

ON THE HUMAN RIGHTS FRONTLINE

How the UK government can defend the defenders

COUNTRY BRIEFINGS

In recent years, human rights defenders have faced unprecedented levels of repression around the world. This has taken place against a global backdrop of rising, unchecked authoritarianism and moves by some governments to undermine international human rights mechanisms. The situation underlines the importance of the UK government developing a strategy to support and protect human rights defenders.

To aid this process, Amnesty International and our partners conducted interviews with 82 human rights defenders in seven countries – Egypt, Colombia, Russia, Zimbabwe, the Philippines, Afghanistan and Libya – between June and September 2020. The key issues raised in these interviews are outlined in the following seven briefing papers.

The interviews also informed the recommendations made in our report *On the human rights frontline: How the UK government can defend the defenders*. The report urges the UK government to do more to support and protect human rights defenders, and proposes an adequately funded, cross-departmental and gender-responsive strategy to achieve this goal.

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See www.amnesty.org.uk/onthehumanrightsfrontline for the full report, published by Amnesty International and the Centre For Applied Human Rights, working with a number of UK and international organisations.

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COUNTRY BRIEFING

AFGHANISTAN

Human rights in Afghanistan

The civilian population suffers crimes under international law, human rights violations and abuses because of the continuing conflict. Conflict-related violence has led to thousands of deaths and injuries and the displacement of hundreds of thousands. Human rights defenders are intimidated, threatened, detained and killed. European and neighbouring countries continue to forcibly return Afghan asylum-seekers and refugees. Gender-based violence against women and girls persists due to the weak rule of law and harmful traditional and cultural practices. It is increasingly difficult for journalists to work and they face reprisals from armed groups, state officials, and security forces.

Human rights defenders in Afghanistan

It has long been extremely dangerous to speak out in support of human rights in Afghanistan, and recently the situation has deteriorated further. In September 2019, Abdul Samad Amiri, a provincial official of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), was abducted and killed. In November 2019, human rights defenders Musa Mahmudi and Ehsanullah Hamidi, who exposed the existence of a pedophile ring and revealed more than 100 instances of sexual abuse suffered by boys in Logar province, were arbitrarily detained by the National Directorate for Security, Afghanistan's top intelligence agency.

In March 2020, eight prominent human rights defenders received death threats in Kabul. The following month, human rights defender Ibrahim Ebrat was shot in Zabul province, while his colleague's life was threatened. In April 2020, Wida Saghary, a prominent woman human rights defender, received a death threat. In June 2020, two human rights workers from the AIHRC lost their lives in an IED (improvised explosive device) attack on their way to the office. The next month, social activist Esmatullah Salam was abducted and killed in Ghazni province.

Since January 2020, the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) has reported more than 30 attacks on human rights defenders across Afghanistan.



A demonstration by civil society organisations against the sexual harassment of girls and women in Kabul, Afghanistan in 2015 © Marcus Perkins for AI

Country briefing: Afghanistan

Feedback from the interviews

Amnesty International interviewed 25 Afghan human rights defenders: 15 from Kabul and 10 from other provinces – Herat, Mazar, Takhar, Helmand and Kunduz. Twenty were male and five were female. The focus of their work varied and include the following issues: peace, justice, ending violence against women, education, human rights defender safety and protection, women's rights, and corruption.

The interviewees all highlighted an increase in targeted threats and killings, particularly in Kabul, Herat, Mazar, Ghazni, and Logar provinces, though the problem is nationwide. Almost all had personally experienced threats and/or intimidation as a result of their work, and many said family members had also been threatened. As a result, the majority spoke of significant pressure from their relatives to stop their human rights work.

'My wife is asking me to start a business – she says close the organisation and stop human rights work if I would like to see the family alive.'

Human rights defender from Kabul

Many interviewees spoke about a rise in the damaging influence of conservative religious actors and warlords across the country who regularly condemn the work of civil society and human rights defenders – especially women human rights defenders – as against religion and Islam. These figures claim human rights work is part of a western agenda and promotes values that are contrary to Afghan culture.

There are also increasing attacks and defaming of human rights defenders – and women human rights defenders in particular – on social media, which the interviewees said was extremely dangerous as it influences public attitudes towards human rights defenders and human rights in general.

As negotiations with the Taliban commence as part of the peace process, the US and international community is seen as legitimising the armed group. Interviewees said they could be easily targeted because of their support for human rights. They also feared that they could be identified as a group opposing the Taliban, which would increase their vulnerability.

'The current deteriorating situation for human rights defenders, as well as the targeted killing and pressure... is an effort to create fear and shut them down.'

Human rights defender from Kabul

UK government priorities and actions

Afghanistan is a human rights priority country for the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). The FCDO's 2019 human rights report listed support for media freedom as a priority, along with projects focusing on gender-based violence, women's political participation, the peace process, and women, peace and security.

An overview of the UK's engagement with human rights defenders

None of the 25 human rights defenders interviewed were actively engaged with the UK embassy in Kabul. Some were surprised to hear Afghanistan was a human rights priority for the UK and that the embassy had a human rights officer. Until 2016, the embassy was active on human rights issues in Kabul but there since appears to have been a significant decrease in engagement.

The interviewees were not aware of any kind of support from the UK embassy for human rights defenders in Afghanistan or of the *UK Support for Human Rights Defenders* policy document, which was published in July 2019. They believed the embassy's approach to engagement with human rights defenders was selective, based on personal contacts, and if meetings took place it must be with a small group of individuals. To their knowledge the embassy had not recently

organised any events, round tables, or discussions on human rights or the plight of human rights defenders.

The human rights defenders from the provinces were not aware of the work of the UK embassy at all. They had never been approached by the embassy for any kind of meeting, either face to face or online. They were also not aware of the UK ambassador or any other official having visited the provinces or met with human rights defenders.

Only four of the 15 Kabul-based human rights defenders had ever received funding from the UK. One organisation received UK funding between 2014 and 2016 to provide safety and protection training to human rights defenders in Kabul and several provinces. When the funding came to an end, the organisation requested an extension but the embassy denied it. None of the human rights defenders from the provinces had received any UK funding.

The interviewees were not aware of any statements or social media posts by the UK embassy in response to news of attacks or intimidation against human rights defenders. Although they felt it was possible the embassy might speak out about particularly high-profile cases, even this was deemed as demonstrating a lack of consideration and commitment to the needs of human rights defenders in general and the importance of their work.

‘If the UK embassy meets human rights defenders, they sit, discuss, take notes and end up saying I will communicate your concerns. [But there] has never been assurance on how the UK government will help human rights defenders.’

Woman human rights defender from Kabul

Visa applications

The interviewees reported mixed experiences of applying for visas to visit the UK. While some had been granted a visa, others were denied with no explanation given. One human rights defender from Kunduz explained that the embassy asked her to go to India to apply for a visa. There she spent a significant amount of money applying via an express visa process but was still denied a visa and never given a reason as to why.

‘In 2014 I was selected as a civil society representative for a London conference, but my visa was denied despite [me] providing complete documentation. I contacted them many times to ask why but they never explained.’

Human rights defender from Kabul



A photo of human rights defender Fatima ‘Natasha’ Khalil, who was killed in Kabul, Afghanistan in June 2020 © Marcus Yam/Los Angeles Times via Getty Images

International community engagement

The interviewees were not particularly positive about the engagement and support from the international community for human rights defenders. Many said they considered engagement to be ad hoc and selective. The human rights defenders from Kabul did not recall any specific meetings, discussions or round tables to consider – let alone offer – support to human rights defenders in Afghanistan in response to increased attacks and intimidation.

The human rights defenders from the provinces felt completely abandoned by both the international community and the Afghan government with regards to protection. Many said the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) engaged with them to collect information about their provinces, but provided no support when they needed it. They believed there was a complete disconnect between UNAMA in Kabul and its provincial offices. None of them had any contact with embassies or donors generally, nor been invited to any meetings with ambassadors and other political officials, either in their provinces or in Kabul.

‘UNAMA in Takhar province continuously asked me to collect data from districts. When I was threatened and I asked them to support me, they denied it. They said we have no responsibility. I believe international organisations... must not misuse the efforts and hard work of human rights defenders and in return not even give them moral support.’

Human rights defender from Takhar province

What the UK should prioritise in its efforts to support human rights defenders in Afghanistan

1. The UK government must put political and diplomatic pressure on the Afghan government to prioritise the protection of human rights defenders and establish a protection mechanism for them. The UK government is one of the largest donors to the Afghan government and can thus exert significant leverage.

In December 2020, six months after these recommendations were made, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani issued a Presidential decree establishing a Joint Commission for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, welcomed by Amnesty International as major victory for human rights. However for the Commission to be effective it must be provided with full backing by the Afghan government and the international community will continue to have a vital role to play in ensuring its meaningful implementation and success.

2. As the UK government already works with various Afghan institutions such as the police, national security director and attorney general’s office, the embassy should work with these government agencies to build their understanding of the needs of human rights defenders and boost their technical capacity to provide protection.
3. The UK government should lead on establishing a basket fund for human rights defender protection and relocation within and outside of Afghanistan, encouraging other donors to also contribute. A basket fund would, crucially, save many human rights defender lives. It would also contribute to the ability of human rights defenders to continue working to promote human rights during the ongoing and incredibly sensitive peace process.

‘There is no protection grant for human rights that can be accessed immediately when a human rights defender faces severe risk... A human rights defender at severe risk can easily lose their life due to a lack of funding for her/his protection.’

Woman human rights defender from Kabul

In addition, the UK embassy should:

- Regularly promote the *UK Support for Human Rights Defenders* document on the embassy website and Twitter feed, and circulate it to civil society networks;
- Reach out and engage with a broad range of human rights defenders, particularly those in the provinces;
- Develop flexible funding streams accessible to small grassroots organisations, focusing on capacity building, protection and security;
- Contribute to and improve existing emergency protection funds to improve rapid response;
- Support projects to monitor and document human rights abuses regionally.

COUNTRY BRIEFING

COLOMBIA

‘An unknown number calls you and tells you to stop working otherwise something will happen to you. They told me to stop influencing women to defend their rights otherwise I would be killed.’

