

# CUPHNER



comics as eyewitness

September 2021

Democratic Republic of Congo

front line defenders

## cypher

/ˈsaɪfər/

The dictionary definition of cypher is 'a secret or disguised way of writing'. In many ways, this is the essence of comics storytelling – the image, rather than the word, is a disguise for many words, that can convey meaning, emotion, and can re/frame an entire narrative.

Rap and hip hop culture has taken the word and ascribed a new meaning: 'an informal gathering of rappers, beatboxers and/or breakdancers in a circle, in order to jam musically together.' This, too, we find relevant to this project, in that we are bringing together artists and HRDs in freestyle collaboration of activism and art with the aim of informing, elevating and inspiring.

For us, this captures the spirit of why we are working in comics and guides how we facilitate the process of creative production.

Edited and published by:  
Beldan Sezen and Adam Shapiro

Cover art by Asimba Bathy

If you wish to use or reproduce any images or from this publication, please contact: [campaigns@frontlinedefenders.org](mailto:campaigns@frontlinedefenders.org)



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution - This license allows reusers to copy and distribute the material in any medium or format in unadapted form only, for noncommercial purposes only, and only so long as attribution is given to the creator.

Copyright by Front Line Defenders and the artists.  
[frontlinedefenders.org/cypher](http://frontlinedefenders.org/cypher)





**adam shapiro**

It is perhaps, ironic, that this issue at this time features a story from the Democratic Republic of Congo. A country that has experienced conflict for decades, that has produced countless refugees and displaced persons, it has largely been ignored by the international community. Ironic, because at this very moment, the international community has both abandoned Afghanistan while simultaneously an unprecedented mobilization of human rights, humanitarian and civil society organizations is underway to help colleagues, friends and those who we admire get out to uncertain futures. Steps that were never taken for human rights defenders and civil society activists from the DRC.

The combination of COVID and the Afghanistan crisis have conspired to mean that we only have one story for this edition. But we are honored to have the talent of Congolese artist Asimba Bathy bring forward the story of the Bambuti Indigenous Community and give visibility to an indigenous people struggling for their rights in a complex and sometimes incomprehensible context. With this story, we bring more attention to a marginalized population and together with Asimba, hope you will engage and share.

# Editorial



**beldan sezen**

Time and time again I have to realize that publishing a comic zine about Human Rights Defenders depends not only on our efforts to put the stories together but on outer circumstances that are beyond my control; or, in the scheme of bigger things Cypher is a small fish. Like a sardine. The stories we had lined up for this issue got delayed, interrupted or simply didn't happen because of Covid, security concerns, more pressing issues to practically support HRD's on frontlines and of course Afghanistan. I know, I should have called Biden and ask to check in with us so his actions to withdraw wouldn't interact with our publishing timeline. Alas. Fortunately Cypher is an online publication. The stories delayed will appear in future issues and I'm super pleased to focus an entire issue on the work of Joseph Itongwa Mukumo and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Septmeber 2021

# Democratic Republic of Congo

In 1971, the Kahuzi-Biega National Park in the Democratic Republic of Congo was established, at which point the indigenous Batwa communities that had been living in the area designated as the new national park were evicted. They were pushed into dwellings at the border of the park and in subsequent years became impoverished and lost significant cultural and linguistic heritage tied to the use of their traditional lands.

The Park was then inscribed as a World Heritage Natural Site in 1981, at which time no mention was made by the World Heritage Committee of the indigenous communities associated with the site.

In 2003, the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights [Working Group On Indigenous Populations/Communities And Minorities In Africa](#) reviewed the situation of the Batwa around Kahuzi-Biega, [noting](#):

“Land should have been given to the Batwa, but this did not happen. Now the Batwa are forbidden to hunt in the park, and forbidden to collect park products. They have no food resources or medicinal plants, and the forest is no longer their place of worship. The Batwa have been culturally and psychologically shattered by the loss of their forests.”

The ACHPR report also [observed](#), “The Batwa who were driven out of the Kahuzi – Biega forests are now extremely poor, even destitute. Most have no property, and it is very difficult for them to obtain their basic needs...The Batwa have no legal protection once neighbours from other ethnic groups decide to take their land or drive them out of their villages.”

