

# FRONT LINE DEFENDERS



GLOBAL ANALYSIS 2020

**fi** FRONT LINE  
DEFENDERS

# **FRONT LINE DEFENDERS GLOBAL ANALYSIS 2020**

# FRONT LINE DEFENDERS GLOBAL ANALYSIS 2020

1.	Human rights defenders killed in 2020.....	2
2.	Statistical breakdown of violations against HRDs .....	4
3.	Remembering the HRDs lost to COVID-19 .....	6
4.	Global Overview .....	8
	i. Introduction.....	8
	ii. COVID 19, the impact and response.....	9
	a. Digital (in)security, opportunities and the digital divide.....	11
	b. Marginalised communities and additional pressure on WHRDs .....	11
	c. Jailed defenders further punished .....	12
	iii. Land, indigenous peoples' and environmental defenders .....	12
	iv. The business link.....	14
	v. Social mobilization, protests and the role of HRDs .....	15
	vi. Online violence and social media platforms .....	17
	vii. Looking ahead .....	18
5.	Americas.....	20
6.	Asia & the Pacific .....	28
7.	Europe and Central Asia .....	36
8.	Middle East and North Africa .....	44
9.	Sub-Saharan Africa.....	50
10.	Methodology .....	58



On the cover: An indigenous student holds a poster with “human rights defenders are not terrorists” written on it during a demonstration against the Philippines' Anti Terrorism Law in the University of the Philippines in Quezon City on June 4, 2020. © Mark Z Saludes

## HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS KILLED IN 2020

THESE ARE THE NAMES OF THE 331 HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS WHO WERE KILLED IN 2020, AS REPORTED TO THE INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS MEMORIAL. WE REMEMBER THEM AND TO THEM WE DEDICATE OUR WORK.

### Afghanistan

Hamidullah Rahmani  
Syed Haider Hashimi  
Qudratullah Stanikzai  
Sayed Wali  
Ibrahim Ebrat  
Fatima Khalil (Natasha)  
Jawid Folad  
Ziaudeen Kamal  
Asmatullah Salaam  
Hamza Ghafarzoy  
Abdul Baqi Amin  
Haji Mohammad Nabi  
Malala Maiwand  
Mohammad Yousuf Rasheed  
Freshta Kohistani  
Abid Jahid  
Anonymous / security concerns

### Bolivia

Carlos Orlando Gutierrez Luna

### Brazil

Celino Fernandes  
Wanderson de Jesus Rodrigues  
Fernandes  
Fernando Ferreira da Rocha  
Raimundo Paulino Da Silva Filho  
(Paulino do PT)  
Daniquel de Oliveira dos Santos  
Anísio Souza  
Zezico Rodrigues Guajajara  
Ari Uru-Eu-Wau-Wau  
Airtón Luis Rodrigues da Silva  
Adão do Prado  
Antonio Correia dos Santos  
(Antonio do Barroso)  
Original Yanomami  
Marcos Yanomami  
Kwaxipuhu Ka'apor  
Énio Pasqualin  
Jane Beatriz Machado da Silva

### Canada

Karima Baloch

### Chile

Alberto Alejandro Treuquil  
Iris Rosales Quiñilén  
Marcelo Cea  
Jorge Ruiz

### China

Tursun Kaliolla

### Colombia

Gloria Isabel Ocampo

Virginia Silva  
Mireya Hernández Guevara  
Gentil Hernández Jiménez  
Óscar Quintero Valencia  
Anuar Rojas Isaramá  
Nelson Enrique Meneses Quiles  
Jonh Fredy Alvarez Quinaya  
Tulio César Sandoval Chia  
Jorge Luis Betancourt  
Samuel Federico Peñalosa  
Neivan Yordan Tovar  
Wilmar Alexander Sampedro Posada  
Carlos Andrés Chavarría Posada  
Luis Darío Rodríguez  
Jaime José Vanegas Urueta  
Hernando Herrera Arango  
Fernando Quintero Mena  
Jose Antonio Riascos  
Bayron Rueda Ruiz  
Iván Giraldo  
Javier Girón Triviño  
José Antonio Mendoza  
Libardo Arciniegas  
Yamid Alonso Silva Torres  
Efrén de Jesús Ospina Velásquez  
Pedro Angucho Yunda  
Felipe Angucho Yunda  
Rafael Manotas  
Luis Alberto Parra  
Jader Alberto Parra  
Albeiro Silva Mosquera  
Luis Hugo Silva Mosquera  
Miguel Ángel Castellanos Marín  
Jorge Humberto Alpala  
Luis Mario Tálaga Wallis  
Didian Arley Agudelo  
Amado Torres  
Julio Gutiérrez Avilés  
William Ramiro Montoya  
Jorge Macana  
Edwin Alexis Vergara  
Cristian Adrián Angulo  
Luis Eladio Mecha  
Ángel Ovidio Quintero  
Marco Leopoldo Rivadeneira  
Ivo Humberto Bracamonte Quiroz  
Omar Guasiruma Nacabera  
Ernesto Guasiruma Nacabera  
Carlota Isabel Salinas Pérez  
Alejandro Carvajal  
Wilder García  
Jairo Beltrán Becerra  
Teodomiro Sotelo Anacona  
Mario Chilhueso  
Hugo de Jesús Giraldo López  
Jesús Albeiro Riascos Riascos  
Sabino Angulo Advincula

Floro Samboní Gómez  
Alejandro Llinás Suárez  
Carlos Mario Cañaveral  
Jairo de Jesús Jiménez Isaza  
Álvaro Narváez Daza  
Uben Guerrero  
Pedro Elías Calderón  
Carlos Andrés Sánchez Villa  
Teylor Cruz Gil  
Julio César Hernández Salcedo  
Javier García Guaguarabe  
Jorge Enrique Oramas  
Freddy Angarita Martínez  
Emérito Digno Buendía Martínez  
Aramis Arenas Bayona  
Olga Lucía Hernández  
Saúl Rojas González  
Edwin Emiro Acosta Ochoa  
María Nelly Cuetia Dagua  
Pedro Ángel María Tróchez  
Joel Aguablanca Villamizar  
Hermes Loaiza Montoya  
Arcángel Pantoja  
Omar Agudelo Agudelo  
Julio Humberto Moreno Arce  
Edison León Pérez  
Edier Adán Lopera  
José Ernesto Córdoba Rodríguez  
Gracelio Micolta  
Carmen Angel Avendaño Yarudo  
Luz Miriam Vargas Castaño  
Antonio Cuero  
Agustín Imbachí Gómez  
Rosalbina Becoche Yandi  
Yoanny Yeffer Vanegas  
José Javier Uragama Chamorro  
Mateo López Mejía  
Gentil Pasos Lizcano  
Rubilio Papelito Limón  
Zury Saday Varela  
Paola del Carmen Mena Ortiz  
Armando Suárez Rodríguez  
Victor Alfonso Calvo Guevara  
Edwin García Agudelo  
Rodrigo Salazar  
Florentino Toconás Mensa  
Mauricio Sandoval Lara  
Sigifredo Gutiérrez  
Ernesto Aguilar Barreras  
Jose Gustavo Arcila Rivera  
Fabio Alfonso Guanga García  
Luis Carlos Gómez  
Luisa Avila Henao  
Alvaro Menza Peña  
Mauricio Pérez Martínez  
Libardo Rosero Delgado  
Hernando Jose Molina

Patrocinio Bonilla  
Uberney Muñoz  
José Abelardo Liz Cuetia  
Jaime Monge Hamman  
Fabio Andrés Gómez Grande (Atacuari)  
Edis Manuel Caré Pérez  
Rita Rubiela Bayona Alfonso  
Fernando de Jesús Gaviria García  
Omaira Alcaraz  
Julio César Sogamoso  
Sandra Banda Meneses  
Juan Pablo Prado Bolaños (Kokonuko)  
José Nelson Tapia Caizamo  
Cristóbal José Ramos Ayazo  
Oliverio Conejo Sánchez  
Simón Ochoa  
Ramón Enrique Montejo  
Santo Manuel Baltazar Peña  
Jorge Luis Quintero Villada  
Ana Bisbicús  
Carlos Navia  
Juana María Perea Plata  
Jorge Luis Solano Vega (Koky)  
Genaro Isabare Forastero  
Jhonny Walter Castro  
Francisco Parra (Pacho)  
Miguel Tapi Rito  
Guildon Solís Ambuila  
Joaquín Antonio Ramírez  
Julio Velásquez  
Elkin David Marcelo Chacón (Danny)  
Freddy Agustín Barragan  
Elizabeth Betacourt  
Freiner Lemus  
Norvey Antonio Rivera  
Oswaldo Rojas  
Nelson Ramos Barrera  
Freddy Güetio Zambrano  
Erlin Forastero Undagama  
Eduardo Alarcón Córdoba  
Jhon Jairo Guzmán Pulgarín  
Lácides Manuel Cochero Alba  
Arquímedes Getulio Centenario Carriazo  
Darwin Rafael de Hoyos Madera  
Julio Eduardo Hoyos Moreno  
Óscar Javier Hoyos Banquet  
Auberto Riascos  
Luis Gonzalo Hincapié  
Libio Chilito  
Byron Alirio Revelo Insuasty  
Douglas Cortés Mosquera  
Edgar Hernández  
Fernando Mejía Angarita  
Harlin David Rivas Ospina  
Omar Bisbicús  
Carlos Escué  
Darwin René Bisbicús Guanga



Alirio de Jesús Serna Sierra  
Franco Nativel Salamanca Hoyos  
Roberto Eduardo Parra Ovalle  
Fablio Armando Guanga Quistial  
Omar Moreno Ibagué

#### **Costa Rica**

Jehry Rivera Rivera

#### **Democratic Republic of Congo**

Frédéric-Marcus Kambale

#### **Guatemala**

Luisa Sandoval (Wicha)  
Bryan Guerra  
Dominga Ramos Saloj  
Héctor David Xoy Ajulip  
María Fernanda Pérez  
Domingo Choc Ché (Abuelo Ku)  
Alberto Cucul Cho  
Medardo Alonzo Lucero  
Fidel López  
Abel Raymundo  
Benoit Pierre Amedee Maria (Benito)  
Misael López Catalán  
Carlos Mucú Pop  
Jose Choc Chamán  
Abelardo Quej Ixim

#### **Honduras**

Santos Felipe Escobar Garcia  
Vicente Saavedra  
Karla Ignacia Piota  
Víctor Manuel Rodríguez Paz  
Iris Argentina Álvarez  
Edwin Fernández Saravia  
Antonio Bernáñez Suazo  
Germán Gerardo Vallecillo  
Jorge Posas Rodríguez

Scarleth Campbell Cáceres  
Marvin Damián Castro Molina  
Julio Andrés Pineda Díaz  
José Antonio Teruel  
Francisca Aracely Zavala  
Arnold Joaquín Morazán Erazo  
Luis Alonso Almendares  
Laura Carolina Valentín Dolmo  
Pedro Arcángel Canelas  
Jose Adán Mejía  
Felix Vasquez

#### **India**

Pankaj Kumar  
Ranjan Kumar Das  
Shubham Mani Tripathi  
Babar Qadri (The Lion)  
Devji Maheshwari  
Rakesh Singh Nirbhik

#### **Indonesia**

Hermanus Bin Bison  
Pastor Yeremia Zanambani

#### **Iraq**

Ahmad Abdessamad  
Safaa Ghali  
Janat Madhi  
Anwar Jassem Mhawwas (Umm Abbas)  
Hisham Al-Hashemi  
Tahseen Osama Ali  
Reham Yacoub  
Salah Al-Iraqi

#### **Libya**

Hanan Al Barassi

#### **Mexico**

Isabel Cabanilas de la Torre

Homero Gómez González  
Isaac Medardo Herrera  
Karla Valentina Camarena del Castillo  
(Valentina Ferrety)  
Benito Peralta Arias  
Juan Zamarrón Torres  
Adán Vez Lira  
Pablo Guzmán Solano  
Esteban Martínez Pérez  
Eugui Roy Martínez  
Óscar Ontiveros Martínez  
José Antonio Montes Enríquez  
Tomás José Martínez Pinacho  
Jeanine Huerta López  
Mireya Rodríguez Lemus  
Oscar Eyraud Adams  
Daniel Sotelo  
Juan Aquino Gonzalez  
Rodolfo Diaz Jimenez

#### **Nepal**

Dilip Kumar Mahato

#### **Nicaragua**

Mark Rivas  
Nacilio Macario

#### **Pakistan**

Shaheena Shaheen

#### **Peru**

Arbildo Meléndez Grandes  
Benjamín Ríos Urimish  
Gonzalo Pio Florez  
Jerson Henry Noé Suárez  
Lorenzo Wampagkit Yampik  
Santiago Vega Chota  
Roberto Carlos Pacheco Villanueva  
Jose Jorge Muñoz Saavedra

#### **Philippines (The)**

Jennifer Tonag  
Jay-ar Mercado  
Emerito Pinza  
Romy Candor  
Marlon Maldos  
Nora Apique  
John Farochilin  
Jose Reynaldo Porquia (Jory)  
Allan Aguilando (Mano Boy)  
Carlito Badion (Karletz)  
Froilan Reyes (Kawing)  
Jose Jerry Catalogo  
Randall Echanis  
Zara Alvarez  
Armando Buisan  
Ignacio Jr. Arevalo (Tukoy)  
Roy Giganto  
Reynaldo Katipunan  
Galson Catamin  
Eliseo Jr. Gayas  
Maurito Diaz  
Artilito Katipunan  
Mario Aguirre  
Jomar Vidal  
Rolando Diaz

#### **South Africa**

Fikile Ntshangase

#### **Sweden**

Sajid Hussain

#### **Syria**

Hussein Khattab (Kara al-Safrani)

#### **Thailand**

Kannika Wongsiri



**HRD Memorial Website:**  
<https://hrdmemorial.org/>

# AT LEAST 331 HRDS KILLED IN 2020

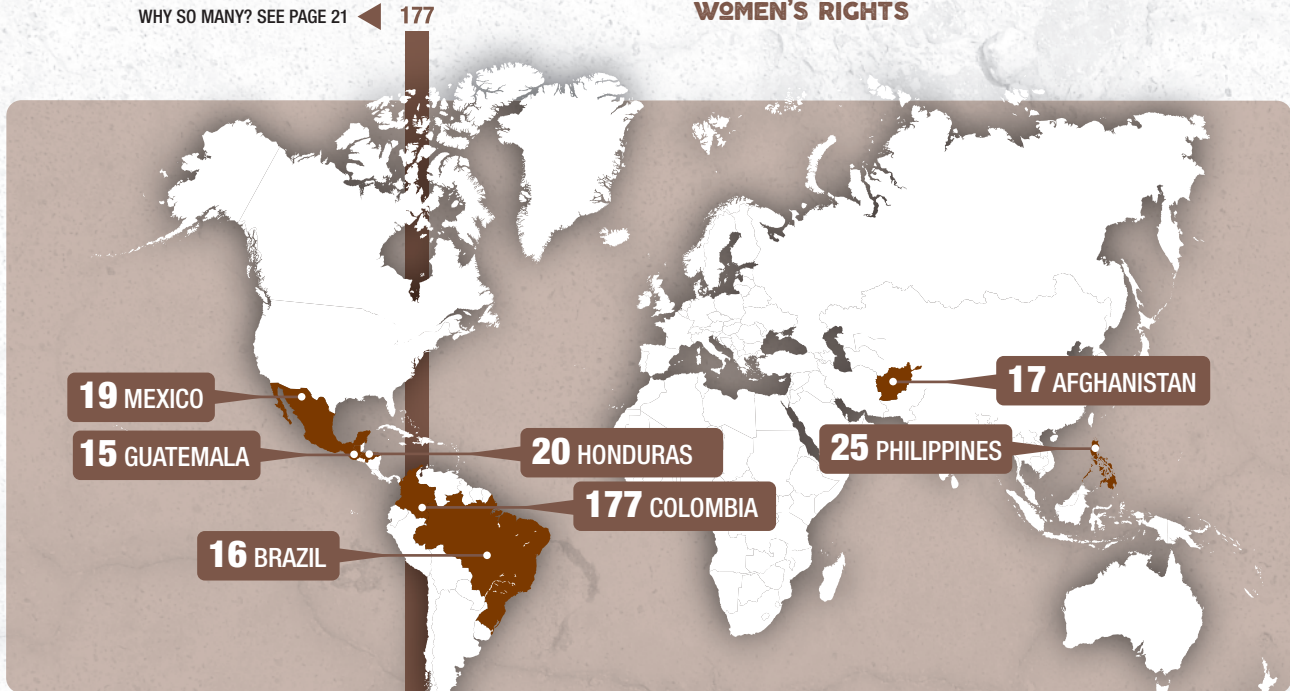
**287** MEN **44** WOMEN

**69%** WORKING ON LAND, INDIGENOUS PEOPLES', ENVIRONMENTAL RIGHTS

**26%** WORKING SPECIFICALLY ON INDIGENOUS PEOPLES' RIGHTS

**28%** OF WHRDS WORKING ON WOMEN'S RIGHTS

WHY SO MANY? SEE PAGE 21



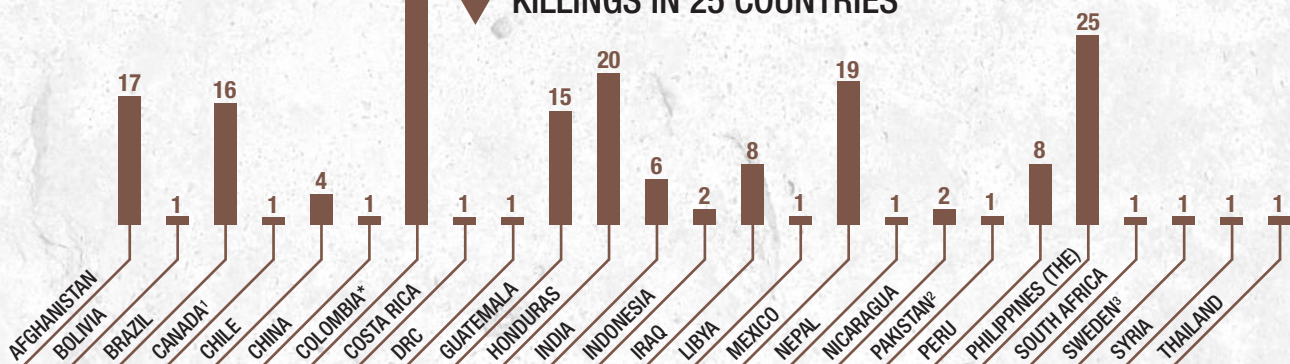
**20**  
HRDS KILLED  
WORKING ON  
ANTI-CORRUPTION

▲ COUNTRIES WHERE THE MOST HRDS WERE KILLED

**6**  
TRANS WOMEN  
HRDS KILLED, ALL  
IN THE AMERICAS

IN **85%**  
OF THE KILLINGS,  
A GUN WAS THE  
MURDER WEAPON

▼ KILLINGS IN 25 COUNTRIES





## HOW HRDS ARE TARGETED AROUND THE WORLD

The following statistics are derived from Front Line Defenders case work and grant applications between 1 January and 31 December 2020 based on 919 reported violations. They are not exhaustive. Furthermore, incidents of surveillance and threats have been removed because the vast majority of HRDs experience these violations on an ongoing basis. For Front Line Defenders methodology, please see page 58.

### Most common violations

\*excluding killings

Detention/arrest	29%
Legal action	19%
Physical attack	13%
Other harassment	7%
Raid/break in	6%
Smear Campaign	6%
Torture/ill-treatment	5%

### Reported violations breakdown by gender

The table below shows the breakdown of the most common violations by gender as reported to Front Line Defenders in 2020. The percentages shown reflect the violations experienced as a proportion of the total number of violations to which each group was exposed

Most common violations by gender	Women HRDs	Men HRDs
*excluding killings		
Detention/Arrest	24%	32%
Legal Action	19%	20%
Smear Campaign	8%	5%
Physical Attack	12%	14%
Raid/break in	7%	5%
Torture/ill-treatment	5%	5%
Other Harassment	10%	5%

### By sector

According to the violations reported to Front Line Defenders in 2020, the three most targeted sectors of human rights defence were: land, environmental and indigenous peoples' rights (21%), LGBTIQ+ rights (14%) and women's rights (11%).<sup>4</sup> Within those sectors, the table below details the most common ways in which these HRDs were targeted:

Reported violations	Land, indigenous, environmental peoples' rights	LGBTIQ+ rights	Women's rights	All HRDs
*excluding killings				
Detention/Arrest	27%	11%	11%	29%
Legal Action	17%	6%	13%	19%
Smear Campaign	3%	9%	14%	6%
Physical Attack	26%	29%	22%	13%
Raid/break in	9%	9%	11%	6%

### The law as a weapon

Front Line Defenders recorded 274 charges filed against HRDs in 174 cases in 2020.

#### Charges

Public order / assembly / illegal gathering	24%
Other criminal charges	15%
Spreading fake news / rumours / propaganda	14%
Terrorism / membership or support of terrorist organisation	12%
Defamation / Insulting state / damaging national unity	10%
National / state security / sedition	8%
Trespassing / vandalism	6%
Tax evasion / fraud / financial	4%
Resisting authority/violence against authority	4%
Theft	1%

### Digital risks

Every year, Front Line Defenders field-based Digital Protection Coordinators provide practical technical support to hundreds of human rights defenders to mitigate risks they face in the digital sphere. The most common security issues for which emergency requests were received by the Digital Protection Coordinators are listed in the table below, based on a total of 304 requests. The vast majority of reported online threats were delivered via Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

#### Security Issue

Online threats	26%
Social media account hacked/Account security compromised	16%
Phone surveillance	11%
Physical surveillance	11%
Confiscation/theft of devices or info	9%

Requests for emergency digital support were most common from HRDs working in the following sectors:

#### HRD Sector

Human rights movement (range of cross-cutting issues)	17%
Land/environmental/indigenous peoples' rights	16%
LGBTIQ+ rights	11%
Freedom of expression	10%
Women's rights	9%

1. 2020 saw the shooting dead of one Baloch rights defender, Shaheena Shaheen\*, in Pakistan, and the death in suspicious circumstances of 2 more Baloch rights defenders, Sajid Hussain and Karima Baloch. Both Hussain and Baloch were living in exile in Sweden and Canada respectively, after receiving threats to their lives in Pakistan as a result of their activism. Sajid, who had been living in Sweden since 2017, disappeared on 2 March and his body was found on 23 April in the Fyris river, north of Uppsala, Sweden. Similarly, Baloch disappeared in Toronto, Canada, on 20 December and her body was found on 21 December in a body of water off Toronto Island. While authorities in both Sweden and Canada have ruled that these deaths were accidental, the families and the human rights community in Balochistan are calling for more thorough investigations into these two drownings.  
\*Shaheena Shaheen was shot dead in her home in Balochistan by her husband of five months, who reportedly wanted her to stop her activism and disapproved of the public profile her work brought her.

2. See above

3. See above

4. These sectors were followed by HRDs working on cross-cutting human rights themes (11%), corruption (6%), impunity/justice (5%) and freedom of expression (5%).

## THE TOLL OF COVID-19 ON THE HUMAN RIGHTS COMMUNITY

As documented in this report, many HRDs have been on the front line of supporting communities in their struggles against COVID-19. They have been working on issues of food sovereignty, access to information, protective equipment and healthcare, and raising their critical voices to ensure that governments are acting effectively to minimise the risks to vulnerable groups. Many HRDs have died as a result of the pandemic and we acknowledge their immense loss to the human rights community and commemorate their tremendous contributions. The following are profiles of just some of the defenders who were lost to COVID-19 in 2020.

---

### MANY HRDS HAVE DIED AS A RESULT OF THE PANDEMIC AND WE ACKNOWLEDGE THEIR IMMENSE LOSS TO THE HUMAN RIGHTS COMMUNITY AND COMMEMORATE THEIR TREMENDOUS CONTRIBUTIONS

---

On 5 May, Colombia-born, Mexico-based human rights defender Jaime Montejó died after contracting the virus. Jaime was a human rights defender and co-founder of Brigada Callejera "Elisa Martínez" (Elisa Martinez Street Brigade in Support of Women) in Mexico City. Mexico is estimated to have more than 70,000 sex workers and Jaime and other members of his organisation continued and amplified their support to sex workers as the pandemic spread. He helped lead the organisation's emergency response to the drastic increase in life-threatening risks facing sex workers, including homelessness, hunger, and contracting COVID-19. Brigada Callejera "Elisa Martínez" designed and distributed drawings to show workers how to protect themselves from the disease while taking clients. When dozens of newly-homeless sex workers began living together outside a subway station, Jaime and other HRDs, mostly women, from Brigada brought food, face masks, and tarps to shelter them from the rain. Jaime contracted and died of COVID-19 after choosing to continue his human rights work. Colleagues report that he was denied entry to 16 hospitals in Mexico City, which they believe was a direct result of the stigma associated with sex work.

On 30 March, Lorena Borjas, a staunch defender of the rights of trans people, Latinx people, undocumented people and sex workers died as a result of COVID-19 in New York City, USA. Lorena had been a prominent community organiser and health educator for decades, including setting up a HIV testing site in her own home, and a syringe exchange program for trans women using hormone injections. In 2011, she and a fellow activist set up a community fund to cover bail and pay legal fees for LGBTIQ+ immigrants, and just a few weeks prior to her death, she set up a fund for trans people who had lost their jobs to COVID-19.

