terrorism Act and terrorism financing charges were widely used against individual HRDs and organisations. Front Line Defenders is aware of at least 13 HRDs in the Southern Tagalog region who are currently facing trumped-up criminal charges under the Anti-Terrorism Act.

Defenders faced such charges too in **India** and **Pakistan** where they face arrest and detention on counter-terrorism and other national security charges; these included [Khurram Parvez](#) and [Irfan Mehraj](#) in Kashmir; six defenders campaigning against the Citizenship Amendment Act; [G.N. Saibaba](#), a HRD with a severe disability; and eight of the original 16 HRDs arbitrarily detained in the [Bhima Koregaon case](#) among others. Pakistani WHRD **Imaan Mazari** was accused of a number of violations under the Anti-Terrorism Act in August following a speech she gave at a public rally organised by the **Pashtun Tahafuz Movement** rights group in Islamabad during which she criticised the Pakistani military for abuses and human rights violations.

In several countries, counter-terrorism logic has also permeated policing, financing and other administrative functions, with specialised agencies provided with powers that are misused to intimidate, harass, surveil, interrogate and compromise the work of HRDs. Even without resorting to arrest, counter-terrorism agencies, such as the Counter Terrorism Investigation Department (CTID) in **Sri Lanka** or the National Investigation

Agency (NIA) in India, were used to harass and intimidate HRDs on an ongoing basis, in particular defenders from minority religious and ethnic groups. In September and October, multiple raids were conducted by the police and NIA in New Delhi, and in the states of Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Telangana. In September, the house of HRD and journalist [Seema Azad](#) was raided and 39 journalists linked to the NewsClick website were raided in October 2023, thought to be due to the website's prominent coverage of human rights violations. Its editor [Probhir Purkayastha](#) was arrested shortly thereafter under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act. In Pakistan, the home of [Hooran Baloch](#), a prominent WHRD defending the rights of victims and family members of enforced disappearances, was raided in Quetta, Balochistan on 27 November.

## DELEGITIMISATION AND CRIMINALISATION OF DEFENDERS

Disinformation and labelling tactics were used to erode HRDs' credibility and their support networks in a range of countries across the region, including **Cambodia, India, Pakistan, the Philippines and Vietnam**. Religious, ethnic, caste and other identity minorities were particularly at risk from this form of persecution, as state authorities spread defamatory narratives designed to criminalise and defame them. The frequent labelling, smearing, or red-tagging of HRDs as "terrorist", "criminal", "traitor", "anti-state propagandist", "Maoist" or other dehumanising terms, demonised and minimised their legitimate human rights demands. It was particularly notable in cases of persecution of Baloch, Sindhi and Pashtun HRDs in Pakistan, Tamil and Muslim HRDs in Sri Lanka, Dalit and indigenous HRDs and Muslim HRDs in India and against indigenous HRDs in the Philippines, as outlined in [Jennifer Awingan-Taggao's case](#) above. In Thailand, the Bangkok Civil Court ruled in February that two WHRDs, [Angkhana Neelapaijit](#) and [Anchana Heemmina](#) had been victims of an online smear campaign and that their work as WHRDs [warranted](#) state protection in line with Thailand's international human rights obligations.

Criminalisation of defenders remained pervasive in **China** where the authorities continued to arbitrarily detain, prosecute and sentence HRDs to prison terms to silence, deter, and punish individuals for defending human rights. Between January and October, at least 12 HRDs<sup>19</sup> were sentenced by a court in mainland China or in **Hong Kong** to prison terms ranging from 4.5 months to 14 years, for a combined total of more than 77 years. The actual number of HRDs sentenced during this period is most likely higher.

The recent publication of (an unofficial translation of) [the verdict](#) against [Cheng Yuan \(程渊\)](#), an internationally-connected HRD, provides a striking illustration of the Chinese government's suspicion and hostility towards HRDs' engagement with foreign entities, including receipt of foreign funding. The verdict states that Cheng Yuan's organisation

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19 Based on the cases that Front Line Defenders has been able to monitor and document.



As the spokesperson of SOS Network in the Philippines, Indigenous WHRD Jeany Rose Hayahay is at the forefront of many public gatherings, protests and meetings, and is consistently red-tagged and monitored as a leader, facing reprisals and threats, both directly and indirectly. She is at high risk of being killed, arrested or imprisoned yet continues to lead at the forefront with determination and courage.

© Save Our Schools Network

received foreign funding to conduct human rights activities and notably mentions the existence of a so-called “Certificate of Affirmation of the Status of Hostile Organisation” issued by the Ministry of State Security. The verdict names several overseas Chinese-run or international human rights NGOs as having been certified as such, and records HRDs’ interactions with those organisations dating back to 2012.

The verdicts issued in trials of HRDs reveal that they were convicted and sentenced solely for exercising their rights, including acts such as writing or sharing articles criticising government policies or officials, seeking funding for human rights activities, calling for democratic reforms, participating in human rights workshops, holding peaceful protests, organising commemorations of victims of human rights violations, and even organising or attending private, indoor events to discuss human rights and democracy issues.

HRDs continue to be subjected to prolonged detention, torture and ill-treatment and a lack of adequate medical care while in detention, as well as a flagrant denial of fair trial rights. Several defenders continued to be held in prolonged arbitrary detention awaiting trial or a verdict after a trial. The case of WHRD and lawyer [Li Yuhan \(李昱函\)](#) is illustrative

of the blatant disregard for fair trial rights: on 25 October, Heping District Court in the city of Shenyang sentenced the WHRD to six and a half years in prison. The verdict was announced over two years after her trial and over six years after she was initially detained. The 74-year-old has reportedly been subjected to torture and ill-treatment, and she has been repeatedly denied adequate medical attention, despite the grave deterioration of her health in detention.

## **ENVIRONMENTAL, INDIGENOUS PEOPLE'S AND LAND RIGHTS DEFENDERS**

Sustained attacks by corporate-linked and state actors against the land and livelihoods of indigenous and other minority groups in the region further eroded their traditional forms of organisation and way of life, while making them increasingly vulnerable. HRDs defending indigenous peoples' or minority groups' rights to land, livelihoods, a healthy environment and self-determination were targeted with multiple charges meted out by co-opted judicial authorities. These HRDs had to contend with relentless and complex forms of criminalisation, and SLAPPs, draining their resources and destabilising their human rights work, while simultaneously resisting displacement, deforestation and denial of access to their land and resources.

The situation for grassroots movements in **India** remained challenging and is rooted in decades of suppression especially against Dalit and Adivasi (indigenous) communities. The conflicts and persecution are heightened for those located in mineral rich states, and directly linked to state and corporate commercial interests in relation to extractive industries, who see local communities as a barrier to profit expansion and resort to reprisals to undermine and suppress local campaigns. Such repression is often accompanied by dense militarisation and police presence in villages to monitor movements and criminalise the work of local communities and defenders, who are labelled as Maoists. In Jagatsinghpur District, Odisha HRDs and community leaders involved in a peaceful land rights campaign against the forcible acquisition of land for a steel plant (anti-Jindal campaign) have faced serious reprisals including arrest, detention and physical violence. Throughout 2023, affected villages in the district have been cordoned off with a heavy police presence, restricting the daily lives of communities, including free movement. In November, the police in [Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra](#) conducted a brutal crackdown on a peaceful protest ongoing for nine months. The protest, led by **Madia-Gond Adivasis** - recognised by the Indian government as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group - was against iron ore mining in the area and the existential threats to their land, livelihoods, culture and environment. 21 protesters, including HRDs, were arrested during the protest and released subsequently. In the midst of this protest, [six new mines were leased to five companies](#), with over 40,000 people at risk of forced displacement if these mines are allowed operate.

HRDs and community leaders associated with [Jagrit Adivasi Dalit Sangathan \(JADS\)](#), a collective that has been working for over 20 years to advocate for the rights of Dalit and Indigenous communities in rural areas of Madhya Pradesh, also faced repression. Over 50 land and environmental defenders were arbitrarily detained in the 15 months from October 2022 to December 2023. On 23 July, [Madhuri Krishnaswami](#), one of the most prominent leaders of JADS was served with an “externment” (forced eviction) order for a period of one year. This externment notice is made by the local administration, effectively expelling the named person from a particular area. In addition to the eviction order, 21 charges were filed against the WHRD, falsely accusing her of aiding illegal deforestation. Another HRD linked to JADS, [Nitin Varghese](#), was arrested on false charges by Madhya Pradesh police on 29 August 2023. The HRD was falsely accused of instigating violence by local communities against government officials and was detained for two weeks prior to his release on 12 September 2023.

Multiple HRDs working to protect the environment were arrested or sentenced in Vietnam in 2023, including [Hong Thi Minh Hong](#), who was [sentenced](#) to three years in prison in September on trumped up tax evasion charges. Some of the HRDs targeted were involved in steering the Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETP) deal the Vietnam government signed with G7 nations in December 2022. This includes the climate researcher and expert [Ngo Thi To Nchien](#), who was arrested in September and who had been providing advice to the Vietnamese government in developing its JETP implementation plan. At least six environmental defenders have been arrested in recent years on tax evasion charges.

Meanwhile, communities in war-affected North and East [Sri Lanka](#) faced risks of further dispossession as some of their lands expropriated during Sri Lanka’s civil war are now being used for large-scale commercial purposes or are in the hands of military actors or settlers. In April, HRD [Kairudeen Nihal Ahmed](#), director of the Human Elevation Organisation in Ampara, was stripped naked and beaten by an unidentified group of thugs while documenting the expropriation of community lands by commercial plantations. The defender was subsequently targeted with repeated state surveillance, interrogation and harassment including by the CTID. In [October 2023](#), Sri Lankan police suppressed peaceful protesters in Madhavanai and Mayilathamadu, Batticaloa, who are campaigning against the ongoing encroachment of their pastureland by majority community settlers. The authorities have responded to their expression of dissent, protests, and the exercise of the right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly with assault and intimidation. Elsewhere, in Nepal, communities continued to be forcibly evicted and displaced to make way for development projects, including energy and infrastructure projects. Newari indigenous defenders from the Kathmandu valley were repeatedly beaten, arrested and threatened, while HRDs from urban settlements were labelled as “anti-state” and criminals for their resistance to forced evictions.

## TRANSNATIONAL REPRESSION

Concerning patterns of collaboration by governments in the region, aimed at ensuring continued persecution of HRDs even after they have crossed borders, persisted in 2023. The growing transnational reach of abusive governments can neutralise defenders' protection strategies and sends a chilling message that defenders' safety is not guaranteed anywhere in the region, or in some cases beyond the region. Defenders who sought safety for themselves and their families through forced exile or temporary relocation were targeted during their attempts to relocate, or once in their final destination. Despite having fled their countries of origin, defenders faced equally grave threats of surveillance, attacks, and even death. Even HRDs with refugee status in a third country and in the process of resettlement were targeted and forcibly returned. Travel bans on HRDs further compounded their security risks, forcing them to embark on perilous irregular migration routes, complicating further their options for relocation.

In May, Lao HRD **Bounsuan Kitiyano**, who had his refugee status recognized by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), was [shot dead](#) in a border town in northeastern Thailand. Bounsuan, a member of Thailand-based "Free Lao," a network of Lao migrant workers and HRDs, participated in activities including peaceful protests at the Lao Embassy in Bangkok and human rights workshops on topics including human rights, environmental rights, anti-corruption and democracy. A month prior to his shooting, **Savang Phaleuth**, another "Free Lao" member living in Thailand, was [arrested](#) by police authorities from an unidentified unit.

Vietnamese blogger and democracy campaigner **Duong Van Thai**, who also had refugee status in Thailand, was abducted in Bangkok and was forcibly returned to Vietnam where he was formally arrested and charged with "distributing anti-State propaganda". Pakistani authorities [threatened and intimidated](#) the family members of Baloch HRDs who had since relocated outside of Pakistan but who continued to advocate for human rights. In India, authorities [cancelled the passports](#) of several Kashmiris, including HRDs, lawyers, artists and journalists, violating their rights to citizenship.

