

# FRONT LINE DEFENDERS GLOBAL ANALYSIS 2019



**f** FRONT LINE  
DEFENDERS

**On the cover:** Chilean women presenting a local dances and songs in the middle of the demonstrations against the police repression and the government in the center of Plaza de la Dignidad in Santiago during mass mobilisations in December.

photo credit: Felipe Marín Araya (@angulos\_dispersos)

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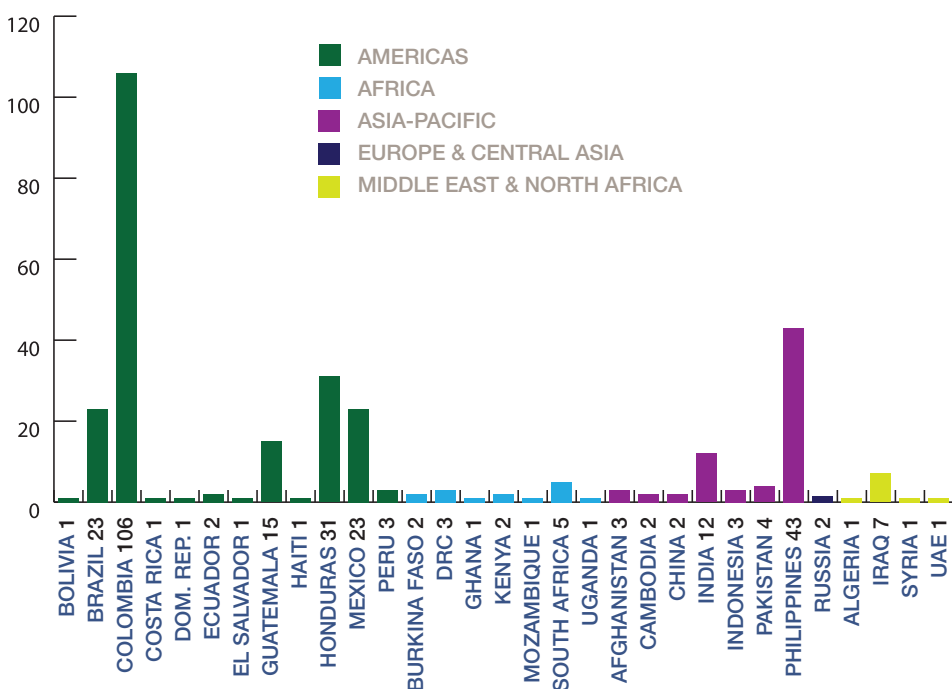
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# FRONT LINE DEFENDERS GLOBAL ANALYSIS 2019

**THESE ARE THE NAMES OF THE 304 HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS WHO WERE KILLED IN 2019, AS REPORTED TO THE INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS MEMORIAL. WE REMEMBER THEM AND TO THEM WE DEDICATE OUR WORK.**



**IN THE CASES FOR WHICH THE DATA IS AVAILABLE, 85% OF THOSE KILLED HAD PREVIOUSLY BEEN THREATENED, EITHER INDIVIDUALLY OR AS PART OF THE COMMUNITY / GROUP IN WHICH THEY WORKED.**

**PREVIOUS ATTACKS HAD BEEN PERPETRATED AGAINST THE HRDS WHO WERE KILLED OR THEIR COLLEAGUES OR FELLOW HRDS IN THEIR AREA IN 75% OF THE CASES FOR WHICH DATA IS AVAILABLE.**

**13% OF THOSE REPORTED KILLED WERE WOMEN**

**40% OF THOSE KILLED WORKED ON LAND, INDIGENOUS' PEOPLES AND ENVIRONMENTAL RIGHTS**

**KILLINGS IN HONDURAS INCREASED FOUR-FOLD COMPARED TO 2018, WHILE DECREASING IN GUATEMALA AND MEXICO**

**BOLIVIA**

Ronald Aceituno Romero

**BRAZIL\***

Paulo Anacleto  
Raimundo Benício Guajajara  
Carlos Cabral Pereira  
Sandro Cipriano  
Francisco de Souza Pereira  
Luis Ferreira da Costa  
Dilma Ferrera Silva  
Paulo Guajajara  
Jose Izídio Dias  
Nemis Machado de Oliveira  
Alessandro Bráulio Matos Fraga  
Leo Antonio Michels Ostrowski  
Marcelo Miguel Ortiz D'Elia  
Humberto Peixoto  
Maxciel Pereira dos Santos  
Firmino Prexede Guajajara,  
Eliseu Queres  
Edvan José Ribeiro  
Ari Ribeiro da Silva  
Marcio Rodrigues dos Reis  
Rosane Santiago Silveira  
Antônio Sobrinho  
Emyra Wajãpi

**COLOMBIA**

Mario Alberto Achicué  
Jesús Adier Perafán  
Miguel Ángel Alpala  
Dagoberto Álvarez  
Belisario Arciniegas García  
Carlos Aldario Arenas Salinas  
Freiman Baicué  
Demetrio Barrera Díaz  
Cristina Bautista

Hernán Antonio Bermúdez  
María Nelly Bernal Andrade  
Luis Eduardo Caldera Villamizar  
Pablo Emilio Campo Tequia  
Toribio Canás Velasco  
Wilmar Carvajalino  
Asdrúbal Cayapu  
Francisco Javier Cervantes Florez  
Victor Manuel Chanit Aguilar  
Fredy Yesid Chisco Garcia  
Magdalena Cocubana  
Dilio Corpus Guetio  
Alfonso Correa Sandoval  
Concepción Corredor  
José Cortés Sevillano  
Bernardo de Jesús Chanci  
Querubín de Jesús Zapata Avilés  
José Del Carmen Jara Ardila  
José Hugo Delgado Téllez  
Humberto Díaz Tierradentro  
Gilberto Domicó Domicó  
Oneida Epiayú  
Marlon Ferney Pacho  
Eliodoro Finscue  
Samuel Gallo  
Lilia Patricia García  
Orlando Gómez  
Anderson Ramiro Gómez Herrera  
Didier Ferney González  
Héctor González  
Edwin Andrés Grisales Galvis  
Enrique Guejia Meza  
Miguel Antonio Gutiérrez Martínez  
Policarpo Guzman Mage  
Milton Hernández  
Liliana Holguín  
María del Pilar Hurtado  
Lucero Jaramillo Álvarez

Joaquín Emilio Jaramillo López  
Fernando Jaramillo Velez  
Mauricio Lezama Rengifo  
Humberto Londoño  
Argemiro López Pertuz  
José Fernel Manrique Valencia  
Aquileo Mecheche Baragon  
Elicerio Mendoza  
Kevin Mestizo  
Dumar Mestizo  
Jesús Eduardo Mestizo Yosando  
Wilmer Antonio Miranda  
Diofanor Montoya  
José Arquímedes Moreno  
Yunier Moreno Jave  
José Arled Muñoz Giraldo  
Uver Ney Villano  
Jhon Jairo Noscué  
Daniel Obando Arroyo  
Daniilo Olayo Perdemo  
Jose Jair Orozco  
Aydali Ortega Marulanda  
Lede María Ortega Ortiz  
José Manuel Pana Epiayú  
Wilson Pérez Ascanio  
Zaira Bellasmín Pérez Hinojosa  
Anderson Pino Castaño  
Julián Alexander Quiñones Oñate  
Maritza Quiroz Leiva  
Constantino Ramírez Bedoya  
Ladevis Ramos  
Guillermo León Rengifo Ramírez  
Walter Enrique Rodríguez Palacio  
Daniel Eduardo Rojas Zambrano  
Marco Antonio Romero Lozano  
Sonia Rosero  
Jairo Javier Ruiz Hernández  
Luis Manuel Salamanca Galindez

John Salas Barrera  
José Rafael Solano González  
José Gerardo Soto  
James Wilfredo Soto  
Miguel Suárez Santiago  
Eugenio Tenorio  
Wilson Charley Tenorio  
Eduardo Torres  
Erick Yammid Torres Buitrago  
Aydée Trochez  
Flower Jair Trompeta Pavi  
Victor Manuel Trujillo  
Luis Joaquín Trujillo  
José Eduardo Tumbó  
Gilberto Valencia  
Benedicto Valencia  
Jairo Vargas Yandi  
Eric Esnorald Viera Paz  
Christian Andrés Vitonás Yatacué  
Gersaín Yatacué  
Ebel Yonda Ramos

**COSTA RICA**  
Sergio Rojas Ortiz

**DOMINICAN REPUBLIC**  
Ignacio Alfonso Abreu Romero

**ECUADOR**  
Inocencio Tucumbi  
Vicente Vera Párraga

**EL SALVADOR**  
Jade Camila Díaz

**GUATEMALA**  
Rosendo Wosbeli Aguilar Gómez  
Delfino Agustín Vidal

\* Full information for Brazil has not been made public by our source for data Comissão Pastoral da Terra (CPT); the online version of the report will be updated when this information is released. Please refer to <https://www.cptnacional.org.br/publicacoes-2/destaque/5037-despejos-assassinatos-e-reforma-agraria-paralisada-marcam-primeiro-ano-do-governo-bolsonaro>

Gabriel Humberto Chacón García  
Jorge Miguel Choc  
Paulina Cruz Ruiz  
Willy de Paz Bojorquez  
José Roberto Díaz  
Professor Diana Isabel Hernández  
Juárez  
Jorge Juc Cucul  
Leonel Nájera Mage  
Manuel Pérez Hernández  
Isidro Pérez Pérez  
Julio Ramirez  
Melesio Ramírez  
Obdulio Javier Villagrán

**HAITI**  
Judy Charlot

**HONDURAS**  
Jorge Alberto Acosta  
Edgar Joel Aguilar  
Johana Alvarado  
José Alejandro Arita  
Lesbin Daniel Ávila Caballero  
Maribel Boilan  
Buenaventura Calderón  
Santi Carvajal  
Leonardo Gabriel Castillo Lagos  
Kerin Francisco Cerna Hernández  
Eblin Noel Corea Madariaga  
Santos Isidro Cruz  
Wilfredo de Jesus Moncada  
Noel Isaac del Cid  
Bessy Ferrera  
Darlin Dionisio Funes Vásquez  
Oscar Francisco Guerrero Centeno  
Abad Miguel Guity  
Leonardo Gabriel Hernandez  
Luis Antonio Maldonado  
Juan Samael Matute  
Solomon Matute  
Óscar Daniel Mencía Cantarero  
María Digna Montero  
Adolfo Redondo  
Junior Javier Rivas  
Milgen Idán Soto Ávila  
Mirna Teresa Suazo Martínez  
Maricruz Tolvez  
Marco Tulio Cruz  
Anselmo 'Telmo' Villareal

**MEXICO**  
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Isaías Cantú Carrasco  
Arnulfo Cerón Soriano

Gregorio Chaparro Cruz  
Sinar Corzo Esquinca  
Gustavo Cruz Mendoza  
Eulodia Lilia Díaz Ortiz  
Samir Flores Soberanes  
Luis Armando Fuentes Aquino  
Bernardino García Hernández  
José Santiago Gómez Álvarez  
Abiram Hernandez Fernandez  
Noé Jiménez Pablo  
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Bartolo Morales Hilario  
Mario Moreno López  
Rafael Murúa Manriquez  
Camilo Pérez Álvarez  
Zenaida Pulido Lonbera  
Telésforo Santiago Enríquez  
Norma Sarabia  
Cruz Soto Caraveo  
Isaías Xantenco Ahuejote  
Maria Cristina Vazquez

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Cristian Java Rios  
Paul McAuley  
Claudia Vera

**BURKINA FASO**  
Hama Balima  
Fahadou Cissé

**DRC**  
Joël Imbangola Luneau  
Muhindo Kanzogha Obadi  
Papy Mumbere Mahamba

**GHANA**  
Ahmed Hussein-Suale

**KENYA**  
Samuel Ragira Mogaka  
Esther Mwikali Wambua

**MOZAMBIQUE**  
Dr. Anastácio Matavel

**SOUTH AFRICA**  
Ayanda Denge  
Roland Mani  
Kuliswa Nondala  
Tshililo Timson  
Midasi Wanana

**UGANDA**  
Wasswa John

**AFGHANISTAN**  
Saeed Karim Musawi  
Mena Mangal  
Abdul Samad Amiri

**CAMBODIA**  
Sum Moeun  
Uon Vanna

**CHINA**  
Wang Meiyu  
Nurmuhammad Tohti

**INDIA**  
Dani Batra  
Jagdish Golia  
Naresh Mitra  
B Mohan  
Sukhram Munda  
Abhimanyu Panda  
Chirag Patel  
Vinayak Shirsat  
Bal Govind Singh  
Kishore Singh Juliasar  
M Sreenivas  
Shabbar Zaidy

**INDONESIA**  
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Maraden Sianipar  
Martua Siregar

**PAKISTAN**  
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Malik Amanullah Khan  
Afzal Kohistani  
Arman Loni

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Emel Tejero  
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Leah Tumbalang  
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Yelena Grigoryeva

**ALGERIA**  
Kamal Eddine Fekhar

**IRAQ**  
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Safaa Al-Saray  
Hussein Adel Madani  
Dr. Alaa Mashthob Abboud  
Ali Mahmoud Najm al-Lami  
Adnan Rustom  
Zahraa Salman

**SYRIA**  
Ali Mahmoud Othman

**UNITED ARAB EMIRATES**  
Alia Abdel Nour

# Global Overview

2019 WAS CHARACTERISED BY WAVES OF **PUBLIC UPRISINGS** OF REMARKABLE MAGNITUDE IN EACH OF THE WORLD REGIONS, demanding changes to how people were governed. The role human rights defenders (HRDs) played in these protests ranged from organising and mobilising to monitoring and documenting human rights violations, and to assisting those who were injured or arrested. The causes of street protests and social unrest differed, but tended to revolve around outright rejection of deep economic inequality, rampant corruption, and calls for greater civil and political rights. While the demonstrations were largely peaceful, the security forces in many countries used acts of violence carried out by a minority of protesters as an excuse to respond with excessive use of force against the majority. Even in contexts where there was no threat to them, security forces were often ruthless. This was highlighted in Sudan in June when three HRDs were among dozens shot dead by security forces while participating in a sit-in at the headquarters of the Transitional Military Council. The speed with which police and other forces were authorised to use tear gas, rubber bullets and live ammunition on non-violent protesters was extremely worrying, as governments around the world sought to remove the tactic of peaceful, on-street mobilisations from the toolkit of civil society.