On 31 March, Indonesian doctor and women's right defender Ratih Purwarini died after contracting COVID-19 during the course of her work as the Medical Manager at Duta Indah Hospital. The mother of two was a fierce advocate for the survivors of gender-based violence. She volunteered with Indonesia's National Commission on Violence Against Women, Komnas Perempuan, and she set up the initiative Akara Perempuan in 2015 to provide legal assistance and counselling to survivors of gender-based violence.

In September, Ziauddin Tariq Ali, a human rights defender and trustee of the Liberation War Museum in Bangladesh, contracted COVID-19 and died a week later in hospital, on 7 September. Ziauddin was instrumental in setting up the Liberation War Museum in Dhaka in 1996, which documented the Liberation War of 1971 and succeeded in raising awareness among Bangladeshi youth and bringing about accountability for crimes that took place during the war. He was also a member of Muktiir Gaan, a cultural group that inspired the freedom movement with its songs in the 1970s, and continued to be active in Bangladeshi culture scene throughout his life.

On 17 October, Elyes Ezzine, a prominent lawyer and HRD and the director of the Tunisian Institute of Democracy and Development, died from the virus. In his early 40s, Elyes was father to two young boys. He is especially remembered for





*Serusy Ka'apor, indigenous leader, Brazil*



**Ziauddin Tariq Ali**

Screenshot taken from Ziauddin Tariq Ali's interview with Dhaka Tribune



**Lorena Borjas**

<https://scoop.upworthy.com/trans-latina-activist-lorena-borjas-dies-she-brought-light-to-us>



**Elyes Ezzine**

<https://www.businessnews.com.tr/deces-delyes-ezzine-du-covid-19,520,103010,3>



**Jaime Montejo**

Source: Brigada Callejera "Elisa Martinez"



**Ratih Purwarini**

Source: Facebook

his work to promote youth rights and for his civil society cooperation outreach across the Mediterranean, Africa, and Asia.

Lastly, the picture from Brazil was particularly bleak. Due to a number of factors, including lack of access to adequate healthcare, defenders working on indigenous peoples' rights and the rights of the LGBTIQ+ community, have been especially adversely affected by the pandemic. The following are just some of the defenders who have died in Brazil as a result of COVID-19: indigenous rights defender Serusy Ka'apor; indigenous leader Aritana Yawalapiti; iconic indigenous rights defender Chief Paulo Paiakan; indigenous chief Bep Karoti Xikrin; indigenous leader Otávio dos Santos; indigenous rights defender João Lira; indigenous leader Chief Bepkot Kayapo Xikrin; indigenous leader Chief Nikaiti Mekranotire; indigenous leader Cidaneri Xavante; indigenous leader Nelson Mutzie Rikbaktsa; indigenous rights defender Lourenço Amantino; indigenous rights defender Dionito José de Souza Macuxi; indigenous rights defender Bernaldina José Pedro; indigenous leader Chief Vicente Saw Munduruku; indigenous leader Chief Martinho Boro Munduruku; quilombola rights defender Carivaldina Oliveira da Costa known as Tia Uia; and quilombola rights defender Santana Cordeiro. Sadly, the LGBTIQ+ community also lost a number of HRDs, including: Amanda Marfree; Baga de Bagaceira Souza Campos; and Camila Oliveira; and trans rights defenders Thina Rodrigues; and Vitória Maia. Right to health campaigner, padre Antonio Luiz Marchioni and women's rights defender and lawyer Marizabel Ghirardello were also lost to the human rights community in Brazil as a result of COVID-19.

# Global Overview

## (i) Introduction

**M**OMENTUM FROM A YEAR OF PROTESTS IN 2019 CARRIED INTO THE OPENING MONTHS OF 2020 AS HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS (HRDs) SOUGHT TO CAPITALISE ON GAINS MADE THE PREVIOUS YEAR IN DEMANDING CHANGES TO HOW THEIR COUNTRIES WERE GOVERNED. BY MARCH, HOWEVER, IT WAS CLEAR THAT SIGNIFICANT NEW CHALLENGES WOULD EMERGE WHEN THE WORLD HEALTH ORGANISATION DECLARED COVID-19 A GLOBAL PANDEMIC. THE SITUATION CREATED NEW DEMANDS ON DEFENDERS AS THEY SOUGHT TO ASSIST THEIR COMMUNITIES, WHILE ALSO CREATING NEW RISKS IN THE FORM OF RESTRICTIVE MEASURES, EXPOSURE TO THE VIRUS THROUGH THEIR OUTREACH WORK AND INCREASED EFFORTS BY STATES TO CONTROL THE FLOW OF INFORMATION. THE CRISIS LED TO AN INCREASE IN RISKS FOR WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS (WHRDs), LGBTIQ+ DEFENDERS<sup>5</sup> AND FOR THOSE DEFENDING THE RIGHTS OF VULNERABLE POPULATIONS, INCLUDING REFUGEES, MIGRANTS AND SEX WORKERS.<sup>6</sup>

Against this backdrop, the regular everyday risks faced by HRDs all over the world remained ever-present; according to information collected by Front Line Defenders and provided by partners in the [HRD Memorial project](#), at least 331 HRDs were killed for carrying out their peaceful human rights work in 2020; as more cases continue to be verified, it is expected that this number will ultimately increase. 69% of those killed worked on land, environmental or indigenous peoples' rights. Colombia alone accounted for 177 or 53% of the murders (see note, page 21). Impunity remained the norm and killings were frequently preceded by aggressive on- and offline smear campaigns aimed at discrediting the work of HRDs. Given how many killings occur in the context of efforts to exploit land for economic activity, and in which there is often conflict and violations of rights, there remains a fundamental disconnect between the responsibilities and actions of businesses, investors, local authorities and the rights of communities, including to be informed of and to reject proposed projects. In a year when the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) [warned](#) that "a serious risk to global food security" is being posed by dramatic losses in biodiversity and highlighted the vital role indigenous communities play in the sustainable management of nature, the continued targeting of indigenous peoples' rights defenders is something that should concern policy makers everywhere. Last year, 26% of those killed were defenders of indigenous peoples' rights. Front Line Defenders has recorded the killing of 327 indigenous peoples' rights defenders since 2017.

In every region of the world, arrest and detention continued to be the most common reported violation used by states to undermine or stop the work of HRDs. In addition to restrictive legislation introduced supposedly in response to the pandemic, various other laws were passed which were designed to limit the ability of HRDs and civil society to function well and safely (see below). Some of these, along with COVID 19-specific restrictions, were brought in or used to undermine protest movements which had gained both momentum and experience the previous year. Yet despite these circumstances, rights-based social mobilizations did occur on a large scale throughout the year in which HRDs played a vital role, as outlined below in Belarus and the USA, among other countries. Popular discontent with ruling powers' manipulation of elections continued to be a trigger for exceptionally violent crackdowns in a number of countries, with defenders often violently targeted and attacked as they documented abuses, provided medical assistance to the injured and campaigned for free and fair elections.

The dramatic moves taken by many major social media platforms to ban thousands of individuals inciting violence and promoting mis- and disinformation in the US in early 2021 may bring more attention to the type of online violence that



## [WHAT DID WE LEARN IN 2020?]

- The move by many to online working resulted in a marked increase in the attention paid by HRDs to their digital security practices, yet it also meant that HRDs less familiar with online spaces and/or with less access to secure tools and equipment (e.g VPNs) were more likely to be exposed to online attacks.
- The physical digital divide was exposed by geographical locations which had no or limited internet infrastructure; in the latter case the costs of connection were high and many defenders could not afford any or stable internet connectivity.
- Working remotely with defenders made it more difficult and took longer to establish trust; online capacity building had to be carried out in much shorter bursts over longer periods of time.
- Temporary relocation to another country is sometimes the most effective protection response in situations of severe risk. Last year demonstrated how quickly this measure can become extremely difficult or impossible when borders are shut overnight. Further strengthening local protection measures and capacity as well as pursuing other emergency relocation options is necessary.
- While relocation to another country is sometimes the only safe option, given the linguistic, cultural, sustainability and logistical challenges this change often presents, Front Line Defenders has worked to encourage more international efforts and resources to be put into building capacity to facilitate in-country relocation where it is safe to do so. Front Line Defenders recognises that there will always be situations where, because of the work or identity of the HRD, in-country relocation cannot be a safe option. Local lockdowns highlighted the importance of mobility as a security strategy for many HRDs and when this option was removed, it significantly increased risk.
- The literal closing of borders further boosted ethno-nationalism and racism, especially in Europe, where those working to defend the rights of minorities, refugees and migrants during the pandemic came under sustained attack.
- The introduction of the National Security Law in Hong Kong has had a chilling effect locally and has the potential to reduce China-related human rights activism around the world. As has happened with the Russian Foreign Agent Law, there are fears that other countries may follow suit.
- Despite the continuing declining political will of democratic governments to take effective action on human rights issues, a handful of cases did show that when there is a unified response that includes actors from a broad range of sectors, advocacy can result in success, as exemplified by the [release](#) of three staff members from the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR) in Egypt in December, following an international outcry.
- The resilience of the LGBTIQ+ movement was sustained despite ongoing attacks against LGBTIQ+ defenders and organisations. While these defenders often choose to avoid public advocacy, and sometimes any publicity at all for security reasons, the number of grant applications Front Line Defenders received in 2020 spoke to both the scale of the attacks and the number of individuals and organisations continuing to work in defence of LGBTIQ+ rights at local and national levels. This was especially true in Africa where, despite a hostile environment, Front Line Defenders provided grants to over 46 LGBTIQ+ defenders and organisations (amounting to just under 7% of the total number of grants provided by FLD globally).
- The growth of the Black Lives Matter movement highlighted the urgent agenda for racial justice in the United States and resonated across the globe in an unprecedented manner, bringing greater attention to and mobilisation around local struggles rooted in structural racism and discrimination. Among the many lessons from this pivotal moment, it is clear that organisations working on protection must also engage in a deeper analysis on race-based discrimination as part of risks that HRDs face in many countries.

HRDs have been subjected to for years. Unfortunately, those companies have frequently been too slow or unaware of the real, acute danger when cases of HRDs being targeted online are brought to them, especially in contexts where there is a proven pattern that suggests physical attack often follows such online posts. The U.N. Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders [notes](#) in her 2021 report to the 46th Session of the Human Rights Council, that she “received testimonials from multiple defenders indicating that killings and attempted killings are often the culmination of a series of acts involving abuse, vilification and threats.” In the inevitable debate on the extent of and limits to freedom of speech and the role of tech companies as moderators, it is essential that the voices and experiences of HRDs, who have been trying to flag these issues for years, are taken into account.

## (ii) COVID-19, the impact and response

The challenges presented by the virus and state responses to it were met with remarkable resilience from human rights defenders around the world, who found themselves taking on a multitude of new roles in addition to their everyday rights defence work. In a year of unending crisis, the impact that HRDs have on their communities was demonstrated as countries struggled to cope with the rapidly spreading pandemic. From educating on virus-prevention measures in states where governments sought to downplay the seriousness of the pandemic to turning to humanitarian work in areas where the state was largely absent or had abdicated its responsibilities, HRDs filled voids and saved lives. In countries where the ruling authorities mishandled, ignored or minimised the pandemic, the work of defenders was particularly important,

yet they were not included in “essential worker” groups and faced punishment for attempting to continue their work. Many defenders were forced to balance their pandemic relief work with their day-to-day human rights work, and that work, especially on behalf of the most vulnerable, carried greater risks and presented bigger challenges in the midst of a pandemic, when governments moved to further restrict rights, stifle dissent and consolidate control. Defenders of the most ‘visible’ minority groups were often the worst impacted, including those defending the rights of LGBTIQ+ communities, sex workers and refugees/migrants, because they were often living and working in environments hostile to them where restrictions on movement limited their security options.

## IN A YEAR WHERE MANY STANDARD PROTECTION MEASURES WERE NOT POSSIBLE DUE TO RESTRICTIONS ON MOVEMENT, DEFENDERS WERE FORCED TO COME UP WITH NEW WAYS TO ENSURE THEY COULD CONTINUE THEIR WORK

The economic impact of the pandemic significantly hindered the ability of some defenders to operate, particularly in cases where a HRD’s human rights work was voluntary while they earned money elsewhere. As employers cut numbers or furloughed staff all over the world, defenders also lost jobs resulting in them having less time, energy and resources to dedicate to human rights work as they struggled for financial survival. Furthermore, fundraising within their communities

### [HOW HRDS HELPED]

- In Belarus, where the authorities disregarded the severity of the pandemic, the civic initiative ByCOVID lobbied and organised local businesses and volunteers to provide hospitals with protection kits and medical equipment.<sup>7</sup>
- In Brazil, HRDs organising in favelas combatted the spread of the virus, distributed food and documented cases in their neighbourhoods.
- Indigenous peoples’ rights defenders in Colombia, Bolivia and Brazil produced information adapted to the languages and realities of their communities to help minimize the impact of the virus.
- The Campesino Movement in Colombia and Landless Workers Movement in Brazil provided food, medical and sanitary supplies to at-risk groups, including preparing fast-growing seeds, distributing food and producing natural soap to distribute in remote communities.
- In Mexico, Brigada Callejera, a human rights organisation working to support sex workers’ access to health and education and to prevent human trafficking made huge efforts to support hundreds of sex workers and homeless people that were deeply impacted by the pandemic. They carried out a mapping and analysis of the situation in the streets, installed a camp a community kitchen for those who were left homeless, raised funds, helped them with the negotiation of rents, provided sanitary equipment and health support and did advocacy work with local authorities to guarantee the basic rights of these communities during the pandemic.
- In Honduras, at the beginning of the pandemic, OFRANEH established COVID-19 Attention Centres inside Garifuna communities to organise the community’s response. In the absence of an adequate response from the authorities, women from the community weaved masks that were distributed in the communities, shared teas and remedies made from medicinal plants to strengthen the immune system, established a system to protect the community’s borders to control entry and exit and thus prevent contagion, distributed anti-bacterial gel and food to the most vulnerable families, and conducted outreach work on how to prevent the spread of the virus.
- Coalition Anti Sida, a LGBTIQ+ organisation in Mali, sent emergency kits to the LGBTIQ+ community, including to those living with AIDS. The kits included hand sanitizer, gloves, face masks and HIV medication.
- Land rights activists in Liberia supported affected rural communities by sending them mobile phone credit to report and send information regarding the ongoing exploitation of lands by companies despite restrictive measures taken by the government.
- The Gender and Justice Unit of the Malawi Human Rights Defenders Coalition provided personal protective equipment (PPE) and COVID-19 dignity kits to survivors of violence as well as to frontline workers. It also established a safe house and ran a GBV Clinic with COVID-19 prevention measures.
- In Egypt, Azerbaijan, Russia and Georgia, HRDs organised to prepare and deliver meals to isolated and/or quarantined COVID-19 patients.
- Staff of human rights organisation Karapatan in the Philippines organised community kitchens, mobilised food drives and distributed food and health equipment (including PPE) to poor communities and prisoners, conducted health and human rights education and training sessions, and information drives regarding COVID-19.
- In Tajikistan, HRDs helped doctors buy PPE and supported vulnerable groups, including the elderly and children at boarding schools, by providing them with medicine, masks, disinfectants and food. The Office of Civil Freedoms, a civil society organisation, collected more than \$15,000 USD through crowdfunding to provide this support.
- In Russia, HRDs launched a COVIDарность (COVID&solidarity) initiative to facilitate support to vulnerable groups by fellow community members.
- Sex worker rights defenders in Bangladesh provided humanitarian relief to marginalised communities who often fell outside of mainstream relief efforts, notably transgender people, hijra<sup>8</sup>, kothi<sup>9</sup> and sex workers.

to resource human rights work, which had become a successful strategy in some countries to raise money when foreign contributions have been banned, became increasingly difficult due to the economic fallout.

For this work, HRDs were sometimes subjected to attack online and offline and in a year where many standard protection measures were not possible due to restrictions on movement, defenders were forced to come up with new ways to ensure they could continue their work. In many instances, this entailed upskilling in digital security, designing protection strategies based on remaining in their own region and gaining a greater familiarity with online advocacy and networking.

### **a) Digital (in)security, opportunities and the digital divide**

By the middle of the year, Front Line Defenders observed a marked increase in the number of HRDs reflecting on the role technology played in their work and expressing a willingness to learn more, whereas in the past digital security was sometimes one of the last security measures into which HRDs were willing or able to invest. Defenders were often more cautious about their use of certain tools than the international organisations that wanted to speak to them and which continued to routinely use Zoom despite the [evidence](#) that quickly emerged around the platform's security flaws. At the beginning of the pandemic, freely available secure tools could not perform satisfactorily enough to ensure that HRDs would not revert to services like Zoom. This changed as more financial resources were made available to install secure services and for organisations to subscribe to high performance servers. Front Line Defenders received dozens of reports of online meetings taking place on insecure platforms being infiltrated by aggressors who took advantage of security flaws to target LGBTIQ+, feminist and Black defender virtual spaces. Another challenge was the lack of easy-to-access and up-to-date information to guide defenders on how to establish secure working environments at home, particularly in languages other than those most commonly used.<sup>10</sup>

While many HRDs significantly engaged with digital organising and advocacy for the first time in 2020, virtually all defenders were exposed to new risks through their engagement with online tools. With HRDs migrating to working from home, they often lacked access to digital security infrastructure available in their offices or normal workplaces. Furthermore, in the early months of the year, there was simply not enough capacity among organisations specialising in digital security to respond to requests of assistance from HRDs to set up this secure infrastructure. Defenders often used personal devices for their work, presenting additional digital threats. Additionally, for some NGOs, questions were raised about how far organisational security protocols could and should extend to personal devices. Ultimately, the widespread use of surveillance technology by some states meant that governments were able to use defenders' unprecedented reliance on technology to target and monitor them.

The normalisation of virtual meetings allowed for greater peer engagement by defenders who, limited by geography or circumstance, may not have had the opportunity to participate in physical meetings. This peer support was vital for defenders to share their views and tactics but also to strengthen their wellbeing and sense of empowerment at a time when social contact was at a minimum. Although the shift to online meetings opened up some opportunities, it also highlighted the yawning digital divide in terms of access to devices and resources, stable internet connections and digital literacy, all of which were necessary to capitalise on these opportunities. For HRDs in rural and less connected areas, travel restrictions did result in less knowledge of their security situations and a greater delay in their accessing adequate support.

### **b) Marginalised communities and additional pressure on WHRDs**

Those working on the frontlines and providing support to the most oppressed and vulnerable groups, including ethnic minorities, homeless people, sex workers, LGBTIQ+ people and refugees and migrants were exposed to stigmatisation, physical attack and health risks related to the pandemic. In a number of countries, including Guatemala, Israel, Kenya, Mexico, Poland, Turkey, Uganda and the United States, religious figures with large public followings (and sometimes with state endorsement) explicitly named homosexual acts, behaviour, and marriage equality as causes of the disease, putting defenders of these rights at risk of attack. In the Balkans, refugees and migrants were called 'super spreaders' of the virus and presented as dangerous to be around. WHRDs faced increased risks stemming from the sharp [rise](#) in the levels

of domestic violence in every country around the world.<sup>11</sup> The lockdowns, closure of schools and the increased care demands of at-risk family members affected the ability of WHRDs to work. Being the main caregivers in many families, women defenders were forced to combine their human rights activity with an increased amount of work in the domestic sphere. For some WHRDs, especially young women, being confined to home often meant that their women's rights and feminist activities could not be revealed to their families, thus impacting their safety and activism. At a time of an unprecedented spike in violence against women, WHRDs from Mersin Kadın Platformu (Mersin Women's Platform) in Turkey, despite wearing masks and socially distancing, risked being fined for holding protests to denounce government statements that Turkey was considering withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention on combatting violence against women.<sup>12</sup>

### **c) Jailed defenders further punished**

There was a depressing consistency to how HRDs who were detained in inhumane conditions were also subjected to greater risk of contracting COVID-19 across each region. When countries allowed for prisoner releases due to the pandemic, HRDs were usually not among those released, despite the fact that they were all serving prison terms for non-violent 'crimes'. Due to overcrowding, poor (if any) medical care and unsanitary conditions in detention centres, HRDs, especially those with pre-existing chronic conditions, remained at serious risk in prisons and often seemed to be moved into situations of immediate peril. They were frequently held in cells with inmates displaying COVID-19 symptoms, yet were refused access to testing, isolation or medical treatment. Defenders were also subjected to lengthy delays in their cases proceeding to trial as a result of the closure of courts. The [case](#) of detained WHRD María Esperanza Sanchez in Nicaragua is illustrative. Arrested in January because of her leadership in the pro-democracy movement, she suffered several asthma attacks which were not adequately addressed, resulting in the defender being hospitalised for a week. On being discharged from hospital, prison officials refused to follow the recommendations of International Red Cross doctors, who prescribed her a daily nebuliser treatment. Upon returning to prison, María Esperanza found that 30 inmates were presenting symptoms of fever, cough, diarrhoea and vomit. Despite doctors' recommendations that she be kept in isolation, she was detained in a cell with a number of sick prisoners. In July, María Esperanza was sentenced to 10 years in prison. By year's end, her health had continued to deteriorate and permission to see a doctor remained a struggle.

Denial of basic medical treatment led to the death of [Azimjan Askarov](#) from Kyrgyzstan, who, despite weeks of deteriorating health, was not tested for COVID-19 and was not provided access to adequate medical care. Azimjan was in a clear high-risk category due to his advanced age and ill-health resulting from poor treatment during 10 years in prison. In Iran, while up to 100,000 prisoners were temporarily released by 19 April to combat the spread of COVID-19 in jail, HRDs were largely excluded. [Arash Sadeghi](#), an Iranian human rights defender who has been suffering a rare form of bone cancer since 2018, had to postpone his medical check-ups until late August as a result of the inefficient and ineffective response to COVID-19 by the authorities in Rajaee Shahr prison and he was denied medical leave on the basis of his deteriorating health condition. A number of imprisoned HRDs contracted the virus, including WHRDs [Nasrin Sotudeh](#) and [Narges Mohammadi](#).<sup>13</sup> The prisoners were not shown the result of their tests but verbally informed by prison staff, leading some to question whether or not they had actually contracted COVID-19.

Elsewhere, authorities used the threat of being detained in COVID-19-conducive environments to stop HRDs from doing their work. In India, police increased arrests of HRDs active in the anti-Citizenship Amendment Act movement despite the pandemic. Given the health risks in overcrowded prisons, defenders had to consider the additional risk to their lives on top of the potential deprivation of liberty, when doing their rights work. A number of defenders contracted COVID-19 in prison in India, including 80-year-old Varavara Rao.

## **(iii) Land, indigenous peoples' and environmental defenders**

The killing of HRDs continued unabated and, in some countries, murderers took advantage of lockdowns to target defenders whose security strategies would have previously involved frequent changes in location. With attackers often linked to or in collusion with police or military forces, the securitised nature of the COVID-19 response in many countries ensured that would-be murderers had even better access to defenders, given the increase in police and military presence

in public spaces. 2020 witnessed another rise in the level of violence directed against HRDs in Colombia, particularly those participating in the implementation of the peace process and engaging in voluntary drug crop substitution initiatives or those opposing the extraction of natural resources. The killings of HRDs in Colombia did not stop during periods of lockdown, with at least 14 killings recorded in March, 13 in April and 15 in May, testament to the common refrain from HRDs during the year that “perpetrators do not self-isolate”. At the same time, the number of defenders receiving protection from the National Protection Unit was reduced. In Mexico, the Federal Congress approved the dissolution of several federal trust funds, including the main source of income to the Protection Mechanism for Human Rights Defenders and Journalists, leaving more than 1,300 beneficiaries of protection measures in a state of uncertainty.

---

### **THE KILLINGS OF HRDS IN COLOMBIA DID NOT STOP DURING PERIODS OF LOCKDOWN ... TESTAMENT TO THE COMMON REFRAIN FROM HRDS DURING THE YEAR THAT “PERPETRATORS DO NOT SELF-ISOLATE”.**

---

Indigenous peoples in the Amazon were put at risk by actors engaging in illegal logging, ranching or mining who would normally be met by peaceful opposition; at the same time, the Brazilian government continued to hand out concessions to companies. Indigenous defenders faced a double risk in these circumstances as they were targeted by those actors and also put at risk of COVID-19 being introduced to their territories by outsiders. As [stated](#) by the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples, “Those indigenous peoples in voluntary isolation, many of which are in the Amazon, who have lesser immunity to diseases, can easily disappear if an infected person comes into their communities.” The indigenous community in Brazil was hit particularly hard, with at least 930 indigenous people dying from the virus. In the midst of the pandemic, the Amazon saw an increase in the levels of deforestation for the second year in a row, reaching a 12-year high. By October 2020, Brazil had already matched the amount of deforestation that took place in all of 2019. While President Bolsonaro [praised](#) Brazil before the UN as having some of the best environmental legislation in the world, at home he was [referring](#) to environmental NGOs as a ‘hard to kill cancer’ on his weekly online broadcast in early September.

The grave risks faced by those defending their land or communities are often exacerbated by the remote locations in which they live. They cannot rely on rapid external support in case of attack and must develop their own response mechanisms, as exemplified by the [2020 Americas Regional Winner of the Front Line Defenders Award](#), the Indigenous Guard of Cauca in Colombia. Among its many activities, the Guard carries out collective protection actions with its communities, gives talks on awareness raising and peace, patrols their territories, gives humanitarian protection for child victims of armed actions, rescues injured people in the context of armed conflict under the framework of humanitarian action, carries out training on anti-personnel mines, and organises relief actions for communities that have been displaced from their lands. Because of its role, the Indigenous Guard has been subjected to multiple attacks from different actors who seek to break the peaceful resistance of the communities they defend.