China's extremely sophisticated transnational repression includes overt and covert tactics involving harassment and surveillance of HRDs in third countries, formal extradition orders and abusing Interpol's red notice system. On 28 July, **Lu Siwei**, a HRD and lawyer, was detained and later deported to China by Lao authorities, where he was once again detained. He has since been released from prison pending an investigation. Lao authorities proceeded with the defender's *refoulement*, despite an [appeal](#) by UN experts to halt his deportation and warnings of the real risk of serious harm that he would face if he were returned to China. Meanwhile, police in Hong Kong interrogated the families of HRDs who had fled the territory and for whom arrest warrants had since been issued.

## VACUUM OF PROTECTION FOR ROHINGYA HRDS IN EXILE

Defenders protecting the rights of their own communities in situations of protracted displacement due to armed conflict, systemic persecution and other severe human rights crises in their countries of origin, face risks due to their status as defenders and refugees. Rohingya HRDs who have sought refuge in **Bangladesh** and **India** were forced to carry out their human rights work in extremely hostile contexts. In the securitized camp settings of Cox's Bazar, Rohingya defenders faced violent threats from Rohingya militant groups, namely the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) and the Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO), as well as from human traffickers, but have no rights to any form of legal protection or justice. The armed militias have kidnapped HRDs for ransom, believing those collaborating with local or international NGOs are well-off. HRDs have also been targeted by these militias because they expose human trafficking and drug running, activities in which the militant groups are involved.

Rohingya HRDs also advocate for and provide fundamental services such as healthcare and education, as well as documenting killings and other abuses in the camp. Moreover, these defenders regularly assist international actors and journalists to record the [gross violations](#) committed against this Muslim minority group in Rakhine state by the Myanmar military in 2017. HRDs face serious risk of abductions, physical attacks, sexual violence, death threats and killings, and the HRDs are insufficiently protected in the camps despite the presence of a range of Bangladeshi security forces and UNHCR. WHRDs who assume a more active role in the camps are often deemed to be disrupting traditional gendered roles and have also been threatened by militant groups as well as their own husbands and male relatives. The fact that several Rohingya HRDs reported opting to return to Myanmar – a place where they were subjected to mass atrocities – is telling of the widespread brutal control, violent insecurity and protection vacuum in the camps.<sup>20</sup>

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20 Front Line Defenders analysis of protection grants to Rohingya HRDs between January and December 2023.

## TARGETING OF WHRDS AND LGBTIQ+ DEFENDERS

According to the risks reported to Front Line Defenders from HRDs during the year, WHRDs were among the most frequently targeted defenders in the region, with death threats, intimidation of family members and arrest and detention all featuring prominently. WHRDs were particularly vulnerable to online smear campaigns and threats for their work advocating for gender equality and against gender-based violence including in **India, Sri Lanka** and **Nepal**. Gendered online attacks have far-reaching consequences for WHRDs not only in their work life but also in their family and community spaces. Disinformation campaigns were used to bolster and spread sexist and misogynist attacks against WHRDs and to smear their reputations and humiliate them. Such campaigns often evolved into offline threats from within their communities and other forms of legal persecution, while religious bigotry and extremism in several contexts further compounded online abuse. In January, a prominent Muslim WHRD from Puttalm, Sri Lanka, **Juweiriya Mohideen**, was slandered on Facebook and was accused of working against Islam. These attacks were prompted by her work around reforming Muslim personal laws and seeking equal status and protection for Muslim women. The online attacks were followed by influential religious figures making misogynistic speeches at places of worship, leading to threats of physical violence and to her and her family being ostracized by the community. In remote parts of Nepal, WHRDs working to end gender-based violence and advocating on behalf of survivors as well as women who were killed faced direct risks because of their work, including attacks by state and non-state actors and criminalisation.

In **Malaysia**, an improvised explosive device was [discovered](#) planted on the car of LGBTIQ+ rights defender **Siti Kasim** during a routine service of her vehicle in Bangsar. She had [previously received death threats](#) for advocating for LGBTIQ+ rights and speaking out against the rise of religious extremism in Malaysia. That extremism was evident elsewhere in the region and further undermined previous progress on LGBTIQ+ rights. In May, the Federal Shariat Court in Pakistan [rolled back key protections afforded to transgender persons under the Transgender Persons \(Protection of Rights\) Act 2018](#) – considered one of the more progressive pieces of legislation on transgender rights globally. The court upheld the challenge made by religious groups that the protections afforded to transgender persons under the Act were against the principles of Islam. Due to their peaceful campaigning for their rights, transgender rights defenders have been repeatedly [targeted](#) with violence and smear campaigns.



# HRDS DEFENDING BALOCH RIGHTS IN PAKISTAN



Baloch activists hold portraits of their missing family members during their sit-in protest in Islamabad, Pakistan, 25 Dec. 2023. They had travelled to the capital to protest enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings in Balochistan.

© Associated Press / Alamy Stock Photo

Families of victims of enforced disappearances faced intimidation, threats and humiliation, and in some contexts risked even being forcibly disappeared themselves in **Pakistan**, **Sri Lanka** and **India**. For years, HRDs have persisted with their strategies to pursue truth, justice and redress for enforced disappearances despite unaccountable governments, as well as widespread impunity and escalating threats. In the highly militarised Baloch region, HRDs are caught between state forces, state-supported paramilitaries and militants, forcing them to work in extremely dangerous conditions. WHRDs have reported to Front Line Defenders that they were pressured into repeating state propaganda on Balochistan, joining government-organised press conferences and informing on their colleagues. When they refuse to do this, there is a noticeable increase in the smear campaigns against them and the threats they face.

In December, Baloch WHRDs organised a march from Balochistan to Islamabad to highlight historic and ongoing violations by Pakistani authorities against the Baloch community, including enforced or involuntary disappearance, extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detention and torture. The peaceful marchers were attacked by police in Islamabad on 20 December with hundreds arrested and scores injured.

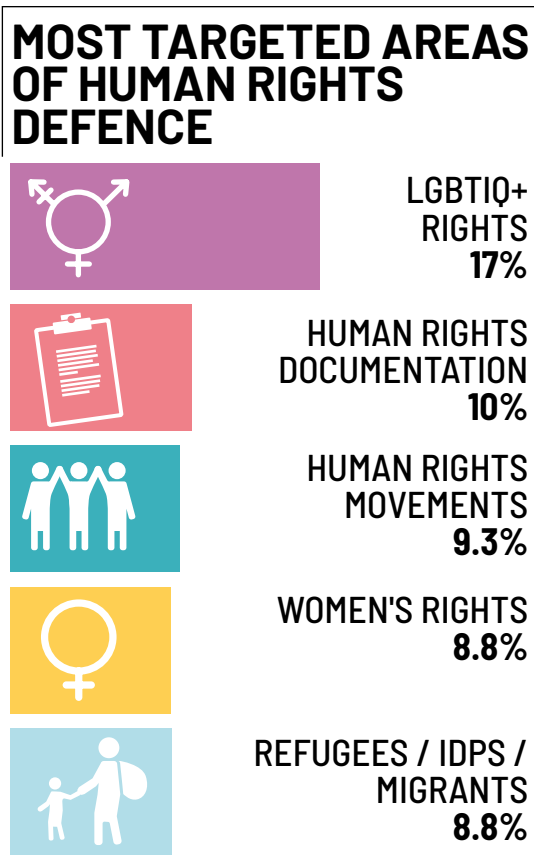
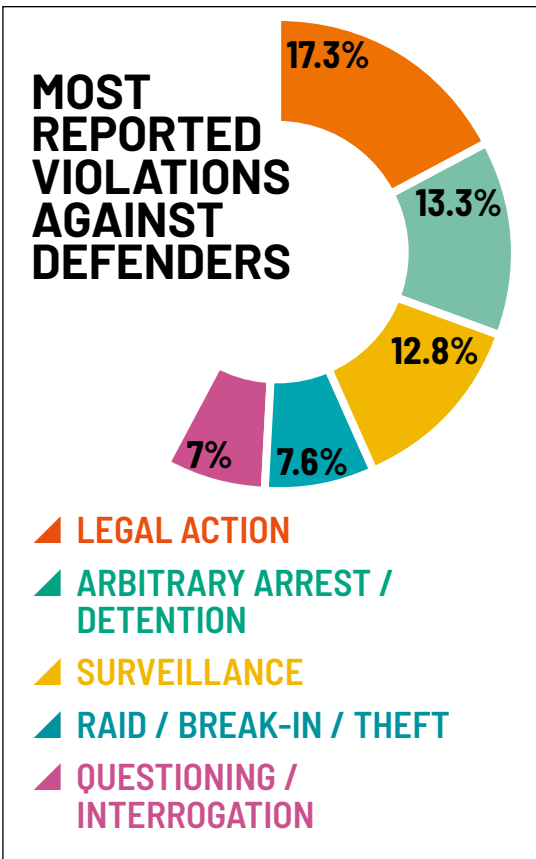
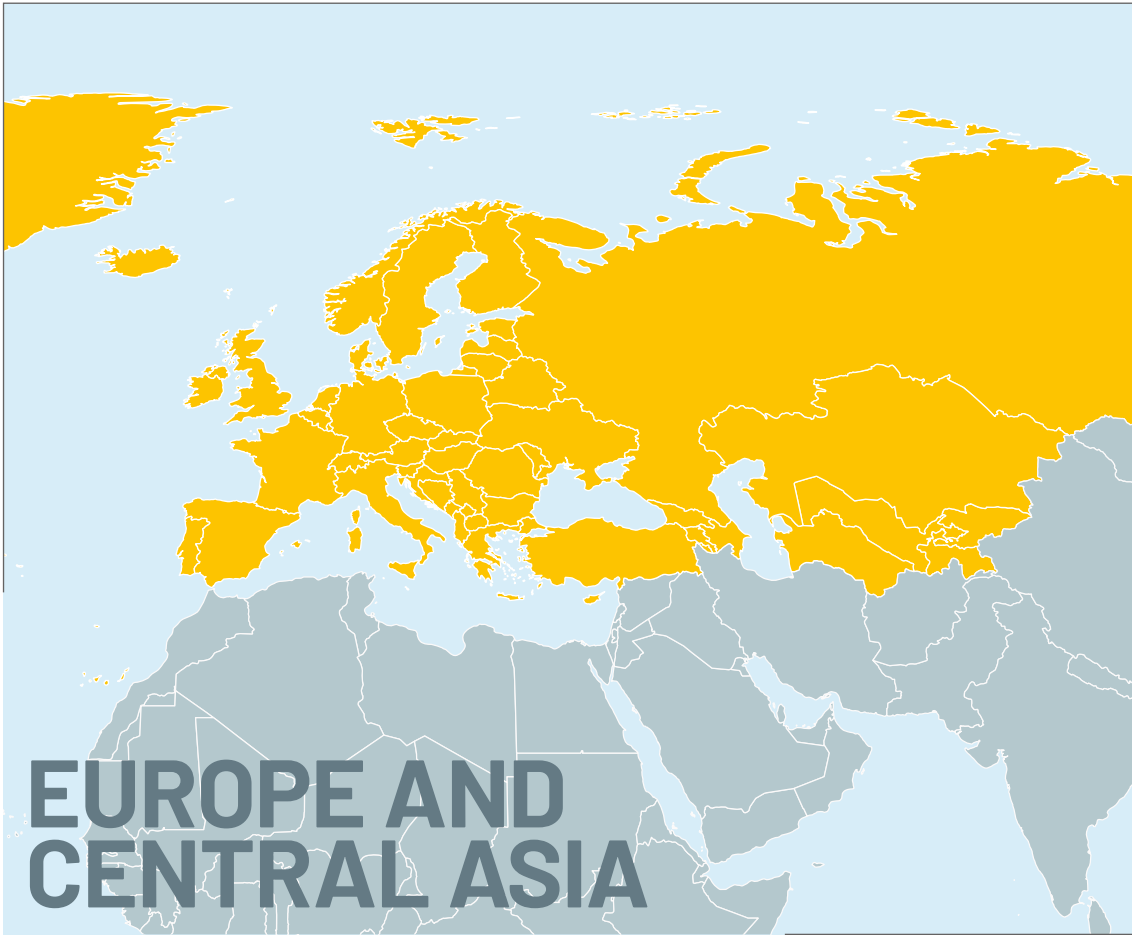
## WELCOME DEVELOPMENTS

1. In several instances defenders successfully challenged defamation cases brought against them in the context of business activities. Defenders [Haris Azhar and WHRD Fatia Maulidyanti](#), who risked facing a six year prison sentence if found guilty of defamation in a case connected to mining business interests, were eventually acquitted in Indonesia. In **Thailand**, WHRDs [Angkhana Neelapaijit, Puttanee Kangkun and Thanaporn Saleephol](#) were acquitted in a criminal defamation case. The three WHRDs had been facing 37 bogus criminal defamation charges filed against them by a Thai chicken company in retaliation for their social media posts supporting other Thai labour rights defenders facing SLAPPs for actively denouncing the company's exploitative labour practices.
2. Although there was much to be pessimistic about in the region last year, as highlighted above, the resilience shown by defenders in the face of systematic dismantling of civil society frameworks in many countries was remarkable. While the shutting down of NGOs and the introduction of ever more restrictive legislation had an impact on HRD work, defenders did not permit these measures to erase citizen's voice. HRDs were instrumental in amplifying farmers' rights-based protests in **Sri Lanka** and **India**, marginalised Baloch WHRDs drew global attention to their cause through their Long March and multiple campaigns were organised by Indian HRDs to protect environmental and land rights in a very hostile environment. Women's voices were widely expected to be silenced in Afghanistan following the take over of the Taliban and the exodus of thousands of HRDs from the country, but WHRDs continued to resist attempts by the Taliban to invisibilize them, providing resistance at every turn and keeping the issue alive at the international level.



