

ANNUAL REPORT 2016



f FRONT LINE
DEFENDERS

On the cover: Members of Tanggol Bayi (Defend Women) and Karapatan protesting at the killing of HRDs in the Philippines.
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STOP THE KILLING OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

THIS REPORT HIGHLIGHTS SOME OF THE MAIN GLOBAL AND REGIONAL TRENDS IN THE REPRESSION OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS IN 2015 INCLUDING KILLINGS, DISAPPEARANCES, ARBITRARY DETENTION, TORTURE, FABRICATED PROSECUTIONS, UNFAIR TRIALS, LONG PRISON SENTENCES, DEFAMATION AND RESTRICTIVE LEGISLATION.

THESE ARE THE NAMES OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS WHO WERE KILLED IN 2015, AS REPORTED TO FRONT LINE DEFENDERS.

WE REMEMBER THEM AND TO THEM WE DEDICATE OUR WORK.



AFRICA

Somalia	Abdullahi Ali Hussein Daud Ali Omar
South Sudan	Peter Moi

AMERICAS

Brazil	Maria das Dores Salvador Priante Adenilson Da Silva Djalma Santos da Conceição Eusébio Ka'apor Gilmar Alves Da Silva Gleydson Carvalho Raimundo dos Santos Rodrigues Semiao Fernandes Vilhalva Gerardo Ceferino Serván
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Colombia	Alex Fabián Espinosa Carvajalino Alfonso Gonzalez Quintero Carlos Alberto Pedraza Salcedo Daniel Abril Diego Iván Aguirre Diego Villadiego Sánchez Edgar Quintero Edward Alexis Granados Flores Emiliano Silva Ernesto Guzmán Ernesto Pejendino Pejendino Ever López Fernando Salazar Calvo Gabriel Padilla Jiménez Gerardo Velasco Gersaín Fernández Gilmer Genaro García Ramírez Gustavo Bañol Rodríguez Héctor García Sandoval Héctor William Cabrera Suárez Heriberto Narváez Hoyos Herlen de Jesús Barriosnuevo Posso Hernán Torres Cabrera Jaminton Andrés Ávila Jesús Alberto Trillos Roján José Alirio Prieto Ramirez José Armando Calderón Alvarez José Joaquín Herrera Utría José Joaquín Pinzón
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Juan David Quintana Duque Luis Carlos Peralta Cuellar Luis de Jesús Rodríguez Parada Luis Fernando Wolff Isaza Luis Iván Roa Castro Luis Miguel Claros Luis Peralta Cuellar Nelson de Jesús Ríos Santamaría Nicasio Sánchez Guanay Pedro Cuadro Herrera Sandro Arley González Senén Namundia Siberston Guillermo Pavi Ramos Willington García Wilson Arboleda Blandón Camila Flores Eder Manuel Mieles Tejada Elizabeth Méndez Sánchez Flor Alba Núñez Liliana Ramos Largo María Luz Lucero Figueroa Viviana Agudelo Zapata Wallis del Carmen Barriosnuevo Posso Jhon Jairo Ramirez Olaya Luis Francisco Fernando Gonzales
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El Salvador	Francela Méndez
Guatemala	Daniilo Zapón López Federico Salazar Rigoberto Lima Choc Sebastian Córdova Sajic Telésforo Odilio Pivaral González Roberto Rolando Álvarez
Honduras	Hector Orlando Martínez Motiño Jorge Alberto Castillo

Juan Carlos Cruz Andara Juan Francisco Martinez Angy Ferreira Gloria Carolina Hernandez Vasquez Violeta Rivas	
Mexico	Alberto Almeida Gustavo Alejandro Salgado Delgado Julián González Domínguez Miguel Ángel Jiménez Blanco Rubén Espinosa Becerril Nadia Dominique Vera Pérez Norma Angélica Bruno Román José Isabel Cervantes Ángeles
Nicaragua	Benito Francisco Rosmeldo Solórzano

**FRONT LINE DEFENDERS RECEIVED
REPORTS THAT 156 HRDS WERE KILLED
OR DIED IN DETENTION IN 25 COUNTRIES
IN THE FIRST ELEVEN MONTHS OF 2015.**



ASIA PACIFIC

Afghanistan	Angiza Shinwari Shafee Nasiri Umran Aziz
Bangladesh	Avijit Roy Bijoy Das Faisal Arefin Dipan Niloy Neel Washiqur Rahman
India	Guru Prasad Shukla Jawahar Lal Tiwary Kirpasindhu Sahu Malleshappa M Kalburgi Sandeep Kothari Ruisoting Aimol, alias Mary Jagendra Singh
Indonesia	Indra Pelani Salim (alias Kancil)
Myanmar	Johnny
Pakistan	Muhammad Zaman Mehsud Sabeen Mahmud
Philippines	Dionel Campos Emerito Samarca Endric 'Bayoto' Calago Florencio 'Ka Bong' Romano

Lito Abion Datu Juvello Sinzo Roger B. Vargas Tata Baito Teodoro 'Ka Tudyoy' Escanilla Teresito 'Sito' Mula Labastilla Virgilio Leotorco Lucila L. Vargas Walter Ayuban Joel Gulmatico Rosalie Calago Jose Alimboyogo Mabini 'Tata' Beato Songkok Asero Frenie Landasan Bleamar Mondejar Luis Carbajosa Benilda Santos Ruben Enlog Oligario Quimbo Felix Basig Jel Ahing Arnel Morada Welmer Somina Jobert Samia Uldarico Camayudo Menelao 'Boy' Barcia

Thailand	Chai Bunthonglek
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EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA

Azerbaijan	Rasim Aliyev
Turkey	Tahir Elci

MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

Egypt	Karim Hamdy Shaimaa ElSabbagh
Iraq	Jalaa al-Abadi Thaer Al-Ali
Libya	Intissar Al Hasairi
Sudan	Abdullah Abdelkader Firas Al Naji Ibrahim Abd al-Qader Fares Hamadi
Syria	Yehia Hourani Kenji Goto
Yemen	Abdul-Karim Al-Khaiwani

Human rights defenders (HRDs) face increasingly restrictive and punitive environments in every region of the globe. Extreme violence is being used more frequently and in more countries, while judicial harassment has become normalised in many parts of the world. Those who target HRDs have stepped up their efforts to silence them, both within their borders and internationally.

In a range of countries where political leaders are seeking to cling to power, human rights defenders who have spoken out have been targeted. In Burundi, the attempt by President Nkurunziza to stand for a third term prompted mass protests and threw the country into crisis. HRDs were at the forefront of the movement against a third term and bore the brunt of government repression, especially after a failed coup staged in May by a group of disgruntled army officers. Dozens of HRDs and journalists were forced to flee after facing serious death threats and attacks. The few HRDs who remained have paid a high price: the doyen of the human rights movement, Pierre Claver Mbonimpa was the target of an assassination attempt in August, resulting in serious physical damage to his face. His son-in-law and his son were murdered in October and November respectively. In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), delays in the electoral calendar sparked fears that President Kabila – due to step down in 2016 – may seek a third term or otherwise extend his current term. Protests by civil society groups and opposition parties in January, March, April and September were violently dispersed by police, and members of Filimbi and Lucha – two peaceful pro-democracy movements – were charged with planning terrorist acts and conspiracy against the state.