In nearly all of the countries that experienced mass protests, **HRDs were specifically targeted**; in Iraq, where anti-corruption protests saw over 300 people killed in October and November, woman human rights defender (WHRD) Saba Al Mahdawi was abducted and held for nearly two weeks by unidentified militants, likely as a result of her work providing food, water and medical aid to injured protesters; in Kazakhstan, election monitors highlighting irregularities in the presidential elections in June and journalists covering the subsequent demonstrations were detained and threatened; in Chile at least 22 people were killed and thousands of others injured, and in the Democratic Republic of Congo, at least five people were killed in protests demanding greater protection of the civilian population by the government and the UN's MONUSCO peacekeeping force, after more than 3000 civilians were massacred by militias in Beni, Eastern DRC.

In other countries, including Sudan, Zimbabwe and Indian-administered Kashmir, the internet was shut down or specific websites blocked in an attempt to limit the ability of protesters to communicate with each other and the outside world, while also negatively impacting the work of defenders documenting human rights abuses. Despite these attacks, the longevity of the protest movements was extraordinary and forced some countries to reconsider the relationship between the state and the public; autocrats in Sudan and Algeria were deposed, while in Chile, Ecuador and Lebanon, authorities relented to demands to reduce inequality by introducing reforms or backtracking on bills which had initiated the demonstrations. In Hong Kong, a bill that would allow for extraditions from the semi-autonomous territory to mainland China, which would have posed serious risk to HRDs, was scrapped. However, as elsewhere, these changes were insufficient or came too late and the target of protests expanded beyond initial demands to wider issues of fairness, political freedoms, accountability and transparency.

While small groups of people in these demonstrations engaged in vandalism, brawls with police, use of hard objects and Molotov cocktails to respond to police violence and other aggressive tactics, excessive and indiscriminate use of force against protesters and even ordinary bystanders has been the hallmark response by the authorities in many countries, often followed by denial and dismissal of calls for independent investigations.

The fact that the **security of HRDs** is inextricably linked to those in power, starkly highlights how human rights have failed to be institutionalised and continue to be seen as a gift that rulers have the discretion to bestow. Although this is nothing new, the periods before, during and after elections in 2019 were some of the riskiest moments facing HRDs, as defenders were singled out for political purposes. In Poland, the ruling Justice and Peace Party (PiS) made countering 'Western LGBTI ideology' part of its platform for the October elections; WHRD Elzbieta Podlesna was arrested and charged with 'offending religious beliefs' for posting images of Our Lady of Czestochowa (Virgin Mary) with a rainbow halo. The Polish Interior Minister condoned her arrest, tweeting, "All that nonsense about freedom and 'tolerance' does not give ANYONE the right to insult the feelings of the faithful". HRDs encountered sustained attacks in the run-up to elections in Mozambique, also in October, with those involved in election monitoring particularly targeted. Dr Anastácio Matavel, an NGO director, was killed after he attended a training session for election observers. He was shot dead by a group of five men as he left the meeting; four of the five were police officers. In Bangladesh, two journalists were charged in January under the Digital Security Act after publishing initial election results, which showed that the number of votes cast in one constituency was higher than the total number of registered voters in that constituency. Bangladeshi authorities claimed that the initial results were mistaken and that the journalists published 'false' news in an attempt to question the legitimacy of the election.

While popular discontent around the climate crisis continued to increase, the link between sustainable development and the work done by **defenders of land, environmental and indigenous peoples' rights** still fails to be politically prioritised

## TEN LAWS LIMITING HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENCE

New legislation passed or amended in 2019 that further curtails the ability of HRDs and civil society to protect and advance human rights included:

- The ‘sovereign Internet law’ in **Russia** requires that Internet service providers install software to track, filter and reroute Internet traffic, and allows the government to block access to content.
- Although **Nicaragua** approved a sweeping amnesty law, it prohibits released protesters from engaging in any protests, and prevents victims from accessing justice. It also protects police and others who took part in a violent crackdown on anti-government protests.
- **Egypt** enacted a new NGO law as an alternative to the widely criticised previous Law No. 70 of 2017. The new law continues to impose restrictions on the establishment of NGOs, their activities and funding. It replaces prison sentences for violating its provisions with huge fines.
- The government of **Tanzania** passed The Written Laws (Miscellaneous Amendments) (No 3) Act of 2019 which presented amendments to eight different laws. The changes give the state wide discretionary powers to suspend non-governmental organisations and evaluate, investigate and suspend their operations. The legislation requires civil society groups, including community-based and self-help groups, to publish their annual audited financial reports in mainstream media, thereby a cost burden that could bankrupt small, grassroots organisations. The authorities can also refuse to register any organisation without giving a reason.
- **Burkina Faso** adopted a law amending the Criminal Code which restricts freedom of expression, press freedom and the right to information. Any act aimed at offending the defence and security forces will lead to prison sentences and heavy fines.
- In **Tajikistan**, the new Law on Public Associations introduced additional reporting obligations for NGOs, such as submitting information about their income and expenditures and keeping record of domestic and international activities for at least five years.
- Journalists have continued to be targeted for their reporting in **Nepal**. A new Information Technology Bill threatens freedom expression on social media, and a Media Council Bill could limit press freedom in the country.
- **Togo** modified the law that regulates freedom of assembly and conditions under which protests can take place. The changes include restrictions around time and place, and limit the number of protests.
- The Political Parties, Groups and Movements Act in the **Dominican Republic** penalises “negative comments” in social media against candidates in political campaigns with a prison sentence of up to 10 years. In addition, the proposal to create an *Observatorio Electoral de Redes Sociales* (Electoral Observatory of Social Networks) in order to identify “fake news” can limit the free flow of information.
- The Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Bill in **Singapore** was created to ‘protect Singaporeans from fake news and educate them about potential damage it can cause - in particular inciting racial and religious disharmony.’ The bill gives powers to the state to correct online content and to order Internet service providers to post statements about ‘false’ content.

and protected. In her statement to the Human Rights Council in September 2019, Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples reported that, “extractive activities within indigenous peoples’ lands and territories undertaken without adequate consultation or consent are the main source of serious violations of their human rights, including violence, criminalisation and forced displacement”.<sup>1</sup> The number of defenders who are being killed each year remains extremely high. In 2019, Front Line Defenders recorded the killing of 304 HRDs, 40% of whom were working on land rights, indigenous peoples’ rights and environmental rights. In the Philippines in August, Lumad leader and WHRD Leah Tumbalang was shot dead in the province of Bukidnon, targeted because of her campaigning against mining activities starting in the area. She had previously received death threats and, according to a local Lumad organisation, hers was the 14th murder of an indigenous peoples’ rights defender in Bukidnon province in the first eight months of 2019.<sup>2</sup>

Land, environmental and indigenous peoples’ rights remained the most dangerous sector of human rights defence due to the profit-driven exploitation of natural resources, combined with rampant corruption, weak governments and systemic poverty. This rush for profit and models of development based on resource extraction are extremely shortsighted, as noted by the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Philip Alston, in a June report. He warned that “On its current track, climate change will decimate the global economy. According to the IPCC, at 2°C of warming, the world would experience socioeconomic losses amounting to 13% of global GDP and \$69 trillion of damage. Accounting only for the rise in temperature, and not the associated extreme weather events, one study found that unmitigated warming is expected to reduce average global incomes roughly 23% by 2100 and widen income inequality.”<sup>3</sup> The lack of binding regulatory frameworks at the international level is a contributing factor to the risks faced by HRDs, as is the belief that

mega-projects, even with environmental safeguards, are essential for ‘development’, despite objections from local communities. Development Finance Institutions (DFIs) have also been failing to adequately assess human rights risks in projects they fund and to respond effectively and quickly when threats emerge.<sup>4</sup> Smear campaigns are extensively used to target HRDs to try to reduce their support base, win over public opinion or to justify criminalisation processes. In Guatemala, members of the Nuevo Dua Chorti Indigenous Association (CCCDN) were subjected to numerous attacks, intimidation and attempts to divide the community, when they were portrayed as taking advantage of their leadership roles for personal gain. CCCDN provides support to Maya Chorti communities whose way of life is at risk due to hydroelectric and mining projects being implemented on their territories. In the DRC, three HRDs were arrested following protests against a Canadian-owned company operating palm oil plantations. Following their arrests, the company implied that the defenders were detained as a result of “the assault and battery of company employees and theft from the company.”<sup>5</sup>

As **WHRDs** gained ground in some countries, populist and state-sponsored backlash against women’s rights continued unabated in many others. This was exemplified by the opposition of groups affiliated with the church to the adoption of a domestic violence law in Russia, and ongoing impunity for perpetrators of sexual harassment and violence such as in the case that sparked the #MeToo (#EnaZeda) movement in Tunisia. Given the global influence of the United States, particularly worrying was the creation of a new Commission on Unalienable Rights to advise the Secretary of State and to “provide fresh thinking about human rights discourse where such discourse has departed from our nation’s founding principles of natural law and natural rights.”<sup>6</sup> The Commission is chaired by an anti-choice opponent of same sex marriage and is part of a larger push by the Trump administration against recent gains on women’s and LGBTI+ rights. There were advances made elsewhere; abortion in Northern Ireland was decriminalised after a vote in Westminster, while the new Argentine president, who took office in December, vowed to legalise abortion in what would be significant progress for women’s rights in the region.

Online smear campaigns, trolling and defamation continued to be a daily occurrence for WHRDs around the world in order to intimidate, shame or harass, and push them out of human rights activism and online spaces. Yet WHRDs face multiple risks which are not always visible in public advocacy and formal documentation of threats. Data drawn from Front Line Defenders Urgent Appeal statistics and Protection Grants programme from 2019 is instructive in this regard. While the Urgent Appeal statistics (see page 9) are only based on violations that the HRD wanted to be made public for advocacy purposes, the statistics from the Grants programme (see page 10) capture all the violations that led to a grant application by an HRD and thus give a more complete picture of the range of risks. Where sexual violence is not represented in the ‘public’ statistics, 7% of grant applications from women included reports of sexual violence or sexual harassment. Although it is commonly perceived that men defenders are at greater risk of physical attack, according to Front Line Defenders data from 2019, women were at least as likely to experience such attacks as their male counterparts. Women also reported being more likely to be subjected to verbal abuse and surveillance.

Defending the rights of those on the margins of society continued to be an unpopular and risky activity in 2019. Those **promoting or protecting migrants rights** were harassed, intimidated, arrested and attacked as political leadership on the issue remained sorely lacking. While the European Commission referred Hungary to the Court of Justice of the EU regarding the criminalisation of support to asylum seekers in July, in October the European Parliament voted against a resolution which would have seen the EU increase its search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean. From 1 January to 23 October 2019, the day before the vote was taken, the International Organisation for Migration reported that 1,080 people had died while trying to make the crossing.<sup>7</sup> In Italy in June, the captain of humanitarian ship *Sea Watch 3*, Carola Rackete, was detained for ‘aiding illegal immigration and entering Italian waters’. Three days later, a judge ruled that the WHRD had not violated the law because she was “doing her duty saving lives” and was complying with international maritime law. Data from the IOM shows that the Mediterranean crossing was the most lethal ‘border crossing’ for migrants in the world, with the US-Mexico border the second most lethal in 2019. Research by Front Line Defenders revealed that HRDs protecting migrant families, refugees, asylum seekers, and others along migrant routes from Honduras to the United States faced severe threats from both state and non-state actors (see page 15).

The leaks of confidential internal government documents in late 2019 concerning the operations of detention camps in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China are the latest addition to a growing body of credible evidence brought to light by human rights defenders of the mass and arbitrary incarceration of at least a million members of predominantly Muslim minority groups – mainly the Uyghurs, but also Kazakhs, Kyrgyz and Uzbeks. Beijing’s campaign against Muslim minorities is reinforced by a vast physical and digital surveillance apparatus in the region, relying on artificial intelligence technology, arbitrary collection of biometric data, placement of ethnic Han officials in the homes of Muslim residents, and an extensive networks of surveillance cameras and checkpoints. Chinese authorities have retaliated against Uyghurs living abroad for speaking up about the camps by threatening their family members still in China. Authorities in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have also pressured human rights defenders in those countries to end their campaigns for the release of their fellow nationals.



Those providing humanitarian assistance, working as medics or focusing on health rights were targeted in a way which suggests the **growing politicisation** of these issues. In addition to migrants rights defenders, HRDs in each of the world regions came under attack for trying to alleviate suffering. In Paraguay, WHRD Elisa Barrios and her 17-year-old son were detained for two days for assisting flood victims in a marginalised neighbourhood. Three health rights defenders in China were arrested on subversion charges in July because of their work to promote the rights of persons living with HIV/AIDS, hepatitis B patients and persons with disabilities, and to support victims of occupational diseases and their children. The offices of Fundación Mavid, an organisation defending the rights of people living with HIV/AIDS in Venezuela, were illegally raided in February; antiretroviral drugs and milk formula were confiscated while three staff members were detained. In Turkey, 11 council members of the Turkish Medical Association were sentenced to prison on a charge of “provoking the public to hatred and enmity” in connection with two public statements that they had issued drawing attention to the negative effects of war and conflict on public health. An extremely worrying trend of targeting those fighting Ebola virus continued in the DRC. In the first 10 months of the year, the World Health Organisation (WHO) documented over 300 attacks on health centres in the country, resulting in six deaths.<sup>8</sup> In November, community worker and journalist Papy Mumbere Mahamba, who was raising awareness about the virus on community radio, was shot dead in his home. According to the WHO’s Health Emergencies Programme, at a global level “violence carried out deliberately against health workers and hospitals had never been so bad.”<sup>9</sup>

There were significant gains for LGBTI+ rights in 2019, including decriminalisation of same-sex sexual acts in Botswana, Angola, Bhutan and Ecuador. In Botswana, the ruling includes same-sex activity for women, and in Angola, the government prohibited discrimination based on sexual orientation. Taiwan witnessed a historic moment when the country’s legislature approved a draft bill to legalise same-sex marriage. As LGBTI+ movements continued to grow stronger, backlash from existing and new anti-rights and conservative actors only doubled, while increasing the level of sophistication in their tactics. In May, the Kenyan High Court upheld the country’s law criminalising same-sex activity, while the government stated that this decision is an “effective method to contain the country’s HIV epidemic.”<sup>10</sup> The bill to protect transgender rights that passed in India in early December is deeply flawed as it requires a proof of gender reassignment surgery and gives the state the discretion to decide on the final evaluation of a request to change legal gender.<sup>11</sup>

Data from the Front Line Defenders Protection Grants programme confirmed the overall trends with regard to continued threats experienced by LGBTI+ rights defenders. Transgender activists are especially vulnerable due to their heightened visibility coupled with limited or entire lack of protections. Out of threats reported by LGBTI+ defenders who received support, 46% were faced by defenders who identify as trans or non-binary. The Trans Murder Monitoring (TMM) project confirms a total of 331 cases of reported killings of trans and gender-diverse people between 1 October 2018 and 30 September 2019.<sup>12</sup> On 7 July, Honduran WHRD Bessy Ferrera was shot dead by unidentified men. Bessy’s murder attests to the climate of extreme violence under which LGBTI+ people, and especially trans and sex worker rights defenders, operate.