Indonesian HRD Haris Azhar and WHRD Fatia Maulidyanti, who risked facing a six year prison sentence if found guilty of defamation in a case connected to mining business interests, were eventually acquitted in Jan. 2024.

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Source: Front Line Defenders (2023)

# EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA

In the second year of **Russia's** full-scale invasion of **Ukraine**, HRDs, including human rights journalists and lawyers, documenting human rights violations continued to be at severe risk, working and living in extremely dangerous conditions. Ukrainian HRDs faced fresh challenges with an increased array of war-time human rights violations committed by the Russian Armed Forces, including the capture of a growing number of civilian hostages and the indoctrination of Ukrainian children, whom Russian authorities have abducted or who reside in the occupied territories. Due to the massive scale of human rights violations and war crimes systematically committed by the Russian military forces in Ukraine, coupled with the continued need to push for the protection of human rights in Ukraine at a time of war, defenders are undertaking an extremely heavy workload that is taking its toll on their mental and physical health.

Physical health has been a major issue for Ukrainian HRDs in long-term detention in Russia. In many cases, defenders were denied access to adequate medical treatment, while their families feared for their physical and psychological security and integrity. Throughout 2023, [Iryna Danylovych](#), [Emir Usein Kuku](#) and [Server Mustafayev](#), all of whom were sentenced to imprisonment in penal colonies by the Russian authorities, were routinely denied medical assistance. Iryna Danylovych, a citizen journalist and health worker serving a seven-year sentence, was [transferred](#) from Crimea to Russia without her family or legal representatives being informed.

The war in Nagorno-Karabakh has also significantly affected the mental health of HRDs, especially those supporting Armenian families who had fled the fighting to uncontested territory in **Armenia**. Facing a new phenomenon of people fleeing Nagorno-Karabakh, HRDs expanded their work, which led to further well-being challenges, particularly for WHRDs who were prominent in meeting the needs of the displaced. Some of those providing support are displaced persons themselves, which increased the risk of further entrenching traumatic experiences they have already faced. Lack of resources available



Members of the National Union of Journalists of Ukraine hold posters with portraits of three journalists imprisoned by Russia - Iryna Danylovych, Iryna Levchenko and Victoria Roshchina - on Independence square in Kyiv, Ukraine, 17 Oct. 2023.

© AP Photo/Alex Babenko

and uncertainty about the future added to the stress levels of both survivors and caregivers, roles which were frequently not distinguished. The need to focus attention on humanitarian aid, as well as physical security, meant fewer resources and less capacity were dedicated to psychosocial support. Partially to address this, human rights groups in Armenia whose work focuses on well-being and mental health support increased their volume of pro bono work. Women-led initiatives and human rights organisations self-organised to create safe spaces for refugees to share their stories and to benefit from the solidarity of their colleagues.

## WEAPONISATION OF LAW

Several governments in the region used a range of legal measures on the pretext of countering terrorism, extremism or foreign interference to repress, obstruct or criminalise the work of HRDs and further reduce civic space. In **Turkey**, the Chair of the Turkish Medical Association **Şebnem Korur Fincancı** was [sentenced](#) to 2 years 8 months imprisonment for “making terrorist propaganda” under article 7/2 of the Anti-Terror Law. A criminal investigation was initiated against the WHRD after she gave her professional opinion as a forensic expert during an interview with a TV station in which she commented



Turkish Medical Association President Dr. Şebnem Korur Fincancı talks to journalists after being released from Bakirkoy Women's Prison in Istanbul, Turkey, 11 Jan. 2023.

© AP Photo/Emrah Gurel

on video footage that the station claimed showed chemical weapons had been used in Turkey. Şebnem Korur Fincancı agreed that the images suggested the use of chemical and toxic gases which affect the nervous system and that an independent investigation should be carried out. Following these remarks, the Turkish Ministry of Defence registered a complaint against her and an investigation into her comments was opened.

A number of governments attempted to ([Georgia](#)) or did table foreign agent laws ([Republika Srpska/ Bosnia Herzegovina](#), [Kazakhstan](#), [Hungary](#) and [Kyrgyzstan](#)), which raised the alarm as civil society anticipated detrimental consequences for human rights organisations and defenders. These laws strike at the core mandate of many civil society, human rights and media groups: that of challenging governments and demanding transparency, accountability and justice. Such laws routinely contain overly broad and vague provisions which permit authorities to exercise disproportionate control over civil society organisations. During the year human rights and media organisations were targeted with burdensome administrative requirements, restrictions on advocacy activities and access to foreign funding, and de-registration, all of which radically suppress legitimate human rights work. In September, Kazakh authorities [published](#) a register of organisations and individuals in receipt of foreign funding. The “foreign funding register” included many well-respected and long-established national and international human rights organisations, placing them at even greater risk of intimidation or harassment. After several attempts in recent years to introduce legislation with similar “foreign agent” provisions, in December, Hungary [adopted](#)

a [“Sovereignty Protection Bill”](#) that gives authorities far-reaching investigative powers, allowing them to severely curtail political opposition and target human rights and civil society organisations in receipt of foreign funding. By insinuating that human rights organisations in receipt of foreign funding are somehow betraying national interests, the argument for the universality of human rights and internationally accepted norms is critically undermined, and human rights themselves are re-cast as foreign values.

Having previously criticised **Russia** and **Georgia** and taken **Hungary** to the European Court of Justice in 2017 for similar legislation, the **EU** pushed ahead with its own foreign funding legal instrument at the end of the year. Despite widespread [criticism](#) from civil society in Europe, on 12 December, the European Commission [introduced](#) the Defence of Democracy package, which includes the proposal for an [EU Foreign Interference Law](#). Many HRDs in the bloc fear that such a law could be used to silence dissent, stigmatise their work and furthermore provide cover to repressive regimes to introduce similar laws in their jurisdictions. While the European Commission has cited transparency as a major motivator behind this legislation, the fig leaf of transparency has been [used](#) for years by authoritarian governments to crack down on NGOs which receive their funding from abroad. Such legislation also undermines one of the key rights affirmed in the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, namely to “solicit, receive and utilize resources” for the protection of human rights. The [commentary](#) from the UN Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights on this article highlights that this includes “the receipt of funds from abroad”.

In the Russian Federation, the government continued its assault on HRDs and activism in defence of human rights and universal values.<sup>21</sup> Authorities persisted with their efforts to smear and register human rights organisations as “foreign agents” and as “undesirable organisations”<sup>22</sup> under the “foreign agents” law and related laws that enable them to shut down and ban organisations considered to be undermining Russia’s constitutional order and security. [Man and Law](#), a prominent human rights organisation in the Republic of Mari El that monitors detention conditions and investigates human rights violations, was accused of committing several so-called “gross violations”, including for example having omitted to include the label of “foreign agent” on its reports to the authorities. On 17 August 2023, the Court of Appeals in Moscow [upheld](#) a decision to close the [Sova Centre](#), once again using the “foreign agents” legal provisions to target the organisation. Of growing concern was the continued use of the repressive “undesirable organization” label to silence and jeopardise the work of [Russian human rights](#) organisations in exile, aimed at preventing their continued work in Russia, including through raising the cost for those still in Russia to collaborate with such organisations.

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21 In 2022, the Ministry of Justice shut down a number of prominent human rights organisations, including Memorial Human Rights Centre, Sphere Foundation, and Russian NGO Justice Initiative. On 24 January 2023, Moscow City Court moved to shut down Moscow Helsinki Group, the oldest human rights organisation in Russia.

22 Russia’s list of “undesirable organisations” now contains 88 entries, including mostly international civil society organisations, Russian political dissent groups and some national human rights groups that have had to register outside of Russia.

# HUMAN RIGHTS LAWYERS

Human rights lawyers were subjected to systemic persecution in **Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russia, Russian-occupied Crimea** and **Turkey**, not only in the form of disbarment, but also through administrative and criminal persecution, surveillance and searches of their homes. In Belarus, two lawyers in succession representing the [WHRD Nasta Loika](#) – who in October was transferred to the Homel Penal Colony No.4 to serve her seven-year sentence – were obstructed in their legal defence of the WHRD. In January, the Bar Qualification Commission of the Ministry of Justice in Belarus withdrew human rights lawyer [Tatsiana Lishankova's](#) licence to practice law in retaliation for her work defending Nasta. Subsequently in March, Nasta's lawyer, [Inessa Olenskaya](#), had the renewal of her licence blocked by the Bar Qualification Commission due to her human rights work, which will lead to the lawyer's eventual disbarment.

In July, a group of unidentified individuals [attacked and severely beat](#) Aleksandr Nemov, a human rights lawyer who was travelling to Grozny in the Chechen Republic, to attend the verdict of HRDs he was representing. In April and May, the Russian authorities [raided](#) the offices of human rights lawyers from Crew against Torture in Pyatigorsk, Nizhnii Novgorod, and Krasnodar. In October, local authorities in the Chechen Republic took lawyer [Magomed Alamov](#) hostage and threatened to kill him. In May, WHRD [Elena Pershakova's](#) apartment was [raided](#) by law enforcement officers for six hours. In August, a group of unidentified individuals [tear-gassed](#) representatives of the LGBTQ+ rights lawyers organisation [DeloLGBT](#), when they arrived at a court hearing concerning the blocking of the website of the trans rights organization Centre T.

In Turkey, human rights lawyer and member of the Lawyers for Freedom Association (ÖHD) [Gülhan Kaya](#) was [arrested](#) on 9 June on charges of "membership of a terrorist organisation" for her professional activities as a human rights lawyer. Those activities have included her representing the families of victims of the 2015 ISIS bombing in Suruç, Urfa, in which 34 people were killed and for which only one perpetrator has so far been convicted. During her interrogation, she was questioned about visits and calls she had made to her imprisoned clients and her reasons for taking up those cases. She was remanded in custody until the first hearing of her trial on 9 November. Although she was released, the criminal case against her continues.

Within a broader context of administrative and legal persecution bolstered by the ongoing misuse and abuse of counterterrorism and anti-extremism measures, human rights and media organisations were targeted with numerous groundless legal cases. Defenders in **Belarus** and **Kyrgyzstan** were subjected to ongoing smear campaigns, judicial harassment, violations of due process rights and arbitrary detention. As part of a continuing effort to suffocate civic space in Belarus, in February the Committee for State Security [labelled](#) the [Belarus Association of Journalists](#) as an "extremist organisation" and in June added their website and social media channels to the "Republican List of Extremist Content". This exposes anyone who uses their online channels to the risk of administrative and criminal persecution. One of the branches of the human rights organisation [Viasna](#) was similarly targeted in August 2023. Accusations of terrorism or extremism have severe ramifications





Oleg Orlov, a Russian HRD and council member of Human Rights Center “Memorial” (HRC “Memorial”), gestures to the media at a courtroom prior to a session in Moscow, 8 June 2023.

© AP Photo/Emrah Gurel

for HRDs in Belarus, where they are [blacklisted, humiliated and prosecuted outside any judicial process](#). In an attempt to quash investigative reporting on the President and other senior officials in Kyrgyzstan, the Prosecutor’s Office of the city of Bishkek [filed](#) a motion to shut down the human rights media outlet [Kloop Media](#), accusing its reporting of going beyond the scope of the organisation’s charter.

