

FRONT LINE DEFENDERS

EUROPO
POMÓZ

REPORT

GLOBAL ANALYSIS

FRONT LINE DEFENDERS GLOBAL ANALYSIS 2021



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THESE ARE THE NAMES OF THE 358 HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS, FROM 35 DIFFERENT COUNTRIES, WHO WERE KILLED IN 2021, AS REPORTED TO THE HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS MEMORIAL.¹

AFGHANISTAN

Bismillah Adel Aimaq
Adel Nang
Khalil-ur-Rahman Narmgo
Yusuf Khpowlak
Abdul Sabur Karimi
Haji Aminullah Rahimi
Samad Paktin
Sayed Murtaza Sadat
Khalil Ahmad Khair Khah
Naser Abdul Rahman
Fani Safiullah
Fawad
Abdul Rahmad Mawin
Zhowanday Helamand
Frozán Safi
Hijratullah Khogyani
Eng. Mohammad Naweed
Imdadullah Hamdard
Naik Amal

ARGENTINA

Elias Garay

BANGLADESH

Mushtaq Ahmed
Mohib Ullah

BRAZIL

Lucas dos Santos
Fernando dos Santos Araújo
Elso Sandro Cerqueira Armini
Isac Tembê
Gerusa Reis
Márcio Velloso da Silva
Madalena Leite
Emmanuelly Carolina Barbosa
Fragoso
Lindolfo Kosmaski
María da Luz Benício
Reginaldo Alves Barros
Antonio Gonçalves Diniz
José Francisco de Souza Araújo
José Carlos Adriano
Wagner Romão da Silva
Amarildo Aparecido Rodrigues
Amaral José Stoco
Kevin Fernando Holanda de Souza
Edvaldo Santos Cordeiro
Alex Barros Santos da Silva
Geovanne Rodrigues Xavier
Leuvis Manuel Olivero Ramos
Roberto Muniz Campista
Carlos Alberto Pereira Esteves
Rafael Gasparini Tedesco
Gedeon José Duque
Rogério Diego dos Santos (a. k. a.
Julya Madsan)

BURKINA FASO

Rory Young

CHILE

Dennise Cortes
Javiera Rojas

CHINA

Kunchok Jinpa
Guo Hongwei

COLOMBIA

Gerardo León
Edwin Antonio Indaburu
Luis Alfredo García Chavarría
Gonzalo Cardona Molina
José Grasisquier Toro Ledesma
José Robinson Quino Bonilla
Fredman Herazo Padilla
William Antonio Rodríguez Martínez
Linda Díaz Romero
José Abadía Parra
Janeth Zapata
Julián Sneider Muñoz
Carlos Erid González Cortéz
Fermiliano Meneses
Yobani Carranza Castillo
Arcenio Quinayas Ruiz
José Miguel Barrientos Uribe
Remberto Arrieta Bohórquez
Samuel Alfonso Moreno Macualo
Yordan Eduardo Guetio Medina
Orlando Manuel Chimá
Alejandro Manugama Cheche
Marcos Paí
John Albeiro Paí Pascal
Jaime Enrique Basilio Basilio
Carmen Ofelia Cumbalaza
María Bernardina Juajibioy
José Santos López
Carlos Alberto Vidal
Aura Esther García Peñalver
Arlex Albeiro Hoyos Zapata
Rafael Domicó Carupia
Yarley Margarito Salas
Horacio Andrés Moreno
José Riascos
Juan Carlos Aguirre
Luis Octavio Gutiérrez Montes
Francisco Giacometto Gómez
Justiniano Torres García
Sandra Liliana Peña Chocué
Wilson de Jesús López Cifuentes
Duver Yovani Laguna
Juan David García Naranjo
Beatriz Moreno Mosquera
Mauricio Valencia Sánchez
Lucas Villa
Felipe Andrés Pérez
Geovanny Cabezas Cruz
Wilber Torres Cifuentes
José Manuel Caballero
Sir Armando Álvarez
Yefer Edison Oliveros Daza

Sebastián Jacanamijoy
Jair Adán Roldán Morales
Luis Fernando del Castillo
Jordany Rosero Estrella
Beatriz Helena Cano Uribe
Juan David Guegue Trochez
José Alonso Valencia
Danilo Galindo
Argenis Yatacué
Luciana Moscoso
Harold Ángulo Vencé
José William Mayoral Castillo
Dagoberto Bayona Santiago
Ángel Miro Cartagena
Diana María Jaramillo Henao
Danilo Torres
Yoni Alejandro Chala Hueje
Luis Picasio Carampaima
José Gregorio Lugez
Fernando Vela
Nelson Galván Ascanio
Higinio Bailarín
Derly Pastrana Yari
Gertrudis Hernández Leal
Alexander Enrique Escobar Molina
Yeisi Campo
Oscar Ivan Suárez Riascos
Luis Hernando Castrillón Molina
José Vianey Gaviria Hoyos
Jean Carlos Rodríguez Díaz
Oswaldo de Jesús Pérez Navarro
Elias Paí Guanga
Miguel Muchavisoy Agreda
Francisco Javier Posada Posada
Carlos Freddy Londoño Bautista
Nerio Fernando Rodríguez
Eliécer Sánchez Cáceres
Jhon Jairo Chocué
Esteban Mosquera Iglesias
Mairon Javier Chaverra Mosquera
Jesús Albeiro Gutiérrez
María Dorfenis López Cordón
Juan Daniel Quintero Lizcano
Marco Tulio Gutierrez Mendoza
Efrén Antonio Bailarín Carupia
Marcos Efraín Montalvo Escobar
Dilio Bailarín
Martin Bayona
Ilia Pilcué Yule
Apolinar Rivero
Henry Perea Montaña
Jaime Cuadrado
John Alberto Pascal Pascal
Hildo Guitierrez Gómez
Jorge Antonio Loaiza
Oswaldo Enrique Hernández Zuñiga
Víctor Orlando Mosquera
Winnie Geraldine Luisa Forero Gómez
Omar Cárdenas Lozano
Efrén Antonio España
Luis Alfonso Narváez Escobar

Rogelio López Figueroa
Luis Efraín Sánchez Balaguera
Nazaria Calabás Tunubalá
Santiago Guarín
Noel Corsini Zúriga
Edinson Valenzuela Cúama
Víctor López Gómez
Luis Alberto Ramos Bertel
Robinson Jiménez Bautista
Willington Hernández
Hermer Antonio Monsalve
Marcos Camayo Guetio
Nancy Yaneth Mejía Araque
John Alexander Sierra
Juana Panesso Dumasá
Albert Mejía Portillo
Jhon Mario García Guanga
Cristina Isabel Cantillo
Freddy Pestana Herrera
Huber Velásquez
Arnubia Yunda Cuetia
Wilmar Ascanio Angarita
Gustavo Orozco Ramírez
Javier Esnaider Castillo Ortiz
María del Carmen Molina Imbachí

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

Kubali Bushiri
Sefu Shadari
Barthelemy Kubanabandu
Rodríguez Haramba
Matsongani Fannuel Kambale
Joël Mumbere Musavuli
Pascasie Soda
Cabral Yombo
Edison Kambale

ECUADOR

Andrés Durazno
Victor Enrique Guaiñas Gutama

ETHIOPIA

María Hernández
Yohannes Halefom Reda
Tedros Gebremariam Gebremichael

GEORGIA

Alexander Lashkarava

GHANA

Ibrahim "Kaaka" Mohammed

GREECE

Giorgios Karaivaz

GUATEMALA

Jesús Choc Yat
Emilio Aguilar Jiménez
David Girardot Pazmiño
Cecy Caricia Ixpata
Andrea González

Regilson Choc Cac
Pedro Alfonso Guadrón Hernández
Octavila Sánchez Vázquez
Ramón López Jiménez
Feliciano Apolinario Quiróz
Alberto Tec Caal

HAITI

Marie Antoinette Duclaire
Diego Charles

HONDURAS

David Fernando Padilla
Martín Abad Pandey
Victor Martínez
Juan Carlos Cerros Escalante
Vanessa Zuniga
Juan Moncada
Tatiana García
Wilmer Joel Funez Ochoa
Oscar Javier Pérez
Celenia Bonilla
Nelson García

INDIA

Amrabhai Boricha
Maidul Islam Midya
Kawasi Waga
Bheema Ursam
Uika Pandu
Stan Swamy
Shridhar T
Vengatesh Nr
Roopa P
Sushil Kajal
Waseem Akram
Rai Singh Gurjar
Athuan Abonmai
Shekh Farid
Moinul Haque
Saddam Husaain
Vipin Agarwal
Gurvinder
Lavepreet Singh
Daljeet Singh
Nakshatra Singh
Tamilaruvan
Buddhinath Jha

IRAN

Behnam Mahjoubi

IRAQ

Ihab Jawad Al-Wazni

KENYA

Joanna Stutchbury

LEBANON

Lockman Slim

MEXICO

Gala Ocampo Figueroa
Vicente Guzmán Reyes
Ambrosio Guzmán Reyes
José Luis Chávez Mondragón
Naomi Alonso
Fidel Heras Cruz
Manuel Carmona Esquivel
Ramiro Rodríguez Sántiz
Gerardo Mendoza Reyes
Raymundo Robles Riaño
Noé Robles Cruz
Jaime Jiménez Ruíz
Carlos Marqués Oyorzábal
José Santos Isaac Chaves
José de Jesús Robledo Cruz
María de Jesús Gómez Vega
Mario Alberto Vázquez Aguilar
Efraín Espinoza Pérez
Homeró Terán Vanoye
Marco Antonio Arcos Fuentes
Francisco Javier Barajas Piña
José Ascensión Carrillo Vázquez
Luis Urbano Domínguez Mendoza
Leobardo Hernández Regino
Julio César Coctecón Rendón
Tomás Rojo Valencia
Federico de Jesús Gutierrez
Oliverio Martínez Merino
Flor de Jesús Hernández
David Díaz Valdez
Simón Pedro Pérez López
Gladys Aranza Ramos Gurrula
Aline Sánchez
Lea Juárez Valenzuela
Domingo Sántiz Jiménez

Jacinto Romero Flores
Rodrigo Morales Vázquez
Manuel Cartas Pérez
Devanny Cardiel
Alejandro García Zagal
Marisol Cuadras
Marcelino Álvarez González

MYANMAR

Chan Thar Swe / K Za Win
Myint Myint Zin
Ah Khu
Thinzar Hein
Khet Thi
Ko Soe Naing
Anonymous
Anonymous

NICARAGUA

Armando Pérez Medina
Albert Jairo Hernández Palacios
Dolvin Acosta
Victor Manuel Matamoros Morales
Armando Suarez Matamoros
Borlan Gutiérrez Empra
Sixto Gutiérrez Empra
Kedelin Jarquín Gutiérrez
Ody James Waldan Salgado
J.L.P. / J.R.B.

PAKISTAN

Naheed Bibi
Irshad Bibi
Ayesha Bibi
Javeria Bibi
Noor Islan Dawar
Sheeba Gul
Nazim Jokhiyo
Muhammad Zada Agra

PANAMA

Edgar Omar Williams

PERU

Yenes Ríos Bonsano
Herasmo García Grau
Estela Casanto Mauricio
Mario Marco López Huanca

Lucio Pascual Yumanga

PHILIPPINES (THE)

Antonio Baluarte Arellano
Romeo Loyola Torres
Julie Catamin
Emanuel Asucion
Melvin Dasigao
Mark Lee Coros Bacasno
Ana Mariz Lemita-Evangelista
Ariel Evangelista
Dandy Miguel
John Heredia
Joseph Canlas
Jaymar Palero
Marlon Napire
Veneranda Ginanao
Gerald Ral
Juan Macababbad

SOMALIA

Farah Jamal Adan
Abdiaziz Mohamud Guled

SUDAN

Faisal Yousef Mohamed
Sit Alnfor Ahmed Bakar

TANZANIA

Paschal Raymond

THAILAND

Somsak Onchuenjit

TONGA

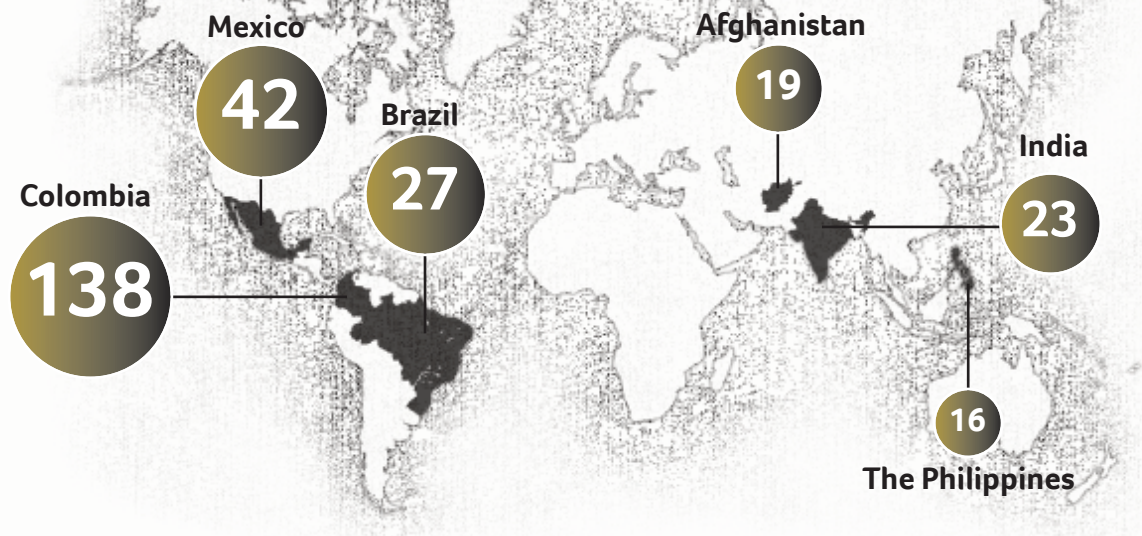
Polikalepo Kefu

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Jahaira DeAlto

1. The HRD Memorial data shown here is a presentation of the cases of verified killings of HRDs that have taken place between 1 January 2021 – 31 December 2021. It is likely that this dataset is incomplete as partners continue to gather and verify cases. Challenges include: killings in remote areas having gone unreported; self-censorship by communities for fear of reprisals; reduced movement and access to remote areas for data collection and verification as a result of COVID 19; and suppression of information by vested state and non-state interest groups.

The HRD Memorial is a joint, global initiative by a network human rights organisations including: ACI-Participa (Honduras); ASAS-e-Fekr Social & Legal Research Service Consultancy (Afghanistan); Amnesty International; Comité Cerezo (Mexico); FIDH; Front Line Defenders; Global Witness; Human Rights Defenders' Alert – India; Karapatan (the Philippines); OMCT; El Programa Somos Defensores (Colombia); Red TDT (Mexico); Social Association of Afghan Justice Seekers (SAAJS) (Afghanistan); and UDEFEGUA (Guatemala).



In 2021, the Human Rights Defenders Memorial (HRD Memorial) investigated and verified the killings of 358 human rights defenders (HRDs) in 35 countries.

The HRD Memorial is a global initiative led by 14 national and international human rights organisations to gather and verify data about HRDs who are killed for their human rights work. HRD Memorial partners gather real-time data on the killing of HRDs and historic data on killings dating back to 1998, when the UN Declaration on human rights defenders came into effect. Launched in 2016, the HRD Memorial presents a unique, verified dataset that highlights the scale of the killings of defenders worldwide, and provides a basis for effective advocacy and campaigning to stop the killings. The HRD Memorial keeps alive the memory of defenders who have been killed, celebrates their courage and achievements, and offers solidarity with their families, friends and colleagues.

Afghanistan	19	Ghana	1	Nicaragua	10
Argentina	1	Greece	1	Pakistan	8
Bangladesh	2	Guatemala	11	Panama	1
Brazil	27	Haiti	2	Peru	5
Burkina Faso	1	Honduras	11	Philippines (the)	16
Chile	2	India	23	Somalia	2
China	2	Iran	1	Sudan	2
Colombia	138	Iraq	1	Tanzania	1
DRC	9	Kenya	1	Thailand	1
Ecuador	2	Lebanon	1	Tonga	1
Ethiopia	3	Mexico	42	United States of America	1
Georgia	1	Myanmar	8		

Issue



59% of HRDs killed worked on defending land, environmental and indigenous peoples' rights

Identity



26% of HRDs killed were indigenous persons



18% of HRDs killed identified as women (including trans-women)

Partners in the HRD Memorial include: ACI-Participa (Honduras); ASAS-e-Fekr Social & Legal Research Service Consultancy (Afghanistan), Amnesty International; Comité Cerezo (Mexico); FIDH; Front Line Defenders; Global Witness; Human Rights Defenders' Alert – India; Karapatan (the Philippines); OMCT; El Programa Somos Defensores (Colombia); Red TDT (Mexico); Social Association of Afghan Justice Seekers (SAAJS) (Afghanistan); and UDEFEGUA (Guatemala).

CHAPTER 1: GLOBAL

I. Overview

In 2021, human rights defenders (HRDs) protected their communities and one another despite violent threats to their well-being, physical security, families and lives. In the second year of the pandemic, governments continued to use COVID-19 as an excuse to crack down on freedom of assembly and association. Some used the economic impact of COVID-19 as leverage to expand and promote so-called “development” projects that damage the environment and local communities. HRDs led creative movements for rights that withstood racist, misogynistic and increasingly transphobic populism; humanitarian crises; corruption and rigged elections; violent crackdowns by authoritarian regimes; and military coups.

Crises in Myanmar, Afghanistan and Nicaragua have been devastating for the people of those countries and accompanied by sustained attacks against HRDs. Well-known HRDs have been compelled to go into hiding or to leave in order to seek safety. New groups, including students and teachers, have become active as defenders, providing assistance to victims, documenting human rights violations and publicising reports. Defenders in Myanmar piloted new tactics related to “hiding and visibilising” certain groups of defenders at certain times, strategically placing HRDs in and out of the media spotlight in ways that maximized the effectiveness of their campaigning and minimized the threats to their lives. In Nicaragua, dozens of HRDs have been confined to “in-house prison,” whereby police forces or paramilitaries maintain a constant presence outside the houses of HRDs, making it impossible for them to leave out of fear of being attacked or detained. Afghan defenders were plunged into an unprecedented crisis that reversed decades of innovation and human rights work. HRDs, in particular women HRDs still inside the country, risk their lives to challenge ‘Taliban reform narratives’, carve out spaces of relative safety, and document the egregious violations of human rights carried out by the Taliban and other armed groups on a daily basis.

In 2021, 358 HRDs were targeted and killed for their peaceful, powerful human rights work, according to HRD Memorial project partners. As in previous years, the highest number of killings occurred in the Americas and Asia Pacific regions. Defenders working on land, environmental and indigenous peoples rights, whose human rights activities disrupt the economic interests of corporations and individuals in mining, logging, and other extractive industries, accounted for 59% of the total killings. Targeted killings of land, environmental and indigenous peoples’ rights defenders took place in Argentina, Brazil, Burkina Faso, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, India, Kenya, Mexico, Nicaragua, Peru, the Philippines and Thailand. While 2021 provided a slight reprieve from COVID lockdown measures and allowed mobilisations to return to the street as part of calls for justice across many human rights movements, governments and security forces around the world responded to these peaceful demonstrations with extreme violence. In Colombia, India, Iraq, Mexico, Myanmar and the Philippines, HRDs who organized or participated in peaceful public protests were targeted, including those who died in custody as the result of torture after being detained for peacefully protesting.

In Mexico, five indigenous Chatino community members of Paso de la Reyna, Oaxaca, were killed in the first three months of the year, including land and environmental defenders Fidel Heras Cruz and Jaime Jiménez Ruiz. They had both worked to oppose megaprojects and the exploitation of the Río Verde by political and economic powers in the area. In Brazil, 27 human rights defenders were murdered in 2021, including 19 land rights defenders. On 26 January, land rights defender Fernando dos Santos Araújo was shot in the back of the head at the Santa Lucía settlement in Pau D’Arco. The HRD was a key witness to the 2017 Pau D’Arco massacre – in which military police executed ten landless workers – and had returned to the settlement to continue the collective struggle for land and agrarian reform. The killing and attacks against HRDs was not limited to the Americas and Asia; extreme violence towards land and environmental rights defenders is common globally. On 15 July, Kenyan land and environmental rights defender, Joanna Stutchbury was fatally shot; she had campaigned against land-grabbers and private developers who had taken over part of the Kiambu Forest.

Impunity for killings, disappearances, and other crimes against HRDs remains rampant, and defenders of particular marginalized groups are increasingly calling attention to laws and policies (or the lack thereof) that contribute to a “double impunity” for crimes against HRDs. In Ukraine and Georgia, for example, violent far right and neo-Nazi attacks on LGBTIQ+ defenders in 2021 were classed as “hooliganism” by police, ignoring the homophobic motives of the violence. Defenders in both countries have called for hate crime legislation that includes sexual orientation and gender identity as protected categories, as well as legislation that protects and affirms the work of HRDs.

Despite widespread impunity, 2021 brought a rare moment of accountability for a WHRD who was killed after exposing business-related human rights abuses. In July 2021, five years after the murder of indigenous WHRD Berta Cáceres, Roberto David Castillo, former President of the internationally financed hydroelectric company Desa, was jailed for co-collaborating in her murder. The high court in Tegucigalpa ruled Berta was murdered for her activism opposing to the construction of the Agua Zurga Dam, which led to delays and financial losses for Desa. Unfortunately, in many business-related cases there is little effort to properly investigate links between corporations and reprisals against defenders, enabling

Despite this positive development in the struggle for accountability, several governments also introduced **budget cuts** which dissolved and undermined national institutions dedicated to pursuing justice. Between June and July 2020 – in the midst of COVID-19 mobility restrictions – Guatemalan President Alejandro Giammattei announced the merging of four state institutions, previously dedicated to the protection of victims of human rights violations and armed conflict, and the furthering of human rights: the Presidential Secretariat for Women (SEPREM), the Secretariat for Peace (Sepaz), the Presidential Coordinating Commission for the Executive's Policy on Human Rights (COPREDEH) and the Secretariat for Agrarian Affairs (SAA) (three of which emerged as a result of the 1996 peace accords) into a single institution, the Presidential Commission for Peace and Human Rights (COPADEH). The impact of this was felt throughout 2021, as the merging of these institutions created a sense of uncertainty and a lack of clarity as to how the government will fulfill its international obligations regarding the protection of HRDs and journalists and responsibilities within the newly established institution remain unclear, as there is also a reduction in staff and resources. In March 2021, the government also denied the Human Rights Ombudsman's Office (PDH) the necessary budget to operate for the majority of the year, delaying funding until the end of 2021. HRDs reported that they strongly felt the impact of losing one of the last allies left in Guatemalan institutions for the majority of 2021. According to HRD Memorial partner UDEFEGUA, 11 HRDs were killed in Guatemala in 2021.

corporate actors to frequently get away with murder.

The second year of the COVID-19 pandemic continued to expose how threats faced by HRDs are inextricable from issues of poverty, extreme economic inequality and the lack of state protection. For defenders living in poverty, labour rights defenders, and those protecting the working poor, disabled, underemployed, or other economically marginalized groups, COVID-19 induced extreme threats such as hunger that impacted their health, families and activism. Ongoing economic violence, homelessness and housing insecurity, and the inability to gather in person without fear of raids and arrests was felt especially by minority rights defenders, LGBTIQ+ defenders, sex worker rights defenders and others who rely on mutual aid and community shelters in place of state-sponsored support. The past two years have exacerbated economic stratifications in human rights movements, seen in issues such as the financial burden of detention. The likelihood that a detention will result in a defender's family going hungry, for example, varies greatly depending on if the HRD was the sole breadwinner, if their family has a financial safety net, if they have relatives who can financially support them, and if they are connected to national or international organisations able to support with living costs such as food, shelter, and medical bills.

II. Surveillance

Surveillance technologies are used to target HRDs to infiltrate their networks, get access to their information and contacts, and dissuade them from continuing their human rights work. The prevalence of surveillance technology contributes to a chilling effect in which defenders are aware they may be targeted and therefore may become fearful to continue their work.

In October, a digital forensic investigation carried out by Front Line Defenders uncovered the presence of Pegasus spyware on phones belonging to six Palestinian HRDs. Three of the 6 Palestinian HRDs who were targeted worked for organisations that had been designated the same month as “terrorist organizations” by the Israeli Minister of Defense. The designation not only criminalised but defamed and stigmatized their work, and was a clear attempt to cut them off from foreign funding and support. In the aftermath of the [Pegasus Project report](#) in July 2021, several HRDs [reported](#) to Front Line Defenders that they are purposefully reducing their public-facing human rights work.

Front Line Defenders has since discovered Pegasus spyware on the phones of defenders in Bahrain, Jordan, and El Salvador. Targeted surveillance has uniquely violent effects on WHRDs, as authorities exploit gendered, political and social power structures to defame, blackmail, and dox WHRDs, including by publishing private conversations and intimate photos taken from WHRDs' phones. According to forensic investigations carried out by Front Line Defenders in November and December of 2021, Bahraini WHRD Ebtisam Al-Saegh had been hacked at least eight times between August and November 2019 with Pegasus spyware, and the device of Jordanian WHRD Hala Ahed Deeb was infected with Pegasus spyware since March 2021. Ebtisam Al-Saegh reported extreme psychological

What is Pegasus? Developed and sold by Israeli surveillance firm NSO Group, Pegasus spyware exploits technical vulnerabilities in a victim's device to covertly gain access to the device and extract data, including text messages, emails, media, microphone, camera, passwords, voice calls on messaging apps, location data, call logs, and contacts. The spyware can also potentially allow an attacker to activate the phone camera and microphone, to spy on an individual's calls and activities. As such, Pegasus not only enables the surveillance of the target, but also the target's communications and interactions with other people.

distress and constant fear as a result of her phone being compromised and that she no longer felt safe to remove her headscarf in her home for fear of photos being remotely taken and shared of her. A number of other WHRDs and journalists in the MENA region were targeted with Pegasus spyware in 2021 [including Emirati WHRD Alaa Al-Siddiq](#).²

In November 2021, the UN General Assembly adopted a [resolution](#) on the protection of HRDs which called on States to refrain from using surveillance technologies to target HRDs. However without a global moratorium on the sale of surveillance technologies and until proper oversight and safeguards can be established, the safety of HRDs around the world will remain in jeopardy.

III. Terrorism Charges and Smear Campaigns

Terrorism is one of the most politically expedient accusations available to governments that want to demonise and criminalise HRD activities. Authorities shift and transform what constitutes terrorist activity to suit a wide array political purposes, and to criminalise HRDs working on a range of rights areas including land, environment, self-determination, women’s rights, anti-torture, migrants rights, and indigenous peoples’ rights.

The criminalisation and smear campaign designating Palestinian HRDs as “terrorists” is one of several instances in which HRDs were branded or charged as terrorists or extremists in 2021. In countries with vastly different political systems, documentation by Front Line Defenders exposes an extensive ecosystem of counter-terrorism laws, special investigative units, militarized battalions, and court systems that governments are using to target and neutralise defenders. Authorities in Algeria, Belarus, Cameroon, China, Egypt, India, Iran, Israel, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Tajikistan, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Venezuela have used a combination of legal charges and state-controlled media report to brand HRDs as terrorists or extremists in order to demonise and undermine their legitimate human rights work, including attempts to cut them off from international support and solidarity.

A non-exhaustive list of laws used to accuse or charge HRDs with terrorism in 2021³

The majority of cases involve men. For analysis of the more nuanced ways in which terror charges and accusations are weaponized against women human rights defenders, see [Hidme Markam](#) (page 38), [Kamira Nait Sid](#) (page 53), and [Najmeh Vahedi and Hoda Amid](#) (page 11).