The aggravating risk factors that isolation can bring is captured by the protocol implemented by one group of indigenous defenders in Para state in Brazil who told Front Line Defenders that, in the case of an emergency, they would “send someone in a fast boat to another village down the Tapajós river, where they can climb a mountain to text their [security contact] in Itaituba.”

---

### **WHILE PRESIDENT BOLSONARO PRAISED BRAZIL BEFORE THE UN AS HAVING SOME OF THE BEST ENVIRONMENTAL LEGISLATION IN THE WORLD, AT HOME HE WAS REFERRING TO ENVIRONMENTAL NGOS AS A ‘HARD TO KILL CANCER’**

---



## (iv) The business link

The defenders working on land, indigenous peoples' and environmental rights being killed while opposing business-related human rights abuses once again highlights the urgent need for legislation on mandatory human rights due diligence for business enterprises to be implemented. Such legislation would, in theory, ensure that companies are addressing issues at the earliest stages which, if left unaddressed, have the potential to result in harm to communities and HRDs for exposing and protesting those human rights abuses. The staggeringly high levels of impunity in the countries where most HRDs are killed every year suggests that those states are not capable of or willing to effectively protect defenders. The UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights make it clear that companies have a responsibility to respect human rights and yet the many cases of reprisals against defenders linked to business enterprises and their activities highlight that binding obligations on business to undertake human rights due diligence are crucial, particularly for companies operating or sourcing produce and materials from regions where HRDs are at high risk.

---

### **"I REFUSED TO SIGN. I CANNOT SELL OUT MY PEOPLE. AND IF NEED BE, I WILL DIE FOR MY PEOPLE." FIKILE NTSHANGASE, SOUTH AFRICA. SHOT DEAD BY GUNMEN IN HER HOME**

---

In a typical case, in October in South Africa, Fikile Ntshangase, a leading member of the Mfolozi Community Environmental Justice Organisation, was shot dead by four gunmen in her home in front of her 11-year-old grandson. She had apparently refused to accept a bribe meant to entice her to sign an agreement to withdraw a legal challenge against the Tendele Coal Ltd mining company. She stated "I refused to sign. I cannot sell out my people. And if need be, I will die for my people." As of year's end, there had been no arrests. The planned expansion of Tendele Coal Ltd's Somkhele mine in Kwa-Zulu Natal province would involve moving around 200 families from their ancestral lands, which has caused significant tensions within the community between those who have been willing to accept compensation and move and those who refuse. Twenty-one families filed a case against Tendele; some of them have received death threats and had gunshots fired at their house. Tendele has aggravated the situation by publicly blaming the families who refuse to move for the potential closure of the mine. In a letter to the families in February, Tendele's business development manager wrote, "It is regrettable that your households' number [redacted] is holding the Mine, it's 1,500 employees and many families that have signed contracts and indeed the entire Community to ransom". This was the latest in a number of letters and statements which, according to lawyer Kirsten Youens, amounted to incitement and 'had fuelled flames of violence by blaming impending job losses on her clients'. In Thailand, a gun was pointed at land rights defender Dam Onmuang by an individual believed to be affiliated with a multinational palm oil company. The defender has been a strong advocate for community land and natural resources management for marginalised people in Thailand. He has played a vital role in his capacity as the community coordinator in the Santi Pattana community, by taking the lead in negotiating in land disputes with palm oil companies and the authorities, so as to protect and safeguard the community's guardianship of the land and natural resources. This incident was the latest in a series of attempted killings and death threats against land rights defenders associated with the Southern Peasant Federation of Thailand. In the Philippines, where the second highest number of defenders killed was recorded in 2020, the Duterte government continued to foster an environment in which killings of HRDs were openly encouraged and sanctioned by a government routinely labelling defenders as terrorists and communists.



### (v) Social mobilization, protests and the role of HRDs

The pandemic stalled the momentum of protest movements started in 2019, though these sometimes did re-emerge in the latter part of the year through the sustained efforts of HRDs. 2020 also saw massive new or renewed protest movements mobilize, including in:

- **Poland** in defence of reproductive rights;
- **Mexico** against gender-based violence;
- **Bulgaria** in countering the corruption of the political elite;
- **Thailand** in opposition to the ongoing rule by military junta
- **Lebanon and Iraq** against ongoing political mismanagement and corruption
- the **United States** in reaction to systemic racism
- **Belarus and Kyrgyzstan** in response to fraudulent elections
- **Algeria** in support of democratic reforms;
- **Peru** for civil rights after the dubious removal of the president in November.

In Zimbabwe attempts to protest corruption around the COVID-19 response by the state were brutally suppressed and failed to take off in July. The same occurred in Uganda when demonstrations ahead of the January 2021 elections were violently dispersed and dozens killed. In each of these cases, HRDs who were at the forefront of demonstrations were targeted with physical attack, defamation and criminalisation. The response from the authorities in Belarus was particularly shocking; extreme police violence was used in an attempt to suppress the protests, and hundreds of cases of torture were documented by HRDs. By the end of the year, over 33,000 protesters had been arrested. Women defenders played a vital role in strengthening the peaceful character of the protest movement. In the immediate response to the police brutality after the election and the consequent possibility that the protests would turn violent, WHRDs reacted by playing on the image of the traditional Belarusian woman; they protested in white and sang lullabies, leaving the police unsure of how to act, and buying some time for peaceful strategies to develop. As women protesters, including WHRDs, were not seen as presenting an existential threat to the political elite, in the first months of the protests they were most often not detained or were released shortly after detention. Eventually the authorities realised that women represented the same level of threat as men, and so began using similar levels of violence against them. Despite the brutality of the crackdown, the resilience of civil society in refusing to be cowed was remarkable. This was in part assisted by new alliances between HRDs, academics, lawyers and business owners who joined together to mount a rights-based response to the overwhelming physical power of the state (see page 41).

---

**GIVEN HOW RUSSIA'S 2011 'FOREIGN AGENT LAW' WAS – AND CONTINUES TO BE – REPLICATED IN NUMEROUS COUNTRIES, THERE IS A REAL FEAR THAT OTHER STATES WILL ADOPT A VERSION OF THE HONG KONG NSL LAW IN AN ATTEMPT TO LIMIT HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISM TAKING PLACE IN THIRD COUNTRIES**

---

The Black Lives Matter movement, linking with ongoing movements for racial justice in many countries, led to significant upheaval in the US and a questioning of the systemic racism against Black people following repeated documented incidents of police violence and in some cases murder. Building on years of organising and solidarity, Black Lives Matter became more of a global movement as protests in response to police violence became more ubiquitous and coalesced with increased economic insecurity and inequality. Police violence directed against Black people has long been a concern in Brazil, but such violence reached new levels in the early months of lockdown. Between March and June, in Rio de Janeiro alone, the Military Police killed five people a day, the highest rate in 22 years. The majority of those killings took place in the favelas, where most residents are Black. In late May and early June, while the protests in the US were taking place, Black Brazilian HRDs also organised demonstrations under the banner, 'We took to the streets because they came to kill us in our homes'. Violence against HRDs fighting for equality for Dominican people of Haitian descent and against racism rose in the Dominican Republic in the aftermath of BLM protests. Direct threats, harassment and racist violence against Reconocido and other organisations and HRDs, particularly Afro-Dominicans, occurred at an alarming rate; the authorities did not investigate despite the serious threats.

## [RESTRICTIVE LEGISLATION]

Over the course of the year, dozens of pieces of legislation further narrowing civil society space were passed by governments around the world, often in the context of COVID-19. The below are examples of legislation unrelated to COVID-19 which will have a damaging impact on the ability of HRDs to work safely.

- In Guatemala, Decree No. 04-2020, popularly known as the NGO Law (Ley de ONGs), was approved in February. The decree, which introduces reforms to Decree 2-2003, allows for greater government control over national and foreign organisations. One of the most worrying aspects is the power granted to the Executive Branch to cancel the legal status of NGOs when it is determined that they are carrying out activities contrary to “public order”.\*
- In Nicaragua, the Law for the Regulation of Foreign Agents was introduced, which obliges all organisations or entities that receive funds from foreign governments, either directly or indirectly, to be registered as “foreign agents”. Being registered as a foreign agent would include an automatic ban on participation in almost any kind of political or electoral activity.
- In December, the Law on Preventing Financing of Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction passed through Parliament in Turkey. The law allows the state to replace any NGO member who sits in an administrative position and suspend the activities of the organisation if the person has been charged with serious crimes, including terror-related charges. Thousands of HRDs have been prosecuted since the attempted coup in Turkey in 2016, including many under security or anti-terrorism legislation.
- In Russia, for the first time, the Ministry of Justice included individuals in the register of “foreign mass media performing the functions of a foreign agent”. The list so far includes five people, one of whom is HRD Lev Ponomarev, head of the organisation, For Human Rights.
- In October, the Civil Society Commission in Tripoli, Libya, ordered all NGOs registered over the past five years to reapply for new registration or they would be deemed dissolved. Under the new registration process, NGOs are required to sign a pledge that they will not communicate with embassies or international governmental or non-governmental organisations without prior permission from the executive.
- In December, Greek authorities adopted a law preventing NGO workers from publicly sharing any information related to the operations or residents of refugee camps in the country, including any concerns about potential violations against asylum seekers in those camps.
- In India, Amendments to the Foreign Contributions Regulations Act (FCRA) further restricted the space for defenders to access resources and organise, including by granting express power to the executive to conduct inquiries and deny licenses to defenders based on spurious charges, reducing the cap on administrative expenses to 20% and severely limiting the ability of smaller organisations to access funds.
- The Philippines Anti-Terrorism Act contains overly broad and vague definitions of ‘terrorism’ and gives police the power to declare individuals or organisations as ‘terrorists’ or ‘supporters of terrorism’, allows for arrest without warrant and detention of suspects for weeks without charge.
- In May, the Niger parliament adopted a law authorizing the interception of certain communications sent electronically on the grounds of fighting terrorism, causing significant concern amongst HRDs over potential misuse of this law by the authorities to silence dissenting voices.

\* On 2 March, the Constitutional Court (CC) of Guatemala provisionally suspended the reforms to the NGO Law decreed by Congress and enacted by President Alejandro Giammattei. A final ruling by the CC remained pending at the time of writing.

In Hong Kong, the months-long protest movement which had drawn millions of people onto the streets was hobbled first by the pandemic and then by the overnight enactment of the draconian National Security Law (NSL) unilaterally by Chinese authorities. Under the new law, peaceful expression of political opinions, peaceful assembly, criticism of the government, and cooperation with international actors – including human rights organisations and potentially the United Nations – could be criminalised in the name of punishing “secession”, “terrorism”, “subversion of State power”, and “collusion with foreign forces”. Front Line Defenders is aware of a number of human rights-focused organisations based in Hong Kong that have suspended their work on mainland China and Hong Kong as a result of the law. The NSL also provides for extra-territorial application, allowing it to be used against human rights activities conducted outside of Hong Kong by anyone of any nationality. This last point is especially concerning as it has the potential to exercise a chilling effect on civil society activism well beyond China’s borders. HRDs from Hong Kong based in Ireland, for example, told Front Line Defenders that they were curtailing their protests while Ireland’s extradition treaty with Hong Kong remained active (it was subsequently suspended in October). Given how Russia’s 2011 ‘Foreign Agent Law’ was – and continues to be – replicated in numerous countries, there is a real fear that other states will adopt a version of the Hong Kong NSL in an attempt to limit human rights activism taking place in third countries. This kind of law could, for instance, be used to target EU-based human rights defenders lobbying for targeted sanctions under the recently announced [EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime](#). Whereas before, foreign activists were routinely refused entry to countries in reprisal for their activism elsewhere, a “national security law” with the type of extraterritorial application enshrined in the Hong Kong NSL raises the possibility that instead they could now be detained and face serious criminal charges should

they enter or transit through these countries. Even without this type of law, HRDs continued to be targeted outside of their home countries. Last year, two Baloch HRDs from Pakistan were found dead in suspicious circumstances in Sweden and in Canada. [Sajid Hussain](#) and Karima Baloch, who left Pakistan in 2012 and 2015 respectively, had continued to highlight the issue of enforced disappearances and killings in Balochistan. Both defenders received threats on a regular basis after leaving Pakistan.

## **(vi) Online violence and social media platforms**

The vast majority of online threats to defenders and smear campaigns which lower the threshold for violence and often result in physical harm were carried out on a handful of well-known social media platforms. Women, transgender and gender non-conforming HRDs were routinely targetted with harassment, hate speech, discrimination, dissemination of personal or intimate information, defamation and other forms of online violence to silence and punish their public participation in social media. Yet the corporations which operate the platforms failed to adequately respond to this phenomenon. This was evident to Front Line Defenders in a number of cases last year in Asia where HRDs were directly vilified or threatened on social media by government - or religious-backed vigilantes and in which responses by companies were weak and inconsistent. Although most online attacks on HRDs breach the platforms' rules against abusive or violent behaviour, the companies allocate insufficient human and economic resources to address these cases. In addition, they do not always appreciate the real-life risks to defenders following threats made on social media.

---

## **WOMEN, TRANSGENDER AND GENDER NON-CONFORMING HRDS WERE ROUTINELY TARGETTED WITH HARASSMENT, HATE SPEECH, DISCRIMINATION, DISSEMINATION OF PERSONAL OR INTIMATE INFORMATION, DEFAMATION AND OTHER FORMS OF ONLINE VIOLENCE**

---

In a number of instances, Front Line Defenders flagged certain cases as 'high-risk', yet were informed by the company that their experts on the ground had found no significant threat. But no information was given about who the on-the-ground experts were or whether they were well-versed in the HRD context in that particular country, location or community. For example, in Sri Lanka a WHRD who is from the Internally Displaced Person (IDP) community was the target of a smear campaign on Facebook. Despite obvious risks to her safety, and the risk of communal tension, the post was not taken down, as company experts deemed it did not violate community standards. There was a clear lack of understanding and willingness to engage with the manner in which such posts, which generate a large amount of traffic, can damage the well-being, reputation, and physical safety of a defender, especially a woman from a vulnerable identity group. In this particular case, Facebook representatives stated that they had consulted with their local contacts in Sri Lanka who had advised that there was "no likelihood of violence". There was also no engagement on how community tensions between IDPs and host communities could be exacerbated and exploited by smear campaigns on social media platforms. As a result, the WHRD had to undertake a series of security measures to deal with the potential fallout of this smear campaign. This type of unsatisfactory response and dismissal of risks identified by HRDs themselves highlights the distance Facebook (and other social media companies who have similar shortcomings) has yet to travel in relation to the protection of human rights, especially of vulnerable communities, notwithstanding the creation of a human rights oversight board. Notably, the UN Special Rapporteur on minority issues [urged](#) the company in December to "take the rights of ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities into account in reaching decisions, particularly on hate speech." Dr Fernand de Varennes further encouraged Facebook to draw on the [UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech 2019](#) when defining hate speech.

Elsewhere, there were examples of good practice, albeit in cases which took months to resolve. In March, an Iraqi HRD's Facebook account was closed after a request from the Iraqi authorities as a result of the defender's posting of information and photographs of Iraqi security forces using excessive force against protesters. After months of engagement with Facebook staffers, the account was restored in October and verified, making it more difficult for it to be closed again. Defenders were also faced with regular hacking attempts aimed at undermining their work or humiliating them. In

Guatemala, a WHRD and journalist had her social media fan-page hacked and she lost control of her own Facebook page. On the fan-page, intimate pictures of her were uploaded and she faced an extortion attempt relating to other photos. In addition to using social media to document human rights abuses, defenders also sometimes use their accounts as a form of protection, gained through sizeable online followings or to publicly make known their whereabouts when going to dangerous areas for work.

### **(vii) Looking ahead**

A complex landscape for human rights defence lies ahead. It is already clear that richer countries will emerge out of the COVID-19 nightmare long before others, and although there is an opportunity for all societies to reimagine how they are run, economic realities will limit how much is possible. Defenders will be impacted by the economic fallout and the diversion of attention and resources away from an already underfunded human rights ecosystem. A two-tier 'recovery' may see existing inequalities further entrenched, leading to increased marginalisation of vulnerable groups and the inevitable human rights violations and targeting of HRDs that would follow. For this reason, it is essential that defenders' voices are heard in the post-COVID planning, given how in country after country, HRDs, especially women defenders, proved invaluable during this time of emergency.

It was the work and struggle of HRDs that led to the groundbreaking Escazu Agreement in Latin America, which will enter into force in April. By recognising in law the role of public participation in addressing environmental challenges – and recognising the importance of HRDs in this context – the Treaty emphasizes the interlinkages between protection of the environment and human rights and that one cannot be achieved without the other. That being said, many of the countries where it is most dangerous to be a HRD in the region, including Brazil, Colombia, Guatemala, Honduras and Peru, have yet to ratify the treaty. With COP 26 scheduled for November 2021, states have the opportunity to integrate land, indigenous peoples and environmental defenders into their climate change mitigation strategies as they commit to reductions in greenhouse gases under the ratchet mechanism.<sup>14</sup> It is hoped that U.S re-engagement on climate will inject a sense of urgency to proceedings and will include greater appreciation of the role played by defenders in managing and protecting their environments. There is, however, the risk that progress in tackling the causes of climate change will lead to a greater backlash against defenders who are highlighting these issues.

---

**WITH COP 26 SCHEDULED FOR NOVEMBER 2021, STATES HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO INTEGRATE LAND, INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AND ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENDERS INTO THEIR CLIMATE CHANGE MITIGATION STRATEGIES AS THEY COMMIT TO REDUCTIONS IN GREENHOUSE GASES\***

---

\* COP26 is the 26th UN Climate Change Conference which will take place in Glasgow in November 2021

There have also been advances in relation to business and human rights, with the European Commission pledging to move forward with an initiative requiring EU companies to carry out human rights and environmental due diligence on their business operations around the world. This is a promising development which has the potential to have a tangible impact on the security of thousands of HRDs in every region of the world, and, for that reason, it is vital that HRDs' knowledge and experience is taken into account in this process. With impunity such a common feature in the killing of HRDs in many countries, there is also an opportunity for defenders to make use of the recently adopted EU [Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime](#) which will allow for the targeting of "individuals, entities and bodies...responsible for, involved in or associated with serious human rights violations and abuses worldwide." At a time when technology is being increasingly used to limit human rights and to spy on HRDs, there was a further promising development in November when MEPs and the European Council reached a provisional agreement on a new set of rules to govern the export of dual use products from the EU which can be "repurposed in ways to violate human rights". Importantly for HRDs, this includes cyber-surveillance tools.

Despite the attacks, the ravages of COVID-19, the loss of employment, the restrictions on movement and the opportunistic imposition of restrictive legislation, the resilience shown by defenders in 2020 was a testament to their courage. This, combined with their crucial work during the course of the year, serves as a reminder to policymakers everywhere why facilitating an enabling environment for HRDs should remain a priority, especially as the world continues to struggle with COVID-19.

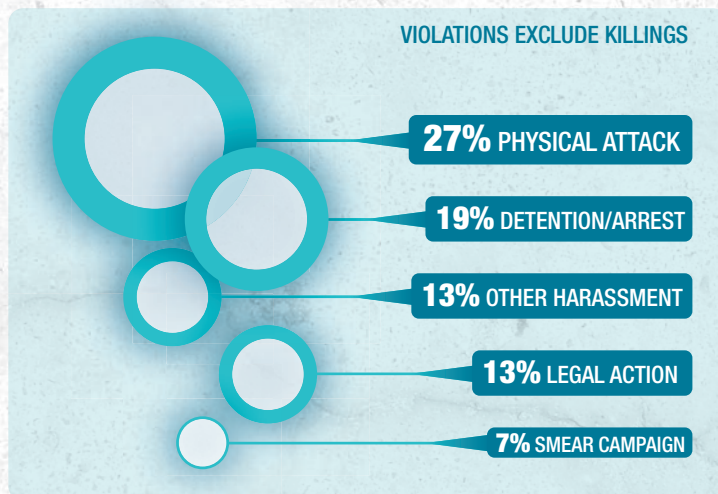
## Footnotes

5. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer + . Front Line Defenders uses 'Q+' in this report in the belief that some people may not assimilate as easily into other categories. Queer identity reflects the space to be present but fluid and to define one's own boundaries at a given time. LGBTIQ+ reflects greater inclusiveness and respect for bodies, genders, relationships and diversity of people FLD supports.
6. In December 2020, Front Line Defenders published a [report](#) highlighting the specific challenges faced by LGBTIQ+ and sex workers rights defenders.
7. <https://www.ridl.io/en/when-autocrats-fail-civil-society-steps-up/> As noted by Freedom House, "The group proved so effective that it [collaborated] with the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the Ministry of Health to streamline the delivery of medical and personal protective equipment into the country."
8. In Bangladesh, 'hijras' are people who, assigned "male" at birth, identify as feminine later in life and prefer to be recognized as hijra or a third gender.
9. In Bangladesh, 'kothis' are generally understood as MSM who may "feminize their behaviour and prefer to assume a more feminized gender role in their sexual relationships" (Sexual Right Initiative, Feb 2009).
10. In the early months of the pandemic, Front Line Defenders released [two guides](#) on working securely from home, which we translated into multiple languages.
11. UN Women [refers](#) to the increase in domestic violence during COVID as a "Shadow Pandemic"
12. The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, better known as the Istanbul Convention, is a human rights treaty of the Council of Europe against violence against women and domestic violence which was opened for signature on 11 May 2011, in Istanbul, Turkey.
13. Nasrin was temporarily released in October but returned to prison in November in spite of her doctors' instructions that her medical leave should be extended. Narges was also released in October; she had contracted COVID-19 in July.
14. "The ratchet mechanism requires that every five years parties to the agreement come forward with more ambitious national climate goals, taking into consideration the technological, economic and social progress of the intervening years."  
<https://www.economist.com/international/2020/12/13/paris-anniversary-climate-pledges-bring-progress-but-fall-short>



# AMERICAS

## TOP FIVE VIOLATIONS AS REPORTED TO FLD: AMERICAS 2020

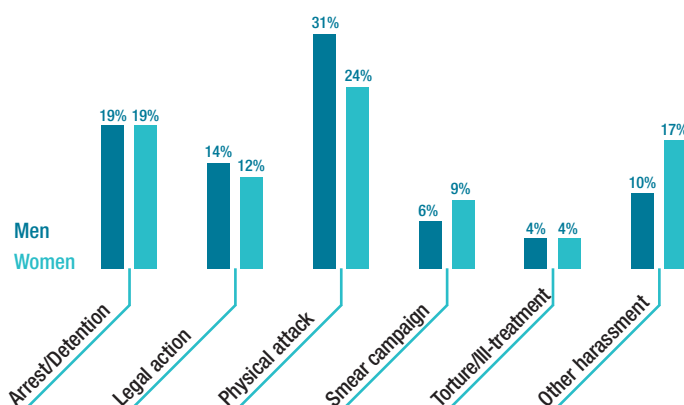


**264**  
HRDS KILLED IN  
THE AMERICAS



## HOW MEN AND WOMEN WERE TARGETED

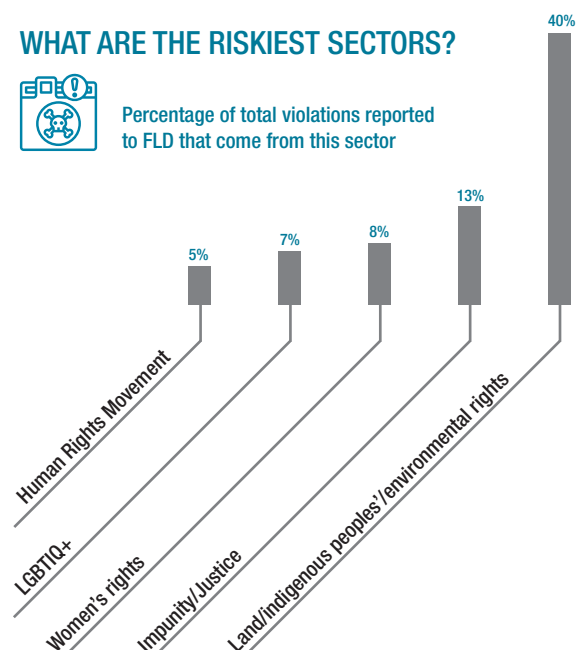
VIOLATIONS EXCLUDE KILLINGS



## WHAT ARE THE RISKIEST SECTORS?



Percentage of total violations reported to FLD that come from this sector





THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC AND STATE RESPONSES TO IT ADDED TO THE REGULAR SECURITY RISKS FACED BY DEFENDERS IN THE AMERICAS. DEFENDERS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES' RIGHTS, LAND RIGHTS AND ENVIRONMENTAL RIGHTS, ALONG WITH THOSE WORKING ON LGBTIQ+, WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND SEXUAL HEALTH AND REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS CONTINUED TO BE SOME OF THE MOST TARGETED HRDs IN THE REGION. THESE GROUPS ALSO TENDED TO BE MOST SEVERELY IMPACTED BY COVID-19, EXISTING, AS THEY OFTEN DO, ON THE MARGINS OF SOCIETY WITH LIMITED ACCESS TO RESOURCES OR HEALTHCARE SERVICES.