Since the 1970s, tensions have only deepened between park rangers and the local Batwa peoples, also called ‘Pygmies’. With the emergence of armed groups, the threats to the indigenous population has only increased, and the community has suffered great violence, intimidation and further decimation of their rights and dignity. In 2019 and 2020, protests and other forms of collective action by the community were met with violence and force, while the authorities used defamatory language and PR efforts to further dehumanize and criminalize the community.

In September 2021, a military tribunal found Chance Miyonya, a former army captain who deserted to form a militia in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, guilty of crimes against humanity, war crimes and environmental crimes and sentenced him to life in prison. The trial exposed how the rebel leader kidnapped and tortured of dozens of people living in Batwa villages within the park in 2019 and 2020.

Joseph Itongwa Mukumo, an indigenous person from the Bambuti people and resident of the Kahuzi-Biega National Park, is President of the Council Administration of the Network of Indigenous Peoples of the DRC (REPALEF DRC). In 2019, he campaigned for the liberation of a pygmy indigenous village chief from the village of Bumoga in the Kahele territory near the Kahuzi-Biega National Park, who had been detained during protests by indigenous peoples for their rights.

Artist: Asimba Bathy

<http://asimbabathy.over-blog.com>  
[www.facebook.com/bathyasimba](http://www.facebook.com/bathyasimba)



# A LAND FOR OUR DIGNITY.

BUKAVU, KAHUZI BIEGA NATIONAL PARK...

Asimba Bathy



OOOH MUNGLU WANGU !  
TUNA LI BAFANYA NINI?\*



GIVE US BACK  
OUR LANDS!



GIVE US BACK  
OUR DIGNITY!

\*OH HH MY GOD, WHAT DID WE DO TO THEM?

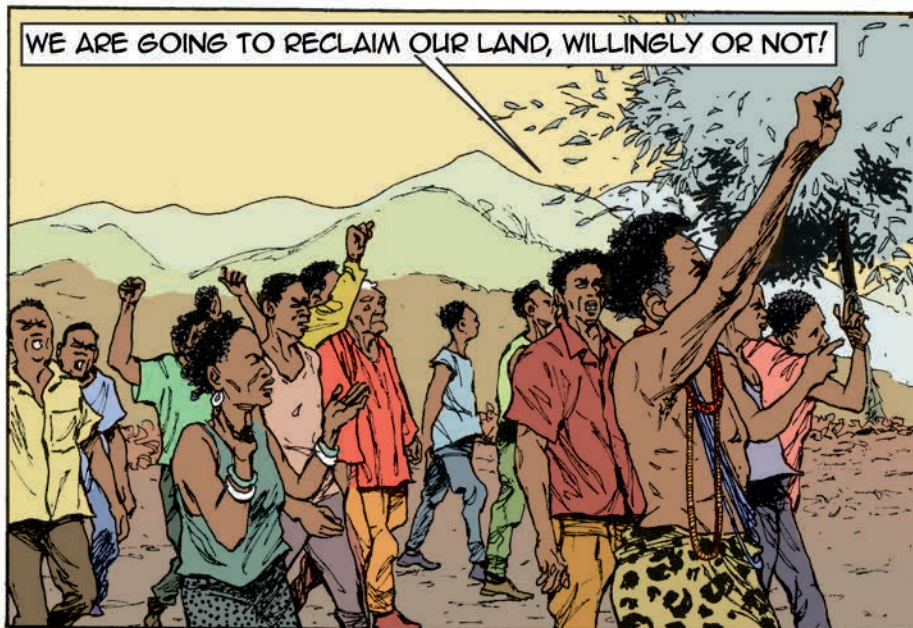
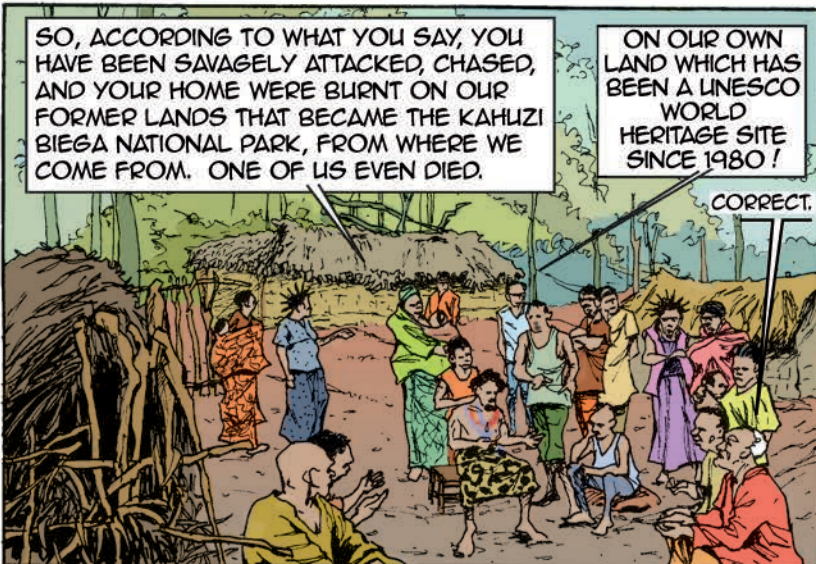




