

THE SUNFLOWER DECLARATION



A call to action to protect
human rights defenders at risk



Photo from the Nobel Peace Prize Exhibition 2022:
Nobody Plans to Give Up. (Photo: William Keo/Magnum Photos)

Drafted by Center for Civil Liberties, Memorial, Viasna, Civil Rights Defenders,
Freedom House, Front Line Defenders, Norwegian Helsinki Committee,
Norwegian Human Rights Fund, and with input from the Senior Advisor to
the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders.

Presented at the Nobel Peace Conference HUMAN
RIGHTS HEROES in Oslo, 31 August 2023 by the 2022
Nobel Peace laureates Center for Civil Liberties,
Memorial and Viasna on behalf of Ales Bialiatski.

The Peace Prize laureates represent civil society in their home countries. They have for many years promoted the right to criticise power and protect the fundamental rights of citizens. They have made an outstanding effort to document war crimes, human right abuses and the abuse of power. Together they demonstrate the significance of civil society for peace and democracy.

Norwegian Nobel Committee, October 2022

PREAMBLE

The 2022 Nobel Peace Prize focuses the world's attention on the important role civil society—and we as individuals—play in protecting human rights and democracy. When we act to secure human rights—political, civil, social, cultural, environmental, and economic rights—for ourselves and others, we help build just and peaceful societies.

According to the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, “Everyone has the right, individually and in association with others, to promote and to strive for the protection and realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the national and international levels.”ⁱ

Human rights defenders are persons, who individually or in association with others, act to promote or protect human rights peacefully.ⁱⁱ This can include a great diversity of people such as activists for the environment, women's rights, LGBT rights, indigenous rights and religious freedom, journalists, and union representatives. Concretely, they inform people about their rights, document abuses, speak out against oppression, and call for accountability for crimes. Human rights defenders have helped improve our laws and systems, promoted policies and standards where they are lacking, made vital resources and privileges available to more people, broadened understanding and respect for humans regardless of our strengths or vulnerabilitiesⁱⁱⁱ, and are indispensable to achieving progress on the Sustainable Development Goals.

Peace cannot exist without human rights, and human rights cannot exist without those who defend, promote, and protect them.

Growing Risks

As humanity faces multiple crises, the ability of human rights defenders to safely do their work is a precondition for creating positive and lasting change.^{iv} And yet, in a time of rising authoritarianism, growing inequalities, unsustainable economic growth, and opaque algorithm-steered disinformation, perpetrators increasingly threaten human rights defenders and the space in which they work for what they do or who they are. As a result, according to Front Line defenders [2022 Global Analysis](#)^v, for the first time, the HRD Memorial documented more than 400 target killings of human rights defenders.

Rising authoritarian tendencies^{vi} all over the world challenge the work, security, and well-being of defenders. To maintain power, these regimes repress freedom of assembly, freedom of expression, and freedom of association—rights that are fundamental to human rights

work. They manipulate historical memory to impose their views on society. Authorities capitalize on crises—including environmental disasters, war, pandemics, and displacement—to crack down on civic freedoms and further restrict the ability of human rights defenders to do their work. They use laws to target civil society and human rights defenders, and to marginalize their position in society. New technology strengthens authorities' ability to surveil and persecute as well as implement weaponized laws within and across borders. Facing harassment, detainment, and violence at home, some defenders are forced to flee. Yet, in exile, states do not protect them or facilitate their continued work. Meanwhile—and at times hand in hand with authorities—businesses prioritize profit over the environment and people's rights. In addition, states fail to protect defenders from harassment and extra judicial killings by non-state actors or to secure accountability.

The vast majority of attacks on human rights defenders rest in impunity. This is unacceptable. There must be tangible consequences for those who harm human rights defenders if we wish to safeguard our democracies and, ultimately, peace. On a systemic level—to ensure that human rights defenders are empowered and enabled to continue their work—governments must adopt international standards and then consistently fulfill these responsibilities. In addition, they must publicly recognize human rights defenders' contribution to sustainable peace and consequently consistently provide political, financial, and practical support to them wherever they are at risk.