2020 witnessed a rise in the level of violence directed against HRDs in Colombia, particularly those participating in the implementation of the peace process and engaging in voluntary drug crop eradication initiatives or those opposing the aggressive extraction of natural resources. Periods of national lockdown forced defenders at risk to stay in place, even when their security strategies included frequent movement. During the first six months of the year, HRD Memorial partner, Programa Somos Defensores (Colombia), reported a 61% increase in the number of defenders killed compared to the same period last year, and of these killings, 48% happened during a period of government restrictions or confinement.

### WHY ARE SO MANY DEFENDERS KILLED IN COLOMBIA?

Following the signing of the peace agreement (Nov 2016) and the demobilization of the FARC, and in the absence of any, or at best limited, state presence or apparatus, new and existing armed groups assumed control of territories once controlled by the disbanded group. Since 2017, these warring factions have competed to control the territories in pursuit of their illicit economic and trafficking activities. HRDs have been left exposed by the failure of the Colombian government to implement crucial elements of the peace agreement. Political leaders have stigmatized defenders who highlight the situation while the authorities have, in at least a couple of cases, withdrawn protection measures from leaders at risk. It has been left to HRDs to push for the implementation of crucial elements of the peace accords and to promote crop substitution programmes to their communities. These defenders, alongside those defending land, environmental and indigenous peoples' rights, are routinely targeted by armed groups. Last year saw the added dimension of these armed groups violently imposing quarantines, mobility restrictions and forcing communities to comply as a means to better exert their control and limit the abilities of those opposing their illicit activities. The State's response was to increase the military's presence in these territories, which has been counter-productive and ultimately has increased the levels of violence and risk for communities and HRDs. Military personnel have also been denounced for their disproportionate use of force against civilians and HRDs.

Environmental and indigenous peoples' rights defenders continued to be the most exposed to death threats and killings throughout the region, including those perpetrated by police and military forces. The declaration of states of emergency or states of siege in Chile, Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico and Peru brought the police and military into everyday life, tasked with monitoring compliance. In Chile, Mapuche defenders were subjected to various acts of aggression and arbitrary detention. Twenty-five Mapuche leaders, currently imprisoned because of their peaceful activities, were denied release amidst the virus outbreak.

In Honduras, attacks against environmental and indigenous peoples' rights defenders and communities, mainly by state forces, surged last year. In May, Edwin Fernández, a member of OFRANEH (Black Fraternal Organisation of Honduras) and the Río Tinto Committee, was murdered in his home in front of his family. Three unknown men entered and demanded that Edwin hand over the key for the security gate of the Río Tinto community. The Río Tinto Committee had closed the community to protect the Garífuna<sup>15</sup> community from COVID-19. When Edwin refused, they shot him dead. Two months later, five Black Garífuna leaders were forcibly disappeared by armed men wearing police clothing; they remained missing at the time of writing. Attacks also continued against members of COPINH and HRDs from Guapinol, with the perpetrators connected to economic and corporate interests and stakeholders.

Endemic impunity in the vast majority of cases of disappearances and killings virtually guarantees the persistence of these violations. In a typical example from September, a judge in Tehuacán, Mexico acquitted three alleged perpetrators of the 2018 disappearance of Sergio Rivera Hernández, despite multiple witnesses positively identifying them at the

scene. Sergio, whose whereabouts were unknown at year's end, exposed multiple human rights violations against local indigenous communities and environmental damage during the construction of the Coyolapa-Atzatlán hydroelectric system. Indigenous defenders and communities were targeted in the Miskito region of Nicaragua, the Bribri and Brörán regions of Costa Rica and in Mapuche regions in Chile. Communities in the Indigenous Territories of Salitre, Térraba, Cabagra, China Kichá, and Maleku in Costa Rica suffered increased attacks as they defended their rights as indigenous peoples against the illegal occupation of their territories. These included gun attacks, arson, death threats, intimidation, damage to property and at least one murder of a defender, Jehry Rivera, none of which resulted in adequate investigations by the authorities or protection for the defenders.

HRDs defending land and resource rights, be they indigenous peoples, environmental defenders, farmers or peasants, were subjected to the same invective from elites as in previous years. Governments and complicit business actors used COVID-19 measures as an opportunity to press ahead with land grabs and mass evictions, with opposition weakened by the restrictions and the virus. The lifting of environmental safeguards in Brazil placed thousands of communities at risk and caused even greater concern among HRDs about the proposed EU-Mercosur trade deal. The agreement, which would be the EU's largest-ever trade deal, would grant privileged access to the EU market for goods from Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay. Defenders noted that this would lead to increased European demand for products, including beef, resulting in a rise in deforestation, illegal land grabs, environmental degradation and violence against rural and indigenous communities in the Amazon. The case of [Claudelite Santos](#) (below) is illustrative of the risks posed to environmental defenders by cattle ranchers and farmers in the region. That this trade deal has progressed so far, at a time when the EU is also moving to reduce the human rights impacts of EU-based business operations, highlights some of the fundamental inconsistencies between the expressed values and actions of the Union.

Other governments, including in Peru, Honduras, Mexico and Panama, permitted the continuation of development projects, deforestation and mining despite economic shutdowns. On 23 November, 300 members of the National Guard arrived at the Zapatista Camp in Apatlaco, Mexico to evict the camp that was guarding the territory. The National Guard allowed the entry of machinery to restart construction work on a pipeline, which is part of the Morelos Integral Project (PIM) that violates the rights to water, self-determination, land and territory, and life, in various communities, particularly those in the *ejidos* of Ayala, Morelos.

## [EMBLEMATIC CASE – MEXICO]

**Kenia Inés Hernández Montalván** is an indigenous N'oomdaa' WRHD, feminist, lawyer, speaker of the Amuzga language and native of the community of Xochistlahuaca in the state of Guerrero, Mexico. She is the coordinator of peasant *Collective Libertario Zapata Vive*, a peasant movement that defends land rights, collective identity and promotes different forms of peaceful resistance against the neoliberal development model imposed by the Mexican State. She relocated to Mexico City in 2019 due to the risks she was facing at home, yet she continued to face death threats, smear campaigns, persecution, as well as judicial harassment.

In June, Kenya was arbitrarily detained by state police in the State of Mexico. She was charged with aggravated robbery. Although she was granted conditional release for the duration of the legal process, in October she was detained in the State of Puebla, and was charged with 'robbery with violence'.

Days later, Kenya was about to be released through precautionary measures that allowed her complementary investigation to be conducted outside of prison. However, new charges of "assault on public roads" were filed and she remains in a maximum security prison in Morelos, held in isolation from other prisoners. According to Antonio Lara Duque, Kenya's lawyer who works with *Centro de Derechos Humanos Zeferino Ladrillero*, her criminalisation is "the result of machismo and the patriarchal system that governs the federation and the states of Morelos and Estado de México, which do not allow a woman to lead the social struggle and [her arrest] seeks to make an example of all others who dare to protest".



Source: Centro de Derechos Humanos Zeferino Ladrillero

WHRDs were forced to balance their activism with their role as primary caregivers, while also struggling with an alarming increase in gender-based violence during periods of confinement. Some perpetrators of this violence also held positions of power within the human rights community. Protests in Mexico to denounce the sharp rise in the rate of femicides and level of gender violence were met with repression by state and municipal police forces, including arbitrary and incommunicado detention, violent eviction, lack of access to and delay in legal defence, excessive use of force, seizure and/or damage of protesters' electronic equipment and violations of due process. On 9 November, a group of at least 50 municipal police officers beat protesters and fired live ammunition during a protest against the rape and murder of Bianca 'Alexis' Lorenzana in the city of Cancun in Mexico.

In Chile, the targeting of two Mapuche spokeswomen revealed specific challenges faced by indigenous women human rights defenders. [Nora Ñancul](#) and [Gricel Ñancul](#), who have spent years peacefully trying to regain the rights to indigenous land occupied by State and private interests, were detained without a warrant by police in September as they worked on land close to their home, with their young children close by. Police verbally and physically assaulted the women and their children, using misogynistic and racially discriminatory language, before knocking them to the ground and dragging them through the mud. One of the reasons the defenders believe they were [targeted](#) in this way is because of their role as indigenous mothers, "extending Mapuche generations," which conflicts with an economic model based on resource extraction and the impoverishment and disenfranchisement of the Mapuche people. In the United States, indigenous women continued to resist ongoing threats to their territories. Despite the pandemic, protests against one of the largest tar sands pipeline projects in North America, Line 3 Pipeline, continued on Anishinaabe land in northern Minnesota; indigenous defenders and their allies faced threats and arrests on charges of 'trespassing'.

Following COVID-19 measures introduced by the Salvadoran government, attacks against WHRD and women's rights organisations in the country increased significantly, including those active in online spaces. Journalists and WHRDs were targeted with harassment, smear campaigns and intimidation – expressed with misogynist language – in retaliation for

## [EMBLEMATIC CASE – BRAZIL]

[Caudelice Santos](#) is a WHRD working on environmental rights in the State of Para in Brazil. As a result of her denunciation of violations resulting from land grabbing, logging and other environmental crimes, she has received numerous death threats. In 2011, her brother, environmental defender Jose Claudio, and his wife Maria were [murdered](#), targeted because of their work defending the rainforest. The couple had previously received death threats from loggers and cattle ranchers. Following their killing, Caudelice began a ten-year-long struggle to achieve justice for her brother and sister-in-law, despite the fact that impunity for HRD killings is the norm.

As a result of her efforts, two men were found guilty of the murders. One of them, a large-scale farmer, was sentenced to 60 years in prison in 2016, yet police in Para have made no attempt to execute the arrest warrant. The second man, also a large-scale farmer, was sentenced to 42 years imprisonment in 2013, but escaped in 2015 when he was being transferred between prisons and has since been in hiding. All the time, in addition to her work defending the environment and in the absence of the state authorities' action on the case, Caudelice has been putting pressure on the police to act and soliciting the public for information on the perpetrators' whereabouts.

In August, Caudelice received a tip which she duly passed on to the police about the location of the perpetrator who escaped from prison in 2015. This information led to the re-arrest of the convicted murderer, and Caudelice has continued her efforts to bring the second man to justice. However, as a result, the threats she is facing have once again increased and she has been forced to leave the region for her safety. Following the arrest, Caudelice stated:

*"They cut down one, two trees, but a thousand, five thousand other trees will appear. This is how we will be able to make the world a place with hope, with people seeing the future with hopeful eyes and not afraid to lose their life for the chainsaw of greed and malice of those who do not agree with the idea that the environment is life and that those who defend it also deserve to live."*



*Caudelice pictured with her mother in a moment of joy after a year of attacks. A death threat was delivered to her mother's house towards the end of the year.*

their critical coverage and analysis regarding the government's management of the pandemic. In Guatemala, women journalists and WHRDs working with Prensa Comunitaria and Ruda were harassed while doing their work reporting on and supporting demonstrations that took place in the context of the Global Day of Action for Access to Legal and Safe Abortion. Profiles created on social networks by actors hiding behind a veneer of "pro-life" and "pro-family" ideology were deployed to intimidate and harass journalists and to censor and silence WHRDs. In Brazil, sexual health and reproductive rights remained an ideological battleground; defenders working on these rights were threatened, criminalised and attacked. The lengths to which the authorities were willing to go in this fight was illustrated by the case of a 10-year-old girl who was raped and impregnated. State officials, with the support of the Ministry of Human Rights, exerted enormous pressure on the girl and her family not to have an abortion, even though abortion in cases of rape is legal. Feminist activists who acted in the child's defence were threatened and meetings organised by the WHRDs were attacked by extremists. The doctor who performed the abortion also received threats. The 'green wave' feminist movement in Argentina succeeded in overturning regional norms, when Congress legalised abortions up to 14 weeks in December. This followed years of campaigning by the grassroots women's movement, often in an extremely hostile environment.

LGBTIQ+ defenders were particularly affected by the pandemic because of stigma, discrimination and family tensions during confinement, loss of employment opportunities, obstacles to movement, lack of access to health services and reduced access to tools and support networks beyond their community. In addition to the continued precariousness of work, economic insecurity, the increase in homelessness and the deterioration of their health, LGBTIQ+ rights defenders faced physical violence. Trans women defenders were killed for working for the rights of the LGBTIQ+ community and for access to healthcare for the LGBTIQ+ community, sex workers and people with living with HIV/AIDS. In Mexico at least three transgender defenders were murdered during the year, including Mireya Rodríguez Lemus, a well-known defender of the rights of LGBTIQ+ communities and sex workers, and President of the Association Unión y Fuerza de Mujeres Trans Chihuahuenses, A.C. She was found dead, with signs of torture, in September in the municipality of Aquiles Serdán in Chihuahua after having been missing for several days.

Healthcare workers and journalists reporting on the pandemic were targeted in a number of countries. In Chile, social leaders, including health workers, had their personal information made public, including their place of work; as a result, they received hate messages and experienced intimidation and harassment. In Nicaragua, a number of doctors were

## [HRD IMPACT – BRAZIL]

In protest against police violence still prevalent in Brazil despite the COVID-19 restrictive measures, Black movements in Brazil took to the streets, under the slogan of 'our option is to be killed by the virus or by the police'. In April, killings by the police during operations reached record rates in Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo. The movement of favelas in Rio de Janeiro, in partnership with the Public Defender of the State of Rio de Janeiro, and a number of civil society organisations advanced ADPF 635 at the Supreme Federal Court (STF). This is a judicial action of Constitutional control, popularly known as "ADPF of the Favelas", with the objective of recognizing and remedying the serious violations caused by the public security policy of the state of Rio de Janeiro against the Black and poor population of the favelas and other poor neighbourhoods during police operations.

Through this strategic initiative, young Black leaders from the movement were successful in achieving a court order to suspend police interventions in the favelas during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown measures. The recognition of racist practices by the Military Police and the prohibition of the use of helicopters, among other equipment, was a significant victory for civil society. However, the government of Rio de Janeiro has failed to comply with the measure on several occasions, permitting police raids in direct contravention of the court ruling. On 4 December, two children, who were playing at the doors of their homes, were tragic victims of stray bullets during a police operation in Duque de Caxias, a city in the Rio de Janeiro metropolitan area.



Source: Raouli Santiago Instagram

*"To die from bullets or to die from the virus. Are these the options for the favelas?"*

fired from their jobs after signing a letter demanding a halt to the criminalisation of healthcare workers who condemned the lack of adequate government action on the pandemic and requesting the provision of PPE. There was an increase in attacks on humanitarian organisations in Venezuela, while HRDs and journalists were summoned for questioning in Cuba and fined for publishing images showing long lines of people buying food and of the presence of military personnel in the streets. In Guatemala, Maya K'iche journalist and indigenous defender, [Anastasia Mejía](#), was placed under house arrest in October after spending over a month in detention. She was charged with 'sedition' and 'aggravated attack' following her participation in and coverage of a peaceful protest on 24 August in Joyabaj denouncing the mayor's management of resources intended to address the COVID-19 pandemic.

While social movements were impacted by the virus, sustained popular protests were widespread in the region in 2020. Demonstrations were met with excessive use of force and police brutality in Colombia, Chile, Cuba, Guatemala, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Peru and the USA. In Cuba, at least 132 people - including journalists, artists and HRDs - participating in and covering protests on 30 June against police brutality were subjected to arrest, internet cuts and house arrest. In the second half of April there were at least 50 arbitrary arrests in Nicaragua in the context of the second anniversary of the beginning of the protest movement and the current crisis in that country. The largest demonstrations in 20 years were held in Peru in November following the dubious impeachment of the president. Police responded to the protesters with excessive force, resulting in the death of two students; over 200 protesters were injured. HRDs monitoring police actions were subjected to physical and verbal harassment, while HRD [Carlos Rodríguez](#) was detained for 15 hours for attempting to observe detainees held in a police station.

The murder of George Floyd by police in the USA was followed by the most widespread popular mobilization in the country since the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. His killing and the killings of Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, Ahmaud Arbery and many [others](#) exemplified the institutional racism and police brutality directed against Black Americans. Endemic racism posed serious security concerns for Black HRDs highlighting and seeking justice for violations; protesters, activists and journalists of all ethnicities marching against racism and documenting the protests encountered violent police responses including the use of rubber bullets, tear gas, pepper spray and, in some cases, live ammunition. In one [case](#) in Minneapolis, a medical tent was stormed by police who opened fire with rubber bullets at those inside, including at [nurses](#) treating injured people. Parroting authoritarian and ethnonationalist leaders around the world, President Trump labelled peaceful protesters as terrorists and sent military units onto the streets. According to the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), at least 400 journalists were [arrested](#) between 26 May and the end of the year, with over 17,000 protesters detained during the first two weeks of protests alone.

Violence against HRDs advocating for equality for Dominican people of Haitian descent and against racism rose after the BLM protests in the USA spread to other countries. Direct threats, harassment and racist violence against Reconocido and other organisations and HRDs, particularly Afro-Dominicans, spiked at an alarming rate. Despite the seriousness of the threats, they were not investigated by authorities. On 9 June, [Ana María Belique](#), coordinator of Reconocido, [Maribel Nuñez](#), Afro anti-colonial activist and journalist, and [Fernando Corona](#), an Afro-descendant human rights defender, were arbitrarily [detained](#) and physically assaulted by police officers while leading a peaceful demonstration against racism in Independence Park in Santo Domingo in honour of George Floyd. In the days preceding the demonstration, a video was uploaded to Twitter by an ultra-nationalist group threatening violence if the march went ahead. Indigenous Minga communities in Colombia spearheaded a huge protest movement against the increased number of killings of social and community leaders. Political elites characterized the Minga as being involved with the guerrilla movement, paving the way for a militarized response to social protest, which featured excessive use of force and indiscriminate shooting with live ammunition by security forces.

HRDs in Brazil who ran in local elections placed themselves in very real danger. Male candidates were physically attacked, while women were widely subjected to attempts to humiliate, offend and frighten them out of public life. Black WHRDs running to be elected councillors faced violence on social media networks and were subjected to disinformation campaigns and hacker attacks. They were also subjected to physical attacks and received warnings that they would be killed if elected. In addition, there were several reports of violence carried out against LGBTIQ+ activists who had also put their names forward.



Criminalization, judicial harassment, and the abuse of power remained common tactics among public officials and powerful actors to intimidate defenders and demobilize social movements and organizations. Arbitrary arrests and detentions, mainly of environmental, feminist, anti-colonial, freedom of expression, civic space, and indigenous peoples' rights defenders, were commonplace throughout the region. In many cases, the judicial harassment and criminalisation of defenders is only one of a number of ways that they are punished for their activism. The case of Nicaraguan student leader, [John Cerna](#), is illustrative in this regard. Following his pro-democracy activism, he was arbitrarily detained in February along with four other students. They were forced to sign a blank arrest warrant, and were transferred to El Chipote prison in Managua. After a relative visited Cerna in prison in November, they reported that the HRD showed serious signs of physical and psychological torture, and that he was lacking adequate medical attention to treat his epilepsy in the maximum security cell that he had been transferred to in September.

Smear campaigns and online attacks remained a daily occurrence for many defenders in the region, particularly women defenders, with high-level government officials and powerful media outlets conspiring to discredit and publicly stigmatize HRDs. On 10 May, trans Black WHRD and artist Rosa Luz was the victim of numerous attacks on her social networks after she posted a video about racism in the Brazilian music industry. She was subjected to attack by the "hate cabinet"<sup>16</sup> (*gabinete do ódio*), which maliciously and falsely claimed that Rosa Luz was a left-wing terrorist and a hate instigator, and that she was financed by one of the largest private banks in Brazil. Rosa Luz received death threats through her Instagram account, and was widely attacked on Twitter. Hackers threatened her with the disclosure of her personal information, and two of her close friends were also attacked online. Rosa Luz was obliged to go offline for a period and strengthen her protection as a result.

In El Salvador and Mexico, attempts were made by elites to link HRDs to criminal groups or "international interests". In August, the President of Mexico questioned sources of funding received by independent media and environmental organisations which had highlighted violations carried out in the development of the government-sponsored "Tren Maya", a controversial 1500 km railway project that will impact indigenous communities and the natural environment in Yucatán Peninsula. In response, the organisations publicly declared the funding they received and reported it to the relevant accountability mechanisms. In Peru, a governor told media outlets that the Indian Ambassador, on a visit to the Chaparrí reserves, could face danger if he stepped out of his car, implying that local HRDs and communities engaged in peaceful activism represented a threat.

## [HRD IMPACT – NICARAGUA]

The [Observatory for COVID-19](#) in Nicaragua was created in March as a multidisciplinary space by and for defenders, health professionals, journalists and other sectors concerned about the impact of COVID-19 on the country. The collective gathers information on how the pandemic is evolving and about about threats to and dismissals of health professionals who have faced reprisals for their health-related advocacy.

The Observatory collects information from primary and secondary sources about the situation of the pandemic in the different departments of the country, verifies and analyses the data with the support of professionals of various disciplines, and presents periodic reports and infographics on its website and social media accounts. This has been an effort to fill in the gaps left by the Nicaraguan government, which has followed a policy of denial and concealment of information on the health crisis. The Observatory and its members have been subject to threats, smear campaigns and the creation of fake Twitter account meant to mislead the public.



Source: From the Twitter account of The Observatory for COVID-19 highlighting myths vs the reality of the virus.



The attacks against and threats to HRDs in the Americas occurred in the context of weakening regional human rights norms and creeping normalisation of digital surveillance of HRDs. A [report](#) by the University of Toronto's Citizen Lab revealed that governments in Chile, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico and Peru use software supplied by Israeli surveillance firm Circles to spy on their citizens' mobile phones through the interception of calls, text messages (SMS) and the locating of devices over networks. It was also [revealed](#) that the National Army in Colombia had engaged in a well orchestrated spying on at least 130 people, including HRDs. In Mexico, despite a [well-documented](#) history of spying attacks against journalists and HRDs and despite the election of a self-proclaimed left-wing government, such practices continue to go unpunished, and sophisticated spyware is sold on to cartels by corrupt state officials. Cartels regularly target defenders working on migrant rights issues in Mexico. In a 2019 [report](#), Front Line Defenders outlined how organised crime groups attacked and threatened these HRDs because their work interfered with the criminals' human trafficking business. In 2020, Front Line Defenders documented threats, harassment and surveillance of migrant rights defenders and migrant shelters by members of organised crime and local and federal police forces, mainly along the US-Mexico border.

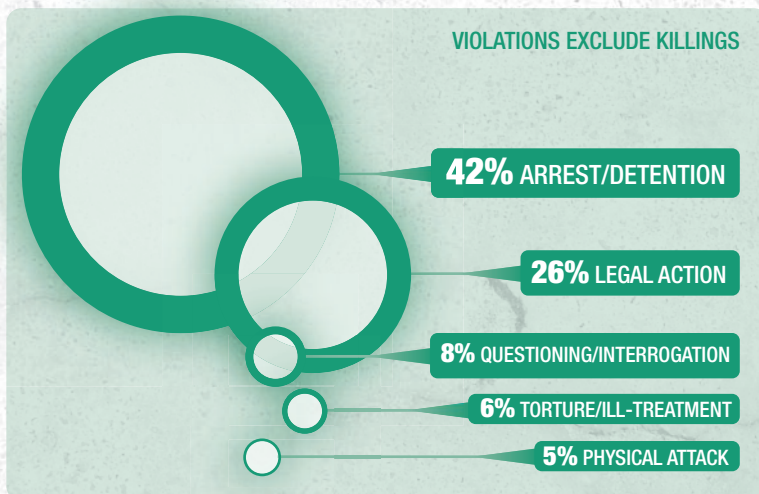
#### Footnotes

15. Garifuna are Afro-descendant and indigenous people mainly living in coastal parts of Central America.
16. An informal group linked to Rio de Janeiro councilor Carlos Bolsonaro (PSC), son of the President, accused of spreading false news and promoting virtual attacks based on extreme right ideologies.



