

Amnesty International UK

BRIEFING



BRAVE Campaign – Calling for Recognition & Protection of Human Rights Defenders

Introduction

As we fast approach 2018, the 70th anniversary year of the adoption by world leaders of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a review of the global human rights situation reveals an alarming increase in attacks against the many brave individuals around the world who defend and promote human rights.

Human rights defenders (HRDs) come from all walks of life and may include journalists, teachers, farmers, poets, lawyers, student and community leaders, politicians, health professionals and whistle-blowers. They are harassed, tortured, jailed and even killed, for daring to challenge abuse of power by governments and corporations, protecting the environments, defending minorities, opposing traditional barriers to the rights of women and LGBTI people, or standing up against abusive labour conditions.

Authorities are targeting human rights defenders and their organisations through law, policy and practice. This includes restrictions on funding, the freezing of assets; travel bans, reprisals against their families, surveillance and smear campaigns. Government officials may seek to justify such actions in the name of protecting national security; defending national sovereignty from the perceived malign influence of foreign funders, organisations and states; upholding traditional values and norms that do not allow for equality; or promoting economic development through public and private corporations that exploit natural resources.

Since January 2012, the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law has documented over 161 new restrictive legal initiatives in over 70 countries. Front Line Defenders recorded 281 HRDs killed in 2016, up from 156 in 2015. In 2016 alone, people in 22 countries killed for peacefully standing up for human rights; 75% of which were killings of HRDs in the Americas. In 63 countries, they faced smear campaigns. In 68 countries, they were arrested or detained because of their peaceful work. In 94 countries, they were threatened or attacked. These numbers alone provide a clear indication of the unparalleled global assault we are witnessing.

More specifically, women human rights defenders (WHRDs) face gender-based violence in addition to the attacks other HRDs might face, including sexual violence, and threats, harassment and defamation campaigns linked to their status as women. Frequently, WHRDs are targeted not only because of their activism, but also because of their gender, and their activities are repeatedly delegitimised and denigrated. Those who challenge gender stereotypes and who work on issues like sexual and reproductive health and rights, or defend more widely the human rights of women and girls, are often especially at risk of gender-based threats and attacks.

Amnesty International believes that HRDs are crucial in upholding human rights across the world. Defending and promoting their rights and the space in which they live and operate is one of the most important ways to ensure human rights for everyone.

It is against this backdrop, that Amnesty International has launched BRAVE, a global campaign including in the UK, to increase recognition and protection of HRDs. The campaign will focus on WHRDs, the misuse and regressive use of laws, smear campaigns, and online and off-line surveillance, and calls for HRDs to be recognised, protected and able to operate in a safer environment. More at: www.amnesty.org.uk/defenders

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL UK ADVOCACY OFFICE

For more information on any of the issues contained in this briefing, please contact parliament@amnesty.org.uk or call **020 7033 1557**

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Cases

The campaign will highlight many cases. Here are two priorities for our parliamentary work:

Azza Soliman, Egypt

Over the past two years, the Egyptian authorities have escalated an unprecedented crackdown on civil society organisations. As of June 2017, they had banned 17 HRDs from travelling abroad and frozen the assets of seven organisations and 10 individuals. On 25 June, the president approved new legislation, which severely restricts NGO activities. NGO staff risk imprisonment or huge fines for: the receipt of funds, or the carrying out research or joint activities with foreign NGOs, unless all approved by the authorities; and for carrying out activities which are deemed to “harm national unity or disturb public order”.

Azza Soliman¹, a lawyer and long-standing WHRD, founded the Centre for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance in Cairo, which provides legal aid, support and literacy lessons for women, especially those who have experienced domestic abuse and rape. She has continually harassed by the authorities since 1998s, and arrested several times. She has been the target of smear campaigns and government surveillance, and she faces constant harassment by security forces and pro-government media for her work helping women victims of torture and arbitrary detention.

In December 2016, Azza Soliman was arrested, interrogated and charged with false charges of tax evasion, operating a civil society organisation without proper registration, and with slandering Egypt's image by claiming that women in the country face rape. She is banned from travelling abroad and her assets and those of her organisation have been frozen.

Istanbul 10 and Taner Kilic, Turkey²

Amnesty International is extremely concerned about the fate of its colleagues and other human rights defenders in Turkey, as well as the wider crackdown on civil society, since the failed coup attempt in July 2016.

On 5 July 2017 İdil Eser, the Director of Amnesty Turkey, was arrested along with nine other human rights defenders (now known as the Istanbul 10), whilst attending a routine workshop on the island of Büyükada near Istanbul. Their arrests came less than a month after the Chair of Amnesty Turkey, Taner Kılıç, was detained in İzmir. In October, an indictment was filed against the 11 human rights defenders, calling for jail terms of up to 15 years on terror charges. The indictment is a patchwork of untruths and is itself a damning indictment of the flaws in Turkey's justice system.

During the first trial hearing on 25 October, the court decided to release İdil and the other seven remanded members of the Istanbul 10, as well as join Taner's case with the Istanbul 10 case, but decided to continue his detention.

The UK government has already called for the release of Taner and İdil, however, it is important that it continues to pressure the Turkish authorities and call for the charges to be dropped against all of them, and for Taner Kilic to be immediately and unconditionally released.

¹ More info at: https://www.amnesty.org.uk/files/fi08116_7.pdf If you would like to work long term on Azza's case, please email: IAR@amnesty.org.uk

² More on İdil Eser at: www.amnesty.org.uk/files/2017-07/UA16617.pdf More on Taner Kılıç, at: www.amnesty.org.uk/files/2017-06/UA13817.pdf

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What are we asking the UK government to do?

Given the urgency and scale of the situation which HRDs are facing, Amnesty International is calling on the Foreign Secretary to launch a strategic plan to support HRDs, globally. This plan needs to have;

1. Ministerial leadership
2. Prioritisation in-country, through UK Embassies and High Commissions.
3. Significant funding
4. A focus on women HRDs

Such action would build on the UK Government's existing work in this area, of which there are excellent examples. There are also EU guidelines on HRDs and the Foreign Office's internal HRD toolkit, both of which recommend practical ways to support human rights defenders. However, the UK's efforts remain inconsistent, in part because of: more awareness and/or leadership needed on the issue, including at post; inadequate consultation with human rights defenders; limited prioritisation by other UK government departments which operate abroad; and insufficient funding for HRDs.

A new and public plan of HRD work could help resolve such concerns. It would also demonstrate the UK's continued commitment in this area ahead its intended withdrawal from the European Union, through which it currently channels significant political and financial support. And the launch of such a plan could mark next year's 70th anniversary of the UDHR and 20th anniversary of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders.

What can you speak to your MPs about?

1. Introduce them to the BRAVE campaign – why have we launched this campaign? – and to the two cases, Azza Soliman (Egypt) and Istanbul 10 and Taner Kilic (Turkey).
2. Ask them to raise concern in Parliament about the global crackdown on HRDs and to urge the Foreign Secretary to launch a strategic plan to address this.
3. Ask them to drop into our Annual Human Rights Day reception any time between 12:30-2pm on 6th December 2017 at Speakers House and take action on some of the cases

November 2017

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