THEY CHASE US AWAY FROM OUR LANDS, CHARGE US BRUTALLY AND BURN OUR HOMES!

AND THIS HAS BEEN GOING ON SINCE 1970, THEY TOOK 6,000 SQUARE MILES OF OUR LAND TO MAKE A NATIONAL PARK!

WITHOUT EVER COMPENSATING WITH OTHER PROPOSED LANDS.





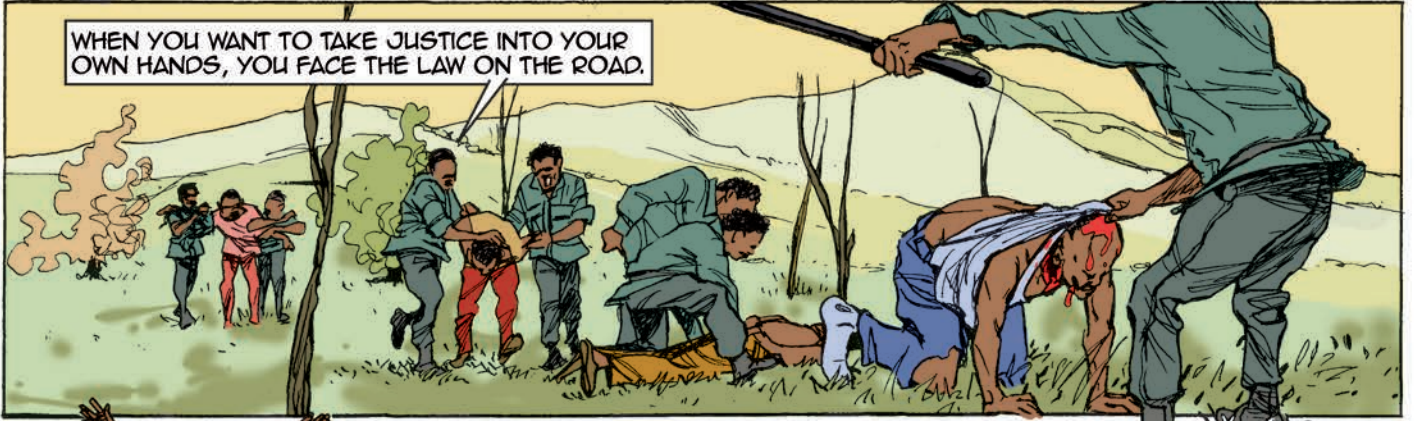
**ATTACK!!!**



*Abino Beatty*



WHEN YOU WANT TO TAKE JUSTICE INTO YOUR OWN HANDS, YOU FACE THE LAW ON THE ROAD.



COME AND HELP US. THEY ARE OUTNUMBERED.



OVER HERE, BOYS, THEY'VE CAUGHT THE CHIEF OF THE CLAN!







LET'S RUN AWAY, THEY USE GUNS!



WHAT ABOUT OUR LANDS? ARE WE GOING TO LEAVE THEM LIKE THAT?





