

ON THE HUMAN RIGHTS FRONTLINE

How the UK government can defend the defenders

REPORT SUMMARY

'I feel really threatened and everything I worked for is at risk. If the UK [prioritises human rights defenders]... they will help us to survive because I'm sure the world needs us to stay here to make change.'

Journalist and woman human rights defender, Egypt

The case for a UK government strategy to support and protect human rights defenders

As human rights defenders face unprecedented repression around the world, we are collectively urging the UK government to provide greater support and protection for them. To achieve this goal, we are calling for the development of an adequately funded, cross-departmental and gender-responsive strategy.

'If I don't get killed, I am going to get arrested.'

Women's rights and LGBTI+ defender, Philippines

Introduction

To help make the case for why a strategy to support and protect human rights defenders is needed, we have drafted a proposed strategy that the government could adapt and adopt. Its structure reflects strategies that effectively guided the UK's work on the death penalty and torture in the past. The content – notably its goals and objectives – is based on interviews Amnesty International arranged with 82 human rights defenders across seven countries. It also draws on the expertise of UK and international organisations with decades of experience of working with human rights defenders around the world. See the full paper and proposed strategy at www.amnesty.org.uk/onthehumanrightsfrontline.

Why should the UK develop a strategy to defend the defenders?

Human rights defenders are agents of change in their communities, and it is through them that sustainable progress on human rights can be achieved. The UK government acknowledges the fundamental role they play in improving human rights, gender equality, open societies, sustainable development, and access to justice, all integral parts of the UK's foreign policy objectives. A human rights strategy would therefore not only help defenders, it would also maximise the UK government's impact on a range of its priorities.

- Human rights defenders have an important role in helping states achieve the Sustainable Development Goals and the promise to 'leave no one behind', as the UN Human Rights Council has explicitly recognised.
- They are key partners in ensuring sustainable business practices, as they encourage due diligence and identify remedial avenues when harm occurs.
- Support for them provides vital support for the rule of law and the international rules-based system. If reprisals against defenders – particularly after their engagement with UN mechanisms and the global human rights community – are not challenged, respect for the rule of law and the international rules-based system is weakened.

Unlike other aspects of its human rights work, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) does not have a strategy to guide its work with human rights defenders. Such a strategy would identify clear, achievable objectives and priorities to work towards; highlight input needed from across government; and require monitoring and evaluation.



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PHOTOS L to R: Nonoy Espina, chair of National Union of Journalists of the Philippines © Jes Aznar/Getty Images. Demonstration against sexual harassment of girls and women in Afghanistan © Marcus Perkins for AI. Human rights defenders take part in a May Day march in Bogotá, Colombia in 2019 © Raul Arboleda/AFP via Getty Images.

Despite examples of good practices, the UK's support for human rights defenders is highly variable and inconsistent – both between posts and between government departments. As a result, the UK undermines its own work and misses valuable opportunities.

'The UK is deliberately losing ground due to lack of [a] 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

What the human rights defenders said

Amnesty International organised interviews with 82 human rights defenders in Afghanistan, Colombia, Egypt, Libya, Russia, the Philippines and Zimbabwe. We spoke to journalists, lawyers, community activists, and civil society organisation staff based in urban and rural areas and working on a wide range of issues. Many are well connected and experienced at engaging with the international community.

- **Only 40 per cent** had been in contact with the UK about their human rights work over the last two years; **70 per cent** were in contact with other countries' embassies.
- **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; **6 per cent** had sought or received support from the UK.
- **75 per cent** were not aware of their local UK embassy publicly speaking out 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.

Recommendations for the UK government

When asked what was the one thing the UK needed to improve, the human rights defenders repeatedly said it should 'speak out more'. This was the most common recommendation in six of the seven countries.

'The statements that had come about, from the UK and others... contributed to me being let out alive.'

Jestina, human rights defender, Zimbabwe

The second most common recommendation was for the provision of flexible funding sources, including long-term and core funding for human rights organisations.

'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 third most common recommendation was for establishing or supporting rapid response, individual and collective protection mechanisms for human rights defenders at 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, Afghanistan

Our proposed strategy

Based on the feedback we received from the human rights defenders, our proposed strategy has three priority goals and five objectives for the UK.

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

Objective 1: Promote the right to defend human rights

Objective 2: Strengthen the capacity of human rights defenders

Objective 3: Improve accountability and access to justice for human rights defenders

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

Objective 4: Improve access to funding for human rights defenders

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

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

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