

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to start by thanking Kerry Rea MP both in her own capacity as Chair of the Parliamentary sub committee on human rights

and as a representative of Foreign Minister Smith.

Your positive words on the importance of human rights defenders were very welcome.

We really do feel that Australia can play a very important role in terms of the protection of human rights defenders building on some of the excellent work the Government is already undertaking.

I would also like thank Alex MacDonald and all the team here at the Wise Foundation for their support in hosting this exhibition.

If you watch the news each day its a pretty awful world we live in.

It would certainly be easy to talk to you about all the terrible things going on in the world in terms of human rights, whether in Congo or Sudan, Colombia or Honduras, Iraq, Iran or Afghanistan.

But I want to tell you about something more positive.

About human rights defenders.

About the people who are making a difference, in countries around the world, in spite of the threats that they face.

And about the importance of working to protect them and enlarge the space in which they can work.

People like Padre Tamayo, Bertha Oliva and Donny Reyes in Honduras, whose photos and stories are part of this exhibition here today.

Padre Tamayo is an absolutely fantastic, but very humble man, who continues to work for the rights of local communities, and to protect the environment against the interests of logging companies, in spite of the assassination of two of his colleagues, and ongoing death threats against himself.

He is obliged to live with constant armed protection.

As recently as this July he had to go into hiding for a few weeks because of an upsurge in threats against him.

You can see the nice soldier guarding him in the picture. There is a bit of a track record in Honduras and Latin America of those supposedly responsible for protection being involved in assassinations or of mysteriously being

absent from the scene at the key moment. My colleague Jim asked this soldier about it, and he promised he would fight to defend Padre Tamayo if necessary, but from other examples we know the problem will be if he does not show up for work one day...

Bertha Oliva has been working for human rights since her husband was “disappeared” in the 1980s, she thought those dark days were over, but she is again facing serious threats because of her human rights work, and her office was raided by the police using tear gas in the last few months.

Donny Reyes continues to lead the work of the lesbian and gay rights organization Arcoiris, in spite of being arrested, beaten and raped in police custody two years ago. When you read the details of what happened to him you wonder how anyone could have the strength to continue. The key witness in his attempt to bring those responsible to justice was assassinated, but Donny refuses to be deflected in his fight for justice, in his own case or in the cases of the 210 lesbian and gay victims murdered in hate crimes in the last seven years in Honduras.

He is a lovely guy, with a fantastically positive attitude to life in spite of what he has been through. And more concerned for the needs of others than for himself.

The situation in Honduras is in so many ways desperate. The interpreter who worked on the Front Line mission when these photos were taken, an outspoken transsexual activist called Nicole Moreno, was murdered in January this year.

The reason Donny, Bertha and Padre Tamayo are being threatened is because they are making a difference. They are effective in their mobilisation of people to stand up for their rights. And all three played important roles in the social movement which was eventually successful in opposing the recent military coup in Honduras.

And there are similar stories of courage and effectiveness in other countries including the other human rights defenders pictured here.

Hebel Aboel Koloy who spent 6 months in jail recently on trumped up charges because he defends the rights of the Borok people in North East India.

Sonia Biserko, Biljana Kovacevic and Natacha Kandic from Serbia who have played key roles in bringing Radovan Karadzic to the dock in the Hague this week, in spite of huge hostility and ongoing threats and attacks from within their society. They are regularly abused and denigrated in the media in Serbia. But they are winning.

Aminatou Haider and El Ghallia Djimi, who with great dignity sustain the peaceful struggle for the human rights of the Saharawi people in the face of the most brutal Moroccan repression. El Ghallia's house was raided by the police the day after the photo on the wall over there was taken. Seven of her colleagues are currently in jail awaiting a trial in a military court on trumped up charges.

And we are hugely fortunate to have with us here today my friend Njeri Kabeberi from Kenya who was forced to be accompanied everywhere and constantly change where she was sleeping during and after the election related violence in Kenya in early 2008. Because of her outspoken comments on the necessity of bringing those responsible to justice her name was published in a list of traitors.