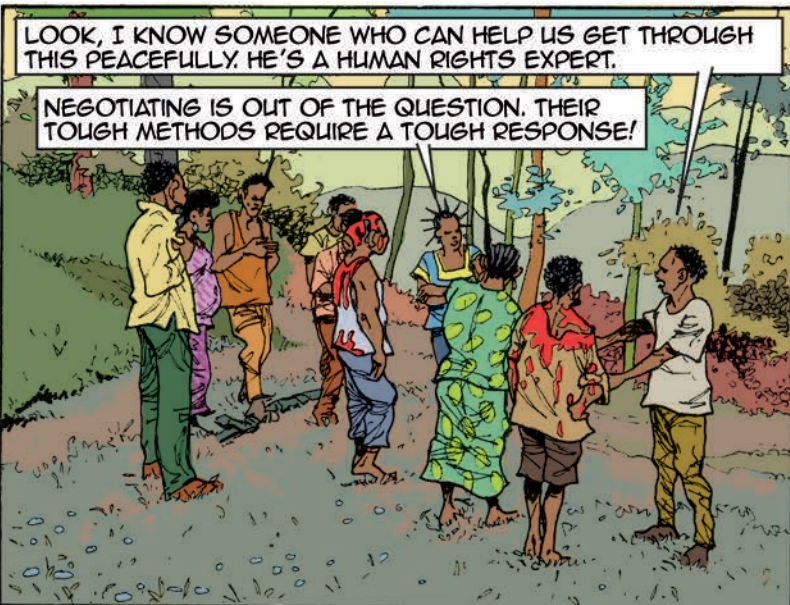


THIS IS ONLY A QUESTION OF TIME!



WHAT ARE WE GOING TO BECOME NOW?

I PROPOSE THAT WE GO TO GET SOME BACKUP AND COME AND SOLVE OUR PROBLEM OURSELVES.



LOOK, I KNOW SOMEONE WHO CAN HELP US GET THROUGH THIS PEACEFULLY. HE'S A HUMAN RIGHTS EXPERT.