## RESTRICTION ON FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT

Throughout the year, authorities in **Russia** and Russian-occupied territories of **Ukraine** continued to use war-time censorship laws against defenders who expressed condemnation of the Russian Armed Forces’ war crimes and other human rights violations in Ukraine. Human rights defenders, including [Svetlana Anokhina](#), [Oleg Orlov](#), [Dmitry Talantov](#) in Russia, as well as [Abdureshit Dzhapparov](#) and [Alexey Ladin](#) in Russian-occupied Crimea, were charged, fined and/or continued to be held in pre-trial detention under charges related to “discrediting” or disseminating “fake” or “false” information on the Russian Federation’s Armed Forces. These cases mirror a broader trend of systematic targeting of HRDs, including lawyers and journalists, who have used social media and other tools to advocate for ethnic minority rights and denounce human rights violations in the context of the Russian invasion.

In many parts of the region, there was explicit targeting of HRDs, who were pressing for the public's right to have a say in how they are governed, promoting rule of law and exposing corruption. In June, HRD and lawyer **Eduard Marikashvili** joined a peaceful demonstration in front of the **Georgian** Parliament in Tbilisi and held a blank piece of paper in his hands. This was to symbolise his opposition to the growing alliance between the Georgian and Russian Government, specifically in relation to an attempt by the Georgian Government to introduce a duplicate of Russia's notorious "foreign agents" law. The police violently arrested and detained him, and in September, he was [charged](#) with hooliganism. In November, a court in Baku, **Azerbaijan**, [placed](#) HRD and journalist Ulvi Hasanli, and WHRD and journalist Sevinc Vaqifqizi, in pre-trial detention for four months for their reporting on authorities' alleged corruption and human rights violations in the context of war in Nagorno-Karabakh. In January, **Uzbek** HRD and lawyer Dauletmurat Tajimuratov was [sentenced](#) to 16 years in prison for his role in leading peaceful protests in Nukus in 2022, aimed at protecting Karakalpakstan's status as an independent republic.

The growing intolerance of protest was also evident in the moral panic that took hold in several Western European states following public demonstrations opposing **Israel's** war on **Gaza** in the last quarter of the year. Several governments responded by [banning or restricting protests and vigils](#) on the pretext of potential risks of anti-semitism or threats to public order, including in **Austria, Germany, Switzerland** and **France**. The **UK** Home Secretary [described](#) marches in support of a ceasefire as "hate marches", while [accusing](#) the London Metropolitan Police force of behaving more leniently toward pro-Palestinian marchers than other demonstrators.

## VIKTORIA AMELINA

**Viktoria Amelina** was a WHRD and a renowned writer who joined the Ukrainian human rights organisation Truth Hounds in June 2022 to record war crimes committed by **Russia**. As part of her work, she had been documenting allegations of such crimes in the liberated territories of eastern, southern and northern **Ukraine**, and particularly in the village of Kapytolivka in Kharkiv region. On 27 June, Viktoria was in Kramatorsk, in the Donetsk region, where she was accompanying a delegation of Colombian writers and journalists. That evening the group was having dinner, when a Russian missile hit the building in which the restaurant was located. This missile killed 13 civilians and injured a further 60. As a result of the missile strike, Viktoria Amelina sustained fatal injuries, and [died](#) three days later on 1 July 2023. She was one of 11 HRDs recorded by the HRD Memorial killed in Ukraine during the course of the year.

Authorities in **Uzbekistan** and **Turkmenistan** used restrictions on freedom of movement to intimidate defenders and hinder their work. In May, the Uzbek government [barred](#) Kazakh HRD **Galym Ageleulov** from entering the country. He was *en route* to Tashkent to observe the appeal of 22 protesters detained in the Karakalpakstan Autonomous Republic since July 2022, including **Dauletmurat Tajimuratov**, mentioned above. Turkmen WHRD

and journalist [Soltan Achilov](#) and her daughter were stopped from boarding their flight to Switzerland on 18 November, preventing her attendance as a keynote speaker at the [University of Geneva's Human Rights Week](#). This denial of freedom of movement came only days after high-ranking government officials [expressed](#) their commitment to human rights and fundamental freedoms during Turkmenistan's 4th Universal Periodic Review.

## TARGETING OF SOLIDARITY

Those offering humanitarian and other support to people on the move elsewhere in the region were criminalised and harassed, particularly in the countries at the outer border of the European Union, including [Greece](#), [Poland](#) and [Latvia](#). In July, HRD [Ieva Raubiško](#) from the refugee rights organisation Gribu palīdzēt bēgļiem (I Want to Help Refugees) was [indicted](#) for "organising intentional illegal crossing of the state border for a group of people" for helping a group of Syrian asylum-seekers at the Latvia-Belarus border. After learning the group had been pushed back to [Belarus](#) from Latvia numerous times in one month, the organisation was able to secure a European Court of Human Rights decision that stated that the group should not be deported until 8 February 2023 and that they should be provided with necessary care. Ieva and her colleague went to the border to ensure that the interim measure was implemented and when they saw the group, they immediately contacted emergency medical services and reported the situation to border guards. However, they were taken into custody and interrogated, and their phones were confiscated.

In Poland, HRDs supporting people on the move at the Poland-Belarus border continued to face push back from border guards. Their cars were regularly stopped for checks and defenders were questioned about where they were going. HRDs are routinely given administrative fines between 300 and 500 Polish zloty by border guards for throwing food and other goods across the border fence. In December, nine defenders who had been charged with an administrative offence for providing food, liquid and clothing to asylum-seekers were [acquitted](#) and fines they had received were [dismissed](#). Also dismissed due to procedural flaws were the espionage charges against 24 HRDs in Greece, including [Seán Binder](#), [Nassos Karakitsos](#) and [Saraardini](#). The defenders had been accused of people smuggling, money laundering and membership of a criminal organisation for assisting refugees in trouble who were trying to cross the Aegean Sea to the island of Lesbos.

## CONTINUED USE OF STRATEGIC LAWSUITS AGAINST PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) [continue](#) to be used by private companies and governments in the region against HRDs and journalists as a means to silence criticism and obstruct crucial human rights work. In November, a political agreement was [reached](#) between the European Parliament and European Council on a 2022 [European Commission Directive](#) which would protect HRDs and others against

cross-border SLAPP cases. Progress in national jurisdictions was slower however, and although Ireland [published a Bill](#) that would reform its problematic defamation laws, which would include measures to address SLAPPs, it was one of the few countries in the region to do so. In July, the **Republika Srpska** entity [re-criminalised](#) defamation, re-introducing criminal penalties, including fines up to 3,000 BAMs (approx. 1,500€) with a possibility of higher fines if “defamation” is carried out through the media. Following her country visit to Italy in June, the Council of Europe’s Commissioner for Human Rights expressed alarm about the use of SLAPPs and [urged](#) the Italian government to “fully decriminalise defamation and ensure that lawsuits are not used as SLAPPs.”

Despite the adverse legal environment, in several cases in 2023, defenders successfully pushed back against lawsuits, with courts ruling in their favour. In **Kazakhstan**, the oil company NASAR Solutions was [forced to recall](#) its SLAPP suit against environmental rights defender **Galina Chernova**. The company had accused the WHRD of “dissemination of deliberately false information” in relation to her allegations of the dumping of waste into the Atyrau city sewer system. In **Ukraine**, the enterprise “Ukrekoprom” filed a defamation lawsuit against the Odesa-based environmental organisation **Green Leaf (Zelenyi Lyst)**, for mentioning in [an article](#) from 2020 that the company was allegedly dumping hazardous waste. In November, the defenders were acquitted after the [Supreme Court upheld the decision](#) of the court of appeal in favour of the defenders.

## WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

The ECA region did not escape the continued global backlash against women’s rights, which undermined the work of defenders on gender equality and brought [risks](#) to those protecting sexual health and reproductive rights, which are being violated in **Andorra, Armenia, Poland, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Ukraine, and Russia**. In March, **Justyna Wydrzyńska**, founder of the website [Women on the Net](#), Poland’s first online forum supporting women seeking safe abortions, contraception or sex education, was [convicted](#) of “aiding to perform abortion” and sentenced to eight months of community service for 30 hours a month.

Women Human Rights Defenders faced threats in both private and public spaces and, reflective of global trends, were subjected to smear campaigns and online gender-based violence (GBV). Following her country visit to Georgia, the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders [noted](#) that “at an entrance to the Parliament [in Tbilisi], I could see posters with women human rights defenders depicted and accused of being ‘spies against the church’ and that the “crude misogyny of members of [the ruling] Georgian Dream in Parliament contributes to the coarsening environment which then impacts on WHRDs”. WHRDs supporting survivors of domestic violence and other forms of GBV reported being threatened, including with death, by male partners and other family members of survivors. The entrenched and violent denial of the right of women to live free



Polish WHRD Justyna Wydrzynska is seen with supporters ahead of her trial at the Praga district court in Warsaw, Poland on 6 Jan. 2022.

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from violence took its toll in several contexts, with numerous WHRDs reporting emotional and psychological burnout.

Illustrative of this trend, is the case of the **Ukrainian** WHRD and health rights defender **Daryna Dmytrievska**, who was **bombarded** with text and social media messages involving threats and slurs for having denounced GBV on her social media channels. During the online onslaught that followed, the WHRD was also subjected to a doxing attack when an ultra-right Telegram channel posted personal information about her. She was also targeted with hundreds of texts with explicit sexual content, threats of rape and physical violence. Elsewhere, WHRD **Vanessa Mendoza Cortés**, the head of Stop Violències, **appeared before** the criminal court of **Andorra** on 4 December, on charges of “committing a crime against the prestige of the institutions [of Andorra]”. These charges were in connection with her public statement on a televised documentary concerning sexual and reproductive rights in the country, as well as the presentation of a shadow report submitted by Stop Violències to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) on 19 October 2019.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup> She was **acquitted** on 17 January 2024.

Women's and feminist movements also saw efforts to muzzle their legitimate demands for equality and rights, with concerted efforts by authorities to silence and minimize the significance of women's rights agendas as well as freedoms of assembly and expression. In **Kazakhstan**, for example, for the third consecutive year, authorities [rejected](#) a request submitted by [8MarchKZ](#) to organise a women-led peaceful protest to mark International Women's Day on 8 March. During a court hearing on 12 April 2023, the Akim (local governor) of Almaty, Erbolat Dosayev, justified the decision to ban the march by stating that it would be a threat to public security.

## LGBTIQ+ DEFENDERS ON THE SPOTLIGHT

While there were positive developments for LGBTIQ+ persons in **Slovenia**, **Latvia** and **Estonia** with the legalisation of same sex marriage or civil partnership, elsewhere in the region, laws and measures that discriminate against LGBTIQ+ defenders continued to expand. In a context where LGBTIQ+ individuals are demonised on a near continuous basis, their existence as out individuals is still not safe. In **Kyrgyzstan** and **Russia**, authorities developed new anti-LGBTIQ+ "propaganda" laws, or further expanded the remit of existing ones, to facilitate even further the persecution and criminalisation of LGBTIQ+ defenders.<sup>24</sup> On 30 November, Russia's Supreme Court [ruled in favour](#) of a motion filed by the Ministry of Justice to label the so-called "international LGBT movement" as "extremist". This unprecedented ruling will have serious repercussions for LGBTIQ+ defenders in Russia, potentially pushing many into exile and aggravating risks for those who will continue their work on the ground in Russia. Not only does this ruling intensify the risks of criminalisation, it also legitimises and incites violence and discrimination against an already at-risk community. The ruling builds on years of sustained assault on LGBTIQ+ defenders in Russia, including the shutting down of many LGBTIQ+ NGOs and the banning of gender-affirmation procedures earlier in 2023. In May, a Court in Moscow [fined](#) HRD [Yan Dvorkin](#) for violating the so-called "LGBT propaganda" law, after he denounced homophobic hate speech by public officials on social media.

