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U.S. Support for Human Rights Defenders

Overview

Protecting and supporting human rights defenders is a key priority of U.S. foreign policy. Because human rights defenders seek to hold their governments accountable to protect universally recognized human rights, defenders are often harassed, detained, interrogated, imprisoned, tortured, and even killed for doing their work. The Department's objective is to enable human rights defenders to promote and defend human rights without hindrance or undue restriction and free from fear of retribution against them or their families. The work of these brave individuals and groups is an integral part of a vibrant civil society, and our investment in and support of them is likewise an investment in and support of the rule of law and democracy.

Every day, around the world, many in civil society turn to us for assistance in emergency situations and to help them achieve longer-term goals that will make their countries more just and democratic.

Our Tradition of Respecting and Protecting Human Rights, Both at Home and Abroad

The desire to live freely under a government that respects and protects fundamental freedoms and human rights was the primary motivation of the founders of the United States. Human rights have not only been part of the United States since its beginning — they were the reason our nation was created. The Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments protect many rights that, in the twentieth century, became recognized and protected in international human rights instruments, and the United States has played a central role in advancing these rights through the [Universal Declaration on Human Rights](#), ensuing covenants, and beyond.

It is important that we stand beside those who, sometimes at great risk to themselves, work to ensure that their governments protect and promote human rights and implement their human rights obligations and commitments. This belief is the impetus for the U.S. government's support of the [UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders](#), which was adopted by consensus of the General Assembly in 1998, and our continued engagement to protect and promote fundamental freedoms and the role of human rights defenders both bilaterally and in multilateral fora.

A Human Rights Defender Is...

Following the principle set forth in the [UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders](#) that "everyone has the right, individually and in association with others, to promote and to strive for the protection and realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the national and international levels," the Department defines human rights defenders as individuals, working alone or in groups, who non-violently advocate for the promotion and protection of universally recognized human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Defenders can be of any ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religious denomination, or age. They can come from any part of the world, and from any social class or background, and also can be a person with a disability. How individual defenders promote and protect human rights also varies across country, context, and profession and can include, but is not limited to:

- Collecting and disseminating information on human rights violations;
- Supporting victims of human rights violations;
- Rallying action to secure accountability and end impunity;





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- Supporting better governance and government policy;
- Contributing to the implementation of human rights treaties; and
- Educating and training others on human rights.

Strategies for Protecting and Supporting Human Rights Defenders

The Department of State protects and supports human rights defenders in a variety of ways, including:

- Designating a human rights officer at every post whose portfolio includes activities to support human rights defenders.
- Documenting and reporting on the situation of human rights defenders worldwide throughout the year and in the annual U.S. Department of State Country Reports on Human Rights Practices.
- Maintaining regular contact with human rights defenders, including engagement at the ambassadorial level and more regular engagement by the human rights officer and other embassy personnel.
- Advancing instruments in multilateral fora that protect human rights defenders, such as the [UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders](#).
- Working with like-minded governments, the UN, regional and/or international organizations to address specific threats to human rights defenders and discourage laws that restrict the freedoms of assembly, association, or expression or otherwise constrain the operating space for human rights defenders. The UN has special rapporteurs in each of these areas, including one on the situation of human rights defenders.

“Individual people, through their own individual organizing efforts or through the nongovernmental organizations that they choose to become part of, all have this freedom to be able to shape the media – to have an impact through the media.”

President Barack Obama,
UN General Assembly, New York,
N.Y. September 23, 2013

- Amplifying the voices of human rights defenders through public diplomacy as well as local initiatives by posts to highlight the work of human rights defenders. The United States raises the profile of human rights defenders through its annual Human Rights Defender Award and International Women of Courage Award and its celebration of Human Rights Week each December;
- Encouraging host governments to engage constructively with human rights defenders and seriously consider their information and concerns.

- Protecting human rights defenders through emergency assistance. The U.S. government provides quick help to human rights defenders around the world with emergency technical and financial assistance. Through the “Lifeline: Embattled civil society organizations (CSOs) Assistance Fund,” which includes contributions from fifteen donor governments, the U.S. government provides emergency assistance when CSOs get into trouble for their work to promote human rights, democracy, and labor issues.

- Visiting human rights defenders in prison, as appropriate, or, if they are under house arrest, at their homes (or visiting their families, if access to human rights defenders in prison is not possible).
- Attending human rights defender hearings and observing their trials.
- Helping human rights defenders obtain international protection, when they request it, through international organizations, non-governmental organizations or governments, including our own, when appropriate.

