

ANNUAL REPORT ON HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS AT RISK IN 2017



On the cover: The Cauca River in Antioquia, Colombia, where communities and families active in the Ríos Vivos Antioquia Movement struggle to defend their right to remain in the territory before the completion of the Hidroituango hydroelectric dam - the largest to be built in the country. Isabel Cristina Zuleta (pictured) is spokeswoman for those affected by the project.

Photo credit: Ivi Oliveira, Front Line Defenders.

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**ANNUAL
REPORT
ON HUMAN
RIGHTS
DEFENDERS
AT RISK
IN 2017**

THESE ARE THE NAMES OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS WHO WERE KILLED IN 2017, AS REPORTED TO FRONT LINE DEFENDERS. WE REMEMBER THEM AND TO THEM WE DEDICATE OUR WORK.

ARGENTINA

Santiago Maldonado

BELIZE

Albert Cattouse

BRAZIL

Silvino Nunes Gouveia
Manoel Quintino da Silva Kaxarari
João Ferreira dos Santos
Jorge Matías da Silva
x Ceará
Eraldo Moreira Luz
Flávio Gabriel Pacífico dos Santos
Valdenir Juventino Izidoro
Raimundo Mota de Souza
Damião Lima da Silva
Roberto Santos Araújo
Raimundo Silva
Kátia Martins
Antonio Jose Mig Claudino
Waldomeiro Costa Pereira
Weldson Pereira da Silva
Ozeir Rodrigues da Silva
Regivaldo Pereira da Silva
Nelson Souza Milhomem
Weclbson Pereira Milhomem
Jane Julia de Oliveira
Ronaldo Pereira de Souza
Bruno Henrique Pereira Gomes
Antonio Pereira Milhomem
Hércules Santos de Oliveira
Rosenildo Pereira de Almeida
Ademir de Souza Pereira
João Ferreira dos Santos, 'João do Ouro'
Lindomar Fernandes Martins
Adeilton Brito de Souza, 'Boga'
Gildásio Bispo das Neves
Amauri Pereira Silva
Valdir Pereira Silva
Marcos Pereira Silva
Cosme Rosário da Conceição
Sônia Vicente Cacau, 'Cry Capric'
José Caneta Gavião, 'Cu Carut'
Zé Menino
João da Cruz Abreu
Sebastião Ferreira De Souza
Izaul Brito dos Santos
Ezequias Santos de Oliveira
Edson Alves Antunes
Aldo Aparecido Carlini
Samuel Antônio da Cunha
Francisco Chaves da Silva
Fábio Rodrigues dos Santos
Valmir Rangeu do Nascimento
Silvone Gonçalves da Silva
Weclbson Pereira Milhomem
Etevaldo Soares Costa
Manoel Índio Arruda, 'Índio'
Maria da Lurdes Fernandes Silva
Maria Trindade da Silva
Antônio Alves Gomes, 'Toninho'

Zacarias Lalau
Vanderson Siqueira dos Santos
Hugo Rabelo Leite
Liversino Azevedo, 'Vitor'
Elivelton Castelo Nascimento
Orestes Rodrigues de Castro
Renato Souza Benevides, 'Baixinho'
Weverton Cantão
Paulo Sérgio Bento Oliveira
Valdinei Assis da Silva, 'Nei'
Yure Silva
Geovane Alves de Jesus

COLOMBIA

Mario Castano Bravo
Mario Jacanamajoy
Albert Martinez Olarte
Ramon Alcides Garcia Zapata
Eliecer Carvajal
Liliana Patricia Castano Montoya
Miguel Angel Cardona
Ofelia Espinoza De Lopez
Oscar Ferney Tenorio
Jorge Luis Garcia del Rio
Luis Villadiego Puentes
Juana Almazo Epiayu
Nelson Eduardo Velandia Ortiz
Maritza Yuliana Garcia Vinasco
Jose Adalberto Torrijano Andrade
Javier Sevilla Alvarez
Roberto Ortega Maclausan
José Yimer Cartagena Usuga
Gildardo Antonio Valdés
Luis Edilson Arango Gallego
Fabián Aberto Álvarez Marín
Liliana Astrid Ramírez Martínez
Ezquivel Manyoma
Jimmy Humberto Medina Trujillo
Wilmer Hernández Caicedo
Jairo Arturo Chilito Muñoz
Luis Fernando Gil
Hector William Mina
María Efigenia Vasques
Manuel Ramírez Mosquera
Fernando Rivas Asprilla
Aulio Isararama Forastero
Eugenio Rentería Martínez
Alberto Román Acosta
Katherine Escalante Castilla
Narda Barchilón
Ricardo Córdoba
Iván Martínez
Wilmar Felipe Barona
Efen Santo
José Reyes Guerrero Gaitán
Carlos Augusto Paneso
Daniel Felipe Castro Basto
Jairo Arturo Muñoz
Jesús María Morales Morales
César Augusto Parra
Alciviades de Jesús Largo Hernández
Carlos de Jesús Báez Torres
Alfonso Pérez Mellizo

Miguel Emiro Pérez
José Jair Cortés
Emigdio Dávila
Aldemar Parra García
Miguel Ángel Hoyos
Eberto Julio Gómez Mora
Wilfredy González Noreña
Albenio Isaias Roseo Alvarez
Edenis Barrera Benavides
Fabian Antonio Rivera Arroyave
Eder Cuetia Conda
Falver Cerón Gómez
Hernando Murillo Armijo
Jorge Iván Bigamá Ogarí
Emilsen Manyoma
Edmiro León Alzate Londoño
Wiwa Yoryanis Isabel Bernal Varela
Edilberto Cantillo Meza
Ruth Alicia Lopez Guisao
Javier Oteca Pilcué
Deiner Alexander Mendez Berrío
Diego Fernando Rodriguez
Montenegro
Eliver Buitrago Gutierrez
Luis Genaro Ochoa Sánchez
Camilo Alberto Pinzon Galeano
Rubiel Sánchez Vargas
Idaly Castillo Narváez
Severino Grueso Caicedo
Jose María Lemus Téllez
Nelson Fabra Díaz
José Rafael de la Hoz Villa
Álvaro Arturo Tenorio Cabezas
Mario Andrés Calle Correa
Jorge Arbey Chantre Achipiz
Jáider Jiménez Cardona
Nolberto Lozada Ramón
Gerson Acosta Salazar
Bernardo Cuero Bravo
Mauricio Fernando Vélez Lopez
Segundo Victor Castillo
Ezequiel Rangel Romano
Washington Cedeño Otero

GUATEMALA

Sebastian Alonso Juan
Francisca Aguilar
Salvador Manuel Villagrán Trujillo
Tomás Francisco Ochoa Salazar
Francisco Xol Beb
Brenda Domínguez
Maaz Coc Carlos
Laura Leonor Vasquez Pineda
Mateo Tzip Xo
Ramón Pérez Carrera
Eugenio López y López

HONDURAS

Sherlyn Montoya
Faustino Murillo
José Alfredo Rodríguez
Carlos william Flores
José de los Santos Sevilla

Silvinio Zapata Martinez
Roque Martínez Ramos

MEXICO

Juan Ontiveros Ramos
Silvestre de la Toba Camacho
José Alberto Toledo Villalobos
Miriam Rodríguez Martínez
Isidro Baldenegro Lopez
Benjamín Juárez José
Marco Antonio Pazuengo Salazar
Fredy Cruz García
Alan Geovani Martínez Contreras
Rafael Hernández Cisneros
Marciano Martínez Cruz
Antonio Santiago González
Humberto Morales Santíz
Cecilio Pineda Birto
Hiram Yussel Tejeda Salas
Ricardo Monlui Cabrera
Miroslava Breach Velducea
Juan José Hernández Alchino
Santiago Crisanto Luna
Luis Gustavo (menor) Hernández
Cohenete
Francisco Jiménez Alejandre
José Carlos Jiménez Crisóstomo
Maximino Rodríguez Palacios
Gerardo Corona Piceno
Héctor Jonathan Rodríguez Córdoba
Jesús Javier Váldez Cárdenas
Agustín Vázquez Torres
Miguel Vázquez Torres
Rodrigo Guadalupe Huet Gómez
Meztli Omixochitl Sarabia
Fernando Tlaxcalteca

NICARAGUA

Felipe Perez Gamboa
Celedonia Zalazar Point
Camilo Frank Lopez

VENEZUELA

Freddy Menare

DRC

Alphonse Luanda kalyamba Nguba
Tsongo Sikuliwako Alex

SOUTH AFRICA

Sibonelo Patrick Mpeku
Soyeso Nkqayini
Mohahu Daniel Maseko

TANZANIA

Wayne Lotter

UGANDA

Erasmus Irumba

BANGLADESH

Abdul Hakim Shimul

MYANMAR

U Ko Ni
Htay Aung
Lung Jarm Phe

PAKISTAN

Hina Shahnawaz
Muhammed Jan Gigyani

PHILIPPINES

Manuelita Cumba Mascariñas-Green
Lando Moreno
Apolonio Maranan
Vivencio Sahay
Webby St Argabio
Arnel Otacan
Erning Aykid
Virgilio Balungag
Lolita Pepito
Rodrigo Timoteo
Perfecto Hoyle
Elioterio Moises
Paez Father Marcelito
Daniol Lasib
Elisa Badayos
Alejandro Laya-Og
Edwin Pura
Roger Timboco
Lomer Gerodias

