



# ON THE HUMAN RIGHTS FRONTLINE

How the UK government can defend  
the defenders

**Report by Amnesty International UK and the Centre for Applied Human Rights (CAHR), working with Peace Brigades International UK, The Law Society of England and Wales, Gender Action for Peace and Security (GAPS), Kaleidoscope Trust, Bond, CIVICUS, The Fund for Global Human Rights, Front Line Defenders, Forum Asia, Together We Build It and JASS (Just Associates).**

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## Contents

<b>Introduction .....</b>	1
<b>Who are human rights defenders? .....</b>	1
<b>Repression against human rights defenders .....</b>	2
<b>Attacks on international human rights mechanisms .....</b>	6
<b>Domestic laws restricting foreign funding for NGOs .....</b>	7
<b>The impact of Covid-19 .....</b>	8
<b>Why human rights defenders should be a priority for the UK .....</b>	10
<b>Why a strategy to support human rights defenders is an effective approach for the UK .....</b>	11
<b>Why a strategic approach to supporting human rights defenders is needed .....</b>	12
<b>Developing a strategy with human rights defenders at the centre .....</b>	14
<b>A proposed UK government strategy for human rights defenders.....</b>	15
<b>In their own words – voices from seven countries .....</b>	23
<b>Endnotes .....</b>	24

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## How the UK government can defend the defenders

Around the world there is an unprecedented surge in attacks against human rights defenders – people who protect and promote human rights. This report is centred on interviews with 82 human rights defenders in seven countries who are targeted because of their vital work. It highlights and supports their urgent calls for the UK government to do more to support and protect them – through a strategy that is adequately funded, cross-government and gender-responsive. The report proposes a strategy the UK government could adopt and adapt. Such a strategy could have a huge impact on the lives and work of human rights defenders and organisations, improve the international human rights landscape as a whole, and help the UK achieve a wide range of foreign policy objectives.

### Introduction

For many years, NGOs and charities have been urging the UK government to develop a strategy to guide its global work on human rights defenders. This report outlines why a strategy is needed, what it could look like, how it would help the UK achieve its foreign and development policy objectives, and crucially, the impact it would have for human rights defenders themselves. The structure of the proposed human rights defenders strategy reflects former Foreign and Commonwealth Office strategies that effectively guided the UK's work on the death penalty<sup>1</sup> and torture<sup>2</sup> in the past. The proposed strategy – notably its goals and objectives – is based on interviews Amnesty International and partner organisations conducted with 82 human rights defenders across seven countries: Egypt, Colombia, Russia, Zimbabwe, Philippines, Afghanistan and Libya. The interviews focused on their work, engagement with the UK, and recommendations for how the UK government could best support them. Our thanks to everyone who took the time to share their experiences, expertise and views – we hope this report will help to improve recognition of and support for their work.

### Who are human rights defenders?

Human rights defenders are people who promote or protect human rights<sup>3</sup>. They could be teachers, journalists, peace workers, trade unionists, lawyers, NGO workers, politicians, government employees, or private sector workers. Locally and globally, human rights defenders help to make human rights a reality, strengthen the rule of law, build peace and prevent conflict, end poverty and inequality, foster gender equality, protect the environment and promote sustainable development. Human rights defenders are agents of change, and their ability to operate safely and freely is a vital element of an open society. Supporting them is one of the most effective ways to create just, equal and open societies with human rights and access to justice for all.

**Nyasha Nyakunu, Media Institute of Southern Africa, Zimbabwe**

‘Before 2013 the constitution included no specific provisions for the right to media freedom and access to information, so we successfully campaigned for explicit provision to guarantee the right to freedom of expression, media freedom and access to information – now they exist under section 61 and 62 of constitution.’



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 Maguindanao massacre in 2009 killed nearly 30 journalists and we have sent their children through school and many have now graduated. It's a huge thing to the families left behind.'

**Nonoy Espina, human rights defender and chair of the National Union of Journalists of the Philippines**

'Attacks and violations against human rights defenders should be considered a war crime. No joke about it. Because these people are targeted for their work in war zones. Its no different from attacking a doctor treating war victims or attacking hospitals. Attacking and conducting violations against human rights defenders is a weapon of war.'

**Woman human rights defender, Libya**

As there is currently an unprecedented surge in repression against human rights defenders around the world, we are calling on the UK government to prioritise work to support and protect them. This work should include the development of a cross-governmental, adequately funded and gender-responsive strategy, with particular consideration given to human rights defenders facing specific risks such as women and LGBTI+ people, environmental, indigenous and land rights activists, journalists and lawyers.

## Repression against human rights defenders

In recent years, human rights defenders have faced increasing levels of repression, with those working on environmental issues facing some of the gravest risks.<sup>4</sup> Front Line Defenders reported that more than 304 human rights defenders were targeted and killed because of their work in 2019. Forty per cent were defending environment or land rights.<sup>5</sup> In 2019 Global Witness reported 212 murders of environmental human rights defenders – the highest number ever recorded in a single year.<sup>6</sup>

In the report *Deadly but preventable attacks*,<sup>7</sup> Amnesty International showed how those working on issues such as women's, LGBTI+, and indigenous and minority group rights were also at

heightened risk of attack. The motives behind attacks are multiple and layered. Some people are attacked because of their legitimate activities, such as standing up to powerful human rights abusers, sharing information and raising awareness about violations, or confronting discriminatory public opinion and social norms. Others are attacked for who they are, as well as what they do. As a result, human rights defenders who face discrimination and inequality are in particular danger.

Human rights defenders face surveillance, criminalisation (including arbitrary arrest, detention, prosecution, and imprisonment), restrictive laws, stigmatisation, disciplinary proceedings that prevent them from carrying out their jobs, threats against family members, hostage taking, enforced disappearances and physical attacks, sometimes amounting to torture and including murder. *Deadly but preventable attacks* argues that when human rights defenders are targeted with impunity, the authorities are signalling their contempt for human rights as a whole.<sup>8</sup>

**Ricardo, child rights defender, Colombia**

'They basically said I had 24 hours to leave the country. If I did not leave, they would kill me. The voice, tone, and the kind of threat was brutal to me. I decided to keep working... Two weeks after the call I [suffered] the first attack.'

'The attacks continue against us – either by killing, false charges or harassment. One big issue is the relentless vicious vilification and "red-tagging"<sup>9</sup> all over the country. Sometimes [people's faces are] plastered on posters accusing [them] of being terrorists. We have lost 13 human rights workers in our organisation in the last 4 years. 7 people have been in jail, and we receive death threats for breakfast, we say here at Karapatan.'

**Cristina Palabay, Secretary General of Karapatan and human rights defender, Philippines**

**Jestina Mukoko, human rights defender, Zimbabwe**

'I was taken at dawn to an unknown place and blindfolded. I was bundled in a car flanked by two men. For 21 days they kept me incommunicado and tortured me because they wanted to extract a confession. I then spent 68 days in prison.'