# ASIA & THE PACIFIC

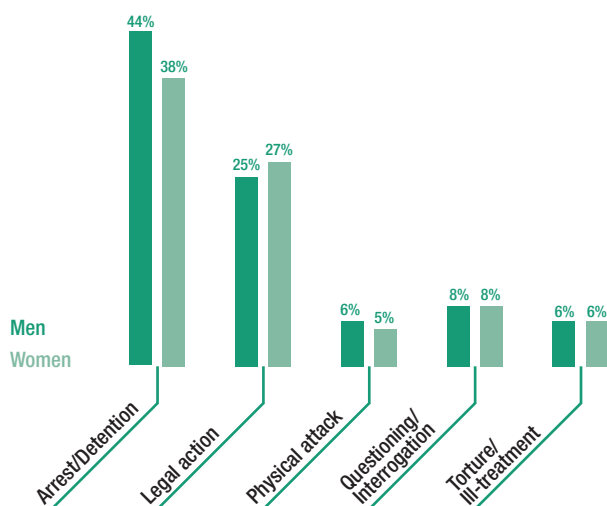
## TOP FIVE VIOLATIONS REPORTED TO FLD: ASIA & THE PACIFIC 2020



**54**  
HRDS KILLED IN  
ASIA & THE PACIFIC



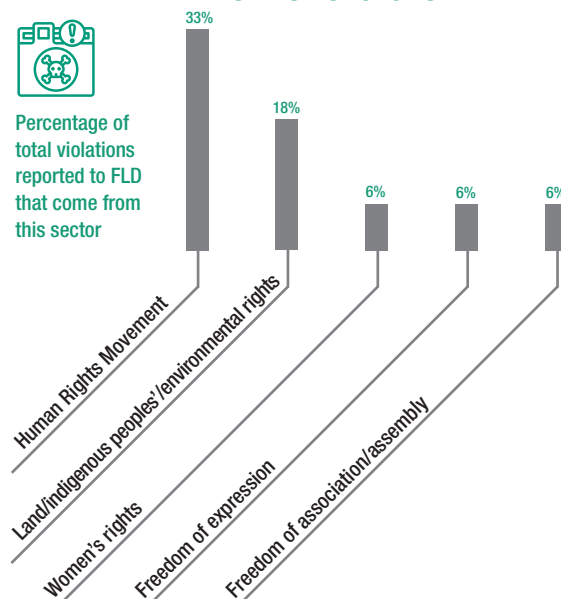
## HOW MEN AND WOMEN WERE TARGETED VIOLATIONS EXCLUDE KILLINGS



## WHAT ARE THE RISKIEST SECTORS?



Percentage of  
total violations  
reported to FLD  
that come from  
this sector



**H**RDS IN THE ASIA & THE PACIFIC REGION FACED THREATS TO THEIR SAFETY AND ATTACKS ON THEIR DIGNITY FROM GOVERNMENTS, PRO-GOVERNMENT FORCES, CORPORATE INTERESTS AND RELIGIOUS EXTREMISTS. IN SOME CONTEXTS, HOSTILE COMMUNITIES AND FAMILY MEMBERS WERE THE SOURCE OF THREATS, OR MADE DEFENDERS MORE VULNERABLE TO ATTACK. WOMEN AND LGBTIQ+ DEFENDERS WERE PARTICULARLY VULNERABLE IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19 AND RELATED RESTRICTIONS, INCLUDING LIMITED ACCESS TO RESOURCES AND CURTAILMENT OF MOVEMENT. GOVERNMENTS AND PRO-GOVERNMENT ACTORS, SOUGHT TO CONSOLIDATE POWER AT THE EXPENSE OF THE SECURITY OF HRDs AND THE COMMUNITIES THEY REPRESENT. THE POWER SOUGHT AND ENFORCED WAS BOTH IDEOLOGICAL – IN TERMS OF NATIONALIST, RIGHT WING, ANTI-MINORITY DISCOURSES – AND IN RELATION TO CONTROL OF AND ACCESS TO RESOURCES BY BOTH STATE AND NON-STATE PROFIT-MOTIVATED AGENTS.

Advocacy opportunities for HRDs were severely constrained due to the pandemic, especially in the first half of the year. Movement restrictions and the difficulty in accessing secure and reliable online platforms further isolated some local communities. China and India, along with a number of other states, continued their attempts to reduce and reframe normative human rights standards. In June, the UN Human Rights Council adopted a so-called “win-win” resolution on “mutually beneficial cooperation” proposed by China, after a divisive debate and with the objection of one-third of the Council members. The resolution introduced by China is a continuation of its efforts at the UN to promote “negotiations” between governments as the main means of addressing human rights issues, at the expense of robust critical scrutiny where independent UN experts and civil society play an active role. The Indian government similarly attempted to silence international criticism of its human rights record. In January, Indian authorities successfully lobbied to halt an attempt by the European Parliament to adopt an urgency resolution condemning human rights violations in India, especially in the context of the Citizenship Amendment Act. Later in the year, the EU announced resumption of its stalled human rights dialogue with India. Given India’s past record, there are doubts about the efficacy of the dialogue, unless clear, transparent and enforceable benchmarks are established at the outset.

## **CHINA AND INDIA, ALONG WITH A NUMBER OF OTHER STATES, CONTINUED THEIR ATTEMPTS TO REDUCE AND REFRAME NORMATIVE HUMAN RIGHTS STANDARDS**

2019 and 2020 were years of significant political change in Afghanistan, India, the Maldives and Sri Lanka, while governments tightened restrictions on freedoms of assembly and association in Thailand, Cambodia, Myanmar and the Philippines. In India and Sri Lanka, repressive right-wing governments with histories of targetting HRDs were given overwhelming popular mandates in local and national elections. Other governments with democratic mandates reneged on human rights commitments, at the cost of security and well-being of most vulnerable communities. Aung San Suu Kyi’s government won elections in Myanmar in a clear sign that although the military is losing its political clout, the military-era policies of ethnic exclusion and marginalisation that have carried over to civilian rule continue to be favoured, or at least accepted, by large parts of the electorate. In Afghanistan, the government has proven incapable of living up to its public rhetoric on protecting and supporting human rights defenders in the country – [Ibrahim Ebrat](#), a prominent defender who had been previously threatened by the Taliban, was [killed](#) in May in Zabul province. In June, two staff members of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, Fatima Khalil and Ahmad Jawed, were [killed](#) in a targeted attack while travelling to work in Kabul. Journalist and WHRD Malala Maiwand and her driver were killed in Jalalabad on 10 December, International Human Rights Day. According to data provided by the Afghanistan Human Rights Defenders Committee and the HRD Memorial project, at least 17 defenders were killed in 2020, the highest total for a single year in the country since the start of the documentation project. A Government appointed Commission on HRDs has yet to be fully operationalized. The peace process, and the release of Taliban members from prison, has increased the vulnerability of and threats to HRDs. In the Philippines, the Duterte government rules with a democratic mandate, yet is openly hostile to the concept of human rights and widespread impunity is one of a number of factors as to why so many HRDs are killed on an annual basis. In the Maldives, the ruling party that had been elected on a relatively pro-democratic

agenda, failed to preserve and protect space against pressure from extremist groups. The closure of the Maldivian Democracy Network (MDN) remained in effect through 2020 and staff were forced to relocate for their safety, while organisational assets were confiscated and bank accounts shut down without prior warning.

The legal formalisation of the years-old characterisation of HRDs as anti-state, traitors or terrorists gathered speed in Hong Kong (see Global Overview) and the Philippines, where the Anti-Terrorism Act was hastily passed in July. The Act contains an overly – and perhaps intentionally – broad and vague definition of terrorism that can be used to target HRDs. Any individual, group or organisation can be declared terrorists or supporters of terrorists by police, who have also been given wide-ranging powers to implement surveillance with little oversight, detain suspects for two weeks without a warrant and to freeze assets. Environmental and indigenous peoples' rights groups have raised concerns that the government is planning to use the Act to intensify its counterterrorism operations in environmentally protected areas and to secure those areas for mining and plantations. Of the 25 HRDs recorded killed in the Philippines in 2020, 84% were working on land, environmental and indigenous peoples' rights. In a shocking incident on 30 December, nine indigenous leaders and HRDs of the Tumanduk nga Mangunguma nga Nagapangapin sa Duta kag Kabuhi (TUMANDUK) community were shot dead on Panay Island during a police and military operation, seemingly designed to break local resistance to the construction of a mega-dam. According to witnesses, some of those killed were executed while they slept. After news outlets reported the massacre, the police 'red-tagged' the indigenous HRDs, claiming they were 'Communists' and therefore, 'terrorists'.

## OF THE 25 HRDS RECORDED KILLED IN THE PHILIPPINES IN 2020, 84% WERE WORKING ON LAND, ENVIRONMENTAL AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLES' RIGHTS

### [EMBLEMATIC CASE – INDIA]

Following the passage of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in December 2019, mass protests against this discriminatory law erupted across the country. Defenders in North Eastern States, especially Assam, had been protesting the National Register of Citizens for some years, and suffering the consequences. This time, however, anger and frustration were shared across the nation. Protests were brutally suppressed by police and security forces and abetted by non-state pro-government, and in some cases, party-affiliated, gangs. HRDs, the majority of whom are students from the minority Muslim community, were beaten, arrested, and charged under the penal code and anti-terror laws.

The exact number arrested and jailed is unclear, but among those detained were [Safoora Zargar](#), [Gulfisha Fatima](#), [Devangana Kalita](#), [Natasha Narwal](#), [Khalid Saifi](#), [Meeran Haider](#), [Shifa ur Rehman](#), [Dr. Kafeel Khan](#), [Sharjeel Imam](#), [Asif Iqbal Tanha](#), and [Umar Khalid](#). A pattern quickly emerged of multiple First Information Reports (FIRs) being filed against a single defender, including under anti-terror laws. The aim has been to prolong incarceration, irrespective of the final outcome, as has been exemplified in the case of [Devangana Kalita](#) and [Natasha Narwal](#), who, though they were granted bail in one case, remained in jail at year's end due to charges filed against them in a second case.

This has been a dangerous and especially disturbing strategy, given the uncontrollable spread of COVID-19 in Indian jails. In Assam, indigenous peoples' and land rights defenders [Akhil Gogoi](#), [Dharyia Konwar](#), [Bitu Sonawal](#) and [Manash Konwar](#) were detained and linked to the CAA protests. Despite testing positive for COVID-19, and being granted bail, [Akhil Gogoi](#), remains in jail due to multiple FIRs being filed against him.



*Women protesters listen to speeches at the Shaheen Bagh protest site, where approximately a hundred thousand people assembled on January 12, 2020 to protest against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) passed by the Indian Parliament*

Credit: Mustafa Quraishi



The pattern of criminalizing and arresting HRDs under cyber security and anti-terror laws continued as common practice in India and Pakistan. Over 40 defenders were detained in 2020 in India, many of them under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA), the National Security Act (NSA) and the Public Safety Act in Indian-administered Kashmir. Others were charged with sedition under the Indian Penal Code. The majority of defenders arrested were either from ethnic minorities or student activists campaigning peacefully against the regressive Citizenship Amendment Act. Others included lawyers, journalists and academics, who were falsely charged in connection to a case dating to 2018 in Bhima Koregaon. In Pakistan, the family of [Gulalai Ismail](#) continued to face charges under cyber security laws. Gulalai, a WHRD campaigning against extra-judicial killings, was forced to flee the country for her safety, while her parents were criminalised and her father faced repeated efforts to detain him. In Sri Lanka, the rhetoric labelling human rights defenders as anti-state agitators or traitors intensified following presidential and parliamentary elections, with campaigns led by senior government officials, including the Prime Minister. Defenders were summoned for interrogation, subjected to widespread surveillance, vilified in mainstream media and had charges filed against them. Investigative journalist [Dharisha Bastians](#) had her home raided, and personal electronic devices confiscated as clear reprisal for her reporting.

In Bangladesh, following the outbreak of COVID-19, authorities ramped up their use of the Digital Security Act to open investigations into and charge dozens of people, including HRDs, for their online writings criticising the government's public health response to the pandemic. According to local HRDs, 430 people were charged under the DSA in 2020, compared with 206 in 2019. Vietnamese authorities continued to target defenders under the 2018 Penal Code. In October,

## EMBLEMATIC CASE – PHILIPPINES

In the Philippines, the **Cordillera People's Alliance (CPA)**, an indigenous peoples' rights organisation, was targeted by a coordinated online campaign which included the throttling of connection to email servers, trolls and government officials posting defamatory, inflammatory and accusatory content online and trolls attacking children of HRDs by posting pictures of them and writing hate speech.



On 12 April, the Filipino army dropped propaganda flyers from helicopters over parts of the Cordillera region, inferring that local human rights organisations were in fact members of or colluding with armed communist rebel groups in the area. CPA issued a statement criticising this waste of resources given the need for economic assistance amidst the pandemic. This was met by online attacks led by the official pages and accounts of the Armed Forces of the Philippines, the Philippine National Police and their supporters. These attacks included photos that were taken from their personal accounts, of which some were distorted or edited to portray them as communists, terrorists, and supporters and recruiters of the New People's Army among others. The CPA had been previously targeted by so-called 'red-tagging' in February when flyers distributed to the public labelled the group as a "communist front".

Alongside these incidents, leaders in the organisation noted that their internet connection had become unstable. One HRD reported that his email had suddenly become inaccessible and he was only able to access it using a VPN; further investigation suggested specific targetting of his internet connection. At the time of writing, arrest warrants had been issued for the same HRD based on trumped-up murder charges resulting in his having to temporarily relocate.

*Above: One of the leaflets dropped over the Cordillera region, part of which reads as follows: "No to CPP-NPA-NDF (Communist Party of the Philippines - New People's Army - National Democratic Front of the Philippines) They are the terrorist virus that plague society..."*

*Let us not worry because the government will send what we need. So let us not believe the groups that promise help but have a different agenda such as the allied organisations of the CPP-NPA. They will use this crisis just to recruit or collect for their needs...*

*Let us not be deceived by these groups. Instead let us inform that there is a government program for all sectors including rebels who surrendered like the Enhanced Comprehensive Integration Program..."*

*[Goes on discussing the financial and livelihood benefits for rebels who surrender (with examples) and calling for cooperation and unity]*

WHRD, blogger and journalist [Pham Doan Trang](#) was arrested and immediately charged with “making, storing, disseminating or propagandising information, materials and products that aim to oppose the State of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam” under article 117 of the Penal Code. She faces up to 20 years in prison and she was arrested just a few hours after the 2020 US-Vietnam Annual Human Rights Dialogue concluded. Arrests of HRDs also increased in Cambodia, Myanmar, Philippines and Thailand. Amidst ongoing protests for political reform in Thailand, pro-democracy HRDs were continually harassed and subjected to a cycle of arrest, release on bail and re-arrest. The infamous *lèse majesté* law (criminalizing criticism of the monarchy) was invoked again to target defenders, after an unofficial halt since 2018.

In Cambodia, after the arrest of HRD and trade union leader [Rong Chhun](#), widespread protests took place calling for his release. In response, the authorities arrested 19 HRDs and artists in just over a month, with a dozen being charged with ‘incitement’ or ‘attempts to cause social chaos’. These arrests mainly targeted youth-led groups, including [Khmer Thavrak](#), [Mother Nature](#), and the Khmer Student Intellectual League Association. For the first time, the EU partially [suspended](#) Cambodia’s trade advantages under the ‘Everything But Arms’ scheme, on account of systematic and repeated human rights violations. One of the EU conditions for the lifting of the suspension is that the Hun Sen government amends or repeals the 2015 Law on Associations and Non-Governmental Organisations, which limits the capacity of civil society organisations to operate. Campaigning for workers’ rights in the context of COVID led to arrests in Malaysia where WHRD [Sarasvathy Muthu](#) and three other HRDs were detained after gathering at Raja Permaisuri Bainun Hospital to peacefully protest poor working conditions for cleaners in state hospitals. The defenders sought to draw attention to the lack of sufficient protective equipment and the risk of infection for cleaners. Sarasvathy and the group of protesters had been peacefully demonstrating outside the hospital with placards for an hour before they were arrested.

In Myanmar, there was a spike in arrests of student HRDs in September and October, in advance of the general election. Several members of the All Burma Federation of Student Unions (ABFSU) were detained as they organised protests in different cities in solidarity with Rakhine students who held protests against the government’s continuing human rights violations and internet shutdown in Rakhine State.

---

## SINCE 2016, THE COMPANY HAS FILED AT LEAST 37 COMPLAINTS AGAINST 22 HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

---

Chinese authorities attempted to further reduce the ability of the dwindling number of human rights lawyers to assist clients by assigning government-approved lawyers to HRDs facing prosecution, instead of allowing the HRDs to choose their own legal counsel. Government-approved lawyers in these cases do not actively share information with the defenders’ families and have, unsurprisingly, failed to adequately defend their clients. In some cases, the identity and contact information of these government-assigned lawyers was even withheld from families. This practice has the effect of denying the defenders’ families and the outside world access to any information concerning the defenders’ wellbeing or details of the criminal proceedings, thereby undermining the timeliness and efficacy of public and private advocacy. Human rights lawyers were also targetted in other parts of the region. In March, lawyers from the [Indian Civil Liberties Union](#) (ICLU) and other organisations were assaulted by police officials when seeking access to detainees at a police station in Delhi. The ICLU has provided legal aid to students and protestors who have been harassed, detained and arrested during the anti-CAA protests across India. In Sri Lanka, threats, harassment and interrogation of [K. Guruparan](#), an academic and lawyer, continued; Guruparan represents families of disappeared persons in a case with alleged military involvement.

Physical attacks against defenders did not pause during the pandemic, particularly for those defending the rights of minorities. In Pakistan, [Nayyab Ali](#), a transgender rights defender was bound and beaten for nearly three hours by unidentified men who threatened to kill her if she continued campaigning for the rights of trans persons in Pakistan. In Nepal, indigenous WHRD [Bidya Shreshta](#), who works against forced displacement and to preserve and protect cultural rights, was beaten by armed police, and also had cases filed against her and fellow defenders. In Mongolia, a woman human rights defender from the herder community working to mitigate the negative impacts of extractive industries was

severely beaten; in India, indigenous women and community leaders who led the anti-CAA campaign were jailed and remain incarcerated without charge several months later, on multiple First Information Reports (complaints).

A number of defenders in Asia were harassed and intimidated because of their opposition to corporate land grabs. The financial resources at some companies' disposal were also used to try to silence HRDs who raised allegations of violations through Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs). In Thailand, three WHRDs, [Angkhana Neelapaijit](#), [Puttanee Kangkun](#), and [Thanaporn Saleephol](#), faced defamation charges brought against them by a Thai chicken company, Thammakaset Company Limited, for their social media posts expressing support for other human rights defenders who were being judicially harassed by the company. Since 2016, the company has [filed](#) at least 37 complaints against 22 human rights defenders. While many of these cases have been dismissed or ruled against the company by the courts, several cases still remain open and serve to drain the limited resources of defenders. A briefing [published](#) by the Business and Human Rights Resource Centre in March found that Southeast Asia “has become a global hotspot for SLAPPs and other judicial harassment against HRDs.”

As HRDs were pushed online to continue their work during the pandemic, they were subjected to increased online threats, trolling, smear campaigns and cyber attacks. Those most frequently targeted by such attacks tended to be HRDs working for the rights of gender diverse peoples and communities, indigenous people, and women. In Sri Lanka, human rights lawyer Achala Senevirathne, who represents families of the disappeared in a case implicating senior level military officers, was subjected to violent and sexualized abuse on social media.

## [HRD-IMPACT: CHINA]

In late December, the National People's Congress Standing Committee, China's top law-making body, adopted the 11th round of amendments to the Criminal Law. One amendment makes it a criminal offence for personnel with such specialised responsibilities as guardians, adoptive parents, care-takers, educators and medical care providers to engage in sexual activities with girls between the age of 14 and 16 who are under their care, regardless of the minor's consent.

The inclusion of this new criminal offence is seen as a positive outcome of active policy advocacy by civil society and women's rights defenders to combat sexual violence by men in positions of power vis-a-vis their victims. “Little Vaccines Against Domestic Violence”, an informal, volunteer-driven campaign group active during the coronavirus lockdown, initiated a signature petition in May and proposed two changes to the Criminal Law: 1) amend the definition of rape to include “lack of consent” as a core principle when determining crimes of sexual assault; and 2) add a crime of using one's position of power to commit sexual assault and to better define “position of power”.

In less than ten days, the petition received more than 64,500 signatures, which, according to the organisers, made it the largest petition concerning women's rights in China. Many supporters of this campaign posted artwork, shared their own experience of sexual violence, and left supportive comments online. The petition was mailed to the Commission of Legislative Affairs of the National People's Congress Standing Committee.

The organisers said the outpouring of public support for the petition and the subsequent introduction of the new draft amendment to the Criminal Law demonstrates that mainstream public opinion recognises the severity of sexual violence. More importantly, it shows individuals feel increasingly empowered and are more willing to participate in public processes to better hold authorities accountable for upholding the State's obligation to punish sexual harassment and violence.



*This image is a viral Weibo post on Little Vaccine's official Weibo account (which was to set public but has since been censored) showing women posting pictures of themselves holding a placard that reads “We call for amending the (Criminal) law for the sake of our Stars” (young girls).*

When social media in a country becomes convulsed by a certain topic, marginalised or minority communities, and those who defend them, are often exposed to a significant increase in risk. An example of this occurred in Pakistan when a man on trial for blasphemy was shot dead in Peshawar in July. What followed was a Twitter storm celebrating his murder and murderer, posted alongside pictures of him dying accompanied by the hashtag ‘blasphemy’. Tweets soon started grouping ‘liberals’ and members of the LGBTIQ+ community, including HRDs, alongside alleged blasphemers and called for violence against them. A number of these HRDs contacted Front Line Defenders’ Digital Protection Team to help improve their online security and reduce the impact of the attacks. While human rights work is sensitive at the best of times in Pakistan, in such a febrile environment the risks faced by defenders are multiplied and many pause their work until the moment passes.

Stringent financial regulation has been used to prevent defenders in the region from freely accessing resources and organising. Even small transactions and financial transfers result in intense scrutiny from banks and government agents. In India, amendments to the Foreign Contributions Regulation Act (FCRA) further restricted access to resources, especially for smaller organisations, and empowered authorities to conduct inquiries - including into allegations of seditious conduct - before granting a FCRA license. In Sri Lanka, following Presidential and Parliamentary elections in November 2019 and August 2020 respectively, numerous HRDs, especially those working in the war-affected North and East, were visited by intelligence officers and questioned regarding their work, registration and finances. These inquiries were carried out by the Counter Terrorism Investigation Department at the behest of the Central Bank. The Hong Kong National Security Law and its implementation empower the police chief to require foreign organisations or individuals to provide information to aid investigations into national security offences, including “assets, income, sources of income, and expenditure” of such organisations.

## [HRD-IMPACT: THAILAND]

In April, a community anti-mining group in Lampang province in Northern Thailand won a significant victory in the courts against the granting of a license to mine lignite in the area. The Rak Baan Heang Group, in partnership with the Community Resource Centre, successfully sued the Ministry of Industry, the Director of the Department of Primary Industries and Mines, and six officials. Chiang Mai Administrative Court found that the process to approve the licence was unconstitutional; the Rak Baan Heang Group further argued that the mining company’s social and environmental impact assessment was deeply flawed as it did not establish the community’s free prior informed consent to the project, despite the company’s claims to the contrary. HRDs in the Rak Baan Heang Group have been protesting since 2010 about the presence of the mining company and have been subjected to various forms of harassment and intimidation as a result, including receiving death and kidnapping threats. Although a notable victory, it may not necessarily be the end of the process, as the company can still appeal to the Supreme Administrative Court.



Source: The Community Resource Centre

*Member of the Rak Baan Heang Conservation Group celebrate their court victory.*

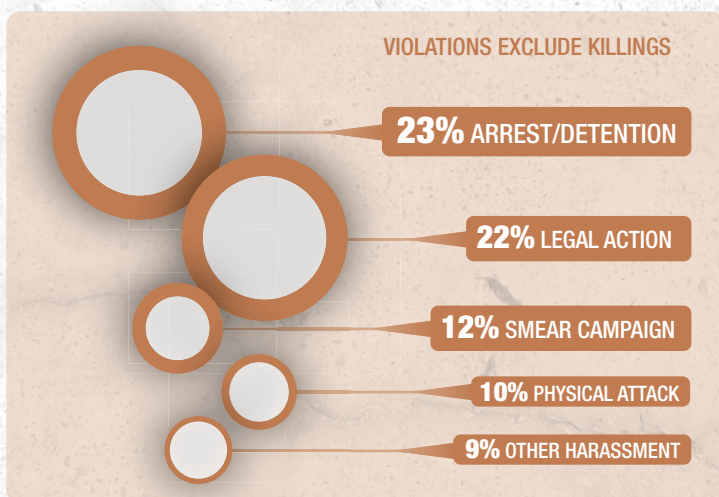


Attacks on minority ethnic, religious and linguistic rights defenders, and the communities they represent and work with, were reported across the region. Credible reports of mass arbitrary detention and surveillance of Uyghurs and other Muslim-majority minorities in Xinjiang continued to emerge. Forced sterilisation of Muslim women, forced labour, discriminatory restrictions of cultural and religious expression, and destruction of graveyards and religious sites in Xinjiang were documented. Among those believed to be under arbitrary detention in Xinjiang are a large number of Uyghur intellectuals, including translators, writers, poets, and musicians, whose work on Uyghur culture is essential to its vibrancy and very existence. The civic space for human rights defenders in Xinjiang is non-existent in a context of pervasive surveillance and repressive laws and regulations. Those who defend the rights of Uyghur and other Muslim minorities, including by raising concerns of mass arbitrary detention, are themselves at risk of being detained in the vast network of concentration camps in the region. Tursun Kaliolla, a Uyghur human rights defender and former civil servant, died in December 2020 while in custody in Xinjiang. He was detained after submitting a complaint to national officials against Xinjiang officials for establishing "training centres", which were in fact unlawful detention facilities holding large numbers of innocent people without charge or trial, and that the detainees were subject to ill-treatment. A number of experts [raised the alarm](#) that China's repressive actions in Xinjiang constitutes "cultural genocide". In India, the majority of those targetted for protesting the CAA were from the Muslim community, even though protesters came from all religious and ethnic communities. In Sri Lanka, Tamil and Muslim HRDs, especially those working directly with victims of enforced disappearance and arbitrary detention, defending land rights, and pursuing accountability for state violence, were targetted with surveillance, lengthy interrogation, and harassment. In Pakistan, religious and ethnic minorities were subjected to attack by extremist groups, while regressive laws and policies, including the anti-blasphemy law, remain on the books despite the danger posed to minority communities.