As a direct consequence of reprisals against HRDs and public unrest, nearby countries deemed safe or safer were faced with the exodus of HRDs and their families, or served as a relocation hub. As a result of systematic repression in Nicaragua, scores of HRDs and journalists fled the country, most of them relocating to Costa Rica. Although the country has been willing to receive them, many HRDs have struggled to adapt and had to discontinue or limit their human rights work. Thailand was known as a safer option for HRDs in the region and beyond, however the country has become increasingly dangerous due to the lack of legal recognition of the rights of refugees and asylum-seekers, surveillance and intimidation, and the forcible return or disappearances of HRDs and political dissidents from neighbouring countries. On 6 February, the Pan-African Human Rights Defenders Network launched the Ubuntu Hub Cities programme, which provides HRDs at risk with the option of relocating within sub-Saharan Africa instead of moving further away. The Barcelona Guidelines on Wellbeing and Temporary International Relocation of Human Rights Defenders at Risk were jointly developed by a number of organisations to address the issue of wellbeing of HRDs in relocation.<sup>13</sup>

High-profile HRDs in long-term imprisonment continued to symbolise how the very idea of human rights is perceived to be an existential threat to corrupt and autocratic rulers. Nasrin Sotoudeh, Iranian WHRD and human rights lawyer, received a renewed sentence of 33 years in prison and 148 lashes on 11 March. Long-sentences are used as deterrents and warnings to other HRDs and anyone who more broadly defends human rights and fights for fundamental freedoms. The unusually harsh sentencing in her case is illustrative of the impact that HRDs can have on disrupting the structures of oppressive power.

## HRDS: AGENTS OF SOCIAL CHANGE

Despite the difficult context in which HRDs continued to operate in 2019, there are many examples of positive developments due to their work for the defence of human rights:

- After years of advocacy and protests, **Mexican** feminist groups and WHRDs celebrated the legalisation of abortion in the state of Oaxaca, as it became the first state in the country to decriminalise abortion since legalisation in Mexico City 12 years ago.
- The Male Guardianship system was revoked in August in **Saudi Arabia**. The revocation of male guardianship enabled several WHRDs to flee Saudi Arabia and to pursue their human rights work from safer locations.
- In **Jordan**, the Parliament withdrew the Cybercrime Bill in February, after huge pressure from human rights activists and civil society organisations. The bill restricted freedom of speech and the right to privacy.
- In **Sudan**, the Public Order Law of 1996 was revoked in November 2019 by the Sudanese Transitional Government. The law had a direct impact on women and women human rights defenders, who could be arrested if found dancing, wearing trousers or mixing with men who were not their relatives. Women could be punished with flogging, fines and, in rare cases, stoning and execution.
- In **Morocco**, the women of Sulaliyat tribe were granted the right to inherit and own land, after tireless campaigning by the Democratic Association for Moroccan Women (ADFM) and several civil society organisations.
- In southern **Madagascar**, nine members of a community resisting the creation of the Base Toliara ilmenite mine (a subsidiary of Australian mining company Base Resources) have become the face of the community resistance. Following a peaceful protest against the project in April, they were arrested, charged and later convicted of damage to property which they did not commit. In early November, the government suspended the project<sup>14</sup> in response to HRDs' peaceful resistance at the local and national levels, stating that the benefits of the proposed mine were not clear. This unprecedented move helped legitimise HRDs' efforts in bringing attention to the potential environmental impact of the mine on their ancestral lands.
- **Russian** LGBTI+ rights defenders were successful in gaining visibility and public support, including within traditional human rights organisations. Their events attracted many supporters and received substantial media coverage, despite the fact that the ban on "propaganda of homosexuality" constitutes a threat that could be enforced at any moment. In an unexpected development, the Resource Centre for LGBT people in Yekaterinburg won several court cases concerning homophobic comments on social networks. The courts found that the comments contained hate speech and ruled they be deleted or the authors would be fined

## HOW HRDS ARE TARGETED AROUND THE WORLD

The statistics below are derived from Front Line Defenders case work from 1 January – 18 December 2019 based on 895 reported violations. They are not exhaustive and only represent incidents of violations reported to Front Line Defenders where the HRD wanted the organisation to conduct public advocacy on their case. They do not include violations where the HRD requested that their case not be made public or where support other than public advocacy was provided to the defender. Furthermore, incidents of killings have been removed from the figures below. Please refer to pages 4-5 for information on the killing of HRDs.

### Reported violations

Violations (excluding killings)	Percentage
Detention/arrest . . . . .	22%
Legal action . . . . .	20%
Physical attack . . . . .	13%
Threats . . . . .	10%
Raid/break in . . . . .	6%
Disappearance . . . . .	4%
Torture/ill-treatment . . . . .	3%
Questioning/interrogation . . . . .	3%
Smear campaign . . . . .	3%
Verbal abuse . . . . .	2%
Travel ban . . . . .	1%
Sexual violence . . . . .	<1%

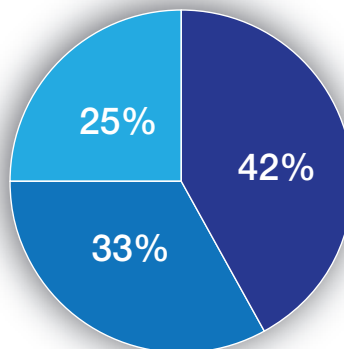
The table below shows the breakdown of violations by gender as reported to Front Line Defenders for public advocacy in 2019. The percentages shown reflect the violations experienced by WHRDs and HRDs as a proportion of the total number of violations to which each group was exposed. They significantly under-represent cases of sexual violence given that public advocacy was very rarely requested in such cases.

### Reported violations by gender

Reported violations by gender* excluding killings	Women HRDs	Men HRDs
Detention/Arrest . . . . .	23%	29%
Legal Action . . . . .	21%	24%
Physical attack . . . . .	11%	10%
Threats . . . . .	9%	6%
Raid/break in . . . . .	5%	6%
Other harassment . . . . .	5%	4%

Front Line Defenders issued 189 Urgent Appeals in 2019 documenting these violations. In 58% of the appeals, HRDs suffered more than one violation:

<b>1 violation</b>	<b>42%</b>
<b>2 violations</b>	<b>33%</b>
<b>3+ violations</b>	<b>25%</b>



\*In 2019, FLD issued urgent appeals recording 15 violations against transgender and gender non-conforming HRDs. Of these, eight were legal action, four were detention/arrest, two were threats/smear campaign/verbal abuse, and one was a raid/break in.

### Most common reported violation by region

Violation	Africa	Americas	Asia	MENA	ECA
Detention/arrest	16%	15%	10%	31%	7%
Legal action	11%	12%	13%	17%	17%
Threats/smear campaigns/verbal abuse	7%	25%	11%	3%	7%
Physical attack	6%	12%	6%	15%	6%
Raid/break in	35%	5%	5%	3%	7%

Overall, detention, arrest and/or legal action made up 51% of the violations against HRDs that Front Line Defenders reported from 1 January – 18 December 2019. Out of 189 urgent appeals issued by FLD, 33% of the incidents reported involved more than two violations against HRDs, and 25% involved more than three violations. This confirms overall trends on the increasingly complex and sophisticated nature of risks HRDs experience globally.

Front Line Defenders has a Protection Grants programme whereby HRDs can apply for funding of up to €7,500 for protection needs. Front Line Defenders records data on the type of violation which has resulted in the person applying for a grant, and there is often more than one violation. The figures below show in what percentage of grants were specific violations recorded.

In 2019, Front Line Defenders awarded 626 protection grants (up to 18 December) to individual human rights defenders, totalling €1,513,353. Although the casework data offers important information about the scale and type of threats HRDs experience and the resulting advocacy, grants data allows for deeper understanding of the relationship between violations, mitigation and/or response follow up, as well as more in-depth information about HRDs and their needs. For instance, grants data shows a higher percentage of verbal abuse, sexual violence and harassment, and threats experienced by WHRDs than casework data, once again confirming both the reports Front Line Defenders receives from WHRDs on the ground and overall global trends.

### Reported violations by gender in grants provided by Front Line Defenders

\*Percentage of grants per group

Violation type	Women HRDs	Men HRDs
Threats . . . . .	25%	22%
Surveillance . . . . .	15%	10%
Physical attack . . . . .	10%	9%
Legal action . . . . .	5%	6%
Detention/arrest . . . . .	5%	14%
Smear campaign . . . . .	5%	6%
Sexual violence/sexual harassment . . . . .	7%	-

\*In 2019, FLD awarded 26 grants to transgender and gender non-conforming HRDs. Of these, 16 involved detention/arrest, 8 involved physical attacks, and 5 involved arrest/detention and 5 involved other forms of harassment.

### Type of violations leading to grant application by region

Violation	Africa	Americas	Asia	MENA	ECA
Threats	46%	64%	35%	35%	48%
Physical attack	22%	36%	18%	13%	23%
Detention/arrest	21%	22%	23%	22%	15%
Surveillance	19%	41%	14%	6%	25%
Legal action	9%	14%	9%	5%	16%
Smear campaign	8%	16%	3%	4%	24%
Sexual violence/sexual harassment	1%	3%	3%	5%	2%

# Africa

CHANGES IN POLITICAL POWER IN A NUMBER COUNTRIES IN AFRICA IN 2018 RARELY LED TO IMPROVEMENTS IN 2019. In Nigeria, promises of reform and accountability that headlined the presidential elections were quickly forgotten; HRDs reported that the online environment became more repressive, as the government monitored and censored HRDs' activity on social media, blogs and online newspapers. Similarly, in the DRC, HRDs witnessed the pledges of the new president's electoral campaign give way to old habits that repressed freedom of speech and assembly. Defenders continued to be arrested for peaceful protest and held for short periods of time, or were arbitrarily detained. The year was particularly brutal for HRDs in Zimbabwe where the administration of Emmerson Mnangagwa oversaw a return to the fear of the Mugabe era through widespread police violence, physical attack and routine intimidation.

Positive developments in Ethiopia following years of repression stood out in marked contrast to the overall trend for the region. Since coming into power in 2018, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has pushed through reforms which have dramatically changed the environment for civil society. He publicly condemned past human rights abuses and appointed former dissidents and large numbers of women to senior government roles. A peace agreement with Eritrea earned him the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize. Tangible evidence of the opening of the space was seen in the launch of the Ethiopian Human Rights Defenders Coalition and the replacement of the severely restrictive Charities and Societies Proclamation Law. Despite these positive changes, the situation in the country remained delicate. This was evidenced by events in October when violence erupted in Addis Ababa, and in much of the Oromia region. Activist Jawar Mohammed accused security forces of trying to orchestrate an attack against him. The claim was denied and over a period of two days, violence that had ethnic and religious dimensions erupted in the Oromia region and led to the killing of 86 people.

Physical attacks and death threats remained common tools used against HRDs in incidents that were rarely investigated. The case of Malawian HRD Timothy Mtambo is instructive as to how threats can quickly escalate to more dangerous attacks; in August a district councillor with the ruling party released an online video in which he vowed to kill the HRD if he did not cease organising protests against the alleged mismanagement of national elections held in May. A few months later, in October, gunmen opened fire on the HRD, attempting to kill him. In Mozambique working on governance and accountability issues was particularly risky. This was evidenced by death threats received by WHRD Denise Namburete from N'weti, and the killing of a leading election observer, Dr. Anastácio Matavel, eight days before the voting day. The situation in Mozambique was exacerbated by the state failure to protect HRDs and citizens in a deteriorating economic

## **CASE STUDY** **HYPERINFLATION AND REPRESSION IN ZIMBABWE**

Deep economic crisis and corruption in Zimbabwe led to widespread protests and subsequent crackdowns on human rights defenders and civil society groups in 2019. Early promises of reform, jobs and prosperity quickly proved to be illusory, and the new administration failed to deal with corruption or address human rights abuses. An increasingly nervous government that came to power in a disputed election has resorted to repression of peaceful protestors and excessive use of force, as the state accused participants of being in league with the political opposition to topple a constitutionally-elected government. Between July and September there were at least 50 reported cases of abduction of activists targeting HRD leaders, trade unionists and opposition parties. All reported hostile interrogations by their abductors and, in some cases, torture. The scale of these abductions has instilled fear among HRDs working in Zimbabwe. Over a dozen people were killed in 2019 when security forces fired live ammunition at protestors. As a result of the continued instability and faltering rule of law, anticipated investments did not materialise. Cash shortages became apparent and were followed by fuel shortages, which led to more citizen disgruntlement and protests.