Jestina Mukoko, human rights defender,  
Zimbabwe © Matifadza Maravanyika

Criminalisation of human rights defenders is a way to silence dissent and make it difficult for them to carry out their work freely and safely. In many countries false charges and arrests, harassment, funding restrictions, administrative barriers and restrictive laws designed to clamp down on dissent are creating a climate of oppression and a shrinking space for civil society and freedom of expression.<sup>10</sup>

'The government weaponises the law to get rid of human rights defenders here... 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 [about shooting] us dead.'

Women's rights and LGBTI+ defender, Philippines

### Women human rights defenders

These are women who defend human rights, or people of any gender who defend women's rights and rights relating to gender, identity and sexual orientation. Their actions and identities challenge patriarchal power structures, harmful social norms and stereotyped gender roles. As a result, they face specific challenges, such as sexual violence, smears, and gender-based legal, social, financial, political, economic and cultural barriers. They are also often stigmatised in their communities because their work – on issues such as sexual and reproductive rights – and leadership roles often conflict with social and cultural gender norms.<sup>11</sup> The risks are even greater for those who face intersecting forms of discrimination: women who belong to racial or ethnic minority groups; are poor, lesbian or trans; are sex workers; or have a combination of these identities are likely to be further marginalised and face particular challenges.





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

### LGBTI+ defenders

LGBTI+ defenders experience intersectional discrimination due to their human rights work and because of transphobic, homophobic or biphobic discrimination. For example, Amnesty International has documented numerous violations of the right to peaceful assembly when authorities have banned Pride marches or left demonstrators vulnerable to violent attacks from homophobic and transphobic counter-protestors. Moreover, LGBTI+ human rights defenders face being criminalised as a result of their individual and group identities, as well as because of their work: 72 countries still criminalise homosexuality – almost half are in the Commonwealth and most of the relevant legislation is a legacy of British colonial rule.<sup>12</sup>

‘Over the last five to 10 years it’s been a very difficult time – the organisation has been raided many times, maybe twice a year. Activities were disrupted, staff taken off to the police station, police have come to office with warrants for suspicion of drugs or porn. It’s very traumatising for the community, but the community is resilient.’

**Samuel of LGBTI+ association GALZ, Zimbabwe**

### Journalists

Journalists and media workers often face threats of violence and other human rights violations because of their work. Those who expose human rights abuses and cover armed conflicts, organised crime and corruption suffer particularly high levels of attacks. Violence against journalists, bloggers and media workers often leads to self-censorship and can become an effective tool for silencing dissent and criticism of those in power. When journalists are attacked, it is not just their work that is endangered but also the right of society at large to be informed.

‘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 in the country.’

**Human rights defender and journalist, Egypt**



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

'Many of these cases (of killings) remain unsolved and it's basically created a culture of impunity. It is true that if you can do this to journalists it's easier to commit this to other people too and it makes the human rights situation really bad... [President] Duterte hates the independent media, he hates dissent. Freedom of expression is under siege and the freedom of the press is linked to that.'

**Nonoy Espina, chair of the National Union of Journalists of the Philippines and a human rights defender, Philippines**

### Lawyers

Lawyers often face attacks that aim to prevent them from carrying out their work. It is important to remember that the legal representatives of human rights defenders are often human rights defenders themselves and carrying out their professional duties can come at great cost to their and their families' lives. Attacks on lawyers have a chilling effect, discouraging others from taking up cases for fear of retaliation from the authorities or others. This severely restricts access to justice in human rights-related cases. In some countries only relatively small groups of lawyers who strongly believe in the independence of the legal profession, the rule of law, and access to justice are willing to put themselves at risk. Without a lawyer to represent them when they are arrested or prosecuted, human rights defenders lack a voice and are unlikely to receive a fair trial. Prosecutors and judges are also at risk in many countries, with some forced into exile. If they are not adequately supported and protected, there is no hope for the rule of law or access to justice anywhere.

### Attacks on international human rights mechanisms

The increasing attacks on human rights defenders are taking place against a backdrop of rising, unchecked authoritarianism and moves by some governments to undermine international human rights mechanisms.<sup>13</sup> It is no coincidence that the latter facilitates the former<sup>14</sup> and vice-versa: taken together they constitute a worrying threat to the international rules-based system and respect for the rule of law at both national and global levels. Nowhere is this disturbing synergy more apparent than in the growing reprisals against members of civil society – including activists and victims of human rights abuses – for cooperating with the United Nations, something noted by the UN secretary general in September 2020.<sup>15</sup> A renewed emphasis on 'traditional values' and anti-feminist narratives are also attempting to redefine and

weaken hard-won progress on LGBTI+ and women's rights everywhere from Latin America to Eastern Europe.

This backlash presents multifaceted threats to women's rights, notably reproductive health and bodily autonomy. For example, the decision of the Trump administration to join long-standing efforts by other member states to remove agreed language on 'reproductive rights' from UN resolutions and promote language on 'the role of the family' that seeks to exclude and stigmatise LGBTI+ people.<sup>16</sup>

'The use of national security arguments and legislation, and counter-terrorism strategies by states as justification for blocking access to, or punishment for engaging with the UN, continues at alarming levels.'

**UN Secretary General António Guterres**

'Since Beijing [World Conference for Women in 1995], the global rights landscape has changed, with attempts to dilute the Convention [on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women] and focus on 'traditional values' that seek to confine women to the family and undermine sexual and reproductive health. Women human rights defenders face violence, including online, and criminalisation of their work or restrictions on registering and funding women's organisations.'

**Hilary Gbedemah, chair of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women**

### Domestic laws restricting foreign funding for NGOs

Domestic laws that restrict NGOs from receiving foreign funding is another obstacle for human rights defenders. These laws put organisations receiving this kind of funding under increased oversight and burdensome regulatory and fiscal regimes. Some deny NGOs that have received certain foreign funding the right to be registered under national law. For example, Hungarian legislation forces NGOs receiving foreign funding beyond a certain threshold to declare it upon registration, along with the name of the donors. In January 2020, the advocate general of the Court of Justice of the European Union advised that this law restricted the principle of free movement of capital.<sup>17</sup> Since 2012, Russia's Foreign Agents legislation has forced many NGOs to curtail their operations and/or shut down. It prevents NGOs from receiving foreign funding unless they register as foreign agents, which hampers their ability to operate freely.<sup>18</sup> Such legislation has been replicated in other countries, including Egypt.<sup>19</sup>



Farai Maguwu, human rights defender, Zimbabwe © Farai Maguwu

## The impact of Covid-19

The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing human rights abuses across the world and provided fresh opportunities for repressive governments to further restrict already shrinking civic and political spaces.<sup>20</sup> This inevitably has a negative impact on human rights defenders. As in previous crises, LGBTI+ people have been blamed for the pandemic in several countries, increasing levels of discrimination and stigmatisation and making the work of LGBTI+ defenders even harder.<sup>21</sup> The pandemic and the restrictive measures implemented by governments to try and control it have put other human rights defenders on the frontline: health and social workers, journalists, and others who work to inform the public about Covid-19 are among those at heightened risk.<sup>22</sup>

In several countries, including Egypt, there are grave concerns about prison conditions and overcrowding related to the pandemic. Organisations working on detention rights and with human rights defenders and activists in prison have not had access to them for most of 2020. Turkey and Iran passed legislation to release prisoners from jail due to Covid-19 concerns but human rights defenders were excluded.<sup>23</sup> Journalists in Venezuela, Russia and Zimbabwe have been arrested for reporting on the pandemic and their government's responses to it.<sup>24</sup>

'We're in an existential crisis, not a health crisis. The most attacks against human rights defenders since the beginning of the pandemic are against journalists. Since 1 April 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 other rights are under attack.'