Country	Accusations / Charges	Law	Targeted HRD
Algeria	“belonging to a terrorist organization”	Article 87 of the Penal code	Kamira Nait Sid
Belarus	"educating or training people for participation in mass riots, or financing such activities" "participating in a criminal organization" "inciting to racial, national or religious hatred or discord" "calling for action against the national security of Belarus" "establishing an extremist group" ⁴	Articles 293, 285(2), 130(3), 361(3), 361-1(1) of the Criminal Code	Maria Rabkova
Cameroon	"incitement to terrorism made through the media, tracts means to reach the public" ⁵	Article 8 (2) of the Law on the suppression of Acts of Terrorism	Amungwa Tanyi Nicodemus
China	"forming, leading and participating in terrorist organisations" "advocating terrorism or extremism or instigating terrorist activities"	Article 120 and 120C of the Chinese Criminal Code	Yidiresi Aishan
Egypt	“membership in a terrorist organisation with knowledge of aims and intent”	Anti-Terrorism Law, Terrorist Entities Law	Mohamed El-Baqer and Mohamed Ibrahim
India	“raising funds for a terrorist act” “conspiracy” “recruiting of any person or persons for a terrorist act” “membership of a terrorist organisation” “raising funds for a terrorist organisation”	Sections 17, 18, 18B, 38, 40 of the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA)	Khurram Parvez
Pakistan	“sedition” “criminal conspiracy”	Anti-Terrorism Act	Muhammad Ismail
Sri Lanka	PTA allows detention without charge for up to 18 months, and without being produced before a judge	Prevention of Terrorism Act	Hejaaz Hizbullah
Tajikistan	“public calls for performance of an extremist activity made using the mass media or the Internet”	Part 2, Article 307.1 of the Criminal Code of Tajikistan	Abdulmadjd Rizoiev
Turkey	“membership of a terrorist organisation” “undermining national unity and state security”	Article 314/2 of the Turkish Penal Code	Raci Bilici
Venezuela	“fraudulent handling of cards” “criminal association” “money laundering”	Law on the Financing of Terrorism	Azul Positivo

The ways in which accusations of terrorism and extremism are defined and weaponized vary not only based on how a government has structured its penal code, or which movement of HRDs it is seeking to criminalize, but also on the gender and ethnicity of the defenders involved. In India, on 9 March, WHRD Hidme Markam was arrested by Chhattisgarh police on several charges including the anti-terrorism law, Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) and accused of involvement in Maoist activities. She was arrested during an event held on International Working Women's Day, protesting the use of torture and sexual violence by police against Adivasi women in the State. Markam was accused of terrorist activist not solely because of her women's rights work; her Adivasi identity and her advocacy on behalf of her indigenous community – frequently branded as “Naxals,” “Maoists,” “communists,” and “terrorists” by Indian authorities – made her a target for the discriminatory application of the anti-terrorism law.

Terror charges often enable worse treatment for HRDs in military or terrorism courts, prisons, interrogation centres, and investigative units. In Sri Lanka, the use of the country's anti-terror law in HRD cases is aimed at ensuring prolonged incarceration without recourse to bail, even when there is a clear lack of evidence. HRD Hejaaz Hizbullah, arbitrarily arrested in April 2020 on baseless anti-terror charges, remained in prison throughout 2021 under the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act. The application of terrorism-related charges determines which courts defenders are tried in, and what degree of transparency their trials receive. Egypt continued its widespread use of terrorism charges (namely “funding a terrorist organisation”) against HRDs, including Ezzat Ghoneim and Ramy Kamel, in 2021. Since the military took over large swathes of Egypt's civil and political life under the Al-Sisi regime, most of these cases are sent to Emergency State Security Courts, but the country is also using Terrorism Circuit Courts in civilian criminal courts to review HRD cases as well. In October 2021, WHRD Azza Soliman petitioned the court to remove her name from the travel ban and asset freeze lists, after prosecutors dropped charges against her and other HRDs in the foreign funding case, opened in 2011. The appeal to remove her name from the travel ban and asset freeze lists was unexpectedly and inexplicably moved from the civilian court hearing her case to a Terrorism Circuit Court. In Algeria, a group of defenders had their case moved from a civil court to an anti-terror court in April, with a similar lack of transparency over if, how and when their case will be reinvestigated, and what impact it could have on their potential sentencing. The move occurred after the Public Prosecutor of Oran charged HRDs Kaddour Chouicha, Jamila Loukil and Said Boudour with “enrollment in a terrorist or subversive organization” in a case along with twelve other activists from the “Hirak” protest movement. If convicted, the HRDs face twenty years' imprisonment.

In 2021, HRDs in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka also endured violent raids on their homes and offices by counter-terrorism units such as Bangladesh's Rapid Action Battalion, Pakistan's Counter Terrorism Department, and Sri Lanka's multiple intelligence and counter-terror agencies. During these attacks, HRDs' families endure physical and psychological violence. Even when charges are not filed, the raids and accusations themselves serve as a form of defamation and smearing that can cut HRDs off from their community, networks and funders, who may fear being associated with the HRDs.



Spotlight: Deadly Smear Campaigns and “Red-tagging”

Cases of HRDs charged and imprisoned under anti-terrorism legislation only tell one piece of the story. As Israel did with six Palestinian rights organisations, publicly adding HRDs to official terrorist lists is another tactic used to smear and stigmatize legitimate human rights work. On 13 September, the UAE Cabinet issued Ministerial Resolution No. 83 of 2021, adding to its terrorist list 13 groups and 38 individuals including HRDs Ahmed Mohammed Al-Shaiba Al-Nuaimi, Mohammed Saqr Al-Zaabi, Hamad Mohammed Al-Shamsi, and Saeed Nasser Al-Tenaiji. These designations can have severe consequences for HRD security. On 20 December, Egypt’s New Cairo Emergency State Security Misdemeanour Court sentenced HRDs Mohamed El-Baqer and Mohamed Ibrahim to four years in prison; the defenders had previously been added to Egypt’s terrorist list for five years in November 2020, indicating that their prison sentences were set to align with their designated time on the terrorist list.

In the Philippines, the deadly phenomenon of “red-tagging” is notoriously used to accuse HRDs of being “communist terrorists” before targeting them with extrajudicial killings, judicial harassment, arbitrary arrests, false charges, detention and threats. Red-tagging has been a central component of the government’s counter-insurgency campaign against the New Peoples Army (NPA) for decades, and is widely used to intimidate, silence and kill government critics. President Roderigo Duterte’s National Task Force on Ending Local Communist Armed Conflict creates billboards, posters, and pamphlets that brand HRDs, journalists, and activists as NPA actors or sympathizers, who are then targeted for their “terrorist” activity. Examples of HRDs’ human rights work that has been branded as extremist, terrorist, or communist activity by the government includes natural disaster humanitarian relief, indigenous people’s rights defense, and leading movements of peasant farmers. On 5 March, President Rogrigo Duterte delivered a speech in which he ordered the Philippine National Police and the Army to “ignore human rights” and “kill” and “finish off” communist rebels in armed encounters. Two days later, on 7 March, Filipino police and military officers conducted a coordinated operation targeted HRDs across the provinces of Batangas, Cavite, Laguna and Rizal, and executed five HRDs in front of their families.

Yet, despite the horrific levels of violence waged against Filipino HRDs who have been branded as terrorists, an examination of Front Line Defenders 2021 documentation revealed no known cases of HRDs actually being charged under the country’s widely criticised Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020. HRDs have been arrested on *other* fraudulent charges after being red-tagged, usually in the six to 12 months after being defamed. On 21 March, police and military officers arrested WHRD Renalyn Tejero in Cagayan de Oro City, and charged her with “attempted murder” and “murder,” though no victims were named nor evidence provided. She was previously included on a government list of individuals deemed to be “communist-terrorist group priority targets” in the Caraga region. Fraudulent murder charges appears to be on the rise for red-tagged HRDs, including young women defenders like Tejero.

The government’s assault on HRDs in the name of fighting terrorism is underpinned not by the Anti-Terrorism Act itself, but by its well-worn tactic of rampant red-tagging and other baseless accusations. The 2020 Act is relatively new when compared to the country’s decades-old weaponisation of counter-insurgency language to attack civil society. This highlights the fact that explicit anti-terror laws and penal code articles are only one piece of the broader anti-terrorism landscape that threatens HRDs. Accusations, smear campaigns, and informal terrorist lists can be just as dangerous, and in some cases deadly, as anti-terror laws themselves.

The chart on page 8 lists countries using charges against HRDs which explicitly reference terrorism or extremism in the law, the act, the penal code, or the charge. In many countries, however, charges of terrorism and extremism are used in conjunction with charges related to sedition, harming national unity, or other national security charges. In Pakistan, the crime of sedition, for example, falls under the Anti-Terror Act. Pakistani HRD Muhammad Ismail was charged under the country’s Anti-Terrorism Act of 1997, arrested in the Anti-Terror Court, and had his home raided by the Counter Terrorism Department, but was actually charged with sedition and criminal conspiracy.⁶ In countries such as Algeria, where sedition and terrorism are separate charges, HRDs have received both charges. Amazigh WHRD Kamira Nait Sid was charged with both “undermining national unity and state security” and “belonging to a terrorist organization” under Article 87 of the Algerian Penal code with penalties ranging from 10 years to life imprisonment and the death penalty.⁷

Terrorism, membership in, or support of a terrorist organisation accounted for 11% of the 197 charges against HRDs documented by Front Line Defenders in 2021. When combined with charges of damaging national unity, defaming the state, state security, and sedition, these account for nearly 40% of all charges against HRDs in 2021.

Of 197 charges against HRDs issued in 140 cases

Charge	Percent of all cases
Terrorism / Membership or support of a terrorist organisation	11%
Defamation / Insulting state / Damaging national unity	17%
National security / State security / Sedition	10%

National Security, Morality, and Iranian WHRDs

In February 2021, the Tehran Court of Appeals upheld the seven and eight year prison sentences of WHRDs Najmeh Vahedi and Hoda Amid, respectively, who were charged with “collaborating with the hostile American government against the Islamic Republic of Iran on women and family issues” for holding women’s rights workshops on the terms of marriage, dowries, “familial legal rights in Iran” and the value of women’s work in the home. The language used in Amid and Vahedi’s cases conflates women’s rights in the family unit with national security (“collaborating with the hostile American government”), and raises concerns about the implications on WHRD security of other family laws, which are increasingly framed in securitized language.

In November 2021, Iran’s Guardian Council ratified the Youthful Population and Protection of the Family law, promoted by the government as a strategy to boost birth rates. Article 61 states that abortion could now fall under the crime of “corruption on earth.” While not a direct accusation of terrorism, “corruption of Earth” is the highest crime in Iran, punishable by death, and often accompanies charges of terrorism or espionage. The law prohibits free distribution of contraceptive goods and imposes a ban on voluntary sterilizations for men and women, aside from very exceptional cases, a move that will disproportionately impact women in situations of social marginalization, economic precariousness and domestic and sexual violence. UN human rights experts quickly called on Iran to repeal the law, identifying it as an “alarming and regressive U-turn by a government that had been praised for progress on the right to health.” The new law puts WHRDs at risk not only of “corruption on Earth” charges but, in the context of increasingly securitized language on women’s rights in Iran (as in Amid and Vahedi’s cases), also at risk of other charges related to national security, espionage and terrorism.

IV. “Gender Ideology”: The Backlash on Feminists and LGBTIQ+ HRDs

Defamation, smear campaigns, and fear-mongering around the work of HRDs remained a constant threat for defenders around the world in 2021. In addition to accusations of terrorism, anti-nationalism, and anti-development, HRDs were also accused of the promotion of vaguely defined concepts like “gender ideology” and “LGBT ideology.” Gender ideology is a nebulous, flexible, catchall term used by anti-rights actors to stigmatise and create fear around the legitimate work of HRDs advocating for women’s rights, gender justice, LGBTIQ+ rights and, in particular, the rights of transgender people. It has been used to derail and disrupt a wide range of struggles for equality and justice. While gender ideology is most obviously being used to attack WHRDs and LGBTIQ+ rights defenders, it is also used as a moral panic tool for other political purposes, and to smear human rights agendas including economic justice and peace efforts. As feminist organisation AWID [documented](#) in its 2021 report on anti-rights actors, “Colombian voters narrowly rejected the [2016] peace agreement after a campaign by ultra-conservative organizations, the Catholic church, and Evangelical groups which claimed the agreement had been ‘contaminated’ by ‘gender ideology,’ on the basis that the text recognized the differentiated impact the conflict had had on women and LGBTIQI people.”

As feminist organisations globally are analyzing the impact of anti-gender ideology movements on human rights and human rights funding, cases of HRDs documented by Front Line Defenders in 2021 indicate that this discourse has a tangible impact on HRD security. The concept of gender ideology is purposefully amorphous, malleable, and deployed against defenders in different countries. Throughout 2021, Polish authorities continued the judicial harassment of LGBTIQ+ defender [Bart Staszewski](#), ongoing since September 2020, with approximately [20 ongoing investigations](#) into his activism. Staszewski is accused of carrying out a defamation campaign against the Zakrzówek municipality after he placed multilingual signs with the slogan “LGBT-free zone” under the official road signs of the areas that have voted in support of the homophobic bill against “LGBTIQ+ ideology” in 2019. If found guilty, the HRD will be required to make a public apology on social media and on other media outlets, and pay financial compensation to the plaintiffs.



The increase in accusations that HRDs fighting for gender justice are promoting a sinister “ideology” accompanied a 2021 trend of homophobic and anti-trans bills, congressional and parliamentary votes and court rulings in [Australia](#), the [Dominican Republic](#), [Ghana](#), [Guatemala](#), [Hungary](#), [Spain](#), [Poland](#), and the [United Kingdom](#) (UK), and the [United States](#) (US). In the US alone, [33 states](#) (of 50) introduced more than 100 bills opposing transgender rights in the first four months of 2021. In several countries, public support was garnered by labeling transgender rights as part of a harmful, radical “ideology.” For HRDs, this language positions their struggles for gender and LGBTIQ+ rights as abnormal, foreign, illegitimate and contrary to existing, normalized systems (such as patriarchy, capitalism, racism or authoritarian rule).

V. Racism, Xenophobia and Nationalism

Racist policing, race-based nationalism, xenophobia, anti-migrant rhetoric and other intersecting themes are critically linked to HRD in/security, and underpin a wide range of violent attacks on both individual HRDs and the political activism of raced groups, especially Black and Afro-descendent communities. In Portugal, the headquarters of SOS Racismo was vandalised twice with swastikas and racist slurs in 2021. An online petition was launched to strip SOS Racismo's leader, Mamadou Ba, of his Portuguese citizenship and deport him from Portugal in response to his prominent, vocal activism for the rights of people of African decent in Portugal. Ba is also the frequent target of defamatory campaigns, by the far right and neo-Nazi movements in Portugal, accusing him of being racist. This is a common refrain heard in several countries, in which anti-racist HRDs are accused of inciting race-based tensions for visibilising and demanding accountability for structural racism. This type of critique is yet another strand of the populist rhetoric that feeds accusations against HRDs (see above) of promoting "gender ideology," by pathologising and demonising HRDs who make valid critiques of societal inequalities.



Indonesian WHRD Veronica Koman is currently in self-imposed exile in Australia due to the immense risks she faces in Indonesia on charges of "spreading fake news", "displaying race-based hatred", and "disseminating information aimed at inflicting ethnic hatred" in retaliation for her work defending the rights of West Papuans. On 7 November, two unidentified persons threw a package containing explosives at her parents' house in West Jakarta. The package contained the message: "If the police and security forces cannot find Veronica Koman, we will scorch the earth of wherever you hide and of your protectors." The message was signed in the name of "Homeland Defender Militant Fighters". On the same day, another relative of Veronica Koman's received a package with a dead chicken inside it, and a message reading "anyone who is hiding Veronica Koman will end up like this."

While Ba was not deported from Portugal, the calls to do so echo the xenophobia and race-based nationalism that have led to the killing, harassment, abuse, detention and deportation of migrant rights defenders globally in 2021. Russian authorities deported migrants rights defenders Izzat Amon and Valentina Chupik amid widespread, xenophobic attacks on migrant workers from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Amon was abducted in Moscow and forcibly transferred to Tajikistan in March; in September, Chupik was barred from returning to Russia, where she has resided with refugee status since 2006, after a visit to Armenia. In May, Qatar detained and charged Kenyan citizen, blogger and labour rights defender Malcolm Bidali with "offences related to payments received by a foreign agent for the creation and distribution of disinformation within the State of Qatar". Bidali had worked as a security guard in Qatar and he documented in his blog the exploitation and human rights violations migrant workers are subjected to in Qatar – a rare and extremely dangerous form of activism. Malcolm Bidali has written for Migrant-Rights.org, and a few days before his detention he had spoken at an online event about labour rights in Qatar.

Members of eight of 15 organisations in the regional group, Border Violence Monitoring Network, have been recently prosecuted in Greece, Croatia and Slovenia, charged with facilitating illegal migration, while Italy brought charges against 21 defenders that carry a fine *per person rescued*. Omer Essa Mahdi, an Iraqi citizen who arrived in Croatia on 26 April 2017 and was granted refugee status on 7 September 2018, was stripped of his refugee status in January 2021 as a reprisal against the migrant rights work of his partner, WHRD Tajana Tadić. Tajana Tadić is the program manager of Are You Syrious, a human rights organisation created in 2015 in Croatia supporting migrants on the Balkan migration route. Omar Essa Mahdi was obliged to leave Croatian territory. Belarus facilitated a humanitarian crisis

on the Balkan migration route. Omar Essa Mahdi was obliged to leave Croatian territory. Belarus facilitated a humanitarian crisis on its borders with Poland, Lithuania and Latvia, leading to both the establishment of new HRD initiatives to save refugees and migrants, and violent crackdowns on these defenders.

Violent attacks on migrant rights defenders are especially dangerous for HRDs who are refugees and migrants themselves, and who live and work in refugee and IDP camps and shelters. In September 2021, three armed individuals shot and killed Rohingya HRD and refugee rights defender Mohib Ullah in Kutupalong camp in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. Mohib Ullah was known for his work documenting atrocities committed against Rohingyas by Myanmar's military, as well as advocating for an end to violations of human rights in Kutupalong Camp, which is regularly threatened and attacked by Bangladeshi extremist organisations. On 12 October 2021 in Mexico, eight armed men broke into Casa Betania Santa Martha Shelter in Salto de Agua, Chiapas and threatened migrant rights defenders inside. Such attacks are life-threatening and have severe psychological impacts for defenders who not only work, but live with their families, inside these camps and shelters.



VI. Corruption

Front Line Defenders documented arrests, attacks and harassment of anti-corruption HRDs in Bangladesh, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Indonesia, Republic of Congo, Sudan, and Uzbekistan in 2021, with defenders in Indonesia and Bangladesh targeted for their COVID-19-related anti-corruption work. Anti-corruption defenders investigating how governments are mismanaging the COVID-19 pandemic and misappropriating funds and resources for political or personal gain faced new risks. In May, [Rozina Islam](#), a WHRD and senior journalist with the Bengali newspaper Prothom Alo, was arrested at the Secretariat of the Ministry of Health in Dhaka, and accused of taking photos of official documents at the office of the personal secretary to the Secretary of Health. She has reported extensively on human rights issues in Bangladesh and most recently published a series of investigative reports on the government's weak management of the COVID-19 pandemic, including on corruption and mismanagement in the health sector. The case against her was filed by the Health Ministry under sections of the criminal code related to theft and "disclosing information."⁸ If charged and convicted, the WHRD faces punishment ranging from 14 years in prison to the death penalty. On 10 September, the Presidential Chief of Staff personally accused HRDs and members of Indonesia

Corruption Watch (ICW), [Egi Primayogha](#) and [Miftachul Choir](#), of defamation and reported them to the Criminal Investigation Unit of the National Police of Jakarta. The accusation related to an ICW study that alleged the involvement of various public officials in promoting the circulation of the drug Ivermectin (a drug primarily used for horses, cows, and other large animals) during the COVID-19 pandemic. If charged, the human rights defenders could be sentenced to 6 years in prison.

In Uzbekistan, anti-corruption blogger Miraziz Bazarov was brutally beaten outside his home in Tashkent on 28 March by three unknown individuals, resulting in a fractured leg, a concussion and internal bruising. Bazarov was attacked hours after a music fan group he organized had held a regular meeting in Tashkent; Bazarov did not stay long at the meeting and was not present when an anti-LGBTIQ+ mob attacked the group. Later that day, in an

unusual move, the Tashkent police published a video accusing the HRD of promoting homosexuality and inciting protests. Later that evening, Bazarov was assaulted outside his home and had to be hospitalised. He was placed under police surveillance at the hospital for one month and then remanded on 29 April, charged with "defamation" and "insult" (Articles 139 part 3 (d), and 140 of the Criminal Code of Uzbekistan, respectively) and placed under house arrest for the rest of the year. The charges relate to a video the blogger posted in October 2020, critiquing a local school which allegedly measured students' socks as part of the school's "struggle against LGBT ideas." The HRD has previously been threatened and harassed in Uzbekistan for his anti-corruption work, in a manner that weaponizes homophobia as retaliation for the HRD's work in other human rights areas. In July 2020, Bazarov [published](#) an open [letter](#) to the Asian Development Bank (ADB) about possible corruption and misuse of funds related to US \$500 million worth of funding the ADB allocated to help Uzbekistan respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. Bazarov also published the information on his Facebook page and Telegram channel. Following the release of the letter, he was threatened by Uzbekistan's State Security Service and days later, received several messages notifying him that he was registered as a 'gay prostitute' on an online prostitution service alongside photos of him and his mobile number, putting him at significant risk given that homosexual acts among men are illegal in Uzbekistan and the high levels of homophobia in Uzbek society. The 2021 attack appears to be a result of the state sponsored abuse begun in 2020 as retaliation for his anti-corruption work.

Research by Transparency International (TI) demonstrates how corruption and impunity contribute to an unsafe climate for HRDs. TI [examined](#) Front Line Defenders 2020 data on HRD killings and found that 98% of those deaths occurred in 23 countries with high levels of public sector corruption. Corruption both enables human rights violations (such as ill-

DFIs and COVID-19

Although the ADB Anticorruption and Integrity Unit opened an investigation into Miraziz' case, the case was closed shortly after, without warning and without explanation. ADB continues to provide [financing](#) for COVID-19 response projects in Uzbekistan without known conditions intended to prevent further retaliation, or to address the ongoing retaliation against Miraziz. In 2021, several Development Finance Institutions (DFIs) continued to finance COVID-19 response projects around the world without addressing reprisal risks, despite cases like that of Miraziz Bazarov and other high profile cases of HRDs, journalists and healthcare workers being subjected to reprisals for speaking out critically about some of these projects throughout the pandemic, and despite DFI commitments to not tolerate reprisals.⁹

treatment in detention with no oversight or accountability for police behaviour) and impedes access to justice by slowing investigations, undermining due process, and allowing impunity for perpetrators with connections to power.

VII. Imprisonment & Resistance Behind Bars

Detaining and sentencing defenders for long periods of 10 years or more remained a tactic used by governments to remove HRDs from their communities. Iranian human rights lawyer Amirsalar Davoudi's sentence of 30 years and 111 lashes was upheld on appeal in July, and in December a military court in Pakistan sentenced HRD [Idris Khattak](#) to 14 years in prison. The year also marked a full decade behind bars for Bahraini HRD [Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja](#), who is also a Danish citizen, serving a life sentence in Bahrain, and two decades in incommunicado detention in Eritrea for journalist [Dawit Isaak](#), who is also a Swedish citizen.

Torture, mistreatment and denial of medical care resulted in the deaths of at least 6 unjustly imprisoned defenders in 2021. Tibetan citizen journalist Kunchok Jinpa and anti-corruption defender Guo Hongwei, serving sentences of 21 years and 15 years, respectively, for their human rights work, both died in Chinese prisons following allegations of torture and mistreatment at the hands of authorities. Fr. [Stan Swamy](#), an indigenous peoples rights defender in India, Joseph Canlas, a peasant leader and HRD in the Philippines, and Iranian defender [Behnam Mahjoubi](#), a freedom of religion advocate in Iran, each died due to denial of timely and adequate medical care in prison.

In 2021, Front Line Defenders documented a wide range of cases in which authorities repeatedly reinforced the isolation of HRDs serving long prison sentences and intentionally kept them from their families. Vietnamese blogger [Trần Huỳnh Duy Thức](#) and Crimean Tatar minority rights defenders [Server Mustafayev](#) and [Emir Usein Kuku](#) continue to be incarcerated far from their home towns. In Iran, a number of WHRDs were transferred to remote prisons far from their families without prior notification, using transportation methods that further exposed them to COVID-19. WHRD [Narges Mohammadi](#) (Iran) was held in solitary confinement and denied visitation rights, and [Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja](#) (Bahrain) and [Atena Daemi](#) (Iran) were repeatedly denied telephone calls to their lawyers and families. In Nicaragua, the family members of detained WHRD [María Esperanza Sánchez García](#) brought her prescription medication to the prison, and prison guards refused to give it to her.

These emotional and physical punishments not only affect the HRDs, but also the defenders' partners, children, siblings and parents. Families often face arduous day-long journeys and financial strain to visit their loved ones in remote prisons. The economic impact on defenders' families exacerbate the existing poverty many are dealing with, especially when the imprisoned defender was the primary earner in the family. Additionally, some family members have been fired from their jobs or unable to find employment due to their relationship with an imprisoned defender, increasing their already precarious financial situation. The weaponization of poverty against imprisoned defenders and their families was compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, with travel restrictions and job insecurity exacerbating the difficulties of maintaining connections with imprisoned family members.

Despite the immense burden borne by imprisoned HRDs and their families, defenders continued to utilise their time behind bars to document and publicise grave violations of prisoners' rights that often occur with impunity. Iranian WHRDs who were relocated to remote prisons, for example, bore witness to the previously undocumented extent of human rights abuses taking place in these more remote locations, including the exploitation of inmates for labour, the sexual abuse of women prisoners and the prevalence of "temporary marriage contracts" whereby men inmates pay prison guards for "temporary marriages" with women inmates.

A number of WHRDs took immense personal risks and made public statements about these abuses. While on temporary medical leave, [Sepideh Gholian](#) published social media posts about the poor conditions and abuse of female inmates at Bushehr Prison. In September 2021, she was summoned to appear before the Branch 2 of Bushehr Public and Revolutionary Courts on charges of "spreading virtual disinformation" and "propaganda activity against the state". On 4 November, Gholian was transferred to the public ward of Evin prison in Tehran following interrogations based on new charges brought against her for her reporting on violations. The case is still pending before the courts. In February 2021, [Narges Mohammadi](#) published a video explaining how prison officials and the then-head of Evin Prison beat her, touched her inappropriately and sexually harassed her during her forced transfer to Zanjan prison in December 2019. Three months later, the WHRD was informed that she had been sentenced on new charges to 30 months in prison, 80 lashes and two fines. The WHRD had just been released from prison in October 2020 having served 4 years of a 16-year sentence. She maintains that these new charges were based on her continued human rights work, including her work from inside Evin and Zanjan prisons.

Travel bans and house arrests also have extreme and traumatising effects on defenders and their families. Not being able to move freely undermines HRDs' access to work, medical care, food, housing, family support, respite, and training opportunities, which in turn results in mental, physical and economic insecurity. In Saudi Arabia, WHRD [Loujain Al-Hathloul](#) was released in February, followed by two other WHRDs [Nassima Al-Sadah](#) and [Samar Badawi](#) released in

June after spending nearly three years in detention. The three WHRDs were sentenced to five years in prison in connection with their women's rights activism, with the suspension of two years of the term. They are still banned from travel and from using social media for another five years. While their release means that WHRDs are safer relative to the extreme risks of psychological and sexual violence in prison, they continue to have their freedom of movement and expression severely restricted by these bans.

VIII. New Policies & Guidelines to Protect HRDs

- In March, Facebook released a human rights policy recognising HRDs as a “high-risk user group” and committing to “offer specific measures to protect their safety.” However HRDs continue to experience violations of their freedom of expression on Facebook. (See Sub-Saharan Africa chapter, page 21.)
- In May, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on “The effects of climate change on human rights and the role of environmental defenders on this matter,” calling for “for the adoption of an EU list of priority countries in which [the EU and member States] would step up their action in support of environmental rights defenders” and called on the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy / Vice-President of the European Commission “to provide an annual public report on actions carried out in the priority countries, as well as on the protection of environmental defenders worldwide”.
- In July, the UN Human Rights Council adopted by consensus a resolution on civil society space recognising the role of civil society during the pandemic and acknowledging the increased challenges, both online and offline, for civic space and HRDs.
- In October, a rapid response mechanism to protect environmental defenders was established under the Aarhus Convention. The mechanism will establish a Special Rapporteur specifically to respond to environmental rights defenders facing arrest, attack, or other persecution.
- Also in October, the UN Human Rights Council appointed a Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights in the context of climate change, which HRDs and international civil society organisations have been calling for since at least 2010. The new Special Rapporteur will provide new avenues for documenting and responding to threats and attacks against HRDs who are targeted for their work on climate change.