# EUROPE & CENTRAL ASIA

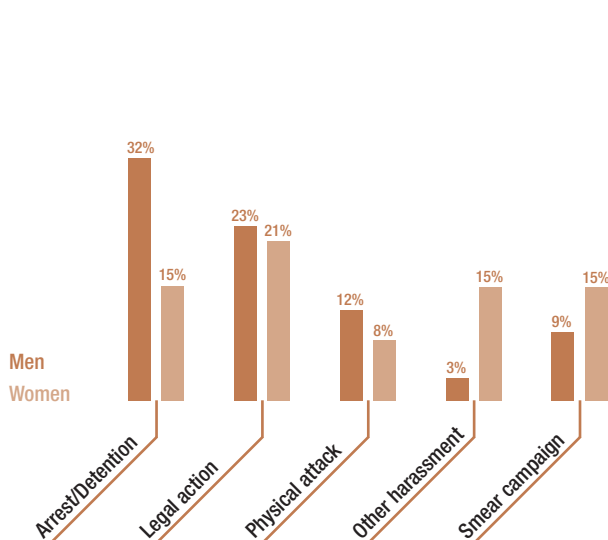
## TOP FIVE VIOLATIONS REPORTED TO FLD: EUROPE & CENTRAL ASIA 2020



**1**  
HRD KILLED IN  
EUROPE & CENTRAL  
ASIA

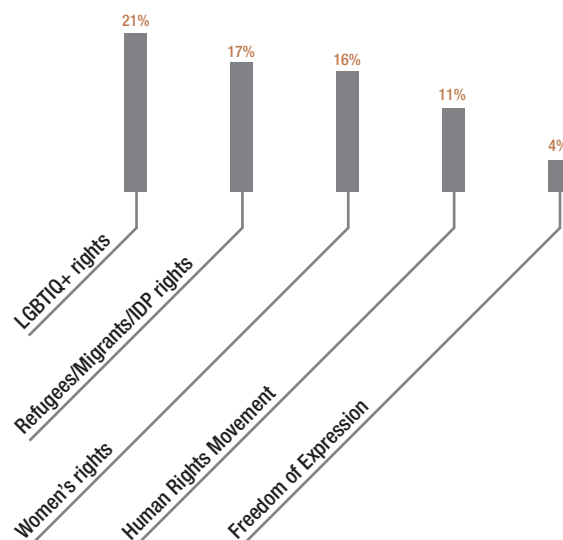


## HOW MEN AND WOMEN WERE TARGETED VIOLATIONS EXCLUDE KILLINGS



## WHAT ARE THE RISKIEST SECTORS?

Percentage of total violations reported to FLD that come from this sector



THROUGHOUT EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA, THE WORK OF HRDS WAS HEAVILY IMPACTED BY RESTRICTIVE MEASURES AUTHORITIES ADOPTED IN THE FACE OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC. AS WITH OTHER REGIONS, RESTRICTIONS OFTEN WENT ABOVE AND BEYOND WHAT COULD BE JUSTIFIED ON PUBLIC HEALTH GROUNDS AND WERE USED TO TARGET HRDS. FREEDOM OF ASSEMBLY WAS HEAVILY RESTRICTED IN MANY COUNTRIES AND HRDS WERE OBLIGED TO DEVELOP NEW FORMS OF PEACEFUL PROTEST, INCLUDING ONLINE DEMONSTRATIONS, PARALLEL SIMULTANEOUS PROTESTS IN SMALL GROUPS, AND SOCIALLY DISTANCED DEMONSTRATIONS, WHICH NEGATED THE SECURITY STRATEGY OF SAFETY IN NUMBERS.

Access to court hearings was restricted, even in situations where the courtroom was big enough to allow for social distancing, as demonstrated in the case of Turkish lawyer [Levant Piskin](#); Dutch diplomats were not permitted to observe his hearing despite there being ample space. Family visits to imprisoned HRDs were also banned on COVID-19 grounds, even though prisoners themselves were often held in cramped and unsanitary conditions. Additional punishment of imprisoned defenders was meted out in Belarus, where, despite horrific prison conditions, restrictions on delivery of food parcels to prisoners were introduced on the pretext of the virus. Most of the imprisoned HRDs suffering from illnesses with COVID-19-like symptoms were not tested and were not isolated from inmates. [Server Mustafayev](#), a defender in Crimea, was brought to a court hearing with a fever and a cough after a three-month postponement because of COVID-19 restrictions on the work of courts. In September, he was sentenced to 14 years in a penal colony on charges of “membership of a terrorist organisation” and “planning to violently seize state power”. Server is coordinator of Crimean Solidarity, a civil society organisation that monitors human rights violations, observes trials, and provides legal and financial aid to families of arrested individuals.

## **SMEAR CAMPAIGNS AND ONLINE HARASSMENT WERE COMMONPLACE AND WHILE MUCH OF IT HAPPENED ON SOCIAL MEDIA NETWORKS, ATTACKS WERE ALSO ORCHESTRATED IN STATE-OWNED MEDIA**

Smear campaigns and online harassment were commonplace and while much of it happened on social media networks, attacks were also orchestrated in state-owned or state-aligned media. In Ukraine, HRDs were vilified after publishing a report on gender-based violence in the government-controlled areas of Donetsk and Luhansk, including information on sexual violence against women perpetrated by members of the Ukrainian military forces. The UK Home Secretary, Priti Patel, criticised “do-gooders” and “leftie-lawyers” for assisting migrants file legal immigration claims. In Kazakhstan, [Evgeny Zhovtis](#) was the target of an online campaign in Kazakh media and on Facebook and YouTube that was launched in response to his criticism of a new draft law as undermining the freedom of assembly and in particular his position on the right of non-nationals to participate in peaceful assemblies. HRDs suffered doxxing attacks, particularly WHRDs and LGBTIQ+ defenders; in Kyrgyzstan, two LGBTIQ+ defenders were doxxed in attacks, which proved difficult to mitigate as there is limited Kyrgyz language capacity among employees of online platforms (including Facebook, Instagram, YouTube). Phishing attempts were also widely reported, including in Armenia, Russia and Ukraine.

The incoherent and unsatisfactory response by the EU and its member states to the arrival of refugees and migrants to a small number of entry points leading to the overwhelming of local services continued to generate hostility to refugees and migrants and to those who attempt to assist them. The Greek government persisted in voicing its suspicion of NGOs working with refugees and migrants, while several human rights organisations operating in the country reported difficulties in complying with restrictive NGO legislation introduced at the end of 2019, ultimately failing to re-register their organisations. After Turkey stopped preventing refugees and migrants trying to cross its borders into Europe, which had been closed since 2016, there was an increase in attacks on NGO members at the Evros border and on the Aegean islands, especially in Lesbos, Chios, Kos and Naxos. Those attacks included physical assaults, arson and the prevention of NGO boats from docking. In March, the Chios People’s Warehouse was destroyed in an arson attack, while in Lesbos the same month, a refugee and migrant shelter run by NGO One Happy Family was also burned to the ground.

HRDs supporting refugees and migrants on the Balkans route faced police harassment, physical attacks and smear campaigns. [Zehida Bihorac](#), an elementary school teacher from the Una-Sana Canton, located at the EU-border between Bosnia and Croatia, received online threats, was assaulted by unidentified individuals and harassed by police as a result of her work providing humanitarian assistance to refugees and migrants. [Tajana Tadić](#) working with Are You Syrious? in Croatia faced police harassment in October and the refugee status of her partner was revoked following a secret procedure, in what was believed by the HRD to be an act of retaliation for her work in support of refugees and migrants. In Bosnia, Croatia and Greece, defenders were denied access to refugee camps and other facilities. With lockdowns imposed, many HRDs and humanitarian workers also lost their access to informal settlements which placed already vulnerable populations at increased risk.

NGOs elsewhere were also targeted during the course of the year. Between mid-October and the end of November, at least 13 human rights groups in Kazakhstan (including Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law, [Kadyr Kasiet](#) and the International Legal Initiative) received notifications that they had incorrectly completed declaration forms relating to foreign income, in some cases dating back to 2018. The offence carries a fine of 555,600 Tenge (US\$ 1,300) and suspension of activities, with a greater fine and a ban on activities for a repeat offence within a year. Members the International Legal Initiative, which provides free legal assistance for the family members of ethnic Kazakhs imprisoned in political re-education camps in China and advocates to protect the victims of gross human rights violations in Xinjiang, faced constant surveillance and blocking of their WhatsApp accounts. During the course of the frequent inspections – to which NGOs in Turkey are subjected – Göç İzleme Derneği (Migration Monitoring Association) was accused of issuing publications containing information against the security and military forces of the state; a criminal investigation was opened targeting board members who faced charges of "insulting the military and security forces".

---

## HRDS SUPPORTING REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS ON THE BALKANS ROUTE FACED POLICE HARASSMENT, PHYSICAL ATTACKS AND SMEAR CAMPAIGNS

---

A number of political crises in the region increased security risks faced by defenders. In Belarus, the presidential elections created a hostile atmosphere for HRDs and civil society at large throughout the year. The targeting of defenders was evident months before the election when eight HRDs participating in peaceful protests in April and May were detained and subjected to judicial harassment. Six of the eight work with prominent NGO [Human Rights Centre Viasna](#) (HRC Viasna). After incumbent Alexander Lukashenko claimed victory in what were widely discredited as fraudulent elections, mass protests were met with an unprecedented level of violence and widespread use of torture and ill-treatment. Scores of HRDs were among the 33,000 people [detained](#), many of whom were sentenced to between 5 and 15 days' administrative detention for 'violating the procedure for holding a protest' and 'disobeying the legal order of an officer of public authority'. [Maria Babkova](#), Coordinator of the Volunteer Service at HRC Viasna, and Andrey Chapyuk, a volunteer, were indicted on charges of "education or other preparation of persons for participation in mass riots, or financing such activities" and face up to three years in prison. WHRDs were integral to developing support mechanisms for those injured during the protests. Among the defenders most at risk were journalists reporting on the election results, the protests and the police crackdown, with over 400 detained between August and year-end. At the end of 2020, eight journalists and representatives of organisations supporting the media [remained](#) in custody under criminal investigation, four of them members of the Belarus Press Club. Katerina Borisevich, a correspondent with TUT.BY, faces up to three years in prison for disclosing medical information about Raman Bandarenka, a protester who was beaten to death in Minsk after trying to prevent the destruction of protest art. With the permission of the Raman's mother, Borisevich published an article stating that there was no alcohol in his blood, refuting the official version of the Investigative Committee asserting that he was drunk.

The government blocked access to internet data on mobile phone provider services in an attempt to disrupt the protests, but protesters often managed to bypass this by sharing home wireless hotspots. Authorities also engaged in internet throttling to slow the pace and organising capacity of the movement. Given the months of struggle, the brutal response



and the ineffective international reaction, by year's end an atmosphere of fear, powerlessness and exhaustion had begun to seep into civil society in Belarus which led to a shift in tactics to embrace locally-organised ad hoc protests.

The six-week war over Nagorno-Karabakh between Armenia and Azerbaijan added to pressure faced by HRDs in both countries. Armenian defenders documented war crimes and provided humanitarian assistance to people fleeing the region to Armenian towns. While there was a high level of support for the war in Azeri society, including among civil society and HRDs, a number of defenders who did speak out against the conflict were vilified, intimidated, received death threats, and some of them were forced to relocate for their own safety.

Conservative sociopolitical trends impacted the security of HRDs in Andorra, Hungary, Kyrgyzstan, North Macedonia, Poland and Russia, where political actors moved to further restrict rights. In Andorra, [Vanessa Mendoza Cortés](#), President of Violències, faced charges of "defamation with publicity" against the Government, "defamation against the co-princes", and "crimes against the institutions" following a public statement she made in a documentary concerning sexual and reproductive rights in the country and the presentation of a shadow report submitted by Stop Violències to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women on 19 October 2019. The WHRD is facing at least four years in prison. In May, the Hungarian parliament rejected ratification of the Istanbul Convention,<sup>17</sup> ignoring civil society pressure, while the Orban government was on record describing HRDs' concerns as 'political whining'.

## IN MAY, THE HUNGARIAN PARLIAMENT REJECTED RATIFICATION OF THE ISTANBUL CONVENTION, IGNORING CIVIL SOCIETY PRESSURE

In July, Polish WHRDs [Elżbieta Podleśna](#), Anna Prus and Joanna Gzyra-Iskandar were charged under Article 196 of the Criminal Code for "offence to religious beliefs" in relation to the use of posters depicting the Virgin Mary with a rainbow halo in the colour of the LGBTIQ+ flag around head and shoulders. The first hearing took place in January 2021, with the defendants facing a maximum sentence of two years in prison if found guilty. Yulia Tsvetkova, a LGBTIQ+ and women's rights defender from Russia, faces up to six years in prison, accused of distributing pornography for publishing her and others' drawings of the female body online. She has already been fined for propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations among minors for content she posted online relating to feminism and LGBTIQ+ rights.

Massive WHRD-led protests in Poland followed a ruling by the Constitutional Court in October that the termination of fetuses with congenital defects would no longer be permitted, even when the fetus would not survive outside the womb. In what were some of the largest protests in 30 years, [occurring](#) in more than 400 communities all over the country, hundreds of thousands of mostly women demonstrators forced a delay in the implementation of the ruling, which, at year's end, remained without legal power. The demonstrations were met with excessive use of force, criminalization of peaceful protesters, and incitement to violence against protesters by public officials. Women's demonstrations were also

## [EMBLEMATIC CASE – POLAND]

In August 2020, [Margot and Łania](#), two LGBTIQ+ rights defenders, were arrested in Warsaw for placing rainbow flags into the hands of several statues in the Polish capital. Margo and Łania are activists from "Stop Bzdurom" (Stop Bullshit), an initiative created in response to "Stop Paedophilia", a campaign that publicly associates LGBTIQ+ people with paedophiles. The initiative also protests the so-called self-proclaimed "LGBT-free zones" that have been declared in an estimated 30% of the country. "Stop Bzdurom" uses performances and street actions to bring public attention to discrimination against LGBTIQ+ people.

*LGBTIQ+ protests in Poland*



Source: Syrena Collective Twitter

met with violence in Kyrgyzstan on International Women's Day. Marches in Bishkek and Baku were attacked by unidentified men in plainclothes while police detained 70 protesters in Bishkek and up to 20 in Baku. The WHRDs who organised the march in Baku faced an unprecedented cyber attack, with two of the leading organisations' websites taken offline and various social media accounts of prominent WHRD Gulnara Mehdiyeva and other WHRDs hacked; feminists and queer activists involved in the marches were subjected to defamation campaigns labelling them as opponents of traditional family values, "worthless women of their country and prostitutes".

In North Macedonia, the Constitutional Court repealed the Law on Prevention and Protection from Discrimination, which had been adopted in May 2019, due to the failure to meet formal procedural requirements. The key achievement of this law was the prohibition of any discrimination based on race, origin, nationality or ethnicity, religion, political beliefs, and crucially, it included sexual orientation and gender identity. Following a successful campaign lead by local HRDs, the law was reinstated by the parliament at the end of October. Going against the trend towards conservatism in some parts of the region, Montenegro legalized same-sex partnerships in July, with the President stating that the move was "a step toward the family of most-developed democracies".

## IN ITS FIRST RULE OF LAW REPORT, THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION POINTED TO SEVERAL EU MEMBER STATES FAILING TO MEET THE EU'S MINIMUM STANDARDS ON FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF RULE OF LAW

At the EU level, efforts were stepped up to address attacks on the rule of law and fundamental rights occurring in EU member states. In its first rule of law report, the European Commission pointed to several EU member states failing to meet the EU's minimum standards on fundamental principles of rule of law, including judicial independence, media freedoms and obstacles faced by civil society. Poland and Hungary continued to be subject to Article 7 proceedings, an EU Treaty mechanism that can strip member states of their voting rights for serious breaches of EU values. In June, the European Court of Justice ruled that Hungary's Law on the Transparency of Organizations Receiving Foreign Funding, which attacks the very existence of independent civil society groups, was unlawful and contrary to EU Treaties. In November, the European Parliament, European Commission and the EU Council – represented by Germany as current chair of the EU's rotating presidency – reached a landmark agreement on the details of a new mechanism that would

### [EMBLEMATIC CASE – KYRGYZSTAN]

In July, Azimjan Askarov, a prominent human rights defender whose case Front Line Defenders had worked on for over a decade, died in a penal colony in Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyz authorities denied repeated requests for Azimjan to receive medical treatment outside of prison after his health had deteriorated. Suffering from pneumonia and fever, but denied a COVID-19 test, it is reasonable to assume that Azimjan died from the virus. Azimjan Askarov spent 25 years documenting human rights abuses in Kyrgyzstan. He was arrested on 16 June 2010, following violent clashes the same month between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in southern Kyrgyzstan, in which more than 400 people were killed. He was tortured and condemned to life imprisonment following an unfair trial at which the main pieces of evidence presented against him were confessions obtained as a result of torture and the testimonies of policemen involved in the events.



Despite 10 years spent in jail, Azimjan Askarov never lost hope for justice; until his last days he fought for the implementation of a UN Human Rights Committee decision ordering his release in 2016. Front Line Defenders had the opportunity to visit Azimjan Askarov in jail on several occasions, until his transfer in 2019 to penal colony No. 18 where his conditions of detention significantly worsened and his visits were restricted. Front Line Defenders was denied permission to visit Azimjan at the end of February 2020. Azimjan died after weeks of complaints about his medical condition that were ignored until his very last days. Azimjan's ten-year fight for freedom was shared along each step of the way by Khadicha Askarova, his wife, his confidant, supporter and defender. Following Azimjan's death, the Supreme Court refused to recognise Khadicha as his legal successor and terminated her cassation appeal.

make EU funding conditional on respect for the rule of law. The new regulation applies to all EU funds under shared management from 1 January 2021. In a significant ruling defending the parameters of peaceful human rights activism, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) ruled against the conviction of members of a boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) group in France, finding that they had not violated the European Convention on Human Rights on grounds of discrimination through their actions.

In November, a second ECtHR ruling [expanded](#) on the link between human rights, the environment and the responsibilities of states when it recognised as admissible the complaint of six Portuguese climate campaigners, aged between 8 and 21, against 33 States which are not reducing emissions sufficiently to meet the Paris Agreement targets. Another positive ruling for human rights defence occurred in January in Italy, where the Supreme Court of Cassation rejected an appeal filed by Italian prosecutors against the release of WHRD Carola Rackete, the captain of humanitarian ship Sea Watch 3 and member of Sea Watch NGO. The Court ruled that her arrest had been unwarranted. On 2 July 2019, a judge in the Court of Cassation ruled that Rackete had not acted against the law, because she was "doing her duty saving human lives" and she was complying with international maritime laws. Following calls for reform of the EU Facilitation Package, in September the European Commission adopted its Guidance on the implementation of this EU legislation, clarifying that the Facilitation Directive cannot be construed as a way to allow humanitarian activity mandated by law – such as search as rescue operations – to be criminalised. The European Commission encouraged the 19 EU member States that have not already done so to make use of the exemption contained in Article 1(2) of the Facilitation Directive to prevent the criminalisation of solidarity, acknowledging the growing use of the Directive in judicial prosecutions and investigations against migrant rights defenders in EU member States since 2018.

## ATTACKS ON MEDIA PERSONNEL REPORTING ON HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS TOOK PLACE IN NUMEROUS COUNTRIES IN THE REGION

Environmentalists and defenders of land rights achieved some successes despite smear campaigns and public attacks. In November, the house of Tahira Tibold, one of the Brave Women of Kruščica (BWK), was stoned after the Bosnian government announced amendments that would prevent the negative impact of small hydropower plants on the environment, and after [confirming](#) that there would be no government subsidies for the construction of these plants after 2020. BWK has been fighting against the construction of hydropower plants on local rivers for several years. Land defenders from the Sinjajevina-Durmitor mountain range in Montenegro, the biggest mountain grassland in the Balkans, succeeded in postponing a military training by NATO on their lands, which for millennia have served as pastures for local communities. The defenders blocked NATO access to the pastures by camping in freezing temperatures on the land

### [HRD-IMPACT: BELARUS]

As the largest protests in Belarusian history were met with widespread police violence and use of torture in detention, HRDs quickly set about establishing a platform to connect those injured with specialists and others to aid their recovery.

In a successful example of cross-sector collaboration, [Probono.by](#) is comprised of human rights defenders and professionals from the youth, education, medicine, cultural management, IT, legal and business sectors who gave their time voluntarily to respond to the crisis. Within four months of beginning its work, Probono.by had provided support in 6,697 cases and 1,157 people had applied to volunteer.





and refusing to leave. Without proper consultation with local communities, military installations are being built on 7,500 hectares in the heart of the UNESCO-recognized Tara River Biosphere Reserve. Local communities fear that the use of explosives and of weapons in this area may cause irreparable damage to the ecosystem. In Turkey, HRDs involved in Kaz Dağları Dayanışması (Mount Ida Solidarity) – a grouping of environmentalists who have set up a protest camp in the Ida mountains to object to deforestation being carried out by a Canadian gold mining company – were fined more than 500,000 TL (more than €55,000).

Attacks on media personnel reporting on human rights violations took place in numerous countries in the region. Those highlighting shortcomings in their governments' response to the pandemic faced penalties and persecution for their reporting, with defenders in Russia receiving administrative charges for allegedly spreading 'disinformation'. [Avazmad Ghurbatov](#), a journalist from Tajikistan, received threats and was twice attacked by unidentified men for his coverage of COVID-19. In Serbia, Ana Lalić, a journalist with the *Nova.rs* portal, was arrested on 1 April on charges of causing panic and unrest for reporting on the difficult situation in the Clinical Centre of Vojvodina. She was detained and interrogated and her electronic equipment was seized. Journalists covering other rights-based issues were also targeted, including David Frenkel in Russia, who was hospitalised with a broken shoulder after being attacked by police for investigating voting irregularities. In Chechnya, [Elena Milashina](#), an investigative journalist working for *Novaya Gazeta*, was attacked along with lawyer [Marina Dubrovina](#) in Grozny after they travelled to the city to observe the trial of Islam Nukhanov. Nukhanov had been illegally detained and tortured in the basement of the Department of the Ministry of Interior in Grozny after uploading a video on YouTube showing the luxurious houses of the head of the Chechen Republic, Ramzan Kadyrov, and his allies. Several months after the attack, Ramzan Kadyrov posted a video on Instagram in which he issued a death threat to Elena Milashina for her coverage of the spread of COVID-19 in Chechnya. Journalists covering protest actions in Bulgaria, France and Poland were victims of police violence. Anti-corruption activists and journalists in France, Hungary, Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine were also targeted. In Kyrgyzstan, journalists from Kloop and RFE/RL's Radio Azattyk received threats connected to their work on a joint [investigation](#) with the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) revealing involvement of Kyrgyz border officials with a smuggling scheme worth more than \$700 million.

## [HRD-IMPACT: TURKEY]



*Protesters at the 17th Istanbul Pride March in 2019, shortly after police violently dispersed the main March. Credit: Ateş Alpar*

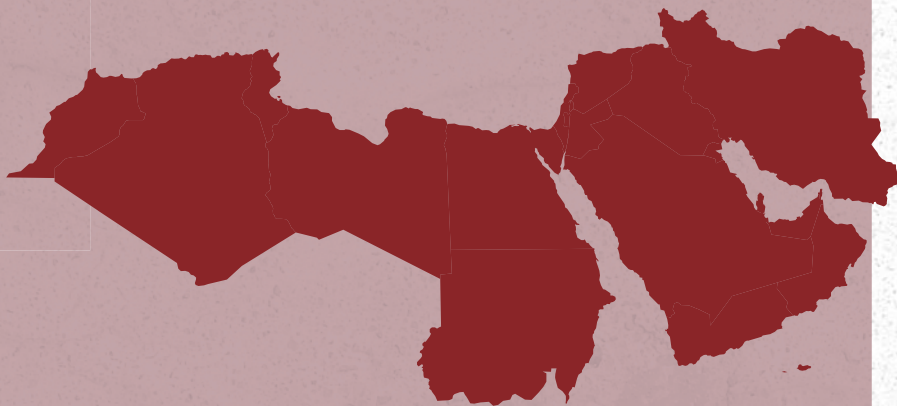
In March, KaosGL, an Ankara-based LGBTIQ+ rights organisation won a legal case it had filed against an indefinite ban on all LGBTIQ+ activities, which had been imposed by Ankara Governor in 2018.

A similar ban was issued by the Governor during the state of emergency in 2017, which was lifted by an Ankara administrative court in 2019 after the ban was contested by KaosGL. The organisation has played a key role in challenging discriminatory measures through the courts.