**Tabani Moyo of the Media Institute for Southern Africa, Zimbabwe**

'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. It is especially true for LGBTI+ youth who have to stay at home in self-isolation, commonly being exposed to psychological and physical violence [from] their relatives.'

**Veronika Lapina, Russian LGBTI+ Network**



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



Danelly Estupiñán, human rights defender,  
Colombia © Duncan Tucker/AI

Elsewhere protective measures for human rights defenders have been reduced. This has happened in Mexico<sup>25</sup> and Colombia, where social leaders were put at increased risk as a result, as evidenced by the deadly violence they continue to face.<sup>26</sup> In Colombia, the pandemic has hidden from view the violence faced by human rights defenders and the lack of protection provided by the authorities. Some told Amnesty International that the authorities have reduced protection arrangements such as provision of bodyguards and nightly patrols during this period, while at the same time giving the go-ahead for activities that increase risk to communities, such as the extraction of natural resources, police operations, and the forced eradication of illicit crops.<sup>27</sup>

Countries must recognise that defending human rights is an essential activity during emergency periods and ensure human rights defenders can continue their work free from reprisals, intimidation and threats. Recognising and protecting the work of human rights defenders is vital if we are to tackle Covid-19 effectively, save as many lives and livelihoods as possible, protect the most vulnerable communities and ensure no one is left behind.<sup>28</sup> Human rights defenders – including journalists, women human rights defenders, LGBTI+ defenders, trade unionists, and environmental, land and indigenous rights defenders – help the public to understand the impact and implications of Covid-19 in their communities and how it affects different sectors of society, particularly the most marginalised and at risk.<sup>29</sup> Lawyers are also monitoring the legality of human rights restrictions implemented as part of the pandemic response, and seeking to ensure fair trial guarantees are respected. For example, in Egypt Covid-19 has been used as a pretext to prolong pre-trial detention without a hearing or an adequately reasoned judicial decision.<sup>30</sup>

**'Our government does not need a pandemic to crack down on civil society. We published the testimonials of some brave health workers (nurses and doctors) who have witnessed the conditions of Egyptian hospitals. As a result, there has been a crackdown on health workers, with medical staff arrested on charge of spreading false news. We have been victims of a smearing campaign that even targeted us personally.'**

**Human rights defender, Egypt**



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

The pandemic further exacerbates the funding shortages suffered by many human rights defenders and smaller NGOs. Funding bodies have fewer resources to allocate and some have already moved away from human rights work to focus on Covid-19 humanitarian responses. Therefore flexible funding that is sustained over the long-term will be more important than ever for human rights defenders and their communities so they can set up programmes and strategies to tackle abuses.

### Why human rights defenders should be a priority for the UK

The UK government argues that the promotion of human rights abroad is a priority.<sup>31</sup> In 2019 the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) set out its plan to champion human rights, good governance and the rule of law, and defend the international rules-based system. The following year the Foreign Secretary confirmed that human rights and international law will guide a government-wide review of security, defence and foreign policy.<sup>32</sup>

The UK government therefore recognises human rights defenders are an essential part of its foreign policy. In the 2019 policy document *UK Support for Human Rights Defenders*, it acknowledges the fundamental role they play in the realisation of human rights, gender equality, democratic spaces, and access to justice and peace, all key elements of the UK's foreign policy objectives.<sup>33</sup> The publication of this policy document is significant not only as evidence of the UK's support for the legitimacy of human rights defenders but also because it identifies practical measures of support, raises awareness among government officials, and provides guidance for UK embassies and high commissions.

'A message directly to all human rights defenders around the world... we stand by you and support you wherever you are in the world.'

**Minister for Human Rights Lord Ahmad and Minister of State Harriet Baldwin in 2019 policy paper *UK Support for Human Rights Defenders***

But it is no substitute for a considered and comprehensive strategy to support human rights defenders. In fact, the lack of a strategy to underpin and direct resources and actions, including those specified in the policy document itself, render it ineffective. Only 11 per cent of the 82 human rights defenders across seven countries interviewed by Amnesty International for this report had even heard of the policy document, despite the fact many are well-connected with the international community, including the UK.

The policy document provides guidance on how to support human rights defenders, which is important. But if the guidance is not supported by capital-led initiatives focused on improving support for human rights defenders – such as increased and more flexible funding, multilateral interventions, cross-departmental plans, and consistent engagement – any efforts by embassies will be diluted, ad hoc and less effective. A strategic approach would identify interventions to both support and promote the work of defenders and challenge at the international level the global trend towards repression. It would identify clear and achievable objectives, highlight the input needed from other government departments, and require monitoring and evaluation, which would maximise its effectiveness.

**‘Frankly, I do not remember a specific output from the UK directly related to human rights defenders, though I am sure that the embassy may have issued a statement regarding some incidents related to defenders. But from our experience we found that speaking without action does not mean anything.’**

**Woman human rights defender, Libya**

### **Why a strategy to support human rights defenders is an effective approach for the UK’s international human rights work**

A strategy for supporting human rights defenders would identify opportunities for maximising the UK’s credibility and leadership internationally, and improve the impact and value for money of other initiatives and priorities. Human rights defenders are positive agents for change whose objectives often mirror the UK government’s foreign policy and development priorities. For example, they have an important role in helping states achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.<sup>34</sup> Human rights defenders are indispensable for sustainable and inclusive development, and for addressing poverty and inequality. The Human Rights Council has recognised<sup>35</sup> this and emphasised their crucial role in realising the 2030 Agenda, including the pledge that ‘no one will be left behind’. Human rights defenders are experts in their communities, as well as on the issues they work on, and it is through them that the UK can have a meaningful and sustainable impact on human rights across its foreign policy and development priorities, including preventing sexual violence in conflict, ensuring media freedom, protecting freedom of religion and belief, girls’ education, and tackling the climate crisis.



Cristina Palabay, human rights defender and secretary general of Karapatan, Philippines.  
© National Council of Churches in the Philippines

'We need the perspective, support and critical challenge that civil society organisations and human rights defenders bring. We all need to ensure they feel safe, including in virtual meetings. When they cooperate with us, we are strengthened. And every reprisal diminishes our ability to deliver for the people we serve.'

**Jonathan Allen, Chargé d'Affaires, UK Mission to the UN, New York**

Human rights defenders are also key partners in promoting sustainable business practices, as they encourage due diligence and identify remedial avenues when harm occurs. This has been acknowledged by a group of large businesses, including UK-based companies such as Anglo American and Unilever<sup>36</sup> and is in line with the UK government's commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals.<sup>37</sup> For example, human rights-compliant business practices are essential in increasing respect for the rights of workers and communities affected by business operations.<sup>38</sup>

Supporting human rights defenders is also critical for protecting the rule of law and the international rules-based system. If reprisals against human rights defenders – particularly following their engagement with UN mechanisms<sup>39</sup> and the international human rights community<sup>40</sup> – are left unchallenged, respect for the rule of law and the strength of the international rules-based system are weakened. As the UN General Assembly has recognised, human rights defenders have a key role to play in supporting efforts to strengthen conflict prevention, peacebuilding, and sustainable development work.