Noira, women’s rights defender

Human rights in Colombia

Violence in the ongoing internal armed conflict and disputes over territorial control following the signing of the 2016 peace agreement rages on in parts of the country. The main victims continue to be indigenous peoples, African-Colombian and *campesino* (peasant farmer) communities, and human rights defenders. Concerns remain about impunity for crimes committed during the armed conflict and threats against and killing of human rights defenders. Violence against women, particularly sexual violence, persists.

The absence of state authorities and their neglect of territories once controlled by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People’s Army (FARC-EP) have left a power vacuum in areas historically disputed by various armed groups for their natural resources and/or strategic locations. This exacerbates structural problems of inequality, exclusion and extreme poverty affecting the majority *campesino* population, African-Colombian and indigenous communities, with women at a particular risk. In this context, killings of human rights activists and defenders have reached historic levels in recent years.

Human rights defenders in Colombia

For many years Colombia has been one of the world’s most dangerous countries for people who defend human rights, indigenous territory, and natural resources. Since the peace agreement was signed in 2016, the situation has deteriorated, particularly for those living in areas that are geographically strategic and rich in natural resources. In 2019 at least 118 human rights defenders were murdered in Colombia, while the Somos Defensores Program recorded 95 killings of human rights defenders in the first six months of 2020 alone.

Colombia has established a range of measures, at least on paper, to protect human rights defenders. In theory, the country has one of the most comprehensive protection systems in the region. But the systems are ineffective because the authorities refuse to take preventive action to address the structural causes of collective violence against human rights defenders.

Country briefing: Colombia

Covid-19 has put human rights defenders at even greater risk, due to restrictions on travel (ie being unable to travel out of areas where they are at risk) the violent situation they face and the lack of protection they receive from the authorities. During the pandemic, the authorities reduced protection schemes for some defenders and authorised activities that put communities at increased risk, such as the extraction of natural resources, police operations, and forced eradication of illicit crops.

‘The situation is very complicated now in Colombia, especially for indigenous peoples, peasants, and human rights defenders. We are between the virus and the bullets. I never thought we would go back to such dark times. They kill us, they threaten us, they lie, and they slander. If the UK acted, it would add to what other embassies are already doing.’

Ricardo, child rights defender

Feedback from the interviews

Amnesty International interviewed 10 human rights defenders from across Colombia: two from the capital Bogotá, two from Cali, and six from other regions. Four identify as male, six as female. One identifies as LGBTI+. The focus of their work varies: two promote peace, three are environmental and land defenders, two work on women’s rights, and the others respectively cover child rights, forced disappearances, and human rights defender protection.

All 10 have experienced death threats as a result of their work, many of them within six weeks of the interviews taking place. Death threats against human rights defenders in Colombia are to be taken seriously – at least two of the interviewees had colleagues who had been murdered. Seven of the interviewees had been forced into hiding or displaced because of threats they received. In addition to death threats: three interviewees experienced explicit harassment from security forces; three experienced physical attacks, including torture; one was criminally sued; and the homes of at least two were broken into.

‘I never imagined it was so hard to stand up to defend our own things. I have gone through torture, they killed some of my friends and nowadays I am not even in my village, I am in another place. I’m hiding.’

Jota, human rights defender and musician



Human rights defenders take part in a May Day march in Bogotá, Colombia in 2019 © Raul Arboleda/AFP via Getty Images



UK government priorities and actions

Colombia is a human rights priority for the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). In the FCDO's 2019 human rights report, the plight of human rights defenders was raised as a particular concern. According to the report, in 2019 the UK directly supported approximately 450 at-risk human rights defenders in Colombia through training to improve protection and security and legal support to fight impunity in cases of attacks. The UK also helped to strengthen the capacity of the attorney general's office, including the special unit dealing with attacks on human rights defenders.

'I have a lot of contact with the German embassy... with Sweden and Switzerland, and a bit with the embassy of Norway. I have the contacts and the numbers of the staff in all those places. There is a communication mechanism to inform them if something happens.'

Leyner, peace activist and winner of the World Prize for Pluralism

An overview of the UK's engagement with human rights defenders

Although human rights defenders are a priority for the UK, nine of the 10 interviewees had not been in touch with the UK embassy in Bogotá at all. None of them knew which embassy staff member was working on human rights, or how to easily contact them. Only one was aware of the *UK Support for Human Rights Defenders* policy document, which was published in July 2019. None of them received UK funding or even knew what funding was currently available and how to apply for it. One had applied for UK funding unsuccessfully in the past. Only one was aware of instances when the UK embassy or government publicly promoted the work of human rights defenders.

While the experiences of 10 interviewees cannot be easily generalised, it was surprising to hear that UK embassy support was seen as so insufficient, particularly given the UK's prioritisation of human rights defenders. The interviewees were selected to be representative of human rights defenders working in rural areas as well the capital; seven had travelled and worked internationally; two had received international recognition in the form of human rights prizes; at least one received protection from the National Protection Unit (Colombia's State protection mechanism for human rights defenders); and six were in regular contact with a number of other embassies.

Country briefing: Colombia



Colombian human rights defender Bernardo Cuero, who was assassinated in June 2017
© AFRODES/Erlendy Cuero

One interviewee told us that embassies can make a difference just by meeting with human rights defenders: ‘When the Colombian authorities know that someone met with embassy X, things get better. But it is frustrating because we don’t have enough response from them.’ However, three interviewees said meeting with embassies can be frustrating – and potentially difficult and time consuming – when there is so little follow-up afterwards.

‘The fact that they listen to us is very important. What is complicated is to follow-up with these conversations. There is usually no follow-up.’

Berenice Celeita Alayon, president of the Asociación Para la Investigación y Acción Social

Best practice support for human rights defenders in Colombia

Five of the interviewees said support from the EU, Spain, Germany and Norway embassies was particularly good. Norway has funded a large part of Somos Defensoras’ work for more than 12 years. Germany has a human rights sponsor programme, and the ambassador recently proposed humanitarian protection for certain defenders for the duration of the pandemic to ensure they are still able to work and move around safely and freely.

‘The German embassy started sponsoring me two months ago... they comment on my situation, directly towards the Colombian government, saying “we are watching, don’t let them kill him”.’

Leyner, peace activist and winner of the World Prize for Pluralism

Amnesty International Spain has an established temporary relocation programme for human rights defenders at risk that is supported by the Spanish government. The EU has raised human rights defender cases with the Office of the Prosecutor and pressed for accountability. It has also visited the regions involved, organised events, and funded protection organisations.

‘The most concrete support was given by the EU, because they visited the territory and that was really helpful. They have also organised an event with the government and some embassies, where we exposed the gravity of the situation.’
Isabel, Ríos Vivos–Antioquia Movement (a human rights movement composed of associations and negatively affected by the ‘Hidroituango’ dam)

What the UK should prioritise in its efforts to support human rights defenders in Colombia

‘Every speech is important to give visibility to the situation in Colombia. Every embassy is important. Campaigns to support, the letters to support, this kind of diplomacy is very important.’

Leonardo Diaz, Somos Defensores

Unsurprisingly, given how dangerous it is to be a human rights defender in Colombia, the most common recommendation from interviewees for the UK was for it to fund and support emergency protection mechanisms, enabling relocation inside and outside of the country. The second most common recommendation was for the UK to put political and diplomatic pressure on the Colombian authorities to prioritise protection and recognition of human rights defenders. Many interviewees referenced the strong relationship between the UK and Colombia and its ability to wield influence. The UK should hold the Colombian government to account and press it to fulfil its human rights obligations. The third most common recommendation was funding and capacity building for small grassroots organisations.

‘They [the UK] mentioned the amount of funding available to organisations in Colombia, a very huge amount. But the requirement to access to these calls and tenders is very high. We asked if it could be more flexible and they made a pledge to do that. After that meeting I never had contact with them again.’

Noira, women’s rights defender

In addition to the above, the UK embassy should:

- Regularly promote the *UK Support for Human Rights Defenders* document on the embassy website and Twitter feed, and circulate it to civil society networks;
- Reach out and engage with a broad range of human rights defenders, particularly those defending environmental and land rights and those in rural and African-Colombian communities;
- Develop flexible funding streams accessible to small grassroots organisations, focusing on capacity building and security;
- Contribute to existing rapid response emergency protection funds – including and prioritising those set up by communities themselves – to enable human rights defenders to relocate with their families at short notice when facing extreme risk;



Jani Silva, environmental rights defender, Colombia © Nubia Acosta

Country briefing: Colombia

- Support projects to monitor and document human rights abuses regionally;
- Include on the embassy's website the contact details – in English and Spanish – of British officials responsible for human rights in Colombia.

'What we need is peace of mind to carry out our work. If we have peace of mind we can work, which also requires economic support. As human rights defenders, we don't have a salary, and the only back up we receive is death. Our only allowance is death.'

Ricardo, child rights defender

COUNTRY BRIEFING

EGYPT

In collaboration with



Human rights in Egypt¹

The authorities resort to a range of repressive measures against protesters and perceived dissidents, including enforced disappearance, mass arrests, torture and other ill-treatment, excessive use of force and severe probation measures. They severely restrict human rights organisations' and political parties' freedom of association.

Constitutional amendments have expanded the role of military courts in prosecuting civilians and undermined the independence of the judiciary. Following protests in September 2020, the Supreme State Security Prosecution ordered the detention of thousands pending investigation in relation to vaguely worded 'terrorism'-related charges. Extensive use of exceptional courts led to grossly unfair trials and, in some cases, death sentences. More generally, executions continue, torture is rife in detention, and detention conditions are dire.

Women face discrimination in law and practice, and high levels of sexual and gender-based violence. LGBTI+ people in detention have been forcibly subjected to invasive anal and sex determination tests. Workers and trade unionists have been arbitrarily arrested and prosecuted for striking and protesting. The authorities have restricted Christians' right to worship, and refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants are arbitrarily arrested and detained for irregularly entering or leaving Egypt.