As exemplified by the Burundi crisis, direct, physical targeting of HRDs is an extremely serious threat. Front Line Defenders estimates that **156 HRDs were killed** or died in detention in 25 countries in the first eleven months of 2015. This marked an increase over the previous year, both in the number of killings and in the number of countries where they occurred. Killings were reported in Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Brazil, Colombia, Egypt, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Libya, Mexico, Myanmar, Nicaragua, Pakistan, the Philippines, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, Thailand, Turkey and Yemen, with over half of the killings occurring in Latin America.¹

Overall, **45% of the killings** were linked to the defence of **environmental, land and indigenous peoples' rights**. In Asia and Latin America, killings of members of this particular group of HRDs accounted respectively for 67% and 41% of the total number (see regional sections below). Other groups targeted included HRDs working on corruption and impunity as well as journalists and other HRDs using the media – including online and social media – to denounce abuses.

The case of Pierre Claver Mbonimpa also exemplifies another trend; the intimidation and **targeting of family members** as a means of putting pressure on HRDs. In addition to Burundi, this tactic was prevalent in Azerbaijan, China and several countries in Latin America. It ranged from actual or threatened physical harm to deprivation of liberty and prosecution, to loss of employment, which was often not reported due to fear of further retaliation. In Azerbaijan, relatives of Emin Milli, founder of the online news site Meydan TV, addressed a public letter to the President disowning Emin Milli for his “betrayal of Azerbaijan”; they were reportedly pressured into writing the letter.

The surge in the adoption of restrictive legislation continued, going beyond restrictions on funding to include new efforts to use the law to **break contacts between HRDs and their international partners and supporters**. The Russian Federation and China spearheaded such efforts in 2015. In May, three years after its infamous ‘Foreign Agent Law’, the Russian Federation passed a law on ‘undesirable organisations’. This law grants the General Prosecutor authority to declare foreign organisations undesirable, if they are deemed to present a threat to Russia’s constitutional order, its defence or its security. Groups listed as undesirable are prohibited from carrying out activities and disseminating publications and other information within the country, including through the media. The broadly formulated legislation gives significant scope for arbitrary application. In particular, the law makes any cooperation by Russian citizens with ‘undesirable organisations’ an offence punishable with up to six years’ imprisonment. Four international groups were included on the list at year’s end, including the Open Society Foundation. Other donor organisations have closed their programmes in the country as a result of the law, thus depriving civil society groups of important support.

In China, the National People's Congress released a second draft Foreign NGO Management Law in May for public comment. The text requires international organisations to register or obtain a temporary permit to carry out any type of activity in mainland China, and grants the Public Security Bureau extensive supervisory powers, including over the personnel employed by the organisations. The law makes the provision of support (financial or otherwise) by unregistered NGOs to individuals or organisations within mainland China illegal, and establishes punitive measures (fines and detention) for any Chinese citizen receiving such support. As it is very likely that only groups working on issues deemed non-sensitive will be allowed to register, the law will effectively cut support and limit exposure and visibility for most Chinese HRDs.

Travel bans to prevent HRDs from attending international events are being used in a growing number of countries, particularly in Asia and the Middle East and North Africa. The use of travel bans was also notable in Azerbaijan, while Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan maintained restrictive exit visa regimes. In all cases, the purpose remained the same as the laws described above: to cut support, exposure and visibility for HRDs, as well as to limit discussion about the country in international fora.

The use of **state security and counter-terrorism laws** against HRDs continued to be a common tactic of repression across all regions. The fight against terrorism since 9/11 has been recognised as one of the key drivers for closing civil society space worldwide. With the increase in security concerns in the wake of terror attacks in Ankara, Beirut, Bamako, Paris, Tunis and elsewhere in 2015, there is a real risk that HRDs may be affected further, both in relation to the situation in their own countries and vis-à-vis support from abroad. This is a particular concern, for example, in relation to visas for temporary relocation in cases of extreme danger. It is of the utmost importance that legitimate police and security work against those who use terrorism and mass attacks against civilians does not undermine the protection available to HRDs.

Furthermore, debate surrounding the use of **encryption** has been reignited. Governments have stated their opposition to publicly available tools which enable users to communicate securely and the US in particular has been calling on technology companies to allow 'back-door access' to products which offer end-to-end encryption. Encryption is a vital resource for HRDs who work in restrictive environments and who rely on encryption to protect themselves, their networks and their information. As the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression noted in a report earlier in the year, it is not possible to have a form of encryption that only allows some parties back-door access to it because "compromised encryption cannot be kept secret from those with the skill to find and exploit the weak points, whether state or non-state, legitimate or criminal".²

In July, the hacking of Italian IT company Hacking Team provided evidence of what was long suspected; that governments with poor human rights records purchase **surveillance technology** and use it against HRDs. The company sells software that allows its clients to hack into computers and mobile devices, bypass encryption and monitor the target's communications and movements. When declared by Reporters Without Borders an 'Enemy of the Internet' in 2013, Hacking Team said that the company "goes to great lengths to ensure that our software is not sold to [...] any 'repressive' regime". The hacked documents showed that the company had in fact sold software to, among others, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Egypt, Ethiopia, the Russian Federation, Saudi Arabia and Sudan. This provides further argument in support of the urgent need for effective European Union export control mechanisms to ensure that technology is not sold to governments that may use it against HRDs.

2015 marked the 20th anniversary of the execution of nine Ogoni activists by the Nigerian government. Those executions marked a watershed moment for efforts worldwide to make companies accountable for the human rights impact of their business activities. While a lot has changed in relation to the discourse on **business and human rights**, the international community remains very far from having effective mechanisms to hold companies to account. In a welcome recognition of how HRDs are affected when working on issues around business, a resolution adopted by the UN General Assembly (UNGA) in November referred explicitly to the responsibility of business toward HRDs, and called on businesses to engage in meaningful consultations with them.³

While the **General Assembly resolution** included new, positive language and reiterated strong concern at the targeting of HRDs, the opposition to it was even more strident than usual. The African Group⁴ tabled 39 amendments, some of which were of very serious concern as they aimed to water down states' responsibility to protect HRDs and undermine the legitimacy of human rights work. The amendments were eventually withdrawn, but China and Russia called for a vote on the resolution. While the text passed with a strong majority,⁵ this was the first time that a resolution on HRDs was not passed by consensus, and marked a step up in the offensive against

HRDs within the UN. China, the Russian Federation, Syria, Burundi, Kenya, Myanmar, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, Zimbabwe, North Korea, South Africa, Iran, Pakistan, and Sudan voted 'no'. While it is no coincidence that in many countries which voted against or abstained HRDs are routinely targeted, it is worrying that the opposition included democracies such as Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa.⁶

On a positive note, Honduras passed a law in May establishing a new **national system for the protection of HRDs**, following in the footsteps of Brazil, Colombia and Mexico. The law came as a response to numerous recommendations made by civil society and international bodies and hopefully will result in more effective protection of HRDs at risk in a country where extreme violence is rampant. The first challenge the government needs to address is to draft regulations to make the mechanism operational, rapid and effective. This must be done in consultation with HRDs. High-level political support, adequate resources, and implementation by an independent body, separate from government, are essential.