In January, the European Court of Human Rights [ruled on a case](#) where a book of fairy tales that included depictions of same-sex relationships was adjudged to be in violation of the Minors Protection Act in **Lithuania**. The Court found that the labelling of a book as harmful to children because of this content violated Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). The Ministry of Justice moved to amend the Minors Protection Act in July, but the Lithuanian Parliament [voted against](#) the amendment, which would have removed the clause stating that any information that "denigrates family values, promotes a different concept of marriage and family formation from that enshrined in the Constitution and the Civil Code" is harmful to children. In December, the Court further [ruled](#)

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<sup>24</sup> In November 2022, Russia's parliament passed the law banning "LGBT propaganda", which criminalises any act considered to be promoting what Russia considers "non-traditional sexual relations". This law further expands on the 2013 law which banned "propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations" among minors.

that Poland's failure to legislate for same-sex unions violates Article 8 of the ECHR, which guarantees the protection of the right to private and family life.

LGBTIQ+ defenders in the region are frequently targeted with physical attacks that the relevant authorities failed to investigate in a timely manner, further emboldening perpetrators. During the year, defenders and organisations supporting LGBTIQ+ communities were violently targeted in **Armenia** and **Georgia**. While an attack against the 2021 Pride Festival in Tbilisi remains uninvestigated, on 8 July 2023, a group of approximately 2,000 individuals attacked NGO [Tbilisi Pride's](#) Pride Festival in Georgia. They stormed the venue and beat attendees, forcing the human rights NGO to cancel the Pride festival and related events. In Armenia on 21 August 2023, a group assaulted people attending a vigil organised by the [Right Side](#) NGO in Yerevan for a transwoman who had been brutally murdered the previous day. Members of the organisations have previously been targeted with death threats and physical attacks. In both cases, the LGBTIQ+ organisations reported an inadequate response by the police who were present when attacks occurred. Solidarity within the LGBTIQ+ community was also attacked. In Azerbaijan, authorities temporarily detained LGBTIQ+ defenders Javid Nabiyeu and Ali Malikov when they publicly protested arrests of transwomen in Baku in May.

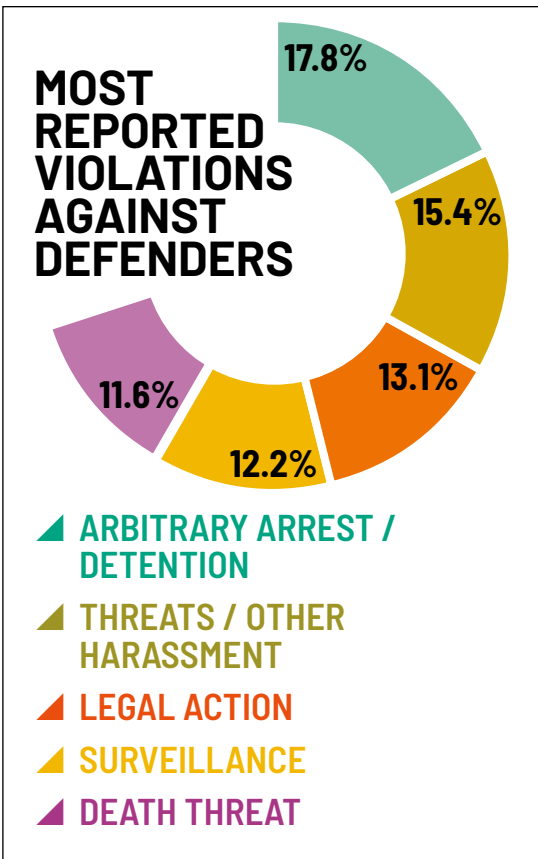
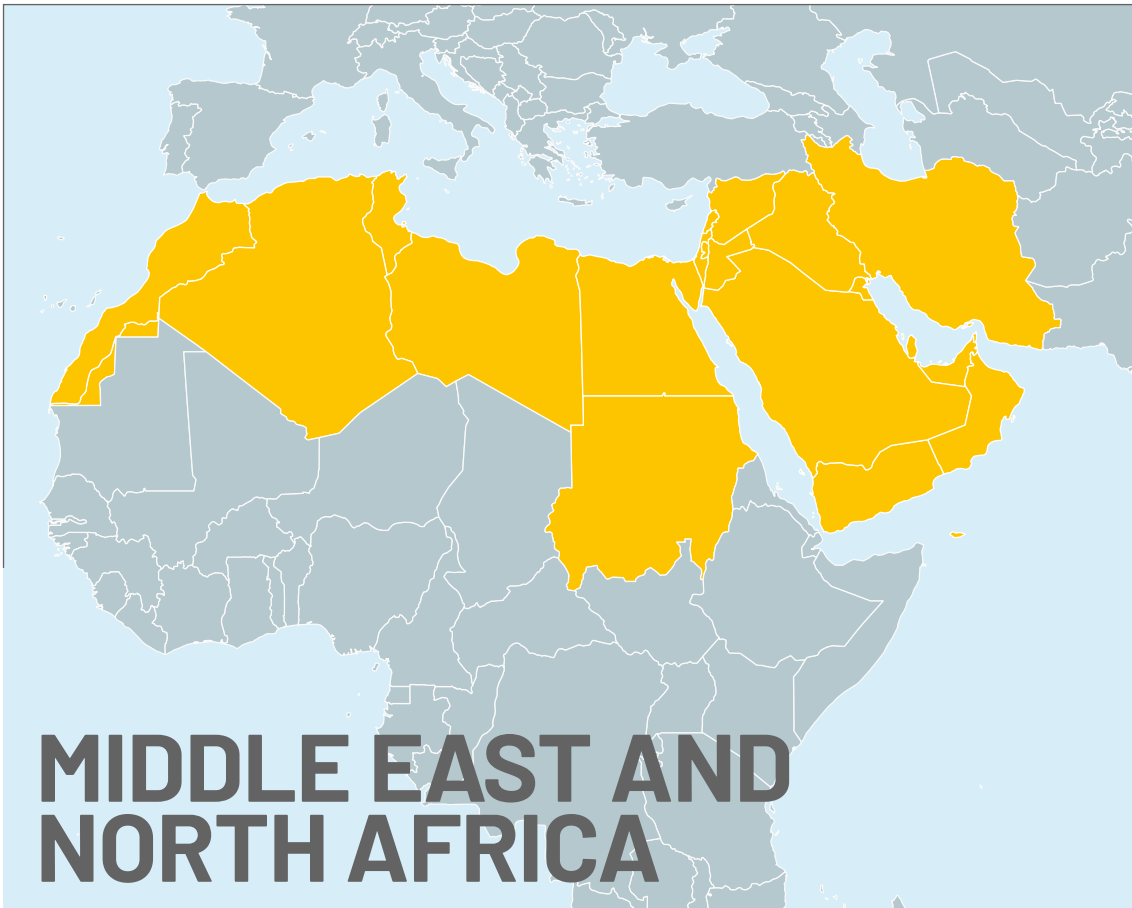
In **Turkey**, the government and pro-government media continued to target LGBTIQ+ rights defenders. During Pride Month in June, at least 241 activists, including HRDs, journalists and lawyers, were arrested in Istanbul, Izmir and several other cities. Among them was an Iranian refugee and LGBTIQ+ defender who was arrested and sent to a deportation centre, risking his forced return to Iran where he faced the potential of the death penalty. Thanks to the efforts of HRDs and the Istanbul Pride Committee, he was [released](#) after a month in detention. In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, LGBTIQ+ defenders were violently attacked by a group of civilians in Banja Luka of Republika Srpska in March after a planned private film screening and panel discussion event was banned by the authorities for "security reasons". The group was subsequently attacked by twenty to thirty individuals. At least three HRDs, including journalist and HRD **Vanja Stokic**, were [injured in the attack](#), during which the police failed to intervene.

Throughout 2023, authorities failed to effectively investigate attacks against LGBTIQ+ defenders which had taken place the previous year. In Ukraine, police ended their already unsatisfactory investigation into the assault on the prominent LGBTIQ+ defender **Olena Shevchenko**, who was tear-gassed while delivering humanitarian aid in 2022, [without apprehending the perpetrators](#). The authorities did not notify the WHRD or her lawyers that they were taking this step, nor did they respond to requests for information on the case. In Kazakhstan, HRDs **Zhanar Sekerbayeva** and **Gulzada Serzhan** were finally able to push the Shymkent authorities to start investigating a 2021 attack against them, while another attack against them that took place in Karagandy that year remains uninvestigated.

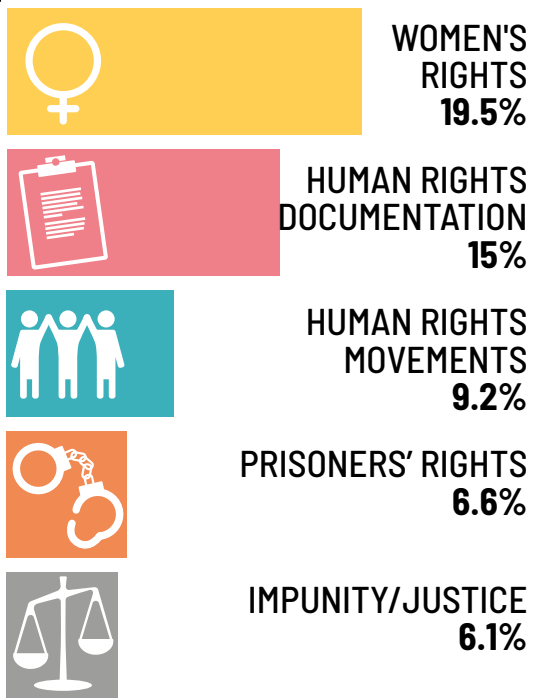
## WELCOME DEVELOPMENTS

1. In **Turkey**, four HRDs were [acquitted](#), six years after their arrest, at the second hearing in a retrial of the Büyükada Case, also known as the #Istanbul10 case. They had been sentenced to between two- and six-years' imprisonment on terror-related charges. The retrial took place after the Court of Cassation's [ruling](#) to overturn the HRDs' sentences on 22 November 2022. However, only **Günel Kurşun** was fully acquitted. The other three defenders have appealed the reasoning behind their acquittal, which stated that not enough evidence had been found to lead to a safe conviction, while the Prosecutor is appealing the acquittal of **Taner Kılıç**. At the hearing, Günel Kurşun referred to the widespread smear campaigns and targeting of the HRDs from the day of their arrest, saying, "First we were spies, traitors; then we were accused of aiding terrorist organisations without being a member and now the prosecutor is asking for our acquittal. This is a clear indication of the state of our justice system." He finished his statement by saying that all he did was defend human rights and said, "I would do the same things again and actually I am. I am still a human rights defender."
2. In an important decision, on 18 July, the Vienna Commercial Court dismissed a [lawsuit](#) that had been brought by the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) against **SOS Balkanroute and its founder Petar Rosandić**, accusing the NGO and its founder of damaging ICMPD's reputation. In a statement published by the refugee rights organisation in April, it had referred to the newly constructed centre in Lipa Camp - a temporary reception centre in Bosnia and Herzegovina - as "Austria's Guantanamo"; a statement which the court argued fell under the scope of freedom of expression, which is protected by Article 10 of the ECHR.





### MOST TARGETED AREAS OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENCE



Source: Front Line Defenders (2023)

# MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

2023 in the MENA region will be forever marked by the horror and atrocities unleashed on the Palestinian people following Hamas' murderous rampage in Israel on 7 October, and the resultant paralysis of an 'international rules-based order' to bring an end to the slaughter. The massively disproportionate response by Israel also exposed the limits and double standards of the international human rights system. Those limits were also apparent in the response to the conflict in Sudan, which raged for much of the year but largely dropped from view after 7 October.

## ISRAEL – WAR

With no possibility of escape, by the end of the year Palestinians in **Gaza** had endured nearly three months of relentless and largely indiscriminate bombardment, with over 20,000 people killed, its health and education systems completely decimated, over [80% of the population](#) forcibly displaced and [mass starvation](#) at the hands of the Israeli authorities and armed forces. **Israel** cut off access to services indispensable to survival including water, food, and electricity while obstructing the delivery of fuel, humanitarian assistance, and internet. In the same period, HRDs in the West Bank also [reported](#) a significant increase in violent attacks by settlers and the Israeli military. Despite repeated warnings by the UN of the risk of [genocide](#) and [famine](#), on several occasions, the [UN Security Council failed](#) to adopt a resolution endorsing an immediate and permanent ceasefire. In the face of such a massive loss of human life, the response of governments that repeatedly emphasize the importance of human rights has been one of moral failure, marked by a gross dereliction of their duty to uphold international law.