NEGOTIATING IS OUT OF THE QUESTION. THEIR TOUGH METHODS REQUIRE A TOUGH RESPONSE!



UNTIL WE ARE NOT SAFE ON NEW LANDS...

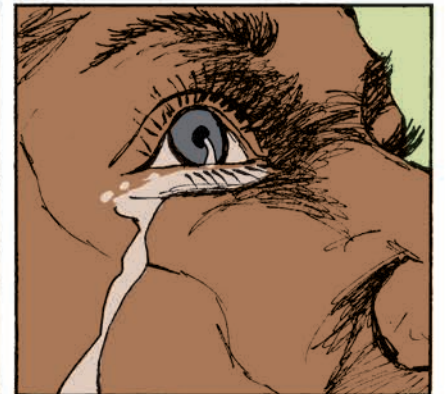
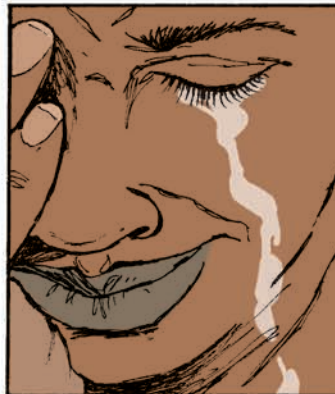
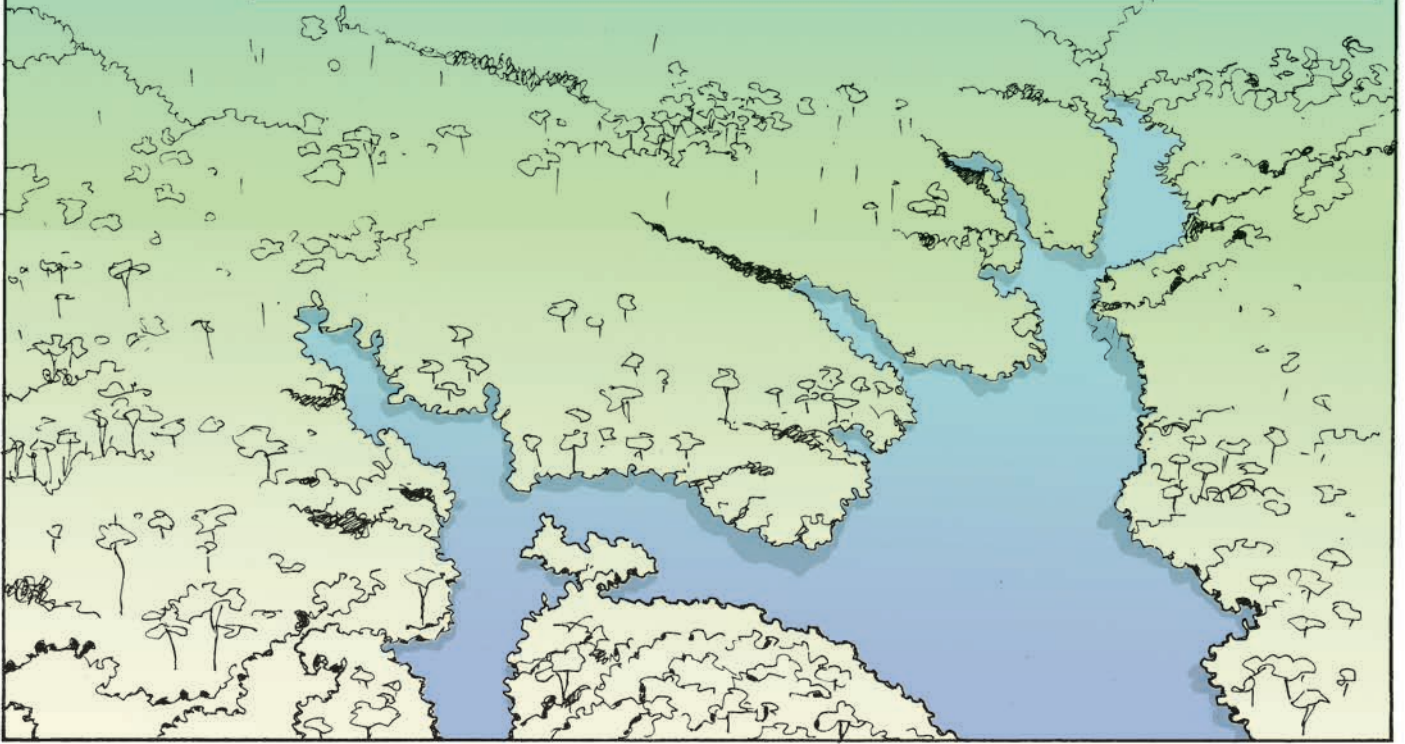