The establishment of state protection mechanisms is to be welcomed and is urgently needed in many countries. However, there is also a critique that this has become a way for governments to create the impression that they are tackling violence against HRDs, which is evidenced by the fact that they often remain weak or extremely under-resourced as is the case in Mexico and Brazil. Furthermore, these mechanisms do not address the root causes of attacks. In Mexico, many HRDs feel that the protection programme has almost become a distraction, absorbing civil society's time and turning every meeting on the risks faced by HRDs into a discussion on the mechanism. Honduras has a chance to demonstrate that it is serious about protecting HRDs, and that it is not simply trying to score political points with foreign partners and international bodies.

A new EU-funded mechanism to support HRDs at risk, **ProtectDefenders.eu**, was officially launched in December. The initiative, which is managed by a consortium of 12 international and regional NGOs including Front Line Defenders, makes available much needed funds to support the protection of HRDs and is a welcome response to the current backlash against them. We need, however, to remind all supportive governments of the ongoing need for strong and consistent political responses to the attack and targeting of HRDs. As the vote on the HRD resolution in the UNGA shows, hostile states are stepping up their efforts in international arenas. HRD allies must do the same.

1. Documenting all killings of HRDs is extremely challenging, and it is very likely that the real figure is far higher.
2. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, A/HRC/29/32.
3. On the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the execution of the Ogoni activists, Front Line Defenders, the Institute for Business and Human Rights and Civil Rights Defenders published in December "Human Rights Defenders and Businesses: Searching for Common Grounds", available at <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/node/30291>.
4. Within the United Nations, member states are arranged in geopolitical groups: <http://www.un.org/depts/DGACM/RegionalGroups.shtml>
5. 117 in favour, 40 abstained, 14 against.
6. The following states abstained: Algeria, Angola, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Belarus, Bolivia, Brunei Darussalam, Cameroon, CAR, Comoros, Congo, Cote d'Ivoire, Cuba, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ecuador, Egypt, Eritrea, Fiji, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Kuwait, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Mali, Mauritania, Mozambique, Namibia, Nicaragua, Niger, Oman, Qatar, Swaziland, Tajikistan, Togo, Uganda, United Arab Emirates, United Republic of Tanzania, Uzbekistan, Venezuela, Vietnam, and Yemen abstained.



Of great concern in Africa is the continued **disappearance** of two HRDs, whose whereabouts remained unknown at year's end. Itai Dzamara, from Zimbabwe, was abducted in March by five armed men; he is the main organiser of the 'Occupy Africa Unity Square' campaign, launched in October 2014 to demand accountability from the government for its reported "failure to satisfy the needs of its people". Clement Lomornana, from South Sudan, was last seen on 15 August when he was forced into a military vehicle; he is a staunch advocate for media rights and freedom of speech, and had been vocal on the ongoing civil war and subsequent peace talks.

A number of HRDs suffered **physical attacks** in Angola, Cameroon, Nigeria, Togo and Uganda. In January, Gerald Kankya and Simon Amanyire of the Twerwaneho Listeners Club, a human rights group that produces radio programming, were attacked in Fort Portal, in western Uganda, in connection with their campaign against land grabs. They were punched, kicked and hit with clubs by a mob of 30 people that appeared to have been acting on the orders of a local senior police commander. When they attempted to file a complaint, the police refused to accept it.

In a number of instances, the **homes and offices** of HRDs were broken into and electronic equipment and sensitive documents were taken away. There were reports of such incidents in Angola, Cameroon, DRC and Uganda.

Death threats against HRDs were reported in Angola, Burundi, Cameroon, DRC, Kenya and Uganda. In Kenya, in March, John Mulingwa of Kamukunji Human Rights Defenders, a grassroots organisation working in one of Nairobi's informal settlements, received a number of threatening calls that instructed him to halt an investigation into a case of extra-judicial killing or risk his life. He went into hiding as a result. In Cameroon, Tilder Kumichii of the Bamenda-based Gender Empowerment and Development received repeated threatening calls from anonymous individuals demanding that she stop her work on domestic violence. In Angola, six members of OMUNGA – a human rights group promoting the rights of street children – received serious death threats in July. In February, the home of the organisation's coordinator was broken into by men wearing military uniform.

Arbitrary detention and judicial harassment were by far the most common tactics used by African states against HRDs. Front Line Defenders documented such cases in Angola, Burundi, Cameroon, Chad, DRC, Ethiopia, Mauritania, Niger, Rwanda, Somaliland, Uganda and Zimbabwe. In January, a court in Mauritania handed down a two-year sentence to three anti-slavery activists, including 2013 Front Line Defenders Award winner Biram Dah Abeid; they were convicted on charges of membership of an unregistered organisation and unauthorised assembly. Djiby Sow was acquitted on appeal, while Biram Dah Abeid and Brahim Bilal had their sentences confirmed. In Chad, Djeralar Miankeol, who has been vocal on corruption in the petrol sector and unlawful expropriation of land, was charged with contempt of court and sentenced in July to two years in prison. He was eventually released on appeal after six weeks in detention. In DRC, David Bugamba, a human rights lawyer, spent ten days in preventive detention in September on charges of libel, defamation and contempt of court three days after filing a complaint with the Attorney General regarding the administration of the justice system in Bukavu.

The so-called '**fight against terrorism**' was used as a pretext to target HRDs in Kenya and Ethiopia. In Kenya, in April, days after the terrorist attack in Garissa University which killed 148 people, two highly respected Mombasa-based groups, MUHURI and Haki Africa, had their names listed in the official gazette as suspected terrorist entities and their bank accounts were frozen as a result of these unsubstantiated charges. In Ethiopia, in October, the Zone9 bloggers, who had been detained for more than a year, were cleared of terrorism charges. Their release was welcome but it was no sign of a change in the government's attitude towards HRDs or its abuse of counter-terrorism laws. Six Ethiopian HRDs travelling to Nairobi to attend a workshop on food security were arrested in March and charged in September with terrorism offences. The charge sheet reportedly referred to the food security workshop as a meeting of a terrorist group.

Harassment through the issuing of **summonses** by police or other law enforcement agencies, **interrogations** and **surveillance** continued throughout the region. In March, members of a trade union that brings together

hospital workers in Togo reported that their offices came under military surveillance when they hosted the general assembly of the national trade union confederation *Synergie des travailleurs du Togo*. Since July in western Uganda, the director of Freedom Radio, a community radio station known for its human rights programming, has been repeatedly summoned and interrogated by police. The harassment started after he resisted pressure from pro-government politicians to put an end to some of the radio broadcasts viewed as “undermining government programmes”. Although an alleged labour law violation was given as justifying the repeated summonses, there was reason to believe that all of these measures were taken to exert pressure on the director to alter the editorial line of Freedom Radio.