### **Why a strategic approach to supporting human rights defenders is needed**

'I want to know that other entities, embassies, and organisations at least see that 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.'

**Woman human rights defender and journalist, Egypt**

Although there are examples of good practices across the diplomatic network – including in Russia, Zimbabwe, Egypt and the Philippines – the UK's support for human rights defenders remains highly variable and inconsistent, both across embassies and government departments. As a result, the UK undermines its own work and misses opportunities to maximise its impact. For example, UK's support for the creation of a Women Peacebuilders' Protection Framework is welcome. But the government has not linked this work with the importance of consulting, supporting and protecting women human rights defenders who, though they may not identify as peacebuilders, are vital for securing peace and security in areas of conflict .

It is also a matter of great concern to see the Prime Minister and other Ministers delegitimising the work of lawyers in the UK, so much so that the Law Society has expressed concern, stating that any attack on the legal profession undermines the rule of law.<sup>41</sup> These public statements from the government are worrying not only because they take place in a climate where lawyers face increased abuse, threats and hostility, but because they also damage the UK's credibility when championing the rule of law<sup>42</sup> and opposing reprisals against human rights defenders abroad.<sup>43</sup> In fact, public statements against lawyers and other human rights defenders are tactics that are often used in countries with authoritarian regimes and where the rule of law is under serious threat, such as Turkey and Egypt.

## Human rights defenders on their experiences with the UK government

Amnesty International arranged interviews with 82 human rights defenders across seven countries for this report:<sup>44</sup>

- Only 40 per cent had been in contact with the UK in their role as human rights defenders within the last two years; 70 per cent were in contact with embassies of other countries.
- 89 per cent had not heard of the *UK Support for Human Rights Defenders* document.
- 76 per cent did not know how to contact someone at their local UK embassy.
- 94 per cent had experienced threats, harassment or abuse as a result of their work; only 6 per cent had sought or received support from the UK for these threats.
- 75 per cent were not aware of their local UK embassy speaking out publicly in support of specific human rights defenders who were at risk.
- 31 per cent had been contacted by their local UK embassy to contribute their knowledge and experiences on human rights.
- 75 per cent had never received funding from the UK.

‘Regarding the UK, in 2017 we presented a project of protection of human rights defenders but they didn’t approve it and we didn’t know what happened. This was the only contact we had with them.’

**Leonardo, human rights defender, Colombia**

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

**Human rights defender from Kabul, Afghanistan**

‘The expectation for the UK is high because of the historical context. If the UK wants to they can have more impact than any other. 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 of Southern Africa, Zimbabwe**

‘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 to the point that every time there is a change of team I am always worried.’

**Human rights defender, Egypt**

‘More support would be positive and mean that more HRDs voices are legitimised and their message amplified. 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 here due to smear campaigns and for people to understand value in their human rights. Its [the UK] support should not only be restricted to pride moments.’

**LGBTI+ rights defender**

## Examples of good UK practice

- In November 2020, the UK foreign secretary swiftly and publicly raised the arrest and detention of staff of the Egyptian Initiative for Person Rights (EIPR) with his Egyptian counterparts – the three human rights defenders were later released after being detained for two weeks.
- The UK embassy in the Philippines supported LGBTI+ rights and defenders during Pride month and on the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia. This included hosting events and film screenings with a focus on LGBTI+ rights.
- The UK mission in Geneva engaged with human rights defenders in the Philippines as part of the universal periodic review processes.
- Supportive statements about at-risk human rights defenders in the Philippines, Zimbabwe, Russia and elsewhere have been issued.
- The UK embassy in Russia provided assistance with a small number of emergency evacuations.
- Regular human rights lunches and other networking events were held for human rights defenders in countries such as Russia and Zimbabwe.
- The UK spoke out and made joint statements when the offices of Egyptian newspaper Mada Masr were raided and its staff arrested.
- The UK embassy in Cairo arranged meetings with human rights defenders when Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office ministers and staff visited Egypt.

This kind of work can lead to better protection for human rights defenders and greater recognition of their invaluable work. Public recognition in itself helps to counter the smears and stigmatisation that undermine the ability of human rights defenders, activists and civil society organisations to operate in many countries.

'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 of the Media Institute of Southern Africa, Zimbabwe**

'I think the UK does a lot already. Much more than other missions anyway, especially during the pandemic. As a team, we welcomed the UK's initiative to fly a rainbow flag in front of the embassy during Pride week in June 2020. It was a huge sign of support for us as an organization and the LGBTI+ community in Russia. And it would be great if more diplomatic missions would show such support.'

**Veronika Lapina, Russian LGBTI+ Network**

## Developing a strategy with human rights defenders at the centre

If the UK government commits to devising and implementing a strategy to improve support and protection for human rights defenders, we recommend consulting both human rights defenders themselves and UK civil society organisations that work with them to develop meaningful goals, objectives and activities. It is important to include a diverse range of human rights defenders in terms of gender and other characteristics, the issues they work on, and the area in which they operate.<sup>45</sup> Their active participation in, and consent for, such initiatives is key to ensuring that UK government action is as impactful as possible and, crucially, does not have a detrimental effect.

'While engagement with the 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, human rights defender, Zimbabwe**

To contribute to this process, we have developed a proposed strategy for human rights defenders that the UK government could adopt and adapt. Although it is essential for the UK to develop its own goals and objectives, we hope our work will set out a clear vision for what a strategy could look like, with parameters and realistic objectives. The structure of our strategy reflects former Foreign and Commonwealth Office strategies that have guided the UK's work on the death penalty<sup>46</sup> and torture<sup>47</sup> in the past (other existing formats such as the National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security may also be useful).<sup>48</sup> Our suggested goals and objectives were developed through interviews with 82 human rights defenders across seven countries<sup>49</sup> and are based on an assessment of where the UK could realistically make a difference to both individual human rights defenders and in terms of an improved environment for human rights defenders to work in more generally.

## A proposed UK government strategy for supporting and protecting human rights defenders

### Vision

The UK government recognises the fundamental role of human rights defenders in upholding the rule of law and the realisation of human rights, gender equality, open societies, access to justice and peace, all integral elements of the country's foreign policy objectives. The UK's vision is for human rights defenders to be able to carry out their crucial work freely and safely, without fear of reprisal, and be recognised as positive contributors to their communities and countries. Human rights defenders both contribute to and benefit from the upholding of the rule of law, improved access to justice, and more open, gender-equal and democratic societies.