In June, the government abolished the multi-currency system that had precariously held things together, resulting in hyperinflation. As a result, the work of HRDs has become much more challenging. The government sought to impose tighter controls on scarce foreign currency, which has meant that the government is scrutinizing revenue streams of NGOs much more closely in order to accuse them of funding regime change or moving funds out of the country. This can also be seen as a retaliatory tactic against Western governments that fund most of the HRD work in the country and which have also imposed sanctions on members of the ruling party, Zanu PF. Despite the deteriorating situation and the risks involved, civil society actors have responded in waves of protests to the government's misrule, with teachers, unions and doctors all coming out in general strikes.

situation and unchecked exploitation of natural resources by foreign and politically connected local actors. Guinea faced mass protests which began on 14 October, when protesters took to the streets to oppose the amendment of the Constitution that would allow President Alpha Conde to run for a third term. The security forces failed to comply with international standards on the use of force when policing demonstrations and killed at least nine people and injured dozens of protesters. There are growing concerns that the situation in Guinea may deteriorate ahead of the October 2020 presidential election.

HRDs with the influence to mobilize peaceful demonstrations were particularly targeted, pointing to a deeply-rooted political insecurity and highlighting the speed and boldness with which security forces turn to violence. In Uganda, WHRD Nana Mwafrika Mbarikiwa suffered a horrific assault by police officers after attempting to obtain permission to organize a peaceful protest against police brutality. The defender, who was seven months pregnant at the time, was beaten unconscious; a number of months later, she was violently arrested at a peaceful protest and temporarily denied the medication she required as a result of the April beating. In Zimbabwe, 17 protesters were killed in January when demonstrating against a hike in fuel prices and dozens of others were severely beaten. In Malawi, leaders of the HRD Coalition were attacked with guns, petrol bombs and physical assaults while leading protests.

HRDs working in zones of armed conflict are caught in between armed, non-state groups, and state security or government forces. Defenders play a crucial role in monitoring human rights abuses and are often one of the only sources of objective information, as they strive to report from remote areas that are not well connected, or where international organisations have been expelled. In Burkina Faso, Cameroon, and northern Nigeria, human rights defenders work under intense pressure and at great personal risk to advance human rights within the backdrop of armed conflict. The terrorist attacks that have increased in the north of Burkina Faso over the last three years undermined the work of HRDs and NGOs, particularly the establishment of an implementation mechanism for the protection of human rights defenders, as provided by the HRD protection law adopted in June 2017.

HRDs are subject to restrictions on freedom of expression and the authorities often invoke ‘security’ as a justification to ban all peaceful demonstrations. In Cameroon, HRDs reported abuses committed by both government forces and separatist groups, and highlighted the government’s inability to provide security and support to its citizens. As a result, HRDs were targeted with judicial harassment, trumped-up charges, and physical surveillance; at times, it was nearly impossible for them to conduct their work due to the unstable context and the nature of the threats they received. In Mozambique, journalist Amade Abubacar was arrested without a warrant in January when he was interviewing people who had fled their homes due to the intensification of attacks carried out by members of an extremist group. Amade was held in pre-trial detention for nearly 100 days, including 12 days in incommunicado military detention. Though provisionally released in April, Amade still faces charges of crimes of “public incitement” and “injury against public officials”.

When reporting on state abuses against citizens or legally representing those targeted, HRDs were often criminalised and routinely subjected to attempts to delegitimise them. In Tanzania, lawyers and journalists were among those singled out. The Miscellaneous Amendments to the Advocates Act of 30 September 2019 restricts lawyers to either representing the government or private parties but not both, creating a narrative that labels lawyers who choose to represent private parties as ‘anti-government’. Lawyers and journalists were slapped with money laundering charges in five cases, which carry a mandatory three to five year jail sentence as evidenced by the case of journalist Erick Kabendera. Human rights lawyer and former president of the Tanganyika Law Society, Fatma Karume, was barred from practising on mainland Tanzania and restricted to her native Zanzibar after challenging the appointment of the Attorney General Dr Adelardus Kilangi as unconstitutional. These actions by the Tanzanian government has led to self-censorship among journalists, and reluctance by lawyers to take up cases of HRDs.

HRDs in the region were often vilified for presenting a bad image of the state to the international community. This takes on another dimension for WHRDs who are further smeared and de-legitimised by government officials, armed groups and anonymous online trolls. In August, WHRD Mbolatiana Raveloarimsa from Madagascar received sexualised threats on Twitter and was called a ‘slut’ following an open letter she published in advance of the Pope’s visit, in which she highlighted issues facing average citizens of Madagascar, especially extreme poverty and lack of good governance. In northern Nigeria, WHRDs faced harassment for their work in the form of smear campaigns, physical attacks and cultural exclusion. One WHRD has experienced this multiple times over in the course of her career. As she prepared to get married last year, community members tried to persuade her partner not to marry her, insisting that women like her do not stay in marriages long. This push to punish the WHRD for her public work by influencing her private life is a common trend in the region, one that highlights the complex nature of threats and intimidation against WHRDs.

In Cameroon, the DRC, Guinea, Madagascar, and Sierra Leone, HRDs working in the context of extractive projects have faced a plethora of intimidation, threats and attacks including arrest, judicial harassment, and even death. Large swathes

of land in sub-Saharan Africa are held under customary tenure, with a significant portion of customary land ownership going unrecognised by state legal frameworks.<sup>15</sup> HRDs work with communities to identify their land boundaries, to support them in talks with companies, and to monitor company activities and encroachment. In eastern DRC, communities living around agricultural concessions for palm oil plantations faced judicial harassment and police intimidation for denouncing land-grabbing by the company, PHC-Feronia (Plantations et Huileries du Congo is a subsidiary of Canadian company, Feronia). Many years of conflict in the concession areas came to a head last year when one member of a local organisation, Joël Imbangola, was beaten to death by a man identified as having been employed as a security guard at the company.<sup>16</sup>

The risks facing LGBTI+ defenders in the region remained severe, yet organisations and individuals working on these rights showed great resolve despite attacks. HRDs won a long-fought victory in Botswana when homosexuality was decriminalised by the High Court with Judge Michael Leburu declaring that “Human dignity is harmed when minority groups are marginalised”. Angola, too, decriminalised homosexuality in January and introduced a ban on discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. In Kenya, however, the High Court upheld a ban on gay sex in May. In Tanzania, HRDs were forced to relocate offices and community shelters after they were either evicted or asked by the authorities to move “for their own safety”. In Uganda, a member of parliament threatened to reintroduce the infamous “Kill the Gays” bill in October. Despite retractions by the government, potential rehabilitation of the bill, which calls for death as a penalty for homosexuality, leads to fear among the community and incites homophobic violence. The same month, a mob attacked the offices and shelter of Let’s Walk Uganda, as the attackers attempted to climb into the premises, they chanted homophobic slurs. Sixteen HRDs who were in the shelter called the police for help, who took the HRDs into custody to protect them from the mob. However, the next day these HRDs were charged with sodomy and human trafficking after police found condoms in the shelter. LGBTI+ refugees in Kenya were also targeted; throughout the year there were several reports of general persecution and homophobia against LGBTI+ refugees from Uganda and other countries in Africa who reside in Kakuma Refugee Camp.

There were positive developments in the region in regards to legal frameworks for the protection of human rights defenders, which is an essential part of a broader strategy to ensure recognition and protection of HRDs and their work at the national level. Such frameworks continued to advance in West Africa, and in 2019, Togo joined the list of countries that have adopted or those who are working to adopt laws and implementation mechanisms for the protection of HRDs including Burkina Faso, Cote d’Ivoire, Guinea, Mali, and Niger. HRDs reported that these laws, although sometimes lacking enforcement, contributed positively to their security situations as they provide legal recognition of HRD work.

## HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS NETWORKS

The continued failure of governments to provide protection for HRDs has led to the creation and strengthening of HRDs’ networks in East and Southern Africa. Governments in the region are of the the major threat to the safety of HRDs, or work in collusion with non-state actors to put HRDs at risk. National human rights institutions are usually disempowered to assist HRDs through deliberate underfunding by states or by laws which do not enable them to provide protection to HRDs. Protection responsibility invariably falls on HRDs themselves. In East Africa the establishment of networks has quickly taken root, and coalitions exist in Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Somalia and South Sudan. The Ethiopian coalition was launched in early December 2019.

In Southern Africa, the coalitions are fairly new but already provide important support to HRDs through protection and capacity-building. New coalitions are now present in Zambia and Malawi, and HRDs in Mozambique and Lesotho have begun to initiate their own networks as well.

A critical support for HRDs has also been provided through the sub-regional networks. The East Africa and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Network (DefendDefenders) is a leader in providing regional protection for HRDs and building the capacity of national coalitions. The Southern Africa Human Rights Defenders Network is quickly becoming a vital force for HRDs in the sub-region. On a more continental level the Pan-African Human Rights Network has become a strong grouping, particularly with the strengthening of its Ubuntu Hub Cities programme for HRDs. Front Line Defenders has continued to work closely with these coalitions.

# Americas

IN 2019, THE AMERICAS WERE CONVULSED BY VARIOUS POLITICAL, SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL CRISES, which grew out of the failures of political and economic choices made by current and past governments. The predominant extractive neo-liberal model that has prioritised the interests of external investors and domestic elites has fuelled corruption and failed to develop sustainable economic growth for the majority of the population. The continent witnessed increasing privatisation of basic public services, the “flexibilisation” of environmental and labour rights legislation, the creation of new legislation to undermine human rights activism, and the dismantling of policies designed to tackle inequality. Demonization of the mainstream women’s rights agenda and intensification of fundamentalist discourses from all sectors, including high level politicians, were evident in almost all countries in the region.

A combination of important elections and the beginning of new terms provided the impetus for much of the upheaval, while some countries struggled with political deadlocks. Divisive general and local elections were held in Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala and Uruguay, while new presidential terms began in Brazil, El Salvador, Mexico and Venezuela. Additionally, political crises from previous years bled into 2019 in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua. Peru saw an abrupt change of president as a result of investigations into corruption, while mass protests erupted in Chile, Colombia and Ecuador. After allegations of election meddling, Bolivia witnessed a violent change of government. In Honduras, anti-government protests demanded the president’s removal after the announcement of executive and legislative decrees that could lead to the privatisation of education and health care; these calls were later renewed with the conviction of the president’s brother on drug trafficking charges in the U.S. In Venezuela, a year of street protests, counter-protests and political instability over the legitimacy of President Maduro’s second term and his opponent Juan Guaido did not yield an end to the political crisis as more people fled the country, while those who remained endured food, medicine, electricity and fuel shortages. In Cuba, a new Constitution came into effect in April, and a number of changes are underway on the island since the passing of leadership from the Castros; however, fundamental freedoms remain elusive.

October and November saw a wave of demonstrations, which were met with police brutality, serious limitations and attacks on the freedom of association and freedom of expression, and the imposition of states of emergency in Bolivia, Chile, Colombia and Ecuador. While the trigger for each protest movement varied – contested elections in Bolivia, an increase in the cost of public transport in Chile, corruption in Colombia, and cuts in fuel subsidies in Ecuador - wide sections of the population engaged in the mobilisations. During the course of 2019, de facto, and partial or complete states of exception/emergency were also declared in Guatemala, Nicaragua and Honduras.

Attacks on journalists and those documenting and reporting on human rights violations were common, as well as the persecution of those who were perceived as responsible for organising or having a leadership role during protests. In Guatemala, President Jimmy Morales stated publicly that criminal groups acted “in collaboration with pseudo human rights defenders and pseudo peasants” in the violent events that pushed the government to declare a state of emergency, while Chile’s President declared the country was “facing a war against a relentless enemy,” instead of recognising what was in fact a self-organised civil society tired of years of decline in the so-called “strongest economy of the region”.<sup>17</sup>

In the United States, political and extremist violence continued to be a worrying trend, with mass shootings, excessive use of force by security forces and police, and hate crimes happening across the country. In parallel, the country witnessed persistent and diverse protest movements, with HRDs of all backgrounds, genders and ages leading calls for political, racial, social and environmental justice.

Further conflict appears inevitable as governments in the region, regardless of political persuasion, continued to embrace mega-development projects and grant major concessions to transnational companies in order to secure such projects. This economic model remains dominant in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico and Peru. In Mexico, President Lopez Obrador’s vow to fight poverty entails investing in extractive projects, while HRDs opposing them face enormous risks due to the high-powered corporate interests and potential profits involved. This was exemplified by the case of environmental defender Samir Flores, who was killed in the state of Morelos after leading opposition to a thermoelectric power plant and pipeline over concerns that it would use and contaminate water supplies. The killing occurred three days before a referendum proposed by the President on whether the power plant should go ahead. The President had opposed the power plant before taking office. In Colombia, the environment further deteriorated in 2019 with the faltering of the Peace Accords, local elections and the announcement of the return of some former armed opposition group members to their guns.

While footage of the burning Amazon prompted much rhetoric around the climate crisis from world leaders, the tangible responses of governments to the work of land, indigenous peoples’ and environmental rights defenders were indicative of their real intent. As in every previous year for which Front Line Defenders has data in the Americas, the vast majority of HRDs



killed were those working on these rights. They were also more likely to face unfair or fabricated judicial proceedings, which were frequently drawn out and costly, sapping the time, resources and energy of communities. While these defenders should be gaining better protection alongside the global focus on climate change, authorities continue to target them.<sup>18</sup> When Brazil briefly held the world's attention as the Amazon burned, President Bolsonaro attributed the fire to environmental rights defenders and NGOs as an attempt to damage the reputation of his government,<sup>19</sup> which also led to criminalisation and arrest of four firefighters from Alter do Chão, in the state of Pará.<sup>20</sup> Bolsonaro's targeting of sections of the population involved in rights defence is strategic, deliberate and dates back to his time as a Federal Deputy, when he stated that he wanted MST, the Landless Workers' Movement, designated as a terrorist organisation. The July murder of Luis Ferreira da Costa in Valinhos, a member of a MST camp on the outskirts of Sao Paulo, was a tragic illustration of the potential consequences of such an approach. The HRD was killed during a demonstration in which the protesters distributed seeds, flowers and food while asking for water from municipal authorities.