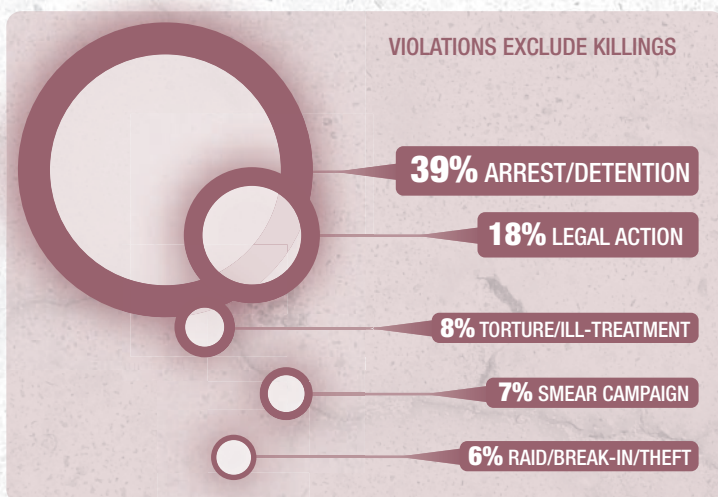
**Footnotes**

17. Ibid. See footnote 12 on page 19.



# MIDDLE EAST & NORTH AFRICA

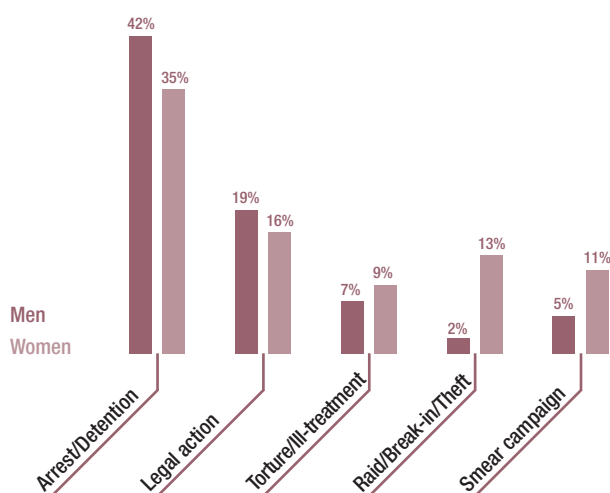
## TOP FIVE VIOLATIONS REPORTED TO FLD: MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA 2020



**10**  
HRDS KILLED  
IN MENA



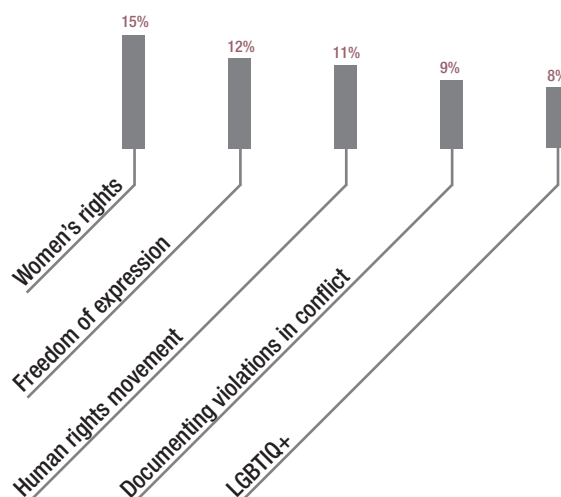
## HOW MEN AND WOMEN WERE TARGETED VIOLATIONS EXCLUDE KILLINGS



## WHAT ARE THE RISKIEST SECTORS?



Percentage of total violations reported to FLD that come from this sector



IN 2020, HRDS IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA WERE CONFRONTED BY ONGOING ARMED CONFLICTS, ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL CRISES, OPPRESSIVE REGIMES AND THE SPREAD OF ARMED MILITARY GROUPS, IN ADDITION TO THE PANDEMIC. ANTI-GOVERNMENT DEMONSTRATIONS CONTINUED IN ALGERIA, IRAQ, LEBANON, OPT, SUDAN AND WESTERN SAHARA AND NEW SOCIAL PROTESTS EMERGED IN EGYPT AND LIBYA, WHERE DEMONSTRATORS CALLED FOR RIGHTS-BASED SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CHANGE. HRDS IN THE REGION WERE SUBJECTED TO ARBITRARY DETENTION, JUDICIAL HARASSMENT, KIDNAPPINGS AND ASSASSINATIONS BECAUSE OF THEIR PEACEFUL HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISM.

October marked a year since Iraqis took to the streets protesting against corruption, poverty, the increase in unemployment and sectarian policies. In May, new prime minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi assumed office, with promises to improve the situation in the country, though little tangible change was evident by year's end. HRDs documenting abuses against protesters by the police and exposing the role of armed militias in confronting demonstrators were targeted. At least eight defenders active in the protest movement and who denounced state violence and the activities of armed militias were killed, seven of whom were murdered in targeted assassinations. The police routinely fired live ammunition and metal pellets to suppress the peaceful protesters; since the start of the movement, more than 600 people have been killed. On 14 August, Tahseen Osama Ali, a member of Al-Basra Civil Youth Group was shot and killed in his apartment when two masked intruders broke into his home. Just days earlier in a post on Facebook, Tahseen had accused Basra's police chief (Lieutenant General Rashid Falih) of failing to protect protesters and allowing criminal gangs to roam the city and kill activists and journalists. Five days later, another member of the Al-Basra Civil Youth Group, WHRD Dr. Reham Yacoub, was shot and killed by an attacker on the back of a motorcycle as she was leaving the gym in her car. [Lodya Remon Albarty](#), a WHRD working to promote the rights of women and youth, and who had been prominently involved in the demonstrations, was shot and injured in August, along with a colleague. The WHRD had previously received death threats from militias because of her work on women's rights. The assassination attempt was followed by an online defamation campaign which was centred on accusations that Lodya had been in a relationship with one of her colleagues and that her family was responsible for the attempted killing in a so-called 'honour crime'. The Iraqi authorities enforced periodic internet shutdowns in Baghdad and Basra to facilitate operations to target the demonstrators and to prevent the news of such operations from spreading. The blackouts further prevented HRDs from coordinating in different governorates to respond to attacks by armed militias.

## THE IRAQI AUTHORITIES ENFORCED PERIODIC INTERNET SHUTDOWNS TO FACILITATE OPERATIONS TO TARGET THE DEMONSTRATORS AND TO PREVENT THE NEWS OF SUCH OPERATIONS FROM SPREADING

In Lebanon, HRD activism was dominated by the ongoing economic and political crisis. In August, a few days after the deadly explosion at the Beirut port, the capital's streets were taken over by demonstrations, leading to the resignation of the Lebanese government. This increased the political uncertainty in the country and the resignation was not enough to assuage the deep discontent with how the country has been managed; demonstrators protested against endemic government corruption and the mismanagement of the economy. Lebanese security forces met the demonstrators with tear gas and rubber bullets, inflicting injuries on the protesters and several HRDs. In 2020, the Cybercrimes Bureau summoned defenders for questioning in response to their use of social media to organise and sustain the movement.

The prominent participation of women in protests provided an opportunity for WHRDs to voice their concerns against persistent forms of discrimination and violence against women in Lebanon. In August, feminist activists and leading women's rights organisations promoted a gendered disaster response plan to ensure women's representation, access to health services and sexual and reproductive health rights, and to prevent and respond to violence against women in the context of COVID-19. As a result of the economic crisis, thousands of migrant workers - mostly women - lost their jobs and many were left homeless. Migrant rights defenders faced discrimination in their struggle for better treatment of migrant workers and were themselves at risk of being fired and deported because of their activism. Some have chosen to work more discretely as a result.

At a time when protest movements had gathered pace throughout the region, governments seized on the opportunity afforded by the pandemic to disrupt that momentum by arresting HRDs. In July, the Palestinian Authority detained several HRDs from the movement 'Enough Communication Companies' after they organised a peaceful demonstration demanding an end to the corruption and nepotism within the government. Although the organisers stated that they would maintain social distance, protesters were detained on the grounds that they had violated COVID-19 regulations. The detainees were placed at greater risk by the unsanitary conditions in the crowded cells in which they were held. In March, Lebanese security forces removed the protest camp at Martyrs' Square in the heart of Beirut, using the lockdown and the suspension of the demonstrations to clear the camp. In Algeria, after the Hirak movement announced the suspension of demonstrations in March due to the pandemic, police detained several HRDs. Journalist Khaled Drareni was convicted of "inciting an unarmed gathering" and "endangering national unity" because of his work covering and documenting the demonstrations; in September he was sentenced to two years imprisonment.

## CRIMINALISATION, INCLUDING LENGTHY PRISON SENTENCES AND APPALLING TREATMENT IN JAIL, WAS COMMONPLACE AS PUNISHMENT FOR HRDS IN IRAN

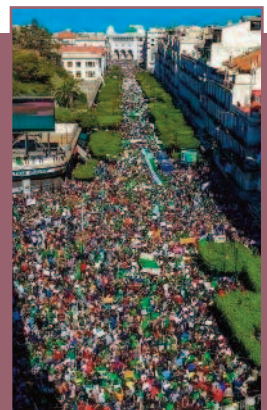
The rapid transformation to online work due to the pandemic left HRDs exposed to digital security risks, especially since many HRDs do not have sufficient awareness, resources or prior training to keep up with the latest digital safety protocols and tactics. Following their move to online work in Iraq, women's rights organisation Pana Center for Combating Violence Against Women was subjected to multiple digital attacks and attempts to gain control of their social media account and infect the organisation's devices.

Criminalisation, including lengthy prison sentences and appalling treatment in jail, was commonplace as punishment for HRDs in Iran. In April and May, labour rights defenders were subjected to court summonses, new charges and arbitrary denial of temporary release during the pandemic. [Jafar Azimzadeh](#), [Parvin Mohammadi](#), [Nahid Khodajou](#), [Shapour Ehsanirad](#), [Esmail Abdi](#) and [Mohammad Habibi](#) were targeted because of their criticism of the government's decision to only marginally increase minimum wage following negotiations which excluded stakeholders who work peacefully for the rights of workers and employers. The targeting of imprisoned labour rights defenders also came at a time when they had been critical of the government's handling of COVID-19 with regard to prison conditions and the temporary release of prisoners. In June, labour rights defender, [Sepideh Gholian](#), began serving a five-year prison sentence on charges of 'assembly and collusion against national security'; she refused to request a pardon from the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Women's rights defenders including [Yasaman Aryani](#), [Raheleh Ahmadi](#) and [Monireh Arabshahi](#) continued to serve long prison sentences on charges of "encouraging people to commit immorality and/or prostitution"

## [EMBLEMATIC CASE – ALGERIA]

After the **Hirak movement** suspended the peaceful demonstrations amidst the spread of COVID-19, the Algerian government launched a detention campaign that targeted several human rights defenders. Algerian authorities amended the Penal Code in April to impose harsh penalties for receiving foreign funding to 'carry out acts likely to undermine the security of the state, the stability and normal functioning of its institutions, national unity, territorial integrity, the fundamental interests of Algeria or public security and order.'

The Law also increased the penalty for the offence of contempt of public authorities and introduced the offence of publishing false news to undermine public security or order. Walid Kechida, cartoonist, blogger and founder of the *Hirak Memes* Facebook page, was detained in April and held in preventive detention for over seven months on charges of 'contempt of the President' for posting satirical cartoons on the social media. He was sentenced to three years in prison on 4 January 2021.



Source: Halim Fendial Facebook page



for their peaceful campaign against the obligatory hijab for women in Iran. In June, the 15-year prison sentence against [Saba Kord Afshari](#), a 22-year-old WHRD, was re-imposed after she removed her hijab while walking in the street. Saba was initially sentenced in August 2019 but appealed, and was acquitted on 17 March 2020.

After the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps admitted shooting down Ukraine International Airlines Flight 752 in January 2020, killing all 176 civilians on board, HRDs who organised protests were prosecuted. [Bahareh Hedayat](#), a student rights defender and campaigner for women's rights was sentenced to four years and eight months on 25 July.

Torture and ill-treatment was widespread in prisons in the region. In Saudi Arabia, [Abdullah Al-Hamid](#) died in April in hospital after being in a coma for 15 days. His death was a direct consequence of the ill-treatment he was subjected to in prison, which included depriving him of necessary medical care that doctors had repeatedly asked the authorities to provide. Reports of sexual assault and torture of WHRDs in Saudi jails also emerged in October following the publication of a [report](#) in advance of Saudi Arabia hosting the G20 summit in November. In Egypt, HRDs were frequently subjected to torture and ill-treatment during interrogation. In February, while being interrogated, [Patrick George](#), a researcher at the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, was tortured with electric shocks by police; the public prosecutor then ordered his remand under preventive detention.

## THE MOROCCAN LGBTIQ+ COMMUNITY RECEIVED ONLINE ATTACKS BY HUNDREDS OF PEOPLE ON FACEBOOK AND INSTAGRAM

There remained little physical space in the region for the work of LGBTIQ+ defenders, but this work did persist. Those who do attempt to openly defend the rights of these communities are subjected to smear campaigns, harassment, detention and attack. In late January, [Rania Amdouni](#), a member of Damj (the Tunisian Association for Justice and Equality), suffered an intensive online harassment campaign, which was amplified by clerics in several mosques in Tunis. She was labelled a “heretic” because of her work promoting the rights of the LGBTIQ+ community and she also received death threats. Also in Tunisia, 2019 Front Line Defenders Award Winner [Badr Baabou](#) was subjected to intensified surveillance by the police. His house was raided and vandalised, but no action was taken by the police to investigate the incident. Rasan Organization, an NGO that defends the rights of LGBTIQ+ people in Kurdistan was targeted by a satellite TV channel close to the main Islamic parties, alleging that the work violated the customs and traditions of conservative Kurdish society. The channel published a documentary video targeting the organization and the LGBTIQ+ community in Sulaymaniyah. The organisation has been subjected to numerous cyber attacks on its Facebook page, as well as online bullying of its members.

## [EMBLEMATIC CASE – SUDAN]

In Sudan, the joint civilian-military transitional government embarked on a review of legislation to bring it into line with international human rights standards, and to ensure the independence of the judiciary and the rule of law. In July, the government amended parts of the Criminal Code of 1991, including abolishing the crime of apostasy, removing the death penalty for murders committed by children, and removing the death penalty and flogging for sodomy.

The amendments also criminalize actions that include gender-based violence and provides for better protection for women. In September, the government agreed on principles separating state from religion, ending 30 years of Sharia law in Sudan. HRDs in Sudan have expressed hope that these and other law reforms will pave the way for investigations of past human rights violations committed by state actors. Despite these positive developments, strict conditions for registration of civil society organisations remained in place. HRDs continued to face threats, arrests, intimidation, harassment and death threats. Armed attacks in Darfur and other parts of Sudan, which were often quickly followed by internet shutdowns, made HRD documentation and monitoring of violations very difficult to carry out.



Credit: Ula Osman

The Moroccan LGBTIQ+ community received online attacks by hundreds of people on Facebook and Instagram, after a Turkey-based Moroccan Instagram influencer encouraged her followers to download gay dating apps with the supposed intention of highlighting the hypocrisy of Moroccan society by showing how many LGBTIQ+ people there were living in the country, where homosexuality is illegal. This led to a massive campaign where people created accounts on such apps and shared photos on Facebook and Instagram, leading to people being outed, ostracized and worse. In Egypt, Iraq and Libya, online attacks against HRDs defending the rights of LGBTIQ+ persons generated social mobilization campaigns against these communities, including by local media which took advantage of what was happening on social media to report on these online trends and by doing so, further spread the homophobic messaging contained in them.

In Morocco, several HRDs were charged as a result of social media posts. [Omar Naji](#) was charged with ‘defamation’, ‘the spread of false news for the purpose of insulting public institutions’ and ‘publishing photos of persons without their consent’ in relation to a Facebook post he made where he defended the economic rights of the street hawkers. Algerian environmental defender [Mohad Gasmi](#) was placed in preventive detention in June after being accused of “praising terrorism” as a result of Facebook posts he made in relation to his participation in peaceful protests organised by an anti-fracking movement in southern Algeria. Jasser Jaser, a Palestinian HRD, was arrested by the Palestinian Authority in relation to social media posts in which he defended the economic rights of Palestinians; he was charged with “transmitting insulting news” and sentenced to three months imprisonment, though he was acquitted on 8 December. Notorious Israeli company, NSO Group Technologies, which [sells](#) sophisticated spyware to regimes around the world without any safeguards on how it is used, provided many governments in the region with the tools to target human rights defenders. In July, a court in Tel Aviv rejected a lawsuit lodged by Amnesty International seeking the revocation of NSO Group’s export license.

In September, indigenous Bedouin HRDs in Israel, [Aziz Abu Madhi’m](#), [Saleem Abu Madhi’m](#) and [Sheikh Sayah Abu Madhi’m](#), were convicted of “trespassing with intent to commit an offence”, “breaching legal orders” and “unlawful entry into public land” for continuing to reside in a village that is not recognised by the Israeli authorities despite its establishment preceding that of the State of Israel. The authorities, which consider it to be built on state land, had previously demolished the village in 2010.

## [HRD-IMPACT: SUDAN]



*Text for Photo: Women protesters taking to the streets to march for women's rights in Sudan. Credit: Ula Osman*

Sudanese women HRDs have been fighting for years to end female genital mutilation (FGM), which is a widespread practice in the country. In July, the Sudanese government finally ratified amendments that criminalises this practice. Furthermore, women no longer need permission from a male relative to travel with children. The Public Order Law, which had been widely used to arrest, flog and deprive women of their rights through its prohibition of “indecent and immoral acts” was repealed in late 2019, reducing some of the obstacles faced by women to engage in human rights work in both public and private spheres.

For more than two decades, WHRDs in Sudan have fought against discriminatory laws and led a number of civil society initiatives, including the ‘**No to Oppression against Women Initiative**’, started in 2009 following the arrest of a number of women for wearing trousers in a restaurant in the capital. They organised protests to raise awareness of their rights, issued statements rejecting the laws, and supported survivors of gender-based violence through their mass presence in the courts.

The physical safety of HRDs continued to be a major concern in conflict contexts. In Yemen, warring parties subjected HRDs, particularly journalists, to enforced disappearances, prolonged detentions and unfair trials. In April, a court in Sanaa sentenced four journalists to death on charges of ‘broadcasting false and malicious news and rumours in support of Saudi-led coalition crimes on Yemen’. The four journalists have been in [detention](#) since June 2015 following their arrest as a result of their reporting on human rights abuses.

In Libya, HRDs were victims of harassment, abduction and violence by both Eastern and Western-based authorities and their affiliated armed groups. In August, armed groups in Tripoli and Sirte violently attacked peaceful anti-corruption protesters, leaving four dead and many injured. A number of protesters were detained in unknown locations for several weeks, including Mohaned al-Kawafi, the coordinator of the newly established 8/23 youth protest movement. In November, WHRD and lawyer Hanan al-Barassi, was shot dead in Benghazi city centre by a group of unidentified men following her online criticism of corruption and misuse of power by leaders of the Libyan Armed Forces. In Western Sahara, Moroccan authorities intensified surveillance and harassment of Sahrawi HRDs following the escalation of the military confrontation between Morocco and the Polisario Front in November, which ended the cease-fire agreement the two parties had signed in 1991. WHRD [Mahfouda Bamba Lefkire](#) was released in May after serving six months imprisonment in El Ayoun prison after being charged with “obstruction of justice” and “insulting a public servant”. Even after her release, she was severely harassed by the Moroccan authorities; her family and friends were not permitted to visit her in her house and she was under constant surveillance. In an article posted online, she was accused of committing adultery. In November, Moroccan Special Forces raided the houses of two leading members of the Nushatta Foundation for Media and Human Rights and verbally abused and threatened their families. In Iraq, the [Organisation of Woman's Freedom in Iraq](#) (OWFI) faced dissolution on allegations that the establishment of some of its shelters violated Iraq's ‘Law on Non-Governmental Organisations’; the case was dismissed in November. OWFI works on empowering and protecting women who face violence or find themselves in situations of risk.

## [HRD-IMPACT: TUNISIA]

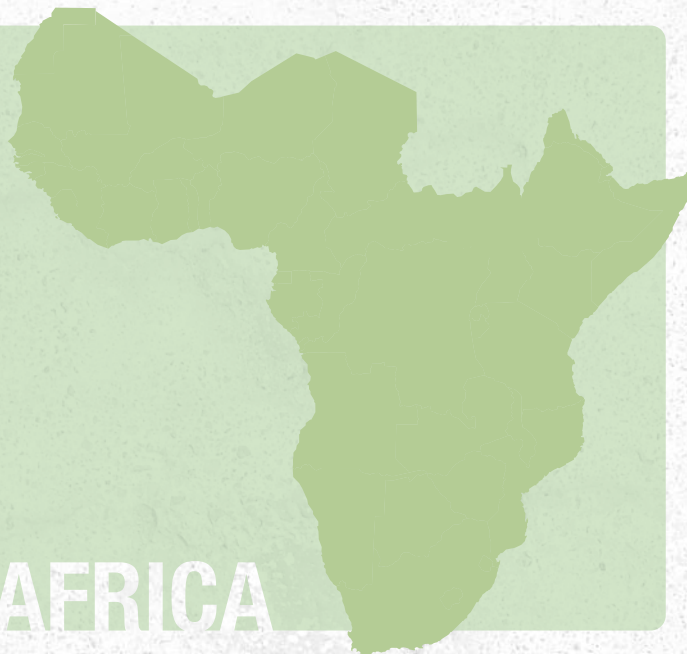
In October 2020, the Tunisian Parliament rejected the "Repression of attacks against armed forces" bill. This was after several campaigns, joint petitions to parliamentarians and demonstrations organized by Tunisian human rights defenders against this bill. These activities were led and coordinated by the **Hassebhom (Hold them Accountable) Campaign** which brought together a coalition of human rights defenders, bloggers and NGOs.

The bill would have given the Tunisian Security Forces authorisation to use lethal force in order to protect property. It would also have exempted the security forces from being prosecuted for serious human rights violations, and from criminal liability.



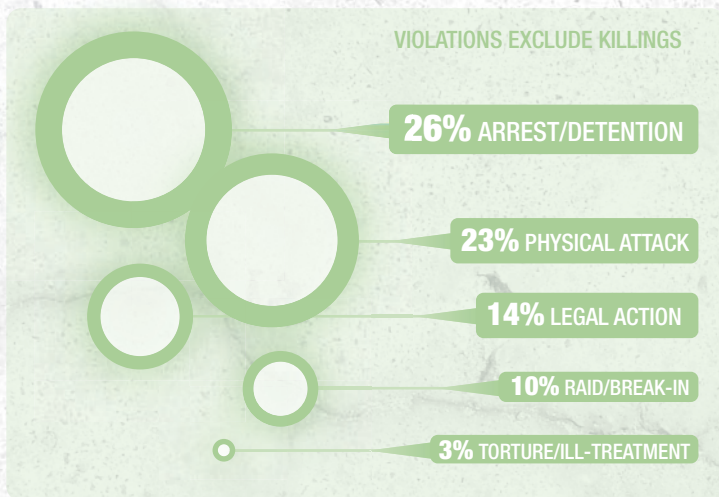
*Tunisian protesters shout slogans during a demonstration in Tunis protesting the high cost of living, increasing poverty and random arrests in the country. Credit: Malek Mahouachi*





# SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

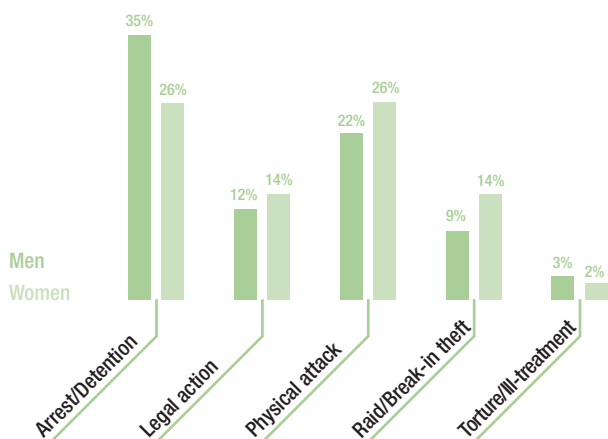
## TOP FIVE VIOLATIONS REPORTED TO FLD: SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA 2020



**2**  
HRDS KILLED IN  
SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

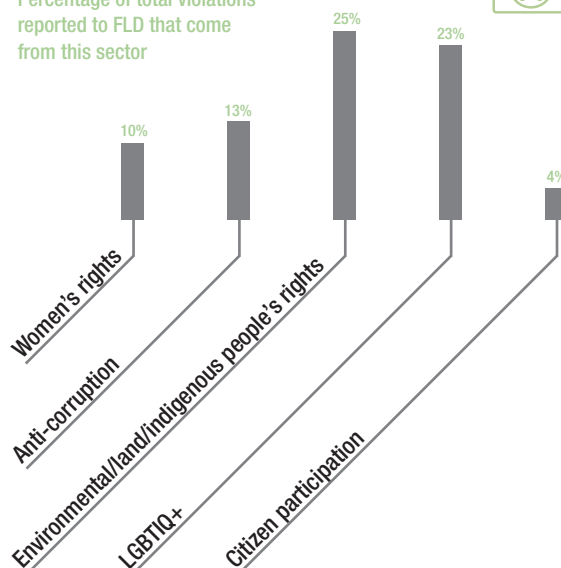


## HOW MEN AND WOMEN WERE TARGETED VIOLATIONS EXCLUDE KILLINGS



## WHAT ARE THE RISKIEST SECTORS?

Percentage of total violations reported to FLD that come from this sector





**A**S IN PREVIOUS YEARS, ELECTIONS IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA INCREASED THE RISKS FACED BY HRDS BOTH IN TERMS OF PRE-ELECTION CRACKDOWNS ON CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE CONTESTED NATURE OF SOME ELECTIONS WHICH LED TO PROTESTS AND OFTEN VIOLENT RESPONSES FROM THE SECURITY FORCES. INTENSELY CONTESTED ELECTIONS TOOK PLACE IN BURUNDI, CÔTE D'IVOIRE, GUINEA, TANZANIA AND TOGO. DECISIONS BY PRESIDENTS IN CÔTE D'IVOIRE AND GUINEA TO RUN FOR THIRD TERMS IN CONTRAVENTION OF NATIONAL CONSTITUTIONS LED TO PROTESTS WHICH WERE BRUTALLY SUPPRESSED, LEADING TO THE DEATHS OF DEMONSTRATORS AND THE TARGETING OF HRDS.