On 21 November 2023, Israel's deliberate shelling of Al Awda Hospital in northern Gaza resulted in the killings of three HRDs and healthcare workers, Zeyad Tatari, Mahmoud Abu Nujaila, and Ahmad Al Sahar (clockwise from left). Many more HRDs have been heavily impacted by Israel's bombardment and siege of Gaza.

© Private

The impact on HRDs, as on the population at large, has been devastating. Those defending the right to health and the right to life as doctors, nurses, or ambulance workers, those exposing and documenting war crimes as journalists, and those providing humanitarian support as volunteers or employees of aid agencies were all specifically targeted by Israeli bombs or guns.

Healthcare workers on the front lines of the emergency health response were repeatedly [targeted](#) by Israeli military forces. Working to rescue and save the lives of severely injured civilians, they were killed, injured, threatened, forcibly disappeared, interrogated, ill-treated, and detained in reprisal for their human rights work. On 21 November, the [deliberate shelling](#) of one of the last remaining functioning hospitals in northern Gaza resulted in the killings of three HRDs and healthcare workers, [Zeyad Tatari](#), [Mahmoud Abu Nujaila](#), and [Ahmad Al Sahar](#). Despite continued calls and intimidation by the Israeli military to evacuate Al Awda Hospital in Jabalia, northern Gaza, the Head of the hospital, [Ahmed Muhanna](#), and his team refused to abandon patients and risked their lives to provide crucial healthcare to

those who could not be evacuated. After a 16-day siege, with Israeli tanks and snipers preventing anyone from entering or leaving the hospital, on 17 December, Israeli soldiers raided Al Awda Hospital. They unlawfully detained Ahmed Muhanna along with 21 others, who were also detained, bound and stripped of their clothes, before being released after several hours of interrogation and ill-treatment. On 18 December, Israeli soldiers returned with Ahmed Muhanna and unlawfully detained another 11 persons, including patients and five staff members. At the time of writing, Ahmed remains in incommunicado detention. HRDs reported that all hospitals across northern Gaza have faced widespread and systematic patterns of targeting, siege, and occupation by Israeli military forces.

*“We also are relying on Western countries to support the norms that they established after World War II to protect civilians. Their complicity in creating a culture of impunity for Israel is shameful. The United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Germany are setting aside the rules of international humanitarian law. After thirty years of the Oslo Accords, there is virtually no talk of peace, a two-state solution, or an end to the occupation and blockade. Instead, the international narrative appears to condone all of Israel’s actions involving apartheid, siege, and war crimes.*

*It feels like the Israeli strategy is to push 2.4 million of us out of Gaza and into Sinai. If that happens, then the West Bank and occupied East Jerusalem may be next, and the Zionist project will be complete.*

*But we are human beings – we are the people of Palestine. We deserve dignity. We deserve justice and we deserve freedom. We believe we are on the right side of history and that we are the stones of the valley. Despite the immensity of the challenges we face, people here do not give up.”*

**Palestinian HRD Raji Sourani**

In addition to the devastating impacts of the conflict on women and children and the targeting of aid workers, journalists have also been at heightened risk. Due to restrictions on foreign media entering the Gaza Strip, the outside world was largely reliant on Palestinian journalists to document the scale of atrocity being carried out in the territory. By mid-December, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in the Occupied Palestinian Territory had [verified](#) the killing of “50 journalists and media workers” and was in the process of investigating a further 30 cases, “amounting to approximately 6 percent of all those registered with the Journalists’ Syndicate in Gaza”. By February 2024, when further verification had taken place, the [UN reported](#) that more than 122 journalists and media workers had been killed in Gaza since 7 October, three in Lebanon from Israeli shelling and four in Israel in the Hamas attacks.

HRDs were also impacted in the targeting of civilians. On 7 December, Israeli military forces [stormed](#) the Beit Lahia area and detained hundreds of Palestinians, including HRDs. Families were separated and men were stripped of their clothing. Men, along with several women and children, were bound, blindfolded, and bundled into the backs of trucks, before being transferred to a detention camp where they endured degrading conditions,

ill-treatment, hunger, and cold. [Ayman Lubad](#), a member of the [Palestinian Centre for Human Rights](#) (PCHR), was one such HRD unlawfully detained before being released on 14 December. The defender reported repeated interrogations and ill-treatment while in incommunicado detention, illustrative of the pattern of violations against the thousands of Palestinian civilians who have been unlawfully detained both before and since 7 October.

One notable aspect of the conflict has been the ability of Palestinian journalists and HRDs to use the internet and their social media platforms to document human rights violations and communicate directly with citizens worldwide, allowing them to circumvent mainstream media reporting. This direct communication and streaming of violations in real-time in Gaza and the West Bank have been crucial in catalysing and sustaining protest movements worldwide in support of a ceasefire and the rights of Palestinians. This has happened notwithstanding Israeli-imposed [internet shutdowns](#) and TikTok and Meta's systemic [silencing](#) of Palestinian voices and Palestinian allies on Instagram and Facebook. Biased moderation practices have led to an unprecedented number of Palestinian and Palestine-related accounts and content being banned, removed, or having reduced reach (shadow banning). At the same time, hate speech, dehumanisation, and incitement to violence against Palestinians had little moderation and circulated widely.

On 29 December, [South Africa](#) filed a case against Israel before the International Criminal Court of Justice (ICJ), arguing that Israel's behaviour has violated the UN Genocide Convention.

## SUDAN

The under-reported conflict in [Sudan](#) continued to wreak devastation on the population and HRDs, with thousands of [people killed and over 7 million displaced](#) by the end of the year, [making it](#) "the country with the largest number of displaced people and the largest child displacement crisis in the world". Against a backdrop of escalating violence and atrocities against the civilian population by both the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF), HRDs faced acute risks to their safety. Those who had documented human rights violations committed by RSF in the years before the outbreak of the current conflict were specifically targeted.

Front Line Defenders documented the [targeted killings](#) of eight HRDs in Sudan in direct retaliation for their work, of which the following were killed in El Geneina, West Darfur: [Abd Elrazeg Adam Mohammed](#), [Tareg Hassan Yagoub Elmalik](#), [El Sadeq Mohammed Ahmed Haroun](#), [Mohammed Ahmed Kudia](#), [Khamis Arabab](#) and [Khidir Sulieman Abdelmageed](#). Among those killed were lawyers and members of the Darfur Bar Association who had filed cases against the RSF, accusing them of horrific violations against internally displaced persons (IDPs) in 2021 and 2022. In Nyala, South Darfur, HRD and lawyer [Ahmed Mohamed Abdella](#), was tortured and killed by unidentified armed men, and on 26 October, WHRD, and member of the Women Revolutionary group, [Bahjaa Abdelaa Abdelaa](#), was shot and killed while attending the funeral of a family member. Despite having received death threats, Bahjaa had refused to relocate from Nyala because she was caring for her mother, who has a disability.



Sudanese protesters take part in a rally against military rule on the anniversary of previous popular uprisings, in Khartoum, Sudan, 6 April 2023.

© AP Photo/ Marwan Ali

HRDs **providing medical and other emergency support** to civilians were targeted by military intelligence officers and subjected to detention, torture, and other ill-treatment, as were HRDs advocating for an end to the fighting and documenting human rights abuses. Defenders reported being detained in official and non-official detention facilities - frequently held alongside other civilians including children and older people, where they were subjected to torture and faced restricted food and drinking water.

The intensification of the conflict forced many HRDs to flee the country, though the **difficulty** in obtaining visas, funding, and support to relocate highlighted once again the lack of protection systems in place for HRDs in conflict zones. HRDs who remained in Sudan faced severe risks including killing and physical threats, as well as the broader challenges linked to the collapse of the health system and shortage of food and medicines. With the destruction or loss of their work equipment - mobile phones, cameras, laptops, and documents, during attacks on their homes and offices, combined with frequent **internet shutdowns**, Sudanese HRDs faced immense obstacles to continuing documenting violations of international human rights and humanitarian law.

WHRDs paid a heavy price for their active roles in mobilising for peace at the community level, supporting displaced communities, and reporting on and denouncing human rights atrocities committed by the warring parties. Amidst **growing concerns** around the use of sexual and gender-based violence by both parties to the conflict, WHRDs, particularly women on the move with their families and older community members, were particularly vulnerable. Internally displaced WHRDs who fled from Khartoum to Aj Jazirah, River Nile and Kasala states reported being harassed at checkpoints, kidnapped, raped, and targeted with other forms of violence. Following RSF's attack on Aj Jazirah in December, a further 300,000 people were **forced to relocate**. Those who were unable to do so were subjected to further violence and severe food shortages. Despite the grave risks, WHRDs continued to mobilise, calling for peace and support for displaced populations. In August, women-led public events were restricted by military intelligence officers in Aj Jazirah, Wed-Medani, while the WHRDs involved in the Sudanese Mothers Movement protests in the Blue Nile region were arrested. Other initiatives that led protests were also shut down.

## GENDER JUSTICE AND WHRDS

Across the region, women's and LGBTIQ+ rights defenders were regarded as proponents of a so-called "gender ideology" and as pursuing an agenda antithetical to "traditional family values", as reported to Front Line Defenders in [Iraq](#), [Iran](#), [Jordan](#), [Lebanon](#), [Syria](#), and [Tunisia](#). Defenders safeguarding these rights were forced to navigate increasingly difficult contexts, threatened by conservative state, non-state, and religious actors alike. Women advocating for gender justice, in particular, sexual and reproductive rights, and denouncing gender-based violence, were smeared, isolated, and subjected to attack. Moreover, WHRDs supporting LGBTIQ+ allies and movements were targeted. Government officials and religious leaders in Iraq and more recently in Lebanon and Jordan were increasingly emboldened in their scapegoating of feminists and LGBTIQ+ defenders and communities. On 30 September, in another example of the escalating backlash against gender equality in Lebanon, a "Freedoms March", spearheaded largely by feminist organisations but including broad segments of the human rights movement in Beirut, was violently attacked by a group of counter-protestors made up of anti-rights individuals belonging to religious extremist groups. Counter-protestors accused participants of the "Freedoms March" of promoting homosexuality in their calls for fundamental freedoms. Although the authorities were notified in advance of the march, the Lebanese Internal Security Forces (ISF) failed to protect the protesters during the attacks. In the aftermath of the attacks, one of the WHRDs identified in images circulating on social media reported being subjected to a defamation campaign and [targeted](#) with rape threats and death threats. FEMALE, one of the feminist organisations involved, was widely [demonised](#) on social media, forcing the feminist organisation to temporarily shut its centres and suspend its activities.<sup>25</sup> These attacks occurred in a context where various factions in Lebanon increasingly equate human rights and freedoms with LGBTIQ+ "propaganda".

During the year, WHRDs and feminists in particular faced acute levels of online violence, defamation, and hate speech in [Iran](#), [Iraq](#), [Jordan](#), and [Syria](#). The gendered attacks, rape threats, sexual slurs, and deepfakes were all designed to harm, humiliate, stigmatise, and delegitimise WHRDs. Front Line Defenders observed that violence that started online frequently spilled over into offline violence, attacks, and intimidation. Despite the serious risks posed to defenders by aggressive and well-orchestrated online violence, social media companies, including Meta, X and Telegram remained slow to intervene or take measures to protect those targeted.

The [Iranian](#) authorities intensified their discrimination and violent repression of women and girls through "morality" policing, surveillance, and legislative measures to further curtail women's rights and freedoms. From November 2022 into 2023, a series of [deliberate poisonings](#) of hundreds of school girls was carried out across the country. In the absence of impartial and independent investigations by the Iranian authorities, UN Experts [voiced alarm](#) about the possibility that this was an orchestrated reprisal against

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25 As reported to Front Line Defenders

women and girls for refusing to conform to the veiling laws as well as for exercising their right to protest. University professors, teachers, students, trade unionists, and other defenders who denounced this attack as well as the repression of protests were targeted by authorities through termination of employment, forced retirement, or [expulsion from university](#), including [Shahriyar Shams](#), [Zia Nabavi](#) and [Hasti Amiri](#), and through arbitrary detention, including defender [Atekeh Rajabi](#). According to the Coordinating Council of Iranian Teachers' Trade Associations (CCITTA), by the end of the year, at least 20 teachers, including [Jafar Ebrahimi](#) and [Rasoul Bodaghi](#), remained in detention. In September, a [Hijab Bill passed](#) in the parliament, which will see those who do not comply with the country's discriminatory veiling rules facing up to ten years in prison, heavy fines, and lashes.

