



JOINT PRESS RELEASE

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US urged to boost support for human rights defenders globally on key anniversary

(WASHINGTON, D.C., Oct. 17) – Human rights defenders (HRDs), government dignitaries, an independent United Nations expert, and human rights organizations today urged the US government and the international community to continue to stand with and increase support and protection for human rights defenders worldwide.

Several leading human rights organizations also hosted a delegation of HRDs from Colombia, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, Thailand, and Ukraine in Washington, D.C., for an event on Capitol Hill to mark the 25th anniversary of the [UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders](#), adopted on December 9, 1998.

“The US played a key role ahead of the adoption of the UN Declaration, which was an important step towards better recognition and protection of human rights defenders around the world who are at risk for their peaceful work. But a quarter of a century on, much work remains to be done,” said Mary Lawlor, UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders.

“Human rights defenders around the world face threats, smear campaigns, judicial harassment, violence, and even death. In some countries, the risk has only grown – hundreds are killed each year.”

Since the adoption of the UN Declaration on HRDs in 1998 until 2021, an estimated 4,814 human rights defenders have been killed worldwide. In 2022 alone, at least 401 HRDs were killed globally, based on statistics by the HRD Memorial, as [published by Front Line Defenders](#).

The US and other democratic governments must increase efforts to stand with HRDs and speak out against such attacks regardless of where they take place, the organizations said.

Celebrating human rights defenders

HRDs put their lives on the line every day to defend and advance the ability of all people to access their fundamental human rights, and this critically important role was formally recognized with the adoption of the UN Declaration. The HRDs visiting Washington, D.C., exemplify this hardship, and the urgency of doing more to protect them and their vital work in defense of human rights.

"I had to leave my home and livelihood in northern Nigeria because of fears for my life. I received death threats because I left my religion and criticized its contributions to child marriage, abuse of women, and restrictions on women's growth," said Mariam Oyiza Alliyu, Founder and Executive Director, Learning Through Skills Acquisition Initiative, Nigeria.

A two-part event in Washington, D.C., celebrated the achievements of HRDs over the last 25 years by featuring courageous human rights defenders and high-level speakers from the US State Department, USAID, the US Congress, the European Union, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders, and the diplomatic community.

The event was organized by a coalition of international human rights organizations, including: Amnesty International USA, American Bar Association Center for Human Rights, Freedom House, Freedom Now, Front Line Defenders, International Center for Not-For-Profit Law, International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), International Service for Human Rights (ISHR), Martin Ennals Foundation, Peace Brigades International, PEN America, Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights, and World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT). They emphasized the role governments, multilateral institutions, and international organizations play in supporting and elevating the work of HRDs.

The visiting HRDs include: Astrid Torres, Corporación Jurídica Libertad, Colombia; Mariam Oyiza Alliyu, Founder and Executive Director, Learning Through Skills Acquisition Initiative, Nigeria; Lina Al-Hathloul, ALQST, Saudi Arabia; Bussarin Panaeh, iLaw, Thailand; and Maryna Slobodianiuk, Truth Hounds, Ukraine.

Legislation to protect HRDs

The groups called on US lawmakers to introduce and pass bills in both the House and Senate to protect human rights defenders. An example would be legislation creating a limited, targeted visa program to offer HRDs at risk a way out of life-threatening situations of persecution and violence.

The US and other governments should also shore up emergency financial assistance to HRDs on the front lines, including through existing initiatives like the [Lifeline Embattled CSO Assistance Fund](#). Such initiatives allow HRDs and civil society organizations at risk to

receive timely and tailored assistance that meets needs like relocation, medical treatment, psychosocial support, security trainings, and more.

The Biden administration must also do more to engage with HRDs, including by ensuring its embassies and consulates meet regularly with HRDs in-country, providing emergency assistance to frontline HRDs at risk, observing trials, publicly and privately condemning attacks against HRDs, denouncing the unjust detention of human rights defenders, and advocating for their release worldwide. The State Department has taken important steps in this direction with its [Guidelines for U.S. Diplomatic Mission Support to Civil Society and Human Rights Defenders](#) but these guidelines need to be strengthened and mainstreamed at every US mission.

“Communities across the US have a long history of hosting and supporting human rights defenders fleeing from persecution overseas. There are key steps Congress and the administration can take to advance protections of human rights defenders globally,” said Mary Lawlor.

“Protecting and supporting human rights defenders – who are often the first line of defense against waves of persecution and authoritarianism – is crucial to living up to the spirit of the UN Declaration.”

NOTES TO EDITORS:

1. The event on Capitol Hill is open to accredited members of the media. Please contact the organizations listed below for more information or to RSVP.
2. The United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, adopted by the General Assembly in its [resolution 53/144](#) on December 9, 1998, is based on and incorporates human rights enshrined in legally-binding international instruments.

For more information or to arrange an interview, please contact:

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