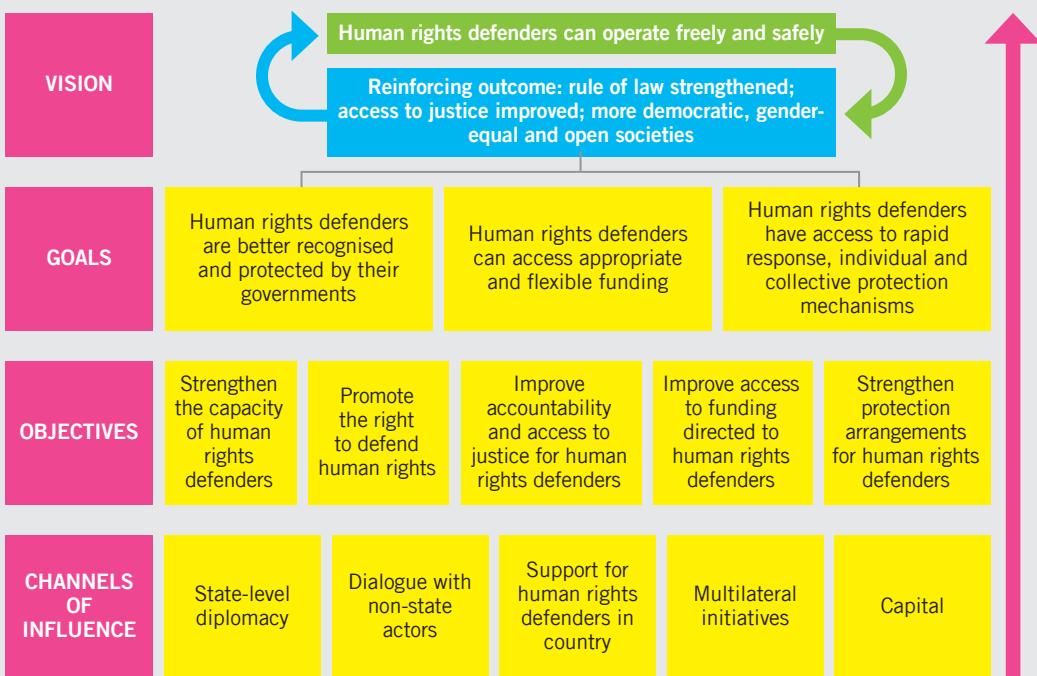
This strategy responds to the most pressing issues that affect the ability of human rights defenders to effectively and safely protect rights, including lack of funding, cyber-attacks and surveillance, stigmatisation and de-legitimisation, the rise of far-right and anti-gender-rights movements, criminalisation, and physical threats, attacks and killings. It includes responses to emergency protection needs and preventative work to create a safer and more supportive environment for human rights defenders to operate in.

To achieve this, the UK government will:

1. Improve minimum standards of support for human rights defenders across its network of embassies and diplomatic posts;
2. Work towards the achievement of specific goals;
3. Identify thematic and country-specific priorities based on analysis of where significant impact can be achieved.



## Theory of Change



### Goals<sup>50</sup>

1. Human rights defenders are better recognised and protected by their governments, including as a result of strategic and outspoken UK government diplomacy;
2. Human rights defenders and organisations are better able to access appropriate, flexible funding for their work;
3. More human rights defenders who are at risk have access to rapid response, individual and collective protection mechanisms.

To achieve these three goals the UK government will work towards five objectives, with progress monitored against a set of indicators.

### Creating a safe and enabling environment

As the UK government works to achieve the three goals listed above and focuses action in priority countries with particularly marginalised groups – see Prioritisation section, page 21, for criteria – the aim of creating a safe and enabling environment for human rights defenders should underpin its strategy as a whole. In 2013, the UN special rapporteur on human rights defenders identified eight elements of a safe and enabling environment.<sup>51</sup>

1. Conducive legal, institutional and administrative framework;
2. Fight against impunity and access to justice for violations against defenders;
3. Strong, independent and effective national human rights institutions;
4. Effective protection policies and mechanisms, including public support for the work of defenders;
5. Special attention for risks and challenges faced by women defenders and those working on women's rights and gender justice issues;
6. Non-state actors' respect and support for the work of defenders;
7. Safe and open access to the United Nations and international human rights bodies;
8. Strong, dynamic and diverse community of human rights defenders.

In order to promote the establishment of a safe and enabling environment and achieve the three goals the UK government will work towards **five specific objectives**. In order to monitor progress in the incremental achievement of these objectives, specific indicators to monitor progress against will be identified.

## **GOAL 1: Human rights defenders are better recognised and protected by their governments**

### **Objective 1 – Promote the right to defend human rights**

#### **Why is it important?**

- ‘The statements that had come about, from the UK and others... contributed to me being let out alive.’ **Jestina, human rights defender, Zimbabwe**
- ‘When I spoke out on issues relating to the treatment of prisoners/prison reforms, I was arrested. The UK and French embassies, shortly after, released a public statement for my release.’ **A human rights defender, Egypt**
- This is particularly important for LGBTI+ defenders, who often have their own identities criminalised and/or prosecuted by their countries as a result of laws inherited from the UK.
- Human rights defenders often report that high-level engagement with UK government representatives provides them with protection – as long as it is done with their full consent.
- ‘When embassies speak out it usually gives us some level of comfort and security to know that people are watching and the state should take their hands off us. It also highlights the severity of stigma and discrimination against minority groups’ **Samuel, GALZ, an LGBTI+ association in Zimbabwe**

#### **Example indicators**

- UK ministers will raise the importance of the work of human rights defenders and their protection needs in bilateral meetings with states, and at multilateral spaces such as Commonwealth events.<sup>52</sup>
- UK ministers and civil servants will meet with human rights defenders visiting the UK, particularly at international conferences, and during ministerial visits abroad UK missions will provide, where appropriate, visible recognition of human rights defenders through publicity, visits or invitations. Priority will be given to reaching out to marginalised human rights defenders, including those in regional or rural communities.
- All UK missions – at the very least in all Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) priority countries – will have human rights strategies, developed in consultation with local human rights defenders and including local human rights defender engagement plans.
- Where possible, all heads of mission will host an annual celebratory event for human rights defenders with networking opportunities.
- The UK will express concern about specific violations, including through diplomacy and universal periodic review processes, or via the UN’s Human Rights Council treaty bodies and special procedures.
- The UK government will issue statements, individually and jointly with other states, to highlight human rights violations.

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### **Objective 2 – Strengthen the capacity of human rights defenders**

#### **Why is it important?**

- ‘When I was released from prison, the US embassy nominated me to do a leadership course so I went to the US for three weeks. I felt empowered by that experience. The UK should not limit its support to just funding, it should also focus on building networks to help human rights defenders develop their expertise and create a global family.’  
**Farai, environmental rights defender, Zimbabwe**
- While human rights defenders are crucial agents of change and experts in their fields, they are chronically under funded, under resourced, overworked, and unable to access opportunities that would enable them and build their capacity.
- To improve recognition of the legitimate and necessary work of human rights defenders, they need investment and support.