Jezreel Arrabis
Dalia Arrabis
Veronico Lapsay Delamente
Venie Diamante
Alexander Ceballos
Wencislao Pacquiao
Renato Anglao
Wilerme Agorde
Edweno Catog
Matanem Lorendo Pocuan
Emelito Rotimas
Glenn Ramos
Orlando Eslana
Ramón Dagaas Pesadilla
Leonila Tapdasan Pesadilla
Cora Molave Lina
Arlene Almonicar
Armen Almonicar
Pedro Pandagay
Hasan Billamin Turabin
Danilo Ruiz Nadal
Elias Pureza
Bernardo Calan Ripdos
Federico Sanchez Plaza
Rodolfo Jr. Dagahuya
Ana-Marie Digaynon Aumada
Jessie Cabeza
Gilbert Rosima Bancat
Joseph Baning

Meliton Catampungan
Carolina Arado
Silvestre Maratas
Mario Castro Basto
Alberto Tecson
Oscar Jr Asildo
Obello Bay-ao
Luardo Yac
Eddie Alyawan
Lito Casalla
Reneboy Mayagano
Ande Latuan

THAILAND

Chaiyaphum Pa-sae

INDIA

Lafiqul Islam Ahmed
Kanhaiyalal Patidar
Abhishek Patidar
Bablu Patidar
Prem Singh Patidar
Surendra Singh Patidar
Sathyanarayan Dhangar
Suhas Haldankar
Rajesh Savaliya
Rathia Jailal
Mukesh Dube
Subramanian

Palanivelu
Gauri Lankesh
Kathiresan
Muthalagan

MALDIVES

Yameen Rasheed

BAHRAIN

Mohamed Kazem Mohsen Zayn al-Deen

EGYPT

Gamal Sorour

IRAQ

Arkan Sharif

MALTA

Daphne Caruana Galizia

PALESTINE

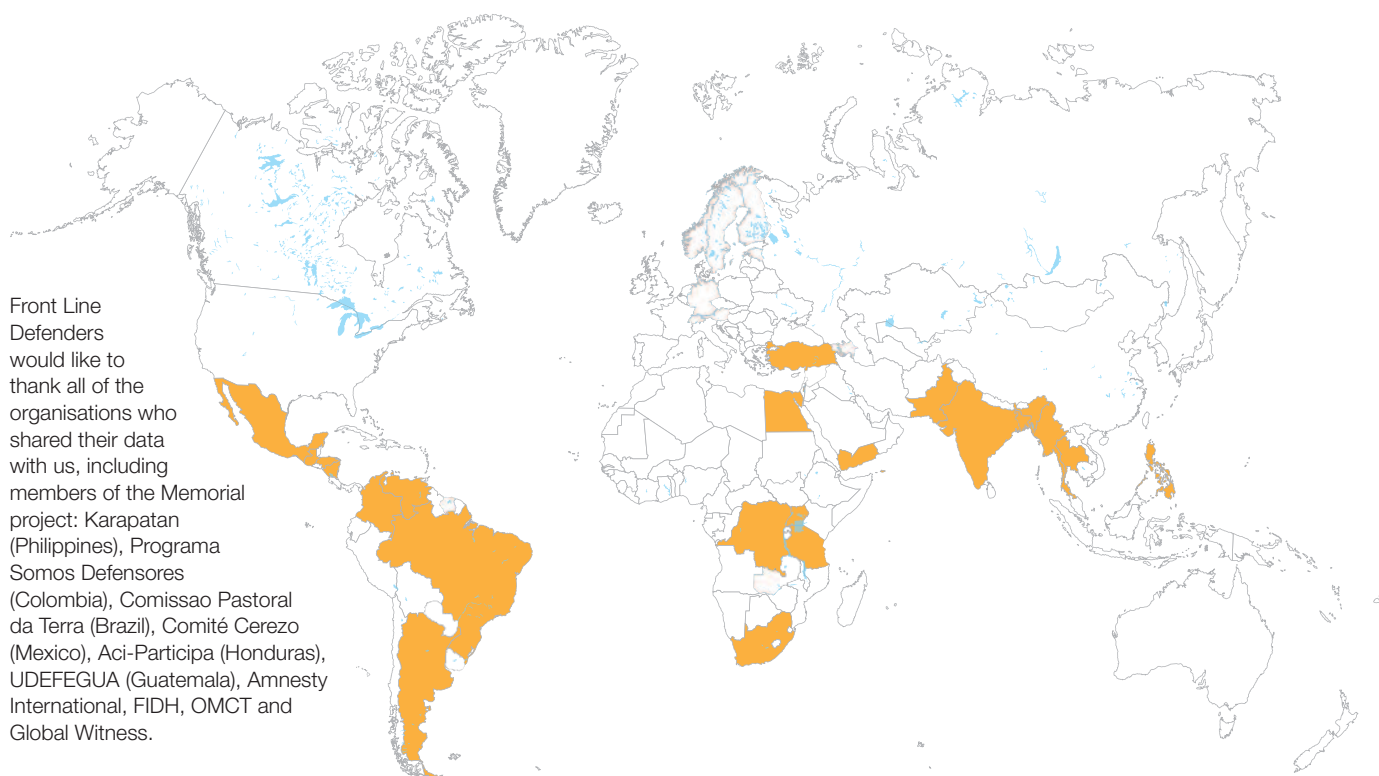
Ibrahim Abu Thuraya

TURKEY

Ali Ulvi Büyüknöhtüçü
Aysin Büyüknöhtüçü

YEMEN

Amjad Abdulrahman Mohammed
Mohammad Kheir Othman



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global analysis

In a highly contested global context in which the advance of human rights has increasingly challenged dictators, religious conservatives and culture capitalists, there has been a well-resourced and coordinated strategy of defamation, criminalisation and violence deployed to intimidate, marginalise and silence human rights defenders (HRDs). The human cost has been high, but in spite of all these efforts, there are more HRDs, working on more issues, in more countries, than ever before.

In 2017, Front Line Defenders received reports on **the murder of 312 defenders in 27 countries**.¹ And yet criminalisation remained the most common strategy employed to obstruct and delegitimise the work of defenders. Thousands of HRDs were detained, presented with fabricated charges, subjected to lengthy, expensive and unfair legal processes and, in some cases, sentenced to long prison terms. The wave of restrictive legislation targeting HRDs and independent media continued in 2017 and both the quasi-legal and the more violent tactics of oppressors were accompanied by professional and well-resourced smear campaigns.

The number of killings of human rights defenders remained truly shocking and the weak response of both national governments and the international community gives little hope that this will change in the short term. **80% of the killings took place in just four countries – Brazil, Colombia, Mexico and the Philippines.**

An analysis of the work done by those killed is instructive: 67% were engaged in the defence of land, environmental and indigenous peoples' rights and nearly always in the context of mega projects, extractive industry and big business. In many countries, governments and security forces were, at best, unresponsive to threats and attacks faced by HRDs and, at worst, state security forces were themselves responsible for the killings. For the most part, international investors and parent companies, whose funding and support initiated and enabled such projects, still do not regard local community leaders and HRDs as key actors to consult when planning projects. This lack of consultation increases the risk of confrontation further down the line and it denies companies early warning signals when conflict in local areas does emerge. In 84% of the killings where Front Line Defenders has the necessary information, the defender had **previously received a threat**, highlighting that if preventive action were taken by police at an early stage, attacks against HRDs could be dramatically reduced.

Impunity for acts of violence against HRDs continues to enable an environment of frequent killings. Among those cases for which Front Line Defenders has collected data, only 12% resulted in the arrest of suspects. The levels of impunity which exist are exemplified by a case in Guatemala in April when a court acquitted the head of security of a mine – then owned by Canadian company Hudbay Minerals – for the murder of indigenous HRD, Adolfo Ich, and the shooting of another, German Chub, in 2009. The acquittal came despite evidence from a witness linking the accused to the shooting, in addition to ballistic and forensic evidence placing him at the scene. Following the ruling, the judge requested that criminal charges be brought against many of those responsible for the prosecution, including the HRD's widow for allegedly "obstructing justice and falsifying information". The family of the deceased defender has faced intimidation over the past three years, including having gunshots fired outside their home as they slept.

The human rights world suffered a cruel loss in July when Nobel Peace Prize winner Liu Xiaobo died of liver cancer in the eighth year of an 11-year prison sentence in China. He developed the cancer sometime after his imprisonment in 2009, yet prison officials failed to provide sufficient medical attention. Doctors finally evaluated him in late May 2017 and diagnosed the disease, but by that point, Liu Xiaobo's cancer had already reached a terminal phase. At that point, he was transferred to a hospital, but he was not released from detention – he remained under strict guard. His wife, Liu Xia, remained under house arrest even after his death, despite never having been accused, charged or convicted of any crime. Liu Xiaobo was the first Nobel laureate to die in custody since 1935, when a German pacifist and dissident, Carl von Ossietzky, died under Nazi guard in hospital. Liu's treatment and death was, as EU Special Representative Stavros Lambrinidis noted at the Dublin Platform for Human Rights Defenders, "a shameful, shameful example for China to set for its people and the world." Failure to provide **appropriate medical care** for HRDs in detention is a recurring trend and yet another tool in the arsenal of repressive states to punish defenders. November witnessed the death of detained Nubian rights defender Gamal Sorour in Egypt due to medical negligence, following his arrest for participation in a peaceful protest.