'We really just want to survive – I'm not talking about quality of life, I'm not talking about feeling completely secure or safe or appreciated or anything... we just want to be able to continue to survive.'

Woman human rights defender and journalist

¹ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/middle-east-and-north-africa/egypt/>



Human rights defenders in Egypt

Over the past months the situation for human rights defenders in Egypt has continued to deteriorate and in November 2020 Gasser Abdel Razek, executive director of Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR) was arrested together with fellow director Karim Ennarah and office manager of EIPR Mohammed Basheer as a result of their human rights work. While in prison, Gasser was ill-treated, held in solitary confinement in a cold cell and without access to warm clothes or a mattress.² Due to international pressure, they were released in early December 2020, but they are still subjected to travel bans and asset freezes and their arrest and pending charges shows the constant threats and risks to work, life and well-being that HRDs are subjected to in the country.

‘One of the big issues is stigmatisation and never ending pressure... [it limits] not only the work but that you are also every day afraid to be imprisoned or kidnapped.’

Women’s rights defender

Feedback from the interviews

Amnesty International interviewed nine human rights defenders from across Egypt. Four were female, four were male, and one was non-binary. They focused on a range of issues: one worked on women’s rights issues, two on media freedom, two on health, sexual and reproductive rights and environmental rights, and four on criminal justice, the rights of people in detention, juvenile detention, and support for individuals at risk. Seven of them had experienced threats, intimidation, arrests, or smear campaigns.

‘I have been subjected to threats and have colleagues who [have] been victims of disappearances, torture, unlawful imprisonment, smearing, harassment, asset freeze and travel bans.’

Human rights defender

The interviewees said criminalisation, censorship and smear campaigns were among the biggest threats to them and civil society in Egypt as a whole. Four had been arrested or had family members or colleagues arrested because of their association with a human rights organisation. One talked about the ongoing threats that hang over them and their organisation every day.

² <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/MDE1233822020ENGLISH.pdf>

'We no longer use the words "human rights" because these automatically attract hostility from the government. A lot of NGOs associated with human rights work have become victims of smear campaigns.'

Human rights defender

Hurdles generated by legislation such as the counter-terrorism law and NGO laws³ are frequently mentioned as putting enormous pressure on civil society. Administrative barriers used to prevent human rights defenders and NGOs from freely operating in the country were also cited. They often require NGO staff to re-register their organisations, during which they are unable to receive funding. Two of the interviewees had in the past year had to go through the process of re-applying for a licence to run their organisations.

'We've had colleagues arrested and detained with trumped-up charges of being part of a terrorist group and spreading false accusations. There were no formal charges – there never is. The authorities are just trying to keep people locked up.'

Human rights defender

Many HRDs have also been subjected to travel bans and asset freezes over the past years and many HRDs and NGOs in the country are being investigated in the Case 173 often referred to as the Foreign Funding Case. The first part of this case saw the trial of staff members of international organizations (includes 43 HRDs) and while they were later acquitted, and verdicts overturned due to international pressure there is continued ongoing investigation into Egyptian NGOs.⁴

Three of the defenders interviewed had either been subjected to travel bans and/or asset freezes themselves, or referred to colleagues having suffered from the restrictions due to being part of the case. One defender referred to when they had their passport confiscated for a long period of time when they tried to travel to Germany following an invitation by the German Parliament.

Attacks on media, press freedom and journalists are also adding to the censorship and almost complete lack of independent news in the country. At present, only a few independent news agencies operate in Egypt, all of which are online and censored. These include Al-Manassas and Mada Masr who both had their staff harassed and arrested for continuing to carry out independent journalism and reporting in the country. The authorities continue to censor both.

'Human rights defenders and journalists are arrested and charged often with anti-terror laws and some [are] held in detention indefinitely. Thousands of websites have been blocked.'

Journalist and human rights defender

The impact of Covid-19

Due to Covid-19 visits to prisons and detention centres stopped between March and August 2020, with no updates on the wellbeing of the detainees that the HRDs interviewed are working with. During this period the flow of information on conditions in detention was also restricted further and so were the rights of the detainees to receive legal representation. While visits have now been resumed, they operate under strict measures.⁵

³ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde12/0715/2019/en/>

⁴ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/12/egypt-ngo-foreign-funding-case-acquittals-must-lead-to-end-of-crackdown-on-human-rights-community/>

⁵ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/08/egypt-allow-prison-visits-and-other-communication-for-detained-defenders-and-political-opponents-without-discrimination/>

‘Our government does not need a pandemic to crack down on civil society. We published the testimony of some brave health workers who have witnessed the conditions in Egyptian hospitals. As a result, there has been a crackdown on health workers, with medical staff arrested on charge of spreading “false news”. At the same time, the pandemic has magnified the situation of the most marginalised sections of the population... [and] we have been victims of smear campaigns.’

Human rights defender

UK government priorities and actions

Egypt is a human rights priority for the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office where issues such as media freedom, journalists at risk and prison conditions remain an area of focus for the UK, with numerous reports of family visits and medical care being denied.

Prison conditions remain an area of focus for the UK and during Egypt’s UPR, the UK publicly raised its concerns regarding extended pre-trial detention, solitary confinement, blocked prison inspections, and restricted access to medical care and family visits.

An overview of the UK’s engagement with human rights defenders

Five interviewees said they have had contact with the UK embassy in Cairo at some point since 2013, though only three knew the identity of the main contact for human rights defenders at the embassy. Two have been in regular contact with UK representatives in Egypt. Two also received direct support from the UK when their family members and co-workers were arrested.

‘We meet UK embassy staff quite often and are always in contact with the human rights officer... we have met with two ministers, including the former minister for the Middle East and North Africa, Alistair Burt. We also meet embassy staff every time someone is in danger or if a violation is reported – the UK also offer to meet with us when anyone gets arrested.’

Human rights defender



Cairo’s notorious Tora prison, where many human rights defenders, political activists and other dissidents are held
© Khaled Desouki/AFP via Getty Images

There are examples of good practices in the way the UK embassy works with human rights defenders, particularly at the human rights officer level. But the interviews also revealed great inconsistency in terms of embassy engagement with civil society and human rights defenders. The experiences of nine human rights defenders cannot easily be generalised, but the interviews demonstrated that smaller, lower-profile organisations had considerably less engagement with the UK embassy. Only two interviewees knew about the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) guidelines on human rights defenders. Only two knew of an instance where the UK had spoken out publicly about a specific case, the most recent being in relation to the crackdown on female TikTok users.⁶

The issue of private diplomacy was also raised. Interviewees said the UK often preferred lobbying behind closed door rather than speaking out in public. While there was understanding that this can sometimes be useful, the general consensus was that they would like the UK to speak out more and more often in public on the human rights situation in Egypt and with regard to individual attacks and arrests. Better feedback following meetings between the UK embassy and the Egyptian government was also cited as important.

‘Generally speaking, the UK embassy is not that open about what was brought up in private meetings with the authorities. They prefer quiet diplomacy. [The] human rights officer in Cairo is good at getting back to let [us] know when a case has been raised and follow up from meetings – but not with much detail.’

Human rights defender

Many interviewees highlighted the importance of UK policy directives coming from the highest level in London and from ministerial level to ensure consistency in approach to the support of HRDs in Egypt and from the UK embassy. Two in particular gave examples of events where other countries sent their ambassadors while the UK only sent along junior diplomats. For example, in 2017, the Canadian ambassador hosted a high-level meeting following the arrest of LGBTI+ activist for flying the rainbow flag. Sixteen countries sent their ambassadors to attend while the UK only sent its second secretary. The feeling is that, rather than commitment and directives coming from the FCDO, much is left up to individual diplomats.

‘The UK embassy is one of the closest partners to pick up the phone when something happens because we have a strong relationship with them. I credit this to the team and not the embassy... every time there is a change of team I am always worried.’

Human rights defender

Best practice support for human rights defenders in Egypt

The majority of interviewees saw themselves as being part of the global human rights movement and the international community. Eight had been in contact with either the EU mission or other embassies in Egypt. However, there was a difference between smaller and larger organisations, with the former having less high-level access.

The French, German and EU delegations in Cairo often came up as having good practices for working closely with civil society. Interviewees also reported regular engagement with Switzerland, the Netherlands, Belgium, Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Canada. Canada, the Netherlands, Germany, Sweden and the US were cited as countries that raised individual cases in public, mostly in relation to Case 173.

⁶ <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/egypt-chilling-crackdown-female-tiktok-users-must-end>

The French embassy has facilitated meetings with high-level French politicians, including President Macron, and government officials. Finland, Switzerland and Norway have also funded some important projects.

‘The Germans and EU delegations are more open, as they provide follow-up to what was discussed in private meetings and debrief us. It is not about the individual officer, it is about the mindset of British diplomacy, which seeks to preserve the confidentiality of private meetings.’

Human rights defender

Beyond engagement with EU and country missions in Cairo, human rights defenders were regularly engaged with other state representatives during the universal periodic review (UPR) process in 2019. During this process one interviewee said their organisation had meetings with representatives from several countries, including the UK.

‘Manifestations of solidarity with political prisoners or human rights defenders [who are] criminalised are particularly helpful. The EU has organised trial observation and so has the International Commission of Jurists. Sometimes Front Line Defenders and Pen International have participated too.’

Human rights defender

What the UK should prioritise in its efforts to support human rights defenders in Egypt

‘People are starting to feel that there can be no change in Egypt – that’s why it’s important to know that you are part of an international community... I would like the UK to play a bigger role in supporting civil society in Egypt.’

Women’s human rights defender

Unsurprisingly, as threats and intimidation against human rights defenders in recent years increased, the most common recommendation from interviewees was for the UK to speak out more and add diplomatic and political pressure on the Egyptian government about the attack on defenders and human rights in general. In practice, this means making more public statements on the wider human rights environment, the criminalisation of activists and NGOs, and on arrests and attacks on defenders, as well as raising cases with the Egyptian authorities. This would hold the authorities to account and increase the recognition of defenders and their work.

‘I want to know that other entities, embassies, and organisations at least see the value of what I’m doing – that it’s valued and important and needed – we really need this legitimacy and we need our government to see us as seen by the outside world – that we do important work.’

