



HM Government

UK Support for Human Rights Defenders

July 2019

Foreword

by **Lord (Tariq) Ahmad of Wimbledon** Minister for Human Rights, the Prime Minister's Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief, and the Prime Minister's Special Representative on Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict, and **Harriett Baldwin MP**, Minister of State at Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Development

Human rights matter. Those working tirelessly to defend human rights matter. We are privileged to work with Human Rights Defenders, and our departments benefit greatly from their dedication and insight. They are amongst the most courageous and determined people we have met. Courageous in the face of threats, harassment, unjust prosecutions and detention, physical attacks, reprisals for cooperating with international organisations; far too many have paid with their lives. Yet they remain determined despite the risks as they fight for a fairer and freer world where human rights are respected and protected for all.

The UK has a proud tradition of strong democratic values and we remain committed to promoting universal human rights, with individuals and communities able to challenge, discuss and debate freely and safely, without fear of attack. Whether globally, or locally, Human Rights Defenders contribute towards the realisation of human rights, the strengthening of the rule of law, and fostering sustainable development. We will continue to support them wherever we can, since promoting and defending human rights is at the heart of what defines us as a nation in promoting the values of a Global Britain.

In many countries, Human Rights Defenders and civil society more broadly have increasingly found the space they operate in limited through restrictive legislation, stigmatisation, persecution, smears, and silencing of dissent. The UK believes that all channels for Human Rights Defenders and civil society to engage with governments and those in power must remain open and safe. We must do all we can to allow them to work and live in safety, and without fear of harassment or harm.

To demonstrate our commitment of continued support of Human Rights Defenders globally, this



Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon



Harriett Baldwin MP

document sets out why Human Rights Defenders are important to us and acknowledges the risks they face in the pursuit of universal human rights. We hope it will give Human Rights Defenders encouragement to know how we may be able to support them, including through our network of embassies and high commissions overseas. Whilst every situation may be different depending on local context, our values and commitments in providing support remain the same.

We will continue to work with Human Rights Defenders and civil society organisations on human rights, democracy, and rule of law issues across the board. The power of collaboration is immense, and we remain determined to strengthen this. The consultation we have conducted with a number of civil society groups and Human Rights Defenders in producing this document has been invaluable.

Finally, a message directly to all Human Rights Defenders around the world: we thank you for your courage and your unwavering determination in fighting for human rights, and for this, we stand by you and support you wherever you are in the world.

UK Support for Human Rights Defenders

Introduction

The UK supports the right of Human Rights Defenders to carry out their activities, and continue with their professions (for example lawyers, journalists) and voice their opinions. Without this, Human Rights Defenders are unable to defend human rights effectively and peacefully. Human Rights Defenders play an essential role in promoting and protecting democracy, respect for human rights and the rule of law.

UK policy is guided by the “UN Declaration of the Rights and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognised Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms” (commonly known as the “*UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders*”), as well as international principles specific to certain issues (UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, and those specific to certain Human Rights Defenders, such as the UN Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers. This non-legally binding Declaration reaffirms the rights of Human Rights Defenders and sets out the particular responsibility of states to protect Human Rights Defenders, including from attacks by non-state actors.

Human Rights Defenders are important to the UK because:

- Human Rights Defenders are on the frontline, defending the fundamental rights that are an essential part of the UK’s foreign policy.
- They document and report human rights violations and are often the only ones who speak up for vulnerable and marginalised groups, bringing public attention to abuses and violations of human rights.
- They play a key role in advocating for gender equality.
- They act as agents of change by calling attention to human rights violations and abuses, and identifying issues that prevent or obstruct positive change. This helps to hold governments to account for their actions.



Naranjargal Khashkhuu, a Human Rights Defender in Mongolia

- Human Rights Defenders contribute to long-term reform and progress, helping bring about more stable, free, democratic, inclusive and prosperous societies. They support peace building and improve access to justice.
- They can contribute to the protection of the land and the environment, and thereby to people’s livelihoods, protecting biodiversity and tackling climate change.
- They play a role in ensuring responsible action by the private sector on human rights which is good for business and communities.
- Promotion of human rights is a core part of UK foreign policy and DFID’s aid and development strategy and forms the basis of the Agenda 2030 Sustainable Development Goals.

Who are Human Rights Defenders?