In each region of the world, **criminalisation remained the most common way in which governments targeted HRDs** to stop their work and delegitimise them in the eyes of their communities. A variety of spurious charges were used to

imprison HRDs who were seen by governments as such a threat that they attempted to jail them for life – or worse. In a number of countries, HRDs were accused of such offences as ‘waging war against the state’ and ‘secession’, charges which carried the death penalty. That HRDs in two countries – Sudan and Cameroon - received presidential pardons on such serious charges only served to highlight the absurdity of the charges in the first place.

States persisted in the use of broadly defined **anti-terrorism legislation** to target defenders and moreover looked to initiate or extend states of emergency following terrorist attacks for undefined time periods. In her report to the UN General Assembly in September, the Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms while Countering Terrorism noted with concern, “the proliferation of permanent states of emergency and the normalization of exceptional national security powers within ordinary legal systems”.² This was evident in Turkey, where the ongoing state of emergency declared following an attempted *coup* in mid-2016 allowed for the detention of hundreds of HRDs, including the case of ten activists attending a human rights workshop who were charged with support for terrorism.

Elsewhere, defenders who organised protests, defended ancestral lands or documented violations that occurred when police used force to disperse gatherings were routinely detained, threatened and harassed. The use of **violence as a ‘first resort’** to respond to people peacefully exercising their freedom of assembly became increasingly common. This was evident in Africa, Asia, the Americas, MENA and in Europe, where Spanish police used excessive force against non-violent supporters of Catalan independence. There was also an uptick in the targeting of international observers and organisations attempting to document human rights violations. In Belarus, 58 international monitors, including a Front Line Defenders staff member, were briefly detained and questioned by police as they prepared to observe a peaceful demonstration. A defamation campaign was carried out targeting Global Witness in Honduras (and also mentioning Front Line Defenders and Oxfam) which accused the organisation of being politically motivated in its work to support defenders of land, environmental and indigenous peoples’ rights, echoing a common accusation levelled against HRDs.

Governments continued to drive a narrative that oversight of their human rights records constituted ‘foreign interference in their domestic affairs’, largely disregarding international standards to which they had willingly committed. When state-dominated media run inflammatory campaigns espousing these sentiments, and thousands of rabidly patriotic commentators echo such accusations online, the very act of questioning government policy or highlighting violations becomes extremely dangerous. Defenders face a **bombardment of hate mail and threats** as well as heightened risk of attack in public places after their photographs and personal details are shared online. A defender of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) rights in Indonesia reported receiving over 500 violent comments on a poem she published online in which she condemned a minister’s anti-LGBTI tweet. A further effect (and objective) of character assassinations is to isolate and alienate the defenders from the public at large, driving a wedge between them and those whose rights they are often fighting to protect. In this way HRDs can be targeted by governments as public enemies, conveniently deflecting attention away from those governments’ own shortcomings.

Isolating HRDs from international allies was a common tactic used by governments, which **deployed travel bans** and made use of legislation restricting **foreign funding** for NGOs in order to limit international contact. Reprisals against those interacting with international human rights mechanisms remained a serious issue of concern and the UN Secretary General’s September report to the General Assembly highlighting 26 countries where reprisals had taken place was welcome in drawing more attention to the issue. However, reprisals are likely to continue unless until the Human Rights Council is equipped with a means to sanction countries that systematically prevent defenders from freely cooperating with the UN.

Defamation, intimidation and threats were more commonly used against women human rights defenders (WHRDs) than their male counterparts and often contained a gendered dimension; 23% of the Urgent Appeals issued by Front Line Defenders in 2017 on WHRDs related to threats or intimidation because of their work, compared to 10% for their male counterparts. Some of these were threats of sexual violence – in July, Malaysian WHRD and lawyer, Siti Kasim, received online threats of rape, death and acid attack following comments she made in defence of LGBTI rights. In Bahrain, Ebtisam al-Saegh was threatened with rape by police if she did not put a stop to her human rights work. She was further subjected to sexual assault while in police custody, seemingly as a reprisal for her cooperation with UN human rights mechanisms. Children of WHRDs were also threatened, as was the case with the daughter of Maria Leonilda Ravelo Grimaldo in Colombia who had a gun pointed at her by two men on a motorcycle. The additional and gendered dynamic to the targeting of WHRDs was prevalent in every region in 2017. Furthermore, WHRDs met discrimination within the human rights movement itself as they challenged cultural and social norms in the course of their public engagement with human rights work.

The reach of repressive states continued to extend into third countries, where HRDs were surveilled, harassed or attacked for engaging in human rights defence, making self-censorship a growing concern. In May, exiled investigative journalist Afgan Mukhtarli was abducted and spirited over the border from Georgia to Azerbaijan where he emerged 24

hours later in police custody. That same month, a group of Egyptian defenders participating in a human rights meeting in Rome were followed, harassed and filmed. The footage was subsequently used to form the basis of a smear campaign against the HRDs on Egyptian television where an MP and TV presenter called for their abduction and stated that “any traitor should be brought in a coffin from abroad.”

HRDs **working in war zones** operated in perhaps the most dangerous environment of all as the unpredictable nature of various conflicts made security planning extremely difficult. Added to that was often the complete absence of rule of law or networks of support to assist HRDs in their work, and the presence of multiple aggressors, all of whom may see the work of HRDs documenting violations as problematic. Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, South Sudan, Syria and Yemen were just some of the countries where defenders bravely continued their work despite ongoing armed conflicts. In Libya, observers from the Libyan Centre for Freedom of the Press documented systematic physical attacks and serious threats against Libyan journalists and bloggers who report atrocities committed by the armed groups fighting throughout the country. In December, authorities in Tripoli prevented the Centre from holding a public event and threatened its leaders.

Despite the challenging circumstances outlined above, there were some **victories for the human rights movement** during the course of the year. Pressure exerted on governments through well-coordinated mass mobilisation campaigns contributed to the release of defenders from custody or the overturning of their convictions in Cameroon, Sudan, Tanzania and Turkey (see below). In November, a Norwegian-led resolution reaffirming the importance of the work done by HRDs was passed by consensus at the UN Human Rights Council, demonstrating that although HRDs are under attack in as many countries as ever, an international commitment to their protection remains. Given that a 2015 resolution at the General Assembly in support of HRDs was adopted only by majority vote, a return to adoption by consensus was a positive assertion of this commitment.

Nonetheless, the global political context, which includes US President Trump supporting autocrats accused of systematic human rights violations such as Philippine President Duterte, ensured continuing difficulties for HRDs. As the EU remained focused on issues of migration and Brexit, it was distracted from one of its general objectives, namely to “influence third countries to carry out their obligations to respect the rights of human rights defenders” and the regression of rights in EU countries such as Poland and Hungary.³ Turkey and Egypt slid ever deeper into authoritarianism, while **political crises** gripped numerous countries in the Americas, leading to the imprisonment and deaths of HRDs. Xi Jinping further consolidated his power in China at the 19th Party Congress, but slowing economic growth and increasing protests and frustrations with corruption are likely to continue to undermine the legitimacy of the party, ensuring the brutal crackdown on defenders which has taken place under his command will continue into the coming years. Vladimir Putin’s announcement that he would run again for President in 2018 makes a similar situation likely in Russia.

2018 marks the 20th anniversary of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders. In the two decades since the Declaration the significant growth and achievements of the global human rights movement has not been matched by the commitment and resolve of governments to human rights. Many governments continue to pledge support for HRDs at the international level while undermining them at every opportunity at home.

africa

State actors and those affiliated with state security forces were largely responsible for violations against HRDs in Africa in 2017. Killings, attempted killings, judicial harassment, arbitrary detention and dissolution of civil society organisations were all used to target HRDs.

Security forces in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Uganda were likely **responsible for the murders** of at least three HRDs during the course of the year. Alphonse Luanda Kalyamba and Alex Tsongo Sikuliwako were working in the eastern regions of the DRC and were shot dead by attackers believed to be members of the national armed forces in June and July, respectively. Kalyamba was probably targeted for his advocacy on behalf of child soldiers in the area while Sikuliwako had been assisting a victim of extortion and arbitrary arrest by the military prosecutor's office. In Uganda, anti-corruption activist Erasmus Iumba was shot dead by members of his country's security forces in June. Five months later, Sibonelo Patrick Mpeku, an advocate for the rights of shack dwellers in South Africa, was dragged from his house and stabbed to death in what looked like retaliation for his activism. There is little expectation that those involved in the attacks in the DRC will be held accountable as **impunity remains** the norm. There has been no proper investigation into the killings of Marcel Tengeneza and Father Vincent Machozi, two HRDs whose murders Front Line Defenders noted in the organisation's 2016 Annual Report. There was more positive news in Erasmus Iumba's case from Uganda, where **a number of suspects were arrested** and trial proceedings were initiated against them. Similar efforts were observed in neighbouring Kenya where five people, including police officers, appeared in court on different dates in 2017 in connection with their suspected involvement in the kidnapping and subsequent killing of human rights lawyer Willy Kimani, his client and a taxi driver in 2016. These prosecutions, however, remain the exception rather than the rule.