The case of Guapinol in Honduras became emblematic as it was the first case of environmental HRDs taken to national jurisdiction, where crimes such as terrorism and drug trafficking are prosecuted. The HRDs decided to voluntarily present themselves on 22 February and were charged with crimes of "unjust deprivation of liberty, aggravated fire, illegal association and theft." Although they were released, the message received by human rights organisations and social movements was that environmental defenders could face criminal charges for their work. Nine HRDs still remain in pre-trial detention in connection to their defense of the San Pedro and Guapinol Rivers; they remain imprisoned until the next hearing, which could take up to one year. As in previous years, private interests continued to exercise their power, often in collusion with local and national authorities, and in many instances, organised crime groups. In El Salvador, members of gangs are often aligned with state authorities and private companies, which hire them to intimidate and attack HRDs. Gangs often control entire territories, charging fees to human rights groups to enter communities or or completely denying them access.

Impunity remains the norm in the region when killings take place, including high profile cases that have drawn international attention and condemnation. In December, seven men were found guilty for the 2016 killing of environmental defender, Berta Cáceres. Among those found guilty were men identified as employees of the company Desarrollos Energéticos S.A. and a member of the Honduran Army. The Court stated that Berta's work defending the Gualcarque River and the Lenca people's rights was the reason she was killed. Berta's family continues to call for company executives and state officials identified in the trial to also be prosecuted. In Brazil, while two suspects were detained early in the year and are going through a judicial process as possible material authors of the assassination of Marielle Franco, so far the investigation has not determined a motive nor those directly responsible for the murder.

On 11 June, 56 unjustly detained HRDs and political prisoners held by the Ortega government in Nicaragua were released. Medardo Mairena, Irlanda Jerez, Ricardo Baltodano, and Amaya Eva Coppens, among others, were granted 'amnesties' with the application of a controversial blanket amnesty law that was adopted on 8 June. The law can also be used to grant protection to security forces, paramilitary groups and authorities responsible for grave human rights violations during the crisis. On 14 November, Amaya Eva Coppens was arbitrarily detained again with 12 other activists and HRDs, while they were providing humanitarian assistance to a group of political prisoners' mothers in Masaya, Nicaragua.

Chile's viral feminist song "A rapist in your path / Un violador en tu camino" by feminist collective Las Tesis was emblematic of the power WHRDs have as a leading force in the region. WHRDs played a central role in calling for protests against repression and in favor of collective rights, leading efforts to free criminalized defenders, pushing for regional solidarity efforts, generating new and creative protection strategies in contexts of social conflict and increased gender-based violence. This also came with increased targeting of WHRDs, teachers and academics, and further criminalisation of a women's rights agenda due to conservative political forces, often aligned with or supported by religious institutions. In Brazil, diplomats have been officially instructed to consider the word 'gender' as only referring to biological sex (female or male) during international negotiations. In

## **FRONT LINE DEFENDERS REPORT ON MIGRANT RIGHTS**

In a report released in September, Front Line Defenders and regional partners PRAMI-IBERO and RedTDT documented dozens of cases of migrant rights defender persecution in the borderlands and along migration routes.<sup>21</sup> In the United States, Mexico and Guatemala, defenders were arrested, assaulted and put on trial for the provision of humanitarian aid including distributing food, water and medical supplies and operating emergency shelters for migrant families. In Mexico and the U.S., arrests and interrogations of defenders assisting asylum seekers demonstrated the criminalisation of all forms of immigration, including those which follow existing legal processes. This crackdown disproportionately affects activists who are themselves migrants or undocumented, as well as women and LGBTI+ activists. The report also found that Mexican and U.S. immigration policies are exacerbating threats from organised criminal groups against HRDs. For example, HRDs working along the Mexico-U.S. border report increased threats and intimidation from criminal groups – which view them as disrupting trafficking revenues.

Mexico, a senator presented an initiative to modify the law to allow collaboration between the church and the state, thus signalling that the state would no longer be deemed secular and could allow for further deterioration of women's rights.

Many attacks against women defenders indicated a level of vicious hostility. Dilma Ferreira da Silva, who, for more than three decades, fought for the rights of 32,000 people displaced by the Tucuruí mega-hydroelectric dam project on the Tocantins River of the Brazilian Amazon, was killed in March, with apparent signs of torture – she also had her throat cut. A number of publicly vocal WHRDs in El Salvador, including Mariana Belloso, Bessy Ríos, and Karen Fernandez, faced smear campaigns, sexual threats, death threats and online harassment after expressing concerns about new government policies. They were publicly insulted by figures closely associated with the President or his cabinet. The inherent gendered nature of attacks, including in online spaces, becomes even more visible when the rights the WHRDs are fighting for are ideologically contested in society or by government. Attacks involving sexual violence and misogynist smearing against WHRDs and organisations who advocate for reproductive rights and against sexual violence, as well as LGBTI+ rights, were common in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, Nicaragua.

WHRDs were also subjected to violations within the human rights movement in cases that were publicly aired in some countries in the region. WHRDs in Mexico led the way by launching a version of the #MeToo movement that included at least 52 cases where the alleged aggressor was himself an activist. This has had an impact on the dynamics inside organisations - particularly in the capital of the country - as some of them opened processes to investigate the cases, created anti-harassment protocols or were held to public scrutiny for not responding to requests for investigations. In Honduras, women defenders exposed sexual violence carried out by their colleagues and decried the resulting silence because of pressure to not 'harm the cause'. This reason was given in a number of countries to defend lack of action when violations were brought to the surface.

Defenders working on LGBTI+ rights were among the most at risk in the Americas; while land, indigenous peoples' and environmental rights defenders are criminalised, attacked and killed because their work has implications on profit margins and political interests, LGBTI+ HRDs were mostly targeted by those who fundamentally disagree with their right to equality. The scale of this targeting was starkly highlighted in a report by Colombia Diversa which recorded the killing of 2,900 LGBTI+ people between 2014 and 2018 in ten countries across Latin America and the Caribbean. More than half of these killings took place in Brazil, which remains the country where the highest number of transgender people are killed worldwide. The progress that the LGBTI+ movement has made has resulted in a ferocious backlash. In Honduras, groups linked to the evangelical church encouraged attacks on LGBTI+ defenders prompted by same-sex marriage legalisation efforts and advocacy for the creation of a national registry on gender identity. One LGBT organization, Arcoiris, had death threats scrawled on the walls of its offices. At the time, the director – who was targeted by a smear campaign – stated that the risk had always been high but "the current situation is just unsustainable". Transgender women defenders faced an increase in attacks in Honduras and Dominican Republic. Risks became so high that a considerable number of trans women defenders were forced to flee Honduras. There was, however, significant progress in Ecuador, when the Constitutional Court ruled in June that the country's ban on same-sex marriage was unconstitutional.

Despite the criticism of and gaps in state protection measures in Brazil, Colombia, Mexico and Honduras, HRDs continue to seek formal protection mechanisms in the Americas. Defenders in El Salvador and Paraguay continued to push forward specific legislation on HRD protection. After a long-fought battle in Peru, in April the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights (MINJUSDH) approved its strongest step for the protection of HRDs at risk through the "Protocol to guarantee the protection of human rights defenders in Peru".

## **HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS FORCED TO FLEE**

One of the ramifications of Primavera Latinoamericana ('Latin American Spring') and other ongoing political and economic crises was the exodus of defenders from their countries in search for safety. This trend severely weakened the human rights movement in some countries and its ability to document and expose violations. It has also led to great uncertainty for those who have had to flee. Venezuela has witnessed the worst refugee crisis that South America has ever seen, with almost 5 million Venezuelans having left the country by the end of 2019. Brazil has seen an increase of LGBTI+ and women's rights defenders and prominent academics and leaders seeking asylum and relocation, including Jean Willys and Debora Diniz.

Defenders from Honduras fled the country or joined migrant caravans to escape routine or targeted violence and poverty, and when they continued their human rights work within the caravans, they were targeted once again. Honduran LGBTI+ defenders, particularly transgender defenders, had to leave their homes as a consequence of threats, including the killing of colleagues and friends. Following the systematic repression in Nicaragua, scores of HRDs and journalists left the country as organisations and media outlets were forced to close, with the majority relocating to Costa Rica after being displaced in their own country.

# Asia

INCREASINGLY AUTHORITARIAN RULERS AND ELECTED GOVERNMENTS IN THE REGION AIMED AT TARGETTING AND ISOLATING HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS THROUGH DIRECT ACTION OR A WILFUL FAILURE TO PROTECT THEM. Governments deployed various methods, including manipulating public narratives to disparage and discredit HRDs. The limited impact of traditional human rights advocacy was apparent in many countries, and the continued erosion of the moral authority of democratic states worsened the context for defenders in Asia.

Governments portrayed HRDs as threats to the fundamental security of the state, a trend more consistently noticeable in Asia than in any other region. This was evident in countries where the space to operate freely was already severely curtailed by various laws and widespread impunity for attacks against defenders. China, which is increasingly wielding its power to project influence abroad, continued to jail HRDs on state-security related charges. Particularly targeted were those who provided a platform for communities to come together to document abuses and highlight violations. Huang Qi, who ran a website, was sentenced to 12 years in prison in July, while Liu Feiyue, who hosted Civil Rights and Livelihood Watch, was jailed for five years. In India, regressive anti-terror or state security laws, such as the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) and Public Security Act as well as the Armed Forces Special Powers Act were used to threaten, deter and in some cases detain defenders. Three indigenous peoples' rights defenders were charged with sedition in February for participating in a peaceful public rally condemning police violence.

The declaration of a state of emergency in the aftermath of the Easter Sunday attacks in Sri Lanka had a chilling effect on the work of HRDs and threatened their safety. Human rights organizations were raided on multiple occasions by security personnel under the guise of emergency and security protocols. The national security agenda, which re-emerged after the attacks, paved the way for the reinstatement of officers who were facing serious allegations of war crimes and killings of HRDs, including the current Army Commander.

In the Philippines, a group of human rights journalists and lawyers were accused of being part of a purported plot to oust President Duterte in April – first by the *Manila Times* and later by the President's office itself. The so-called plotters included several lawyers from the National Union of People's Lawyers, reporters from the independent investigative online news outlet *Rappler*, journalists from Vera Files, a news fact-checking group, and members of the Philippines Center for Investigative Journalism.

Periods leading up to and in the immediate aftermath of elections have consistently been challenging for defenders in the region. States are successfully manipulating democratic structures to put in place or retain administrations with strong authoritarian and nationalist agendas while pretending that a functioning democracy is, in fact, existent. In Thailand, attacks against pro-democracy activists increased both before and after elections in March. Sirawith Seritiwat, a member of the New Democracy Movement, was left in critical condition in intensive care following an assault in June. In Sri Lanka, during the lead-up to the November elections, in which the former defence secretary, who has been accused of war crimes, was the leading candidate, there were increased threats and intimidation of defenders, especially those working on military accountability for historical human rights abuses. Human rights defenders and pro-democracy rights activists were smeared, slandered and received death threats online by supporters of the former defence secretary, now President.

Newly elected or re-elected governments in Sri Lanka, India and Pakistan deliberately targeted HRDs, sometimes resurrecting previous charges. In Pakistan, post-election violence and surveillance against HRDs became even more blatant. The false charges against and attacks on Gulalai Ismail, her family and members of the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement are illustrative. After Gulalai fled the country, her father was detained in what could be termed as an 'abduction-turned-arrest' on trumped-up charges. In June, shortly after the Indian parliamentary elections, Father Stan Swamy and three other defenders were targetted based on a 2018 police complaint, known as a First Information Report (FIR). The case was centred on their alleged involvement in a peaceful campaign for land rights led by indigenous and Dalit groups. Also following the elections, a FIR was filed against senior advocates and founders of the 'Lawyers Collective,' Indira Jaising and Anand Grover, on the basis of an old report from the Home Ministry that alleged violations of the Financial Contributions Regulations Act. In Sri Lanka, within the first month after the elections, the government returned to past practices. Intelligence officers began to conduct routine visits to human rights organizations seeking information about employees, programs and funders. At least three journalists were called in for questioning by State intelligence officers, while HRDs working on emblematic cases seeking accountability for crimes committed by the military faced reprisals.

In the Maldives, despite the restoration of democracy to the island in 2018, HRDs were targeted due to the influence of religious extremists in the new government. HRDs advocating for religious freedom, secularism, women's rights and LGBTI+ rights were threatened online to such an extent that they feared for their lives and for their families. In October, the Maldivian Democratic

Network (MDN) was temporarily banned by the government following attacks and a campaign by ‘religious scholars’ against the organization. The response of the Maldivian authorities – essentially affirming the position of the scholars – sent a chilling message to civil society, and on 19 December, MDN was officially banned and was given 45 days to settle its accounts.

Family members of HRDs often suffered from the consequences of attacks on HRDs or by being targeted themselves, adding to the pressures already faced by defenders. In China, family members were put under de facto house arrest, had bank accounts frozen, or were interrogated by police after making public statements on social media. In September, police pressured a school to deny education to lawyer Wang Quanzhang’s six-year-old son, a relatively common tactic used in the country. In India, the daughter of human rights defenders Urikhimbam Nobokishore and Mangsatabam Sobita was shot at in July, likely in retaliation for their work in defence of indigenous peoples’ rights in Manipur.

Defenders were also targeted under regressive cyber security laws, which were used in tandem with anti-terror laws and charges of sedition. In Vietnam, a cyber security law which came into effect in January 2019 amidst strong opposition was widely used to silence HRDs. In Bangladesh, the Digital Security Act (DSA) was used to arrest HRD Abdul Kaium on charges of digital fraud and publishing offensive, false, or fear-inducing information under the DSA. In Myanmar, prominent filmmaker and human rights defender Min Htin Ko Ko Gyi was sentenced to one year in prison in August under Section 505(a) of the Penal Code for criticizing Myanmar military’s role in politics through his Facebook posts. Despite his advanced age and liver cancer, he was denied bail. In Malaysia, the Court of Appeal in Putrajaya rejected artist HRD Fahmi Reza’s appeal against an earlier conviction under the Communications and Multimedia Act of 1998.

Authorities continued to limit freedom of expression of HRDs and their ability to organize through internet shutdowns or slowdowns. In June, the Myanmar government suspended mobile internet in a large part of Rakhine state, home to the Rohingya community. In Indonesia, the government limited internet access or implemented a complete shutdown of mobile internet in May in Jakarta as a response to post-election protests. A similar shutdown was imposed in the provinces of Papua and West Papua in August after mass protests led to scores of arrests and alleged killings by the security forces.