Finally, 2015 saw the **space for HRDs** in Angola, Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda shrink further due to increased governmental interference with the work of independent human rights organisations or new laws. In Uganda, a new NGO Act was passed in December. The law criminalises groups operating without a permit and requires organisations to register in every district where they intend to operate. It also contains vague clauses, such as a prohibition on carrying out activities “contrary to the dignity of the people of Uganda”, which could be used against groups working on issues deemed to be culturally sensitive. In Rwanda, attempts to hijack the leadership of groups seen as independent of government control continued. In September, police disrupted the general assembly of the *Ligue pour la promotion et la défense des droits de l’homme au Rwanda* (LIPRODHOR), when the assembly elected a new independent leadership. In Burundi, in the context of the ongoing political crisis (see Global Analysis), the government suspended ten of the most prominent human rights groups in November for allegedly inciting violence.

In **Côte d’Ivoire**, the government has so far failed to adopt the regulations required for the implementation of the law on the protection of HRDs, which won the country praise when it was passed in June 2014.

Country in Focus: Angola

Angola intensified its repression of HRDs and journalists in 2015. HRDs were victims of a wide range of threats including physical attacks, police brutality, surveillance, judicial harassment and arbitrary detention.

Freedom of peaceful assembly and expression remained substantially restricted and people attempting to exercise those rights faced police repression and judicial harassment. Arão Bula Tempo and José Mavungo were arrested in March in Cabinda and charged with crimes against the security of the state in relation to their plans to hold a demonstration and to invite Congolese journalists to cover the event. Arão Bula Tempo was conditionally released in May due to his deteriorating health, but charges remain pending and he was subjected to a travel ban. José Mavungo was convicted in September and sentenced to six years in prison.

2015 marked the 36th year since President José Eduardo dos Santos came to power, making him one of the longest serving presidents in Africa. Peaceful demonstrations organised on the occasion to request political change were broken up by police who used excessive force. In June, 15 HRDs who advocate for democratic reform, accountability and good governance were arrested for allegedly preparing a coup. Rapper and HRD Luaty Beirão, one of the detainees, went on hunger strike in protest against delays in hearing their habeas corpus application; his health reached a critical stage. European diplomats and journalists were not allowed to attend court hearings, while demonstrations, vigils and church services organised in solidarity with the 15 detainees were violently dispersed.

In March, President dos Santos issued Decree 74/15, regulating the establishment and functioning of NGOs. The new regulation introduces mandatory registration and a burdensome procedure, which includes the requirement to register with three separate bodies; it requires prior government approval for projects as well as locations where NGOs can operate; and it introduces restrictions as well as prior government approval for foreign funding.

The issue of banned human rights organisations remained unaddressed, and members of such groups have faced accusations of rebellion or running unregistered organisations.

Journalists denouncing human rights abuses committed by the government, bad governance and corruption also continued to be targeted. Rafael Marques de Morais, author of *Blood Diamonds: Torture and Corruption in Angola*, a book documenting killings and torture in the country’s diamond fields, was given a suspended sentence of six-months’ imprisonment in May, for allegedly defaming army generals in his book. In June, an investigation was opened against journalist and human rights defender Mariano Brás based on unsubstantiated allegations of abuse of press freedom, defamation, and insult of public authorities.

Defending human rights in Latin America remained extremely dangerous and the criminalisation of the defence of human rights and peaceful protest movements persisted. Some of the most common charges in cases of judicial harassment in 2015 were 'kidnapping' or 'unlawful deprivation of liberty' in relation to peaceful protests on land rights, the environment and indigenous peoples' rights. Throughout the region, threats, including death threats, remained the most common way of intimidating HRDs. Alongside state actors, legal and illegal non-state actors, such as companies and paramilitary groups, were behind many cases of attack and intimidation. There was also a significant number of legal proceedings initiated by companies against HRDs and communities.

The most worrying issue remained extreme violence. As of 30 November, Front Line Defenders had received reports on the **killing of 87 HRDs** in Latin America, which is well over half the total number of killings reported worldwide. 60% of these killings were in Colombia, with the remainder occurring in Brazil, Honduras, Mexico, Guatemala, Nicaragua and El Salvador.

Most at risk were **environmental, indigenous peoples'** and **land rights** defenders; they were the victims of 41% of the killings in the region. HRDs working on those issues have also suffered judicial harassment, physical attacks, threats, intimidation, and smear campaigns, particularly in Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Paraguay and Peru. Almost all of these cases were linked to opposition to so-called 'mega-projects', especially those being developed by mining companies, and their work involved speaking out about the negative impact of business activities and the lack of proper prior consultation with affected communities. In Peru, César Estrada Chuquilin, member of the Network of Indigenous Communicators of Peru, was the target of intimidation, threats, beatings, confiscation of his equipment and judicial harassment for reporting on opposition to the Conga mining project. In November, he was the victim of an assassination attempt.

2015 was an especially challenging year for many indigenous peoples fighting for the demarcation of their ancestral lands in **Brazil**. HRDs and indigenous leaders from the Ka'apor and the Guarani-Kaiowás peoples were targeted by logging companies that operate illegally in the Amazon rainforest and by local farmers who claim rights over lands recognised as indigenous ancestral land. They faced risks of killing, physical attack and prosecution on the basis of fabricated charges.

HRDs working on **sexual orientation and gender identity** were also targeted. LGBTI rights defenders accounted for 15% of the killings reported in the region, making them the second-most targeted group. 70% of all HRDs reported killed in Honduras were LGBTI rights defenders, and over half of them were trans women; between June and September, Juan Carlos Cruz Andara, Angy Ferreira, Violeta Rivas, Génesis Hernández and Jorge Alberto Castillo were murdered. Trans women HRDs were targeted not only in Honduras: Francela Méndez was killed in June in El Salvador. The brutal nature of these killings left no doubt that the attacks were meant not only to kill but also to degrade the victims on account of their gender identity.

Rural and indigenous **women human rights defenders** (WHRDs) and those working on sexual violence are groups at particular risk. In Honduras, in March, Gladys Lanza Ochoa, Coordinator of *Movimiento de Mujeres por la Paz "Visitación Padilla"*, was sentenced to 18 months' imprisonment on charges of defamation and slander. Targeting of WHRDs was also reported in Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, Ecuador, El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru and Venezuela.

Judicial harassment and **detention** occurred in Colombia, Cuba, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Paraguay and Peru. In Guatemala, Sotero Adalberto Villatoro, Francisco Juan Pedro and Arturo Pablo Juan were accused of making threats, illegal detention, unlawful association, plagiarism and abduction, as a result of their key role in the defence of natural resources and their intervention as mediators in conflicts between communities and state authorities, particularly regarding hydroelectric construction projects.

State-run media outlets were used as platforms to **stigmatise** HRDs and fuel contempt towards them. In Venezuela, public figures including President Nicolás Maduro regularly criticised HRDs in weekly television shows

in order to undermine the legitimacy of their work. Such discourse encouraged attacks, as in the case of Marino Alvarado, one of the HRDs publicly abused by the President, who was subsequently the victim of an armed attack at his home in October.