Human Rights Defenders are defined by the UN Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights as ‘*people who, individually or with others, act to promote or protect human rights*’. Human Rights Defenders can be any person, acting alone or in groups, working to promote and protect human rights. Human Rights Defenders are defined by **what they do, not who they are**. They may not identify themselves as human rights activists, and might instead be seen as, amongst other things, artists; lawyers; journalists; politicians; domestic



Issa Amro, a Human Rights Defender in Occupied Palestinian Territories

workers; environmental activists; celebrities; NGO members; indigenous peoples' representatives, members of ethnic or religious groups, small holder farmers trade unionists; writers; health care workers; entrepreneurs; community leaders; students; bloggers or teachers.

In line with the UN Declaration, those who defend human rights should do so peacefully and without violence. Groups or individuals who use or advocate the use of violence are **not** considered Human Rights Defenders, even if their stated aim is to defend the rights of others.

Human Rights Defenders address any human rights concern, crossing the full spectrum of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights. Human Rights Defenders sometimes focus on the rights of specific persons. These may include women's rights; children's rights; the rights of members of ethnic minorities or indigenous and tribal peoples; or the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) persons. Human Rights Defenders are active in every part of the world: in areas of stability or conflict; where democracy exists and where it does not; and in developing, as well as developed economies.

Key challenges Human Rights Defenders face

The work of Human Rights Defenders can be dangerous. The risks they, their communities and their families face include:

- Threats, violent attacks and killings;

- Intimidation and harassment;
- Losing their jobs and livelihoods;
- Slander and defamation;
- Stigmatisation and de-legitimisation;
- Regulatory challenges;
- Criminalisation including imprisonment;
- Forcible exile, disappearances, displacement and statelessness
- Impunity for those who attack Human Rights Defenders.

Human Rights Defenders at particular risk

Human Rights Defenders who are themselves marginalised, and/or who work with marginalised individuals or groups, can experience particular challenges in their work. For example:

Journalists and media workers often come under severe pressure when shining a light on human rights concerns, which often includes supporting the work of other Human Rights Defenders in the marginalised groups below.

Women Human Rights Defenders can face additional discriminations based on their gender and/or the promotion of women's rights. They are at risk of being targets of sexual and gender-based violence, harassment, intimidation and public smearing. They may face a lack of an enabling environment to work freely as well as legal, social, financial, political, economic and cultural barriers to the exercise of their public voice. There are particular risks with the promotion of sexual and reproductive rights and when challenging gender-based discrimination and harmful traditional practices, including child and forced marriage and female genital mutilation. The risks facing Women Human Rights Defenders tend to increase during periods of conflict and fragility when sexual violence or threats of sexual violence may be used as a weapon of war.

Human Rights Defenders working on land and environmental issues are more at risk of attacks, particularly where private companies, sometimes in collaboration with state representatives, wish to hide activities that are illegal or abuse people's rights and are able



Dina Meza, Human Rights Defender in Honduras and Wanjeri Nderu, Human Rights Defender from Kenya join Lord Ahmad on the panel for Human Rights Day 2018

to act with impunity. This includes risks arising from development projects carried out in rural areas or in ancestral lands. Their often-remote rural locations can increase the risks of attacks. They also face risks of eviction and forced displacement and subsequent loss of livelihoods.

LGBT Human Rights Defenders can face multiple threats by the authorities and by non-state actors wishing to obstruct not only their work but also access to public facilities especially in societies deeply rooted in sexual and other discrimination and marginalisation.

Human Rights Defenders from indigenous communities are often at risk of discriminatory attacks, including attacks on their communities and ancestral lands. Those living and working in remote areas are likely to have limited access to support provided to other Human Rights Defenders. The lack of legal recognition for the land rights of indigenous peoples is a major driver for attacks against indigenous Human Rights Defenders. The issues faced by indigenous Human Rights Defenders are intersectional as they are often also working on land and environmental issues.

Human Rights Defenders working on business and human rights risk being targeted by both employers and governments seeking to prevent abuses from being exposed. The [UK National Action Plan on Business and Human Rights](#) includes specific commitments to protect

Human Rights Defenders who are active on business and human rights related issues.

Human Rights Defenders who are promoting Freedom of Religion or Belief can face significant risks.

Supporting Human Rights Defenders internationally

The UK's approach to Human Rights Defenders is guided by the principle of *do no harm*. We will always seek to consult with Human Rights Defenders or those close to them if their situation prevents them from being contacted, before taking any action.