In the Philippines, the killing of HRDs continued to take place with near impunity. The majority of these killings took place after previous attacks or threats against the defender, which were not investigated nor was the defender given any protection from the state. Defenders working on land, environmental and indigenous peoples’ rights were most frequently attacked, as they highlighted violations related to land grabbing or environmental degradation. Furthermore, HRDs, especially those working on the above rights, were routinely ‘red-tagged’ as terrorists or communist insurgents; security forces then used that alleged information to justify the killings. In May, in response to the continued harassment and killings of its members, the National Union of People’s Lawyers (NUPL) filed a Writ of Amparo to the Supreme Court seeking protection for its members, and got an order in favour in May. Four months later, NUPL lawyer Criselda Heredi narrowly survived an

## LAWS AND SANCTIONS AGAINST HRDS IN ASIA

Laws, regulations, policies and administrative sanctions were used to limit, disrupt and dissuade the work of defenders across the region. In China, when lawyers were not arrested, judicial authorities employed administrative procedures to punish them, notably by revoking or suspending licenses to practice. In January veteran Guangdong lawyer Liu Zhengqing was disbarred for making statements in court the authorities deemed “threatening to national security” and “defamatory”. Authorities cited two defence statements Liu submitted to court in two separate cases, one involved an HRD in Xinjiang, and another a Falun Gong practitioner in Guangdong. The statements were merely legal arguments why Liu’s clients were innocent. The Xinjiang defendant was accused of “inciting subversion of state power” and “providing intelligence overseas” while the latter was accused of “using a cult to undermine implementation of laws”.

Elsewhere, authorities relied on regulations limiting civil society space, such as the Financial Contributions Regulations Act (FCRA) in India, and burdensome requirements of NGO registration in Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan. In November, Amnesty International India was raided and its accounts frozen for alleged violation of FCRA regulations. Many local organizations monitoring and documenting human rights violations faced severe resourcing challenges due to delays in being granted the FCRA license.

The threat of legal persecution loomed large over many defenders openly critical of the government. In the Philippines, HRD and acclaimed journalist Maria Ressa, the co-founder of leading independent news portal *Rappler*, was arrested twice in 2019. In February, she was charged with cyber-libel under the Cybercrime Prevention Act in relation to an article that *Rappler* published in 2012, approximately four months before the Cybercrime Prevention Act was enacted. She was bailed the next day, but was again arrested in March under the so-called Anti-Dummy law, which prevents foreign ownership of assets, including of the media, even though *Rappler* is fully Filipino-owned.

assassination attempt, while with her child and client. Both the WHRD and another lawyer, Anthony Trinidad, had been red-tagged. Anthony Trinidad, who provided legal support to several political prisoners, was killed in Negros in July.

Highlighting the dangers of working at the intersection of land, environmental and indigenous peoples' rights, where there are often large profits and institutionalised racism at play, is the case of Gudda in Chattisgarh in India. He was shot dead by police following his exposure of the illegal acquisition of protected tribal lands by the state government for a proposed iron-ore mine. Other defenders seeking justice for his killing were themselves threatened by the local police chief. The experience of defenders working on land, environmental and indigenous peoples' rights highlights the exacerbated risks for those working locally and those who are marginalized due to intersections of gender, sexual orientation, poverty, ethnicity, location and language. HRDs who lack access to resources and national and international networks of protection are especially vulnerable.

In China, WHRD Ji Shulong was sentenced to four years in prison for writing articles on corruption and pollution. WHRDs are viewed as disruptive in communities where their very existence is often viewed as a challenge to a status quo. In March, prominent Bangladeshi WHRD Sultana Kamal's name was listed as a "target" by banned militant Islamist group Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen alongside suggestions of possible ways to kill her. Women reporting sexual violence against themselves or others were targetted under criminal defamation laws in India and Nepal. In India, prominent journalist and former Union minister M.J. Akbar sued fellow journalist Priya Ramani in January, after she had publicly recounted her experience of sexual harassment by the Union minister. Her public disclosure had paved the way for other survivors to come forward. WHRDs working in the Terai region of Nepal faced harassment and threats especially when intervening in cases of domestic violence or challenging practices such as dowry or child marriage. They lack support and protection from the state and the police, and their own community.

Popular protests in a number of countries in the region often resulted in violence, arrests and targeting of organisers and supporters. In India, there were widespread protests against the enactment of the regressive Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) passed by Parliament on 10 December, which excludes Muslim migrants to India solely on the basis of religion. The government responded with a disproportionate and brutal use of force, mass arrests and crackdown against HRDs and student leaders. Over a dozen people are reported to have been killed in the protests, although the Government denies any responsibility. In Hong Kong, assailants carried out two physical attacks in August and October against Jimmy Sham, a leading member of the Civil Human Rights Front, which helped organised several mass demonstrations.

The security of Bangkok as a regional hub in Southeast Asia for the relocation of defenders at risk was further undermined by the continued collaboration of the Thai authorities with regional governments. Laotian defender Od Sayavong went missing in Bangkok in late August after he participated in a rally in Bangkok protesting the Lao government's human rights record. Vietnamese blogger and Radio Free Asia contributor Truong Duy Nhat went missing in January, but was found in a Hanoi jail in March. HRDs from Cambodia, China, Laos and Vietnam who do arrive safely and file for refugee status with the UNHCR are forced to hide in fear of arrest, surviving on the goodwill of family and friends.

## **CASE STUDY**

### **KASHMIR**

On 5 June, the Indian Government unilaterally abrogated Article 370 of the Constitution of India, which granted special status to the State of Jammu and Kashmir. Overnight, the State was erased as an administrative territory and formed into a union territory under the direct control of the Central Government. Indian-administered Kashmir and its 12.5 million people were put under a state of emergency and communications lock-down. There was a heavy troop deployment to what is already the most militarized region in the world. There were reports of shortages of food and medical supplies and lack of transport even for emergencies.

HRDs in Kashmir speak of surveillance, mass arrests and intimidation of defenders, lawyers, and journalists in order to suppress any dissent, protest or advocacy on this human rights crisis. Shortly after the lock-down, HRDs were summoned to meetings with local police chiefs and administrators who warned of criminal sanction if they continued to engage in human rights work. There are reports of a list of people who are blocked from leaving the country.

The State Human Rights Commission was shut down, and its files and pending investigations taken over by the central authority. This has a direct impact on impunity, particularly for the fate of cases involving extrajudicial killings, torture, and enforced disappearances filed against the security forces. The situation of HRDs in Kashmir is also complicated by the fact that a number of defenders have criminal cases pending against them, which could be revived as reprisal.

## DIGITAL SECURITY RISKS FACING HRDS IN 2019

With field-based digital protection coordinators around the world, Front Line Defenders has direct experience helping HRDs mitigate a wide range of digital risks to which HRDs are exposed. Regardless of the vastly differing contexts in which defenders operate, the nature of digital threats and obstruction are largely similar throughout the world. The most common forms of attack where Front Line Defenders support was requested were defamation, trolling and harassment campaigns, and unauthorised access to social media accounts, information from which was then used to jeopardize the reputations and safety of defenders. This tactic was especially used to target LGBTI+ defenders working in conservative societies, where being outed could put their lives at grave risk. In Egypt and Iraq, the accounts of LGBTI+ defenders were hacked as attackers aimed to use the HRDs' personal information to publicise that they were working on these issues. Elsewhere, authorities led coordinated campaigns of complaint to social media companies which targeted HRDs' accounts in order to get them suspended or shut down, and thereby limit their reach and possibly lose their follower bases. This happened in Algeria, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Egypt, India, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Vietnam.

The theft and confiscation of devices also represented a significant risk to HRDs. In cases of device confiscation by authorities, even with encryption, HRDs were forced to give up passwords, thus allowing access to sensitive information. In general, devices were rarely encrypted and information was rarely backed-up. Such information was sometimes used as evidence to prosecute defenders or to crack down on their networks. Mitigation was sometimes possible through the closure of access to accounts and removal of 'offending' information that was leaked. Harassment or trolling on social media was a daily occurrence for thousands of defenders, and those working on the margins of society were often most targeted. In Indonesia, a WHRD was doxxed (had her personal information leaked) and was subsequently threatened that her sexual identity and advocacy on LGBTI+ rights would be made known to her conservative family, which holds an influential social position. In Guatemala, over 200 HRDs, journalists and activists were also doxxed, while a similar incident happened in Hong Kong where up to 200 supporters of the democracy movement had their personal details revealed online. There was a gendered aspect to this attack, with a journalist at a pro-democracy newspaper reporting that "I received hundreds of threatening calls...they would call me a bitch, and a prostitute, and tell me to watch out or they would kill me."<sup>22</sup>

Internet shutdown, restricting access or blocking certain communication tools such as social media and instant messaging during protests, social upheavals or crises were commonplace in 2019. This impacted the work and security of HRDs in numerous ways; most obviously, with a communications blackout it was far more difficult for HRDs to report on human rights violations, communicate securely, organise and mobilise themselves. This was evident in Kashmir after the Indian Government revoked Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, which guaranteed Kashmir a significant degree of autonomy. Severe restrictions followed and a blockade on communication and information flow was implemented. With phone lines blocked – including landlines, mobile networks and internet communications – people living in Jammu and Kashmir were compelled to use limited government-operated phones to communicate with those outside the region. Similarly, after the Easter bombings in Sri Lanka and the crackdown which followed, defenders were forced onto less secure platforms after WhatsApp, the tool of choice for many HRDs in Sri Lanka, was blocked. In Sudan, a country-wide internet blackout was imposed during the mass public demonstrations, while similar shutdowns occurred in Algeria, Iran and Iraq during protests.

More generally, 2019 offered further evidence that HRDs were a specific group that governments around the world targeted, while investing substantial resources into sophisticated attacks which private companies were willing to facilitate. Research by Amnesty International once again revealed that a government had bought sophisticated spyware from the notorious Israeli NSO Group,<sup>23</sup> which led to the targeting via malicious links contained in text messages of at least two HRDs in Morocco since 2017.<sup>24</sup> Elsewhere, over a seven-month period, senior members of Tibetan human rights groups, among others, were sent WhatsApp messages purporting to be from NGOs and journalists which contained links designed to allow for the installation of spyware on their phones if clicked.<sup>25</sup> All the messages originated from a WhatsApp account linked to a Hong Kong number. Given that some of the companies producing spyware that is used to target peaceful activists are headquartered in countries which claim respect for human rights, it is jarring that so little is being done to prevent the export of this surveillance and spying technology to repressive regimes. In a welcome development in September, prosecutors in Munich opened an investigation into German company FinFisher for exporting spyware without a license. It is alleged that its spyware was used to target HRDs in Turkey in 2017.<sup>26</sup>

# Europe and Central Asia

IN EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA, STATE AND NON-STATE SPONSORED CAMPAIGNS TO DISCREDIT HRDS WERE OFTEN ECHOED BY TRADITIONAL MEDIA AND SOCIAL NETWORKS. Those who defend migrants and asylum seekers, the LGBTI+ community, survivors of gender-based violence and other marginalised groups were portrayed as opposed to traditional values, national security or religious beliefs. The continued emergence of media outlets spreading fake news and ‘troll factories’ contributed to growing intolerance and hate speech, sometimes leading to physical attacks. In October, Hungarian far-right group Légió Hungária vandalized cultural and civic community centre Auróra, which hosts more than a hundred NGOs in Budapest. Auróra had been previously smeared by far-right politicians and pro-government media, which framed the centre as “Soros headquarters”, in reference to the Hungarian-born philanthropist George Soros. The centre also was subjected to police raids and physical attacks which were not adequately investigated.

Civil society organizations working on a variety of rights were targeted by ruling parties, politicised judiciaries or media controlled by political or economic interests. Although the European Commission and the European Parliament initiated a procedure to sanction Poland and Hungary in 2017 and 2018 respectively, for violations of the EU’s ‘core values’, there was little tangible impact. In June, the EU Court of Justice ruled that the Polish “Law on the Supreme Court” of April 2018, which forced Supreme Court judges into retirement and replaced them with those loyal to the ruling party, was in breach of the principle of judicial independence. Thousands gathered in cities across Poland to protest against a proposal that would allow for judges to be fired if they questioned the legitimacy of the government’s judicial reforms.

In July, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) restored voting rights to Russia, which were suspended in 2014 after the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula. Several Russian HRDs opposed this decision as undermining the core values of the institution. They also feared that it sent a message to other Council of Europe members that violations of human rights would go unpunished as long as member states pay their membership fees. However, other defenders argued that the return of Russia’s voting rights would allow Russian citizens to seek justice before the European Court of Human Rights, with Russia being the country with the highest number of filed complaints, and would prevent Russia from restoring the death penalty.<sup>27</sup>

In Western Europe, the criminalisation of solidarity continued to be used as a tool to disrupt the work of HRDs trying to save lives in the Mediterranean Sea. States focused on preventing migrants from reaching European shores and borders adopted laws and practices in contradiction to their legal obligations under the Geneva Conventions, and in violation of international obligations in search and rescue operations. Migrant rights defenders faced smear campaigns and defamation in Belgium, Croatia, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, Poland, Turkey and the United Kingdom,<sup>28</sup> stigmatising them as human traffickers and migrant smugglers. Most investigations and formal prosecutions were related to the vague definition of crime in the EU Facilitation Directive, which fails to properly distinguish between human smuggling and humanitarian work.<sup>29</sup> This is in contrast to the UN Migrant Smuggling Protocol, which requires criminal intent, such as ‘financial or other material benefit’ or unjust enrichment, for prosecution.<sup>30</sup> In Croatia, while accompanying asylum seekers to police stations, HRDs faced questioning and lengthy detentions. In Italy, several criminal investigations were opened against migrant rights defenders and NGOs involved in search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean Sea, including Proactiva Open Arms, Iuventa, Sea Watch and Mediterranean Saving Humans. Their search and rescue ships were seized. Although the Tangier Court of Appeals in Morocco dropped criminal charges against migrant rights defender Helena Maleno, this emblematic case contributed to the stigmatisation and atmosphere of intimidation against migrant rights defenders in Spain.