### **Example indicators**

- UK funding will be more available and accessible to human rights defenders to facilitate capacity-building projects, personal security training, and online security training.
  - The UK will expand the human rights stream of the Chevening Scholarship programme and develop other capacity-building schemes.
  - UK missions abroad will organise and fund training opportunities for human rights defenders on issues they identify as critical to their work, for example, business and human rights.
  - The UK will facilitate contacts among human rights defenders and the exchange of experiences between countries and/or regions.
  - The UK will facilitate and where possible fund safe travel for human rights defenders invited to networking or capacity-building opportunities in the UK, including by facilitating entry clearance applications and fast-track visas.
- 

## **Objective 3 – Improve accountability and access to justice for human rights defenders**

### **Why is it important?**

- ‘The government weaponises the law to get rid of human rights defenders here... if I don’t get killed I am going to get arrested. I wouldn’t go to state authorities to report it because they are the ones who do these things.’ **LGBTI+ defender, Philippines**
- ‘I challenged the fact that I was abducted, tortured and not protected by law. What they extracted through torture was not admissible in court. I applied for damages and was awarded a settlement.’ **Jestina, human rights defender, Zimbabwe**
- Accountability for abuses and criminalisation of human rights defenders is an essential component of a safe and enabling environment. It is also a crucial element of the ability of states to protect individuals and communities. This includes pushing back against restrictive legislation; access to effective remedies, whether judicial, administrative or quasi-judicial; compensation; and the implementation of adequate interim protection measures.

### **Example indicators**

- The UK will provide training for judges, prosecutors and lawyers, potentially through national bar associations. For example, in collaboration with the Law Society of England and Wales and other representative bodies of the legal profession in the UK.
- UK embassy staff will monitor trials involving human rights defenders, whether they are parties to the trial or acting as legal representatives. This is especially important in high-profile cases that may result in reprisals against the human rights defenders involved.
- The UK will share contacts and act as liaison between organisations providing accompaniment for human rights defenders (eg Peace Brigades International, Front Line Defenders) and embassies.
- The UK will establish effective mechanisms to raise concerns with actors under UK jurisdictions that may be involved in violations. For example, in business-related cases, facilitate the ability of human rights defenders to raise concerns about human rights violations perpetrated by British-based companies.
- The UK will make it easier for human rights defenders harmed by the operations of UK companies abroad to get access to remedy in the UK via judicial and non-judicial mechanisms. This is especially important in cases where there is no realistic prospect of the victims gaining a remedy in the country where the harm occurred.

## **GOAL 2: Human rights defenders and organisations are better able to access appropriate, flexible funding for their work**

### **Objective 4 – Improve access to funding directed to human rights defenders**

#### **Why is it important?**

- ‘Lack of funding means we can only offer short-term contracts so we lose valuable people we need in the organisation. Long-term funding also enables us to do our work properly. We are constantly looking for where the next pound is coming from. We spend too much time doing logframes and not enough doing the actual work.’ **Jestina, human rights defender, Zimbabwe**
- ‘We need some welfare. 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, human rights defender, Colombia**
- ‘The requirement to access these calls and tenders is very high. We asked if it could be more flexible but after this meeting in the UK, I did not have any contact [from them].’ **Noira, human rights defender, Colombia**
- Providing core funding for human rights defenders, civil society organisations, NGOs and movements is a primary way third-party states – and, more generally, the international community – can help protect human rights defenders. Sustainable, core funding allows human rights defenders and their organisations to have a greater impact in a safer way.

#### **Example indicators**

- The UK will establish long-term, flexible funding opportunities for human rights defenders, including core funding for their groups, collectives and organisations. It will ensure these opportunities are accessible for marginalised groups, including in remote and rural communities, and non-registered organisations and collectives.
- The UK will ensure funding opportunities are adequately publicised on embassy websites disseminated among human rights defenders and organisations, and where possible provide applicants with support and/or mentorship.
- In consultation with affected human rights defenders, the UK will develop innovative and flexible funding streams accessible in countries where foreign funding is restricted.
- The UK will explore opportunities to support domestic resource mobilisation strategies, or income-generation activities such as social enterprises, for human rights defenders to undertake alongside their activism.
- The UK’s protection funding will be responsive to existing community or self-protection approaches

## **GOAL 3: More human rights defenders who are at risk have access to rapid response, individual and collective protection mechanisms**

### **Objective 5 – Strengthen protection arrangements for human rights defenders**

#### **Why is it important?**

- ‘There is no protection grant for human rights defenders that can be accessed immediately when [they face a] severe risk. Even organisations that provide protection support take at least two months to provide that support to human rights defenders. 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, Afghanistan**
- ‘Human rights defenders need to be removed from the frontline now and again to give them an opportunity to breath fresh air, to sleep at night and become normal human beings again. It did so much good for me.’ **Jestina, human rights defender, Zimbabwe**

- ‘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 Covid-19], we became more vulnerable to abuse.’ **Human rights defender, Russia**
- ‘When I was recently exposed to danger, I wished that someone would help me to get out of Libya for a temporary period. But honestly, I did not want to travel to face an unknown fate, I wished for a programme that includes capacity building for me, because I do not want to reside abroad, I want to stay for a bit, but go back to Libya.’ **Women’s human rights defender, Libya**
- The role of third-party states in supporting domestic efforts to protect human rights defenders is critical. This should include technical assistance to states, along with funding for rapid response emergency mechanisms to relocate human rights defenders and their families within and outside of the country; and funding for collective protection mechanisms. It should also include opportunities for human rights defenders to access respite and relief, which can be combined with capacity-building and international networking opportunities.

### **Example indicators**

- The UK will call for and support the development of collective protection mechanisms where appropriate and in response to calls from human rights defenders.
- The UK will strongly advocate for and support domestic protection mechanisms.
- The UK will provide training to domestic institutions, particularly those mandated to provide protection for human rights defenders. For example, how to integrate gender perspectives into protection protocols for women human rights defenders.
- The UK will prioritise funding for emergency protection mechanisms and champion development of ‘basket funds’ or pooled funding for international embassies to contribute to, providing emergency protection grants
- The UK will expand, develop and disseminate information about ‘rest and respite’ schemes for human rights defenders in the UK, including facilitating accessibility to temporary visas for human rights defenders at risk.

### **Channels of influence**

The UK government will work to achieve these objectives through five main channels:

#### **State-level diplomacy**

The UK government will continue to work bilaterally with states to press for protection mechanisms for human rights defenders, investigate and hold accountable individuals involved in attacks or threats against human rights defenders, raise the cases of human rights defenders who are under attack, and fund projects for human rights defenders.

#### **Dialogue with non-state actors**

The UK government will strengthen its dialogue with non-state actors in support of human rights defenders, including faith leaders, armed groups with de-facto control over particular areas and, above all, corporations headquartered in the UK in line with the National Action Plan on Business and Human Rights. The UK will encourage companies and investors to engage constructively with human rights defenders, implement policies and practices that recognise and respect their rights, and advocate for the protection of human rights defenders and civic spaces.

#### **In-country support for human rights defenders**

The UK will improve its in-country support for human rights defenders. There are many examples of excellent practice by diplomatic missions, often involving collaborative work with like-minded states as part of human rights working groups, which will be celebrated and promoted across the network with the aim of replicating best practice. In particular, missions will ensure outreach to human rights defenders includes marginalised groups, for example in regional and rural areas, and work to develop mutually respectful and beneficial relationships.