The situation for **journalists** reporting on human rights issues remained of concern throughout the region. In Mexico, photojournalist Ruben Espinosa was killed in July, along with HRD Nadia Vera; they were critical voices in the state of Veracruz denouncing abuses allegedly linked to its Governor. In Brazil, journalist Alex Pamplona was forced into hiding due to threats against him. Positive news came from Colombia, where human rights journalist Claudia Julieta Duque won her case against two former high-ranking officers of the now-defunct Administrative Department of Security (DAS) who were found guilty of psychological torture against her; they were sentenced to six years in prison. However, she continues to report harassment and intimidation as the case against three other former DAS officers continues.

HRDs have also faced **suspension from professional associations**. In Paraguay, human rights lawyer Julia Alonso Cabello risked suspension from the Bar Association for her work in defence of indigenous peoples. The President of the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court of Justice accused her of misconduct following her criticism of a Supreme Court decision to review the constitutionality of the 2014 expropriation law, which had allowed for the return of ancestral land to the Sawhoymaxa indigenous people. In Brazil, Luiz Eloy Henrique Amado faced a similar sanction for similar work. He is accused of exacerbating the conflict between landowners and indigenous peoples in the state of Mato Grosso do Sul.

Concern for **digital security** in Latin America increased as a result of revelations in July that at least seven governments in the region – Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Honduras, Mexico and Panama – had bought Remote Control System, a surveillance software package produced by Hacking Team (see Global Analysis section). In Honduras, in September, journalist Dina Meza received emails purporting to be from two known associates, which in fact contained spyware. This incident followed a series of acts of intimidation and threats, including surveillance, intimidating phone calls, smears on social media and sabotage of her vehicle. In Venezuela, in May, human rights groups *Provea* and *Espacio Público* filed a complaint with the Public Prosecutor denouncing illegal interception of their communications by the government.

Country in Focus: Ecuador

Intense social protests took place in 2015, including a general strike in August calling for agrarian reform and improved access to health services, as well as widespread protests opposing large-scale mining projects and the signing of a free trade agreement with the European Union. Protests were also prompted by proposed constitutional amendments that would allow President Correa to run for re-election indefinitely.

HRDs reported an increase in police and judicial harassment, particularly in connection with these protests. In August, environmental and indigenous peoples' rights defender Margoth Escobar was held in preventive detention for over a week on grounds of disturbing the peace following a general strike and demonstration in Puyo. Journalist Manuela Picq was forced return to Brazil, her country of origin, following the cancellation of her residence permit. She was arrested in August during a march organised by the Confederation of Indigenous Nations of Ecuador. Despite a court ruling stating that there were no grounds for her arrest or deportation, her permit was not reinstated.

Attacks on freedom of expression and access to information have also been common. Since a new Communications Law was approved in 2013, the environment for independent media has deteriorated further and self-censorship by journalists has increased. Executive Decree Order No. 16, which contains restrictive provisions in relation to freedom of association and grants the National Secretariat for Communications (SECOM) powers to order the dissolution of NGOs on ill-defined grounds, was used against independent rights groups. In September, SECOM initiated dissolution proceedings against *Fundación Andina para la Observación y Estudio de Medios* (Fundamedios), a human rights and media freedom watchdog, for allegedly acting outside its statutory purposes. The procedure was eventually put on hold on condition that the organisation cease 'political activities' and cease publishing what the authorities called "unfounded alerts with the sole aim of affecting the prestige of Ecuador".

The use of state media to discredit and stigmatise HRDs remained a major concern. Shortly after the start of the dissolution procedure against Fundamedios, paid adverts appeared in leading newspapers carrying a fabricated statement in the name of the National Federation of Journalists in support of the dissolution; a news item produced by SECOM was broadcast on radio accusing Fundamedios of being funded by the CIA and of sending information to the United States. President Correa appeared on television on a weekly basis and frequently referred to named HRDs as enemies of the state.

HRDs in many countries in Asia continued to work in a hostile environment, and were targeted through surveillance, intimidation, threats and harassment, including judicial harassment, arbitrary detention, and torture. HRDs also faced restrictions on their movements within their country or when travelling abroad. In numerous cases, they faced physical attack, disappearance, killing and other forms of violence. States in the region continued to enact legal and administrative provisions in order to restrict their activities.

Judicial harassment intensified in Malaysia, Myanmar and Thailand, and was reported in Cambodia, China, India, the Philippines, Singapore and Vietnam. In India, Teesta Setalvad and Javed Anand faced court proceedings on fabricated charges of embezzlement, misuse of funds and ‘anti-national propaganda’. In Malaysia, the number of arrests under the Sedition Act rose, going from seven in 2012 to 18 in 2013, 44 in 2014 and jumping to over 200 in 2015, including the arrest of more than 20 HRDs. In Thailand, the targeting of HRDs increased as the military junta consolidated its power. While at times HRDs were eventually acquitted, these rulings often arrived after months or years in pre-trial detention. Temogen ‘Cocoy’ Tulawie, in the Philippines, was cleared of fabricated charges of involvement in a bombing incident in July, after spending three years and six months in detention. In China, beginning in July, hundreds of human rights lawyers, legal staff, HRDs and their family members were rounded up by the authorities, and at least a dozen remain ‘disappeared’. 2015 Front Line Defenders Award winner Guo Feixiong was sentenced to six years’ imprisonment in November for his participation in rallies calling for press freedom and for the Chinese government to ratify the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Physical assaults by police, plain-clothes agents or unidentified thugs were on the increase, and occurred in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, China, India, the Maldives, Nepal and Vietnam. In Vietnam, according to local monitors, at least 60 activists and bloggers, including six women, were violently attacked in the first eleven months of 2015; this marked a significant increase over previous years. In Afghanistan, HRDs also reported a significant increase in threats, intimidation and attacks, especially against women HRDs, in the context of the withdrawal of international forces and attacks by a resurgent Taliban. HRDs in China have reported abuse by police in custody, with physical assault, sleep deprivation, shackling of arms and legs and denial of adequate medical attention being amongst the most common complaints.

As of the end November, there were reports of **52 HRDs killed** in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Pakistan, the Philippines and Thailand. Almost 70% of these killings were related to environmental, land or indigenous peoples’ rights. The figure rises to over 90% in the Philippines, where 31 HRDs were killed. The situation was extremely serious in Mindanao as the government implemented its counterinsurgency operation, ‘Oplan Bayanihan’. In Thailand, land rights defender Chai Bunthonglek was shot dead in front of his family in February. He was the fourth member of the Southern Peasant Federation of Thailand to be killed since 2010. In Pakistan, Sabeen Mahmud was shot dead in April after hosting a discussion on human rights violations in the conflict-ridden Baluchistan province. In Myanmar, journalist Ko Par Gyi died in custody, after his arrest in September. The military claimed that he was killed when he “tried to seize a gun from a guard”; however, his body bore clear signs of torture. In Bangladesh, five secular bloggers campaigning against religious extremism were killed, and religious extremists issued death threats against several other HRDs.