Two of her fellow Kenyan human rights defenders, Oscar Kamau King'ara and John Paul Oulu were assassinated as they drove through central Nairobi in broad daylight on the 5th of March this year. Their car was blocked by two vehicles that had been following them and they were shot by several men. It took the police 3 hours to get to the scene from their nearest station all of 1,000 metres away.

All of these human rights defenders demonstrate not only great courage and integrity in the face of violence and repression, but they also inspire and mobilise their communities, through the way they live out the values of respect and tolerance in the most difficult and hostile environments.

I have mentioned briefly some of their successes. We know that it is human rights defenders working with their communities at the local and national levels who deliver the most important and lasting improvements in human rights.

But you don't need to take my word for it – the attacks they face: abuse and denigration, surveillance, disruption of their phone and email, threats, arbitrary arrests, torture, fabricated prosecutions, killings and disappearances; testify to how hard the most powerful are working to stop them.

Front Line was set up in 2001 to work specifically for the protection of human rights defenders, because we believe that this is the most important and effective thing anyone working at the international level can do.

If we can help protect defenders so that they can continue their work at the local and national level, it will make a huge difference. It is summed up in our slogan, Protect One, Empower a Thousand.

And there are practical things we can do that make a difference.

Last year Front Line made 152 grants totalling \$491,810 Australian dollars to individual human rights defenders and organizations in 42 countries throughout the world.

Grants for practical items such as bars on office windows, secure entrance systems for buildings, emergency relocations and legal and medical fees.

One hundred percent of any donation you give to Front Line's Protection Fund for Human Rights Defenders at Risk will go directly to support security measures for human rights defenders, we cover all the costs of running the system.

Front Line also delivers training in security for human rights defenders including specific training in digital security. In 2008 Front Line trained 335 human rights defenders in risk assessment, personal and organizational security and digital security.

Workshops took place in 14 countries including: Afghanistan, Russia, India, the Philippines, Colombia, Congo, Morocco, China, Thailand (for Burma and Vietnam), and Belgium (for francophone defenders from Africa).

We also take up individual cases for urgent appeals and you can sign up to take action on such appeals at our website: www.frontlinedefenders.org

We have also been lobbying European Governments to be more active in working for the protection of human rights defenders.

The European Union and the Norwegian Government have adopted guidelines on the Protection of Human Rights Defenders that set out practical measures that diplomats on the ground should take.

We are now calling on the Australian Government to increase the priority they give to the protection of human rights defenders and adopt similar measures.

And we would like to ask you to support us in that by filling in one of the cards in the room and sending them to Foreign Minister Smith.

Please also go online and sign the petition.
At www.frontlinedefenders.org

On the 15th of July this year all of us at Front Line were devastated by the brutal abduction and killing in Chechnya of human rights defender Natalia Estemirova.

Natalia was an old friend of Front Line who had spent three months as our guest in Dublin, together with her daughter Lana, when she needed a break from the constant threats that she faced because of her work.

Human rights defenders like Natalia display a special form of courage, continuing to work selflessly on behalf of others in spite of the ongoing threats to themselves.

Natalia was only persuaded to take a break because of the concerns of her colleagues and worries about the impact of the stress on her daughter.

Her murder this July followed the killing, in October 2006, of her friend Anna Politkovskaya murdered in Moscow because of her work to expose human rights violations in Chechnya.

In spite of these and other killings, their colleagues continue the work.

Front Line has provided grants to help with security measures

and support with rest and respite breaks for those most at risk.

But as in other parts of the world
it is the courage and determination of human rights defenders
that endures and sustains hope.

That spirit was reflected in the words of Anna Politkovskaya shortly before
she was murdered, she said:

“So each time I go there, people tell me things.
They do so in the sincere hope that, if I record what is actually happening,
it will lead to change, to peace.

Obviously, I am not to blame for what is going on,
but the more I think about it,
the more I would be betraying these people if I walked away.
The only thing to do is to take this to the bitter end,
so that no one can say that when things became difficult, I ran away.”

These human rights defenders are the true heroes of our time.
Please join with us in working to strengthen their protection in order that they
can continue to bring light to the darkest corners of the world.