...WE WILL COME BACK!



THE GENTLEMAN I'M TALKING ABOUT IS THE LEADER OF THE BAMBITI INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY OF LOW ALTITUDES IN THE KAHUZI BIEGA NATIONAL PARK, OUR COMMUNITY HERE IN WALIKALE, NORTH KIVU PROVINCE.

IT HAS THE CAPABILITIES TO HELP US FIND SOLUTIONS TO OUR PROBLEMS BY AVOIDING CLASHES THAT OFTEN COST LIVES.



I UNDERSTAND YOUR PAIN. LET'S TRUST OUR FELLOW COUNTRYMAN.

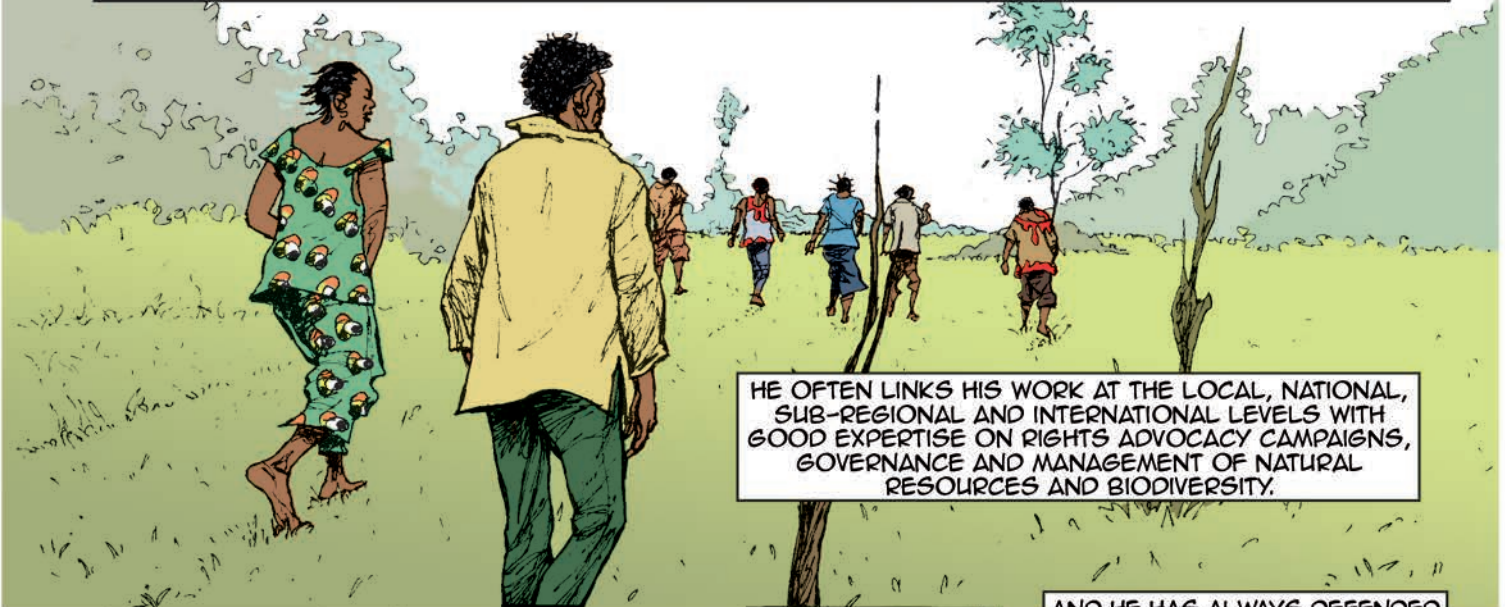


HE IS CURRENTLY, THE SUB-REGIONAL COORDINATOR OF REPALAC AND ALSO THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF ANAPAC-RDC: THE NATIONAL ALLIANCE TO SUPPORT AND PROMOTE AREAS AND TERRITORIES OF THE INDIGENOUS AND COMMUNITY HERITAGE IN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO!





HE HOLDS UNIVERSITY DEGREES IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT AND MANAGEMENT, AND IN HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGEMENT; HE IS ALSO CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS OF THE NETWORK OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES OF DRC (REPALEF RDC), WHICH IS COMMITTED TO THE PROMOTION OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES' CULTURE AND RIGHTS AND THE CONSERVATION OF NATURE....



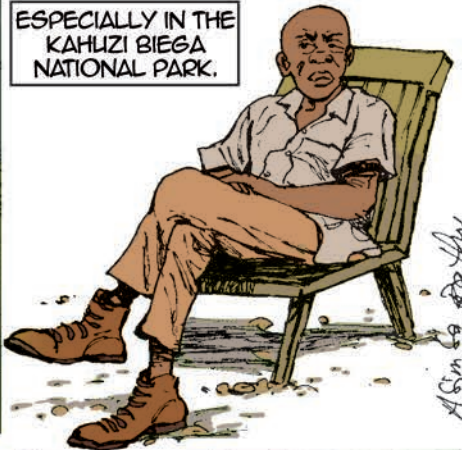
HE OFTEN LINKS HIS WORK AT THE LOCAL, NATIONAL, SUB-REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL LEVELS WITH GOOD EXPERTISE ON RIGHTS ADVOCACY CAMPAIGNS, GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES AND BIODIVERSITY.

WE'RE ALMOST THERE

HIS IS JOSEPH ITONGWA. HE HAS ALWAYS ADVOCATED FOR FAIRNESS AND EXCLUSIVITY IN THE CONSERVATION OF PROTECTED AREAS

AND HE HAS ALWAYS DEFENDED THE DIGNITY OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES IN DIFFERENT SITUATIONS OF VIOLATIONS

ESPECIALLY IN THE KAHUZI BIEGA NATIONAL PARK.



A. Simba - Rep. 1/10/14

I AM AWARE OF THIS PROBLEM THAT AFFECTS ME IN MY HEART AND HURTS ME.

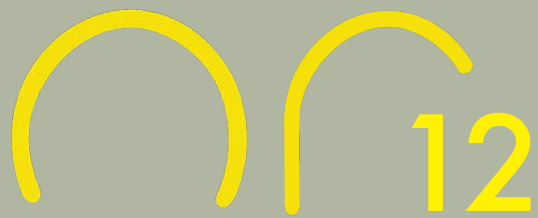


WE WILL FIND A SOLUTION.



BUT FIRST I MUST TRAIN YOU TO MASTER THE TOOLS RELATED TO HUMAN RIGHTS.





Find us online



[frontlinedefenders.org/cypher](https://frontlinedefenders.org/cypher)