Impunity for attacks remained rampant, and authorities showed no interest or willingness to pursue justice. 11 September marked 1000 days since the disappearance of Sombath Somphone in Laos, and no progress has been made in the investigation. In Thailand, Por Cha Lee Rakchongcharoen, known as Billy, has been missing since April 2014 and no progress has been made in the investigation either. Similarly, in the Maldives, human rights journalist Ahmed Rilwan Abdulla remains missing since August 2014. Noone in China has been held responsible for the death of Cao Shunli in custody in March 2014 following months of declining health and the denial of adequate medical attention.

The use of the **Internet and social media** was restricted in several countries including by shutting down or blocking websites or social media accounts. There were also reports of paid ‘Internet armies’ of hackers and others tasked with spreading rumours and smears against HRDs. Social media sites were used by the authorities to

intimidate HRDs. In Malaysia, human rights lawyer Michelle Yesudas received a public message on Twitter from the Inspector General of Police asking her to explain to police a tweet she had posted about rape threats made against a television presenter; three days after the tweet exchange, she was detained by the police. Activists relying on the Internet to have their voices heard also faced prosecution and imprisonment in Bangladesh, China, India, Malaysia, Myanmar, Pakistan, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

HRDs faced restrictions on their **freedom of movement**, including the denial or confiscation of their passports, questioning at immigration and offloading from flights. They were placed on government lists of persons prohibited from overseas travel in China, India, Malaysia, Pakistan and Vietnam. In Pakistan, in March, Abdul Qadeer Baloch, also known as Mama Qadeer, was prevented from boarding a flight and was informed that his name had been added to the Exit Control List as a result of alleged anti-national activities; he was on his way to a human rights seminar in the United States.

In Cambodia, despite widespread criticism from civil society and the international community, the **Law on Associations and NGOs** (also known as 'LANGO') entered into force in August. It requires mandatory registration by all NGOs and grants discretion to the Ministry of Interior to deny registration based on grounds such as peace, stability and threats to traditions and culture – many of which remained vaguely defined. The law allows the government to blacklist, prosecute or deport staff of non-registered or de-registered domestic and international organisations. Bangladesh was in the process of enacting similar legislation, which remained pending at year's end. In October, Pakistan adopted new regulations on international NGOs operating in the country, requiring prior permission to carry out activities. The government also introduced restrictions in relation to what issues organisations can work on and in what geographical areas they can operate, and provided for the withdrawal of registration for activities deemed to be against government policy. It is likely that 2016 will see the introduction of similarly restrictive legislation targeting international NGOs in China.

Country in Focus: Burma/Myanmar

2015 was a historic year for Myanmar. With the overwhelming victory of Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) in the November elections, a civilian government will be sworn into power for the first time since the 1962 coup. Although the elections were largely peaceful, numerous religious minority candidates were arbitrarily blocked by the Union Election Commission, and the ability of the population to participate was limited in numerous other ways, including by laws that unduly restrict freedom of association, assembly and expression.

Police and judicial harassment of HRDs and critical voices intensified ahead of the election, in particular in connection with the holding of protests and the student movement. In March, the government dispersed protests organised by the All Burma Federation of Student Unions (ABFSU) against the new Education Act. While the disruption of the protest was expected, the level of violence and the subsequent determination of the authorities to proceed with prosecutions was surprising. 127 students were initially arrested and 70 were kept in pre-trial detention. They faced charges of unlawful assembly, rioting, incitement, and causing harm to a public servant and risk up to eight years and six months' imprisonment. Court proceedings, which remain pending at the time of writing, have been affected by irregularities, including restrictions on the ability of defendants to meet their lawyers. There were also reports of ill-treatment in detention and solitary confinement. Days before the election, ABFSU leaders who had gone into hiding since the March crackdown were arrested.

Lawyers were targeted for exercising their profession. One of the defence lawyers of the ABFSU members was charged with contempt of court in October, after the crowd present in the courtroom in September reacted loudly when the judge refused to accept a motion by the defence.

Environmental HRDs and communities affected by development projects also faced criminalisation. Naw Ohn Hla and five fellow HRDs were sentenced in May to four years and four months' imprisonment with hard labour on charges of rioting, use of criminal force to deter a public servant from discharging his or her duty, causing undue public fear or alarm and protesting without prior permission, in relation to their staging a protest seeking justice for the killing of a protester by police the previous year. Several other HRDs assisting communities fighting against the expansion of the Letpadaung mine also faced intimidation, harassment, arrest and prosecution.

The criminalisation of the activities of NGOs, smear campaigns and the marginalisation of HRDs in the public arena are the main types of threats which affected HRDs in the region. In Eastern Europe and Central Asia, NGOs are increasingly excluded from public life, deprived of visibility because of increased control over mainstream media, and depicted as foreign agents or as motivated by financial gain.

HRDs continued to fight against **restrictive legislation** in several countries. In Kyrgyzstan, a bill similar to the Russian 'Foreign Agents Law' was passed at its first reading in June. There is concern that the bill may be reintroduced in the new parliament, which was elected in October. In Kazakhstan, amendments to the NGO law introducing restrictions on foreign funding were awaiting presidential approval. In Tajikistan, amendments to the Law on Public Associations, passed in August, introduced a requirement to register foreign funds with the Ministry of Justice for inclusion in a special registry. In the same country, several human rights groups were victims of intrusive inspections carried out by the tax authorities, the Ministry of Justice, the department of labour or other state bodies.

Legislative restrictions were coupled with **smear campaigns** depicting HRDs as agents of foreign interests in Azerbaijan, Belarus, the Russian Federation, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Slander against HRDs was also reported in Serbia, where far-right politicians used threatening and abusive language against WHRDs, as in the case of Staša Zajović, the coordinator of Women in Black.

In **Uzbekistan**, those working on forced labour in the cotton fields were particularly targeted. Dmitry Tikhonov and Elena Urlaeva of the Human Rights Defenders Alliance of Uzbekistan were detained for several hours and questioned in September. In October, the house of Dmitry Tikhonov was set on fire. Uktam Pardayev, chairperson of the Independent Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan (HRSU), was arrested in November; his home was searched and equipment, including computers, was confiscated. Several HRDs remained in prison. Azam Farmonov, chairperson of the Syrdarya branch of the HRSU, received an additional sentence of five years' imprisonment in April for alleged violations of prison regulations, shortly before he was due to be released from a previous nine-year prison sentence. Exit visas allowing HRDs to travel abroad were routinely denied.

Repression against civil society groups continued in **Azerbaijan**. Several HRDs who were arrested in 2014, including Leyla and Arif Yunus, Rasul Jafarov, Intigam Aliyev and Khadija Ismail, received prison sentences ranging from six to eight and a half years for alleged economic crimes, following unfair trials. Their defence lawyers suffered retaliation: Khalid Bagirov was disbarred in July, and disbarment proceedings against Alaif Gasanov remain pending at the time of publication. Independent journalists were also targeted, called in for questioning and threatened. In a worrying development, the authorities also targeted family members: relatives of HRDs, lawyers and journalists were called in for questioning and their homes were raided by police. Several HRDs and members of their families learned only at the border that they were under a travel ban, which was at times imposed without complying with normal legal procedures. Positive news came towards the end of the year, when Arif and Leyla Yunus were released from prison on probation.