Women’s human rights defender and journalist

The second most common recommendation was to reduce criminalisation against human rights defenders and NGOs. This includes pushing back on legislation such as the NGO law that leads to travel bans and asset freezes, and raising the importance of lifting administrative barriers used to target defenders.

The third most common recommendation was strengthening capacity building and engagement with human rights defenders and civil society in Egypt. This includes more regular meetings and consultations with human rights defenders, with project and policies informed by civil society. These actions would help to improve the recognition and legitimisation of human rights defenders.

In addition to the above, the UK embassy should:

- Offer more support for funding and grants to human rights defender projects;
- Prioritise support and protection for WHRDs by embedding gender analysis across their work. This should be developed through meaningful consultation with diverse WHRDs. Based on feedback from the interviews such a strategy would include:
 - Using a gender lens on its work in Egypt;
 - Commenting on women's rights issues publicly;
 - Inviting representatives of the feminist movement to speak at events;
 - Understanding the barriers to the participation of women human rights defenders;
 - Focusing on highlighting women's rights in high-level meetings;
 - Supporting smaller women's rights groups and organisations;
 - Adapting a gender lens to any public statements including on social media.
- Monitor trials and show solidarity with human rights defenders, including attending court hearings and providing trial observations to show the judiciary that the world is watching;
- Understand the barriers to the participation of women human rights defenders in events and wider civil society and to develop plans and protocols to address them;
- Have closer contact between the delegation in Cairo and the UK delegation in Geneva to improve dialogue on civil society issues in Egypt;
- Highlight cases of journalists at risk and press the Egyptian authorities on media freedom;
- Provide information on relocation schemes in the UK, including the York Centre for Applied Human Rights' Protective Fellowship Scheme for Human Rights Defenders;
- Support Egyptian human rights defenders outside the country, including the diaspora community and activists in the UK;
- Link up with the USA and use the close relationship to raise human rights issues;
- Provide capacity building for diplomatic staff to ensure:
 - Continuity of work and relationships with human rights defenders and civil society members when embassy staff leave, ensuring an effective handover;
 - Embassy staff have the training and knowledge needed to understand the context for human rights defenders in Egypt.

COUNTRY BRIEFING

LIBYA

In collaboration with



Between June and September 2020, Together We Build It interviewed a wide range of women human rights defenders from various parts of Libya, and those now based in other countries. Participants were of a range of ages and had varying relationship statuses, education levels, socio-economic backgrounds, and rural and urban locations. They included lawyers, activists and civil society representatives working on a number of issues: health rights; widows and divorced women; violence against women and girls; displaced people; and humanitarian challenges. The aim of the interviews was to gain an understanding of the situation of women human rights defenders and their interactions with the international community, specifically the UK government; and to make recommendations for how the UK government can better support them. This briefing paper outlines the key findings and recommendations. It deliberately ensures the confidentiality of all participants.

Project partners Together We Build It, GAPS and Amnesty International UK are grateful for the time, expertise and input provided by the interviewees, and we hope that UK decision-makers will listen to these Libyan women and ensure their rights are protected and enhanced.

Human rights in Libya

Militias, armed groups and security forces in Libya commit serious violations of international humanitarian law, including war crimes. Fighting in and around Tripoli between forces and militias loyal to the Government of National Accord and the Libyan National Army has killed scores of civilians, injured hundreds more and displaced tens of thousands. Militias, armed groups and security forces have arbitrarily detained thousands of people, most indefinitely and without any judicial process. They have also taken some hostage for ransom or to press for the release of detainees or captives. Torture and other ill-treatment are widespread in prisons, detention centres and unofficial places of detention.

Militias, armed groups and security forces suppress freedom of expression by harassing, abducting and attacking politicians, journalists, human rights defenders and other activists. The Libyan authorities fail to protect women from gender-based violence at the hands of militias and armed groups. Intimidation, threats and violence against lawyers and judges by armed groups and militias have seriously undermined the judicial system. The situation for tens of thousands of refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants remains bleak, as they are exposed to arbitrary arrest and abduction by militias and are regularly the victims of human trafficking and abuses by criminal groups. The authorities continue to unlawfully detain thousands of people in centres where they are subjected to exploitation, forced labour, torture and other ill-treatment. People are targeted by security forces, armed groups and militias because of their sexual orientation. Courts continue to hand down death sentences.

Women's human rights in Libya

The current situation in Libya is highly risky for women. Women human rights defenders are targeted in various ways and operate in the context of war and violence. The security situation itself is a challenge, made worse by various authorities and groups having jurisdiction

Country briefing: **Libya**

in different parts of the country. Many women human rights defenders try to keep a low profile; those who do not are attacked.

Attacks are often targeted at women human rights defenders, especially those working on issues seen as controversial, such as gender equality, sexual violence, human rights and international law. These attacks include media smear campaigns against those who speak publicly inside and outside Libya about women and girls' human rights. Violence is also used as punishment. Reprisals are systematic and include verbal violence, shootings, defamation, and cyber attacks in the media and online. Many women human rights defenders are isolated, which exacerbates the risk of violence and threats. Their freedom of movement is also restricted, including at roadblocks and airports. Forced disappearances occur, as well as armed attacks on organisations and participants in women and youth rights training sessions and events.

Women human rights defenders rarely report violent attacks because the authorities are not trusted and, in fact, are often the ones instigating attacks and threats.

Further information on the situation in Libya can be found in this Women's International League for Peace and Freedom and Together We Build It report, which was based on a nationwide consultation: www.wilpf.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/WILPF_Libya_Policy_Brief_Web.pdf.

Feedback from the interviews

Interviewees outlined the need for the international community, including the UK government, to work with women human rights defenders to ensure they are better supported and protected. This support should strengthen their work, giving them confidence that there is a support system in place should they need it. They reported that the lack of international accountability and a clear and reliable framework for supporting women human rights defenders means that little action is taken to support them on the ground.

Women's participation is essential for human rights and their meaningful participation should be sought by the UK government in its work on Libya. Lack of contact with women human rights defenders is detrimental for the international community: the failure to maintain relationships with women human rights defenders is a lost opportunity for gaining important frontline information and research, and improving the depth and breadth of their analysis by going beyond mainstream sources. Some interviewees also stressed the lack of information the international community receives from women outside of Tripoli, who have different experiences and insights.

Many said they had little to no interaction with representatives of the international community, including the UK government. Some contact with UK government officials takes place at events and meetings. This is usually only on 'women's issues', where women human rights defenders are invited through international NGOs, which are seen as third-party intermediaries. There are also sometimes chance meetings with ambassadors or representatives on the margins of other meetings.

There are no known departments or individuals assigned by the UK government for women human rights defenders in Libya to ensure there is a direct point of information and contact. When there is a need for them to contact an embassy official, some women human rights defenders do not want to go through intermediaries as they do not feel it is a safe way to communicate. They prefer to have direct contact with UK representatives with whom they can build relationships and trust. Some interviewees said it was easier to contact other European embassies as they were more helpful in assisting them directly.

Interaction and meetings with the international community, including the UK government, relies on making and sustaining contacts. Interviewees reported that when contacts move, there is no continuity: they are not introduced to the new officials in the post and therefore lose any contact they had with the international embassies. This breaks down the relationship between the women human rights defenders or civil society representatives and the international community.

When the international community interacts with local women's rights organisations or women human rights defenders, it is often in parallel or separate to official negotiations: women human rights defenders are invited to workshops or talks that take place only with support from international NGOs and sometimes UN agencies.

Applying for UK visas is extremely difficult. The first obstacle is that the UK embassy is based in Tunis, which is not necessarily a safe and affordable journey. When considering visas most interviewees said they were unable to apply for financial reasons or were rejected – some said their UK visa applications were rejected even when they had been invited by the UK government to attend an event.

Interviewees said that when the UK government meets with women human rights defenders, they also meet other non-state actors, such as armed groups. The issues raised by armed groups are often prioritised, with women and girls' rights de-prioritised.

Interviewees said when the international community, including the UK government, is made aware of threats and attacks against women human rights defenders, the information is not shared between embassies. There is no coherence between international embassies and representatives, especially those involved in missions.

None of the interviewees knew of the *UK Support for Human Rights Defenders* policy document issued in July 2019, which asserts the importance of human rights defenders to the UK and describes how the UK government can support them. Even women human rights defenders who had experienced threats and attacks while on international travel that was supported by the UK government had not heard of the document.

Interviewees felt the UK makes statements in support of human rights defenders but does not provide material support. There is little to no financial support to assist and strengthen women human rights defenders – this is a problem for the development of the sector, for human rights advocacy and for education. A properly funded civil society sector in Libya could strengthen human rights and human rights awareness. Interviewees said they often faced obstacles in retrieving and transferring their own money within banks due to the internal banking crisis in Libya. This leaves them with no resources to take a break or relocate temporarily in response to threats and attacks.

What the UK should prioritise in its efforts to support women human rights defenders in Libya

Participants outlined recommendations for how the international community, specifically the UK government, can better work with and support women human rights defenders:

1. Connection and channels of communication:

- **Contact:** The UK government should assign and make public a named point of contact for women human rights defenders in each country in which it operates. They should be contactable during work hours and there should also be an emergency out-of-hours contact. That point of contact should be trained in working with women human rights defenders and have specific knowledge of UK and other organisational support that can be

provided. They should also be responsible for maintaining relationships and building trust and confidence with women human rights defenders, including by ensuring confidentiality.

- **Direct contact:** When working with women human rights defenders, direct contact between UK government officials and the defenders is required, as defenders feel the use of third-party mediators is an added security risk.
- **Databases:** To ensure continuity between UK officials, the UK government should maintain context-specific and secure databases with the details of women human rights defenders.
- **International events:** When inviting or facilitating women human rights defenders to attend international events, the UK government should also facilitate and pay for safe travel. It should also facilitate entry clearance applications and fast-track UK visas, if required. Providing safe travel and logistical support to women human rights defenders is crucial and a fundamental mode of practical assistance. There should also be cooperation between UK government departments, especially the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and the Home Office's entry clearance officers, so invitations for women human rights defenders to the UK are not stymied.
- **Communication and cooperation within and between missions:** The UK government should ensure women human rights defender cases reported to it are well communicated and passed on to the relevant embassies. This will ensure consistency across the UK government and better communications within embassies and across UK missions .