Development finance: Putting commitments into action

Despite many development finance institutions (DFIs) having committed to not tolerate reprisals against people filing complaints or raising public concerns about Bank-financed projects, including HRDs, in recent years, many have failed to put these commitments into concrete action.¹⁰ Front Line Defenders, as part of the Defenders in Development campaign, continued to advocate in 2021 that DFIs implement their commitments by establishing strategies for preventing and responding to reprisals. Some positive developments in 2021 included a number of DFIs starting to develop, or refine, internal tools for responding to reprisals and IFC and IDB Invest developing guidance for the private sector on addressing risks of retaliation – steps in the right direction, but the guidance did not address what the institutions should do to address these risks.¹¹ Despite these initiatives, DFIs often failed to act in support of HRDs at risk (see case of Miraziz Bazarov in the Global Section and Paten Clan, in the Africa chapter for examples). There remains a long way to go before DFIs effectively protect HRDs from reprisals linked to their operations.

- In November, the US Department of State published its “Guidelines for U.S. Diplomatic Mission Support to Civil Society and Human Rights Defenders.” The guidelines affirm that “protecting and supporting human rights defenders is a key priority of U.S. foreign policy,” and commits the US to protecting HRDs through emergency support, prison visits, advocacy with governments, documentation, reporting, and advancing international human rights instruments which protect HRDs.
- In November, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution on HRDs by consensus, recognising the key role HRDs played during the pandemic and reaffirming states responsibility to protect them. The resolution referenced surveillance and counter-terrorism used against defenders.

IX. International Support for HRDs: Spotlight on the EU

The EU and its member states pursued action on a number of individual cases of HRDs at risk throughout 2021 in line with stated commitments in the EU's Guidelines on HRDs, while the EU's Special Representative on Human Rights, Eamon Gilmore, continued to provide important visible support to HRDs. However, the EU has yet to develop an effective and consistent strategy to support imprisoned HRDs, which is particularly problematic in a pandemic context when prolonged pre-trial detention and long prison sentences can constitute a death sentence in light of the rapid spread of COVID-19 in prisons due to overcrowding and unsanitary detention conditions. In 2021, EU public diplomacy on cases of imprisoned HRDs tended to be the exception rather than the norm and there has been little evidence of HRD cases being raised in EU-third country high-level meetings. There was resounding silence – with the exception of tweets by the EU Special Representative on Human Rights and German Human Rights Ambassador preceding and surrounding the death of imprisoned HRD Stan Swamy – when the EU held talks with India. Any private diplomatic efforts on the high-profile case, including during the EU-India human rights dialogue, ostensibly failed.

Business & Human Rights – From Voluntary to Binding

In 2021, a decade since the adoption of the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, there was momentum to move away from voluntary business and human rights principles toward binding legislation. Binding obligations on businesses and States have the ability to greatly improve the protection of defenders globally by requiring companies and investors to assess and address human rights impacts linked to their supply chains (both at home and abroad), and providing an avenue for redress should they not properly do so. One example is the EU's legislative initiative on mandatory human rights and environmental due diligence highlighted above. In order for such initiatives to positively impact HRDs' safety, it is crucial that defenders are consulted during the development and implementation of such legislation, and that the legislation itself requires companies and investors to specifically assess and address risks to HRDs including by engaging with them directly.¹²

Sanctions Regime adopted in 2020, in March the EU imposed sanctions on persons and entities from China, DPRK, Libya, South Sudan, Eritrea and Russia involved in serious human rights violations and abuses. Targeted sanctions against government officials responsible for gross human rights violations are seen as an effective measure by many HRDs in the context of systemic repression.

The European Parliament continued to be a vocal supporter of HRDs at risk, with MEPs speaking out on cases while other EU institutions and stakeholders remained silent. Resolutions were adopted on Bahrain, Cambodia, Cuba, Hong Kong (China), Kazakhstan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the UAE, and Vietnam. In December 2021, FLD worked with a group of 16 Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) to launch a new initiative to pair up MEPs to support 11 long-term cases of imprisoned HRDs and to take action on these cases throughout their legislative mandate with the aim of securing the HRDs' releases.

There were further delays to the much anticipated European Commission legislative initiative on mandatory human rights and environmental due diligence for companies based in and operating in the EU. This initiative is expected to be published in the first quarter of 2022. Responding to the delays, the Netherlands announced that it will move ahead with its own national human rights due diligence legislation.

In December 2021, the EU launched the Global Europe Human Rights and Democracy programme. The programme, worth €1.5 billion, seeks to “step up EU support in promoting and protecting [...] the work of civil society organisations and HRDs around the world during the period 2021–2027.” Concerns remain that too little of this funding reaches HRDs working at local and national levels, who make the most important contributions to sustainable human rights progress. This is partly because of overly bureaucratic processes and partly because of political timidity in terms of finding effective ways to support critical human rights work in autocratic countries that target international funding. The package does include continued support for the EU HRD mechanism, which provides practical support to HRDs through the ProtectDefenders.eu consortium, of which Front Line Defenders is a partner.

The crisis in Afghanistan put a spotlight on the lack of reliable policies within the EU to ensure emergency visas for HRDs. With the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, HRDs, many of whom have been funded and encouraged for years by the EU and EU member states are now facing daily threats of violence and death. A number of defenders reported to FLD their feelings of abandonment and betrayal by those who should have accepted the political, moral and security responsibility for those they had funded. Some EU member states have taken action to provide some visas to defenders, the overall efforts and coordination by the EU to support HRDs to leave the country was disappointing. The crisis continues into 2022 and states still have the opportunity to step up support both for defenders continuing to stay in the country and those forced to leave.

In 2021, the EU continued to take the lead in United Nations human rights fora on initiatives aimed at addressing human rights violations in Belarus, Burundi, DPRK, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Myanmar. Under the EU's Global Human Rights

GLOBAL STATS

HOW HRDS ARE TARGETED AROUND THE WORLD

The following statistics are derived from Front Line Defenders case work and approved grants between 1 January and 31 December 2021 based on 1942 reported violations. Front Line Defenders documents multiple violations per case or grant, as this is the reality of the situation for human rights defenders. The data presented here are based on 720 grants (see Methodology, page 61) and 210 cases, yielding an average of 2.08 violations per case/grant.

This data should serve as an indicator – but not a comprehensive report – of the scope of the violations, threats and risks that human rights defenders face on a daily basis.

Top Violations

Arrest / Detention	17.86%
Threats	12.99%*
Hacking / Cyber Attack	10.8%**
Legal Action	10.11%
Surveillance	8.88%***
Physical Attack	8.4%

* Threats are generally underreported by HRDs, in part because they are so common and many HRDs have come to accept them as a kind of ‘noise’ or because since HRDs can often not identify who has made the threat, they do not think it is something they can report, either to authorities or to international organisations. This is not to underestimate the significance of threats – oftentimes, threats do lead to material repercussions for HRDs.

** This number represents violations only documented by FLD Cases and Grants – the Digital Protection program provides consultation and support for HRDs who have suffered attacks on their devices and platforms; those numbers are not included here, but cyber attacks, including doxing, hacking, surveillance, etc. pose a much larger problem for HRDs than reflected in casework or grants.

*** As with Threats, Surveillance is likely underreported, in part because HRDs may not know they are being surveilled. Additionally, for many HRDs, surveillance is often happening in the digital space, which would fall into the category of support provided by FLD’s Digital Protection Program

Violations by Gender

The table below shows the breakdown of the most common violations by gender as reported to Front Line Defenders in 2021. The percentages shown reflect the violations experienced as a proportion of the total number of violations to which each group was exposed.

Women		Men		Trans Women & Trans Men & Genderqueer/Non-conforming	
Arrest/Detention	17.85%	Arrest/Detention	25.27%	Death Threats	16.05%
Threats	14.17%	Legal Action	15.71%	Physical Attack	12.35%
Torture/Ill Treatment	11.16%	Threats	13.56%	Threats	12.35%
Legal Action	10.9%	Raid/Break-In/Theft	9.85%	Smear Campaign	11.11%
Surveillance	9.67%	Physical Attack	7.12%	Online Violence	11.11%
Other Harassment	9.54%	Other Harassment	7.02%	Arrest/Detention	7.41%
Physical Attack	9.26%	Surveillance	4.1%	Legal Action	7.41%
Raid/Break-In/Theft	8.04%	Questioning/Interrogation	3.41%	Other Harassment	7.41%

By Sector

According to the violations reported to Front Line Defenders in 2021, the three most targeted sectors of human rights defence were: Environmental/Land/Megaprojects/Indigenous Peoples’ Rights (14.5%), Freedom of Expression (9.4%), Human Rights Movement (9.3%), Women’s Rights(8.3%), LGBTIQ+ (7.6%)

Within those sectors, the table below details the most common ways in which these HRDs were targeted:

ENVIRONMENTAL, LAND & INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

	FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION	HUMAN RIGHTS MOVEMENT	WOMEN’S RIGHTS	LGBTIQ+
Legal Action	13.97%	Arrest/Detention 23.3%	Threats 21.26%	Threats 16.67%
Arrest/Detention	12.87%	Hacking/CA 16.48%	Arrest/Detention 19.54%	Arrest/Detention 16.03%
Hacking/CA	9.93%	Threats 11.36%	Surveillance 14.94%	Legal Action 14.74%
Raid/BI/Theft	9.03%	Legal Action 9.66%	Hacking/CA 9.2%	Surveillance 8.33%
				Threats 19.58%
				Physical Attack 16.08%
				Smear Campaign 9.79%
				Legal Action 9.09%

The Law As a Weapon

In 2021, in 88 cases in which legal action was taken against HRDs, Front Line Defenders recorded 116 charges filed against HRDs. The following charges were most commonly used - in many cases, multiple charges were filed against HRDs.

Charges

Public Order / Assembly / Illegal gathering	19.83%
National / State security / Sedition & Terrorism-Related	18.97%
Defamation / Insulting state / damaging national unity	17.24%
Spreading Fake News or Rumours / Propaganda	12.93%

Digital Risks / Threats

In 2021 the Digital Protection Programme provided consultation support to 286 individual human rights defenders (HRDs) and 205 grassroots organisations (directly supporting an additional 2,904 HRDs), through consultations (including security assessments, responses to emergency incidents and mentoring), webinars and trainings. Front Line Defenders supported HRDs from 79 countries. Below are the top four types of violations suffered and sectors targeted with digital threats.

Type of Threats / Violations

Network Shutdown	30.66%
Social Media Security	15.67%
Online Threats / Harassment / Doxing	13.24%
Physical Surveillance	8.01%

By Sector

Human Rights Movement	23.42%
Environmental Rights	10.26%
Freedom of Expression	10.00%
Citizens' Rights	8.42%

Endnotes

2. Alaa Al-Siddiq died in a car accident in the UK on 19 June 2021.
3. As analysed in this report, many countries use terrorism charges together with, or interchangeably with charges related to national unity, such as sedition. This chart includes only those which explicitly reference terrorism in the charges, accusations or law used.
4. In early 2021, national television show "TNT of Protest" alleged that HRC Viasna and Maria Rabkova were involved in terrorist activities. In February 2021, several videos were published by the Investigative Committee connecting HRDs with criminal organisations linked to seizing power, organising riots and terrorist activities. The full list of accusations against the WHRD can be found here: <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/case/woman-human-rights-defender-maria-rabkova-faces-15-years-prison#case-update-id-14562>
5. In February 2021, Pakistani HRD Muhammad Ismail was arrested at the Anti-Terrorism Court-III in Peshawar and spent two months in Counter Terrorism Department custody before being granted bail. He was held in a cell with sixty other people, denied food and clothing, and bound in chains during transport between detention centres. Pakistan's Counter Terrorism Department raided his home in Islamabad in what his lawyers and family believe was an effort to fabricate evidence against him. Ismail was charged with sedition and criminal conspiracy under Pakistan's Anti-Terrorism Act of 1997, indicating the ways in which charges of terrorism, sedition, and charges related to harming national unity are in some countries bound up with one another. See Asia chapter, page 36.
6. Amungwa Tanyi Nicodemus was not ultimately formally charged under the law; the police suspected him of "complicity with secessionists" after photographs of human rights violations committed by security forces were found in his phone.
7. On 1 September, the WHRD and co-president of the World Amazigh Congress was abducted from her home in Draa-Ben-Kheddaas in northern Algeria, detained at an unknown location without any contact with her family or a lawyer for three days. See MENA chapter, page 51.
8. Sections 379 and 411 of the Code of Criminal Procedure relate to theft and possession of items of theft, and sections 3 and 5 of the Official Secrets Act of 1923 relate to 'disclosing information, documents or other articles relating to international relations' and 'disclosure of information, documents or other articles protected from disclosure.'
9. See for example World Bank Commitments Against Reprisals <https://www.worldbank.org/en/projects-operations/environmental-and-social-framework/brief/world-bank-commitments-against-reprisals>, and IFC Position Statement on Retaliation Against Civil Society and Project Stakeholders https://www.ifc.org/wps/wcm/connect/ade6a8c3-12a7-43c7-b34e-f73e5ad6a5c8/EN_IFC_Reprisals_Statement_201810.pdf?MOD=AJPERES
10. See for example World Bank Commitments Against Reprisals <https://www.worldbank.org/en/projects-operations/environmental-and-social-framework/brief/world-bank-commitments-against-reprisals>, and IFC Position Statement on Retaliation Against Civil Society and Project Stakeholders https://www.ifc.org/wps/wcm/connect/ade6a8c3-12a7-43c7-b34e-f73e5ad6a5c8/EN_IFC_Reprisals_Statement_201810.pdf?MOD=AJPERES
11. Most internal tools are not yet publicly available.
12. Read more about Front Line Defenders recommendations for legislation on mandatory human rights and environmental due diligence.



SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Top Violations	Number	Percent
Threats	62/264	23%
Arrest/Detention	49/264	19%
Physical Attack	37/264	14%
Legal Action	28/264	1%
Surveillance	18/264	7%

Riskiest Sectors	Number	Percent
LGBTIQ+	39/454	15%
EELIP	37/454	14%
Corruption	33/454	13%
Citizen Participation	27/454	10%
Human Rights Movement	26/454	10%

I. Overview

HRDs across Africa protected the rights and freedoms of their communities in incredibly difficult, hostile conditions. Amidst military coups, states of siege, emergency measures, ongoing COVID-19 restrictions, online censorship, protest crackdowns, and a surge in the number of civilians thrust into life as refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs), HRDs innovated and designed new methodologies to reach and defend the rights of marginalized people.

In 2021, as in 2020, the need for HRDs in Africa to respond to health emergencies connected to the COVID-19 pandemic rose. In East Africa in particular, where violent attacks on LGBTIQ+ and sex worker communities is rampant and sexual violence from police is extremely common, queer, trans and sex worker HRDs endured arrest, physical attack, and psychological trauma while supporting their communities. In Tanzania, a spate of attacks on HRDs' homes that erupted in 2020 continued in 2021 after it became known locally that they were housing LGBTIQ+ people or sex workers at risk of homelessness, hunger and police violence on the streets.

During a number of military coups in Africa in 2021, HRDs produced detailed documentation of specific human rights violations and acts of corruption. This critical work put them at direct risk of retaliation, even if they were not protesting in the streets. Military coups in Chad (21 April), Mali (24 May) and in Guinea (5 September) presented immense risks and challenges to HRDs. Sixteen people were killed and hundreds, including HRDs, were arrested during protests against the coup in Chad, which broke out between 27 April and 19 May in Chad's capital, N'Djamena, and Moundou, the second largest city of the country. Later in the year, on 2 October, Chadian police violently repressed a peaceful demonstration organised by the Wakit Tama coalition and citizen movement. Several protesters, including anti-corruption HRD [Jacques Ngarassal](#), sustained injuries at the protest, which called for a more inclusive management of the transition of governance from military to civilian rule. In Guinea, however, HRD [Oumar Sylla](#) was [released](#) from prison as the result of a coup. A military junta overthrew President Alpha Conde and announced the liberation of "political prisoners" including Sylla.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)



In April 2021, DRC authorities declared a state of siege in the eastern part of the country, restricting the rights of HRDs already working in a dangerous context. Under the state of siege, civilian cases were transferred to military courts, and HRDs on trial for social media posts now potentially

face the death penalty if convicted. [Parfait Muhani](#) and [Ghislain Muhiwa](#) from the [LUCHA](#) movement were arrested on 6 July and 23 August, respectively. Both were [accused](#) of defamation, and Parfait Muhani is also accused of contempt of the judiciary and criminal association. They were both released on bail from the Central Prison of Goma in November after more than three months in detention and await trial in the Military Court of Goma. If found guilty on the count of the "criminal association," Parfait Muhani could face the death penalty. Upon their conditional release, they were placed under judicial control, which means the defenders are required to meet the judge weekly and sign judicial papers proving they are still in town and complying with release conditions. That same month, on 16 and 17 November, HRD Kizito Bin Hangi issued a press release and gave a media interview on Radio France International stating that six months living under a "state of siege" had not made the Congolese people any safer. Shortly after this statement, the defender started receiving death threats and was forced to go into hiding.

The state of siege has also impacted defenders working on land and environmental rights in the DRC. On 15 September, land and environmental defender [Franck Balimbasa](#) was [arrested](#) without a warrant by police and military officers and beaten while in custody in Lokutu, after raising concerns about human rights and environmental abuses reportedly linked to palm oil company Plantations et Huileries du Congo (PHC) – a company which is backed by major European development banks. Balimbasa is the head of the regional office of Réseau d'Information et d'Appui aux ONG nationales (RIO RDC), a network of 256 non-governmental organisations and 333 farmers' associations across different provinces of the DRC. RIO-RDC has played a prominent role working with communities in rural areas of the DRC to defend land and resource rights.¹³ Balimbasa was temporarily released on 22 September 2021 in order to receive medical attention following the physical assault in detention, but still faces trial in military court due to the state of siege.

Crackdowns on freedom of assembly and association occurred across the continent, and were increasingly targeted at less established groups of HRDs. In South Africa, the government responded to widespread protests by implementing a lock down enforced by the army, while a wave of protests primary led by disaffected and impoverished youth in Eswatini calling for democratic reform faced an unprecedented violent crackdown in which dozens of protestors were killed by security forces.

Despite the immense risks faced by defenders in Africa in 2021, their powerful activism and solidarity from abroad resulted in a number of key positive developments. On 30 June, HRD [Germain Rukuki](#) was released from prison, and has been vocal in his assertion that international pressure exerted on the government was crucial to his release. The defender, who works with the Association des juristes catholiques du Burundi – AJCB (Association of Catholic Jurists of Burundi), had been detained since 2017. In the DRC, former General John Numbi was officially charged with the murder of HRD [Floribert Chebeya Bahizire](#) and his driver Fidèle Bazana Edadi in 2010, however, he has reportedly fled the country.

Despite the immense risks faced by defenders in Africa in 2021, their powerful activism and solidarity from abroad resulted in a number of key positive developments. On 30 June, HRD [Germain Rukuki](#) was released from prison, and has been vocal in his assertion that international pressure exerted on the government was crucial to his release. The defender, who works with the Association des juristes catholiques du Burundi – AJCB (Association of Catholic Jurists of Burundi), had been detained since 2017. In the DRC, former General John Numbi was officially charged with the murder of HRD [Floribert Chebeya Bahizire](#) and his driver Fidèle Bazana Edadi in 2010, however, he has reportedly fled the country.

II. Housing, Land & Corruption

In Zimbabwe, HRDs defending urban residents' rights were increasingly targeted. Several groups of HRDs were targeted for their work investigating and publicising the illegality of demolitions of "informal urban structures," for and producing evidence that forced evictions and demolitions are a strategy used to depopulate urban areas and disenfranchise urban voters (seen to be opposition supporters) before the 2023 election. On 14 June, WHRD [Alice Kuvheya](#) who is the director of Chitungwiza Residents Trust (CHITREST), a community and membership based residents association in Chitungwiza, Zimbabwe, was arrested and charged with inciting criminal activity and gathering with intent to incite public violence.¹⁴ Her arrest was a clear act of retribution after she gave a speech calling for residents to peacefully



resist illegal evictions by the government. Kuvheya's lawyers reported to the court that she was tortured during arrest and detention. Charges against Kuvheya were dropped in November 2021, but the harassment and intimidation of urban land and housing defenders persists.

On 10 August, Ugandan police and army officers shot and wounded sixteen members of Paten Clan, a community in Pakwach District in northern Uganda, in retaliation for their opposition to the Wadelai irrigation project. After the shooting, police refused to give HRDs and those wounded the forms required to document injuries, which meant they were unable to access healthcare in government facilities when it was urgently required. The day after, UPDF officers arrested and beat up four women, including one pregnant woman, while they were on their way to fetch water.

These attacks followed repeated restrictions, harassment, and retaliations faced by community members and land rights defenders in Pakwach District, including:

- Local police detained 9 members of the community on accusations of sabotaging the project. They are currently out on bail.
- Two HRDs who volunteer with the local human rights organisation Buliisa Rural Initiative for Development (BIRUDO), who are also local civil servants, were summoned before the District's Award and Sanction Committee and interdicted from their jobs for supporting the community's rejection of the land acquisition. This punishment meant they are now only earning half salary, have had to hand over their passports to the Resident District Commissioner, and are not allowed to leave Pakwach district.
- The Deputy Resident District Commissioner suspended BIRUDO from operating in Pakwach District by following their work with Paten Clan. BIRUDO works to improve the quality of life of local communities through information sharing, sensitization, advocacy and networking for sustainable development. They were accused of supporting the community to sabotage government projects.

The attacks point to the need for international finance institutions and other funders to assess projects for risks of reprisals, to monitor for reprisals occurring and to intervene before attacks become physically violent. On September 9, Front Line Defenders, along with organisations from the Coalition for Human Rights in Development and other allies, sent an open letter to the African Development Bank and the Nordic Development Fund, calling on them to take immediate actions to address reprisals. However, despite commitments not to tolerate reprisals against whistleblowers, the AfDB did not act in support of Paten clan and BIRUDO.

Also in Uganda, HRDs who have been investigating the impact of oil projects on local communities and on the environment have faced a spate of arbitrary arrests. In May 2021, HRD Maxwell Atuhura was arrested alongside Italian journalist Federica Marsi while waiting to interview communities impacted by the Tilenga oil project. Marsi was released on the same day but Atuhura was held for 2.5 days without charge. Five months later, in October 2021, police raided the offices of Atuhura's organisation, the Africa Institute for Energy Governance (AFIEGO) in Buliisa and Hoima, as well as the offices of community association Oil and Gas HRDs Association (ORGHA). Atuhura was briefly detained for a second time. On 22 October 2021, an additional six members of AFIEGO were arrested. On the same day the police

The Wadelei irrigation project is one of four irrigation schemes funded under the African Development Bank (AfDB) Farm Income Enhancement and Forestry Conservation Project. It is worth USD 91.7 million, including approximately USD 5.9 million in support from the Nordic Development Fund, USD 76.7 million from the AfDB and USD 9.1 million from the Government of Uganda. The project will take 365 hectares of community land, more than double what was agreed to in consultative conversations. It is under construction by the Ugandan company Coil Construction Company Limited.



arrested and detained Robert Biryume, a land rights defender and member of communities affected by the East African Crude Oil Pipe Line (EACOP) project. The EACOP is backed by French Oil company Total and majority state-owned China National Offshore Oil Corporation. The EACOP will cross Uganda and Tanzania, and poses significant risks to the environment, land and resource rights of local communities according to HRDs.

These cases from Uganda mirror a larger trend of criminalisation and retaliation against organisations and community

members who resist large scale land acquisitions for business development around the world. While it remains difficult to directly link retaliatory actions against HRDs to the companies benefiting from them, it is clear that these protects are developed, overseen or funded by companies and investors who are failing to uphold their responsibility to address human rights risks – including reprisals against HRDs – linked to their operations, supply chains and business relationships.

III. Physical, Sexual and Economic Violence Against LGBTIQ+ Defenders

The combination of economic insecurity and rising violence against LGBTIQ+ people and sex workers during COVID-19 has directly impacted HRD security. HRDs from these communities are increasingly called upon to support COVID-19 emergencies, in addition to trying to maintain their pre-COVID human rights advocacy. In 2021, queer and sex worker HRDs in Africa responded to COVID-19 related emergencies including: violent arrests by police in the name of enforcing curfews or social distancing; forced closures of transgender medical clinics and HIV-outreach services; systemic exclusion of LGBTIQ+ people and sex workers from state services including food distribution; and rising homelessness (which intersects with increased reports of police violence after curfew).

Accounts of physical and sexual violence perpetrated against LGBTIQ+ and sex worker rights defenders in 2021 echoed that which erupted in 2020 across the region. As documented in the December 2020 Front Line Defenders report, HRDs in several countries reported physical attacks on their homes and offices after it became known locally that they were housing LGBTIQ+ people or sex workers at risk of homelessness, hunger and police violence on the streets.

Across the region, a major source of anxiety, tension and violence for defenders has been growing hostility towards “key populations,” who are accused of spreading COVID-19. Key populations is a global health term also used by HRDs, referring to “groups that are particularly vulnerable to HIV and frequently lack adequate access to services.” UNAIDS considers gay men and other men who have sex with men, sex workers, transgender people, people who inject drugs and incarcerated people as the five main key populations. The pandemic has greatly accentuated the vulnerability of HRDs from key populations, as they have suffered more reprisals, smear campaigns, and economic precariousness. In May, Ugandan police raided a shelter outside Kampala, arrested 44 people and charged 42 of them with “negligent act likely to spread infection of disease.” HRDs reported that detainees were subjected to anal examinations to determine their sexuality. The United Nations special rapporteur on torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment has found that anal exams amount to torture, are “intrusive and degrading,” and “medically worthless.”

In April 2021, in Benin, three transgender rights defenders were physically assaulted and filmed by a crowd while bleeding and injured. The video was spread wildly inside and outside the country, forcing the HRDs to flee and live in hiding. In May 2021, in Ghana, 21 LGBTIQ+ activists were arrested during a workshop in Accra. They were charged with “unlawful assembly” and detained for 2 months before being acquitted in August 2021. In December, Ghanaian MPs from both the ruling coalition and the opposition introduced what is commonly referred to as an “anti-gay bill,” which bans same sex relationships across the country. If passed, the proposed legislation could see LGBTIQ+ community members and their allies imprisoned between five and 10 years for identifying or advocating for LGBTIQ+ rights.



IV. Elections

Electoral violence has long been a threat to HRDs. In many countries, ruling parties view and treat HRDs as opposition party activists, agents of Western governments or enemies of the state. As a result, in 2021 African elections, HRDs and civil society organisations were subjected to many of the same forms of restrictions and harassments that political activists from opposition parties faced. HRDs who are the most active prior to elections often experience backlash from the government that takes power after the election, regardless of which party they belong to, because they understand HRDs as a threat to power. In an illustrative case, even after the incumbent Ugandan President maintained power (in a highly contested election), 54 civil society organisations and HRD collectives including Witness Radio and Chapter Four were suspended and hit with a range of spurious charges including “operating outside their mandate,” in retaliation for their reporting and documentation during the election. Despite the ruling party and President retaining office, the government punished HRDs who worked for accountability and transparency during the election.



Voting Rights Activists in Zambia

Besides HRDs who were arrested, detained, released or otherwise impacted by actual coups, authorities also used the excuse of HRDs allegedly *planning* coups to arbitrarily arrest them in the run-up to important elections. In the Republic of Congo, HRD [Alexandre Ibacka Dzabana](#), President of the Association M22, which works against corruption and to improve governance, was arrested in March 2021 without a warrant and taken to the *Direction Générale de la Surveillance du Territoire* (General Direction for Territory Surveillance) in Brazzaville. His arrest was made public the following day when a government spokesperson said the HRD was accused of being in contact with exiled Congolese military officers in preparation for a coup and undermining the presidential electoral process. The 11 March detention was a clear attempt to prevent the HRD from organising demonstrations or protests ahead of the presidential elections, which took place on 21 March. The HRD spent 4 months in detention before being released on bail in July.