The authorities fined and jailed **peaceful protesters** for violating restrictive public assembly laws in Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, the Russian Federation and Uzbekistan. In Armenia, a protest against rising electricity prices, one of the largest demonstrations in recent years, was violently dispersed by police. More than 200 protesters were arrested and journalists had their equipment intentionally damaged. Excessive force was also used against protesters in Turkey, including against thousands who gathered in Istanbul to protest at the killing of one of the most prominent figures in the Turkish human rights movement, Tahir Elci, who was shot dead in Diyarbakir in November. In October, in Ankara, at least 99 peaceful protesters were killed by bombs detonated at a rally organised by civil society organisations and opposition political parties calling for peace in the Kurdish region.

Restriction of **media freedom**, including by blocking access to independent news websites, was reported in Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and the Russian Federation. In Kazakhstan, civil society activists were detained and faced charges of incitement of national discord for their posts on social media. In the aftermath of the 2015 European Games in Baku, Emin Milli, founder of the online news site Meydan TV, received death threats from state officials and his colleagues were harassed.

The offensive against HRDs in Azerbaijan and the Russian Federation resulted in scores of HRDs and their families **fleeing** to seek refuge in other countries. The overall deterioration in the human rights situation resulted in numerous cases of psychological burnout.

LGBTI rights defenders faced discrimination, harassment and smear campaigns in several countries; in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine they also faced physical violence. In Kyrgyzstan, an anti-LGBTI propaganda bill, similar to the legislation adopted in the Russian Federation, was tabled and remained pending. In the Russian North Caucasus, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan LGBTI HRDs were forced to work in complete anonymity out of fear for their lives. In Italy, a LGBTI activist faced court proceedings on charges of disturbing public tranquillity and indecency for kissing his same-sex partner, whom he had legally married abroad, during a protest the previous year.

In **Europe**, HRDs are at risk of facing new challenges as a result of terrorism-related concerns and the increased focus on security and surveillance. In Germany, in July, the authorities opened an investigation on charges of treason against two journalists for reporting on surveillance by the country's security agency. The attorney general eventually resigned over the incident and the investigation was closed. In the United Kingdom, a ruling by the Investigatory Powers Tribunal revealed in June that the UK Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) had carried out surveillance against two human rights groups, the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR) and the South African Legal Resources Centre (LRC). A mass surveillance operation targeting opposition politicians, prominent civil society figures and HRDs was unveiled in Macedonia in February.

The worsening climate for activism in Europe is also exemplified by the case of Lisa McKenzie, a UK-based housing activist who was prosecuted for criminal damage for the actions of another person, who placed a sticker on the window of a block of luxury flats, on the basis that she was attending the same protest.⁷ She was eventually acquitted in October in a court ruling which criticised the profiling of housing activists and protesters by police. There were also further worrying disclosures in the UK about the use of undercover police to infiltrate environmental and animal rights groups as well as the announcement by the UK government that it was planning to scrap the Human Rights Act which enshrines the European Convention on Human Rights in domestic law.

Country in Focus: The Russian Federation

In 2015, 105 NGOs were added to the 'foreign agents' list, including all the most prominent and outspoken human rights groups. 96 were added by the Ministry of Justice against their will. Most of them challenged the decision in court but 36 have lost their cases. 14 NGOs have faced administrative charges for not marking their materials as published by a foreign agent and 11 for alleged failure to comply with reporting requirements. Over 30 groups decided to close down. A procedure for removing NGOs from the list was introduced in February. It requires an inspection by the Ministry of Justice even in cases where the organisation's inclusion on the list has already been found to be illegal by a court. 11 NGOs have applied for this procedure on the basis that they are not in receipt of foreign funding, and six have been successful.⁸

While the human rights movement continued to fight against the 'Foreign Agents Law', a further step in the crackdown was taken in May with the adoption of the law on 'undesirable organisations' (see Global Analysis for details).

HRDs contradicting the official account of the conflict in Ukraine and those monitoring human rights violations in Crimea were targeted. The internationally renowned Human Rights Center Memorial was determined by the Ministry of Justice to have 'undermined the Constitution', partly on the basis that it classified Russian involvement in Ukraine as aggression. In July, the Parliament requested an inquiry into the Crimean Human Rights Field Mission, a joint project of Russian and Ukrainian NGOs, for potential inclusion on the list of undesirable organisations.

HRDs in the North Caucasus continued to operate in particularly harsh conditions and were victims of threats, intimidation and physical attacks. 2011 Front Line Defenders Award winner, the Joint Mobile Group had its office repeatedly attacked. The raids appeared to have been organised by local authorities but were presented as a spontaneous reaction by local people to the information published by the organisation. Despite the numerous instances of intimidation and threats, very few are reported to the police or publicised out of fear for the security of their families.

LGBTI groups continued to face harassment and smear campaigns in the media. A new discriminatory draft law was introduced in late October targeting public figures who do not hide their homosexuality; if adopted, it would penalise "the public expression of non-traditional sexual relations". Targeting of LGBTI HRDs also occurred at the hands of far-right groups, and the authorities routinely failed to carry out investigations.

7. Documenting all killings of HRDs is extremely challenging, and it is very likely that the real figure is far higher.

8. All figures correct as of 1 December 2015.

HRDs in the region were caught between authoritarian regimes and the proliferation of intractable domestic and international conflicts. State agents continued to be the main source of threats. However, increasingly, abuses and crimes have been committed by insurgent movements and militant Islamist groups active in several countries in the region.

Killings of HRDs occurred in Egypt, Iraq, Libya, Sudan, Syria and Yemen. Almost half of them were perpetrated by militant Islamist groups. HRDs were subjected to **torture and ill-treatment** by state agents in Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Morocco, Sudan, United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Western Sahara, and by state and non-state actors in Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen. In Saudi Arabia they have also faced harsh **corporal punishment**, as in the case of blogger Raif Badawi. HRDs were held in **incommunicado** detention in Egypt, Iran, Oman, Syria, Sudan and UAE.

The security of HRDs in Yemen deteriorated as a result of the escalation of the **armed conflict** between Houthis and armed forces loyal to President Abdo Rabbo Mansour Hadi. The human rights and humanitarian consequences of the conflict increased after the military intervention of the Saudi-led Arab coalition against the Houthis in March. The increasing influence of militant Islamist groups in Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen seriously threatened the physical integrity of HRDs, especially those working on religious and minority rights, and women's rights defenders. The spread of conflicts and systematic persecution has pushed many HRDs into **fleeing their home countries**. However, they often faced restrictions and harassment as well as difficult living conditions in their new host countries in the region.

In the **Occupied Palestinian Territories** (OPT), HRDs face prolonged administrative detention and military trials. Freedom of movement remained restricted by Israeli occupying forces, which on numerous occasions prevented HRDs from attending international human rights events. The Moroccan authorities continued their repressive policies against HRDs in **Western Sahara**. Peaceful protests calling for the right to self-determination were met by force and the detention and prosecution of Sahrawi HRDs continued to occur. However, in a welcome development, the Moroccan authorities agreed to begin the registration process of the Tomorrow Association of Human Rights and the Sahrawi Association of Victims of Grave Human Rights Violations, two outspoken Sahrawi human rights groups.