The UK, through its network of diplomatic posts and government departments, supports Human Rights Defenders and consults Human Rights Defenders on a wide range of thematic issues as appropriate. That support takes many forms and responds to changing needs, but can include:

'Steady state' contact with Human Rights Defenders: UK missions will, as a matter of good practice, maintain regular contact with Human Rights Defenders as appropriate. 'Steady state' contact allows for the exchange of information and the development of mutual relationships of trust, including where possible with Human Rights Defenders living in more remote regions. This support also helps to ensure

Human Rights Defenders are regularly updated on the work of the UK missions, and UK officials are aware of situations as they progress;

Capacity building: The UK supports Human Rights Defenders, through funding local and international CSOs and NGOs and in other ways, to build civil society capacity, helping provide a framework and support network within which Human Rights Defenders can work;

Engaging internationally on mutual objectives, for example supporting and promoting responsible practice by global extractives businesses, particularly in oil, gas, mining and sourcing of diamonds and minerals in conflict affected and high-risk areas.

Enhancing visibility for Human Rights Defenders and the legitimacy of their work:

Recognition of Human Rights Defenders and their work can contribute to their safety and effectiveness. For example, UK missions might provide a meeting place for groups of Human Rights Defenders; visit Human Rights Defenders at their place of work; take part in seminars and meetings arranged by Human Rights Defenders; invite them to events hosted at the UK mission or in the UK; or give public recognition to Human Rights Defenders achievements. Consultation with Human Rights Defenders prior to any profile-raising activity is essential, as association with foreign diplomats can sometimes create new risks;

Where Human Rights Defenders are under particular pressure or at risk: UK missions will work with like-minded partners and agencies to establish what support can be offered, which will be determined by the local context and in consultation with the relevant Human Rights Defenders in each country. Possible actions may include:

- Raising specific cases publicly or privately with the country's authorities including on the need to implement effective protection mechanisms. A case can be raised at a more senior level, including ministerial where appropriate, or via a formal demarche on instructions from London;
- Issuing public statements; declarations; press releases (in the local language); or media interventions, including on social media;

- Attending trials and visiting detained Human Rights Defenders;
- The [UK National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security \(WPS\)](#) highlights Women Human Rights Defenders in particular as key partners for UK government to deliver on our WPS commitments.
- Where a UK company is implicated, UK missions will raise concerns with the company at senior level invoking relevant standards, such as the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.

Multilateral system

Through the multilateral system, the UK shows its commitment to Human Rights Defenders by working to strengthen and raise global standards for Human Rights Defenders. This includes:

- Co-sponsoring UN and other inter-governmental resolutions calling for better protection for Human Rights Defenders and the human rights standards they work to defend;
- Supporting UN and other multilateral efforts to elaborate and enforce responsibilities of third parties (including businesses) to proactively seek to protect the rights of Human Rights Defenders where relevant to their operations;
- working with partners to address and prevent acts of intimidation and reprisals against Human Rights Defenders seeking to cooperate with the United Nations;
- using the Human Rights Council Universal Periodic Review to deliver constructive and targeted recommendations to states;
- supporting the work of the UN Special Rapporteurs and other Special Procedures who report on the situation of Human Rights Defenders, and human rights more generally, including consideration of the recommendations on country and thematic reports;

- Support Human Rights Defender and civil society organisations to work with the UN, inter-governmental organisations, and other bodies through its observer status or designated representatives. The UK will continue to call for an end to reprisals against Human Rights Defenders who cooperate with the UN.

Emergency help

NGO support: UK missions can help Human Rights Defenders make contact with relevant NGOs. Support may be available from NGOs such as Frontline Defenders, Lifeline, and Peace Brigades International, who can provide practical help and emergency funding. Organisations like Peace Brigades International are also able to offer preventative protection support and capacity building including risk analysis and security strategies.

Contact

For Human Rights Defenders who need to contact UK diplomatic missions, contact details of all UK missions can be found [here](#).

UK pledge

The UK pledges:

- To remain committed to supporting Human Rights Defenders wherever they are in the world;
- To use all routes, bilateral and multilateral, to create stronger global standards to support and protect Human Rights Defenders;
- To consult Human Rights Defenders on projects and policy development where it is appropriate to do so;
- To provide practical in-country support as appropriate, taking into account the local context and the wishes of the Human Rights Defender;
- To publishing this document on local UK mission websites in English and local languages and on the central government website www.gov.uk;
- To disseminate this documents among other government departments;
- To assess, on a regular basis, the **impact of UK activity**, in consultation with UK missions, NGOs and Human Rights Defenders and update this document accordingly.

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