2. Funding:

- **Meaningful consultation:** The UK should provide adequate funding for local women's rights organisations' participation in consultations, recognising that safe, inclusive, non-extractive consultation of women in challenging contexts may require greater planning and resources. (See Amnesty International UK, GAPS, Saferworld, Womankind Worldwide and Women for Women International's Beyond Consultations Tool for Meaningful Participation: <https://beyondconsultations.org>.) The current context of Covid-19 should also be considered with restrictions around travel, as well as limited internet access due to poor infrastructure, which has created additional barriers to meaningful consultation.
- **Hotlines:** The UK and the international community should fund context-specific hotlines for women human rights defenders to use in emergencies. This is especially important given that enforced lockdowns and quarantine have made women human rights defenders feel they are being silenced and in some cases fear for their lives.
- **Fund women's rights organisations and civil society groups:** The UK government should provide dedicated, long-term and flexible core funding for local women's rights organisations for self-defined priorities to strengthen their human rights work and civil society in general.
- **Capacity strengthening:** The UK government should provide funding to strengthen the capacity of human rights defenders so they are better able to carry out their work and manage risks.

3. Implementation and international role:

- **Implementation:** Strategy and actions relating to the protection of women human rights defenders, the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, and the Women, Peace and Security agenda should be implemented and mandatory for all UK government officials to put into practice.
- **International advocacy and accountability:** The UK government should lead by example and advocate for language on the protection of women human rights defenders domestically and internationally, as well as for internationally recognised, coordinated work to establish a protection mechanism for human rights defenders. Attacks on women human rights defenders should be criminalised and possibly be considered a war crime. Those responsible for violating the rights of women human rights defenders should be held accountable.
- **Diplomatic human rights missions:** The newly created Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office should increase its scope for diplomatic representations by UK

officials to foreign governments to address women and girls' rights, gender, power and accountability more systematically.

- **Increase human rights work:** The UK government should increase its human rights work and make it more visible, for example, by undertaking prison visits, to demonstrate its commitment to human rights.

Project partners

- **Together We Build It**, a non-profit organisation founded and launched in 2011 to support a peaceful democratic transition in Libya through empowering women and youth to participate in the political and public sphere, and emphasising the relevant role of women and youth in the peace-building process. The organisation promotes women, peace and the security agenda, and advocates the implementation of United Nations Security Council resolution 1325 in Libya and the development of a National Action Plan relevant to the Libyan context.
- **Gender Action for Peace and Security (GAPS)**, the UK's women, peace and security civil society network. GAPS is a membership organisation of NGOs working in development, human rights, humanitarian assistance and peace-building. It was founded to promote women, peace and security, including United Nations Security Council resolution 1325. GAPS promotes, and holds the UK government to account on, international commitments to women and girls in conflict areas worldwide.
- **Amnesty International UK**, a national section of a global movement of more than 10million people who campaign for every person to enjoy all the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights standards. Amnesty International UK represents more than 670,000 supporters, and is independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion.

COUNTRY BRIEFING

PHILIPPINES

Human rights in the Philippines

According to Amnesty International research, killings by the police and armed individuals remain rampant as the government's violent 'war on drugs' continues. Thousands have been killed in police operations since the Duterte administration took office in July 2016. Victims are overwhelmingly from poor and marginalised communities. Families are unable to obtain justice for their loved ones because of enormous obstacles to filing cases against perpetrators, including fears of retaliation, and there is no meaningful accountability for killings at the national level. Congress has revived attempts to reinstate the death penalty, and human rights defenders critical of the government are increasingly harassed and vilified. The prevailing climate of impunity has fuelled an increase in killings of activists for their political views.

'Recognition is important to clear stigmatisation – if you are an activist here you are "red tagged" and labelled a communist or terrorist, and that is similar to a death sentence. The government has a list of who they think are "terrorists" and human rights defenders are part of that. If the UK recognises in some form that what we do is legitimate – that human rights work is not terrorism – that will help end the stigmatisation of the work we are doing here.'

Women's and LGBTI+ rights defender

Country briefing: Philippines

Feedback from the interviews

Amnesty International UK interviewed 10 human rights defenders from across the Philippines. Four were male, three were female and three were non-binary. Their work covers a range of issues: two work on LGBTI+ rights, one on women's rights, one on labour rights and the protection of journalists at risk, one on labour rights and lawyers at risk, and five on a range of human rights issues, providing paralegal assistance, medical support and forensic examinations. Some support detained human rights defenders and political prisoners or the families of defenders who have been killed. Others provide advocacy training and capacity building, including on LGBTI+ rights. Some protect human rights as part of their activism; others do it as volunteers or through their work as journalists, lawyers and trade unionists.

Many worked on issues directly related to strengthening of the rule of law in the Philippines, including work on extra judicial killings and disappearances, and to campaigning against the anti-terror law and calling on government to institute anti-discrimination laws in the country. One of the HRDs and lawyers interviewed is also a petitioner in the case to reform the SOGIE (Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity and Expression) Equality bill.

Human rights defenders face constant and multifaceted threats, intimidation, and attacks – the latter include harassment, false charges, and imprisonment. Killings are also a regular occurrence. All 10 interviewees have experienced attacks, threats, smear campaigns, and death threats because of their work. One who works for the Human rights alliance Karapatan had a colleague killed as recently as August 2020.

All HRDs interviewed referred to the issue of ongoing criminalisation of HRDs in the country as a major threat and in particular, the issue of red-tagging where defenders and activists are publicly branded as terrorists and communists. Being on the list often also contributes to smear campaigns and stigmatisation of those listed and is creating a climate of fear in the Philippines.

During autumn 2020 there have been further attacks on the media in the country, with the Philippine Congress denial of the franchise application of media company ABS-CBN, which has been off the air since May 2020; the Philippines affiliate of CNN was red tagged for sharing via Twitter a call for donations for victims of a typhoon; and Nestor Burgos Jr, a director of the National Union of Journalists of the Philippines and journalist for the Philippine



Marking International Human Rights Day on 10 December 2020 in Manila, Philippines © Jes Aznar/Getty Images



Daily Inquirer, was among those added to the red-tagging list. Maria Ressa one of the most prominent journalists in the Philippines has also continuously been targetted because of her work. In June 2020, she was convicted of the recently created offence of ‘cyberlibel’ over an article published in 2012, before the law had come into effect.

‘We’ve been on that list as early as I can recall. The first time was in 2005 when we were on a presentation by the military intelligence called ‘Know Your Enemy’. Our members have been vilified and some have had their faces plastered on posters and labelled rebels. My sister has been publicly accused too and we said if you say these things about us, why don’t you file charges? But they don’t have any evidence – they just throw accusations.

I think we are in danger because they are doing this. It does create an environment of fear and this is just speaking for the organisation and for individual journalists and members we have seen targeted. These are the people they don’t agree with – usually they go online and say ‘are you a communist?’ because they didn’t agree with the reporting and to send the journalists a message. When the state can no longer tolerate dissent it’s quite scary, I think.’

Nonoy Espina, chair of the National Union of Journalists of the Philippines

The red tagging was also mentioned by HRDs as a key factor in the increase in attacks against them. Zara Alvarez, a human rights campaigner and paralegal at Karapatan, was shot dead in Bacolod City in August 2020.¹ She faced red-tagging and smear campaigns before being killed. Other human rights defenders interviewed spoke of red tagging as providing what is almost a ‘seal of approval’ for harassing or even killing those listed, some referring to it as a ‘hotlist’.

‘The attacks continue against us – either killings, false charges or harassment. One big issue is the relentless vicious vilification and red tagging... We have lost 13 human rights workers in our organisation in the last four years. Seven people have been in jail and we receive “death threats for breakfast”, as we say here at Karapatan.’

Cristina Palabay, human rights defender and secretary general of Karapatan

¹ <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/philippines-human-rights-defender-shot-dead-cycle-bloodshed-continues>

Country briefing: Philippines



Nonoy Espina, human rights defender and chair of the National Union of Journalists of the Philippines, speaks at a vigil in Manila © Jes Aznar/Getty Images

The proposal to reintroduce the death penalty is also causing concern among HRDs and activists in the Philippines. These laws aim to establish the death penalty as the punishment for several offences including murder, rape, drug trafficking, plunder and kidnapping. The adoption of this would violate the country's obligations under international human rights law.

'The government weaponises the law to get rid of human rights defenders here and that risk is also [present] for me and the work that I'm doing. If I don't get killed I am going to get arrested and if I face threats or abuse or harassment for the work that I'm doing, I wouldn't go to state authorities to report it because they are the ones who do these things – it's a mandate actually from the president to go after activists. He has mentioned in his speeches several times to shoot us dead.'

Women's and LGBTI+ rights defender

The impact of Covid-19

Measures taken in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic have been used continuously to crack down on freedom of expression and civil society, including to attack activists and organisations doing relief work related to Covid-19. It's also been used to attack the LGBTI+ community in the country. President Duterte previously ordered police, military officials and barangay officials to shoot 'troublemakers' protesting during community quarantine², while local officials committed abuses against people accused of violating curfews.³

'Frontline workers are being physically attacked because of the paranoia and lack of knowledge surrounding the pandemic. There is a lot of misinformation. Frontline workers have been left alone to deal with the pandemic, overstretched, and the quality of medical assistance has been affected. They are practically left on their own by the government.'

Edre Olalia, human rights lawyer, president of the National Union of People's Lawyers and transitional president of the International Association of Democratic Lawyers

² <https://www.amnesty.org.ph/2020/03/investigate-reports-of-sexual-harassment-protect-women-from-domestic-violence-amidst-quarantine/>

³ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/04/philippines-investigate-humiliating-abuses-curfew/>

Many LGBTI+ people are experiencing systemic and domestic abuse during the pandemic. Many have been left with no choice but to stay at home in non-accepting environments. This is because people's livelihoods are being severely affected by Covid-19 with job losses, meaning many have had to go back to their hometowns and to stay with their families.