Zambia held [elections](#) in August 2021 amidst unprecedented political and legal volatility. The elections presented immense risks not only for voters and political activists, but for HRDs working on anti-corruption and environmental rights, freedom of expression, and freedom of assembly. In the lead up to the Zambian elections and under serious threat from an increasingly authoritarian Patriotic Front (PF) government, HRDs such as [Fumba “Pilato” Chamba](#), Michael Zulu and others urged citizen participation in governance through social media and other electronic spaces, while HRDs such as [Laura Miti](#) called on the government to be accountable and transparent. These HRDs faced surveillance, arrest and detention under the PF government. Yet, despite government efforts to shut down HRDs’ activism, there was a surge in new voters, especially among youth, which contributed to the change in government, peaceful hand over of power and resetting of Zambia’s democratic path.

The increase in online election campaigns, in part due to COVID-19, puts youth groups and other tech savvy organisations at particular risk. In addition to internet shutdowns to curtail online human rights activism and monitoring before and during an election (see below), there has been an increase in targeting of youth groups which use social media platforms. As HRDs adapt to using online events to discuss human rights ahead of elections and call for accountability and transparency, some governments view this work as akin to opposition party activism, and retaliate against the young defenders as though they were the political opposition. For example, a Ugandan organization, Youth Equality Centre, is now one of 54 suspended organizations by the NGO Bureau. Youth Equality Centre was visited and harassed several times by district security personnel; harassment was most frequent after they conducted online events related to human rights during elections.

In Angola in 2021, journalists reporting on corruption, land rights and governance ahead of the upcoming 2022 elections were threatened, harassed, called in for questioning, charged and placed under house arrest. Angolan defenders report that as the elections approach, the persecution of HRDs who stand up for freedom of expression has intensified as a way to intimidate those who criticise repressive measures taken by the authorities and create an atmosphere of fear among the population.

On 17 June 2021, the National Department of Investigation and Penal Procedure (DNIAP) of the Attorney General's Office of Angola interrogated HRD and newspaper journalist Coque Mukuta, who works with *Voz da América* newspaper in Luanda. He was charged with abusing "press freedom" under Chapter IV Article 74 of the Angolan Press Law, just 48 hours after he had peacefully protested in front of the Attorney General's Office in Luanda against the political persecution of other media professionals. As the year ended, Mukuta remained awaiting trial with restrictive measures against him; he is forbidden to leave home for more than 5 days and he cannot leave the country. Three other journalists and HRDs from his newspaper, plus Jorge Neto from *Jornal Manchete*, Lucas Pedro from Club-k and Escrivão José from Hora H were all being harassed. Escrivão José received anonymous death threats. Mukuta and the others had previously received threats and reprisals for their legitimate work in defence of freedom of expression and human rights. They expect the attacks to worsen in the run-up to the general election scheduled for August 2022.

V. IDP and Refugee Defenders

In 2021, many of the most at-risk HRDs providing direct, emergency support to victims of human rights violations in countries in crisis (such as humanitarian emergencies, states of siege, or coups), were refugees or internally displaced people (IDP) themselves. As with many groups of marginalized, stigmatized defenders, they are often best placed to provide direct support to victims of human rights violations from their own communities. Refugee and IDP defenders understand both conflict and camp settings, and have access to these transient populations when national organizations usually do not. Yet, in Ethiopia and across the Sahel countries, such as Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad, many refugee or IDP HRDs were unable to continue their work or had to reduce their scope of work in assisting displaced populations due to armed attacks on civilians. While the threats of living and working in militarized conflicts affect HRDs who are not IDPs or refugees themselves (as well as the general civilian population), HRDs who live in refugee or IDP camps or who are without legal documentation in a host country must manage the added risks of living in insecure conditions without stable access to housing, food, and medicine.

A March 2021 report from Front Line Defenders documented a range of cross-border attacks on South Sudanese refugee HRDs in Kenya and Uganda, including the targeting of dissenting voices by the South Sudanese government, primarily by the National Security Service (NSS) intelligence agency, which is directly controlled by the Office the President of South Sudan. In Burkina Faso, HRD Daouda Diallo, coordinator of Collectif contre l'impunité et la stigmatisation des communautés (CISC), received regular death threats throughout 2021 for his reporting on the massacre of Yirgou and the immense risks faced by IDPs fleeing the north-east of the country.

HRDs in Ethiopia remain a great concern, heightened by the resurgence in conflict that began in Tigray in late 2019.¹⁵ According to [UN figures](#), nine in 10 people in Tigray now require humanitarian assistance, and at least two million people across Tigray, Amhara and Afar regions have been displaced. A joint [report](#) of the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission and the UN found “that there are reasonable grounds to believe that all parties to the conflict in Tigray have, to varying degrees, committed violations of international human rights, humanitarian and refugee law, some of which may amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity.” The report further details, “a series of violations and abuses, including unlawful killings and extra-judicial executions, torture, sexual and gender-based violence, violations against refugees, and forced displacement of civilians.” The report documented at least 184 civilians killed in one month, stating that Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) fighters “willfully killed scores of civilians in towns and rural areas they captured.” Since the start of the conflict, Ethiopian authorities have attacked freedom of expression using internet shutdowns, which has exacerbated the difficulties of reaching and supporting HRDs at risk. HRDs are also impacted by new foreign funding restrictions, laws criminalising on freedom of assembly, self-censorship, and lack of internet connectivity. On 17 December, the UN Human Rights Council adopted by vote a resolution establishing an international commission of experts on Ethiopia to conduct an investigation into human rights violations and abuses by all parties to the conflict.

VI. Social Media & Internet Shutdowns

The growing importance of digital activism and communication, in the context of unequal access to technology, highlights the need for HRD protection programming that is responsive to these inequalities. Not only location, infrastructure and economic cost, but also education, gender, age, profession and a range of other identities impact access to technology.

In 2021, government authorities shut down the internet in Chad, Zambia, Niger, Uganda and the Republic of Congo ahead of and on the days of national elections, restricting the ability of HRDs to document and share human rights violations during those critical days. In Ethiopia, warring parties have used internet and telecommunications blocking to censor HRDs attempting to document and report extreme violations of human rights.

Defenders have also been subjected to intimidation, judicial harassment and arrests for their online publications.

- On 26 May 2021, WHRD [Samira Sabou](#) shared an article on her Facebook page which accused Niger’s *Office Central de Répression du Trafic Illicite des Stupéfiants* (OCRTIS, Central Office for the Repression of Illicit Narcotrafficking) of reselling drugs it had seized from illegal trafficking. On 27 May, the WHRD received a call from an anonymous individual who demanded that she present herself to OCRTIS. On 3 January 2022, Samira Sabou was found guilty of defamation. She was sentenced to a one month suspended jail term and fine of CFA50,000 (approximately EUR 76).
- In Burkina Faso, cyber activists denouncing human rights violations and criticising poor governance were arrested. At least 8 HRDs and activists were arrested, detained or summoned before being released within a month by the Gendarmerie or the police in different cities of Burkina Faso. Pascal Zaida, the president of the *Coordination des organisations de la société civile pour la patrie* (Coordination of Civil Society Organizations for the Motherland, COP) was arrested at his home on 13 August and taken into police custody, accused of attempting to undermine state security and of subversive declaration after remarks he had made the day before at a press conference of his association. Zaida had criticized President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré’s response to attacks by jihadist groups in the country and denounced a rise in the prices of primary products. He was released on 17 August with all charges dropped. Karim Thiombiano, a cyberactivist was arrested on 30 August 2021 by police officers and taken

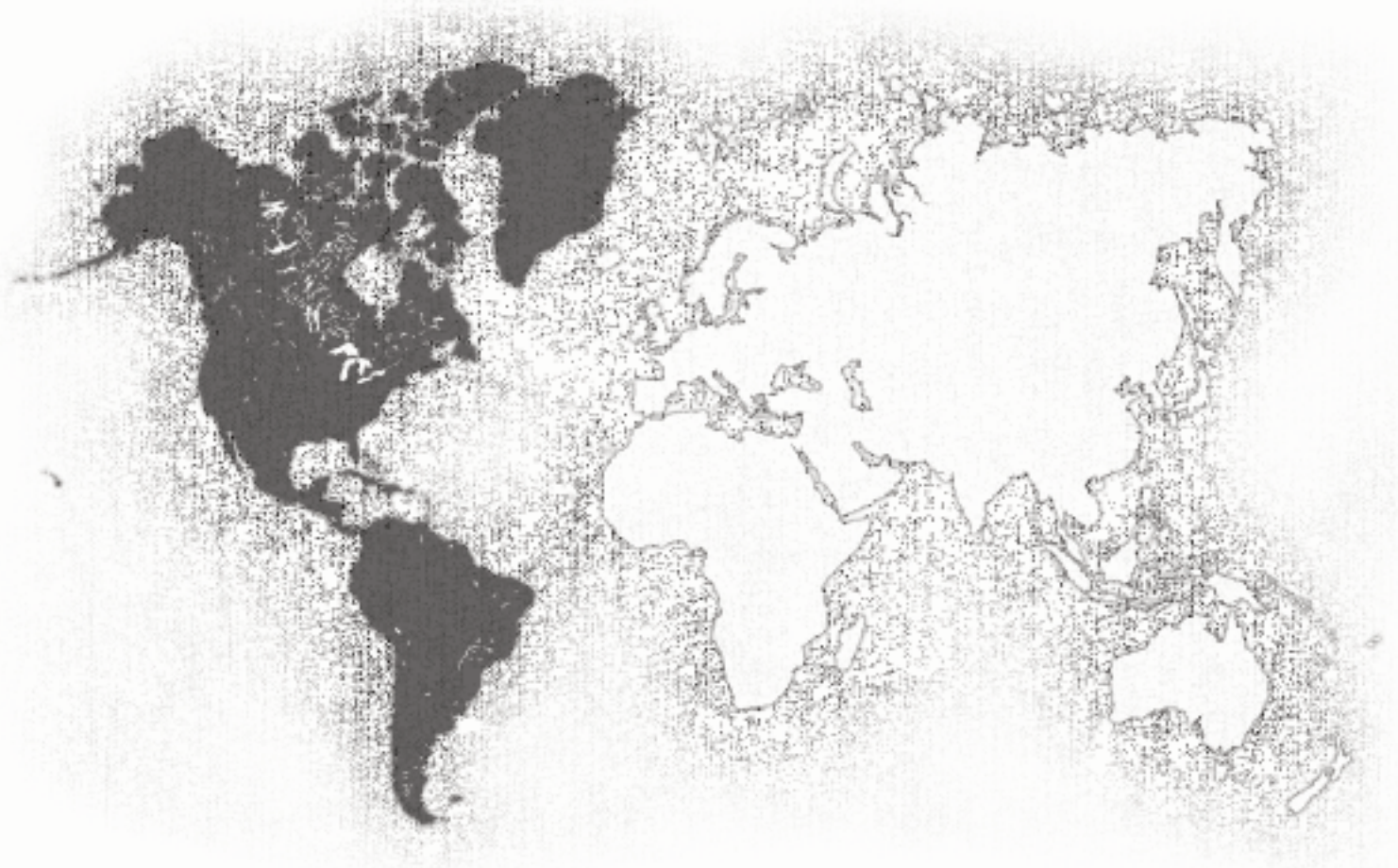
to the Gendarmerie in Fada, without a warrant. His arrest and detention occurred one day after he published a picture of himself in front of the flooded Memorial of Gulmu in Fada N’Gourma. In the caption, he mentioned the 33 millions FCFA (approximately EUR 50,000) used to build the Memorial in comparison to the quality of the infrastructure. Amadou Traore, a teacher who was regularly sharing Karim Thiombiano’s online publications was also arrested after going to the Gendarmerie to ask for the activist’s whereabouts. Both were released on 3 September.

- In Togo, on 11 December, HRD, pro-democracy activist, and disability rights defender [Fovi Katakou](#) was arrested by gendarmes at his home in Soviepe, Lome and taken to the premises of the Central Criminal Investigation and Investigation Service (SCRIC). He is accused of promoting crimes and inciting revolt/rebellion against state authority after a post on his social media page stating “from students, military, religious leaders and artists, nobody was immune from the social control of President Gnassingbe and his clan. Nobody is safe in this country.” Fovi Katakou was detained at the Lome Civil prison, released on 20 December and placed under judicial control. The charges against him are pending as of January 2022.
- Journalists and HRDs [Ferdinand Ayite](#) and Joel Egah were respectively summoned and arrested on 9 and 10 December 2021 by the Research and Investigation Brigade.¹⁶ Their arrest follows complaints made by two government Ministers regarding an online broadcast called L’Autre journal, a popular Youtube news and debate program by *L’Alternative web-TV*, in which they discussed the two Ministers’ alleged corruption and manipulation of Togo’s people. The HRDs were accused of “contempt of authorities” and “propagation of falsehoods”, and detained at the Lome Civil prison. They were both provisionally released and placed under judicial control with the charges still pending, after respectively spending 22 and 21 days in detention.

Discriminatory censorship by social media companies continued to impact the work and security of marginalised HRDs in Africa in 2021. On 9 July, three HRDs who manage the [Africa Sex Workers Alliance \(ASWA\)](#) Facebook page were locked out of their accounts; a message read “Your account has been disabled.” ASWA is the largest sex worker network in Africa representing more than 30 CSOs across the continent. The organisation’s account was locked and wiped of all content on the same day. The page had more than 7,000 followers and was crucial for updating membership about news and resources related to the rights of and violence against sex workers in Africa. This was third time since 2018 that the ASWA account was suspended, resulting in repeated loss of followers, photos, advocacy work and community. Following direct advocacy by Front Line Defenders, Facebook successfully restored the accounts, but the interruption came during one of ASWA’s most highly attended press conferences in the organisation’s history, causing them to miss a major opportunity for increased, strategic, positive visibility. The July account lockouts came after Facebook [released](#) a human rights policy in March which committed the social media company to protecting HRDs using the platform to do their legitimate human rights work – indicating that more work needs to be done to ensure that HRDs from marginalized, stigmatized communities are recognized for their human rights work, and protected on social media platforms. HRDs like sex worker rights defenders have critically limited access to positive visibility in traditional media, such that internet censorship is particularly harmful.

Endnotes

13. RIAO RDC, its members and land rights defenders have long been targeted for their peaceful human rights work. On 15 July 2019, human rights defender and member of RIAO RDC Joël Imbangola Luneza was brutally beaten and killed. A security guard of palm oil company Plantation Huilerie du Congo was investigated for this crime but was subsequently acquitted by the DRC authorities. PHC is a subsidiary of Feronia which has received investment from European development finance institutions, BIO (Belgium), DEG (Germany), and FMO (the Netherlands) as well as the British CDC Group. Prior to this incident, RIAO had been significantly involved in raising concerns about human rights and environmental abuses reportedly linked to PHC. An investigation commissioned by British development finance institution CDC Group (an equity investor of Feronia), found no link between the killing of Joël Imbangola Luneza and Feronia.
14. CHITREST is a legally registered trust providing civic education at a community level, and advocating on health, environment, and housing issues with the government. Kuvheya advocates for the protection of informal trade structures and homes in Chitungwiza and Harare.
15. Direct information on security and risk from Ethiopian HRDs is difficult to obtain due to the ongoing connectivity issues and conflict.
16. Article 3 of the 2020 Press and Communication Code criminalizes speaking out on social media platforms. Several journalists and HRDs have been subjected to judicial harassment for exercising their right to freedom of expression.



AMERICAS

Top Violations	Number	Percent
Surveillance	91/602	15%
Other Harassment	88/602	15%
Physical Attack	86/602	14%
Threats	65/602	11%
Arrest/Detention	56/602	9%

Riskiest Sectors	Number	Percent
EELIP	198/602	33%
Human Rights Movement	62/602	10%
Impunity / Justice	37/602	6%
Prisoners' Rights	34/602	6%
Freedom of Assembly / Protest Movement	34/602	6%

I. Overview

Defenders across the Americas continued to build radical, powerful, feminist, anti-racist social movements in 2021. The ongoing crisis in Nicaragua saw intensified repression and attacks on human rights defenders with many detained or subjected to restrictions. WHRDs refused to silence or reduce feminist protests and artistic resistance in Mexico, the United States, Guatemala, Paraguay, Chile, and Colombia in the face of brutal physical attacks by police. As racist policing, profiling and attacks on Black and Afro-descendent communities threatened the lives of HRDs in Brazil, Dominican Republic, Guatemala, the United States and elsewhere, these defenders achieved a number of landmark successes in visibilising the concrete ways in which race directly impacts their security as HRDs.

In 2021, a third of all violations recorded in the Americas were against environmental, land and indigenous peoples' rights defenders. In response to this long standing trend of violence, a number of newly created regional agreements, country mechanisms and international bodies have opened new venues for these defenders specifically to seek protection. In April, the Escazu Agreement in Latin America – a landmark regional treaty about access to information, public participation and justice for environmental defenders – entered into force. However, in many countries where attacks against environmental defenders are persistent, such as Colombia, Chile, Brazil, Guatemala and Peru, governments have yet to ratify the treaty.

In January 2021, Front Line Defenders and regional news outlet [Agencia Presentes](#) published the results of an [investigation](#) which found a sharp increase in [violence](#) against LGBTIQ+ and [sex worker](#) rights defenders in the first year of COVID-19. Queer and sex worker HRDs in Mexico, Peru, El Salvador, Ecuador and elsewhere reported an increase in physical attacks, sexual assault, arrests, raids on their homes, and harassment by security forces during the pandemic. Brazil continues to have the highest rates of transgender murders in the world, and LGBTIQ+ defenders in Honduras, Dominican Republic and El Salvador are also facing physical violence, defamation and threats as they advance same sex marriage reforms and laws against discrimination based on gender identity. In Honduras, incitement to violence from high-level government officials, acts of intimidation, and surveillance targeted prominent LGBTIQ+ defenders in August and September. The then-President Juan Orlando Hernández [referred](#) to defenders advocating for same sex marriage as “enemies of independence.” These statements can have fatal consequences for LGBTIQ+ defenders. In September 2021, WHRD Tatiana García was murdered in her home in Santa Rosa de Copán. Tatiana García was a well-known trans defender in her community who worked as a legal facilitator providing accompaniment to LGBTIQ+ people and, since 2018, helped file complaints about abuses to the police. Tatiana García reported to colleagues that she had received threats from conservative groups in her community in the days prior to her murder.

Disappearances in Mexico remain a horrifying threat to families and communities. HRDs seeking justice in Mexico, particularly family members of victims of femicides and disappeared persons, have reiterated that as investigations progress, risks increase for HRDs. In San Luis Potosi and Guerrero, defenders have had to take protection measures after a number of attacks following new developments in investigations. In the state of Quintana Roo, the trial of 14 police officers who were charged with committing violence against HRDs, journalists and peaceful protesters during a November 2020 protest against femicides began in May 2021. In the weeks leading up to the trial, the [9N Victims Committee](#) (formed following the November attacks) recorded a stark increase in the number of incidents of aggression, threats, police harassment and attacks on social media against its members.

Elections in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Honduras, and the change of government in the US following the 2020 election, brought radical changes for defenders. In Nicaragua, the days before and during election day were marked by an increase in police harassment, raids, threats and arbitrary detentions against opposition leaders, HRDs, members of civil society organisations and journalists across the country. In El Salvador, the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court issued a ruling allowing the country's presidents to stand for immediate reelection, giving a green light to the country's current president Nayib Bukele to run for a possible second term. This exacerbated concerns of Salvadoran HRDs, who throughout 2021 denounced the President's increasing concentration of power and authoritarian actions by the government. Since the start of the Bukele government in 2019, HRDs have faced persecution, defamation, and insults from the authorities. They have been accused of being part of the opposition, while misogynist attacks on women's rights and feminist organisations have increased in frequency. In Honduras, the first woman president in the country's history was elected in November. WHRDs have [expressed](#) “enormous hope” for a reform of Honduras' laws related to women's rights, in particular the country's extremely restrictive and dangerous abortion laws.

Despite a range of positive legislative moves in President Biden's first year in office, deeply rooted racism in US institutions remains, threatening the freedom, security, and lives of Black HRDs.¹⁷ In February 2021, UN experts [called](#) on the US government to adopt wide ranging reforms to put an end to police violence, and vigorously address systemic racism and racial discrimination. In response, the US State Department invited UN experts who investigate racism to conduct an official US visit.

II. Freedom of Expression & The Right to Protest



In El Salvador and Mexico, presidents and high ranking officials have criticised, questioned and publicly confronted journalists and media outlets, accusing them of spreading lies or “fake news,” a term now common in Spanish in the region. In El Salvador and Guatemala, organisations, HRDs and media outlets that denounce abuses of power are increasingly branded ‘enemies of the state’, threatened or harassed, as in the cases of El Faro (El Salvador), Marvin del Cid and Sonny Figueroa (Guatemala), and [Prensa Comunitaria](#) (Guatemala). Across the region, state-sponsored media attacks on freedom of expression have a tangible impact on HRD security.

Repression and violence continued against WHRDs and protesters in Mexico demanding justice for victims of femicides and a life free from violence. During the 8 March Women's Day Protest, feminist collectives protested in different parts of Mexico to demand an end to violent crackdowns on women's marches. In Mexico City, police surrounded WHRDs attempting to reach the capital's main square and forced them to return to where they started marching. Weeks prior, a feminist protest in Chicoloapan, in the State of Mexico, ended in a confrontation with the police and the arrest of eight women by municipal police officers.

As femicides continue to rise and authorities remain indifferent and stagnant in their response, expressions of rage, though peaceful, have resulted in non-violent direct action. Artistic interventions in public spaces and on public property increased; police forces used violence against the activists. Sexist media portrayals of the protests resulted in calls on the government to punish the women "destroying" cities (with art projects and graffiti on colonial statues, for example) receiving large public support, even as those reports failed to mention the soaring rates of femicides. Such media reports gave cover for the violent response of police, and allowed authorities to continue repressing WHRDs with impunity.

In Colombia, massive protests in the context of a national strike against a tax reform promoted by the government of President Iván Duque and against police brutality were harshly repressed by police. Local organizations [documented](#) at least 47 killings during the nationwide protests, including HRDs Lucas Villa, Sebastián Jacanamijoy, and Jordany Rosero Estrella, and hundreds of people including HRDs were severely injured. On 9 May, indigenous WHRD Daniela Soto was shot twice in her abdomen by gunmen in armoured vans in the La María area of Cañas Gordas, south of Cali. During the attack, at least 11 indigenous human rights defenders from the Indigenous Guard were also injured.



In Brazil and the United States, populist groups drawing support and fervour from current and former presidents Bolsonaro and Trump, rioted *against* democratic institutions. During a Joint Session of the US Congress on 6 January 2021, hundreds of Trump supporters stormed the capitol building as Congress met to certify Joe Biden as the elected president. Trump had urged protesters to fight what he deemed election fraud at a rally outside the White House before the violence began at the Capitol building. In September 2021, Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro and members of his top administration called for and endorsed protests demanding the closure of the Supreme Court, questioning electoral procedures in Brazil and advocating a coup. The Brazilian president defended the legitimacy of these protests in his speech at the opening of the UN General Assembly that same month. Attacks on democratic institutions and civil liberties jeopardises the work of HRDs, positioning them as negative forces in countries and communities for leading struggles towards justice, accountability, and good governance. The increase in political violence in Brazil particularly targets women, the LGBTIQ+ community, black people, and HRDs.

III. Disappearances & Killings

In 2021, the Americas region once again accounted for the most targeted killings of HRDs, according to documentation from HRD Memorial project partners, including Front Line Defenders. In the region, the HRD Memorial recorded the killings of peaceful, powerful, committed HRDs in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Haiti, Honduras, Guatemala, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Peru, and the US.¹⁸

In Mexico, HRD Memorial project partners *Comité Cerezo* and *Red TDT* documented a stark rise in the number of killings of HRDs in 2021, with more than 30 dedicated to the defence of land rights, the environment or indigenous peoples' rights. In the northwestern state of Sonora, land and environmental rights defenders José de Jesús Robledo Cruz and María de Jesús Gómez were murdered on 29 April. The couple organised opposition to a Penmount owned mine in Caborca and this was not the first time the couple had been targeted; in 2017, they were abducted and tortured by masked men dressed in army fatigues. When their bodies were discovered last year, there was a note attached listing the names of 13 other activists, some of whom are in prison and some of whom are missing.

According to data gathered by HRD Memorial partner El Programa Somos Defensores, Colombia is once again the deadliest country in the world for HRDs, with 138 HRDs killed in 2021. While the numbers of HRDs killed in 2021 is fewer than those recorded in 2020, HRDs insist that this was not the result of better protection or other measures implemented by the authorities to combat impunity, but due to two external factors. The first was the cessation of mandatory COVID-19 isolation early in the year, which had made HRDs more easily to locate in their homes by attackers. The second was the National Strike between April and May 2021, which drew indigenous community leaders and other HRDs from rural departments into city centres, exposing them more to non-lethal attacks against the protests, but less to the targeted killings that are rampant in rural areas.

Since the signing of the Peace Agreement in Colombia in November 2016, limited state presence in remote territories has left HRDs exposed to attacks and killings by warring factions, which have competed to control the territories left vacant since the decommissioning of the FARC. Members of social organisations such as the Community Action Boards (*Juntas de Acción Comunal (JAC)*), Afro-Colombian community councils and Indigenous Peoples groups were particularly at risk.¹⁹ In 2021, 33 HRDs working with these Community Action Boards were murdered because of their human rights activities. Without State support, structures and protection, these HRDs have taken on a very visible role in the promotion and implementation of the Peace Accords and the protection of the at-risk populations. While the Government is quick to dismiss the killings of HRDs as occurring in the context of drug trafficking and illegal mining, this rationale seriously undermines the complexity of the situation, the role of paramilitary groups, and reduces the focus on the extraordinary failures by the State to both implement the Peace Agreement and protect HRDs. With Parliamentary elections and Presidential elections due in March 2022 and May 2022, respectively, the relentless violence is not expected to wane.

Alongside the widespread murders of HRDs in the Americas, is the equally horrific and traumatising phenomenon of disappearances. The following cases from Mexico are a snapshot of the persistent and harrowing threat of disappearance that defenders and their communities experienced in the region in 2021:

- On 26 March, women's rights defender, Grisell Pérez Rivera, was disappeared in the State of Mexico. She is the founder of "La Cabaña de la Sabiduría" a shelter to eradicate discrimination and violence against women.;
- On 14 July, ten members of the indigenous Yaqui community were disappeared while driving a herd of cattle to Agua Caliente Ranch, some 85 kilometers north of Loma de BÁCUM in southern Sonora. HRDs report that this is the latest act in a systematic campaign by individuals linked with the mining company to dislodge the community from their lands and quell protests against a gas pipeline and mining concessions.²⁰
- On 5 August, environmental rights defender and member of the Council of Ejido Collective Farms and Communities Against the La Parota Dam (CECOP), Vicente Iván Suástegui Muñoz, was forcibly disappeared by armed men in Acapulco, Guerrero.
- On 27 October, indigenous rights defender Irma Galindo Barrios, who dedicated her life to defending forests in the Mixteca region from illegal logging operations, was disappeared just days before she was scheduled to meet with the mechanism for the protection of HRDs and journalists in Mexico City, a programme of which she was a beneficiary.

At the end of the year, all of the people listed above remain disappeared, while HRDs and family members work tirelessly to investigate the circumstances of the disappearances and find the missing HRDs. Mexican authorities, however, are ill-equipped and unable or unwilling to carry out all necessary actions to find these and many other disappeared HRDs.

IV. Racism

In Brazil, Black and Afro-descendent HRDs are regularly targeted with threats and intimidation because of their work in the struggle against racial inequality. By monitoring and demanding justice in cases of police violence, Black defenders and social movements are targets of a false narrative that tries to link those who speak out against police abuses to organised crime, in order to attack their legitimate work. In Brazil and many other countries in the region, racial profiling followed by police violence threatens the lives, work and security of Black HRDs, especially the ones living in favelas and peripheries of big cities, who are exposed to police control and violence on a daily basis. In January 2021, police officers broke into the house of HRD Tandy Firmino in the Santa Marta *favela*, knocking down his door while his child was home. A day later, during a policing operation in Complexo do Alemão, the military police confiscated, and subsequently destroyed, the cell phone of HRD and reporter Renato Moura, while he was documenting the actions of the police. The device, an iPhone X, which was donated to the HRD, had been used by the *Coletivo Voz das Comunidades* (Voice of the Communities Collective) to document human rights violations in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro. The police justified their aggression by declaring that "the Voz (Voice of Communities) only denounces the police to enhance their own reputation."