## DEFENDING LGBTIQ+ RIGHTS

In a hostile context marked by escalating anti-LGBTIQ+ sentiment, judicial harassment, and violent attacks, LGBTIQ+ defenders and their allies in the women's movement were increasingly vulnerable. In [Jordan](#), the General Intelligence Directorate (GID) ramped up its [persecution](#) of feminists and LGBTIQ+ defenders. The GID summoned several LGBTIQ+ defenders and feminists, threatening them with arrest and detention. GID officials also demanded full details of organisations' funding and employees and ordered some members to resign from their positions. This intimidation forced several of the organisations to close and some HRDs to relocate outside of the country.

In [Iraq](#), pervasive discriminatory rhetoric by authorities exacerbated the already restrictive environment for LGBTIQ+ organisations and communities. A [disinformation campaign](#) was conducted by officials and religious leaders during the year, with the terms "homosexual", "homosexuality" and "gender" coming [under attack](#). In a July report to the Human Rights Council, the UN Independent Expert on sexual orientation and gender identity [noted](#) the levels of danger faced by LGBTIQ+ persons, writing that "members of the armed forces in Iraq engage in violence against LGBT people with impunity; government officials consider these actions to be efforts by the abusers to protect religious or moral traditions". In August, an MP introduced an anti-LGBTIQ+ law in parliament that, if approved, would impose the death penalty or life imprisonment for same-sex relations. Reflective of this trend was the judicial order on 31 May to shut down the [Rasan Organisation](#), one of the only human rights NGOs that openly supported LGBTIQ+ rights in the Kurdistan region of Iraq. Similarly, in Lebanon, LGBTIQ+ HRDs reported a surge in online attacks against the LGBTIQ+ community after Hezbollah's political and religious leader Hassan Nasrallah [called for](#) gay and lesbian individuals to be killed and accused civil society of promoting homosexuality during a speech in July.

In [Tunisia](#), social media channels were used as a vehicle to propagate defamation campaigns and incite violence against LGBTIQ+ persons and involved groups comprising hundreds of members on Telegram and other networks plotting violent actions against HRDs and their allies. [DAMJ - the Tunisian Association for Justice and Equality](#) was targeted with a



# ONLINE DEFAMATION AND OFFLINE ATTACKS AGAINST WHRDS

In **Jordan**, WHRD, lawyer, and Front Line Defenders 2023 Award Winner **Hala Ahed** was targeted by a large-scale defamation campaign on X following her announcement on 13 June of her plans to facilitate a training course on the concept of feminism. Multiple defamatory photos and videos were published by famous content creators and religious and political leaders to discredit her work, and this misogynist and derogatory content was widely circulated. The [campaign](#) appeared to be coordinated by organized groups and was believed to be a reprisal against the WHRD's work on issues including the death penalty and equal provisions under family law in Jordan. She was threatened on the street, was subjected to multiple aggressive comments online and offline, and made to fear for her physical safety. Across the border in **Syria**, **Hiba Ezzideen Al-Haji**, a WHRD campaigning to end discrimination against women in the country, was targeted with a defamation campaign on Facebook, Telegram, and WhatsApp. This also led to offline targeting and abuse, with death threats against a family member, while on 21 July, an Imam in Idlib directly incited action against the WHRD during his sermon before at least 200 worshippers; putting the WHRD and her team at serious harm.

In Iran, the 2023 Nobel Peace Prize laureate Narges Mohammadi's social media accounts, which remain active during her detention in Evin prison, were flooded with defamatory and sexist remarks and accusations around the time of the Nobel Peace Prize Ceremony in November and December. Furthermore, Mohammadi was sentenced to [an additional two years in prison](#) based on posts published on her social media.



Ali, right, and Kiana Rahmani receive the Nobel Peace Prize for 2023 for their mother, imprisoned Iranian WHRD Narges Mohammadi, shown on screen, in Oslo City Hall in Norway on 10 December 2023.

© Fredrik Varfjell/NTB via AP

systematic defamation campaign in which the address and contact details of the organisation and members' photos were circulated while calling for attacks against them, as well as harassment by police and officials from the Ministry of the Interior. DAMJ filed a complaint against the "content creator" who initiated the defamation campaign, and after an investigation lasting months, the preliminary hearing was postponed until February 2024.

The weaponisation of anti-LGBTIQ+ sentiment in an attempt to distract from political challenges at home was evident across the region and served to demonise and isolate LGBTIQ+ communities while undermining their protection and support networks. Moreover, the intentional misrepresentation of broader calls for gender equality and gender justice as so-called LGBTIQ+ "propaganda", was designed to undermine the legitimate and crucial human rights agenda of both LGBTIQ+ and feminist movements in the region.

## JUDICIAL HARASSMENT OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

HRDs advocating for the rights of minority groups, documenting violations and corruption, and calling for the respect of fundamental freedoms of expression, association, and assembly, were subjected to judicial harassment, intimidation, and threats to their livelihoods in **Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Kurdistan-Iraq, Iran, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine**, and **UAE**. A common feature of the legal persecution of defenders was the practice of upholding or extending unjust sentences against defenders to ensure their prolonged detention, often in brutal conditions. In many cases, defenders were charged under "terrorist" or "national security"-related charges. Procedural irregularities and violations of due process during trials were commonplace, as was appalling medical negligence of imprisoned HRDs.

In **Algeria**, defenders [continued](#) to be accused of terrorism-related crimes including "praising terrorism" or "belonging to a terrorist organisation". [Mohad Gasmis](#) sentence of three years imprisonment was maintained after his appeal, while he is also serving another two-year sentence. He is a prominent defender from the south of Algeria and has been [active in defending the rights of the unemployed and supporting a peaceful anti-shale gas movement and the Hirak movement](#). In **Iraq**, the Kurdish HRD and journalist [Sherwan Sherwani](#), due to be released in September 2023, was sentenced to an additional four years imprisonment by a court in Erbil, Kurdistan-Iraq in July. As part of his work, he had been focusing on fighting corruption within the Kurdish government and advocating for prisoners' rights. In **Egypt**, authorities extended their persecution of defenders to those abroad or in exile. In an attempt to silence the criticism of the exiled HRD [Ahmed Gamal Ziada](#) in relation to increasing restrictions of freedoms in the country in the run-up to the 2024 elections, on 22 August, the Egyptian Security Forces detained and charged his father, who has no involvement in human rights work. Following international advocacy, including from Front Line Defenders, Ahmed's father was released.

One year on from the “Woman Life Freedom” uprising in **Iran**, [the authorities continued to harshly repress and punish HRDs](#) for their involvement, while brutally quashing any further attempts of peaceful protest. Throughout 2023, Front Line Defenders documented the cases of over 200 HRDs who were targeted with arbitrary arrest and detention, legal action, torture, and other forms of ill-treatment while imprisoned in the context of the protests. Iran’s February [announcement](#) that it would grant amnesty to over 20,000 protesters did not reverse the trend of judicial harassment and arbitrary detention of HRDs. In the weeks that followed the pardon, the majority of defenders remained in prison. Others, who were released, were re-arrested shortly thereafter, while hefty new sentences were handed down to several WHRDs including [2023 Nobel Peace Prize laureate Narges Mohammadi](#) and [Sepideh Gholian](#), whose sentences were extended by two years and 15 months, respectively. At least five defenders were arbitrarily denied amnesty including [Sarvenaz Ahmadi](#) and [Kamyar Fakour](#). HRDs continued to be subjected to widespread human rights violations while in detention, including denial of access to legal support and information concerning charges against them, denial of access to [adequate medical treatment](#) as well as other forms of ill-treatment.<sup>26</sup>

In October, reinforcing the findings of other UN and human rights experts, the [UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention concluded](#) that the continuing imprisonment of a group of Sahrawi activists is arbitrary. It denounced the violations of due process and fair trial guarantees and the use of torture, urging the authorities to immediately release detainees and to ensure reparations. A number of [prominent HRDs are among the 20 “Gdeim Izik prisoners”](#) unlawfully detained since 2010 and who are currently serving sentences of between 20 years and life. They were arrested before, during, and after the dismantling of the Gdeim Izik protest camp on 8 November 2010, and are serving some of the longest prison sentences in the region. These include [Ahmed Sbaai](#), [Sid’Ahmed Lemjaid](#), [Brahim Ismaili](#), [Ennaâma Asfari](#), [Mohamed Embarek Lefkir](#), [Mohamed Lamin Haddi](#), [El Bachir Khada](#), [El Hassan Eddah](#), [Mohamed Tahlil](#) and [Mohamed Khouna Babait](#).

Similarly, in the **UAE**, [authorities continued to detain dozens of people](#), including 55 people who were convicted in a mass trial known as the “UAE94” case in 2013, despite the completion of their sentences. Among those still in detention are prominent HRDs [Ahmed Mansoor](#), [Dr. Nasser bin Ghaith](#), [Dr. Mohammed Al-Roken](#) and [Dr. Mohammed Al-Mansoori](#). The authorities justified their indefinite detention based on a counter-terror-related legal provision in a 2014 Federal Law. At a time when the global spotlight shone on UAE as it hosted COP28 in November, the emboldened nature of the ruling elite was highlighted by the staging of a new mass trial of 80 of those convicted in the UAE94 case, including HRDs, before the COP meeting had even concluded.

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26 [Narges Mohammadi](#), [Golrokh Iraee](#), [Bahareh Hedayat](#), [Sepideh Gholian](#), [Nasrin Javadi](#), [Vida Rabbani](#), [Sarvenaz Ahmadi](#), [Soha Mortezaie](#), [Nasim Soltanbeygi](#), [Fariha Kamalabadi](#), [Mahvash Shahriari \(Sabet\)](#), [Afif Naimi](#), [Reza Shahabi](#), [Hassan Saidi](#), [Amirsalar Davoudi](#), [Rasoul Bodaghi](#), [Kamyar Fakour](#) and [Jafar Ebrahimi](#) remained imprisoned at the end of the year and new charges and sentences were brought unjustly against HRDs, including [Arash Sadeghi](#), [Jina Modares Gorji](#), [Zia Nabavi](#), [Farzaneh Zilabi](#), [Leila Hossein Zadeh](#), [Zia Nabavi](#), [Hasti Amiri](#), [Shahriyar Sham](#) and [Atekeh Rajabi](#).

Lengthy prison sentences have also been widely deployed in **Bahrain** to silence criticism of human rights violations in the country. HRDs and hundreds of other political prisoners – some of whom have been incarcerated since 2011 – [conducted](#) a mass hunger strike between 9 August and 11 September, in protest of the extremely harsh conditions and their ongoing unjust imprisonment. HRDs who continue to be detained include [Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja](#), [Naji Fateel](#), and [Abduljalil Al-Singace](#). Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja was detained and tortured in 2011 and sentenced to life imprisonment based on fabricated charges. On 9 August he began a water-only hunger strike, protesting his continued arbitrary detention and systematic denial of access to adequate medical treatment by prison authorities. On 15 September, his daughter [Maryam Al-Khawaja](#), accompanied by Front Line Defenders, Amnesty International and ActionAid Denmark, was prevented from travelling to Bahrain to visit her father who was in critical condition. He has since been given some access to medical support and has ended his hunger strike, but the detention conditions for him and others imprisoned remain dire.

## HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS IN PROTESTS

Restrictions on freedoms of association and assembly were prevalent and part of ongoing crackdowns on civic space in a range of countries including **Algeria, Iraq, Iran, Jordan, Lebanon, and Morocco**. In advance of the one-year anniversary of the September 2022 protests in Iran, HRDs were targeted for their leadership roles in the protest movement as well as for working on a range of human rights issues, including labour rights, women's rights, and the death penalty. Defenders were subjected to violent and arbitrary arrests, searches of their homes, and threats to family members. Moreover, the Iranian government persisted with its tactics of regularly shutting down the internet and disrupting telecommunication services in an effort to undermine peaceful protest as well as the vital work of documenting and disseminating human rights violations in many provinces, particularly in Sistan and Baluchistan provinces, where weekly protests were ongoing. In Morocco, in the context of nationwide teachers' demonstrations protesting a Ministry of Education decision that affects the public education sector, the National Coordination of the Education Sector, a social movement comprising 13 unions, associations and collectives, was denied the right to protest in several cities in Morocco in November and December 2023. As an act of reprisal against the teachers' movement, teachers and especially leaders of the movement were targeted with arbitrary arrests.