There are also reports of sexual harassment committed by law enforcers, domestic violence during the quarantine, and sexual harassment at checkpoints in quarantined areas being perpetrated by police and military officers as well as by local barangay officials.⁴

'The pandemic has given the government an excuse for illegal arrests. Their plan is just to wait for a vaccine, while also wiping out human rights defenders so that they are not exposed [and] there is no dissent.'

Women's and LGBTI+ defender

Many interviewees work directly with communities and individuals in detention. No physical hearings have taken place in court since March 2020 and there is limited access to clients. Organisations working with imprisoned defenders have long had difficulties accessing them and Covid-19 has put up additional barriers. Fact-finding mission and face-to-face capacity-building and training sessions are also on hold.

'We have military men in the Government (dealing with the pandemic) rather than experts. This impacts a lot on people on the ground – we will not die from Covid but government neglect'

Cristina Palabay, human rights defender secretary general of Karapatan

UK government priorities and actions

Killings associated with the 'war on drugs', prison conditions, and the treatment of human rights defenders, land rights activists and journalists remain areas of focus for the UK in the Philippines.

An overview of the UK's engagement with human rights defenders

Half of the interviewees (or their organisations) had been in contact with the UK embassy over the past few years but not on a regular basis. Only three were aware of the *UK Support for Human Rights Defenders* document, which was published in July 2019 – two via contact with UK-based human rights organisations and one through the embassy. Only one of the interviewees had received UK funding for a project on freedom of expression run by a Philippine Alliance of Human Rights Advocates (PAHRA) partner organisation. Three others had applied for UK funding without success. Many raised concerns of a potential link between not receiving funding and being on the list of red-tagged organisations. Some have heard that embassies and governments might have reservations on funding organisations who are on the list of red-tagged organisations and/or who are subjected to other smear campaigns.

Interviewees highlighted some examples of good practice and helpful initiatives from the UK in the Philippines, including:

- Advertising opportunity to apply for grants and funds;
- The embassy's support for LGBTI+ rights and defenders during Pride and the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia, including hosting events and film screenings. This was very welcome but interviewees were concerned the UK remained quiet on LGBTI+ rights for the rest of the year. They highlighted the importance of showing consistent support and speaking out on LGBTI+ issues regularly;

⁴ Duterte to police, military officials and barangay officials to shoot 'troublemakers' protesting during community quarantine

Country briefing: Philippines

- The universal periodic review (UPR) process and engagement with the UK mission in Geneva works well. More than half of the interviewees have engaged with the UK mission in Geneva and as part of UPR processes and UN Human Rights Council (HRC) processes. This relationship is very valuable, and they would like closer collaboration between the embassy in Manila and the mission in Geneva, including on engagement with civil society. UK participation in wider meeting with EU delegation on the HRC resolution by Iceland last year was also praised;
- The UK speaking out against the death penalty in Geneva;
- The issuing of supportive statement for at-risk journalist Maria Ressa was frequently mentioned as good practice.

International community engagement

Interviewees said the EU delegation provided some of the most regular support and engagement with human rights defenders and civil society in the Philippines. Sweden, Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, Germany, Spain and Canada were also frequently mentioned by interviewees. The Netherlands and Sweden were regarded as the most consistent on LGBTI+ rights.

'The Dutch align their work with LGBTI+ [rights] and business inclusion and have ongoing dialogue with local organisations. They are... good at identifying where they [can] have added value.'

LGBTI+ defender

The EU delegation in Manila was frequently mentioned as a good example of ongoing and continuous engagement and support for defenders. The German and Swedish ambassadors have hosted defenders and civil society, providing access to diplomats at the highest level.

The universal periodic review (UPR) and UN Human Rights Council processes are also something the interviewees engaged with: four interviewees said they participated or contributed to the UPR processes and through this were in contact with the UK mission in Geneva. They also said they had contact with embassies from the Netherlands, Belgium, Canada, Spain, Germany and Venezuela in relation to the UPR process.

While there are examples of engagement with human rights defenders and the UK embassy in Manila, only a couple of interviewees had contact with it: this needs to be more frequent and consistent. This includes its support to the LGBTI+ community and issues. At the moment, this support is mainly happening during the Pride festival season.

'Increased engagement (from UK) is going to be positive and mean more support to legitimise HRDs voices and amplify messages. The UK needs to help to win the hearts and minds of the public in the Philippines as HRDs are already seen as the opposition due to smear campaigns and for people to understand value in their human rights. Its support should not only be restricted to pride moments'

LGBTI+ rights defender

One thing that came out strongly from the interviews was that the UK's public statement in support of at-risk journalist Maria Ressa was very welcome. However, given that media freedom and journalists at risk are a human rights priority for the UK, it is disappointing that not more cases are spoken out about when arrests and killings are taking place.

‘It does add to your confidence knowing that someone’s got your back and hopefully... the words are backed by actions. It does increase the confidence of human rights workers to know that they are not alone or forgotten... It’s one step closer to keeping us safe.’

Nonoy Espina, chair of the National Union of Journalists of the Philippines

What the UK should prioritise in its efforts to support human rights defenders in the Philippines

Unsurprisingly, given how human rights defenders are under constant threat and attack in the Philippines, the most common recommendation from interviewees was that the UK should speak out more publicly about human rights and defenders in the country. They said it should make statements and support investigations when defenders and activists are arrested, attacked or killed. Recognition of the work of human rights defenders work is crucial to countering a culture of impunity and ensuring their protection.

‘The UK needs to tell the Philippines Government that what’s happening in the country is not acceptable in any civilised society anywhere in the world – it’s totally unacceptable. The UK needs to call out our government. The greatest tragedy is when people can speak out, but they keep silent against injustice. We are complicit when we look the other way.’

Edre Olalia, human rights lawyer, president of the National Union of People's Lawyers, transitional president of the International Association of Democratic Lawyers

The second most common recommendation was for UK political and diplomatic pressure to be put on the Philippines authorities to address the criminalisation and red tagging of defenders and civil society. Reducing the criminalisation of HRDs is key for them to be able to operate freely and safely and laws have been used to arrest, detain and endanger human rights defenders, including through fabricated charges of illegal possession of firearms and practices such as red-tagging. Demanding change in such policies would require convincing the government to take action against violence, threats and harassment of HRDs and repeal laws such as the anti-terror law. The UK should also proactively call out the proposed introduction of the death penalty.



Edre Olalia, human rights lawyer and president of the National Union of People's Lawyers, © GMA News, Philippines

Country briefing: Philippines

The third most common recommendation is to have closer and increased engagement with HRDs and civil society in the Philippines, to ensure that the UK and embassies are informed by civil society. When doing this it's important to engage with HRDs in rural areas and beyond those individuals and organisations based in capital. In the Philippines, this should also include engagement with Indigenous and land rights activists who are amongst the most marginalised in the country.

Overall, the message from interviewees for the UK was the importance of finding a balance between reactive and proactive responses, and the need to call out killings and harassment in the short term and engage with civil society and build capacity in the longer term.

'The reality is that often we lose people not because they lose interest but because they get killed or they are incarcerated. You continuously need to build capacity so whatever happens you continue to have that network... It's [also] important that human rights work is not only confined to particular people or the classic idea of human rights defenders. It must have constituencies amongst everyone.'

Cristina Palabay, Human Rights defender and secretary general of Karapatan

In addition to the above, the UK embassy should:

- Support capacity building. This could be supporting lawyers, facilitating education seminars and empowering land activists, and providing temporary refuge for defenders at imminent risk. The UK should also provide training in research skills so defenders are equipped to record abuses and violations.
- Provide more funding. Defenders need more resources, materials, and protection to carry out their work and simply survive. The UK should ensure funding is more accessible to HRDs including for marginalised groups and for protection.
- Offer greater protection. The UK should provide PPE and security training for defenders.
- Promote and disseminate the *UK Support for Human Rights Defenders* document. It should be featured on the embassy's website and Twitter feed, and circulated to civil society networks. The UK must ensure the guidelines are clear about what support is available.
- Work closely with UK team in Geneva and other multilateral channels with whom defenders are in regular contact, including the high commissioner for human rights and UN special rapporteurs on arbitrary detention, torture, disappearances and freedom of expression;
- Consistently speak out on LGBTI+ issues beyond Pride season;
- Monitor trials to show the judge and judiciary the world is watching.
- Ensure visits to imprisoned human rights defenders
- Attend events hosted by local NGOs, as diplomatic presence can help prevent interference and attacks;
- Share information on the human rights defender respite and protective fellowship scheme at York University;
- Continue to work with EU and EU+ countries such as Norway and Canada to support defenders, hosting joint briefings, exchange information, and make joint statements for greater impact;
- Push for national legislation for protection of Human Rights Defenders.

COUNTRY BRIEFING

RUSSIA

Human rights in Russia

Russia's human rights record continued to deteriorate, with freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly consistently restricted, in law and practice. Those who attempt to exercise these rights face reprisals ranging from harassment to police ill-treatment, arbitrary arrest, heavy fines, and in some cases prosecution and imprisonment. Human rights defenders and NGOs are targeted via laws on 'foreign agents' and 'undesirable organisations'. Minority groups face discrimination and persecution. Counter-terrorism provisions are widely used to target dissenters. Torture remains pervasive, as does impunity for its perpetrators. Violence against women is widespread and inadequately addressed. Refugees are forcibly returned to destinations where they are at risk of torture.

'The main challenges are caused by the state because the authorities intimidate and persecute people who really dig deep into human rights problems.'

Alexey Sokolov, of Legal Basis, Russia, a civic association campaigning for prisoners rights

Human rights defenders in Russia

Amnesty International interviewed nine human rights defenders based across the country: two in Moscow (though their work is not limited to the city or its surroundings), two in Saint Petersburg; two in other cities in the European part of the country; one in the Urals; one in the far east of Russia, and one in Berlin. Five identified as female and four as male. They work on a range of issues, including helping victims of torture, gender-based violence, LGBTI+ rights, feminism and women's rights, the right to information, freedom of expression and media freedom, the environment, prisoners' rights, and lack of justice and effective legal protection at national level (including European Court of Human Rights cases).