For HRDs working on gender justice, land and environmental rights, their struggles cannot be separated from their experience of race and racism. In Honduras, the attacks against and murders of members of the Afro-descendent Garifuna community of Corozal occur at the intersection of various forms of discrimination and stigma against indigenous and Afro-descent people in the country. In March 2021, WHRDs Marianela and Jennifer Solórzano, members of the Garifuna community and Organización Fraternal Negra de Honduras (Black Fraternal Organisation of Honduras, OFRANEH), were detained for four days and charged with usurpation, damages and threats. The charges were brought

by the real estate company “La Sociedad de Raíces y Bienes Juca” (JUCA) in relation to the WHRDs’ defence of their community’s ancestral land. According to feminist partners IM-Defensoras, WHRDs working on the case, “Public Prosecutor’s Office [representative] resorted to a discourse based on racist prejudices to justify, in the absence of evidence and legal grounds, the criminalization of the defenders and the opening of investigative proceedings against members of the Garífuna people.” Similarly, in the north east of Guatemala, the smear campaigns, defamation and criminalisation targeting the WHRDs of the Maya Q’eqchi’ indigenous community must be understood within the historical context of the subjugation of indigenous Mayan women; a context of discrimination with gendered and racialised intersections.

The Right to Water

Environmental rights defenders working on water rights are increasingly targeted in Chile. Private companies have been responsible for water distribution since 1981. According to Chilean HRDs, despite these companies’ regular failure to supply water to some Chilean communities, they are not held accountable. Threats and attacks against environmental rights defenders demanding better distribution lack proper investigation by Chilean authorities.

In December 2021, an investigation carried out by media outlet Interferencia exposed that electricity company AES Andes S.A hired another company to surveil and infiltrate chats of environmental groups that are critical of the environmental and social impacts of the installation of the Alto Maipo hydroelectric project, which is funded by the International Finance Corporation and Inter-American Development Bank. The newspaper had access to reports produced between February and June 2020 that gathered information on individual HRDs, organizations and social movements opposing the project including the Coordinadora No Alto Maipo and the Red Metropolitana No Alto Maipo, as well as other environmental movements working for the right to water in the country, such as the Movimiento por el Agua y los Territorios (MAT, Movement for Water and the Territories).

V. Displacement, Land, Water

Communities across the Americas continue to be displaced to make way for corporations to develop large-scale agribusiness plantations, such as for sugar cane and oil palm. In the Petén region of Guatemala, HRDs have been subject to raids in their homes, threats, and criminalisation for defending their land and territories against the expanding palm oil industry. In Ecuador, four HRDs from the Afro-descendant community of Barranquilla de San Javier have faced a strategic lawsuit against public participation (SLAPP) instigated by palm oil company Energy & Palma. They have been sentenced for provoking financial loss and damage to the company, by holding a peaceful protest in 2019 that blocked the road and the company’s transportation. However, the peaceful protest was only organised on one of the many roads that access the location, thus not possibly generating any financial loss for the company. The resistance by the community is in response to the takeover of 1450 hectares of their land, the pollution of local water sources and deforestation of the Chocó Pacific forest, which holds some of the greatest biological diversity on the planet. In August 2021, the HRDs were sentenced to pay US \$150,000 dollars to the company. The judgement has been appealed by the community.

In Brazil, deforestation and mining activities significantly increased. The protection of natural resources and traditional territories was neglected as government structures established to safeguard the rights of indigenous peoples and the environment were dismantled and weakened. Attacks against and killings of HRDs, indigenous people, members of quilombola (Afro-descendent) communities and environmental defenders increased. Since 26 May 2021, a series of attacks have been occurred in the Munduruku and Sai-Cinza Territories in the state of Pará, affecting both public officials and indigenous leaders who live in the region and stand against illegal mining in the territories of indigenous communities.

In Mexico, the President has given increased control over development projects to the military, resulting in significantly increased presence of the army and private security forces operating in the areas where the projects are located. HRD members of the Union of Ejidos in Defence of the Mayan Territory in Campeche continue to be pressured, harassed and criminalized for seeking transparency from the authorities regarding the construction of the “Mayan Train,” as well as demanding proper public participation in the development of the megaproject.

In September in Guatemala, a court in Chiquimula indicted five defenders of indigenous peoples’ rights who had been peacefully resisting the activities of mining company Cantera Los Manatales since 2016. HRDs María Mendez, Bernardino Pérez, Juan Agustín, Santos Gerónimo Ramos Méndez and Rosa Margarita Pérez Canán, remained under house arrest pending investigations by the Public Prosecutor’s Office on charges of “illegal detentions.”

In October, Panamanian police attacked members of the Indigenous Ngäbe Buglé community on land the Barro Blanco hydroelectric dam, which the community has peacefully occupied since July 2021, when their protest camp was raided and forced to move. The Barro Blanco development project was made possible by funding from development finance institutions FMO (the Netherlands) and DEG (Germany). During the October attack, police used tear gas and rubber bullets on indigenous community members including women, elder people and children, and burned the belongings of people there. One child lost their eye sight after being hit with a rubber bullet, and at least 12 people were injured.

VI. Reproductive Rights Defenders

Reproductive rights defenders in the Americas secured revolutionary change in some countries, while in others, women's health and wellbeing was put under major jeopardy. Major victories in Mexico, Chile and at the Inter-American Court occurred in parallel to violent attacks and legal backslides in the United States, the Dominican Republic and El Salvador. In September the Supreme Court of Mexico decriminalised abortion, and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights ruled that El Salvador violated the rights of a woman who was sent to prison and died while serving a 30-year sentence for having an abortion. The court ordered El Salvador to pay damages to the victim's children, a huge victory for feminist WHRDs in El Salvador who have been struggling for justice for years. Chile decriminalized abortion up to 14 weeks, and the Colombian Constitutional Court is reviewing a lawsuit to declare an article of the penal code criminalising abortion, as unconstitutional – a move driven by WHRDs from the Just Cause movement. Other cases related to violence, sexual assault and fatal fetal abnormality in El Salvador and Ecuador remain before the Inter-American Court, a testament to the fortitude and relentlessness of feminist activists demanding justice both within and outside their national borders.



In the Dominican Republic on 20 April, police used knives and a toxic powder to attack WHRDs maintaining a protest camp demanding the right to abortion. The police tried to remove the women from their tents, cutting the tents open with knives while the WHRDs were inside. Front Line Defenders digital protection team recorded a rise in digital attacks perpetrated against journalists and HRDs working on sexual and reproductive rights in El Salvador, which echoed a growing numbers of reports globally that reproductive rights defenders are being impersonated, shadow banned, and sexually harassed on social media.²¹

In the US, a new law in Texas (Senate Bill 8) that took effect in September, bans most abortions after six weeks – before many people know they are pregnant – and deputizes citizens, rather than the state, to enforce it. The bill encourages people to bring a lawsuit against anyone they suspect has performed or “abetted” an abortion. Vaguely defined, this could include clinics, doctors, receptionists, friends, people who pay for an abortion, people who donate to abortion funds, insurers that approve a claim, taxi drivers who drive a patient to a clinic, or anyone who shares information about abortion options. Included in this widely cast net are a massive number of HRDs in Texas who work in creative, multifaceted ways to ensure access to abortions. Overnight, the bill left many HRDs previously performing legal activities (such as sharing information online about abortion options) suddenly breaking a law and at risk of being sued by their neighbours. Risks amplified by the law include criminalization, border detentions, surveillance, and physical attacks, including bomb threats. Helping pregnant people find other options, such as crossing a state or national border, is criminalised, which directly endangers HRDs who work on both migrant rights and border security, with specific risks to undocumented defenders.

VII. Migrant Rights Defenders

In 2021, a new surge in migrant caravans travelling north, seeking asylum and refuge, was driven by a range of regional factors. Due to increasing violence against the LGBTIQ+ population in Honduras, more than 300 members of the LGBTIQ+ community, including HRDs, departed with the migrant caravans. HRDs leaving Nicaragua have been persecuted, detained by immigration authorities, and suffered extortion demands in Guatemala and Mexico. In Costa Rica and Panama, Nicaraguan HRDs experience delays in their asylum applications and denial of humanitarian assistance.

Migrants travelling to the United States border, journalists, and migrant rights defenders in the south east of Mexico, have endured hostility and experienced a rise in violence. On 12 October 2021, eight armed men broke into Casa Betania Santa Martha Shelter in Salto de Agua, Chiapas and threatened migrant rights defenders inside. Casa Betania Santa Martha Shelter is a transit shelter that provides emergency accommodation, food, and basic health services, and is operated by five Priests of the Divine Word and four other Franciscan Missionary Sisters of Mary (FMM), as well as volunteer migrant rights defenders. Uniformed police officers and agents of Civil Protection arrived at the scene but did not intervene. The attack follows three prior raids on Casa Betania, and similar violence in Chiapas and Tabasco.

In Chile, a major destination country for migrants and refugees in South America, there were simultaneously protests against migration organised by far right groups, and protests against xenophobia acts organised by migrants rights movements which suffered reprisals. Members of migration and refugees organisations have been targeted with digital harassment, smear campaigns and criminalisation.



ACOGUATE, Guatemala

In October 2021, a defamation campaign against the HRDs of the International Accompaniment Project in Guatemala (ACOGUATE) included calls for the government to use the country’s restrictive new NGO law to deport non-citizen members of the HRD organisation. The recently approved “NGO Law” (Decree no. 04-2020) allows for greater government control over national and foreign organisations operating in the country. Attacks began following ACOGUATE’s accompaniment of indigenous people’s rights defenders during a mobilisation on Indigenous Resistance Day, 12 October. In addition to hate speech and threatening messages posted on Facebook and Twitter, members of ACOGUATE received threats through the organisation’s website contact form and via comments on its YouTube account. Many messages called on the Guatemalan authorities and the Guatemalan Ministry of Foreign Affairs to cancel ACOGUATE’s project, initiate prosecution against them and expel all members of the team under the NGO Law. The former Minister of Interior, Enrique Degenhart, called on the government to prosecute the HRDs as a good way to “test the new NGO law”, and Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated it would take action against foreign actors. Apparently bolstered by these high level threats against HRDs, a conservative religious group called Guatemala Inmortal made public a criminal complaint against ACOGUATE.

VIII. Restrictive Laws

A range of new legislation and penal code reforms aimed at oppressing civil society have made the operating environment for HRDs in the Americas increasingly difficult, and forced defenders to make even more complicated daily choices about the risks they take. New restrictive laws have a particularly dangerous impact on marginalized defenders, who often find their identities as well as their activities criminalised or unprotected. In the Dominican Republic, a June 2021 amendment to the penal code eliminated sexual orientation and gender identity as aggravating factors in cases of homicide, torture or barbaric acts and as grounds for the crime of discrimination. The amendment upended decades of work by LGBTIQ+ defenders in the Dominican Republic to ensure that when members of the community are excluded from public services, it would be considered discrimination, and to ensure that killings and attacks on queer people were properly investigated and brought to justice.

In Cuba, Decree-Law 35, under the stated purpose of “defending the Cuban revolution,” requires telecommunications providers to interrupt, suspend, or terminate their services when a user publishes information that affects “public morality” and the “respect of public order.” Several accompanying standards now also regulate the use of telecommunications, including the internet and radio, and give the government new, wide-ranging powers to respond to ill-defined “cybersecurity incidents.” In the United States, new state laws in Florida and Oklahoma aimed at suppressing racial justice protests and the Black Lives Matter movement, while the number of states that have passed legislation punishing boycotts of Israel by U.S. state legislatures reached 33, even as courts regularly overturn these laws on First Amendment protection grounds. Restrictive legislation, anti-NGO laws and penal code revisions were adopted or came into force in Mexico, Guatemala and Nicaragua throughout the year. These include Guatemala’s new NGO law (see ACOGUATE Case), and a reform to the Penal Code of Mexico City opening the door to the use of criminal prosecution against civil organizations and threatening the legitimate exercise of freedom of association.

IX. Nicaragua

The regime of President Daniel Ortega continued to take extreme steps to shut down civil society organizations, close civic space and ensure that there was no strength left in the opposition or social movements. Harassment outside activists' houses, raids, intimidation, threats, violence and repression by police forces, paramilitaries and regime sympathizers were a daily occurrence throughout the year. Mobilizations to mark the third anniversary of nationwide protests were met with persecution of defenders and journalists, hate campaigns and arrests.

Civil society organizations and media outlets such as Confidencial, CENIDH, Esta Semana, Oxfam, and LA Prensa were targeted including through closure, dismantling, cancellation of legal status or confiscation of office spaces and materials. Doctors caring for victims or HRDs were dismissed from their jobs, while many victims did not seek treatment for fear of being persecuted. Lawyers representing hundreds of victims and political prisoners are now in hiding or have left the country out of fear of ending up in jail. This has left victims and defenders who remain in Nicaragua without support networks or legal accompaniment.

Armed attacks, arson targeting crops and houses, torture and assassinations of Miskito and Mayangna indigenous people have increased in the communities of the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua, which continue to struggle against the dispossession of their lands for illegal mining and logging. HRDs have been confined to "in-house prison," whereby police forces or paramilitaries maintain a constant presence outside the houses of HRDs, making it impossible for them to leave out of fear of being attacked or detained. This prevented dozens of defenders – including students and family members of victims, who are increasingly active as HRDs themselves – from leaving their homes to work, study, and shop for food and other necessities. As a result, more HRDs fell into poverty. There has also been a sharp increase in cases of depression and suicidal thoughts reported to Front Line Defenders from HRDs in Nicaragua.

Starting in May 2021 and leading up to the November election, police arrested more than 30 people identified as government opponents including seven presidential candidates, political activists, civil society leaders, HRDs, student leaders, peasant farmer leaders, journalists, and feminists. These arrests were carried out without evidence and with violations of due process, under the guise of Law 977 on money laundering and financing of terrorism, and Law 1055 on the defence of sovereignty. At the end of 2021, the Foreign Agent Law came into effect, triggering the shuttering of organizations and more HRDs going into exile. The code of criminal procedure was reformed to make it possible to extend detention from 48 hours to 90 days, without charges being filed. Political prisoners and defenders spent months being held without being able to speak to their family or lawyers. By the end of the year, visits were still very restricted and several of those imprisoned were suffering poor health. Freddy Navas, member of the *Movimiento Campesino y Aliados* (Peasant Movement and Allies), was in critical condition, having lost 20 kilos and in need of medication.

The criminalized defenders who have been released do not know the legal status of their cases; many are under house arrest, and others are constantly on the run. Many were forced to leave the country or were rearrested. Among the more than 100 political prisoners are HRDs such as María Esperanza Sánchez García (who was sentenced to 10 years in prison), Ana Margarita Vijil, Dora María Téllez, Suyen Barahona and Tamara Dávila.

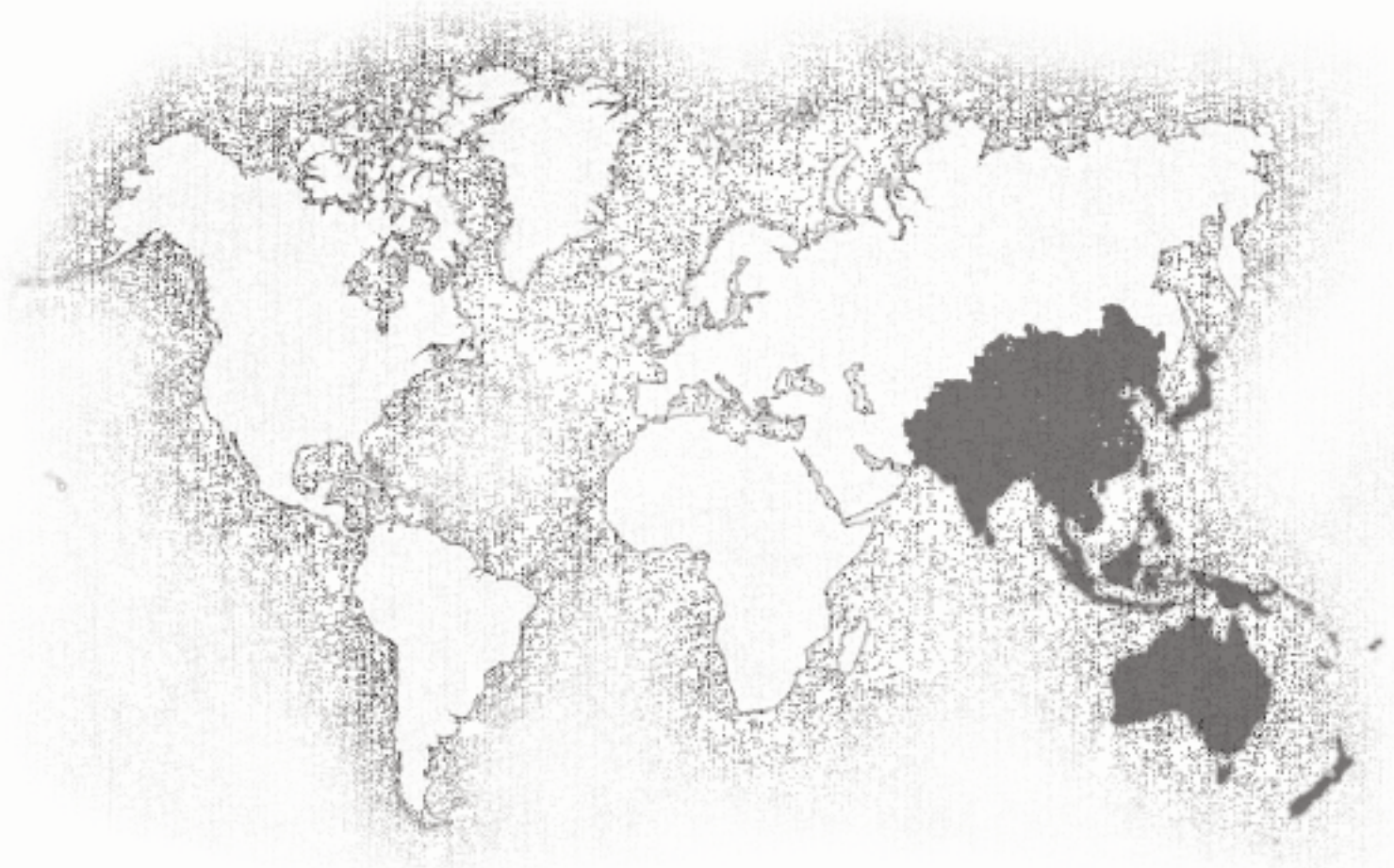
WHRDs have suffered extreme and gender-specific consequences of the violence. Because of their role as caregivers, fleeing is more complicated. WHRDs must ensure that their departure includes the financial and visa requirements for more family members to come with them, or face the horrifying decision to leave behind the people for whom they are caring. Imprisoned WHRDs are subjected to cruel psychological pressure, and made to feel guilty for being imprisoned while having children; many report being stigmatized as "bad mothers." In 2021, three WHRDs reported being sexually tortured in detention; many others reported sexual harassment and threats of sexual violence.

HRDs faced tremendous risk when fleeing the country for safety; and yet, a whole segment of Nicaraguan civil society is now outside the country. The community of defenders who have settled in Costa Rica face unemployment, poverty and precariousness due to delays in the processing of asylum applications and their irregular status in the country. And while they are across a border, threats against and harassment of these defenders has continued.

Despite all the violent efforts of the government to annihilate social movements and civil society organizations, HRDs have continued to work from any possible space to continue documenting violence, attending cases, fighting for the freedom of prisoners, seeking justice and struggling for democratic governance and institutions. Human rights organizations continue to operate heroically, without resources, from underground or from Costa Rica, including the seemingly impossible coordination effort *Urnas Abiertas* (Open Polls), a citizen effort to monitor the 2021 electoral process.

Endnotes

17. The more than 30 executive actions US President Joe Biden took in the first days of his administration included halting funding for the construction of Trump's border wall, reversing Trump's travel ban targeting largely Muslim countries, rejoining the World Health Organization and the Paris climate accords, extending foreclosure and eviction moratoriums, revoking the permit for the Keystone XL pipeline and banning workplace discrimination against LGBTIQ+ employees.
18. HRD Memorial data does not include missing and disappeared HRDs. For detailed figures and case studies of HRD killings in 2021, see: [HRD Memorial](#).
19. A Junta de Acción Comunal (JAC) or Community Action Board is a civic, social and community-based organisation of social management. It is a non-profit entity, with legal status, and is voluntarily integrated by the residents at a local level. <https://www.funcionpublica.gov.co/eva/gestornormativo/norma.php?i=5301>
20. The names of the 10 indigenous peoples who were disappeared are Leocadio Galaviz Cruz, Martín Hurtado Flores, Eladio Molina Zavala, Fabián Valencia Romero, Braulio Pérez Sol, Fabián Sombra Miranda, Juan Justino Galaviz Cruz, Benjamín Pórtela Peralta, Artemio Arvallo Canizalez, and Gustavo Acosta Hurtado.
21. Shadow banning is the practice of blocking or limiting the visibility of posts and other social media content from a user, in a manner that is not immediately obvious to the user they have been censored, except for lower engagement on their posts.



ASIA & THE PACIFIC

Top Violations	Number	Percent
Arrest/Detention	72/305	24%
Threats	69/305	23%
Legal Actions	63/305	21%
Surveillance	25/305	8%
Death Threats	13/305	4%

Riskiest Sectors	Number	Percent
Human Rights Movement	44/305	14%
EELIP	40/305	13%
Women's Rights	31/305	10%
Freedom of Expression	30/305	10%
Freedom of Assembly / Protest Movement	18/305	6%

I. Overview

In 2021, HRDs in Asia and the Pacific endured and innovated during some of the most radical changes the region has experienced in the last decade. Defenders in Myanmar are facing off against the junta government in daily protests and international media campaigns, after a military coup in February removed the country's democratically elected government. Afghan defenders, especially WHRDs, endured immense challenges to their security while witnessing the reversal of hard fought human rights gains achieved over decades of work. Their resilience and commitment to continue defending human rights and each other through the crisis is lesson on how much more the world could do to protect those at risk in Afghanistan. As China cracked down on well-known LGBTIQ+ rights organizations in attacks and shutdowns, queer Chinese defenders have continued their work in more creative and sustainable ways at local levels. In Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and India, HRDs have continued to resist and organise despite the ongoing threat of arbitrary arrest, long term detention, house arrest, and enforced disappearances. Across Asia and the Pacific, HRDs from traditionally "marginalized" groups – women, farmers, ethnic minorities, non-binary people – have been central organising forces in struggles for justice.

Amidst widespread economic violence and instability, stigmatization and smear campaigns targeted labour rights defenders, trade unionists, teachers and WHRDs who had been “red tagged” (branded a terrorist) in the Philippines, specifically for their work with rural or economically marginalised communities. In August, a [joint communication](#) from a group of OHCHR Special Rapporteurs and the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention wrote to Sri Lanka about the arbitrary detention, threats and intimidation against HRDs, journalists and trade union leaders Sudesh Nandimal Silva, Senaka Perera, Tharindu Jayawardhana and Joseph Stalin. The Special Rapporteur on HRDs later [reported](#) “the Government have responded to some of the allegations, but have not addressed most of the questions posed to them.” In Hong Kong, state media attacked the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions, Professional Teachers' Union, Civil Human Rights Front, and the Hong Kong Alliance. A group of Uyghur and other Turkic Muslim WHRDs also received public, sexist verbal attacks by state diplomats.

In Indonesia, officials are increasingly using the Electronic Information and Transactions Law to silence HRDs, especially targeting anti-corruption activists. On 10 September, the Indonesian Presidential Chief of Staff personally reported anti-corruption HRDs [Egi Primayogha and Miftachul Choir](#) to the Criminal Investigation Unit of the National Police of Jakarta for alleged defamation, related to articles the Electronic Information and Transactions Law. If charged, the defenders face six years in prison. The same month, an investment minister lodged a defamation complaint against HRDs [Haris Azhar and Fatia Maulidyanti](#) after their YouTube talk show suggested that military operations in West Papua served only to protect mining businesses. The defenders also face six years in prison.

II. Terror and Anti-Terror

Terrorism and accusations thereof defined 2021 for many HRDs in Asia and the Pacific. Defenders across the region lived and worked at an impossible intersection: trying to defend human rights in zones controlled by violent extremist groups; fighting to end “anti-terror” military campaigns that kill innocent civilians; and, in many cases, being labelled as terrorists *themselves* by governments seeking to demonise and criminalise their work by invoking one of the most politically expedient, abused accusations in the world.

As United States and coalition military forces withdrew from Afghanistan and the Taliban rapidly swept control of the country, Afghan HRDs led on protection measures, including safe houses, internal relocations, meeting basic needs including food, travel and housing, as well as evacuations of thousands of at-risk civilians during one of the largest political and humanitarian crises of the last two decades. HRDs conducted countless hours of meetings, planning, list-making, and alliance-building in the months preceding the August 2021 Taliban takeover. This work is the reason so many people were evacuated and that persons continue to be supported in-country, despite the obvious challenges. Afghan WHRDs still inside the country are struggling to combat the Taliban’s narrative that it is reformed, moderate, and not the violent extremist group it was 20 years ago. The Taliban’s claims have been radically undermined by the violence of their rule since August: killings of activists and journalists, recruitment of child soldiers, attacks on women’s demonstrations, and what the former Afghan Ambassador to the UN recently [called](#) “a total reversal of two decades of advances.” Defenders who remain in Afghanistan are now working inside one of the worst hunger crises in the world,

with crippling sanctions pushing more Afghans to starvation and few international organisations able to send money in to support. (See Section VII. *Protection: Supporting Afghan HRDs Under Taliban Rule*)

Muhammd Ismail

In February 2021, Pakistani HRD Muhammad Ismail was arrested at the Anti-Terrorism Court-III in Peshawar, following nearly two years of judicial harassment for speaking out on behalf of his persecuted daughter, WHRD Gulalai Ismail. Muhammad Ismail is the Secretary-General of the Pakistan NGO Forum (PNF), an umbrella body of civil society organisations in Pakistan. He spent two months in Counter Terrorism Department custody, charged with sedition and criminal conspiracy under Pakistan’s Anti-Terrorism Act of 1997. The defender was held in a cell with over sixty other people, forced to sleep on the floor despite having severe medical conditions, and was not permitted to receive clothes or food from his family or the jail canteen. Security forces bound him in chains during transport between detention centres, and the Counter Terrorism Department raided his home in Islamabad in what his lawyers and family believe was an effort to fabricate evidence against him.

Meanwhile, defenders in Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines endured violent raids on their homes and offices by military and police counter-terrorism units such as Bangladesh’s Rapid Action Battalion and Sri Lanka’s multiple intelligence and counter-terror agencies. HRDs in the Philippines continue to be “red tagged” – targeted by widely published smear campaigns that label HRDs as terrorists. These originate from both state and non-state sources, and are spread via national broadcasters, pamphlets dropped from helicopters in indigenous territories, and on social media.

In Sri Lanka, human rights lawyer Hejaaz Hizbullah has been jailed since April 2020 on baseless anti-terror charges under the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act. The anti-terror law is used to ensure prolonged incarceration without recourse to bail, and despite a clear lack of evidence.

On 2 December, Pakistani HRD [Idris Khattak](#) was sentenced to 14 years imprisonment by a Pakistani military tribunal. Khattak was forcibly disappeared on 13 November 2019 in Pakistan. His family had no information about his fate or whereabouts until nearly 7 months later when military authorities in Pakistan informed a local court that the defender

was in their custody. Despite the state's admission to clear involvement in his enforced disappearance and incommunicado detention, Khattak was not released and no authority has been held accountable for his treatment. Khattak was subjected to a military court martial, tried under the Official Secrets Act, and denied basic due process rights before receiving a 14 years prison sentence for a crime he did not commit.