While the UK is no longer a member of the EU, work and collaboration will continue with EU delegations in country and EU member states such as the Netherlands, Germany, France, Sweden and Denmark, as well as countries such as Norway and Canada.

Diplomatic missions will ensure continuity between posts. New post-holders will be adequately briefed on existing strategies and relationships in order to maximise uniformity of action and long-term engagement. Adequate information exchange between posts will also take place annually regarding the implementation of local plans and the overall human rights defenders strategy.

### **Multilateral initiatives**

The UK will raise the protection of human rights defenders as a strategic priority in multilateral spaces, for example in debates and resolutions in the UN Human Rights Council and General Assembly, the Commission on the Status of Women, and so on. This should also happen in thematic procedures such as the work of UN special rapporteurs<sup>53</sup> on counter-terrorism, human rights defenders and freedom of expression, and through the UK ambassador for human rights.

The UK will prioritise support for marginalised human rights defenders to engage with multilateral processes, ensuring appropriate support and protection is in place in case of reprisals. It will also collaborate with relevant UN offices and other institutions focused on reprisals against human rights defenders. The UK will raise the protection of human rights defenders at G20 summits and with the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, and advocate for human rights defender support and protection within the Council of Europe and the Commonwealth, including at Commonwealth heads of government meetings.

UK missions around the world will also facilitate contact between human rights defenders and the UK mission in Geneva and Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office country teams in London.

### **Capital**

At a capital level, the UK government will ensure its strategies and plans for work abroad – the death penalty, torture, girls' education, media freedom, development country plans, sustainable development goals, trade, security, and so on – all include:

- Objectives for improving the capacity of and support and protection for human rights defenders leading the relevant work on the ground;
- Identification of how funding streams – such as the Conflict, Security and Stability Fund and the Magna Carta Fund – can be made more accessible for human rights defenders, particularly those who are marginalised and/or work independently or with small organisations;
- Support for the human rights defenders who are most in need during crises such as Covid-19;
- Cross-departmental work to improve support for and protection of human rights defenders.

### **Prioritisation**

The UK government will establish criteria to identify priority countries, issues and groups of human rights defenders to support, ensuring that resources are focused and measurable impact is realistic and achievable. The UN special rapporteur on human rights defenders has identified the importance of prioritisation, highlighting the needs of particular groups of human rights defenders who face extraordinary risks.<sup>54</sup> These include women human rights defenders<sup>55</sup>, LGBTI+ rights activists,<sup>56</sup> journalists and media workers,<sup>57</sup> judges and lawyers, trade unionists, environmental and land defenders,<sup>58</sup> and youth and students defenders.<sup>59</sup>

How we will support the most at-risk human rights defenders:

- Ensure meaningful consultation with representative groups of human rights defenders in the development and implementation of plans and initiatives;
- Support and prioritise community and collective protection and funding mechanisms, in response to calls from defenders who tend to benefit most from these types of approaches, such as women's rights defenders and indigenous and land rights defenders.

### **Meaningful consultation with women human rights defenders**

Women's rights advocates have long called for the voices of women from fragile and conflict-affected states to be fully, genuinely and meaningfully heard by decision-makers. However, most consultations remain extractive and tokenistic, with women human rights defenders and their organisations unable to set the agenda or influence processes and rarely benefiting from participation.

The Beyond Consultations<sup>60</sup> tool aims to provide clear and practical guidance on how to tangibly improve the quality of consultations with women human rights defenders and their organisations in fragile and conflict-affected states. It was developed in partnership by Gender Action for Peace and Security, Amnesty International UK, Womankind Worldwide, Women for Women International and Saferworld, and is based on a six-month participatory research project in 2018 with 225 individuals and organisations from 15 countries.

In addition to improving the base level support for human rights defenders across our overseas network of missions, the UK government will identify a number of countries where measurable improvement in the environment in which human rights defenders operate can be achieved. In these countries, the UK government will work with local human rights defenders to identify specific objectives and prioritise efforts to achieve them. Countries will be identified on the basis of:

- The UK having a strong bilateral relationship and ability to influence;
- The extent of the need for protection mechanisms to be strengthened or established;
- An assessment of the space for civil society organisations to operate, including their ability to generate income.

### **Leading a cross-departmental strategy**

The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) is well placed to lead this work, given its expertise in human rights, work with civil society, and missions with responsibility to engage with human rights defenders abroad. But the actions of other government departments also impact on human rights defenders and can strengthen the FCDO's activities. To maximise impact, departments operating abroad – notably the Department for International Trade and the Ministry of Defence – will be aware of and contribute to the realisation of the UK government's human rights defenders objectives. The Home Office will also contribute, given its collaboration with other states on counter-terrorism and security initiatives. It also has a crucial role in providing access to short-term visas for human rights defenders so they can work and receive respite and emergency protection in the UK.

### **Reporting and accountability**

Monitoring progress against the objectives and reporting on actions delivered to support and protect human rights defenders will be essential in order to measure and celebrate progress. It will facilitate communication with human rights defenders and other states about the UK's commitment to achieving genuine and meaningful impact in this area, as well as providing examples of best practice to share with the diplomatic network and externally.<sup>61</sup>

The FCDO will report on work to support human rights defenders undertaken in each 'human rights priority country' in its annual human rights report and via updates every six months.

A baseline analysis study will be commissioned to establish a benchmark of actions and activities currently undertaken by missions. All reporting will be gender disaggregated, as well as by the focus of human rights defenders' work.

### **Capability<sup>62</sup>**

The UK government will continue to strengthen its capability, processes and leadership to deliver this strategy. It will seek to integrate an understanding of the importance of partnering with, and the protection needs of, human rights defenders into all of its human rights, development and diplomatic work abroad. This will be achieved through a combination of training, leadership and resource allocation.

- 'Leadership' will be external and internal, setting the vision for this work across government and championing the work of human rights defenders with partner governments, international institutions and implementing partners.
- 'Processes' are the necessary systems to ensure leadership and capabilities translate into concrete action to deliver this strategy, including internal guidance, policies and toolkits.

We will work collaboratively across government at all levels. We will ensure there are training opportunities for decision-makers at all levels on the needs and benefits of working with human rights defenders, and commit to mandatory pre-deployment training for all UK diplomatic personnel. We will ensure human rights analysis and gender analysis is built into all foreign policy development, and that this is kept up to date as contexts change. We will continue to raise awareness of this strategy and the work of human rights defenders in our engagement across government and with external partners.

### **In their own words – voices from seven countries**

This report is rooted in interviews carried out with 82 human rights defenders across seven countries – Egypt, Colombia, Russia, Zimbabwe, the Philippines, Afghanistan and Libya – between June and September 2020. This report is built directly on the experiences voiced by these human rights defenders, and the report's conclusions reflect this. Their experiences are outlined in more detail in seven country briefing papers: each outlines the country's human rights situation; the challenges facing its human rights defenders; detailed feedback from the interviews and the human rights defenders themselves; an examination of the UK's engagement with human rights in the country; a look at best practice from other countries; and a set of recommendations for the UK government and the local UK embassy to improve their support for human rights defenders in that country. The seven briefing papers can be found at [www.amnesty.org.uk/onthehumanrightsfrontline](http://www.amnesty.org.uk/onthehumanrightsfrontline).