In the aftermath of the Hirak movement's peaceful mobilisation in Algeria throughout 2019 and 2020, restrictions on freedoms of association and assembly have continued to be particularly severe. Despite reform efforts to ensure conformity of laws with the 2020 Constitution, repressive laws and provisions have persisted, including laws that regulate the right to associate, the right to organise and strike, and counter-terrorism related legislation. HRDs attempting to form or regularise NGOs were obstructed from doing so



Ceremony in Bologna to confer honorary Italian citizenship to Egyptian human rights defender Patrick Zaki, free after more than three years in prison in Egypt, 30 July 2023.

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under [Law 12-06](#), which places administrative constraints on the freedom of association. Articles in the law were also deployed to curtail freedom of expression on social media.

On 21 October, the Moroccan authorities prevented the [Sahrawi Collective of Human Rights Defenders \(CODESA\)](#) from holding its first national congress when its members and other HRDs were attacked by a group of people believed to be plain-clothes police. Since its creation in 2002, the collective that works to promote the self-determination of the Sahrawi people in Western Sahara has seen its work and rights to assembly and association consistently obstructed by the Moroccan authorities. Despite the efforts to prevent it, CODESA was successful in organising its congress, albeit remotely, on 2 December 2023.

## HUMAN RIGHTS LAWYERS

HRDs including lawyers faced mounting efforts by the authorities and professional associations to destabilise their organisations and derail their work. In **Lebanon**, bar associations increased their efforts to censor and punish lawyers who have been vocal in demanding accountability for abuses and violations and investigating cases of corruption linked to prominent state figures. In April, [Nizar Saghih](#), a leading Lebanese human rights lawyer, faced sanctions, including possible disbarment from the Council of the Beirut

# TUNISIA

Working to defend human rights in **Tunisia** has become increasingly fraught due to the precarious political and socio-economic context. The lack of space for dialogue between HRDs and public authorities has meant that there have been few opportunities to build trust, while laws restricting the ability of HRDs to work, most notably [Decree Law 54 on combating crimes related to information and communication systems](#), are widely used to silence perceived dissent. This has been compounded by an escalation of anti-human rights rhetoric which made 2023 a challenging year for HRDs.

In February 2023, the President of the Tunisian Republic published [a speech imbued](#) with xenophobic language against sub-Saharan migrants and the human rights organisations that defend them. Demonstrations to protest the sentiments in the speech were organised, but this did not prevent incidents of violence against migrants and the persecution of defenders and organisations working to support their rights. This violence was initiated in particular by groups on social media networks, including one calling itself “the Tunisian Nationalist Party”. Defenders saw their personal information circulated on the networks as part of a smear campaign while threatening messages were sent and phone calls made to the offices of organisations that organised humanitarian support campaigns for migrants.



A march “for rights and freedoms” is held in Tunis in celebration of the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Tunis, Tunisia, 9 December, 2023.

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Bar Association, for publicly criticising amendments to the Lawyers Code of Conduct that would severely limit lawyers’ freedom of expression. Meanwhile, in its [Concluding Observations](#) on **Egypt** in December, the U.N. Committee Against Torture expressed its concern that “lawyers, in particular those involved in political activities or politically sensitive cases, are allegedly often subjected to threats, harassment, intimidation and reprisals and, in some cases, to prolonged pretrial detention, arbitrary detention, torture, other ill-treatment, and enforced disappearance”.

In **Iran**, the authorities deliberately compounded the grief of human rights defenders's families, particularly those of WHRDs, after their deaths, with police consistently stating their cause of death was "suicide". This occurred in the case of **Maryam Arvin**, a 29-year-old Iranian lawyer who died in suspicious circumstances in February 2023, two months after her release from prison. The circumstances surrounding these deaths are not investigated or clarified and often families are forced to accept the "official truth" in order to have access to the bodies of their loved ones or even to attend their funerals.

## WELCOME DEVELOPMENTS

1. On 10 December 2023, **Narges Mohammadi**, the deputy director and spokesperson of the Defenders of Human Rights Centre in Iran, was awarded the 2023 Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of her perseverance in advocating for human rights and women's rights in **Iran**. [In a speech](#) delivered by her children, Narges paid tribute to the resilience of women in Iran fighting for change and building on lessons learned from "45 years of experience with discrimination and oppression in the private and public spheres and with sexual and gender apartheid, [which has been] counteracted by their tireless resistance." The prize was received as an important appreciation of Narges Mohammadi's relentless human rights work and a strong message of solidarity with the Iranian people, especially women and HRDs standing up for their legitimate human rights, including their rights to life and freedom.
2. 2023 saw the end of the long and drawn-out ordeal of **Mohamed El-Baqer** and **Patrick George Zaki** in **Egypt** when they were granted a presidential pardon in July. At the time of their release, Mohamed El-Baqer had spent four years in jail while Patrick George Zaki, although released on bail in 2021, had continued to have criminal charges hanging over him. He was arrested in 2020 for publishing an article the previous year entitled "Displacement, Killing, and Restriction: A Week's Diaries of Egypt's Copts." Mohamed El-Baqer, a human rights lawyer, was arrested while he attended the interrogation of a client in 2019 and was charged with "membership of a terrorist organisation with knowledge of aims and intent"; "membership of an organisation founded contrary to the provisions of law"; "defamation"; "misuse of social media"; and "publishing false news that harms the country's interests.". The pair's release follows a sustained advocacy campaign on their behalf by HRDs and organisations inside Egypt, regionally and internationally.

# METHODOLOGY

## FOR STATISTICS RELATING TO KILLINGS OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

The HRD Memorial brings partner-verified data together under the HRD Memorial umbrella and conducts additional open source research and case-specific verification.

The HRD Memorial is a global initiative led by 12 national and international human rights organisations committed to improving data collection on HRDs who are killed for their human rights work. HRD Memorial partners gather this data annually and historic data on killings dating back to 1998, when the UN Declaration on human rights defenders was adopted.

Partners in the HRD Memorial include: ACI-Participa (Honduras); Amnesty International; Comité Cerezo (Mexico); FIDH; Front Line Defenders; Global Witness; Human Rights Defenders' Alert – India; Karapatan (the Philippines); OMCT; El Programa Somos Defensores (Colombia); Red TDT (Mexico); and UDEFEGUA (Guatemala).

The HRD Memorial presents a unique, verified dataset that highlights the scale of the killings of defenders worldwide, and keeps alive their memory, celebrating their courage and achievements, and offering solidarity to their families, friends and colleagues.

For 2023, the HRD Memorial has counted on the invaluable support of the following organisations and individuals to verify and complete its dataset:

- ▶ Alerte Congolaise pour l'Environnement et les Droits de l'Homme (ACEDH)(DRC)
- ▶ Alianza por los Derechos Humanos de Ecuador
- ▶ Amaru Ruiz, Fundación del Río (Nicaragua)
- ▶ Bufete Jurídico Justicia para los Pueblos (Honduras)
- ▶ Center for Justice and International Law (CEJIL)
- ▶ Centro de Asistencia Legal a Pueblos Indígenas (CALPI)(Nicaragua)
- ▶ Centro de Derechos Humanos Zeferino Ladrillero A. C. (Mexico)



- ▶ Cheikh Sidati Mohamed Hamadi (Mauritania)
- ▶ COFAVIC (Venezuela)
- ▶ Coordinadora de Organizaciones Populares del Aguán (COPA) (Honduras)
- ▶ Comissão Pastoral da Terra (Brazil)
- ▶ Czarina Musni
- ▶ Indigenous Peoples' Rights International (IPRI)
- ▶ Iniciativa Mesoamericana de Mujeres Defensoras (IM-Defensoras)
- ▶ International Observatory for Lawyers in Danger (OIAD)
- ▶ Justiça Global (Brazil)
- ▶ KontraS (Indonesia)
- ▶ Libyan Anti-Torture Network (LAN) (Libya)
- ▶ Movimiento Amplio por la Dignidad y la Justicia (MADJ) (Honduras)
- ▶ Peace Brigades International – Indonesia Project
- ▶ ZMINA Human Rights Centre (Ukraine)

The HRD Memorial is committed to continuing to develop and refine the methodology and verification processes to ensure that these processes continue to be robust and relevant.

## FOR STATISTICS RELATING TO THREATS AGAINST HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

Each year, Front Line Defenders records hundreds of violations against human rights defenders through its public and private casework and its grants programme.

The statistics presented on pages 10 to 14 are derived from 1538 violations reported to Front Line Defenders, between 1 January and 31 December 2023.

Front Line Defenders often document multiple threats and violations per case or grant, as this is the reality of the situation for HRDs, who very often face multiple types of threats and attacks at once.

It is important to note some caveats with the data presented:

The statistics are drawn from 1538 recorded violations, which combine information from Front Line Defenders protection work via grants and urgent actions.

In the global statistics datasets, the number of grants and cases excludes those provided to Afghan human rights defenders. There were over 241 grants provided to Afghan HRDs and including this data in the annual statistics would skew the results in a way that would not be helpful to understanding the situation of HRDs on a global scale. As noted above, the data on support provided to Afghan HRDs is reflected in the Asia-Pacific chapter in a separate table.

For the purpose of calculating the most reported violations against HRDs, the category “threats/other harassment” was considered only when recorded as a stand alone violation, given that threats are such a common violation, they tend to be inconsistently reported by HRDs, or only reported when they reach a threshold of severity.

Incidents of killings have been removed from this dataset. The data on killings are reported separately in the HRD Memorial dataset.

The groups of HRDs presented under “Areas of human rights defence” are listed on Front Line Defenders internal Terminology Guidelines, in which “Issues working on” includes the following: Abuse of Power/Anti- Corruption; Abolition of Death Penalty; Access to Healthcare; Afro Descendants Rights; Anti-Racism; Anti-Slavery / Anti-Trafficking; Children’s/Youth Rights; Citizens’ Rights/ Participation; Climate Justice; Digital Rights; Disability Rights; Disappearances/ Enforced Disappearances; Environmental Rights; Extractive Industries/ Megaprojects; Freedom of Assembly; Freedom of Religion or Belief; Food Sovereignty; Housing Rights / Forced Evictions; Human Rights Documentation; Human Rights Movements; Impunity/ Justice; Indigenous Peoples’ Rights; Labour / Trade Union / Workers Association; Land Rights; LGBTIQ+; Minority Rights; Peacebuilding ; Peasant / *Campesino* Communities; Poverty / Economic Insecurity; Prisoner’s Rights while in prison; Refugees/IDPs/Migrants; Right to Education / Student Rights; Self-Determination; Sexual & Reproductive Health and Rights; Sex Worker Rights; Torture / Police Brutality; Women’s Rights/ feminism.

For the purpose of reflecting the most targeted “Areas of human rights defence”, the categories of environmental rights defenders, land rights defenders and indigenous rights defenders has been disaggregated. In previous editions of

the Global Analysis, these three areas of human rights defence were grouped together given their frequent overlap. By disaggregating the data Front Line Defenders seeks to analyse particular trends within each of those targeted groups across countries.

Freedom of Expression and Freedom of assembly were removed from “Areas of human rights defence”, as in the majority of cases FLD documented these rights are enabling others, rather than the sorely focus of the HRDs work. Therefore including it in the overall numbers would misrepresent different groups of defenders.

The information Front Line Defenders receives is dependent on HRDs being aware of the organisation; as such, this data can not be seen as wholly representative for all HRDs in all countries. Therefore, this data should serve as an indicator – but not a comprehensive report – of the scope of the violations, threats and risks that human rights defenders face on a daily basis.

Front Line Defenders recognises that there are myriad threats and violations that HRDs may experience, but which go unreported. This may be because they do not believe that the violation they are experiencing is serious enough to seek assistance for or are not in a comfortable position to discuss and report it. There is also the possibility that they do not have access to support to be able to report the threat and violation or may feel that silence is a better option to ensure their safety.



# FRONT LINE DEFENDERS

# GLOBAL ANALYSIS

# 2023/24

The Global Analysis is directly based on Front Line Defenders work with Human Rights Defenders globally over the course of 2023. Front Line Defenders would like to thank all donors who supported its work during the year.

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