Defenders of LGBTI+ rights and women’s rights defenders were depicted as promoting ‘gender ideology’. ‘Gender ideology’ has been heavily deployed by conservatives globally as an ‘ideological colonization’ designed to undermine Christian values and to destroy the traditional family structure.<sup>31</sup> In Georgia, the organisers of Tbilisi Pride week received death threats, their offices were attacked and some of their relatives were threatened. In June, peaceful participants of the Istanbul Pride March were attacked with tear gas and plastic bullets as they left the only street that was permitted by police as a location for the demonstration. In Armenia, LGBTI+ rights defender Lilit Martirosyan, her family and colleagues received death threats after she spoke out about rampant discrimination against transgender people at the National Assembly of Armenia. In the summer, a ‘death list’ of prominent Russian activists containing their personal information and addresses was published online by homophobic group, Pila - Russian for “saw”. Elena Grigorieva, who was on the list, was found dead in July having been strangled and stabbed repeatedly, in what was perceived by the community as a targeted attack. No serious investigation was conducted into the threats received by others on the list, and they were not given protection.

Defenders working on addressing gender-based and domestic violence succeeded in pushing these issues onto the national agenda in several countries. In July, the European Court for Human Rights recognised violations in a first case concerning domestic violence and the failure of police to assist a victim in Russia. The judgement was followed by a serious public debate on the need to reform national legislation following the partial decriminalisation of domestic violence in 2017. In Italy, Lucha y Siesta, which runs a shelter for women and was facing eviction, launched a creative crowd-funding campaign, calling for a public as well as an institutional response. Ultimately, they received funds from the local administration to buy out the building. The effectiveness of the women's movement fuelled reprisals, and WHRDs reported an increase in gender-based harassment, online threats and insults in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Poland, the Russian Federation, Spain, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan. The strategy of blackmailing WHRDs with private correspondence or pictures was widespread. Identifying the real identity of the perpetrators in such campaigns remained difficult, making investigation almost impossible.

The right to peaceful assembly continued to be violated in many countries in the region. In Kazakhstan, peaceful demonstrations were heavily repressed in March in connection with presidential elections following the retirement announcement by long-time autocratic leader Nursultan Nazarbayev. In October, Jordi Cuixart, President of Òmnium Cultural, who had been held in pre-trial detention in Spain for two years, was found guilty of sedition and sentenced to nine years' imprisonment in connection to the promotion of peaceful demonstrations in Catalonia. In Russia, civil society

## CULTURAL SHIFT IN APPROACHES TO PSYCHOSOCIAL SECURITY

Human rights organizations in Eastern Europe and Central Asia share some similarities due to the collective historical past; for some, continued use of the Russian language as a regional *lingua franca* and exposure to similar political and media narratives. In recent years, a number of organisations experienced a significant shift in the field of psychosocial support and well-being of HRDs. Traditionally, human rights organisations in the region tended to dismiss the idea of well-being for a variety of reasons, including: counselling being perceived as medical intervention; NGOs operating as a 'circle of friends' and managed as such; hostile legal environments making financial survival of NGOs uncertain and therefore perpetuating already ongoing burnout; a general feeling that the work is not valued; and the use of addictive substances as a primary coping mechanism. In the past, well-being was at best addressed from an individual point of view, with NGO staff members held responsible for their own individual psychological health. This practice was often coupled with a deeply rooted organisational culture of martyrdom, which could lead to endless cycles of burnout and toxic interactions.

The shift towards a greater emphasis on self-care is the result of efforts by many organisations, initiatives and individuals who have been emphasising the crucial importance of self-care and collective well-being for human rights workers and activists for at least ten years. The growth in the number of shelters and temporary relocations programs, and the establishment of the first regional shelter, the Tbilisi shelter, two years ago, played an important role, as hundreds of HRDs from the region benefited from rest, training programs and psychological support. The idea that human rights work has a psychological cost and HRDs should be treated as other care giving professionals gradually moved from a radical one to becoming more widely accepted. LGBTI+ organisations in the region have led the way in developing diverse programs and trainings.

The approach of security specialists working with NGOs and individual defenders has also evolved and matured. Whereas protection of HRDs was initially addressed through specific 'security models' via trainings, and later through risk assessments and security audits, the notion of the 'feeling of security' started to gain more attention. The understanding that personal and collective decisions and behaviours are closely connected to HRDs' overall security, and that burnout is a security issue, has become an integral part of HRD protection discourse. In 2019, Belarusian Human Rights House launched a new initiative bringing together regional HRD protection champions. Previously, these experts addressed the security of HRDs from their particular fields of competence and were not necessarily aware of the work of others. They all reported of being exposed to defenders in psychological distress, and of their own insufficient knowledge of how to respond in such situations.

The culture of stigma around psychological counselling seems to have finally been broken, at least for the younger generation of HRDs who have started to speak openly about its benefits for themselves and their movements. Many efforts have also been made in improving the working conditions in terms of salaries, medical insurance and other benefits, although challenging to implement due to decreased funding in the region and persistent project-based funding culture promoted by donors. According to one Russian HRD, "One of the most obvious signs of this cultural shift in the region is the fact that offices of NGOs actually close after working hours and that breaks and holidays are encouraged and are becoming almost a normal practice".



responded with a successful project called OVD-info (roughly translated as PoliceStation-info), which coordinated timely media coverage of protest actions in different regions of Russia, legal aid and survival kits to those detained, and ran a very successful crowd-funding campaign receiving small but regular donations. In Turkey, 16 HRDs were indicted in March on charges of financing and organizing the 2013 Gezi protests and face a possible life sentence without parole.

Defenders denouncing and documenting repression against Muslim minorities in China were targeted in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan as a result of a political balancing act to ensure Chinese investments. In Kyrgyzstan, nationalist groups such as Kyrk Choro continued to target human rights organisations and defenders, including through physical attacks and attempts to disrupt events. After he managed to leave Turkmenistan in 2019, human rights journalist Saparmamed Nepeskuliev exposed the use of torture and inhumane treatment that he had been subjected to in jail. Gurbansoltan Achigova, a veteran journalist working with the Austria-based Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights (TIHR) was physically attacked and prevented from leaving Turkmenistan.

Attempts to exercise greater control over the internet continued to spread across the region: after many years of similar practices in Belarus and Azerbaijan, the internet was shut down during protests in different regions of the Russian Federation. Defenders reported elaborate phishing attempts, the cheapest and easiest means of digital attack. Physical seizure of devices occurred in Belarus, Kazakhstan, Poland, the Russian Federation and Tajikistan, and resulted in exposure of HRDs' networks and other sensitive information.

Following the online publication of two public statements drawing attention to the negative effects of war on public health after the military operation in Afrin, Syria, executive members of Turkish Medical Association (TTB) were labelled as “traitors” on social media, while the Turkish President also publicly called them “terrorist lovers”. This was followed by the judicial harassment of 11 council members who were sentenced to 20 months in prison on the charge of “provoking the public to hatred and enmity”. In May, three investigative journalists from the website Disclose and Radio France were interrogated by the French domestic intelligence agency (DGSI) after they published a series of reports disclosing the sale of French arms to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates and their use in the war in Yemen. The Ministry of Armed Forces lodged a complaint and the Paris Prosecutor's office opened an investigation into a “compromise of national defence secrecy”.

In the Russian Federation, a relatively new trend in the repression against civil society consisted of targeting human rights lawyers; attorney-client privilege was undermined in many cases, lawyers were called for questioning and their houses searched, physical access to clients in detention and the right to equal representation was obstructed, and in some hearings, lawyers were even prevented from accessing the court room. In August, the offices of Justice Initiative, a legal aid organisation, were searched in Moscow and in Nazran, Ingushetia, following a series of protest rallies. Lawyers in Turkey continued to be targeted and in an emblematic case in March, 18 human rights lawyers from the People's Law Office were sentenced to between three and 18 years in prison on terrorism-related charges following procedurally flawed hearings.

Organisations in Russia continued to be hit with heavy fines for violating the requirements of the “Foreign Agent” law. By the end of 2019, Human Rights Centre “Memorial” and the International Historical and Human Rights Society “Memorial” faced 20 cases for not stating its status as a “foreign agent” on different internet resources, including personal pages of members on social media. In December, the “Foreign Agent” legislation was extended to include any individual who receives foreign funding and disseminates information. In a positive development, Oyub Titiev, the head of Human Rights Centre “Memorial” branch in the Chechen Republic, was released on parole in June after 14 months in detention, after a prior sentencing in March to four years in a penal colony. This relatively lenient punishment reflected the absurdity of the drug charges brought, flagrant absence of evidence and effective trial observation by international diplomats, coordinated by the EU delegation and the Russian human rights community.

Crimean Tatar defenders remained under pressure in occupied Crimea. Crimean Solidarity was routinely visited and surveilled by the Federal Security Service (FSB). Emir Usein Kuku, the Chair of the Crimean Contact Group on Human Rights in Yalta and a member of the Crimean Human Rights Group, and Server Mustafayev, the coordinator of Crimean Solidarity, remained in jail on charges of extremism. The new charges “of forcible seizure of power” were added to previous charges faced by Kuku, and in October, the prosecutor requested a 15-year sentence.

In Belarus, an article in the Criminal Code allowing for the criminal prosecution of those working in non-registered organisations was abolished after a long advocacy campaign of Belarusian civil society. Although no longer a criminal offence as of June, the same activity remained punishable under the Administrative code. In September, the Bulgarian political party Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation – Bulgarian National Movement submitted a request to the General Prosecutor to initiate a proceeding of de-registration of the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, the oldest human rights organisation in the country.

Environmental activists and ecological initiatives in the region faced repression from authorities and security companies. In Southern Italy, environmental activists from the No-TAP (Trans Adriatic Pipeline) movement, who have been opposing the construction of the TAP gas pipeline since 2013, continued to be criminalised. Dozens of peaceful protesters are currently under investigation on charges of resistance to public officers and unauthorised demonstrations.

After a prolonged smear campaign and judicial harassment against activists from the Save Kok Zhailau movement in Kazakhstan, who fought against plans for a national park to be turned into a ski resort, the project was officially suspended. The authorities in Belarus suspended the construction of a battery plant in Brest by a Chinese company after almost a year of protests by environmental defenders.

## **CASE STUDY**

### **PROMINENT INDIGENOUS PEOPLES RIGHTS ORGANISATION BANNED IN RUSSIA**

The Centre for Support of Indigenous Peoples of the North (CSIPN) is the leading organization working to protect the rights of the indigenous peoples of Siberia and the Russian North and Far East and the only organisation of indigenous peoples of Russia that has UN accreditation. On 6 November Moscow's city court ruled to disband the organisation almost 20 years after its founding. The Ministry of Justice requested the liquidation of CSIPN on the basis that the organisation's charter does not comply with recent amendments to legislation on non-profit organisations. The CSIPN was also charged with having failed to submit reports to the Ministry, and for listing an invalid address. Moscow City Court refused to give the CSIPN more time to make the necessary changes and avoid liquidation.

The decision to liquidate the organisation is the culmination of a campaign against the organisation and its leadership that started in 2014. In September 2014, at Moscow's Sheremetyevo Airport, CSIPN director Rodion Sulyandziga had his passport seized, and later returned with one page cut out. As a result, the passport was considered invalid, and Rodion Sulyandziga was unable to attend the UN World Conference on Indigenous Peoples in New York. In 2015, CSIPN was placed on the government's register of "foreign agents". On 11 December 2016, police conducted a search in Rodion Sulyandziga's apartment and took him to the police station for interrogation. In 2018, police searched CSIPN's office, seizing organisational documents and a computer. CSIPN was eventually removed from the register of foreign agents in 2018, as it had stopped receiving much needed international funding.

# Middle East and North Africa

THE ONGOING DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL ARMED CONFLICTS IN THE MENA REGION AS WELL AS THE DOMESTIC POLICIES OF AUTHORITARIAN GOVERNMENTS CONTINUED TO POSE IMMENSE THREATS TO HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISM. Rampant unemployment, poor public services, poverty and corruption prompted unrest in many countries. Popular mobilisations ended the rule of two dictators, Omar Al-Bashir in Sudan and Abdel Aziz Bouteflika in Algeria, bringing a glimmer of hope elsewhere in the region. Women and men HRDs were at the forefront of the protest movements and the ongoing struggle for inclusive democratic transitions in both countries.

The safety of HRDs continued to be of utmost concern as targeted killings took place in Iraq, Libya, Sudan, Syria and Yemen. Defenders also died as a result of inhumane prison conditions or torture in Algeria, Iran, Sudan and UAE. In Sudan and Iraq, authorities attempted to disperse protests by firing live ammunition, resulting in the deaths of scores of demonstrators. Young Sudanese HRDs Mohammed Mattar, Abdelsalam Kisha and Abbas Farah were among those killed during a protest sit-in. Iraqi HRD and cartoonist, Hussein Adel, and his wife, WHRD Sara Taleb, were shot dead at their apartment in Basra by masked gunmen following their return from anti-corruption protests which they had helped to organise. The fate of many HRDs abducted during protests remain unknown despite calls from national and international organizations.

HRDs were subjected to forced disappearance and incommunicado detention in Egypt, Iraq, Libya, UAE and Yemen. In Egypt, Ibrahim Ezz El-Din, a researcher at the Egyptian Commission for Rights and Freedoms (ECRF), was arrested in Cairo and taken to an unknown location for more than 167 days, most likely as a result of his reporting on the right to housing and forced evictions in Egypt. He resurfaced on 26 November and now is held in preventive detention. Most governments used judicial harassment to curtail the work of HRDs, thus raising the emotional and financial costs of engaging in activism. Counter-terrorism provisions and cybercrime laws were most commonly used to detain and prosecute HRDs. As popular protests erupted from country to country, defenders were swept up in mass arrests which occurred in Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon and Sudan. HRDs also faced arbitrary movement restrictions across the region in an attempt to interrupt their interaction with the international community. In Egypt, at least 31 HRDs were under a travel ban in 2019.