In India, overly broad use of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) served to jail HRDs and other peaceful critics of the Hindu-nationalist government. The Bhima Koregaon defenders, who have been held in pre-trial detention since summer 2018 under the UAPA, all remain in jail, except for [Sudha Bhardwaj](#) and [Varavara Rao](#), both of whom obtained bail in December 2021, and [Fr. Stan Swamy](#) who died in custody on 5 July 2021 after being repeatedly denied bail and medical care in jail. Credible reports have concluded that at least some of the defenders' computers were surveilled, and incriminating documents were planted on them for over 20 months. The UAPA was weaponized throughout 2021 to jail HRDs including [Khurram Parvez](#) in Jammu and Kashmir, [Laishram Herojit Singh](#) in Manipur, [Hidme Markam](#) in Chhattisgarh, [Annapoorna](#) in Andhra Pradesh, or to keep HRDs in prison by refusing bail as with [Akhil Gogoi](#) in Assam and the other Bhima Koregaon defenders.

In Myanmar, defenders are working in an extremely volatile context in which the military junta is routinely adding political and social opposition movements to its growing list of "terrorist organisations." Following the coup, and due in large part to the vocal, bold activism of HRDs, international pressure on the junta has led to the release of some prisoners, including HRDs, in October. Yet, the ruling military regime continues to deny fundamental rights and fair trials to those disappeared and arrested; virtually no transparency exists from the regime on how many people have been detained, who they are, where they are held, and what their legal processes will be. HRDs working on these issues and conducting advocacy with any group or politician already designated a terrorist can be prosecuted under anti-terrorism laws.

III. Lasting Impacts of COVID-19 Restrictions

Authoritarian state structures strengthened in several Asia and the Pacific countries in 2021 – from the coup in Myanmar to the consolidation of single party power in Vietnam after the May election – and these increasingly powerful regimes continue to weaponise pandemic restrictions to restrict dissent. Cambodia's widely [criticized](#) "Preventive Measures" law, passed to address COVID-19, grants the government the authority to ban any gathering and demonstration with up to 20-year prison sentences for violations. [Hundreds](#) of people been arrested under the law.

Though working in extremely diverse contexts, HRDs in Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and India reported experiencing similar types of oppression tactics and state-sponsored attacks in retaliation for their human rights work. Restrictions on freedom of assembly including court orders, quarantine measures, and other COVID-related regulations have been used to restrict peaceful, legitimate human rights work since the early days of the pandemic. These persisted in 2021, followed by crackdowns on protests led by HRDs who were dissenting against the anti-rights policies of 2020. Sri Lanka also continued the oppression of in-person organising by compounding the effects of the pandemic with financial restrictions on funding from abroad. A proposed amendment to Sri Lanka's Voluntary Social Services Organisations (VSSO) Act, which regulates operations of NGOs, would control their access to foreign funds.

In China, on 4 January 2022, the West Kowloon Magistrates Court convicted WHRD [Chow Hang-tung](#) for "inciting others" to participate in an unauthorised assembly, based on two articles that she wrote about the Tiananmen Massacre vigil in June 2021, an assembly that was banned by the police, citing COVID restrictions.

IV. Detention & House Arrest



Nguyen Thúy Hạnh

Arbitrary detention and prosecution continue to be a widespread phenomenon in Asia and the Pacific. On 7 April 2021, more than 30 police officers in Hanoi city, Vietnam, arrested WHRD [Nguyễn Thúy Hạnh](#) under Article 117 of the Criminal Code, which relates to conducting anti-state propaganda. Nguyễn Thúy Hạnh has been the target of judicial harassment since 2016 and arbitrarily detained multiple times for her human rights activities for Vietnam's prisoners of conscience, as well as victims of land appropriation. She frequently visits the families of prisoners of conscience and accompanies them to the detention facilities. In January 2022, a family member reported that the WHRD was taken by police for a psychiatric evaluation while in detention awaiting trial. She was admitted to the mental health institution on 7 December 2021 and taken back to prison on 7 January 2022.

In many countries, detention is compounded by the severe lack of transparency regarding where and for how long HRDs will be detained. Chinese HRDs under criminal detention or facing prosecution for their human rights work are denied, or face extremely delayed, access to the legal counsel of their choice, and can be held for months at a time without their families or lawyers being notified of their whereabouts. In 2021, Chinese HRDs [Cheng Yuan](#), [Wu Gejianxiong](#), and [Liu](#)

Dazhi, among others, were sentenced in secret; the outcome of their case was confirmed almost five months later without any official documents given to the family or their lawyers. HRDs Guo Feixiong, Tang Jitian, Lu Siwei, and Wang Yu have been banned from travelling to another country on spurious “national security” grounds, even in situations where they needed to leave urgently to visit critically ill family members. Guo Feixiong, 2015 Front Line Defenders Award laureate, was barred from boarding a flight to the US in January 2021 to see his terminally ill wife, who died one year later in January 2022. They were not allowed to see each other before she died.

Six HRDs from Mother Nature Cambodia who were previously detained on felony and misdemeanour criminal charges were released on bail after 14 months in prison. The HRDs were placed under judicial supervision upon their release, requiring monthly visits to local authorities and limiting their freedom of movement.

Travel bans, house arrest and judicial supervision have extreme and traumatising effects on defenders and their families. Not being able to move freely undermines HRDs' access to work, medical care, food, housing, family support, respite, and training opportunities, which in turn results in mental, physical and economic insecurity. It affects in a particularly harmful way HRDs living in poverty, as their ability to provide for their children, families, and themselves is further harmed. House arrest is yet another example of HRDs' preexisting economic situations exacerbated and weaponized by the state as a form of punishment.

V. The Backlash Against Feminist HRDs

A key trend in Asia and the Pacific in 2021 is the backlash against feminist HRDs, and increasing sexist grabs for cultural power made by governments and ruling parties. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is intensifying ideological control over cultural norms, and suppressing a wide range of human rights related to gender and sexuality as a result. The state is asserting a heteronormative interpretation of gender identity and expression, and launching campaigns to discourage boys from being “feminine” and encourage them to be more “manly.” Online trolls have targetted feminist WHRDs in particular for years, but defenders report that in 2021 sexist trolls, seemingly emboldened by state attacks on gender diversity and femininity, increasingly used the complaint function on Chinese social media platforms to have the accounts of feminist defenders arbitrarily suspended.

WHRD Li Qiaochu

In China, feminist WHRD Li Qiaochu was detained on 6 February and accused of “inciting subversion of State power”. She was taken to Linyi city in Shandong province, where her partner, fellow HRD Xu Zhiyong was also detained and, as of January 2022, is facing trial for “subversion of State power”, which carries a maximum sentence of life imprisonment. The detention appears to be punishment for Li’s publicising the torture her partner was enduring in detention at the hands of the Linyi authorities.



There has been an increase in police harassment of WHRDs and LGBTIQ+ HRDs, some of whom were interrogated by the police about their international contacts and funding. The construction of gender and sexual rights as “foreign” is a key theme underpinning attacks on WHRDs and LGBTIQ+ defenders throughout the region. In June and July, there were apparent coordinated episodes of online censorship and takedown of the social media accounts and posts of associations of youth HRDs who promote the rights of LGBTIQ+ persons in universities across China.

In Pakistan, the annual Aurat March, held on International Women’s Day, was met with such extreme backlash in 2021 that several organizers were forced to flee Pakistan or go into hiding after falsified videos circulated online appeared to depict women chanting “blasphemous” slogans – a crime punishable by death in Pakistan. WHRD organizers were branded anti-Islamic and Western. In India, indigenous rights and anti-mining campaigner WHRD Hidme Markam was also arrested for organising an 8 March Women’s Day Protest and remains in prison as of January 2022 under anti-terrorism laws.

WHRDs and non-binary defenders in Asia and the Pacific continue to face threats that target their identities (as women, parents, queer people, ethnic minorities, indigenous people, and daughters, among other identities), as a way of stopping their political activism. At the same time, as China and other states seek to suppress the political agency of various oppressed identity groups, authorities target defenders from these groups as a way of diminishing the power of the collective.

VI. Physical Attacks & Killings

On 29 September, three armed individuals shot and killed Rohingya HRD and chairperson of Arakan Rohingya Society for Peace & Human Rights (ARSPH), [Mohib Ullah](#) in Kutupalong camp in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. As a defender, Mohib Ullah had documented atrocities committed against Rohingyas by Myanmar's military and advocated for the rights and recognition of Rohingya refugees at the United Nations Human Rights Council, the White House and other international platforms. In August 2019, he organised a large peaceful rally to mark the second anniversary of the military crackdown on Rohingyas in Myanmar. The Kutupalong camp, one of the world's largest refugee camps housing over 900,000 Rohingyas, is continuously subjected to violence from extremist groups such as the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army. Prior to his death, Mohib Ullah had been facing threats that increased with his popularity and the support he gathered for Rohingyas across the world.

In Afghanistan, HRD Memorial project partners documented 10 targeted killings of HRDs in the southern, eastern and northern provinces since the Taliban took control in August. In October, WHRD and economics professor Frozan Safi was murdered in the Balkh province of northern Afghanistan. Safi, like many defenders in Afghanistan, had been trying to leave the country after the Taliban takeover. According to her sister, Safi received a telephone call from an anonymous person on an unknown number. The caller claimed that they could facilitate her evacuation from the country and instructed her to gather proof of her work as a WHRD and leave for a safe house immediately. Believing her request for asylum in Germany to be underway, she gathered some personal items and left her family home in mid-October. Three weeks later, her body was found in the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif. Her family reported that her face and limbs were so riddled with bullets she was recognisable only by her clothing.

Across the region, environmental HRDs, a majority of them indigenous HRDs, often working in opposition to powerful corporate interests, endure extremely high rates of physical violence and killings. Amidst expanding mining operations, agribusiness and the extractive industries, conversion of forests, the construction of dams, infrastructure development and megaprojects, environmental and indigenous HRDs were attacked in the Philippines, Thailand and Bangladesh, among others, in 2021.

Attacks on labour rights defenders are an increasingly insidious form of economic violence in the region; several Filipino defenders were murdered by police in front of their children and families for their work in defense of labour rights in 2021. On 7 March, in the early hours of the morning, Filipino police and military officers conducted a coordinated operation targetting HRDs across the provinces of Batangas, Cavite, Laguna and Rizal. The operation was conducted against HRDs who the state alleged were members of "Communist Terrorist Groups," a continuation of the practice of "red-tagging" HRDs in the Philippines to discredit and demonise their human rights work. The targeted defenders were strong, bold, creative advocates for workers, unions, and the urban poor. Search and arrest warrants were issued prior to the attacks, but it is not known whether the warrants were actually presented to defenders during the raids. At the office of the Workers' Assistance Center in Dasmariñas, Cavite, police first arrested [Emmanuel "Manny" Asucion](#) in front of his wife, then shot at him six times, killing him; before he was executed, the HRD had offered to fully cooperate with the police if a search warrant was provided. At roughly the same time, police shot and killed HRDs [Ana Marie "Chai" Lemita-Evangelista](#) and [Ariel Evangelista](#) in front of their 10 year-old son, after raiding their home. In separate raids on the same day (7 March), police [shot and killed](#) HRDs Melvin Dasigao and Mark Lee Coros Bacasno in their homes in Montalban, Rizal.

The targetting of labour rights defenders in the Philippines is happening in the midst of a years-long government execution campaign targeting HRDs. Two days prior to the March 2021 raids and killings, President Rogrigo Duterte delivered a speech in which he ordered the Philippine National Police and the Army to "ignore human rights" and "kill" and "finish off" communist rebels in armed encounters. The "red-tagging" of HRDs by the government and high-ranking officials has led to an increase in the number of killings of HRDs in the country. HRDs fighting for the rights of workers, the urban poor, indigenous peoples and against development aggression occupy a particularly dangerous – and sometimes lethal – place in the increasingly militarized economies of both the Philippines and the broader region.



VII. Protection: Supporting Afghan HRDs

In addition to the extreme danger and psychological stress experienced by Afghan HRDs now in exile in Pakistan, a number of severe barriers exist to supporting Afghan HRDs who continue working inside Afghanistan. After the United States froze the assets of the Afghan Central Bank and International Finance Institutions such as the World Bank halted their funding of projects in Afghanistan following the Taliban takeover, HRDs and aid workers have struggled to access cash to continue their life saving work.

Many of the current needs reported by HRDs in Afghanistan today mirror those they expressed prior to August 2021, while planning for the Taliban take over. Afghan HRDs have long called for meaningful participation in peace talks and other high-level meetings from which they were systematically excluded, on issues that impacted them directly on the ground. Failure to place defenders and their voices firmly at the centre of conversations that directly affect them, including in relation to financial aid to the country, has had disastrous and dangerous consequences. Prior to August 2021, defenders also asked for continued consular services from other governments and multiple entry visas to come, go, and work with a degree of safety. At present, the need for safe evacuation options for defenders continues. For those who remain by choice or circumstances, clear paths for safety and protection must be assured, coupled with detailed plans for dignified, safe relocation in the future.

Additional requests for support from HRDs still working inside Afghanistan include:

- Ensure that defenders, especially women are safely and effectively included in all discussions and planning that has an impact on their lives and work;
- Accountability for crimes and continued pressure on authorities in Kabul to respect the rights of HRDs, especially women, and those from traditionally oppressed ethnic and religious minority communities;
- Safe and dignified passage out of Afghanistan for those who seek to leave, including the provision of visas and resettlement as a priority, easing regulations around documentation and facilitating access where needed, clarity on visa and resettlement processes and clear timelines as well as evacuation options for HRDs' families;
- Prioritisation of resettlement and evacuation for HRDs' families (whether or not the defenders themselves will actually leave) given the ongoing targeted of HRDs' families by the Taliban;
- Safe spaces and houses where defenders can seek shelter and safety, for those who have been forced to relocate internally;
- Digital security support, and increased support for the increasing number of HRDs arrested following digital surveillance, tracking, and phishing scams. The cost of release following such arrests is high and arbitrary; defenders have been forced to pay large sums of money, secure active intervention of elders and other community members, and in some cases grant access to their devices and private information;
- Platforms for WHRDs' expert voices to counter the false narrative that the Taliban has reformed;
- Flexible funding for institutional support such as salaries, food, electricity, operating costs, and mental health support.

Protection needs for Afghan HRDs seeking to leave the country include: visas and safe evacuation, land borders opened by neighbouring countries, a safe evacuation corridor, an end to hostility and abuse from police in host countries such as Pakistan, access to basic services while there, and clarity on the processes by which an HRD and their family can suddenly be rendered illegal, as immigration rules continue to shift. Clarity is urgently needed on EU, US, Canadian, and other countries' visa processing timelines, along with greater support for other professionals and government servants linked to human rights work such as prosecutors, judges, midwives, and journalists.



EUROPE & CENTRAL ASIA

Top Violations	Number	Percent
Arrest/Detention	111/590	19%
Surveillance	87/590	15%
Legal Action	82/590	14%
Questioning/Interrogation	53/590	9%
Raid/Break-In/Theft	50/590	8%

Riskiest Sectors	Number	Percent
Human Rights Movement	108/454	18%
LGBTIQ+	87/454	15%
Freedom of Expression	59/454	10%
Refugees / IDPs / Migrants	49/454	8%
Women's Rights	47/454	8%

I. Overview

In 2021, HRDs in Europe and Central Asia worked in an environment shaped by rising conservatism, racist anti-migrant rhetoric, smear campaigns against defenders combatting corruption and violent attacks targeting LGBTIQ+ defenders and reproductive rights defenders.

As in the case of [Miraziz Bazarov](#) (see Global Chapter), the persecution of Uzbek WHRD Roza Agaidarov in 2021 typified the immense risks faced by HRDs working on land rights, labour rights, and against corruption in Central Asia. Agaidarov was fired from her job as a materials accountant in chemical company [Indorama Agro](#)'s warehouse, after she discovered a shortage of chemicals worth approximately US \$3 million and a violation of reporting procedures. After informing management, she was accused of "theft" and threatened with a lawsuit. Indorama Agro subsequently filed a lawsuit against Roza claiming she stole diesel gas, and for disclosing information about company fraud in a media interview. The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and International Finance Corporation both provided funding for Indorama Agro in 2021 but the banks conditioned the loans with environmental and social actions required to address adverse impacts associated with the project. The WHRD's case is one of several documented by HRD land and corruption collectives in which Indorama Agro employees are threatened or fired for documenting and advocating against labour rights violations. Agaidarov has since returned to her job.

In January 2021, Poland's Constitutional Tribunal outlawed the termination of pregnancies for fetal abnormalities – the only type of abortion still legal at that point in Poland, and thousands of WHRDs and feminist movements took to the streets to protest. By March 2021, WHRDs from seven organisations in the country had received bomb and death threats from unknown individuals in retaliation for their support for reproductive rights, including: Abortion Dream Team, Federation for Women and Family Planning (Federa), Feminoteka, Fundacja FOR, Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, Centrum Praw Kobiet (Women's Rights Centre), and Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet (All-Poland Women's Strike).

Mamadou Ba, one of founders of SOS Racismo in Portugal, has been documenting racist attacks in Portugal and advocating for the rights of people of African decent, Roma people and LGBTIQ+ communities since 1999. As of result of this vocal, visible work demanding accountability and justice for marginalized communities in Portugal, he has been repeatedly targeted with racist, xenophobic violence by the far right and neo-Nazi movements in the country. In February 2021, an online petition was launched to strip him of his Portuguese citizenship and to deport him from Portugal. The headquarters of SOS Racismo were vandalised twice with swastikas and racist slurs between June and December 2021. Previous attacks include physical assaults, smear campaigns, targetting by right-wing politicians, and accusations that Ba himself is racist and promoting hatred for Portugal.

Several European and Central Asian government responses to the pandemic [presented](#) migrants as threats to public health, which boosted already heightened levels of violence against migrants, refugees and HRDs defending them across Europe and Central Asia. Smear campaigns against HRDs assisting refugees and migrants led to physical attacks and organised racist violence at refugee camps, reception centres, and in border regions, compounding the existing militarized threats that migrant rights defenders face in the region.

Black, African and Afro-descendent HRDs in Europe faced defamation and physical attacks for their increasingly visible calls to address Europe's colonial heritage and the role that European countries played in the global slave trade, as well as their efforts to fight against structural, institutionalized racism. In some cases, HRDs bringing attention to racial violence are accused of creating and instigating racism and anti-white sentiment.

In response to increasing harassment of journalists and HRDs working on freedom of expression across Europe, in November the European Parliament adopted, by a large majority, a [report](#) on the use of strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) against journalists in the European Union. The report calls on the European Commission to create early dismissal mechanisms which would prevent costly and time-consuming litigation; sanctions for claimants; provisions to prevent seeking legal action in a more favourable jurisdiction, safeguards against combined SLAPPs using civil and criminal liability charges.

The Court of Justice of the European Union issued several rulings on restrictive Hungarian legislation in 2021. In June, the Court [ruled](#) that the "Stop Soros Law" (2018), which threatened those assisting asylum-seekers, commissioning information leaflets for them, or conducting human rights border monitoring with one year in prison, violated EU law.²² Hungary took no steps to repeal the Law. In a more positive development, however, following a 2020 decision of the Court of Justice of the European Union, Hungary repealed the 2017 "Lex NGO Law" which required civil society organisations receiving over €20,000 from abroad to register as foreign funded. The [bill](#) that repealed the law fails to address the criminalisation of migrant rights defenders assisting migrants, and gave the State Audit Office power to annually inspect the finances of "approximately [one] thousand associations and foundations which have an annual budget above €55,500."

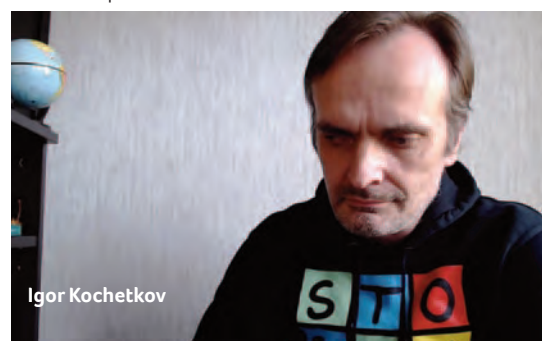
II. Belarus, Russia and Kazakhstan

In Belarus, the mass arrests, torture, and other violations by the government and state security forces that began in 2020 continued into 2021. The government announced a "[purge](#)" of civil society, and [liquidated](#) or started liquidating more than 300 NGOs by the end of 2021, labelling their work "harmful to the country," "extremist" and "political." Human rights groups forced to cease their official work in the country include such as Belarus Helsinki Committee, the Office for the Rights of People with Disabilities, Legal Transformation Center (Lawtrend), Human Constanta, the Belarusian Association of Journalists, the Belarus Press Club and Center for Environmental Solutions. At the end of 2021, the government announced plans to re-criminalise non-registered organisations, putting HRDs in danger of a yet another round of judicial persecution.

Many HRDs in Belarus have been [forced into exile or have gone underground](#) in an effort to protect themselves. The authorities [arrested](#) numerous HRDs, including eight Human Rights Centre Viasna members: [Ales Bialiatki](#), [Maria](#)

[Rabkova](#), [Andrey Chapiuk](#), [Maryia Tarasenko](#), [Tatiana Lasica](#), [Leand Sudalenka](#), [Uladzimir Labkovich](#) and [Valiantsin Stefanovich](#). Seven of them remained in detention at the end of 2021. Many other HRDs have been indicted and are being remanded in custody pending trial for their human rights work. Throughout 2021, Belarus continued to use a range of tactics to curb, criminalise and put a stop to HRDs' activities, including mass raids at offices and houses, use of physical and psychological violence during arrests and in detention, denial of access to medical treatment in detention, closed-door trials, and threats of retaliation against vulnerable family members including imprisonment of elderly parents and putting children into orphanages. Among those targeted included disability rights and women's rights HRDs, as in the case of members of the Office for the Rights of People with Disabilities, [Siarhei Drazdouski](#) and [Aleh Hrablouski](#), who were detained and interrogated by the Investigative Committee on 3 February and held in detention for 6 months.

After the expansion of Russia's notorious law on "foreign agents" (first introduced in 2014) at the end of 2020, the government added at least 93 HRDs, lawyers, media outlets, and journalists to the list. HRDs deemed "foreign agents" by the government are forced to produce comprehensive financial reporting on personal expenses and include the label "foreign agent" alongside their name in any public engagement. The Ministry of Justice added independent media outlets such as Meduza and Dozhd; prominent HRDs Galina Arapova and [Igor Kochetkov](#); journalists [Sergey Smirnov](#), Taisiia Bekbulatova, Olesya Shmagun, and Roman Anin; and human rights organisations including OVD-info, Russian LGBT Network, Coming-Out Group, and many others. At the end of 2021, the Prosecutor's Office moved to shut down International Historical and Human Rights Society "Memorial" and Human Rights Center "Memorial," alleging the groups had violated the law. In June, the Russian parliament also approved a bill expanding the scope of the existing law on "undesirable" organisations, a similar but distinct list of targeted NGOs, HRDs, journalists, media organisations and other civil society actors who are required to disband once added to the list.



Igor Kochetkov

Igor Kalyapin

On 17 September 2021, the Nizhny Novgorod Soviet District Court charged and fined HRD [Igor Kalyapin](#) for his interaction with People in Need, a Czech organization that the Russian Ministry of Justice (MOJ) included in the "undesirable organization" list in 2019. Kalyapin was charged with "participation in the activities of an undesirable organization" under Article 20.33 of the Code of Civic Conduct of the Russian Federation and fined 10,000 Russian Roubles. The HRD and his defence attorneys demonstrated that Kalyapin only interacted with People in Need before the MOJ listed it as "undesirable." Yet, the Court stated that publications from 2015 and 2016 on the Committee Against Torture (CAT)'s website mentioning People in Need qualify as "interactions with [and] undesirable organization." Igor Kalyapin is a founder and former chairperson of CAT. He also founded the [Joint Mobile Group](#) (JMG), which was established by several human rights organisations in November 2009 following the murder of WHRD [Natalia Estemirova](#) in Chechnya. Kalyapin, who is also a member of the Presidential Council for Civil Society and Human Rights in Russia, and his CAT colleagues have been subjected to [defamation campaigns](#), [physical attacks](#), [detentions](#), and [judicial persecution](#) because of their peaceful human rights work.

State-sponsored attacks on lawyers were rampant in Belarus and Russia in 2021. By the end of 2021, [39 Belarusian lawyers](#) had been stripped of their ability to practice criminal law; some attorneys suffered politically motivated disbarment, while others were denied recertification by the Ministry of Justice. Disbarment in Belarus has become one of the key ways that the state silences lawyers, targeting specifically those who openly comment on human rights violations committed by the state and as reprisals for assisting protestors targeted with cases related to the fraudulent 2020 elections. November 2021 amendments to the law on the Bar Association further enabled state control over the members of Belarusian Bar.

In Russia, human rights lawyer Ivan Pavlov has been under criminal investigation since April 2021, when he was accused of "disclosure of the data of a preliminary investigation" relating to one of his clients, former journalist Ivan Safronov. In July 2021, the Moscow City Court rejected Pavlov's lawyer's appeals, despite more than 40 lawyers filing complaints against the previous decision. The leadership of the Russian Bar Association has allied with the state, enacting new, restrictive amendments to its Code of Professional Ethics in April. The amendments allow Presidents of the Regional Bar Associations to file "warnings" against lawyers engaging in human rights work, to prevent human rights lawyers from acting in civic cases,

and to allow the Federal Bar Association to launch disciplinary investigations against any member of the Bar. Each of these amendments limits the personal and professional freedoms of lawyers, and aligns the Russian Bar Association with the state's authoritarian policies.

The immense pressure on HRDs in Belarus and Russia forced many groups to relocate their human rights work outside of their countries, thus increasing the divide between defenders who have resources to relocate and those who do not, with factors ranging from direct connections to funders, family abroad, financial status, refugee status and gender influencing individual calculations.

As in Belarus and Russian, a campaign of defamation and suspensions of Kazakh human rights organisations that began in 2020 continued in 2021. In January, the Kazakh tax authorities ordered a three month suspension on the operation and activities of three human rights organisations: [Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and the Rule of Law](#), [The International Legal Initiative Foundation](#) and the public association [Echo](#). The tax authorities also imposed fines on these and at least six other organisations for alleged violations in reporting of foreign funds. The

resolutions against the organisations were later repealed due to lack of *corpus delicti* (the obligation of the state to prove that a crime has occurred).

III. Accusations of “Extremism”

In 2021, authorities in Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Belarus and Russian-occupied Crimea (among others in the region) accused HRDs of extremist or terrorist activities as a way to defame and criminalise their legitimate, peaceful human rights work. Tajik lawyer [Abdulmajid Rizoev](#) defends the rights of residents in Dushanbe whose homes are to be demolished due to new construction projects, identifying corrupt governmental schemes and providing access to justice to local residents. In retaliation, the HRD was charged with extremism for social media posts made in March 2020. In one post, Abdulmajid Rizoev claimed that 75% of people he interviewed following the parliamentary elections did not vote; in another post, the defender mocked a plaque outside a polling station which read “participation in the elections is a sign of political intelligence.” In June 2021, HRD was sentenced to 5 years and 6 months in prison. From 4 September 4 to 4 December 4 he spent three months in inhumane conditions in solitary confinement without access to his family or lawyers.



Abdulmajid Rizoev

Server Mustafayev and Emir-Usein Kuku

[Server Mustafayev](#) and [Emir-Usein Kuku](#) are Crimean Tatar HRDs serving long-term sentences in Russian penal colonies for “membership of a terrorist organisation” and “planning to violently seize state power.” The HRDs have reported that their cells are damp, with mold on the walls and poor ventilation. Inmates at the prison where they are held routinely complain of ticks and rodents. In September, Kuku was placed under preventive supervision in detention after a correctional officer at a different detention facility in Russia was killed. In the aftermath of that incident, all prisoners sentenced on terrorism-related charges were put under preventive supervision under the allegation that they were “prone to attacking correctional officers.”

In October, the HRDs’ prison cells were raided and almost all of their belongings, including medicine, were confiscated. Mustafayev has been waiting for almost a year for the response to his request to receive medical treatment for his deteriorating eyesight and considerable dental problems. He was checked by a dentist but did not receive medical treatment in 2021, despite testing positive for COVID-19 in addition to existing medical issues. The health conditions of the two defenders have deteriorated considerably during their stay in detention, exacerbated by the extremely poor conditions in prison.