'Most risks are related to physical attacks. They're always in the background. The team that works in Chechnya regularly gets messages with threats, but I don't think we pay much attention to that at this time. If we take them seriously and address all of them, there will be no time left for work.'

Veronika Lapina, Russian LGBT Network

Most interviewees had received direct threats, primarily from the authorities or far-right groups (which are often affiliated with the authorities). These threats – including death threats – were made via email, mail, messenger services, social media, on doors or walls of homes and offices, and in public spaces. Public exposure of private information, such as their phone numbers, residential address, and those of their children, is also used to intimidate them. They reported unannounced police searches or unjustified inspections by other representatives of the authorities, such as fire inspections, the tax office, the prosecutor general's office, and the ministry of justice. Smear campaigns in the media are also common.

'During a certain period of time, all fences in my neighborhood were covered with threats against me, with my name, phone and address mentioned. Basically, anyone could call me at any moment of the day or come to my apartment'

Olga Sadovskaya, Committee Against Torture, Russia

The majority of interviewees named the notorious 'foreign agents' law as a major source of risk and an extra burden for their work. Seven work for NGOs that were placed on the 'foreign

Country briefing: **Russia**

agents' list, which, said one, is akin to be named a 'spy'. The 'foreign agents' law further undermines the public image of NGOs: it stigmatises them; deprives them of access to schools and other formal educational institutions (most of which are public in Russia); and prevents cooperation with any officials and public bodies. It also creates an extra bureaucratic burden and denies them access to public funding in Russia.

'I know for sure that all my travels, all my encounters, all my phone calls are most probably under constant control of the FSB [Federal Security Service]. We live with this constant paranoia. You don't feel free — you feel even less free than the rest of your compatriots.'

Human rights defender

Many of the interviewees and their colleagues have been forced to leave the country and get 'off the radar' for periods of time. Three have suffered arson attacks on their or their partners' offices, and another three have had their vehicles attacked or sabotaged. Those working in the North Caucasus – whatever issue they focus on – face particular dangers. In the region they are followed, intimidated, and sometimes physically attacked. Some report every incident to the police – one said: 'We're human rights defenders after all. We're lawyers. We want to use all legal means available to us' – but the crimes are rarely investigated, even when they involve physical violence. Another interviewee said this is why they do not report such incidents: 'They don't believe in effective investigation and simply don't want to spend any resources when they know for sure that they won't get any positive results.'

'The pandemic has affected all areas of our work. Since March, we are offering more practical support to the community than ever before. The LGBTI community in Russia is extremely vulnerable. The pandemic affected our dialogue with the Diplomatic community in Russia, too, because many of our contacts have been on a lockdown as well.'

Veronika Lapina, Russian LGBT Network

The impact of Covid-19

Nearly all of the interviewees said their work and the risks they face have changed due to Covid-19. Most of those who do legal work said their organisations have received increased numbers of applications from victims of domestic violence, transgender people who have lost precarious jobs, journalists and bloggers prosecuted under the new 'anti-fake news' legislation to fight 'disinformation' around the pandemic, and others seeking help. The work of environmental defenders involves a lot of travelling around the country, which has come to a halt. Interviewees who work with victims of torture, gender-based violence, and LGBTI+ abuse from Chechnya have also had to pause their activities. The closure of EU borders and embassies have made evacuations and temporary relocations impossible.

'Open borders always meant security for us. You always knew that you could just take a plane and sit out a dangerous period abroad if needed. So, when the borders closed [because of the pandemic], we became more vulnerable to abuse.'

Anonymous

UK government priorities and actions

The UK currently has an embassy in Moscow and a consulate in Ekaterinburg. There used to be a consulate in Saint Petersburg, which played an important role in supporting local civil society, but it was forced to close in August 2018 in the aftermath of the Skripal affair.



The Pride flag flies over the British embassy in Moscow, June 2020 © Sergei Fadeichev/TASS via Getty Images

An overview of the UK's engagement with human rights defenders

Three interviewees were not in touch with the UK at all, though two of these said their organisations had received UK funding 10-20 years earlier. The only respondent who had never received UK funding was aware of its availability, but said the related administrative and travel costs were prohibitively high. Half of the interviewees were aware of the embassy's human rights officer, knew how to get in touch with them, and had been invited many times to events at the embassy or consulate, such as human rights-themed lunches and celebrations of the Queen's birthday. This was mainly true for human rights defenders from Moscow, Saint Petersburg and the surrounding regions. Others said that if they ever needed to get in touch with the human rights office they would go to the embassy's website or contact a global NGO such as Amnesty International.

'Even though we're living in the era of the internet, personal face-to-face communication is crucial. You can, of course, continuously exchange emails, send reports and such, but nothing compares to a face-to-face conversation.'

Lawyer and human rights defender

Only two interviewees had heard of the *UK Support for Human Rights Defenders* policy document and guidelines; by contrast, seven knew about the EU's guidelines on human rights defenders. The interviewees from Saint Petersburg complained that they once had very close contact with the UK consulate but since it had closed their contact with the UK was less frequent. In any case, as one put it, 'Much of the work remains the personal endeavor of individual diplomats and unfortunately there's little institutional memory due to high turnover of staff.' The interviewees also highlighted examples of support and examples of good practice from the UK.

'We know that the UK raised our work in private meetings with the Russian authorities. It was a pretty efficient mechanism.'

Olga Sadovskaya, Committee Against Torture

'When I learned about [the UK's] support for the Russian LGBTI+ community, I started to respect the UK even more.'

Yulia Tsvetkova, human rights defender

Other examples of good practice include: UK diplomats inviting at-risk human rights defenders for a talk to show their moral support; regular human rights lunches and other networking

Country briefing: **Russia**

events, as personal contacts are crucial (though only really accessible to defenders from Moscow and, to a lesser extent, from other nearby cities); and UK diplomats sometimes helping Russian human rights defenders at international events. On a few occasions, UK diplomats have also helped with emergency evacuations.

Interviewees highlighted the importance of cultural and educational exchanges, including bringing British celebrities to Russia. For example, Ian McKellen met with LGBTI+ activists and spoke out in their support, while Stephen Fry was engaged to show his support for Russian human right defenders. Offering opportunities to study in the UK through Chevening Scholarships was also seen as a useful form of support.

Funding is a key issue for human rights defenders. At least three NGOs that had previously received core funding from the UK started to experience problems in 2018, when the issues they worked on were reportedly deemed ‘toxic’ by the UK and deprioritised for funding. This was a major blow for them.

Interviewees expressed deep reservations about the confidentiality of their contact with UK diplomats. They cited for example a UK embassy roundtable in 2015 on Chechnya. The UK embassy had insisted that NGOs send ‘real people doing work on the ground’ rather than the ‘usual talking heads’ but the NGOs refused this, saying it would be unsafe. Then at the roundtable itself, the NGOs were surprised to see representatives of Chechen government-backed NGOs also present. The next day the full list of the roundtable participants had reportedly been shared with the office of Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov. The NGOs felt that – through a lack of awareness and meaningful consultation – UK diplomats had compromised the safety of human rights defenders. After the incident, the NGOs say the UK stopped supporting them, claiming it was too risky, reportedly saying it would only support projects on the North Caucasus that had cooperation with local authorities, something that is virtually impossible in Chechnya.

Another issue also involved lack of meaningful consultation. In 2019, some NGOs whose applications for grants had been given preliminary approval discovered that the UK had then decided – without consulting them – to make alternative funding arrangements, which resulted in the NGOs losing a large tranche of funding they had been counting on, which was a major surprise and inconvenience..

‘Staffing is very important. You should appoint people with human rights background; people who have at least some understanding of the region and don’t ask you whether Chechnya is in Russia or not.’

Olga Sadovskaya, Committee Against Torture

Examples of best practice from other countries

None of the interviewees named the UK as the most helpful country or mission. Instead, they said best practice came from the Scandinavian countries (especially Sweden), Germany, Netherlands, Belgium, Switzerland and Canada. The EU delegation in Moscow was mentioned several times as being very humane and helpful. Other European countries were occasionally mentioned, too.

Examples of best practice include Sweden issuing five-year visas to all the staff members of NGOs, including family members. They also issued visas to at-risk activists knowing they would later apply for asylum, which helps with evacuations. Together with Norway, Sweden proactively seeks information about legal cases and offers to attend trials, including outside Moscow and Saint Petersburg. The Swedish delegation also helps to facilitate contacts with Swedish experts and organise events in Russia.

The EU delegation hosts events for human rights defenders and regularly reaches out to them, including those based in the regions. It translates some relevant information about human rights into Russian and posts it on its Facebook page and website. It has also partnered with independent media outlets in Russia to increase the visibility of its work in the country, and provided flexible funding.

Canada has assisted with relocations of persecuted activists and LGBTI+ people, as well as evacuations. Germany has raised individual cases with the Russian authorities and made public statements, while Switzerland maintains a bilateral human rights dialogue with Russia.

The Netherlands provides trial monitoring, offers funding with clear application processes, and helped create a Dutch-Russian expert network for lawyers. Belgium proactively seeks contact with at-risk human rights defenders, and includes meetings with human rights defenders in its programmes for regional visits.

‘Russia is a country that often “forgets” its own laws or international law, so it needs reminders. It’s a country of bad memory. For people like me it would mean a lot of diplomats would point out human rights violations to the Russian authorities.’

Activist Yulia Tsvetkova

What the UK should prioritise in its efforts to support human rights defenders in Russia

The recommendation that came out strongest from interviewees was the importance of providing stable and reliable financial support – including core funding – with clear guidelines and deadlines, good communication, and transparent procedures;¹

‘It’s bad that discussion often boils down to money but funding is really very important. All human rights NGOs in Russia are basically always in survival mode.’