# Endnotes

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- 31 <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/foreign-secretary-introduction-to-queens-speech-debate> Additionally in January 2020, the UK Foreign Minister has stated that “human rights and the international rule of law will be remain guiding lights as the UK conducts the Integrated Security, Defence and Foreign Policy Review” <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/foreign-secretary-introduction-to-queens-speech-debate>
- 32 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/foreign-and-commonwealth-office-single-departmental-plan/foreign-and-commonwealth-office-single-departmental-plan-2019-20#our-objectives>
- 33 ‘UK Support for Human Rights Defenders’ p3, available at [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/819299/UK-Support-for-Human-Rights-Defenders.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/819299/UK-Support-for-Human-Rights-Defenders.pdf).
- 34 <https://www.ishr.ch/news/sdgs-defenders-are-indispensable-sustainable-and-inclusive-development>
- 35 UN Sustainable Development Goals [https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/2754713\\_July\\_PM\\_2,\\_Leaving\\_no\\_one\\_behind\\_Summary\\_from\\_UN\\_Committee\\_for\\_Development\\_Policy.pdf](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/2754713_July_PM_2,_Leaving_no_one_behind_Summary_from_UN_Committee_for_Development_Policy.pdf)
- 36 [https://media.business-humanrights.org/media/documents/files/Statement\\_Public\\_v2.pdf](https://media.business-humanrights.org/media/documents/files/Statement_Public_v2.pdf)
- 37 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/foreign-and-commonwealth-office-single-departmental-plan/foreign-and-commonwealth-office-single-departmental-plan-2019-20#our-objectives>.
- 38 See, for example, SDGs 6, 8 and 12.
- 39 Andrew Gilmore report on HRD reprisals <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25021&LangID=E>
- 40 <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/05/poland-activist-arrested-and-house-raided-after-amnesty-international-meeting/>
- 41 <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/oct/10/lawyers-claim-knife-attack-at-law-firm-was-inspired-by-priti-patels-rhetoric>
- 42 <https://www.lawsociety.org.uk/contact-or-visit-us/press-office/press-releases/attacks-on-the-legal-profession-undermine-the-rule-of-law>
- 43 [https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/every-reprisal-diminishes-our-ability-to-deliver-for-the-people-we-serve?utm\\_source=fc5c1343-8a43-49ca-a602-950fd66d3e48&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=govuk-notifications&utm\\_content=immediate](https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/every-reprisal-diminishes-our-ability-to-deliver-for-the-people-we-serve?utm_source=fc5c1343-8a43-49ca-a602-950fd66d3e48&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=govuk-notifications&utm_content=immediate)
- 44 These statistics reflect the wide disparity in UK engagement with and action in support of HRDs in different countries. While all of the HRDs interviewed in Zimbabwe were in contact with the UK, none of the HRDs in Afghanistan had had contact in their role as HRDs within the last two years.
- 45 For guidance on how to develop and conduct meaningful consultations with WHRDs in fragile and conflict affected countries (but applicable to other groups) see See Amnesty International UK, GAPS, Saferworld, Womankind Worldwide and Women for Women International’s Beyond Consultations Tool <https://beyondconsultations.org/>
- 46 [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/35448/death-penalty-strategy-oct-11-15.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/35448/death-penalty-strategy-oct-11-15.pdf)
- 47 [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/35449/fcostrategy-tortureprevention.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/35449/fcostrategy-tortureprevention.pdf)
- 48 [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/677586/FCO1215-NAP-Women-Peace-Security-ONLINE\\_V2.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/677586/FCO1215-NAP-Women-Peace-Security-ONLINE_V2.pdf)
- 49 See compilation of country summaries: [www.amnesty.org.uk/onthehumanrightsfrontline](http://www.amnesty.org.uk/onthehumanrightsfrontline)
- 50 Interviews conducted or arranged by Amnesty International with 82 HRDs from Russia, Zimbabwe, Colombia, Egypt, Libya, the Philippines and Afghanistan informed the identification of these three key priority goals that the UK could work towards progressively achieving.
- 51 [https://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/HRC/25/55](https://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/HRC/25/55)
- 52 The UK and other Commonwealth States are already committed to creating a safe and enabling environment for civil society and human rights defenders: – particularly the criminalisation arrest and killings of human rights defenders.  
<https://thecommonwealth.org/sites/default/files/inline/CFAMM%28VIR%29%2820%29%289%29REV3%20Commonwealth%20Statement%20on%20Racism%202020.pdf>
- 53 In particular on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism; on the promotion and protection of freedom of opinion and expression; and on the situation of human rights defenders.
- 54 For eg, see A/HRC/25/55 paras. 90 and ff, available at [https://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/HRC/25/55](https://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/HRC/25/55).
- 55 A/HRC/40/60 available at <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G19/004/97/PDF/G1900497.pdf?OpenElement>.
- 56 A/HRC/16/44 available at [https://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/HRC/16/44](https://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/HRC/16/44).
- 57 A/HRC/19/55 paras. 29-59, available at [https://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/HRC/19/55](https://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/HRC/19/55).
- 58 A/71/281 available at <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N16/247/09/PDF/N1624709.pdf?OpenElement>; A/HRC/19/55 paras. 60-92, available at [https://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/HRC/19/55](https://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/HRC/19/55).
- 59 A/HRC/19/55 paras. 93-116, available at [https://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/HRC/19/55](https://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/HRC/19/55).
- 60 [https://beyondconsultations.org/images/Beyond\\_Consultations\\_Research\\_Summary.pdf](https://beyondconsultations.org/images/Beyond_Consultations_Research_Summary.pdf)
- 61 Provided that confidentiality can be guaranteed to the individuals involved, should they so wish.
- 62 This section reflects very closely the capability needs identified in the UK’s National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/677586/FCO1215-NAP-Women-Peace-Security-ONLINE\\_V2.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/677586/FCO1215-NAP-Women-Peace-Security-ONLINE_V2.pdf)

# ON THE HUMAN RIGHTS FRONTLINE

Around the world there is an unprecedented surge in attacks against human rights defenders – people who protect and promote human rights. This report is centred on interviews with 82 human rights defenders in seven countries who are targeted because of their vital work. It highlights and supports their urgent calls for the UK government to do more to support and protect them – through a strategy that is adequately funded, cross-government and gender-responsive. The report proposes a strategy the UK government could adopt and adapt. Such a strategy could have a huge impact on the lives and work of human rights defenders and organisations, improve the international human rights landscape as a whole, and help the UK achieve a wide range of foreign policy objectives.

This report outlines why a strategy is needed, what it could look like, how it would help the UK achieve its foreign and development policy objectives, and crucially, the impact it would have for human rights defenders themselves. Our thanks to everyone who took the time to share their experiences, expertise and views – we hope this report will help to improve recognition of and support for their work.

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Produced by Amnesty International UK,  
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