In Uganda, James Rukanpana was **shot and wounded** in September in retaliation for his work advocating for the rights of local communities to access twenty crater lakes for water and domestic fishing following the acquisition of the lakes by private company Ferdsult Engineering Services Limited. It was later established that the person who shot the defender was a security guard working at Ferdsult Engineering Services Limited. The police arrested the security guard but his trial is yet to begin.

Authorities in a number of African countries continued to **arbitrarily arrest, detain and open frivolous court cases** against HRDs. Arrests were often carried out against defenders after officials publicly equated their human rights activism with a refusal to abide by the law or as a ploy to incite the population against the state. Such was the case of two defenders in Tanzania who were arrested in connection with a capacity-building workshop focused on governance issues in mining areas. They were charged with "disobedience of statutory duty," although a court later dismissed the charges. Two HRDs from Somaliland were arrested for having publicly called for accountability in the police force and an end to police impunity in the autonomous region of Somalia.

Charges related to 'terrorism', often under broad and vague national security legislation, and of **'endangering state security'**, were used to target HRDs in Burundi, Cameroon, Chad, Ethiopia, Niger, Senegal and Togo. Authorities in Cameroon made extensive use of a 2014 anti-terrorism law to curb civil society activities and to target HRDs. In April, Radio France International's Hausa language correspondent Ahmed Abba was sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment and a fine of €84,000 by the Yaoundé Military Court for "non-denunciation of terrorism" and "laundering of the proceeds of terrorist acts". On appeal in December, he was acquitted of the latter charge but the former charge was upheld and he was sentenced to two years' imprisonment, time which he had already served. The defender was arrested in the city of Maroua in 2015 while documenting attacks committed by Boko Haram in the north of the country.

Scores of incidents of police harassment against HRDs demonstrated however, that authorities were willing to use any means at their disposal to silence critical voices. This was particularly noticeable in the targeting of various pro-democracy movements which continued to gain momentum in different parts of the continent. In Niger and Chad, leaders of the "Tournons La Page" Campaign – an international movement advocating for peaceful democratic transfer of power and active in seven African countries⁴ – were arrested and arbitrarily detained. In Niger, the coordinator of the movement was targeted as a result of his affiliation with the campaign, but taken to court on "misappropriation" charges which the

POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTS

2017 saw the beginning of a "new era" in The Gambia after the democratic election of Adama Barrow to power at the end of 2016. HRDs in the country report that the new president has significantly expanded the space for freedom of expression following 23 years of authoritarian rule by Yahya Jammeh.

prosecutor was unable to sustain. Members of two major pro-democracy movements in the DRC, LUCHA and Filimbi, which have been at the forefront of a civil society campaign for the peaceful transfer of power and organisation of timely elections, repeatedly suffered **police brutality and arbitrary detention** due to their peaceful protests. HRDs were frequently held in police custody without formal charges; if they were charged, the allegations against them tended to involve accusations of undermining state security.

Defenders pushing for a rights-based approach to the **exploitation of natural resources** also found themselves at risk. In October, an environmental rights defender, Raleva, was detained and charged with ‘impersonating a district head’ in response to his persistent advocacy for communities affected by gold mining by a Chinese company in Mananjary district of Madagascar. At the time of writing, he remained in custody. In October, a long-delayed but welcome development saw the high court in Malawi overturn the conviction of eight Tanzanian environmental defenders who, in April 2017, had been found guilty and handed suspended sentences by a lower court for “criminal trespassing” and “conducting reconnaissance without permission”. The charges had been brought against them in connection with a planned inspection of the Kayelekera Uranium mine.

Despite the ground gained by some of the pro-democracy movements mentioned above, there was little let-up in state attempts to limit the effectiveness and reach of NGOs. In Tanzania, immigration officers launched an inquiry to probe the citizenship of the coordinator of the Tanzanian Coalition of Human Rights Defenders, while in Mauritania, authorities confiscated the passport of award-winning⁵ human rights defender and president of an anti-slavery organisation, Biram Dah Abeid. In Kenya, a number of human rights organisations received a **“notice of de-registration,”** and at least one was raided by officials from the Kenya Revenue Authorities. In Tanzania, a mandatory system was introduced in August under which all NGOs must be verified and registered, putting an additional strain on organisations advocating for causes like LGBTI rights, which remain unpopular in the country.

In view of the very difficult environment in which HRDs operate throughout the continent, local civil society organisations have been advocating for the adoption of **national legislation** to recognise and protect HRDs. Throughout the year, there was a strengthening of civil society action in West Africa in favour of adopting these laws. In Burkina Faso, a national law for the protection of HRDs was adopted by the National Assembly on 27 June, while the implementation decree of a law passed in Côte d’Ivoire was adopted in February 2017. In Mali, at the time of writing, a draft law was before the Parliament. Niger and Sierra Leone were at an early stage of the legislative process.

ISSUE IN FOCUS: ANGLOPHONE PROTESTS IN CAMEROON

At the end of 2016, lawyers, students, teachers and civil society groups from the northwest and southwest regions of Cameroon engaged in strikes and protests for several weeks in opposition to what they perceived as the marginalisation of the Anglophone minority. Lawyers who started the demonstrations were shortly followed by teachers before the movement spread to other sectors of society. These intense social protests were severely repressed by security forces leading to the deaths of many protesters, hundreds of injuries and scores of arrests.

In an effort to silence HRDs, authorities used restrictive legislation to curtail freedom of expression and assembly. In January, the government arrested two civil society leaders, Barrister Nkongho Felix Agbor-Balla and Dr. Fontem Aforteka’a Neba, representatives of the Anglophone movement, and banned their organisation, Cameroon Anglophone Civil Society Consortium, which had been involved in organising non-violent civil disobedience to protest conditions in schools and to demand the release of imprisoned students and teachers in late 2016 and early 2017. They were detained until the end of August before being released on a presidential pardon. Nasako Besingi, an environmental rights defender who had been outspoken in his condemnation of the police violence used against the protesters, was arrested by security forces in September 2017 and taken to Buea prison, where he was detained for two months before being released.

With presidential elections due in 2018, the Anglophone crisis could lead to greater political instability if it is not resolved. The arrest of the movement’s leading figures, sporadic violence and repressive government measures marked a new phase of the crisis and the aggressive stance taken by the government thus far does not appear to be bringing the situation any closer to a resolution. While a nascent secessionist movement is still marginal, it can no longer be considered insignificant.

COUNTRY IN FOCUS: ZIMBABWE

As 2017 drew to a close, the 37-year rule of President Robert Mugabe was brought to an abrupt end when the army intervened to ensure that power was passed to a former Mugabe ally, Emmerson Mnangagwa. While thousands of people took to the streets in celebration at Mugabe's demise, HRDs signalled caution and warned against expectations of radical change in the environment for human rights defence. Palpable relief at Mugabe's departure among HRDs is understandable given the way his regime treated HRDs and opposition activists – two distinct groups that he intentionally and routinely conflated. The mass killings Mugabe unleashed on communities as he entrenched his power in the years after independence set the tone for long years of unchecked state violence, widespread violations of human rights and political intolerance.

HRDs working to denounce corruption, economic mismanagement and human rights violations perpetrated by police, military and other government agents were routinely targeted and subjected to judicial harassment and arbitrary detention. Also targeted were defenders working on democracy, good governance and public accountability; LGBTI rights and women's rights; freedom of speech; documenting human rights abuses; and advocating for transparency in the country's extractive industries. Throughout Mugabe's administration, particularly during episodes of political crisis, torture and abduction were used as tactics to intimidate or silence those perceived as political opponents, among them HRDs. It was in this context, for instance, that HRD Itai Dzamara was abducted in 2015 and remains disappeared more than two years later.

Emmerson Mnangagwa is the notorious architect of the structures within the ZANU-PF ruling party who oversaw well-documented violations of human rights in Zimbabwe while acting as Mugabe's right-hand man for nearly four decades; this may indicate that what has taken place may simply be a mere changing of the guard.

americas

In 2017, the Americas witnessed not only a rise in the number of killings of HRDs, but defenders also reported an **increase in the level of violence** with which other attacks occur, in many cases committed by the state itself reinforced by the deployment of military forces in a public security role.

At least **212 HRDs were killed in the Americas in 2017**, with 156 of these killings taking place in Brazil and Colombia alone.⁶ 2017 also saw the highest number of killings of environmental defenders and journalists registered in Mexico in recent years, in the midst of a crisis of violence throughout the country. The approval of a new Internal Security Law in Mexico in December that allows for the use of the armed forces in a public security role is particularly worrying, due to the ambiguous wording, its likely arbitrary implementation and possible negative effects on social protest. In Colombia, the peace agreement between the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) was expected to lead to a reduction in violence; however, the number of murders of HRDs has actually increased since the agreement was signed. Most of the defenders killed were local leaders engaged in social or communal work in their territories and died at the hands of paramilitary or 'unidentified' armed actors. Land has been at the root of the armed conflict and, without an appropriate implementation of rural reforms and the dismantling of paramilitary and other armed groups, there will likely be a continuation of the pattern in which demobilised areas see other armed actors rush to gain control of territories previously held by the FARC.

POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTS

In January, a group of seven Guatemalan HRDs achieved a significant breakthrough when a Canadian appellate court cleared the way for them to bring a lawsuit against Tahoe Resources, a Canadian mining company, for injuries they suffered as a result of a violent dispersal of a peaceful protest at the Escobal silver mine. It is hoped that this will set a precedent and force Canadian mining companies to improve their human rights standards, especially as they relate to HRDs protesting against the destructive impact of mining.

In Brazil, there was an increase in both violence and the **involvement of state security forces**. In May, ten peaceful land rights defenders were shot dead by police in Pau D'arco. Six weeks later, a witness to the massacre who had gone into hiding was also murdered. Although most of the killings in the country are related to the defence of land and indigenous peoples' rights, violence against HRDs has gone far beyond these sectors and includes violations in urban areas, such as against HRDs working in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro or LGBTI groups in Curitiba. This situation has been exacerbated by the political crisis, legislative reversals where previously guaranteed rights are downgraded and an increasingly hostile environment for HRDs. Defenders were **regularly slandered**, including by politicians, businesspeople and religious leaders, as 'bad' or 'morally corrupt' people who 'deserve' whatever happens to them. This type of discourse, mostly visible in online platforms, increases the space for such violent attacks to take place. Unfortunately, this was not only the case in Brazil; HRDs across the region were portrayed as traitors, terrorists, imperialists and 'feminazis', and variations of these terms depending on the country. Defenders were attacked on TV shows, social media, radio programmes and in newspapers.

Violence against HRDs escalated in tandem with **political and economic crises** in Venezuela, Brazil, Guatemala, Paraguay, Honduras and Argentina. When public dissatisfaction was manifested through protests, **excessive force** was used as an initial response – sometimes the only one – to disperse peaceful demonstrations. More than a dozen protesters were killed in Honduras in the aftermath of the presidential election in November, while over 160 demonstrators were killed in Venezuela over a period of three months. HRDs were targeted both for organising and mobilising communities and highlighting the human rights violations which subsequently occurred when state security forces intervened. In August 2017, Santiago Maldonado disappeared during a protest for the rights of the indigenous Mapuche people, which was violently repressed by the Gendarmeria Nacional Argentina (GNA), a military security force; his body was found almost three months later in circumstances still to be clarified. In September, a bus full of human rights observers in Honduras was intercepted by state security forces who threw tear gas into the bus, resulting in the hospitalisation of a number of HRDs who had been planning to document the ongoing repression against the university student movement.

After four years of legal appeals by environmental organisation Fundación Pachamama, the Ecuadoran Ministry of the Environment announced in November that it would reverse the 2013 decision to close the NGO's offices and dissolve its legal status. Ecuador had started 2017 with the attempted dissolution of another environmental rights organisation, Acción Ecológica, after the NGO had called for the creation of an Environmental Truth Commission to investigate environmental destruction and violations of the rights of indigenous peoples affected by mining activities. The organisation was then falsely accused of 'straying from its legally-constituted objectives' and 'posing a threat to national security'. Although the decision in the Fundación Pachamama case was a very welcome development, **restrictions on the operation and financing** of civil society

FRONT LINE DEFENDERS

organisations remained a concern in the region, from the freezing of Centro de Documentación e Información's Bolivia bank accounts to the discussion of a restrictive NGO Law in Guatemala.

Filing **baseless lawsuits** against HRDs was still one of the most common strategies used by both governments and non-state actors. Peru, Colombia, Guatemala, Ecuador, Honduras and Mexico accounted for most of the cases reported to Front Line Defenders in 2017. On many occasions, judicial harassment was preceded or accompanied by defamation and smear campaigns at the local level. In a typical case from Guatemala, land rights defender Abelino Chub Caal was charged with 'aggravated land grabbing', 'arson', 'coercion', 'illicit association' and 'belonging to illicit armed groups' in February, following his persistent work in defence of local peoples. He remained in custody at the end of the year despite the prosecutor's request to suspend the criminal case in the absence of evidence against him. Abelino accompanies 29 communities whose land, environmental and cultural rights are threatened by mining interests.

The number and frequency of **attacks against WHRDs** also rose. The threats and attacks they received often included elements related not only to their work but also to their gender. Front Line Defenders received information on such cases from El Salvador, Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Mexico, Brazil, Colombia, Peru and Honduras. Examples included threats of violence and sexual torture and character assassinations on social media, as well as attacks directed at family members or close relatives. In April, a friend of campesino leader Marylen Serna Salinas was abducted and sexually assaulted by three unidentified men in Popayán, Colombia. The men stated the reason for the attack was Marylen's work. The son of Francisca Ramirez was assaulted in April in reprisal for her work in defence of rural communities in Nicaragua. In July, the son of labour rights defender Rita Amador López, from Mexico, received a call from an unknown woman who told him to "...tell Rita that (...) we are going to kill one of her children".

During the course of the year, Front Line Defenders also received reports of an alarming increase in **homophobic and transphobic attacks** in Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Honduras and Peru. In July, the attempted murder of Osmin David Valle Castillo, a prominent HRD in the LGBTI community in Honduras, took place a few months after he had requested government protection measures, which were never properly implemented. LGBTI defenders in the region were also targeted on social media, where threats against them were almost a daily occurrence. Anti-LGBTI campaigns such as 'Don't Mess with My Children' in Ecuador and Peru, or campaigns led by groups seeking to undermine sexual and reproductive rights gathered strength and helped generate a climate of impunity for attacks against LGBTI defenders and WHRDs.

Throughout the Americas, HRDs persistently reported **cyberattacks targeting** their work, with distributed denial of service (DDoS) attacks against civil society organisations and independent media outlets remaining the most common form. In 2017, Front Line Defenders documented such attacks in Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru, Guatemala and Nicaragua. In June, the *New York Times* published an in-depth article on the Mexican government's deployment of US\$80 million worth of spyware against lawyers, journalists and HRDs.⁷ The report featured evidence on the cases of 12 HRDs and their relatives, who were targeted through highly personalised and persistent hacking attempts.

ISSUE IN FOCUS: STATE INVOLVEMENT IN THE DEATH OF ENVIRONMENTAL RIGHTS DEFENDER BERTA CACERES

In November, an International Advisory Group of Experts (GAIPE), convened to investigate the circumstances of the killing of environmental rights defender Berta Cáceres in Honduras in March 2016, published its findings.⁸ The report shows the link between high-level state and non-state actors in her murder. "Dam of violence: the plan that murdered Berta Cáceres" synthesizes an analysis of more than 40,000 pages of telephone records, as well as of chats, text messages, GPS coordinates, and e-mails extracted from some of the mobile phones seized in the criminal investigation. The report reveals that the plan to kill the defender was hatched in November 2015. Information obtained through telephone records confirms that there was an attempt on her life on 5 and 6 February 2016. The report also exposes the existence of a criminal network, composed of executives and employees of the company DESA, state agents and hired killers, all of whom had varying levels of responsibility for the murder. Although eight people are facing trial for the murder, the Public Prosecutor's Office has not shown any progress in relation to intellectual authorship, despite the fact that it has sufficient evidence to promote new lines of investigation. GAIPE also points to the role of international financial institutions, which, despite having prior information about the actions of DESA and its repressive behaviour towards communities in opposition to the dam, failed to ensure that the rights of the affected communities were respected.

COUNTRY IN FOCUS: EL SALVADOR

Environmental rights defenders in El Salvador celebrated a long fought victory when, on 29 March, the government unanimously approved a law to ban metal mining. It is the first time a country has been officially declared mining-free. For decades, Salvadorian HRDs accompanied and mobilised communities who were negatively impacted by mining projects. Although rainfall is plentiful in the country, almost all surface water is polluted. Large-scale mining projects exacerbated existing problems, exploiting water resources that were vital for local communities and further polluting their territories. The promised benefits, if they ever come, do not outweigh the negative impact on the environment; water scarcity, pollution, destruction of forests and toxic waste are only some of the consequences of large-scale mining activities. HRDs who oppose these types of projects are among those most at risk. Since 2006, at least five HRDs have been murdered because of their work in defence of the environment in the country. Despite the ongoing threats and violence, HRDs have built a strong and inclusive network to coordinate their activities, which was key to advancing their cause. Regardless of whether other countries follow El Salvador's example, this victory has been hailed as a source of inspiration and motivation for environmental rights defenders around the world.

asia and the pacific

Elections and electoral campaigns held in 2017 were a catalyst for a significant **increase in repression** and the detention of scores of HRDs (see below). While defenders were busy tackling various forms of attacks, including killings, physical attacks, arbitrary arrests and judicial harassment, they also were forced to invest significant resources and effort to develop new protection strategies to ward off ever-increasing threats.