HRDs have been subjected to police inquiries and **prosecution** in most countries in the region. In some cases, the authorities brought unsubstantiated charges of committing or inciting violence or attacking police officers. HRDs received prison sentences in Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Morocco, Oman, OPT, Saudi Arabia and Western Sahara. In Iran, Atena Daemi, a children's and women's rights defender who also advocates against the death penalty, was sentenced to 14 years' imprisonment in May for 'propaganda against the system' and 'insulting the Supreme Leader'.

New **counter-terrorism** laws were introduced in Egypt and Tunisia. These laws provided the authorities with broad powers of detention and surveillance; they contained a very broad definition of terrorism or introduced restrictions on freedom of expression, association and assembly. In Saudi Arabia, where new anti-terrorism legislation was introduced in 2014, human rights defender Waleed Abu Al-Khair was sentenced in January to 15 years' imprisonment by the Special Criminal Court, which has jurisdiction over terrorism-related cases.

The **right to form** and maintain independent **associations** has been seriously curtailed in most countries. Authorities in Egypt used a new restrictive NGO law to muzzle civil society and put local and international human rights groups under pressure. A judicial investigation was initiated against the Egyptian Democratic Academy, the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS) and the Hisham Mubarak Law Centre on charges of operating without being registered and receiving foreign funding. In order to continue its operation, CIHRS moved most of its staff to Tunisia.

Several **other laws** were used against HRDs. Blasphemy laws have been used to curtail discussion about religion or corruption in religious establishments in Egypt, Iran and Saudi Arabia. Bloggers, journalists and members of human rights groups were harassed by defamation laws in Algeria, Bahrain and Lebanon – for example in the cases of Ghada Jamsheer in Bahrain and Wadih Al-Asmar in Lebanon. Freedom of expression on the Internet has

also been stifled by cyber crime laws in the Gulf countries and Egypt, such as in the case of Omani blogger Said Jadad, who was arrested in November to serve a one year sentence for his online posts highlighting human rights violations in the country.

There were however **positive developments** in some cases in 2015. In Egypt, in September, Yara Sallam and Sanaa Seif were released following a presidential pardon of 100 prisoners, the majority of whom had been sentenced as a result of their peaceful participation in demonstrations in 2014. In July and August, Syrian journalists and HRDs Hussein Ghrer, Hani Zaitani and Mazen Darwish were released after more than three years in prison; they remain, however, on trial before a military court on charges of 'publicising terrorist acts', and other HRDs remain in detention or missing, including Razan Zeitouneh. In Bahrain, Nabeel Rajab was released in July on health grounds following a Royal Pardon, but he continues to face prosecution. In October, the Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet, consisting of the country's key human rights, labour, business and legal organisations, including the Tunisian Human Rights League, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for its key role in the democratic transition.

Stigmatisation and the dissemination of false and defamatory accusations were used by state-owned and private media in Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Morocco, Saudi Arabia and Sudan. Authorities imposed **travel bans** on HRDs in Bahrain, Egypt, Morocco, Oman, Saudi Arabia and UAE, in many instances without following the required legal procedure. In the UAE, the persecution of HRDs has been extended to their **families** by restricting their freedom of movement and undermining their right to education. An inclusive democratic **transition in Tunisia** continues to advance with a significant contribution from civil society and HRDs. However, genuine legal and institutional reforms, especially in the judiciary and the security sector, are still required. The newly adopted counter-terrorism law could lead to restrictions on freedom of assembly, association and expression.

LGBTI rights defenders work in difficult legal and socio-cultural contexts. They face systematic and serious threats and the stigmatisation of their cause, first and foremost due to the criminalisation of homosexuality in many countries. In spite of the challenges the LGBTI rights movement is growing in Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco and Tunisia. In May, the Tunisian authorities registered Shams Association, the first LGBTI association to be officially recognised in the Arab region. However, conservative groups repeatedly called for its closure and extreme religious groups incited violence against its members. In Morocco, members of Aswat, a network of LGBTI rights defenders, were forced to leave the country temporarily to avoid possible arrest after local media outlets launched a campaign against them.

Country in Focus: Morocco

Morocco has witnessed major setbacks in its tolerance of human rights work over the past two years. Judicial harassment has increased, the activities of a number of NGOs have been banned or disrupted, and several groups have been unable to register or renew registration.

Among the organisations that failed to obtain or renew registration were the *Comité de protection de la liberté de la presse et d'expression au Maroc* (also known as Freedom Now), the Moroccan Association for Digital Rights (ADN) and local branches of the Moroccan League for Human Rights. 40 out of 97 branches of the Moroccan Association of Human Rights (AMDH) faced administrative obstacles when renewing their registration in 2015.

HRDs also faced increasing restrictions on their activities. AMDH reported that 97 events it organised were banned by the authorities in the period July 2014 to October 2015. Furthermore, AMDH received an official warning from the Ministry of Interior threatening legal action if it continued to host events organised by Freedom Now, on the basis that the latter organisation is not registered. In February, more than 40 plain-clothes officers raided the AMDH headquarters, reportedly assaulted a staff member, and arrested two French journalists who were preparing to conduct an interview. In January, the Ibn Rochd Center for Studies and Communication closed down; the organisation stated that it had taken this decision due to the growing restrictions imposed on their activities, including the disruption and banning of events and surveillance. Following the publication of a joint report with Privacy International on digital surveillance in Morocco, ADN members were summoned for interrogation and eventually charged. The report offered evidence of the use of spying software against HRDs.

Charges related to state security and foreign funding were used against numerous HRDs. Maâti Monjib, Samad Iach and Hicham Mansouri of the Moroccan Association for Investigative Journalism (AMJI), Hisham Almiraat of the ADN, and journalist Mohamed Elsabr were charged with 'threatening the internal security of the state'; their trial remained pending at the time of writing. The President and Vice-President of AMJI, Rachid Tarek and Maria Makram, faced prosecution based on charges of receiving foreign funding. In March, Hicham Mansouri was sentenced to ten months' imprisonment for adultery in a case which appeared to be politically motivated. Several of those under investigation also faced a travel ban.

conclusion

This report shows that the environment for HRDs across the globe is increasingly restrictive and punitive and that the offensive against them has reached new heights. Yet the international reaction to these deteriorating circumstances has remained weak. While lip-service is frequently paid at an international level to human rights norms and the crucial work of HRDs, it has rarely been accompanied by the practical action necessary to support these same HRDs.

For example, at such times of increased risk, 'friendly' countries must make it easier, rather than more difficult, for HRDs to obtain visas for rest and respite and temporary relocations while their lives or wellbeing are in danger. Cases of the abuse of HRDs must not be relegated to side meetings or neglected altogether when governments, who claim to prioritise human rights, meet with counterparts from human rights-abusing governments seeking trade deals.

New state security and counter-terrorism laws cannot be allowed to target HRDs and frame them as terrorists, robbing them both of their legitimacy and their liberty. As the political will of individual countries to take a strong stand on human rights continues to flag, it is incumbent on states who value human rights to redouble their efforts to support the work of HRDs at-risk in a global environment which is only going to become more and more hostile.

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