## **INHUMANE TREATMENT OF IMPRISONED AND DETAINED HRDS**

Exposing detained and imprisoned HRDs to inhumane and poor conditions is a common practice by most governments in the region. This involves torture and ill-treatment, medical negligence, keeping HRDs in solitary confinement or small cells in unsanitary and unhealthy conditions, and denial of family and lawyers' visits. Although poor prison conditions have been a major source of concern generally, this tactic has been increasingly used by governments as an additional means of reprisal against HRDs and to send a message to civil society. By targeting internationally known HRDs and keeping them in appalling conditions, repressive governments, especially in Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia and UAE, publicly demonstrated their disdain for international criticism of their human rights records. In the UAE, the health conditions of Martin Ennals Laureate, Ahmed Mansoor, deteriorated as a result of poor prison conditions in solitary confinement with no bed or access to running water. He did not receive medical care nor was he allowed to have family visits. He was badly beaten in September and tortured in October as a result of his protests about his poor conditions. Mansoor is held in Al-Sadr prison in Abu Dhabi, serving a 10-year sentence. Prison authorities also punished incarcerated HRDs when they spoke out against their conditions and communicated them to the outside world. In August, imprisoned Iranian child rights defender Saeed Shirzad's health condition drastically deteriorated due to the denial of urgently needed medical attention by the prison administration. He was facing a high risk of kidney failure and suffered from continuous muscle spasms, as well as injuries sustained from prison guards. In April, he completed a five-year prison sentence but judicial authorities activated a one-year suspended prison sentence that was issued against Shirzad in 2012 to punish him for protesting against his conditions.

In many cases, HRDs felt they had no other options but to launch life-threatening hunger strikes, which sometimes resulted in tragic losses. Algerian defender of the ethnic Mozabit minority, Kamal Eddine Fekhar, died in May as a result of medical negligence in detention. The HRD spent two months on an open-ended hunger strike in the Ghardaïa prison, protesting his detention and prosecution. His lawyer reported inhumane conditions in the prison ward, with the HRD being chained to his bed and suffering from skin infections as a result of poor hygiene; his repeated requests to see a doctor were rejected. Egyptian WHRD Esraa Abdel Fattah, on a hunger strike since 8 December, was subjected to electric shocks and death threats. On 16 December her health condition deteriorated and she was transferred to the prison hospital. In Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria and UAE, HRDs were also subjected to ill-treatment and torture as a means of humiliation, reprisal or for retracting false confessions.

The continuing deterioration of socio-economic conditions<sup>32</sup> resulted in the mobilisation of labour rights defenders. In Iran, trade unionist Esmail Bakhshi was sentenced in September to 18 years in prison and 74 lashes along with three other trade unionists and four journalists on various charges of undermining national security. Their 'crime' was publishing evidence of the use of torture by the Iranian security on social media.

A massive environmental crisis and corruption led Lebanese protesters to the streets in early September, bringing together various sectors of society and overcoming some of the sectarian divides that have plagued the country. The protests led to the resignation of Prime Minister Saad Al-Hariri and his government in October. Women were on the front lines from the very first days and faced online defamation and onsite violence from various non-state groups who were trying to infiltrate the protests. Syrian and Palestinian HRDs in Lebanon also faced various forms of harassment and intimidation, including restrictions on their right to associate.

WHRDs were subjected to reprisals for their activism in Egypt, Iran and Saudi Arabia. In Saudi Arabia, the trial of a group of prominent WHRDs including Loujain al-Hathloul and Aziza al-Yousef, who were campaigning for women's right to drive and an end to male guardianship laws, began in March. The WHRDs were not informed of the charges before the hearing, and were not allowed to speak during the proceedings, while lawyers and foreign journalists were not permitted to be present. In March, Iranian WHRD and lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh was sentenced to 33 years in prison and 148 lashes – one of the longest prison sentences handed down to a HRD anywhere in the world. Before her detention, Sotoudeh was representing WHRDs who protested against compulsory veiling in Iran. Gender-based violence or discriminatory charges were used to silence and retaliate against WHRDs and curb their roles in public life. In Sudan, prominent WHRDs were singled out and detained in early 2019 during the pro-democracy protests. Rape and sexual violence were used as a weapon against women activists and protesters. In Morocco, a court in Rabat sentenced WHRD and journalist Hajar Raissouni to one year imprisonment on charges of 'undergoing an illegal abortion' and 'adultery' following a politically motivated trial in retaliation for her work on corruption in the Rif region. Following a campaign by local and international rights groups, she was released by royal pardon on 16 October. In Egypt, transgender WHRD Malak Al-Kashif was arrested in March following her campaigning for social and economic rights. She was put under preventive detention in solitary confinement in Tora Men's Prison until her release in July. Al-Kashif was sexually harassed by an officer and was forced to undergo an anal examination while in detention. Egyptian WHRD Eman Al-Helw was subjected to forced physical examination during her detention, and Saudi WHRD Loujain Hathloul was threatened with rape. WHRD Esraa Abdel Fattah faced a sexualised defamation campaign right after her arrest.

The space for those working on LGBTI+ rights also remains extremely constrained. In August, Palestinian authorities declared that the police would prohibit any event organised or held by Al-Qaws for Gender and Sexual Diversity. In September, an LGBT+ pride concert was cancelled in Lebanon after threats received by the organisers and pressure from religious institutions; earlier in July, a performance at the Byblos Festival by the country's most well-known (and LGBT+ advocate) musical group, Mashrou' Leila, was also forced to be cancelled for similar reasons.

Digital surveillance and cyber attacks were deployed against HRDs, journalists and bloggers in Egypt, Iran, Morocco, Palestine (by both Israeli and Palestinian authorities), Saudi Arabia and UAE. In Iran, Iraq and Sudan, the internet was shut down to curb peaceful protests and cut communications between HRDs, protesters and the outside world. The internet blackout put lives at risk as it obstructed the exchange of information on locations of wounded protesters, roadblocks and medical centres. Israeli firm NSO Group was revealed to be behind the targeting of scores of HRDs in a number of countries via its Pegasus spyware circulated through text messages and WhatsApp calls. Among those who had their devices infected were two Moroccan HRDs, Abdessadak El Bouchattaoui and Maati Monjib.<sup>29</sup>

Authorities repeatedly targeted HRDs who defended the rights of ethnic minorities, indigenous people and those working on environmental rights. In Kuwait, a group of Bedoon HRDs were prosecuted and detained in July for taking part in peaceful protests calling for the rights of stateless persons. In April, 25 Nubian HRDs in Egypt were sentenced to a large fine. Moroccan authorities imposed restrictions and surveillance on HRDs in Western Sahara and in Gaza, Israeli forces continued to use indiscriminate force against protesters and HRDs supporting weekly protests.

Most governments in the region impose severe restrictions on the work of human rights NGOs and civil society organisations. Independent NGOs are not allowed legal status in Algeria, Iran and members states of the GCC<sup>34</sup> do not allow independent NGOs. In April, the Court of Appeal in Casablanca rejected an appeal lodged by Racines, thus upholding the December 2018 decision to dissolve the organisation in December 2018 in connection with its work on freedom of artistic expression in Morocco. In August, Egypt enacted a new NGO law as an alternative to the widely criticised previous Law No. 70 of 2017, which continues to impose restrictions on the establishment of NGOs, their activities and funding. It replaces prison sentences for violating its provisions with huge fines.

Israeli and Palestinian authorities continued to harass and intimidate Palestinian HRDs in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT). In May, HRD and journalist Sari Jaradat was shot by Israeli soldiers while covering protests in Beit Sira village, west of Ramallah. In March, the Coalition of Youth against Settlement suspended its activities following settlers' attacks and threats against its volunteers and field observers in Hebron. In September, Israeli Defence Forces raided the office of Addameer Prisoners Support and Human Rights Association in Ramallah, and confiscated several digital devices and memory cards. Israeli authorities also targeted members and supporters of the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement. In March, the Ofer military court ordered the detention of artist and HRD Hafez Omar without charges for his campaigns on the rights of Palestinian prisoners and the BDS movement.

## **CASE STUDY**

### **EARLY OPTIMISM FOR HRDS IN ALGERIA FIZZLES OUT**

The resignation of the authoritarian president Abdelaziz Bouteflika on 2 April, following a popular uprising against his plans to run for a fifth term, brought hope for the future of democracy and human rights in Algeria. During the protests, leading HRDs took part in the mediation between the protesters and public institutions to find solutions to the crisis. They documented abuses committed against protesters and used audio-visual means to make them available. Human rights lawyers provided legal aid and security advice to activists.

However, in September, the military and the interim president declared there would be presidential elections in December, ignoring protesters' calls to engage in legal and institutional reforms ahead of any elections. A crackdown on protesters and HRDs intensified following this declaration. Detention, judicial harassment and intimidation continued against HRDs who joined and supported the demands of the movement. Despite the president's fall, repressive state policies targeted anti-corruption journalists, bloggers, trade unionists and members of rights groups. In October, journalist and HRD, Said Boudour, was interrogated and charged with defamation and insulting the regime. Abdelouahab Feraousi, president of the National Association of Youth (RAJ), was detained by police officers in plainclothes on 10 October while taking part in a protest in support of detainees in the capital. Many members of RAJ were arrested and detained in the second half of 2019. Human rights lawyer and former president of the Algerian League for the Defense of Human Rights (LADDH), Salah Dabouz, was frequently harassed by the Algerian authorities. He was briefly detained in April and was placed under judicial observation for almost four months for making a critical comment about the judicial authority in Ghardaïa on his Facebook account. In September, he was attacked and stabbed by two masked men in an attempted killing. The intimidation and retaliation against HRDs worsened after their call for the boycott of the upcoming presidential elections to strip it from any popular legitimacy. The eve of the elections in Algeria resulted in the arrest and judicial harassment of many activists.

## Endnotes

1. <http://unsr.vtaulicorpuz.org/site/index.php/en/statements/306-hrc2019-statement>
2. <http://davaotoday.com/main/human-rights/lumad-leader-mother-of-seven-killed-in-bukidnon/>
3. [https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Poverty/A\\_HRC\\_41\\_39.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Poverty/A_HRC_41_39.pdf)
4. <https://rightsindevelopment.org/uncalculatedrisks/>
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6. <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2019/05/30/2019-11300/departments-of-state-commission-on-unalienable-rights>
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12. <https://transrespect.org/en/tmm-update-trans-day-of-remembrance-2019/>
13. <https://www.hrdhub.org/wellbeing>
14. [http://rightsandresources.org/wp-content/uploads/FactSheet\\_WhoOwnstheWorldsLand\\_web2.pdf](http://rightsandresources.org/wp-content/uploads/FactSheet_WhoOwnstheWorldsLand_web2.pdf)
15. <https://news.mongabay.com/2019/11/madagascar-suspends-activities-at-controversial-base-toliara-mine/>
16. See company statement: <https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/death-of-mr-joel-imbangola-lunea>; see announcement of investigation by CDC: <https://www.cdcgroup.com/en/news-insight/news/cdc-appoints-independent-team-to-investigate-the-death-of-joel-imbangola-lunea-feronia/>
17. Amidst such political turmoil, ideologies within society at large became more entrenched. One of the ways this manifested itself in civil society was through increased pressure on HRDs and social movements to ‘take sides’. HRDs and movements who highlighted violations, especially when carried out under the rule of left-leaning governments, frequently found themselves attacked as being aligned to right-wing forces, an allegation that is particularly damaging for HRDs in the Latin American context and which may lead to segments of the population feeling disconnected or not represented by those fighting for their rights.
18. The signing of the Escazu Agreement was one of the most important battles won by HRDs in the region in 2018. However most governments are yet to ratify it. In 2019, only Bolivia, Jamaica, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines and Uruguay ratified the landmark agreement.
19. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/21/jair-bolsonaro-accuses-ngos-setting-fire-amazon-rainforest>
20. <https://www.conectas.org/en/news/conectas-expresses-solidarity-with-firefighters-from-alter-do-chao>
21. <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/statement-report/defenders-beyond-borders-migrant-rights-defenders-under-attack-central-america>
22. <https://www.bangkokpost.com/world/1784944/bulletproof-china-backed-site-attacks-hk-democracy-activists>
23. NSO Group has been selling spyware to repressive governments for years, in the full knowledge that it would be used to target, among others, human rights defenders. For further information, see <https://citizenlab.ca/2018/09/hidden-and-track-nso-groups-pegasus-spyware-to-operations-in-45-countries/>
24. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/research/2019/10/morocco-human-rights-defenders-targeted-with-nso-groups-spyware/>
25. <https://citizenlab.ca/2019/09/poison-carp-tibetan-groups-targeted-with-1-click-mobile-exploits/>
26. <https://www.dw.com/en/german-prosecutors-investigate-spyware-maker-finisher/a-50293812>
27. In October a number of politicians called for the reinstatement of capital punishment following the murder of a 9 year old girl. A moratorium on the death penalty was introduced in 2009.
28. [https://www.migpolgroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Final-Synthetic-Report-Crackdown-on-NGOs-and-volunteers-helping-refugees-and-other-migrants\\_1.pdf](https://www.migpolgroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Final-Synthetic-Report-Crackdown-on-NGOs-and-volunteers-helping-refugees-and-other-migrants_1.pdf)
29. Article 1 section A of the Council Directive 2002/90/EC of 28 November 2002 defining the facilitation of unauthorised entry, transit and residence stipulates: “Each Member State shall adopt appropriate sanctions on (a) any person who intentionally assists a person who is not a national of a Member State to enter, or transit across, the territory of a Member State in breach of the laws of the State concerned on the entry or transit of aliens”.
30. According to Article 3 of the UN Migrant Smuggling Protocol, “Smuggling of migrants” shall mean the procurement, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit, of the illegal entry of a person into a State Party of which the person is not a national or a permanent resident.”
31. <https://www.awid.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/170523-ours-ch2.pdf>
32. According to the World Bank there were ‘growth rates below what is needed to create more jobs for the region’s fast-growing working-age population’. Nearly half of the population in the MENA region is under 25 and the youth unemployment rate is the highest in the world reaching up to 30%. Moreover, the price of oil and gas, the main source of income for the region, declined 13% between April and October.
33. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/research/2019/10/morocco-human-rights-defenders-targeted-with-nso-groups-spyware/>
34. <https://www.gcc-sg.org/en-us/AboutGCC/MemberStates/Pages/Home.aspx>

# FRONT LINE DEFENDERS GLOBAL ANALYSIS 2019

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