Advocacy for the protection of HRDs has become more and more difficult in Asia as governments in the region adopt increasingly authoritarian approaches to governance and label human rights as ‘Western values’. The growing **political and economic influence** of China on many Asian countries has served to weaken the impact of international human rights advocacy. In October, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte accused the European Union of interfering in the domestic affairs of the Philippines and threatened to expel EU ambassadors from the country if criticism of his human rights record continued. The following month Duterte called on police to shoot HRDs if they were ‘obstructing justice’ in his so-called ‘war on drugs’. In September, in response to Western governments’ criticism of the crackdown on dissent in Cambodia, a Chinese foreign ministry spokesman stated that China “supports the Cambodian government’s efforts to protect national security and stability.”⁹ While many states strongly criticised Myanmar for the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingyas in the west of the country, China took the opportunity to stage a public expression of support by opening a liaison office in the administrative capital of Naypyidaw — a step other countries have been reluctant to take because of the city’s isolation and association with the military.

POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTS

In May, the Taiwanese Supreme Court ruled that same-sex couples had the right to marry under Taiwan’s constitution, making it the first Asian country to sanction gay marriage. Taiwanese human rights organisations played a crucial role in promoting LGBTI rights; the Taiwan Alliance to Promote Civil Partnership Rights and other groups held dozens of protests and assemblies, organised information campaigns, filed marriage equality cases in courts, and petitioned legislators and other government officials to accelerate legislation supporting marriage equality.

The **killings and enforced disappearance** of HRDs continued to occur with alarming frequency. As in previous years, the vast majority of defenders killed in Asia were those protecting community and/or indigenous peoples’ rights in the face of **agribusiness and extractive industry** in the Philippines, which remains one of the most dangerous countries in the world to be a human rights defender. In February, Lumad indigenous leader Renato Anglao was shot twice in the head as he travelled by motorcycle with his wife and five year old daughter in Quezon, Bukidnon province, Northern Mindanao. The defender had been documenting and publicising human rights violations arising from the encroachment of cattle ranchers and pineapple plantation owners on ancestral lands of the Manobo-Pulangion tribe. In what has become a typical refrain from law enforcement in the aftermath of a killing, local police alleged that Renato Anglao was on “the list of the identified illegal drug personalities in its area”.¹⁰ At the time of writing, no investigation had taken place into his death. Killings of HRDs also took place in Bangladesh, India, the Maldives, Myanmar, Pakistan and Thailand.

In Pakistan, **enforced disappearances** continued to be a common tactic of intimidation and repression. Several HRDs, including bloggers and campaigners against enforced disappearances, were abducted. Some returned after a few days, but many others remain missing. Enforced disappearances were also common in China, where HRDs were routinely taken by state security forces and held for varying periods of time in undisclosed locations. A court-approved system called “Residential Surveillance in a Designated Location” allows police to detain a suspect in any location of their choosing without necessarily informing the family of the detainee. Human rights lawyers Jiang Tianyong, Gao Zhisheng and Xie Yang were all subjected to this form of detention in 2017. In targeting HRDs for killing, abduction and incommunicado detention, perpetrators deliberately pursued the most outspoken HRDs in order to dissuade others from following their paths.

Detention, arrests and summonses were deployed in Cambodia, China, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Vietnam while prison sentences were handed down to HRDs in China and Vietnam. **Harassment, threats and intimidation** of defenders took place across the region, including in Bangladesh, India and Thailand. In June, WHRD and lawyer Sultana Kamal, who works on gender, environmental and civil and political rights in Bangladesh, received death threats from a hardline Islamist group following her defence of the installation of a statue of Lady Justice outside the Supreme Court in Dhaka.

Increased use of **restrictive legislation** was seen in Myanmar, Malaysia and the Maldives, where variations of a ‘peaceful assembly act’ were used in order to limit defenders’ abilities to mobilise. Attempts to curb their influence online were evident

through the widespread use of internet-related legislation, such as the Information, Communication and Technology Act in Bangladesh, the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act in Pakistan, the Cyber Crime Law in Thailand, and the Communications and Multimedia Act in Malaysia.

WHRDs and LGBTI defenders continued to face increased and often unique challenges, driven by **deep-rooted patriarchal traditions** in many Asian societies. Furthermore, those working on rights rejected by religious extremist groups were at heightened risk due to attacks and violence, increasingly in a more targeted and personal form. At least 11 WHRDs were killed in Asia in 2017. In Indonesia, defenders working on LGBTI rights faced death threats, office raids and physical attacks from both government forces and Islamists.

ISSUE IN FOCUS: PRE-ELECTION CRACKDOWN ON HRDS

Several Asian countries will hold national elections in 2018 and 2019. Ahead of these elections, governments have initiated crackdowns on whomever they consider threats to their political power, including HRDs critical of government wrongdoing. Cambodia is the most crude example of this, where the targeting of HRDs significantly increased following the local elections in June. By year-end, the main opposition party had been shut down, independent media muzzled and HRDs, journalists and politicians all subjected to arrest. In Malaysia, ahead of the 2018 general election, the government has targeted HRDs demanding free and fair elections or protesting against corruption. HRDs were hit with trumped up charges of organising unlawful assemblies, office raids and arbitrary detention. In Indonesia, where a presidential election will take place in 2019, religion is becoming an increasingly dominant issue and is used to make populist attacks on minorities including against HRDs defending the rights of the LGBTI community and religious minorities. HRDs have experienced mob attacks, smear campaigns and death threats.

In the Maldives, HRDs were targeted for highlighting government failures ahead of the 2018 presidential election. In April, prominent HRD and social media activist Yameen Rasheed was brutally stabbed to death. Yameen had been campaigning for justice following the disappearance of a fellow HRD in 2014. He was also an outspoken critic of government corruption and battled against impunity for crimes against journalists and attacks on freedom of expression. His killing was intended to send a message to dissenting voices and in its wake, several HRDs temporarily left the country. In September, the Maldivian government suspended 54 lawyers from practising in any court after they attempted to raise concerns about the independence of the judiciary. In Pakistan, power plays took place between political leaders and the military with an eye towards 2018 elections. HRDs were caught in the middle as those critical of military abuses or campaigning against enforced disappearances by the military were abducted and tortured. In Bangladesh, the government has been careful to maintain the political status quo and thus has been extremely heavy handed in response to any perceived criticism. HRDs were killed and disappeared, threatened and subjected to fabricated charges while protests were stopped with disproportionate force.

COUNTRY IN FOCUS: VIETNAM

Vietnamese bloggers, academics and citizen journalists who have been working for years to push forward a human rights agenda were targeted in a systematic campaign in 2017. Those advocating for freedom of expression, environmental rights and religious rights were arrested, charged and handed lengthy jail terms as “enemies of the state”. Articles 79 and 88 of the Penal Code, relating to “activities aimed at overthrowing the government” and “anti-state propaganda” were used to sentence HRDs Nguyen Ngoc Nhu Quynh (aka Me Nam), Tran Thi Nga and Nguyen Van Oai to five to ten years in jail and additional time under house arrest.

A number of loosely organised HRDs and groups using the Internet to promote human rights bore the brunt of the crackdown and were targeted with arbitrary arrests and incommunicado detentions. HRDs also faced harassment, intimidation and surveillance for liaising with foreign diplomats or meeting representatives of international human rights organisations. In November, three HRDs were detained after meeting with the EU Delegation in Hanoi ahead of the EU-Vietnam Human Rights Dialogue. Environmental rights defenders peacefully protesting the government’s lack of transparency following a massive oil spill by Formosa, a Taiwanese-owned company, were physically attacked when exercising their right to freedom of assembly. In November 2017, 22-year-old Nguyen Van Hoa was sentenced to seven years in prison for reporting on the Formosa spill. While Vietnam had seemed to be making some progress towards greater respect for human rights and civil society, this ground to a halt in 2017, with some HRDs suggesting a link to China’s increasing influence in the region and the deprioritisation of human rights by the US under President Trump.

europa and central asia

In the eastern part of the region, threats, **judicial harassment and physical attacks** were the most common ways HRDs were targeted, while the legitimacy of their work was consistently under assault by state-driven discourse. Within the European Union, continued expression of support for HRDs did not stop a deterioration of the situation for civil society in some of its member states.

The struggle to gain control of the civil society narrative was evident in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan as a new sophistication emerged in the organisation, development and influence of **'government-organised non-governmental organisations' (GONGOs)**. These GONGOs, which operated much more coherently than in previous years, championed government perspectives in efforts to drown out independent civil society voices. They influenced national legislations and were increasingly present at international human rights conferences and gatherings in order to promote pro-government agendas and so-called "traditional values".

Legislation restricting access to foreign funding for NGOs or penalising recipients of such assistance continued to spread in the region. Obsessed with the activities of Hungarian-born philanthropist George Soros, the Hungarian government adopted a law targeting NGOs receiving more than US\$24,000 annually in foreign donations and which fail to both register with the authorities within 15 days as a "foreign funded organisation" and advertise this fact on their websites and all their publications. Amnesty International Hungary announced that it would not comply with these regulations and that it would challenge the legislation in court. In Ukraine, a similar draft law imposing reporting requirements upon organisations in receipt of foreign aid, services and international technical assistance is still pending. In Ireland, as a result of the broad definition of "political purposes" in the electoral legislation, Amnesty International Ireland has been instructed by the Standards in Public Office Commission to return some funding from Open Society Foundation (OSF) in advance of an expected referendum on sexual and reproductive rights in 2018.