The HRDs’ lawyers say communication with their clients is severely restricted, with requests for phone calls and visits are regularly rejected. Their letters to their clients are often opened before delivery, despite being clearly marked as confidential lawyer-client communications.

to six years in prison, while those accused of “financing” extremism in Belarus can be imprisoned for up to five years. A number of WHRDs remain in detention on extremist charges related to their work addressing gender-based violence, the right to education and other social issues. On 9 November 2021, Belarusian authorities arrested WHRD [Olga Gorbunova](#) for her involvement in organising marches supporting women’s rights. On 30 November her colleagues reported that Belarusian authorities had added the WHRD to a list of detainees considered as “inclined to extremism and other destructive actions.” The WHRD supports survivors of gender-based violence through the NGO Radislava and also ran Norm Cafe, which was an inclusive and safe cultural and social space that provided training and employment for women. Gorbunova, who remained in detention at the end of the year, reported being threatened with rape by the correctional officers, and enduring inhumane conditions including lack of heating, mattresses and forced sleep deprivation.

In Russian-occupied Crimea, authorities have been suppressing any expression of solidarity for the Crimean Tatars whose “terrorism” cases are being tried in military courts, and using accusations of extremism to defend these attacks on solidarity. In October and November 2021 dozens of people, including HRDs and human rights journalists, were detained when they arrived at the court to support detainees. Dilyaver Memetov, a HRD and coordinator of the Crimean Solidarity Movement, was detained four times in two months, fined three times, and served a 12 days administrative arrest after he was arrested outside Crimean Garrison Military Court, where he was standing in solidarity with ten Crimean Tatars on trial for baseless terrorism charges. This was one of many instances in 2021 in which lawyers, HRDs and public defenders protecting the rights of Crimean Tatars faced ill-treatment and judicial harassment from the Russian authorities. After refusing a humiliating demand to undress (allegedly to check for “extremist tattoos”) while offering legal support to his Crimean Tatar client, human rights lawyer [Edem Samedlijev](#) was also sentenced to 12 days of administrative arrest. As retaliation for his human rights work and support for Edem Samedlijev, Crimean public defender [Mustafa Seidaliev](#) was sentenced to two administrative arrests (14 and 10 days) for violating public order and on charges of “extremism.”²³

In May 2021, Belarus expanded its laws on countering extremism, including the Law of the Republic of Belarus No. 203-Z on Countering Extremism, and Part 2 of the Article 158 on the Terms of Consideration of Civil Cases by the Original Jurisdiction of the Civil Procedure Code of the Republic of Belarus. The law defines extremism as “anti-state” activity for the purpose of “illegal usurpation of power” or “overthrowing the constitutional order,” such that HRDs who participate in or promote “extremist activities” face up

HRDs Saving Lives in the Polish-Belarusian Border Crisis

The Belarusian government orchestrated the arrival of thousands of migrants at the Polish, Lithuanian and Latvian borders, in retaliation for EU sanctions. In return, each of these three countries introduced states of emergency in border regions, and were bolstered by the EU's own rights-curtailing measures which prioritise border security (through longer registration delays and simplified, quicker return procedures) over migrants' rights.²³ In August, for example, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that Latvia and Poland should provide assistance to the people stuck on the Belarusian border, but did not order the refugees' admission into EU territory.

In response to the crisis, *Grupa Granitsa* (Border Group) was created in Poland, an initiative of 14 NGOs and several volunteers, assisting migrants with legal, medical and humanitarian aid. Meanwhile, right wing politicians in Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia contributed to a media atmosphere dominated by security rhetoric and fuelled by anti-migrant narratives. Right-wing politicians, groups and media outlets accused HRDs of trafficking and facilitating illegal migration. In Lithuania, migrants right defenders from the Lithuanian humanitarian organisation *Sienos Grupė* (The Border Group) and three people of *Médecins Sans Frontières* were fined for entering the border zone during the state of emergency restrictions; they had been working to support a Syrian man at risk of death in the forest.

In Poland and Lithuania, border guards and police prevented HRDs from reaching migrants facing extreme hunger and freezing temperatures. Border guards detained several HRDs, hostile mobs damaged HRDs' vehicles, law enforcement officers seized defenders' electronic equipment, and journalists were prohibited from reporting in border areas under state of emergency rules. In November, the cars of Polish medic volunteers *Medycy na granicy* (Medics on the border), which have provided around 300 migrants with medical assistance, were attacked by unknown people with axes and knives. Following this incident, the HRDs stopped operating on the border out of fear for their physical security.

At night on 15 December, armed Polish police raided the humanitarian aid point run by the Warsaw Catholic *Intelligentsia Club* in Gródek (Podlasie Voivodeship). The premises were searched without warrant, volunteers, including those working with *Grupa Granitsa*, were interrogated during the night and had their electronic devices searched. The next day, a representative of the Podlasie police said the investigation was conducted on the suspicion that the HRDs assisted illegal border crossings, a crime under part 3 of Article 264 of the penal code.

Throughout the crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border, xenophobic narratives circulated in state and online media, presenting the humanitarian crisis as a war in which Polish officers were defending Europe's eastern front. Polish state media continued a trend seen in Italy, Greece, and France of demonising, dehumanising and normalising violence against the non-European "other." In this context, the HRDs who supported and advocated for the rights of migrants and refugees found themselves not only criminalised and attacked, but facing extreme challenges to raise funds to continue their life-saving work in the face of defamation campaigns.

IV. Migration

Migrant and refugee rights defenders in Europe and Central Asia face arrest, detention, imprisonment, trial, physical attacks, seizure of electronic equipment, smear campaigns, and deportation for their work saving lives. In 2021, more than 2,700 migrants died trying to reach Europe according to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM); HRDs say more than 4,000 died trying to reach Spain alone. Many more were beaten, threatened, sexually assaulted, and pushed back into life-threatening situations. HRDs rescued people at sea and on shore, documented illegal pushbacks, provided legal and medical aid, and organised food and clothing distribution. Defenders who are not EU citizens and defenders who were migrants and refugees themselves faced additional risks for conducting this work, including xenophobia, discrimination, having their visas cancelled, being deported, or a worsening of their conditions in refugee camps. Defenders who are deported back to their countries of origin or transit countries (such as Turkey) face detention, torture, and violence, including killing.

The intensification of "Fortress Europe" continues to militarise and complicate the dangerous environment in which migrant rights defenders in Europe work. Greece, Hungary and Poland built physical walls at their borders, while Lithuania and Latvia requested barbed wire as a form of aid from other countries such as Ukraine. Hungarian authorities extended a 2016 decree declaring a "crisis situation due to mass immigration," which allows police to detain and deport migrants seeking asylum, in violation of their rights and the EU's Asylum Procedures Directive. According to the Danish Refugee Council, EU countries pushed back a minimum of 12,000 migrants. Denmark passed a bill legalising this process, allowing for the transfer of asylum seekers to a third country outside the EU.

HRDs are often the only witnesses in heavily militarised border zones where rights abuses are rampant, and have been arrested, detained, and put on trial for documenting violations and providing humanitarian aid. Eight of 15 members of the regional group, Border Violence Monitoring Network, have been recently prosecuted in Greece, Croatia and Slovenia, charged with facilitating illegal migration.

In January, Italy brought charges against a large group of migrant rights defenders which, in addition to a possible five years in prison, carry a €15,000 fine *per person rescued* – typifying the egregious nature of attacks on HRDs saving lives in Europe. The Trapani Prosecutors Office charged 21 individuals, including four HRDs from the search and rescue ship Luventa, and three humanitarian organisations – Save the Children, *Médecins sans Frontières* (MSF) and German NGO *Jugend Rettet* (Youth Rescue) – with "aiding and abetting illegal immigration to Italy" under Article 12 of the Italian Immigration Act.

In June, the Cypriot Administrative Court upheld the de-registration of KISA, one of the oldest human rights NGOs and leading voices in fighting for the rights of migrants and against discrimination and racism, from the Register of Associations.²⁴ In July 2021, members of Josoor migrants rights organisation, which operates only in Turkey, learned they are implicated in a new investigation by the Greek authorities. They are accused of paying migrants in

exchange for false testimonies about the role of Greek authorities in human rights violations.

In November 2021, the trial of [Nassos Karakitsos](#) (Greek citizen), [Sarah Mardini](#) (refugee from Syria) and Sean Binder (Irish citizen) started in Lesbos, Greece. They were originally arrested in 2018, spent more than 100 days in jail and are accused of people smuggling, money laundering, espionage and membership in a criminal organisation while working and volunteering with Emergency Response Centre International. Lengthy legal processes drain HRDs' time and money, take an emotional toll on them, further contribute to their stigmatization, impede their access to funding, and harm organised efforts to save refugees' lives.

In December, HRD Dragan Umičević, a volunteer with Croatian NGO Are You Syrious, received a fine of approximately €8,000 for "aiding and abetting unauthorised entry" related to the events of March 2018 when he had alerted the police about the arrival of a large group of refugees who just crossed the border with Serbia. Dragan Umičević had accompanied the group to the police station to make sure that they could apply for asylum.

Russian authorities violently deported two HRDs working on the rights of migrant workers. On 25 March, migrant rights defender Izzat Amon was abducted in Moscow and forcibly transferred to Tajikistan. The HRD's whereabouts were unknown for two days before the Tajik Ministry of Interior reported that he was being held in pre-trial detention in Tajikistan and facing charges of fraud, in connection to his human rights work in Russia. On 25 September, WHRD Valentina Chupik was barred from returning to Russia, where she has resided with refugee status since 2006, after fleeing Uzbekistan. Upon her arrival from Yerevan, Armenia, Russian border patrol officers informed Chupik that her refugee status had been revoked on 17 September, while she was out of the country, and that she was banned from entering Russia for 30 years. The patrol officers took away Chupik's travel document and detained her in the "clean zone" of the Sheremetyevo airport in Moscow. A European Court of Human Rights interim intervention prevented her direct deportation to Uzbekistan, but she was put on a flight to Armenia, where she now continues her work on protecting migrant rights in Russia. She operates a legal hotline for those in need of assistance, while her own status remains uncertain. After Chupik's deportation, Russian authorities continued to harass her elderly mother still living in Moscow, openly threatening her in retaliation for her daughter's work.

IV. Minority Rights in Armenia

Judicial harassment of minority rights defenders in Armenia is an increasing concern. [Sashik Sultanyan](#), a prominent HRD and head of the Yezidi Centre for Human Rights in Armenia, leads the organisation's work to preserve the identity, language and culture of national minorities and participation of the Yezidi community in the social, political and economic life of Armenia. The organization's goal is to protect the rights of the Yezidis and other ethnoreligious minorities based on the fundamental principles of human rights. In May 2021, officers of the Investigation Department of the National Security Service of the Republic of Armenia searched Sultanyan's home, houses of his colleagues and an office of the Yezidi Centre for Human Rights as part of a criminal investigation for "actions aimed at the incitement of national, racial or religious hatred, at racial superiority or humiliation of national dignity" (Part 1 and Part 2 of Art. 226 of the criminal code). Throughout 2020 and 2021, Sultanyan has faced ongoing judicial prosecution and had his passport confiscated by the officers of the Investigation Department. The HRD's colleagues have been assigned witness status in the investigation and are prohibited from contacting him. The work of the Yezidi Centre for Human Rights stopped due to all of its technical equipment being confiscated in the search on 20 May 2021.

HRDs in Armenia see the case against Sultanyan as a dangerous indicator of what might be coming more broadly, including the potential for manufactured criminal cases against critics of the government.²⁶



V. Attacks on LGBTIQ+ Movements, Feminists and "Gender Ideology"

Attacks on LGBTIQ+ events and community spaces occurred in Bulgaria, Georgia, and Ukraine in 2021. In July, LGBTIQ+ rights defenders in Georgia were forced to cancel the "March for Dignity", the final event of Tbilisi Pride week, after far-right groups stormed the offices of Tbilisi Pride, Shame Movement and Human Rights House Tbilisi and attacked a number of journalists. On 5 July, hundreds of protesters took to the streets of Tbilisi against the Pride march and attacked activists and journalists, accusing them of spreading "anti-

Georgian sentiments." More than 50 people, including journalists and one HRD, were injured, many of whom needed medical treatment in hospital. On 11 July, one of the journalists who was attacked, cameraman Alexander Lashkarava, was found dead in his home.

In Kyiv and Odessa, Ukraine, members of far right groups stormed events organised by LGBTIQ+ rights organisation Insight in May. Two days earlier, members of another far-right group raided a screening of an LGBT+ film jointly organised by KyivPride, throwing a flare and a teargas canister into the premises. The phone number of WHRD and the head of UkrainePride organisation, Sofia Lapina, was made public on the Telegram messaging app by members of a far-right group. She has received numerous threats and homophobic insults in her inbox as a result. LGBTIQ+ defenders say that they know who is responsible for the attacks and that they have filed cases with the police, but none of the perpetrators have been brought to justice. In August, members of the extreme neo-Nazi group Tradition and Order used tear gas canisters to attack a Pride march in Odessa. According to a police statement, one Pride marcher sustained chemical burns to her eyes, face and neck after she was sprayed with an unknown substance. The Primorsky Police Department detained 51 members of Tradition and Order for violence against police, riots and "hooliganism."

In October, Bulgarian LGBTIQ+ community center "Rainbow Hub" was attacked during a trans community event organised by the Bilitis Foundation. Approximately 10 people stormed Rainbow Hub, vandalized the centre, and hit WHRD Gloria Filipova in the face. The attackers included Boyan Rasate, founder and leader of the far-right Bulgarian National Union and then-candidate for the November 2021 presidential elections. Boyan Rasate was arrested and charged with "hooliganism with extreme audacity," since attacks on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression are not recognised as hate crimes in Bulgaria. As in Ukraine, homophobic and transphobic motives are ignored when arrests are made or charges are brought, instead being called acts of "hooliganism." HRDs in both Ukraine and Bulgaria have stressed that this underscores the need for hate crime legislation that includes sexual orientation, gender identity and expression as protected categories. The attack in Bulgaria came days after the Bulgarian Constitutional Court ruled not to recognise gender independent of "biological sex," one of many moves in Europe and Central Asia in 2021 to restrict the rights of transgender, non-binary, and gender non-conforming people.²⁷

In June, Hungary passed a law prohibiting showing "any content portraying or promoting sex reassignment or homosexuality" to minors, furthering the incredibly stigmatised and dangerous context in which LGBTIQ+ defenders live and work. The legislation was presented by Fidesz, the ruling party, as part of an effort to "protect" children, allegedly from paedophilia and other content "which may have a detrimental effect on their development." The bill discriminates against LGBTIQ+ people by conflating homosexuality and gender non-conformity with paedophilia, violates children rights and freedom of speech, and endangers the psychological and emotional safety of young LGBTIQ+ people by stripping away positive, loving portrayals of elder queer people. The bill effectively criminalises the legitimate, critical work of HRDs who advocate for the full and equal participation of queer communities in Hungarian life. Further, the framing of the law as a way to "protect" children likens positive content that visibilises and affirms rights for queer communities to paedophilia, and, as such, constitutes an egregious form of defamation for LGBTIQ+ defenders. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said she was very concerned by this law, and that it breaches



Meeting organised by Feminita, Kazakhstan

EU legislation. Seventeen EU member states (Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Lithuania, Spain, Sweden, Latvia, Greece, Cyprus, Italy and Austria) condemned the law and called it a breach of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.

In Central Asia and Turkey, similar discourses on family values, LGBTIQ+ identities, and the spread of conservative interpretations of Islamic texts in rural areas add to the range of challenges faced by feminist, women's rights, and LGBTIQ+ rights defenders and their allies.

In Kazakhstan, WHRDs Zhanar Sekerbayeva and Gulzada Serzhan, co-founders of Kazakhstan Feminist Initiative "Feminita," continued their innovative and inclusive work on gender equality education in areas outside of Almaty, ensuring that more young women in rural areas could access texts on women's rights and gender in the Kazakh language. On 29 May, during a planned public event was disrupted in Shymkent, Kazakhstan, when the WHRDs were physically and verbally attacked by more than 30 men. The aggressors also verbally insulted the participants, all young women. As with many other similar cases of disrupted events organised by women and LGBTIQ+ HRDs, this attack was followed by online threats and personal data leaks on TikTok and other social media platforms. Zhanar Sekerbayeva received over 60 threatening phone calls and more than 1,500 messages on WhatsApp from unknown individuals. A common trend in Central Asia is the public shaming of WHRDs spearheaded or supported by famous individuals. In this case, popular Kazakh singer Altynay Zhorabayeva publicly denounced the WHRDs and called on the public to disrupt any future events they organised.

In Azerbaijan, in February 2021 a smear campaign against WHRD Gulnara Mehdieva was launched in both traditional media and social media platforms. The WHRD has been targeted for her support to victims of domestic violence and her work to draw attention to the issue of femicide, notably the suicide of young woman in Baku, to whom she provided support. The intensified defamation efforts took place ahead of International Women's Day.

In a digital attack on the HRDs of LGBTIQ+ organisation Kyrgyz Indigo, private information of members and false information of the activities and funding of the group were shared and re-shared online even after the original source was reported and deleted. The ongoing conditions of relative isolation under the pandemic, combined with increased use of social media platforms created more opportunities for anti-LGBTIQ+ groups to engage in doxxing of LGBTIQ+ HRDs and their organisations. Such cases demonstrate that social media companies need to put more resources to address hate speech and violent content on their platforms, especially for defenders who are targeted in local languages that are less monitored by platforms.

Endnotes

22. The legislative package contains amendments to Act XXXIV of 1994 on the Police, Act XII of 1998 on Travelling Abroad, Act I of 2007 on the entry and stay of persons with the right of free movement and residence, Act II of 2007 on the entry and stay of third-country nationals, Act LXXX of 2007 on Asylum, Act LXXXIX of 2007 on the State border, Act XLVII of 2009 on the criminal record system, the registration of judgments adopted against Hungarian nationals by courts of the Member States of the European Union and the registration of criminal and law enforcement biometric data, Act II of 2012 on infractions, infraction procedure and the infraction records system and, finally, Act C of 2012 on the Criminal Code (CDL-REF(2018)025).
23. Police officers filed an arrest report against him for his publication of a video on Hizb ut-Tahrir on his social media in 2012 and in January 2014. Despite the fact that the publication dated back to the time when Crimea was a part of Ukraine's jurisdiction and members of Hizb ut-Tahrir were not prosecuted in Ukraine, the Court argued that such video was included in the Federal Database of Extremist Content list of Russian Federation in April 2014.
24. In December 2020, KISA was de-registered based on the Minister's decision to start a dissolution process for NGOs if certain regulatory requirements were not met within a two-month notice period. In KISA's case, they informed the authorities of a delay in organising their general assembly due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite KISA indicating that all formal requirements would be met within a short time period, and appealing against the Minister's decision, they were nonetheless deleted from the Register of Associations.
25. Lithuania lifted the state of emergency on 15 January 2022
26. Diplomats from the EU Delegation and representatives from Czech Republic, Netherlands, Lithuania, France, and the United States were present at the opening of the trial, which is set to continue on 10 March 2022.
27. Eleven foreign ambassadors in Bulgaria condemned the attack on the WHRD and LGBTIQ+ community centre, and the European Parliament's LGBTIQ+ Intergroup called on Bulgaria to amend the current criminal code to encompass hate crimes and hate speech on grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics.



MIDDLE EAST & NORTH AFRICA

Top Violations	Number	Percent
Arrest/Detention	114/454	25%
Legal Action	81/454	18%
Physical Attack	55/454	12%
Threats	34/454	7%
Other Harassment	33/454	7%

Riskiest Sectors	Number	Percent
Human Rights Movement	65/454	14%
Freedom of Expression	62/454	14%
Freedom of Assembly/ Protest Movement	45/454	10%
Women's Rights	44/454	10%
Self-Determination	40/454	9%

I. Overview

A decade after popular protests manifested in countries across the Middle East and North Africa, governments did more to attack civil society and HRDs than offer meaningful reforms to meet the demands of their populations. These measures included the passage of restrictive laws, abuse of anti-terror legislation, crackdowns on popular protest movements and the widespread imprisonment of human rights defenders, often for expression-related “crimes.” Despite another year of intensifying crackdowns, protest movements in Tunisia, Algeria, Lebanon, Iraq and Sudan demanding good governance were not silenced, and a defiance built on hope and increasing desperation for freedom and full rights persisted. The dissolution of many hard-won, short-lived democratic developments that followed the uprisings of 2011 proved a reason for HRDS to resist, to repeat, to reform tactics and continue in their peace struggle. HRDs in the MENA region and their diverse communities protested exactly because they understand that ten years on, the devastating authoritarian repression must be challenged.

In the context of protests over economic issues, attacks on labour rights defenders and unions intensified in Iran, Egypt and Lebanon, among others. In Iran, for example, protests erupted nationwide fuelled by low wages, unemployment, inflation, government corruption, and an ongoing water crisis, with trade unionists, labour guilds, workers and labour rights defenders organising 93% of all protests in the year, according to the “Legal Protest Working Group” at the Iranian Parliament. In June, Esmail Gerami, HRD and founding member of the Social Security’s Retired Workers Council was sentenced to five of years imprisonment, 74 lashes and a 20 million IRR fine on charges of “gathering and colluding with intent to commit a crime against national security.” He was arrested on 7 March 2021 during a peaceful assembly outside the Ministry of Labour in Tehran in conjunction with nationwide pensioners’ protests. In September, Iranian WHRD and lawyer Farzaneh Zilabi was sentenced to one year in prison and a two-year travel ban, charged with “propaganda activities against the state.” The charges were brought after she spoke to media about the long anti-corruption campaign of Syndicate of Workers of Haft Tappeh Cane Sugar Company (SWHTCSC) and the struggles of the SWHTCSC workers she represented. In October, the sentence of student and HRD Zia Nabavi was upheld; he had been sentenced to one year in prison for his activities in student unions, and for peacefully protesting after Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) admitted to shooting down Ukraine International Airlines Flight 752, killing all 176 civilians on board in January 2020. In December, security forces raided the house of HRD Rasoul Bodaghi, a member of the board of directors of the Iran’s Teachers’ Trade Association (ITTA) and a former supervisor of the Teachers’ Committee of Human Rights Activists in Iran. The raid occurred in Tehran as nationwide protests, sit-ins and strikes by teachers were ongoing. He was physically assaulted during the raid.

Arrest and detention account for 25 percent of all violations recorded against HRDs in the MENA region in 2021; together with legal action against HRDs, these account for 43 percent of all violations. A series of releases of high-profile HRDs from prisons in Egypt and Saudi Arabia in 2021 indicate the importance of pressure from the international community and joint advocacy and campaigning by HRDs both inside the countries and in the diaspora, to give visibility to detained and imprisoned HRDs, and maintain pressure on authoritarian regimes. In Egypt, WHRDs Mahienour El-Masry, Esrar Abdel Fattah and Solafa Magdy were released between April and July after each served almost two years in preventative detention. In August and September, the Investigative Judge authorised by the Cairo Court of Appeal to investigate Case 173 of 2011 (the “foreign funding” case) decided to drop the case against HRDs Azza Soliman, Negad El Borei, Magdi Abdel Hameed and Hossameidin Ali, and their human rights NGOs. Similarly, in October, the case against Moza Hassan and Nazra for Feminist Studies was closed. The decision ensured the acquittal of the HRDs of all charges. However, other key human rights groups – the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, the Arab Network for Human Rights Information, and the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights – continue to be implicated in Case 173, and many Egyptian HRDs remain in prison. The 2021-2026 National Human Rights Strategy was drafted without any consultation with independent human rights groups, and does not include practical implementation measures or any commitments to improve the situation of HRDs in the country. In it, the government assigns blame for the country’s human rights record to “lack of awareness of human rights” by the Egyptian people and civil society, rendering it a deceitful and cynical public relations effort; the Strategy was drafted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs committee responsible for responding to international criticism, rather than the ministry responsible for domestic affairs.

In Saudi Arabia, WHRD Loujain Al-Hathloul was released in February, while two other WHRDs, Nassima Al-Sadah and Samar Badawi, were released in June after spending nearly three years in detention. The three WHRDs had each been sentenced to five years in prison due to their activism to advance women’s rights and equality. They are banned from travel and from using social media for another five years.

The long-term imprisonment of HRDs continued to put extreme financial and emotional strain on defenders and their families, particularly in Iran, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Western Sahara. In early March 2021, the Appeal Court of Riyadh in Saudi Arabia rejected the appeal of HRD Mohammed Al-Otaibi and increased a sentence previously issued against the defender from one to three years, bringing to 17 years the cumulative sentences he has received. The HRD had been first sentenced in January 2018 to 14 years in prison on charges of “forming an unlicensed organisation,” for his role in forming the Union for Human Rights in 2013. In July, Tehran’s Revolutionary Court upheld the sentence of HRD Amirsalar Davoudi – 30 years’ imprisonment and 111 lashes – quashing the Supreme Court’s earlier decision for a retrial. According to Article 134 of the Islamic Penal Code, the human rights defender is required to serve at least 10 years for “forming a group with the purpose of disrupting national security”.

Some governments continued to use draconian laws to impede the rights of HRDs to form and manage their associations independently and to curb communications between HRDs and international human rights mechanisms. In January 2021, the Egyptian Prime Minister issued the bylaws of a new restrictive law on associations (no. 149 of 2019), which allows the government to deny registration to organisations conducting human rights work deemed by the authorities to be political or to harm “public order” or “morals.” In September, Egyptian authorities instructed all NGOs to register under this law or face dissolution.²⁸

Foreign resident and refugee HRDs such as Sudanese and Yemeni HRDs in Egypt, and Syrian HRDs in Jordan and Lebanon were vulnerable to intimidation and threats of deportation. Migrant and refugee rights defenders were targeted in Lebanon and Morocco. On 12 April, internationally-known and recognized migrant rights defender and founder of NGO Caminando Fronteras Helena Maleno was violently expelled from Morocco, where she has resided for 20 years. This was the culmination of years of attacks, surveillance and harassment, including judicial harassment against the woman human rights defender for her work coordinating life-saving assistance to migrants at sea through a 24/7 helpline.

Her expulsion back to Spain took place despite having been acquitted of all fabricated charges of human trafficking in both Spain and Morocco. In September, the Lebanese Military Prosecutor sent a letter to the Tripoli Bar Association requesting authorization to prosecute human rights lawyer [Mohammed Sablough](#) on a charge of ‘false accusations’ in reaction to his legal assistance to the victims of torture and his advocacy against the forcible deportation of Syrian refugees.

In the second year of the pandemic, COVID-19 remained an additional threat to HRDs who are already in vulnerable situations. In Egypt, Bahrain, Algeria, Iran and Western Sahara, imprisoned HRDs already enduring inhumane treatment were denied medical care when they contracted COVID-19 in prison. In Iran, detained HRDs were transferred without notice to prisons in provinces with high rates of COVID-19, despite official recommendations not to travel to those provinces. Defenders documenting poor sanitary conditions, denial of medical care, and abuse of power by prison authorities under the guise of COVID regulations were arrested and charged with “insulting the police.” Those already in prison have been hit with additional charges for their work documenting and reporting. In March 2021, WHRD and labour rights defender [Sepideh Gholian](#) was transferred from the women's ward of Evin Prison to Bushehr Prison in the south of Iran, more than 600 kilometers from Dezfoul, where her parents live. While on a 7-day medical leave due to having contracted COVID-19 while in prison, she reported on the poor conditions she experienced and abuse of women inmates she observed at Bushehr Prison, which resulted in new charges being brought against her – “spreading virtual disinformation” and “propaganda activity against the state.” On 4 November, Gholian was transferred to the public ward of Evin prison in Tehran following nearly a month in the ward by run the intelligence service, where she was interrogated.