Olga Sadovskaya, Committee Against Torture

The second most common recommendation was for the UK to proactively engage human rights defenders in the regions. This would include: attending trials outside Moscow; sharing information about funding; facilitating face-to-face meetings between diplomats and defenders, between defenders from different regions, and between defenders in Russia and the UK; student exchanges; and internships.

‘I think UK diplomats should help increase visibility of human rights defenders in Russia. They should make it known to the broader Russian society that they support Russian civil society.’

Lawyer and human rights defender

In addition to the above, the UK should:

- Create an international network, panel of experts and/or expert groups to share knowledge and strengthen the capacity of Russian human rights defenders, especially grassroots initiatives and/or those in the regions.
- As the UK has left the EU, it should try to re-establish a bilateral human rights dialogue with Russia.

¹ Draft laws introduced in the Russian Parliament in November 2020, if passed, could further severely restrict the ability of NGOs to receive foreign funding

Country briefing: **Russia**

‘It’s a huge loss for us that the EU-Russia human rights dialogue stopped and that only the Swiss dialogue continues. Now that the UK is leaving the EU, it might be even easier for the UK to restore such a dialogue. Because the UK is a rebel, it’s always against everything, so maybe Brexit will prompt them to take such a step.’

Olga Sadovskaya, Committee Against Torture

- Stand firmly by declared UK values and ‘practise what you preach’. This includes respecting the UK’s own judiciary and the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) to avoid sending out a bad example to countries such as Russia.
- Drop amendments to the Human Rights Act.
- Provide emergency support for at-risk human rights defenders, including evacuations.
- Advocate for the use of infringement proceedings against Russia by the Council of Europe’s Committee of Ministers, as with Azerbaijan.

‘There’s a long story of the UK continuously undermining the role of the ECHR on the continent. Since the UK is one of the biggest, well-established and long-existing democracies, it makes it easy for other dictatorial governments to point at the UK and say: “You see, why can’t we do what the UK does?”.’

Kirill Koroteev, lawyer and human rights defender

COUNTRY BRIEFING

ZIMBABWE

Human rights in Zimbabwe

Human rights defenders, activists and civil society groups continue to hold the government to account through street protests and via social media. Many people have participated in demonstrations to protest against price increases of basic commodities and the erosion of incomes. The authorities continue to use overly broad laws to crack down on dissenting voices. Civil society space has shrunk as the authorities suppress, persecute and curtail peaceful activists and protests. State security agents use excessive force in dispersing protests and assemblies. The authorities continue with forced evictions despite constitutional provisions prohibiting the practise.

Human rights defenders in Zimbabwe

There has been a renewed assault on human rights in Zimbabwe, including on freedom of expression, in recent months, especially targeting journalists, activists and human rights defenders who have spoken out against alleged corruption and called for peaceful protests. In July 2020, the authorities thwarted plans for a peaceful nationwide anti-corruption protest, and launched a witch-hunt against political and human rights activists they suspected of organising it. At least 60 activists and opposition supporters were arrested, including renowned writer Tsitsi Dangarembga and opposition spokesperson Fadzayi Mahere, and 16 people were injured¹. Others were abducted by state agents for being suspected of supporting the national protests. A number of activists went into hiding after police published a list of names of defenders who were wanted for questioning in connection with the planned protests; and 14 activists were summoned by the police on 28 July 2020².

1 <https://www.newzimbabwe.com/60-arrested-16-injured-in-31july-protests-lawyers/>

2 <https://minbane.wordpress.com/2020/07/27/https-wp-me-p1xtjg-ezt/>

‘We’re in an existential crisis, not a health crisis. Most of the attacks against human rights defenders since the beginning of the pandemic are against journalists – since 1 April 2020, 30 journalists have been arrested, attacked, harassed. The challenge we are in is broader than health – though it is our right to health that is under siege, to enjoy it many others rights are under attack.’

Tabani Moyo, Media Institute for Southern Africa

Feedback from the interviews

Amnesty International interviewed nine human rights defenders from Zimbabwe. Four identified as women and five as men. Only seven provided information about their current engagement with the UK government. The focus of their work varied from women’s and LGBTI+ rights to freedom of expression, and their jobs included human rights lawyers, journalists and a trade unionist. All worked for civil society organisations or as independent experts and activists.

Most of the interviewees had experienced threats, intimidation and harassment – including arrest and beatings – in the past because of their work. There was a shared concern that Covid-19 and the associated restrictions – nominally put in place to halt the spread of the virus but being used as a cover to restrict various human rights – were having repercussions on defenders, with journalists especially affected.

The interviewees (or their organisations) had all had contact with the UK embassy. Most had been invited to meetings to share their views on human rights, as well as social events, and most said they knew how to contact someone at the embassy if they needed to. About half were aware of the UK speaking out in public statements or on Twitter in support of human rights defenders; four had personally received support after threats were made against them.

‘First step would be non-hierarchical conversations. Right now the UK says, come to the embassy at this time, listen to us – without any consideration of whether that is a good time, whether it is safe to go to the embassy, etc.’

Isabella, woman human rights defender

The view of the UK was generally positive but some interviewees said contact was ad-hoc and initiated by the embassy to ask for their input on specific issues, rather than as an ongoing



Jestina Mukoko, human rights defender,
Zimbabwe © Matifadza Maravanyika

Country briefing: Zimbabwe

dialogue. One commented that invitations to attend meetings at the embassy were usually very hierarchical and did not take into account whether it would be an appropriate day or time for attendees, or indeed whether it would be safe for them to attend. Only one of the interviewees was aware of the *UK Support for Human Rights Defenders* document; the others had not heard of it even though they had had contact with the embassy.

‘It’s really important for the UK to resolve its historical colonial history that creates problems for us who live in post-colonial states whose legal, police and military systems are inherited by what Britain left behind and didn’t solve.’

Isabella, woman human rights defender

All of the interviewees reflected on the high expectations they had of the UK because of its historical ties with Zimbabwe. Two specifically raised the importance of the UK recognising its colonial legacy and the impact that would have on respect for human rights in Zimbabwe. One defender also commented that, although there were often good contacts between defenders and the UK embassy, as well as with other embassies, the UK lacked a strategic approach tailored to the specific context in Zimbabwe.

‘Expectations for UK are high because of historical context. If the UK wants to they can have more impact than any other [country]. The UK is deliberately losing ground due to lack of strategic approach to defending human rights. The UK could help a lot of defenders in distress. They can provide leadership.’

Tabani Moyo, Media Institute for Southern Africa

Some interviewees said they benefited from Department for International Development funding under the Transparency, Responsiveness and Citizen Engagement (TRACE) programme, which commenced in 2014 and at the time of writing had been extended to September 2021. One who personally benefited from TRACE, said the programme allowed for rapid protection according to need. However, at the time of the interviews, interviewees were not clear what TRACE would be replaced with and at least one pointed out that – in any case – funding on its own is not sufficient support given that defenders face daily risks when they carry out their work.

Some interviewees said trying to obtain a UK visa is drawn-out and complicated because they are processed in Pretoria, South Africa. While waiting for the visa to be processed, human rights defenders cannot travel anywhere else; the system also means they cannot respond to opportunities to travel to the UK without advance notice. Being invited by the UK government or a UK institution does not facilitate the process. In addition, they were required to submit the same information every time they applied for a visa.

‘The system should know I have applied before and not ask me to supply the same data again. It also asks me about my grandparents and their date of birth when they know perfectly that Africans of a certain age don’t have birth certificates, so if you are sincere and say you don’t know, it looks like you are lying. So it’s designed to trip you up. There’s an assumption many of us human rights defenders want to flee our country when actually we want to continue doing our work.’

Isabella, woman human rights defender

UK government priorities and actions

Zimbabwe is a human rights country of concern for the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. In its 2019 human rights report, the department’s priorities in the country were listed as media freedom, gender-based violence and targeted arrests, violence, and arrests of journalists, civil society activists and opposition politicians.

‘We expect UK to speak out. While engagement with UK embassy can put me and others at risk we believe they still should do something in support of human rights defenders. When I was abducted the pressure, statements and questions from the international community helped my case. The UK can apply pressure and have an impact.’

Jestina, woman human rights defender

What the UK should prioritise in its efforts to support human rights defenders in Zimbabwe

The top three recommendations from interviewees were for the UK government to prioritise:

- Protection mechanisms for human rights defenders;
- Capacity building for defenders;
- Publicly speaking out in the defence of defenders.

‘The EU issued a statement calling for my release when I was arrested. This definitely affected the outcome of my case. When western countries speak out [against] human rights violations it normally forces the government to respond in action and writing.’

Farai, environmental rights defender

‘The difference we have seen is that when there is [international pressure] it de-escalates situations that are very volatile for human rights defenders.’

Roselyn Hanzi, executive director, Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights

‘A couple of days ago some journalists were beaten up by state security. The UK government retweeted statements to call for accountability of those involved. This was helpful in amplifying the case.’

Nqaba Matshazi, Media Institute for Southern Africa



Farai Maguwu, human rights defender, Zimbabwe © Farai Maguwu

ON THE HUMAN RIGHTS FRONTLINE

In recent years, human rights defenders have faced unprecedented levels of repression around the world. This has taken place against a global backdrop of rising, unchecked authoritarianism and moves by some governments to undermine international human rights mechanisms. The situation underlines the importance of the UK government developing a strategy to support and protect human rights defenders.

To aid this process, Amnesty International and our partners conducted interviews with 82 human rights defenders in seven countries – Egypt, Colombia, Russia, Zimbabwe, the Philippines, Afghanistan and Libya – between June and September 2020. The key issues raised in these interviews are outlined in these seven briefing papers.

The interviews also informed the recommendations made in our report *On the human rights frontline: How the UK government can defend the defenders*.¹ The report urges the UK government to do more to support and protect human rights defenders, and proposes an adequately funded, cross-departmental and gender-responsive strategy to achieve this goal.

¹ See www.amnesty.org.uk/onthehumanrightsfrontline for the full report, published by Amnesty International and the Centre For Applied Human Rights, working with a number of UK and international organisations.

Thank you to all the organisations and individuals who contributed to this report

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