We Nobel Prize laureates, alongside civil society actors, experts, and others, call for urgent action to protect human rights defenders at risk on a coordinated, global scale. We call on:

Democratic Governments to:

- Introduce a flexible, rapid response, temporary protective visa system for human rights defenders facing imminent danger. It should allow for multiple entries over a longer period of time, providing those in need the option to swiftly temporarily relocate with their family. States should increase transparency and consistency in the application and issuance process.
- Develop a plan of action to seek the unconditional and immediate release of political prisoners, increase access to prisoners and information related to prisoners' medical conditions and treatment, demand judicial accountability for crimes committed, and make these above-mentioned point conditions of bi-lateral and multilateral agreements.

- Curb the practice of criminalizing and harassing human rights defenders through the use and abuse of law relating to freedom of expression, association, and assembly, the misuse of counter-terror and state security legislation to charge human rights defenders, and the application of onerous reporting and regulatory requirements to limit their effectiveness.
- Combat transnational repression^{vii} of human rights defenders in exile. Governments should train officials to recognize and respond to transnational repression, ensure that human rights defenders are protected from extradition requests, exempt them from sanctions targeting their home state, and enable them to continue their work.
- Address digital information threats to human rights defenders by implementing the [2021 Nobel Peace Prize laureates' 10-point plan](#).
- Create or update official policies for how embassies and diplomatic staff can support human rights defenders including by recognizing their work, raising their cases with host authorities, monitoring and attending court proceedings, setting up secure communication channels, supporting access to relief programs, and ensuring structured follow up of guidelines implementation.

Multilateral Organizations, including the United Nations, the European Union, the Council of Europe, the Organization of American States, the African Union and The Association of Southeast Asian Nations to:

- Encourage their member states to hold perpetrators to account through existing and new international legal mechanisms.
- Make 1) monitoring abuses against human rights defenders; 2) release of political prisoners; and 3) obstruction of lawfare conditions of bi-lateral and multilateral agreements.
- Introduce systems for safeguarding human rights defenders from transnational repression including extradition claims based on trumped up charges, an example of which is Interpol's Red Notice system.

Businesses and investors (particularly high-risk sectors for defenders, including mining, agribusiness, logging, and energy) to:

- Adopt and comply with guidelines from OECD and UN on business and human rights and adopt a publicly facing, gender sensitive, human rights policy. The policy should make reference to the legitimate work of human rights defenders, commit to meaningful stakeholder engagement with them, strengthen due diligence processes, pledge zero-tolerance for retaliation against defenders who expose human rights violations, and lay out mechanisms for accountability.
- Refrain from engaging in Strategic Lawsuits against Public Participation (SLAPPs) targeting human rights defenders, and publicly commit to doing so.

Donor organizations to:

- Enable human rights defenders through rapid, flexible, stable, and accessible long-term funding, nuanced financial reporting requirements which protect defenders from lawfare, and greater investment in organizations working to provide holistic protection to human rights defenders at global, regional, and national level.

Cities and Universities to:

- Establish "shelter cities" and "shelter study spaces" initiatives from which defenders can continue their work safely while processing their experiences and rebuilding physical and psychological strength.

ⁱ [UN Declaration on Human Rights](#)

ⁱⁱ [Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ [Report: Success through perseverance and solidarity: 25 years of achievements by human rights defenders](#)

^{iv} [As expressed by Volker Türk, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, "full compliance with human rights is the best antidote to the inequalities, unaddressed grievances, and exclusion which are often at the root of instability and conflict."](#)

^v [Global Analysis 2022, Frontline Defenders](#)

^{vi} [A record 42 autocratizers with 43% of the world's population – up from 33 countries and 36% of the population last year." Varieties of Democracy most recent report\(p6\)](#)

^{vii} [Transnational Repression Page](#)