In August 2021, Iranian authorities arbitrarily arrested a group of seven human rights defenders, including Mustafa Nili, [Arash Keykhosravi](#), and [Mehdi Mahmoudian](#) as they prepared to file a complaint against the country’s National Task Force Against COVID-19 including the Minister of Health and other officials responsible for the mismanagement of the COVID-19 crisis. While Mehdi Mahmoudian has been held in detention for over five months, Mustafa Nili and Arash Keykhosravi were released on bail in late December 2021 and face a criminal trial. COVID-19 curfew restrictions have also been used as an excuse for police violence against WHRDs documenting protest movements and police violations in Tunisia, as in the case of Arroi Baraket. In September, Baraket was in a car with two friends returning home when they were stopped by a police patrol a few minutes after the COVID-19 curfew began. When Baraket saw that there were other cars in the street that were not being stopped by the police, she began to record with her phone. Seconds later, her car door was flung open and an officer pounced on her while repeatedly punching her, trying to take her phone. Baraket told the officer that she was only filming the street and not the police, but the officer continued to attack her, and took her device. Police refused to take the WHRD’s complaint and instead filed aggravated charges of aggression with “extreme violence against a public officer” against her. The case is pending before the courts, with the trial due to continue in February 2022.

II. Use of Anti-Terrorist Laws Against HRDs

In Algeria, street protests resumed in February after a year-long halt due to COVID-19. The Hirak pro-reform protest movement, also known as “the revolution of smiles,” faced a new range of challenges.

Authorities adapted their strategies of repression, introducing terrorism-related charges that are increasingly common across the region. In June 2021, the legal definition of “terrorism” was changed in Algeria to allow the prosecution of

The birth of Hirak was supported by a diverse range of HRDs. Front Line Defenders internal research into the protection needs of Algerian HRDs revealed that while many HRDs began their work and established their organisations during the 1990s “Black Decade” period, there are many HRDs who are independent and whose activism emerged from participation in the Hirak movement. This yielded a larger and wider movement for human rights, but also tensions due to overlapping and divergent agendas, political views, generational attitudes, and political identities. HRDs interviewed by FLD identified repression by the state and fragmentation within the movement as two of the main challenges that further complicated the restrictive environment in which they work.

peaceful activists and critical voices; article 87 bis of the penal code, which carries the death penalty, defines terrorism loosely as any act “targeting state security, national unity, and the stability and normal functioning of institutions.” Dozens of people have been arrested and prosecuted on terrorism charges for alleged links to the opposition Rachad movement and the *Mouvement pour l’Auto-détermination de la Kabylie* (*Movement for the Self-determination of Kabylie*), both designated as terrorist entities by the Algerian High Security Council in May 2021. Among those prosecuted are HRDs and journalists [Said Boudour](#), [Kaddour Chouicha](#), [Jamila Loulik](#), [Kamira Nait Sid](#) and [Mohad Gasmi](#). Following a petition by the Algerian Minister of Interior, the Court of Bir Mourad Rias in Algiers dissolved a prominent human rights and youth NGO, *Rassemblement*

Actions Jeunesse (RAJ, Gathering Youth Actions) in October, claiming that the group’s activities violated the purposes set forth in its statute. In addition to executive actions, the Laws on Associations (Law 90-31 of 1990 and Law 12-06 of 2012) continue to be the main barriers to HRDs receiving resources and funding for their movements, protection activities and trainings.

The use of counterterrorism laws against HRDs in Algeria mirrors the practice across the region. In Egypt, the trial of [Ezzat Ghoneim](#) on terrorism charges began in August, after he had been forcibly disappeared and held in preventive

Algerian HRDs Falsely Accused of Terrorism in 2021

Targeted HRD	Human Rights Work	Accusations / Charges	Law	Status ²⁹
Kamira Nait Said	WHRD and co-president of the World Amazigh Congress (WAC) working on the rights of the Amazigh people	“undermining national unity and “belonging to a terrorist organization”	Article 87bis of the Penal code	Detained
Mohad Gasm	Environmental activist and part of the “Unemployed Movement” working on social rights in southern Algeria	“praising terrorism”	Articles 87bis of the Penal Code	Sentenced to 5 years
Kaddour Chouicha	Vice president of the Algerian League for The Defence of Human Rights (LADDH) and Vice President of the League in Oran, promoting political and civil rights in Algeria	“enrollment in a terrorist or subversive organization active abroad or in Algeria”	Articles 87bis of the Penal Code	Under Investigation
Jamila Loukil	WHRD, journalist, and Member of the Algerian League for Human Rights, covering the peaceful Hirak demonstrations in Oran	“enrollment in a terrorist or subversive organization active abroad or in Algeria”	Articles 87bis of the Penal Code	Under Investigation
Said Boudour	Journalist and member of the Algerian League for Human Rights	“enrollment in a terrorist or subversive organization active abroad or in Algeria”	Articles 87bis of the Penal Code	Under Investigation

detention for nearly five months. In November, the Court of Cassation in Cairo rejected an appeal submitted by [Mohamed El-Bager](#)'s lawyer, contesting the Criminal Court of Cairo's prior decision to include the HRD on a terrorist list. HRDs included on the list are banned from travel, have their assets frozen, and are banned from practicing human rights work.

In October, Israeli Minister of Defense, Benny Gantz, announced the designation of six leading Palestinian civil society organisations as “terrorist organizations” under Israel's Anti-Terrorism Law 2016 – Addameer; Al-Haq; Defense for Children – Palestine; the Union of Agricultural Work Committees (UAWC); Bisan Center for Research and Development; and the Union of Palestinian Women Committees. The designation, based on false accusations, not only criminalises these organizations but also has the intention of cutting off their funding and other forms of support they receive from international partners and donors.

III. Criminalization

Over the last two years, Tunisian authorities have displayed increasing intolerance towards those who criticise public officials or institutions. Tunisia's Penal Code, Code of Criminal Procedure, Telecommunications Code, and Decree-Law 115 on the freedom of the press (the press code) all now contain vaguely worded articles penalising freedom of speech, in particular speech deemed offensive toward state institutions or liable to disturb public order or morality.³⁰

Along with Articles 128 and 245 of the Penal Code, Article 86 of the Telecommunications Code is also increasingly being used in what are known as strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) in Tunisia to prosecute HRDs

In Iran in July, a new Social Media Bill was on the verge of “experimental” enforcement (for a temporary period of three to five years before it is officially voted into law), but was returned to parliament for further debate in August due to public pressure. If passed, the bill will criminalise VPNs, block social media that doesn't abide by local laws including complying with censorship and surveillance of users by the Iranian government, and deny mobile services in Iran to any devices which do not pre-install local messaging services. This law would put HRDs in Iran at a much greater risk of surveillance, and potentially limit their access to key services such as Telegram, Facebook and Twitter.

in order to harass and intimidate them by repeatedly summoning them for hearings and investigations without quickly advancing their trials. This tactic discourages individuals from participating in public campaigns or from organising campaigns in the future, while draining those who are targeted of their financial resources in lengthy legal processes. On 21 December, woman human rights defender [Meriem Bribr](#) was sentenced by the Court of First Instance of Sfax to four months' imprisonment and a fine of 500 dinars (approximately €153) under Article 86 of the Telecommunications Code for “knowingly harm[ing] third parties or disrupt[ing] their peace through public telecommunications networks.” The WHRD had reposted a video on her Facebook page in October 2020

documenting a security officer assaulting a civilian in the city of Nabeul, along with a comment criticising the use of violence by members of the security forces against civilians.

The criminalisation of HRDs and bloggers for defamation and insult is in violation of both international law and standards, as well as Tunisia's own constitutional provisions protecting freedom of expression. The crackdown on HRDs and bloggers and all those who express their opinions and criticisms through social media on issues of public interest is an effort by governments to ensure popular protests do not emerge to challenge the status quo. On 17 January, HRD and blogger [Ahmed Ghram](#) was arrested and his computer seized in relation to social media posts in which he criticized the security institution and expressed his support for ongoing protests against draft law 25/2015 (since withdrawn) which would have given increased powers to security forces, further legalising impunity. He was charged with "incitement to disobedience" under Articles 117 and 121 of the Penal Code, for his Facebook posts. He was later acquitted, but his computer was never returned to him.

Other forms of judicial harassment of HRDs, human rights lawyers and human rights journalists were pursued by authorities to silence human rights activism. Moroccan authorities continued the legal persecution of prominent HRD [Maati Monjib](#), the president of Freedom Now and co-founder of the Moroccan Association for Investigative Journalism. In January, he was sentenced to one year imprisonment for "threatening the internal security of the state" and "fraud." He has remained under a travel ban and his bank account has been frozen. In April, the Babylon Governorate Criminal Court in Iraq sentenced human rights lawyer [Hassan Mahari Al-Toufan](#) to two years in prison on trumped-up charges

of "insulting the states and the courts", in retaliation for his fight against corruption and support for the protests.

“One of the main gains of the Arab spring is freedom of expression, including more visibility for the queer community. But the response of Islamists was hostile and fought against our legitimacy as humans. They have total control over a huge part of the Tunisian community because no one wants to be considered as not religious or against Allah's will. There were huge aggressive attacks on us and our presence. Social media attacks and death threats, we were considered as the devils and they called for our death every time. I can say that the revolution brought us the freedom of expression, the visibility that we do exist and we are here part of this community, but also it cost us a lot. The number of arrests is higher, while rape and assault by police has not stopped.” - **Queer feminist WHRD, Tunisia**

Palestinian HRDs faced reprisals from the Palestinian Authority (PA) following the cancellation of legislative and presidential elections that had been scheduled to be held in May and July 2021, respectively. Palestinian organisations monitoring rights and freedoms have documented a number of cases of summons and arrest of activists by the Palestinian security services. Following the death of prominent political activist Nizar Banat, a few hours after his violent arrest by the Palestinian Authority on 23 June, protests in the West Bank were targeted by PA security forces. Social media activists and bloggers reporting on human rights violations continued to face intimidation and harassment by the PA. In August, around 28 human rights defenders, political activists and intellectual figures were

arrested and briefly detained for their participation in protests in Ramallah. Human rights lawyer [Mohannad Karajah](#) was arbitrarily detained by the Palestinian police on 4 July on the premises of the Ramallah Courts. He was informed by police that he is facing the charges of "denouncing the Palestinian Authority", "illegal demonstration", and "inciting hatred within the communities". The detention of Mohannad Karajah was part of a wider crackdown, which Palestinian human rights defenders have been facing since the killing of Nizar Bannat. Though he was released after a few hours, the Public Prosecutor of Ramallah has kept the case open yet refused to file charges against him.

IV. LGBTIQ+ Defenders

Lesbian, bisexual and queer (LBQ) WHRDs face a wide range of attacks that are carried out with the intent of undermining, discrediting and stopping their activism. In the MENA region, these defenders live and work at the intersection of homophobia, sexism, patriarchy, and many raced, classed, and often violent threats. While LBQ defenders continue pursuing creative, strategic, and resistant human rights work, the exhaustion and burnout they experience can be overwhelming. In 2021, queer women defenders in the region increasingly reported grappling with the decision to seek asylum, and the impossible choice of leaving their homes, families, cultures and roots to be able to live and love openly abroad. The decision to leave a home country rife with homophobia does not guarantee a life of physical and psychological security elsewhere. The memory of the life and death of Sarah Hegazi – a queer WHRD who took her own life in Canada in 2020 after leaving Cairo – is a deeply present trauma in LBQ communities across the MENA region who struggle to continue their work in the face of immense pressure in all aspects of their lives and identities.



Rania Amdouni

Sudan

While Sudan's transitional government implemented important institutional and legal reforms, acceded to several international human rights treaties and regularly consulted with civil society groups, the transition to democracy was undermined by state attacks on HRDs. In March, the Criminal Court of Khartoum sentenced WHRD [Waad Bahjat](#) to 6 months' suspended imprisonment and a fine for "insulting a public servant," "publishing false news" and "public annoyance." After the military seized power in October, security forces cracked down on ensuing protests in Khartoum, Omdurman and in other cities across the country, killing at least 78 protesters. At a peaceful protest in Bahry on 14 November, security forces shot and killed 24-year-old nurse and WHRD [Sit Alnfor Ahmed Bakar](#).

WHRDs reported physical and verbal abuse by the Rapid Support Forces during the protests, the same unit responsible for a campaign of sexual violence against women protesters and WHRDs during the demonstrations that led to downfall of former President Omar Bashir. The internet blockade that began the same day as the military takeover on 28 October lasted for 25 days, at the order of the army, despite a Khartoum Court order to restore the internet on 11 November.



Reports of gender-based violence in digital spaces in the MENA region are particularly impactful due to COVID-19 and the persistent closure of physical spaces where women and gender-diverse activists, especially youth without homes of their own, can organize. Online violence, state-sponsored surveillance, public vigilantism and biased, under-resourced content moderation on social media platforms directly impacts the ability of women and LGBTIQ+ HRDs to

be visible in digital spaces. At the beginning of 2021, a number of social media accounts linked to police unions in Tunisia were used to harass and intimidate LGBTIQ+ rights defenders, as well as their lawyers. Personal information was revealed on social media, and defamation campaigns on Facebook were especially vicious. [Rania Amdouni](#), an openly lesbian and feminist WHRD and member of DAMJ, a leading LGBTIQ+ and minority rights organisation in Tunisia, found that hundreds of photographs of her were shared online, accompanied by hateful and derogatory messages about her appearance and sexuality. The extensive defamation campaign led to her being easily recognised in public, facing constant harassment, police checks and ultimately being forced to leave the country.

Cases of being publicly outed on social media have been on the [rise](#) in Tunisia, Iraq, Egypt and Morocco, as documented by Front Line Defenders MENA digital protection team. Private content about WHRDs' has been shared online including their sexual orientation, private lifestyle choices such as photos with alcohol or alleged interaction with

the opposite or same-sex individuals, as well as defamatory content about their children and family members. As in the case of WHRD [Rania Amdouni](#), there exist neither police protection nor adequate laws designed to respond to situations of sexualized online threats.

On 16 June, WHRD [Tanya Darwish](#) received a call from the police informing her that she, her staff and other employees of [Rasan Organisation](#) were under investigation, due to a complaint submitted against them by the Department of Non-Governmental Organisations. Rasan is a human rights organisation based in Kurdistan, Iraq, that works on promoting women's rights and LGBTIQ+ rights in Iraq, supporting communities with legal, social and psychological support. They also work on awareness-raising campaigns. They were charged with "spreading hatred with the aim of promoting illegal actions;" a charge that carries a sentence of up to two years' imprisonment.

V. Conflict and Violations by State and Non-State Armed Groups

Non-state militias and armed groups targeted HRDs and their family members across the region. In Sudan, HRD [Faisal Yousef Mohamed](#) was killed in January in his house in El Geneina city, West Darfur by members of an armed militant group; two of his brothers were murdered in the same incident. In February, the Lebanese police found HRD [Lokman Slim](#) shot dead inside his car in Nabatieh, southern Lebanon, by unidentified assailants. Before his killing, the HRD had received several threats regarding his criticism of militant groups in Lebanon for their human rights violations. In Iraq, Ali Karim, son of prominent HRD [Fatima Al-Bahady](#), was kidnapped and killed in Basra Governorate in July, and Jaseb

Hatteb, father of HRD [Ali Jaseb Hatteb](#), was assassinated in March by a member of a militia group in the city of Amarah. Jaseb Hatteb was intent on finding his son who was forcibly disappeared in October 2019, and received verbal threats from members of a militia group.

Enforced disappearances, kidnappings and killings are common phenomena in Iraq, Libya and Yemen. The prevalence and power of non-state militias and outright armed civil conflict in these countries leave HRDs without protection.

Parties to the conflicts in Yemen and Libya targeted HRDs in order to curtail reporting on atrocities and crimes committed against civilians. In Yemen, journalists were among the most vulnerable groups to suffer from reprisals and harassment by all warring parties. In July, a Houthi-affiliated armed group kidnapped journalist Fahd Yahya Al-Arhabi and detained him in one of their camps, in retaliation for the HRD documenting and publishing a report about a Houthi attack on a the marriage ceremony in Amran. In Libya, military operations between the competing governments ceased following the conclusion of an agreed political road map, which led to the appointment of the Government of National Unity in March 2021. However, security for HRDs inside Libya did not improve; they continued to suffer enforced disappearances, prolonged arbitrary detention and torture. In June, armed men kidnapped and disappeared HRD and journalist [Mansour Mohamed Atti Al-Maghrabi](#) in Ajdabiya in north-eastern Libya. Only after two months did the General Command of the Libyan Armed Forces confirm that the HRD was detained in one of the General Command's prisons.

In Sudan, Iran, Syrian and Jordan, authorities cut off the internet when demonstrations took place, while the Saudi coalition targeted internet lines in Yemen and Israeli bombings destroyed telecommunications infrastructure in Gaza.

VI. Sexual Violence & Calls for Justice

Sexual harassment, sexual violence and other forms of gendered attacks are widespread yet underreported. Women in Sudan have continued to bring forward a women's rights agenda, with these efforts culminating in April 2021 when hundreds of women, together with WHRDs, held a public [demonstration](#) in Khartoum to voice their demands. Representatives from more than 50 organisations read out from [The Feminist Manifesto](#), a groundbreaking collective document calling for the elimination of all laws that discriminate against women and girls. The Manifesto included demands for addressing sexual violence committed against women in conflict settings and for women's full participation in peace building processes. The reliance on women during popular protests while disregarding their role and women's rights agenda after regime change is a common predicament for WHRDs in the region, and in both Algeria and Sudan activists voiced their frustrations.

WHRD Mahfouda Bamba Lefkire

[Mahfouda Bamba Lefkire](#) is a prominent WHRD in Western Sahara. She is a member of Gdeim Izik Peaceful Movement and is active in the Laayoune human rights community. She participates in peaceful demonstrations which call for the right to self-determination, advocates for the freedom of Sahrawi HRDs and organises workshops to support detainees' families.

On 25 September, Lefkire had scheduled a meeting for 3PM at her residence for members of the Gdeim Izik Peaceful Movement to discuss the case of WHRD Sultana Khaya, who has been under de facto house arrest since November 2020. At around 2:45PM, Moroccan police surrounded the residence and roads leading to Lefkire's home, and HRDs arriving to the meeting were dragged, beaten and forcibly blocked from entering. At 5PM, while helping a member of the Gdeim Izik Peaceful Movement enter her residence, police beat both Lefkire and her colleague. Officers also attacked Lefkire's husband and daughter, who was attempting to film the assault.

When Lefkire complained to the officers at the scene, imploring them to stop attacking her colleagues and family, police responded by damaging and removing the electricity box outside her home, which cut off her electricity. Police then threatened the WHRD, saying they had people working for them living in her building, and that next time she would be carried out of the building dead. At 9PM that night, the WHRD's door was kicked in; her broken mobile phone and electricity box were thrown inside her home.

Sexualized violence used as a powerful tactic to torture and humiliate WHRDs is also commonplace when WHRDs are in detention or imprisoned. Egyptian journalist and WHRD [Solafa Magdy](#) was subjected to a forced genital examination which caused severe bleeding. She was also denied release from detention to care for her seven-year-old son as both her and her husband were imprisoned; Egyptian law allows one parent to be considered for release to care for children if both parents are under preventative detention. WHRDs such as [Narges Mohammadi](#) spoke up against torture and sexual abuse in prisons; Mohammadi's "White Torture" campaign documented the use of prolonged solitary confinement and other abusive treatment and conditions for prisoners in Iran. The deployment of sexual violence against WHRDs defenders, including rape, has been documented in many other cases including in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Iraq, Libya and Western Sahara. Despite these examples, many cases are underreported due to fear of further humiliation and retaliation, and overall barriers related to the lack of spaces for open conversation about sexual assault and gender-based violence contribute to ongoing impunity around such violations.

VII. Western Sahara

The ongoing crackdown on HRDs in Western Sahara by Moroccan authorities intensified throughout 2021. Sahrawi HRDs and WHRDs, including their family members, were subjected to imprisonment, surveillance, physical and verbal violence. Moroccan authorities imposed arbitrary restrictions on defenders' movements, placing the private houses of

many prominent HRDs under siege, and in some cases cutting electricity supply to their homes.

In 2021, Moroccan security forces continued to surround the house of HRD and president of the Sahrawi Association for the Protection and Dissemination of Sahrawi Culture and Heritage Bachri Ben Talb in Western Sahara. On several occasions in January and February 2021, the police blocked the entrance to the HRD's house and physically attacked and verbally insulted him and members of his family. HRD Sayed Ibrahim Khaym's family house in the city of Bohador was also under siege for several months.



VIII. Palestine

Palestinian HRDs continued to be targeted by Israeli state and non-state forces, including threats, physical attacks, judicial processes and detention. The silencing of human rights defenders to obstruct their legitimate and indispensable work in Israel, Golan, West Bank and Gaza is not new but has increased since the beginning of the year, and especially since local and worldwide protests against the expulsion of Palestinian families and HRDs from their homes in Sheikh Jarrah erupted in May 2021.

Since the beginning of May 2021, Palestinian HRDs and residents of the Sheikh Jarrah and Silwan neighbourhoods in Jerusalem have been leading campaigns and organising peaceful demonstrations to protest against the forcible transfer of 120 Palestinian families from their homes. Most

of the Palestinian families are refugees who have been denied the right of return and to reclaim their original land and properties – which are often mere kilometers away, but are designated as ‘absentee property’ under Israel’s discriminatory laws. They are facing the threat of forced eviction after Israeli settler organisations filed cases against them in Israeli courts, using the 1970 “Law and Administration Procedures Law,” which allows Jewish Israelis to pursue claims to land and property ownership in East Jerusalem.

Amid the Israeli authorities’ repeated attempts to evict the residents of the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood in East Jerusalem so they can demolish their homes and build settlement units, Palestinian residents of the neighborhood took turns guarding their homes around the clock, for fear of attacks by extremist settlers and the Israeli army. Despite these efforts, Israeli police forcibly expelled Palestinian families from the neighborhood on 19 January. On 4 October, the Israeli Supreme Court offered families in the neighborhood an offer to stay as tenants for 15 years, during which the Palestinian families who reside in their homes will pay the rent (on their own land) to the Nahalat Shimon association, which claims ownership of the land. The residents considered the offer to be the effective confiscation of their homes and land and refused.

As part of its assault on Gaza in May 2021, the Israeli military demolished the Al-Jalaa building which housed the offices of prominent international media outlets, including the Associated Press and Al Jazeera, as well as multimedia and documentary archives concerning crimes committed by the Israeli army in previous attacks on Gaza and its population that could potentially have been used by the International Criminal Court in its investigation into previous conflicts in Gaza. Palestinian HRDs faced not only physical assaults and arrests, but had to contend with biased content moderation online and on social media by Facebook and other platforms, with many HRDs finding their posts removed or that certain hashtags were blocked, often at the request of the Israeli government. [Zamleh](#), a Palestinian digital rights group, documented the scope of the problem and the mismanagement of the response by social media companies. This prompted a campaign by human rights organizations demanding greater transparency in regard to Palestine and how decisions are made on content removal.

The wide-ranging tactics aimed at obstructing the legitimate work of Palestinian HRDs included the targeting the devices of six Palestinian HRDs with surveillance spyware. This was made public just days after the Israeli Ministry of Defense issued an order declaring the Palestinian civil society organizations in which some of them worked to be ‘terrorist organizations’ under Israel’s Anti-Terrorism Law. The defenders targeted included Ghassan Halaika, a field researcher and human rights defender working for [Al-Haq](#), Ubai Al-Aboudi, Executive Director at [Bisan Center for Research and Development](#), who is also a US citizen, and Salah Hammouri, a French citizen, lawyer and field researcher who had been affiliated with [Addameer](#) Prisoner Support and Human Rights Association, and three others who remain anonymous. Their devices had been infected with Pegasus spyware developed by Israeli cyber arms firm NSO Group. The move to criminalise these organizations seemed to be triggered by the discovery of the spyware, raising further questions about the veracity of the allegations, which were already [challenged](#) by the international community. These measures by the Israeli government were executed not just to criminalize, but to cut off funding and other forms of support these HRDs and NGOs receive from international partners and supporters.

Endnotes

28. On 10 January 2022, the Arab Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI) — a leading human rights group devoted to promoting freedom of expression across the Middle East and North Africa, and based in Egypt — announced the halt of its operations, citing “absence of the bare minimum of the rule of law and respect for human rights” as the reason for its closure. The announcement of plans to suspend the activities of the ANHRI coincided with the 11 January 2022 deadline set by the government for civil society organisations to register under the restrictive law or face closure.
<https://www.anhri.info/?p=28614&lang=en>
29. As of December 2021.
30. Article 57 of Decree-Law 115 defines insults as “any expression that offends dignity, or any term of contempt not involving the accusation of anything specific” and provides for a fine between 500 and 1000 Tunisian Dinars (approximately between 147 and 350 USD).

Methodology for statistics relating to violations against Human Rights Defenders

Each year, Front Line Defenders records hundreds of violations that have taken place against human rights defenders. The statistics presented on pages 16 and 17 are derived from 1942 reported violations, based on Front Line Defenders case work and approved grants between 1 January and 31 December 2021.

Front Line Defenders often documents multiple violations per case or grant, as this is the reality of the situation for HRDs, who very often face multiple types of threats and attacks at once. The data presented is based on 720 grants and 210 cases, yielding an average of 2.08 violations per case/grant.

It is important to note the following:

1. Incidents of killings have been removed from this dataset, as they are documented by a collective of organisations via the HRD Memorial.
2. The information Front Line Defenders receives is dependent on HRDs being aware of the organisation; as such, this data can not be seen as wholly representative for all HRDs in all countries. This data should serve as an indicator – but not a comprehensive report – of the scope of the violations, threats and risks that human rights defenders face on a daily basis.
3. Front Line Defenders recognizes that there are myriad violations that HRDs may experience, but which are unreported. This may be because they do not believe that the violation they are experiencing is serious enough to look for assistance, or they are uncomfortable discussing it, or they do not have access to support to report it, or they have their own coping mechanisms. For instance, HRD survivors of sexual violence and harassment are less likely to utilize public advocacy on their cases, may turn to their own networks for support, or may be pressured to remain silent about the violations.
4. The number of grants excludes those provided to Afghan human rights defenders after 15 August 2021. The grants programme was used primarily to provide support to Afghan HRDs leaving the country or relocating within – with the type of violations Threats and/or Physical Violence. There were over 300 grants provided to Afghan HRDs from 15 August to 31 December; including these grants in the annual statistics would skew the results in a way that would not be helpful to understanding the situation of HRDs on global and regional levels over the course of the year.

Methodology for statistics relating to violations against Human Rights Defenders

The HRD Memorial brings partner-verified data together under the HRD Memorial umbrella and conducts additional open source research and case-specific verification.

Partners in the HRD Memorial include: ACI-Participa (Honduras); ASAS-e-Fekr Social & Legal Research Service Consultancy (Afghanistan), Amnesty International; Comité Cerezo (Mexico); FIDH; Front Line Defenders; Global Witness; Human Rights Defenders' Alert – India; Karapatan (the Philippines); OMCT; El Programa Somos Defensores (Colombia); Red TDT (Mexico); Social Association of Afghan Justice Seekers (SAAJS) (Afghanistan); and UDEFEGUA (Guatemala).

Concerning 2021 cases, we are grateful to Justiça Global (Brazil), Comissão Pastoral da Terra (CPT) (Brazil), Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy, Partenariat pour la Protection Intégrée (PPI) (DRC), Acción Ecológica (Ecuador), Indigenous Peoples Rights International (IPRI) (Mexico), Amaru Ruíz, Fundación del Río (Nicaragua), Rabia Mehmood (independent journalist, Pakistan), and Earth Rights (Peru) for their support in providing additional case data and verification on some cases.

The HRD Memorial is a database of HRDs killed since 1998. The data presented here documents the killings that have taken place between 1 January 2021 – 31 December 2021 and is likely to be incomplete as partners continue to gather and verify cases. Challenges include: killings in remote areas having gone unreported; reduced movement and access to remote areas for data collection and verification as a result of COVID 19; self-censorship by communities for fear of reprisals; and suppression of information by state and non-state interest groups.

The HRD Memorial is committed to continuing to develop and refine the methodology and verification processes to ensure that these processes continue to be robust and relevant.

*** On July 15, Front Line Defenders removed a sentence on page 12 after receiving additional information.*

FRONT LINE DEFENDERS

GLOBAL ANALYSIS 2021

The Global Analysis is directly based on Front Line Defenders work with Human Rights Defenders globally over the course of 2021. Front Line Defenders would like to thank all donors who supported its work during the year.

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