In a positive development in Russia, the first case of criminal persecution of a head of an NGO under the Foreign Agent Law was closed in July with the acquittal of Valentina Cherevatenko, Chair of the Coordination Council of the Women of the Don Union. Nevertheless, to date, 88 civil society organisations are designated as performing the functions of **"foreign agents"**, with all the main Russian human rights organisations among them.

The 2015 law on **"undesirable organisations"**, which bans any foreign organisation deemed to undermine Russia's security, defence, or constitutional order, continued to be used against NGOs. To date, the register of "undesirable organisations" includes 11 organisations. In 2017, SOVA Centre for Information and Analysis, a human rights think tank, and the Andrey Rylkov Foundation for Health and Social Justice, which works with drug users, were charged with violation of this legislation because of hyperlinks on their websites to OSF and the US-funded National Endowment for Democracy (NED) which had previously funded the NGOs. Both NED and OSF are designated as "undesirable organisations" in Russia. In November, a new **"Foreign Agent Media" Law** was signed. It targets media organisations receiving foreign funding by imposing additional requirements and introducing sanctions for media who would fail to meet them.

In December, the Polish parliament adopted two worrying laws which gives politicians the power to control appointments to the judiciary and the Supreme Court. The Council of Europe's Venice Commission described the move as putting "at serious risk the independence of all parts of the Polish judiciary".¹¹

In addition to targeting the structures of support which HRDs had built up over years, individual defenders were also frequently persecuted. HRDs in Crimea, under Russian occupation since 2014, faced numerous **police raids, interrogations and arrests**. In January, 2017 Front Line Defenders Award winner, Emil Kurbedinov, was sentenced to ten days' administrative detention for his legal representation of Crimean Tartars, who have been particularly targeted by the *de facto* authorities. The isolation of the peninsula from the international community and the departure of many local HRDs,

POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTS

In Uzbekistan, one of the more repressive countries in the region, there was the surprise early release of several HRDs who had spent many years in prison. Azam Farmonov, Ganihon Mamathanov and Salizhon Abdurakhmanov were all released from prison while Jamshid Karimov was freed from enforced psychiatric confinement. In another positive step, after many years of international isolation, the Uzbek government issued an invitation to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, who visited the country in May, and also extended invitations to representatives of international NGOs. Despite these promising developments, there were fresh arrests of journalists at the end of the year.

increased the vulnerability of those who continue to struggle for the respect of human rights in Crimea.

Defenders of the LGBTI community faced a particularly difficult year in the region. In Chechnya, journalists from Novaya Gazeta who revealed information about the huge number of detentions, instances of torture and murders of persons suspected of being gay received **death threats**. In a spectacular effort and demonstration of cooperation among defenders from different countries led by the Russian LGBT Network, many targets of attack were successfully relocated to safer areas. Defenders from the Russian LGBT Network who coordinated assistance for victims were subsequently threatened. Elsewhere in Russia, the use of discriminatory legislation, known as the “**gay propaganda law**”, resulted in the conviction and fining of Evdokia Romanova who reposted links to articles about LGBTI rights on her social media accounts. In Ukraine, several LGBTI gatherings were **physically attacked** by groups calling themselves “patriotic, and defenders of national values”. Detentions of LGBTI persons also took place on a large scale in Azerbaijan. In Tajikistan, HRDs reported the creation of lists of people identified as being gay by police.

Governments continued to repress peaceful demonstrations across the region. Beginning in February, thousands of people in Belarus protested peacefully against a decree that sanctioned people who had worked less than 183 days per year by imposing a penalty in the form of a fine and/or administrative arrest, effectively criminalising unemployment. Many HRDs were **arrested and sentenced because of their role observing demonstrations**. In a significant victory for the protesters, in October, the new version of the decree abolished the sanctions. In Spain, a referendum on independence for Catalonia resulted in an unprecedented crisis. Human rights organisations denounced the disproportionate measures limiting freedom of expression and freedom of the press while also highlighting excessive use of police force in the dispersal of demonstrations and the targeting of journalists.

Defenders of migrants’ and refugees’ rights were targeted in Croatia, Cyprus, France, Greece, Italy, Macedonia, Russia, Serbia, Turkey and Ukraine. A narrative linking human trafficking with NGOs was propagated to target HRDs assisting refugees. In December, Spanish WHRD Helena Maleno Garzón was charged in Morocco with facilitating human trafficking and clandestine immigration for her work assisting migrants and refugees. In France, Cedric Herrou, a farmer and immigration activist, was convicted in August for aiding illegal immigration and handed a four-month suspended sentence. In June, his lawyer, Mireille Damiano, received death threats in an anonymous letter accusing her of helping immigrants.

ISSUE IN FOCUS: REPRISALS AGAINST INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISTS AND ANTI-CORRUPTION ACTIVISTS

Attacks on freedom of speech through the targeting of investigative journalists was one of the main repressive trends in this region in 2017. In Malta, within the borders of the EU, investigative journalist and blogger Daphne Caruana Galizia was shockingly killed in October by a bomb planted in her car. The HRD was a vocal critic of corruption in Malta’s political scene and had received numerous threats in the past as a result of her work, in particular her contribution to the ‘Panama Papers’ investigation.

At the beginning of the year, Azerbaijani blogger and initiator of the campaign “**Hunt for Corrupt Officials**”, Mehman Huseynov, was arrested and tortured by police because of his work documenting corruption within the ruling party of Azerbaijan. He was sentenced to two years’ imprisonment on defamation charges in March. Also in Azerbaijan, police searched the office of the Turan news agency and seized equipment, and its chief editor was briefly jailed in August. At the end of the year, the Organised Crime and Corruption Reporting Project published an in-depth investigation regarding the laundering of money by Azerbaijani officials and its use to bribe Western politicians, including in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. The Project’s website was blocked in Azerbaijan and journalists were targeted, including through blackmail and threats to their families.

In Ukraine, the President signed amendments to the “**On Countering Corruption**” Law in March that oblige anti-corruption activists to submit public electronic declarations of their property status, a requirement previously only applied to public servants. Moreover, according to the amended Law, individuals who provide any services to anti-corruption NGOs are also required to submit e-declarations. Anti-corruption activists were also physically attacked in Ukraine; Evhen Lisichkin and Dmytro Bulakh from the Kharkiv Anti-corruption Centre were assaulted in reprisal for their activism. HRDs and journalists in Uzbekistan documenting police brutality and forced labour in cotton fields were arrested and beaten. Journalists exposing human rights violations in the Russian North Caucasus received death threats from high-ranking Chechen officials, who acted with impunity.

COUNTRY IN FOCUS: TURKEY

In Turkey, the repression against civil society that intensified after the 2016 failed *coup d'état*, continued in 2017. Through the wide-ranging use of state of emergency laws, the authorities significantly restricted rights to freedom of expression, media, assembly, and association, and targeted those engaged in human rights work. More than 300 NGOs were shut down and many defenders were imprisoned, lost their jobs or faced investigation. In July, eight HRDs from well known Turkish NGOs and two international trainers were arrested during a holistic protection training and charged with assistance to a terrorist organisation, marking yet another escalation of the clampdown. While in detention, a smear campaign in pro-government media outlets alleged that the HRDs were involved in a plot against Turkish interests. After more than three months in pre-trial detention, they were released pending trial. This case illustrated the absurdity of President Erdogan's purge against Turkish civil society, given that all the HRDs were well known internationally for their decades-long and non-partisan work in support of human rights. While HRDs of all types were targeted, the main targets of repression in 2017 were lawyers. Approximately 400 lawyers were sent to prison and almost a thousand others were placed under investigation. Turkey remained the top jailer of journalists in the world with 158 media personnel imprisoned, according to the Journalists' Union of Turkey. Following waves of arrest, HRDs, journalists and academics continued to leave Turkey, significantly weakening the capacity of civil society to deal with the abuses taking place and to pursue justice for those affected.

middle east and north africa

HRDs in the Middle East and North Africa continued to work in **extremely challenging circumstances** and faced numerous threats from multiple actors. The pervasiveness of authoritarianism, social exclusion, discrimination, corruption, and domestic and international conflicts made HRDs targets for different types of persecution. Nevertheless, the ongoing crackdown on HRDs and civil society in the region has not succeeded in eliminating the peaceful struggle for human rights.

Attempts to further reduce the impact of civil society were ubiquitous in Egypt as part of a broader crackdown on HRDs. In June, President el-Sisi ratified a **new restrictive NGO law** that stifles independent civil society, including development, social and humanitarian NGOs. Members of prominent human rights NGOs continued to be summoned and interrogated under case no. 173 on charges of ‘illegal foreign funding’ and ‘operation without registration’. The persecution of LGBTI defenders escalated in September after a group of activists raised the rainbow flag at a public concert in Cairo. Following the event, authorities arrested 54 people, including LGBTI defenders, across Egypt on charges of ‘habitual debauchery’ or ‘promoting debauchery’ and subjected many to forced anal examinations.

POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTS

Although progress in the struggle for LGBTI rights in the region has been slow, Tunisian civil society demonstrated what is possible when a successful campaign by LGBTI defenders resulted in the Tunisian government pledging in September at the UN Human Rights Council to cease forced anal examinations of gay men. Despite this positive development, homosexuality remains a criminal offence in the country, punishable by a three-year penalty.

Charges relating to **terrorism, state security and espionage** were frequently deployed against defenders whose work threatened the state’s monopoly of power. Six HRDs in Sudan were detained and put on trial on charges including ‘conspiracy to conduct espionage and intelligence activities in favour of foreign embassies’ and ‘waging war against the state’. Three of them were detained for almost a year – during which time two were tortured – before all six received a presidential pardon in August as a result of domestic and international pressure.

Fabricated charges, judicial harassment and incommunicado detention were all used to punish HRDs in Iran, Israel, the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT), Oman, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and the UAE. In July, the Israeli Ofer Military Court in the West Bank ordered that WHRD Khitam Saafin, President of the Union of Palestinian Women’s Rights Committee, be detained for three months, without trial, for undefined security reasons. She was accused, based on “secret” evidence which was not presented in court, of affiliating with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine.

Authorities often used force to repress protests in the region. In Morocco, security forces **violently dispersed** sit-ins organized by Hirak Rif, the movement for social and economic rights in the northern Rif region which began in October 2016. Several defenders were detained and prosecuted for their involvement with the protests. Human rights lawyer, Abdessadeq El Bouchtaoui, who was representing many of the detained protesters, is being tried for his criticism of government policies and police brutality. Similar repression took place to disperse peaceful protests calling for self-determination in Western Sahara. Algerian authorities routinely prevented HRDs from participating in peaceful protests, deploying an array of measures including **arbitrary bans on assembly, preventive detentions, use of excessive force, and prosecution of protesters and activists**. State security forces were also responsible for attacks on protests relating to social and economic issues in remote provinces of Tunisia. Civil society in the country continued its struggle to consolidate the democratic transition amid increasing concerns over lack of judicial reform and efforts to restrict freedom of association.

Defenders focussing on the **rights of minorities** have been singled out for special attention. **Kamal Eddin Fekhar**, who works on the rights of the Ibadite religious minority in Algeria, has been targeted over many years for his activism. Those defending the rights of the Nubian community in Sudan and Egypt and the Bedoon in Kuwait also received threats and harassment because of their work. In December, 32 Nubian HRDs faced trial in Egypt following peaceful protests calling for the right of return to their land and for the release of detained Nubian defenders.

In Iran, scores of activists including lawyers, labour rights defenders and WHRDs remained in prison, serving **lengthy prison sentences on arbitrary charges**. In response to their detention, poor prison conditions, ill-treatment and harassment of their family members, detained HRDs, such as children’s rights defender Atena Daemi, who is serving a seven-year prison sentence for ‘insulting the supreme leader’ and for ‘assembly and collusion against national security’,

have repeatedly gone on life-threatening hunger strikes. The Iranian government remained impervious to international pressure and repeated calls for the release of Atena Daemi, amongst others.

The governments in Bahrain, UAE, Saudi Arabia and Oman regularly used restrictive **cybercrime legislation** to curb freedom of expression, as well as harass and imprison HRDs. Winner of the prestigious Martin Ennals Award, Ahmed Mansoor has been detained since 20 March 2017 by the UAE Information Technology Crimes Prosecution on charges that include using social media websites to “disseminate false information to promote sedition, and damage national unity”. In Lebanon, the Cyber Crime Bureau at the Ministry of Interior summoned and interrogated several HRDs, including bloggers, for their critical posts on the Facebook or Twitter. Hand in hand with cybercrime legislation was pervasive censorship – especially in Egypt, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Iran – of online independent news media, human rights organisations and social media fora.

HRDs, including journalists, in conflicts areas in Syria, Libya, Yemen and Iraq have been **easy targets for different state and non-state actors**. In Yemen, members of the Houthi-backed authorities, non-state groups and religious militias continue to threaten HRDs and NGOs. A young defender and blogger, Amjad Abdul Rahman, who was known for his critical views and activities against Islamist groups, was killed in May by gunmen inside an Internet cafe in Aden. Also in Yemen, members of the Mwatana Organisation for Human Rights received threats and were repeatedly intimidated for their reporting on the conflict.

ISSUE IN FOCUS: RESTRICTING HRDS' INTERNATIONAL OUTREACH

A key tactic of governments in the region is to limit HRDs' interaction with the international community in order to minimise attention to the human rights situation in their countries. They do this through restrictive association laws, judicial harassment, prolonged travel bans and refusal of requests to visit made by international human rights observers.

Various ambiguous and broad provisions in domestic legislation allow authorities in the region to restrict the work of HRDs or impose harsh punishments that can amount to life sentences against those HRDs who expose human rights violations in their countries. In Egypt, HRDs have been charged with ‘spreading false news’ or ‘receiving foreign funding to commit acts against the state’s interests’. In September, Egyptian HRD Ibrahim Metwally Hegazy, a co-founder and coordinator of the League of Families of the Disappeared, was detained and forcibly disappeared while *en route* to attend a meeting with the UN Working Group on Enforced Disappearance in Geneva. When he reappeared in detention, he had been tortured and was charged with ‘establishing an illegal organisation’, ‘communicating with foreign entities to harm state security’ and ‘dissemination of false news’. Moreover, the newly adopted association law in Egypt imposes up to five years’ imprisonment for ‘assisting or working with a foreign NGO that is conducting work in Egypt without a license’.

In Algeria, Rafik Belamrania, who documents enforced disappearances, was detained in February and sentenced in November to five years’ imprisonment on charges of ‘excusing terrorism on Facebook’. The decision to imprison him came only a few days after the UN Human Rights Committee, with which he cooperated, found the Algerian government responsible for the summary execution of the HRD’s father in 1995. In Saudi Arabia, WHRD Samar Badawi, who has been under a travel ban since December 2014, was summoned for interrogation in February 2017 in relation to her contacts with international human rights NGOs.

In April, more than twenty HRDs were put under a travel ban in Bahrain ahead of the UN Universal Periodic Review session in Geneva. In October, WHRD Zainab Al-Khamees, member of the Bahrain Human Rights Society, was banned from travelling to attend an international human rights conference. Israeli authorities restricted the movement of some anti-settlement campaigners in the OPT such as Imad Abu Shamsiyya, the co-founder of the Human Rights Defenders Group in Hebron, who was refused permission to attend the Front Line Defenders 2017 Dublin Platform for Human Rights Defenders. International observers were blocked from obtaining visas to meet with HRDs in Algeria and Bahrain, while it remained difficult to meet with HRDs in Western Sahara.

COUNTRY IN FOCUS: SAUDI ARABIA

Despite the well-publicised lifting of a ban on women driving in Saudi Arabia following a twenty year campaign by WHRDs, defending human rights, especially women's rights, remained extremely risky. WHRDs who challenge the endemic discrimination against women continued to be intimidated through travel bans, interrogation and detentions.

As a power struggle played out toward the end of the year, it remained unlikely that Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman's attempts to consolidate his authority will lead to any improvements in the environment for HRDs. The ongoing political and diplomatic tension between the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain on one hand and Qatar on the other, as well as the Saudi-led coalition's military campaign in Yemen, resulted in reinforcing restrictions on freedom of expression and self-censorship among bloggers and journalists.

Repression of HRDs included incommunicado detention, travel bans, harsh prison sentences and unfair trials in specialised courts set up to deal with terrorism. In August, Abdulaziz Al-Shubaili was sentenced to eight years' imprisonment on charges which included "terrorism and its financing". The HRD is a leading member of the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association and had advocated on behalf of imprisoned colleagues. Two other HRDs, Issa Al-Nukheifi and Essam Koshak, who advocated for increased freedom of expression in the Kingdom, stood trial in October on charges including "inciting public opinion". Another defender, Omar Al-Hamid, was sentenced to three years in prison under strict cybercrime legislation for demanding the release in a WhatsApp group of fellow HRDs serving lengthy prison sentences.

Endnotes

1. This figure represents the number of individuals working peacefully to defend the human rights of others who were killed in 2017. It does not include individuals who worked on issues which – as commendable and positive as they may be – are not recognised as human rights under international law.
2. http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Terrorism/A_72_43280_EN.pdf
3. EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders,
https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/eu_guidelines_hrd_en.pdf p.6
4. Burundi, Cameroon, Chad, Congo, DRC, Gabon, Niger.
5. In 2013, Biram Dah Abeid received the Front Line Defenders Award for Human Rights Defenders at Risk and later that year he was also awarded the United Nations Human Rights Prize.
6. All the killings in Brazil, as documented by Memorial partner Comissão Pastoral da Terra, were linked to land conflict in rural areas.
7. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/19/world/americas/mexico-spyware-anticrime.html>
8. <https://www.gaipe.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Exec-Summ-Dam-Violencia-EN-FINAL.pdf>
9. <https://af.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idAFKCN1BF1VT>
10. <http://www.sunstar.com.ph/cagayan-de-oro/local-news/2017/02/14/land-conflict-eyed-possible-reason-lumad-leaders-death-525674>
11. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/-/venice-commission-tackles-polish-judicial-reforms-and-ukrainian-education-law-among-other-issues>

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