Ivorian WHRD Pulcherie Gbalet, president of Alternative Citoyenne Ivoirienne (ACI), was arrested in August along with a number of colleagues after she called for peaceful protests against a third term of President Alassane Ouattara. She was indicted on insurrection charges and remained in detention at year's end. Ouattara was announced the winner on 2 November with a reported 94% of the vote. Ahead of Tanzanian elections in late October, the country's only formal HRD network, the Tanzania Human Rights Defenders Coalition (THRDC), was forced to suspend its operations following incessant intimidation and interference in its activities by the authorities, including the freezing of its bank accounts for allegedly not declaring funds. The THRDC had been previously disqualified by the electoral commission from providing voter education and monitoring the elections. President John Magufuli won re-election with a reported 84% of the vote.

---

## **ACROSS THE REGION, HRDS PROMOTING GOOD GOVERNANCE, TRANSPARENCY, SOCIAL JUSTICE, ANTI-CORRUPTION AND ACCOUNTABILITY WERE SUBJECTED TO CRIMINAL CHARGES, PHYSICAL ATTACKS, INTIMIDATION AND SMEAR CAMPAIGNS**

---

In Malawi, where dozens of people were killed in 2019 after protesting a rigged election, the courts annulled the result in February citing “widespread, systematic and grave” irregularities and ordered a re-run which took place in June. A coalition backed by many human rights defenders won the elections. The result marked a remarkable turnaround in the fortunes of [Timothy Mtambo](#), Chair of the Malawian Human Rights Defenders Coalition. Mtambo received a death threat from a councillor in the ruling party in 2019 as a result of his organisation of protests against the mismanagement of the May elections. Following attacks on social media, in October 2019, Timothy survived an assassination attempt and in March of 2020 he was charged with “inciting another to contravene the law” for calling for protests. Following the election in June, Timothy was appointed Minister of Civic Education and National Unity in the new government.

In Uganda, HRDs were targeted in advance of the elections on 14 January 2021. In December, [Nicholas Opiyo](#), Executive Director of Chapter Four, and four other lawyers and a human rights officer in the organisation were taken by more than a dozen plainclothes armed men from a restaurant in Kampala. They were handcuffed, blindfolded, and whisked away in a tinted van in a convoy of three vehicles. Nicholas, on behalf of the organisation, is now facing charges of money laundering and “related malicious acts”. Nicholas’ arrest came barely a week after he represented in court two NGOs – Uganda National NGO Forum and the Uganda Women’s Network – whose accounts were frozen by security forces over terrorism allegations.

Across the region, HRDs promoting good governance, transparency, social justice, anti-corruption and accountability were subjected to criminal charges, physical attacks, intimidation and smear campaigns. In Zimbabwe, award-winning journalist [Hopewell Chin’ono](#) was arrested in July for allegedly inciting protests, but this was clearly in retaliation for exposing alleged corruption on the part of the former Minister of Health in procuring PPE funded by Development Finance Institutions at the beginning of the COVID-19 restrictions in the country. He was charged with “incitement to commit public violence” and was released on bail on the condition that he desist from using social media for his journalism but was rearrested after he refused to comply with this condition. A protest against corruption and poor governance in Zimbabwe was scheduled for 31 July but had to be aborted after a brutal clampdown by the government. HRDs were abducted, detained and tortured in the month preceding the event.

Arbitrary detention and arrest of HRDs was widespread in sub-Saharan Africa, with little predictability around what transgressions would lead to detention; however, HRDs who challenged government narratives or sought to hold governments to account were clearly targeted. Throughout the year, numerous HRDs and journalists were arrested in Angola, Cameroon, DRC, Mauritania, Niger and Togo for denouncing corruption, impunity for human rights violations, poor or corrupt governance and misinformation promoted by governments. Togolese investigative journalist [Ferdinand Ayité](#) was fined in November for defamation following an investigative report uncovering a case of misappropriation of funds of between 400 and 500 billion CFA francs (610 to 760 million euros), related to the import of petroleum products. This was despite the fact that an audit requested by the Togolese authorities confirmed that the allegations contained in his article accurately portrayed the oil import situation in the country.

In February, 14 human rights defenders were arrested in Mauritania after attending a meeting organised by *Mauritanie Verte et Démocratique* (For a Green and Democratic Mauritania) and *Alliance pour la Refondation de l'Etat Mauritanien* (AREM), an organisation promoting good governance and fighting against impunity. Those detained included 2020 Front Line Defenders Africa Award Winner [Mekfoula Mint Brahim](#), who was charged with an unauthorised gathering and belonging to a group promoting secularism. In January, Mekfoula faced severe backlash and was subject to an online smear campaign for calling for the release of nine LGBTIQ+ persons who were arrested during a private party in Nouakchott. She publicly denounced the growth of religious extremism within Mauritanian society and regularly engages in empowerment projects with women and girls in rural communities. In Chad, [Alain Kemba Didah](#) was charged with committing “act of rebellion and disturbance of public order” in November for his attempts to organise a citizens’ forum to discuss issues of public interest. The forum was banned and when HRDs tried to hold a press conference to denounce the ban, police surrounded the venue and prevented access to the building. Alain is the coordinator of *Mouvement Citoyen le Temps* (Citizen Movement the Time), a movement working to engage all levels of civil society in the democratic process by advocating for freedom of expression and assembly. It mainly conducts its advocacy through campaigns and public debates. Alain remained in custody at year’s end.

---

## LEGAL PROCEEDINGS AGAINST DEFENDERS FREQUENTLY REMAIN OPEN FOR A PERIOD OF YEARS ADDING TO THE PRESSURE BEING EXERTED ON HRDS

---

Legal proceedings against defenders frequently remain open for a period of years adding to the pressure being exerted on HRDs. In December, the hearing of five defenders who are members of *Dynamique Citoyenne* (Dynamic Citizen), a network of Cameroonian civil society organisations was adjourned; it has been [adjourned](#) over thirty times since they were arrested in 2015 on charges of rebellion and illegal demonstration. The five defenders had organised a civil society workshop to mark the International Day of Democracy. In Uganda, [Esther](#) and [Tom Bagoole](#) have faced frequent harassment, intimidation and attack since 2018 after seeking justice for two girls who had been raped at an orphanage founded by the couple. In 2018, their home in Kawanda, Waikato district was attacked, Tom was beaten up and their 12-year-old son was abducted, beaten and abandoned in a nearby village. In 2019, there was a second break-in and Esther was struck by a car in what she believes was a targeted attack. The threats continued into 2020 and their home was broken into again. The couple have filed repeated complaints with the authorities, but have received no information about the status of an investigation nor have they received any protection measures from the police.

The DRC remained an extremely challenging environment for HRDs to work in, with death threats, physical attacks and detentions targeting those working on land and environmental rights, defending LGBTIQ+ rights, promoting good governance, exposing abuses by armed groups and working against recruitment of child soldiers. Numerous defenders were detained for peacefully demonstrating, including WHRD [Anne-Marie Mabo Elumba](#) who was arrested for protesting against a decision of the Attorney General regarding a workers’ rights case. In Mongala Province, three HRDs and one journalist were arbitrarily detained as a result of their participation in a sit-in outside the office of the Governor, calling for his resignation due to his mismanagement of the province and the poor coverage of the social and economic needs of the population. On 21 May, in Beni, North Kivu, [Frédéric-Marcus Kambale](#), a HRD and member of the youth civil society

movement [Lutte pour le Changement](#) (LUCHA), was shot and killed when police dispersed a peaceful protest organised to denounce the levels of violence in the city. On the day of his funeral, seven members of LUCHA were arbitrarily arrested when they placed a box draped in the DRC flag in front of the Kiwanja police station to symbolise Kambale's coffin and denounce his death. In July, a police officer was sentenced to life imprisonment for the killing, and the State was held co-responsible for Kambale's death and ordered to pay US\$100,000 to the victim's family in a civil court. This compensation had not been paid as of writing.

## GOVERNMENTS IN THE REGION, PARTICULARLY UGANDA AND TANZANIA, USED COVID-19 RESTRICTIONS TO CARRY OUT RAIDS ON LGBTIQ+ SHELTERS, ASSAULT THE OCCUPANTS AND ARREST AND DETAIN THEM FOR BREACHING LOCKDOWN RULES

Although generally the region was not as impacted by the pandemic as others, restrictions did have effects on the work of HRDs. States of emergencies and curfews were introduced in many countries, which often meant that defenders could not conduct field visits when news of violations reached them and their assistance was sought. In May, when 42 transgender members of Association Colibri were arrested and beaten in Bafoussam in Cameroon during IDAHOT\* celebrations, HRDs were unable to travel to the area to provide support. Governments in the region, particularly Uganda and Tanzania, used COVID-19 restrictions to carry out raids on LGBTIQ+ shelters, assault the occupants and arrest and detain them for breaching lockdown rules. HRDs who took in LGBTIQ+ people or sex workers when they were forced out by their families were also subjected to break-ins and verbal and physical assaults because they had opened their homes to marginalised communities. In June, two men broke into the Dar Es Salaam home of transgender WHRD [Clara Devis](#), while she was out, and brutally assaulted two LGBTIQ+ community members staying with her. For years, the WHRD has offered shelter to at-risk and homeless LGBTIQ+ and sex worker community members, who experienced even higher risk of homelessness during COVID-19 due to family violence, job insecurity, police raids, and loss of clients. When Clara returned to her home, the victims told her that the attackers said they knew about her work “promoting homosexuality” and “keeping homosexual people in this house” and had demanded to know where she was, where she kept her laptop, and threatened to come back and repeat the assault if the WHRD did not stop her activism. In Uganda, where homosexuality is illegal, a shelter providing a safe space to LGBTIQ+ youth was raided by security forces. Among the 23 people arrested and charged with ‘a negligent act likely to spread infection of disease’ were HRDs working at the shelter. The arrests ignored the particular vulnerabilities of this community and that they were complying with a government order to stay indoors. In general, LGBTIQ+ people and defenders continued to face evictions, raids and

\* International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia

## [EMBLEMATIC CASE – MAURITANIA]

### THE FIGHT AGAINST RACIAL DISCRIMINATION AND SLAVERY

At a time when racial inequality has been pushed onto the international agenda as a result of the Black Lives Matter movement, the fight against racial discrimination and slavery continues in Mauritania. Following her criticism of these ongoing practices, WHRD [Mariem Cheikh](#) was charged with “racist comments through social media”. She was separated from her baby, who she was breastfeeding, and detained for eight days. Mariem remains under judicial supervision.

Despite criminalising the practice of slavery in 2015, it is estimated that more than 2% of Mauritania's population are enslaved, made up mostly of the marginalised Haratine people. Mariem is a member of the Initiative for the Resurgence of the Abolitionist Movement (IRA), an organisation dedicated to the eradication of slavery which has been subjected to judicial harassment for over a decade. Successive attempts since 2011 to apply for registration as an NGO have been unsuccessful. Mariem and her colleagues have experienced multiple risks because of their work, including detention, threats, defamation and disappearance, yet they have persevered in their critical work.



state-instigated community ostracisation particularly in Uganda and Tanzania. Elsewhere, HRDs assisting their communities with humanitarian relief during the pandemic faced attacks, including in Cuando Cubango in Angola, where members of Mbakita were detained, harassed and received death threats.

HRDs defending communities' rights to land experienced a range of violations in the region, from intimidation to murder. Forced evictions implemented by private companies, often with the collusion of government authorities, were commonplace and frequently resulted in arrests and assaults of defenders and community members. In Kenya in May, WHRD [Ruth Mumbi](#) received a message threatening to make her "disappear" if she did not remove posts she had made on social media. The posts documented the forced eviction of 5,000 households in Kariobangi, an estate in north-eastern Nairobi, and the impact of the evictions on the tenants. In February, three land rights defenders from Kiryandongo district in Uganda were [detained](#) twice in the same month and severely beaten in detention. After refusing to sign documents agreeing to vacate their land in exchange for their freedom, they were charged with trespassing on private land. According to local reports, their houses were bulldozed by an agribusiness company without explanation and their families threatened by workers. This move against the three HRDs formed part of a pattern of reprisals for their activities mobilising local communities to defend their land rights and opposing the forced evictions perpetrated by companies implementing farming projects in the area. In the following months, more than 50 families were violently evicted from their land in Kiryandongo without adequate remediation.

## IN MANY CASE INVOLVING CONFLICT OVER LAND, INTIMIDATION CAMPAIGNS HAVE BEEN WAGED FOR A NUMBER OF YEARS

In late December 2019, two HRDs from a community in Hoima, Uganda testified in a French court in which Total Petroleum Company was on trial for breaching French laws on compensation for local communities. The two defenders were harassed by authorities on their return from Paris; they were briefly detained at Entebbe Airport on false accusations of using fake passports and released after 20 hours. In early 2020, three additional witnesses reported being subjected to intimidation, forcing them to relocate from their usual places of residence. The targeting of defenders in Uganda has highlighted the need for better state protection; since 2014 a civil society coalition has pushed for the enactment of a HRD Protection Bill and in July of last year such a Bill was finally [tabled](#) in Parliament.

## [EMBLEMATIC CASE – ZAMBIA]

Civil-society led networks of human rights defenders are often one of the most important and effective protection tools. Yet establishing these networks remains a challenge, even in countries which had traditionally been more receptive to civil society organising. This was evident in the case of Arthur Muyunda from Zambia, who was subjected to a campaign of intimidation and harassment for his mobilising efforts in bringing Zambian HRDs together as the coordinator of the Zambian Human Rights Defenders Coalition (ZHRDC). Arthur is also a member of and Programmes Manager for the Southern African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (SACCORD).

Over the course of ten days in August he was detained twice by police, threatened at gunpoint and warned 'to be careful'. The perimeter fence to his home was breached and though he reported the incursion to the police, no investigation took place. Arthur was subsequently advised by a contact not to be home alone for security reasons during the upcoming weekend. When he returned to his house the following Monday, he discovered that it had been burgled and searched. Among the items taken were a solar power inverter and a television. The friend with whom he stayed over the weekend was visited by unidentified individuals on the night of 31 August who searched his house, but did not take anything. Arthur was informed by a confidential source that two police officers had been assigned to follow him. Despite these actions by the Zambian authorities, Arthur continues to work, to organise and to mobilise on behalf of HRDs in the country.





In many cases involving conflict over land, intimidation campaigns have been waged for a number of years. In August in Cameroon, Jules Dumas Nguebou received a phone call from an unknown individual informing the HRD that he had been paid to kill him. Jules is director of Actions Solidaires de Soutien aux Organisations et d'Appui aux Libertés (Solidarity Actions in Support of Organizations and in Support of Freedoms - ASSOAL), an organisation that fights against the eviction and land-grabbing of vulnerable populations. Jules' house has been broken into twice in the last four years, with the attackers killing his dog on one occasion and injuring a security guard with a machete on another occasion. Although he filed a police complaint after the break-in and attack he did not receive any information about an investigation.

HRDs in the DRC were criminalized when working to hold companies accountable for promises made to communities at the outset of projects. Several land rights defenders from Tshopo province were targeted for opposing the work of the agribusiness company Plantations et Huileries du Congo (FERONIA-PHC). They believe they were arrested for trying to hold the company to account for its promises to build a school, a health centre and a water borehole before starting any exploitation of the lands used by the community. The defenders report that the company violated this agreement by expanding its oil palm plantations before construction of the promised community facilities had been completed. Community members and land rights defenders faced harassment, intimidation and arbitrary arrests on trumped-up charges. Five defenders arrested in September 2019 spent more than six months in detention before being granted release on bail. They are still facing charges in connection with their protest against the activities of FERONIA-PHC, despite irregularities reported during the first hearing.

## HRDS WORKING ON HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES IN THE CONTEXT OF CONFLICT IN WEST AND CENTRAL AFRICA WERE REGULARLY TARGETED FOR DENOUNCING VIOLATIONS COMMITTED BY BOTH ARMED GROUPS AND SECURITY FORCES

HRDs were targeted for objecting to the impact of coal mining in South Africa (see Global Overview) and diamond mines in Zimbabwe, among other countries. In Sierra Leone, Joseph Rahall, a prominent land rights defender, is facing trial after being accused in 2019 of defamation by the multinational corporation, Socfin Group, which exploits palm oil and

### [HRD-IMPACT: NIGERIA]

#### SPECIAL ANTI-ROBBERY SQUAD (SARS) DISSOLVED



Source: Facebook

Following years of abusive practices in Nigeria, the notorious Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) was dissolved after a grassroots campaign spearheaded by young Nigerians. Initiated in 2016 by a human rights defender who started the EndSARS campaign on social media and then taking on new popularity in 2017 around the #ENDSARS hashtag on Twitter, the movement received new momentum on 3 October 2020 when a video showing a SARS police officer shooting a young Nigerian started trending online; the person who filmed the brutality was himself arrested after it went viral. Two days later, on 5 October, another report surfaced of SARS officers killing a 20-year-old up and coming musician.

Previous protests had seen leaders arrested and HRDs who had provided medical services to injured protesters or raised funds to cover the legal expenses were threatened with being charged with terrorism-related offences. After a series of renewed protests, the government announced that the SARS was being disbanded on 11 October, in what was a significant accomplishment by civil society in the country. However, a team of investigators composed of civil society organisations and human rights bodies is yet to be established to investigate alleged abuses by SARS.

rubber in West Africa. Rahall has been a prominent voice denouncing human rights violations committed by the company since 2011, notably against community members in Sahn Malen chiefdom, whose customary land has been developed into an oil palm plantation without their free, prior and informed consent. Multinational companies are operating throughout the region to exploit corrupted systems of land ownership and documentation to take over vast swathes of land for palm oil production, rubber extraction and other activities that have resulted in forced evictions and other human rights abuses.

As elsewhere, increasing numbers of defenders carried out their work online in 2020 which was accompanied by efforts of state authorities to monitor their communications. In December, Citizen Lab at the University of Toronto [reported](#) that the governments of Botswana, Equatorial Guinea, Kenya, Nigeria, Zambia and Zimbabwe were using surveillance platforms developed by an affiliate of the Israeli-owned NSO Group to spy on the communications of HRDs, journalists and opposition figures. In Kenya, an indigenous peoples' rights activist working on land rights and forest conservation had their mobile phone communications intercepted which led to intimidation and eventual self-censorship. Other efforts to disrupt the work of HRDs took the form of internet shutdowns, particularly in the lead-up to and during elections, or during anti-government protests, such as in Burundi, Togo and Tanzania. In Chad, access to WhatsApp and other social media platforms was blocked for over a month, a tactic the government has used a number of times over the past four years. These shutdowns and blockages pose significant security risks to HRDs given their reliance on such platforms to both carry out their work and to strategise on their security. At a time of a global pandemic, blocking popular communication channels exacerbated insecurity both for HRDs and the wider population.

On social media platforms, HRDs were often subjected to targeted campaigns of intimidation and harassment leading some to delete their online profiles, significantly reducing their reach and increasing their risks. This was the case for Arthur Muyunda, a member of the Zambian Human Rights Defenders Coalition who removed his Facebook account due to constant threats and intimidation. Elsewhere, HRDs were prosecuted for content they posted on social media, especially when those posts alleged corruption by officials. In June, WHRD [Samira Sabou](#) was arrested in Niger and charged with defamation under the country's Cybercrime Law, following a complaint by the son of the President. Her arrest was linked to a post on social media the previous month, in which she referred to an audit of the Ministry of Defence regarding embezzlement and overcharging in the purchase of military equipment for the Army. Samira spent two months in detention before the High Court of Niamey dismissed all charges against her.

## [HRD-IMPACT: KENYA]

### DAMAGES AWARDED IN POISONING CASE

After 11 years of campaigning, the [Center for Justice Governance and Environmental Action](#) (CJGEA) in Kenya won huge damages on behalf of the Owino Uhuru community whose members had been poisoned by lead from a nearby smelting plant. CJGEA was founded by [Phyllis Omidio](#) in 2009 to promote environmental justice after her infant son tested positive for lead poisoning while she worked at a lead-acid battery recycling plant. In 2016 CJGEA launched a class-action lawsuit against the owners of the smelting plant and the government for violating environmental and human rights law.

At numerous steps along the way, efforts were made to stop CJGEA's work; in her 2013 testimony at the Dublin Platform for Human Rights Defenders, Phyllis [said](#), "CJGEA came under attack from the government. Police raids were conducted on our offices and my son and I were accosted and abused by gunmen while entering my house in late 2011. I was accused of funding illegal groups and being a terrorist. In 2012 while planning a public demo to lobby and protest the injustice, I was arrested alongside 17 other CJGEA employees and community members." In 2017, the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and the Environment [called](#) on the Kenyan government to offer more protection to Phyllis and her colleagues who were facing death threats. In June 2020, after a five year legal battle, the Owino Uhuru community was awarded US \$12 million.



Credit: Goldman Environmental Prize

Ongoing and newly begun conflicts in South Sudan, Mozambique and Ethiopia limited the operating environment for human rights defence in those countries. The Government of South Sudan continued to target what it viewed as dissenting voices, and HRDs who critiqued the operations of any of the warring sides ran the risk of being labelled as rebels or enemies. This resulted in fear and insecurity among HRDs who frequently self-censored and avoided areas of conflict in these countries. This was also true for HRDs in the Cabo Delgado province in Mozambique and the Tigray region of Ethiopia. HRDs working on human rights abuses in the context of conflict in West and Central Africa were regularly targeted for denouncing violations committed by both armed groups and security forces. Authorities across the region labelled these defenders as supporters of terrorism, or accused them of sapping the morale of the military. HRDs working on conflict-related human rights issues in Burkina Faso, Chad and Cameroon regularly faced intimidation and smear campaigns. In Burkina Faso, Daouda Diallo, Secretary General of *Collectif contre l'impunité et la Stigmatisation des Communauté*, a human rights organisation fighting stigmatisation of ethnic minorities, was threatened by a so-called self-defence group known as 'Koglweogo' after he implicated it in human rights violations.

## METHODOLOGY



### Methodology for recording the killing of human rights defenders

Coordinated by Front Line Defenders, the [HRD Memorial](#) is a joint initiative by a network of national and international human rights organisations that are committed to working together to gather and verify information on the killing of human rights defenders (HRDs) whose deaths are connected to their human rights activities. The project was launched in November 2016 with a mandate to gather both real-time data on the killing of HRDs and historic data on killings dating back to 1998 when the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders came into effect.

**Methodology / data collection:** The HRD Memorial relies on a network of partners and other human rights organisations to gather and verify data relating to the killing of HRDs at national levels. The HRD Memorial brings partner-verified data sets together under the HRD Memorial umbrella, and carries out systematic open source data gathering in a number of languages.

**Verification:** The HRD Memorial verifies that each case identified by the methodology above meets the criteria for inclusion in the dataset. In addition to the original source, two further credible sources are sought per case.

**Access to data:** The HRD Memorial is an ever evolving database on the killing of HRDs. We acknowledge that the dataset presented in February 2021 on the killings that have taken place between 1 January 2020 – 31 December 2020 is likely to be incomplete. This is due to a number of factors including: 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; and suppression of information by governments and vested interest groups.

The HRD Memorial Network is made up of international and national organisations, who gather and verify data on the killing of HRDs. The Network members are: ACI-Participa Honduras; Afghanistan Human Rights Defenders Committee (AHRDC); Amnesty International; Brazilian Committee of Human Rights Defenders; Comité Cerezo (Mexico); FIDH; Front Line Defenders; Global Witness; Human Rights Defenders' Alert – India; Karapatan (The Philippines); OMCT; Programa Somos Defensores (Colombia); Red TDT (Mexico); and UDEFEGUA (Guatemala).

ACCUDEH, Article 19, AWID, CALAS, CIVICUS, CPT, ESCR-Net, East and Horn of Africa Defend the Defenders Programme, Forum Asia, ILGA, Iniciativa Mesoamericana de Mujeres Defensoras de Derechos Humanos (IM-Defensoras), PBI, Protection International, RMP-NMR, Southern Africa Human Rights Defenders Network (SAHRDN) and Urgent Action Fund also support the project's mandate.



### **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 through its public and private advocacy and its grants programme. While Front Line Defenders documents the violations against HRDs both in its casework and the protection grants programme, what kind of support HRDs need and determine is strategic is quite different by programme area; for example, of cases for public advocacy Front Line Defenders engaged last year, only 5% involved violations against LGBTIQ+ defenders. Yet 15% of grants provided went to LGBTIQ+ human rights defenders.

It is important to note some caveats with the data presented on pages 4 and 5.

1. The statistics are drawn from 919 recorded violations, which combine information from Front Line Defenders advocacy and grants programmes.
2. Incidents of killings, surveillance and threats have been removed from this dataset. Given surveillance and threats are such common violations, they are inconsistently reported by HRDs.
3. 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. Particularly last year, when Front Line Defenders field staff was largely unable to travel, it can be assumed that there is much information missing from HRDs in rural, less well-connected areas.
4. 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 and may turn to their own networks, or remain silent about the violations.

# FRONT LINE DEFENDERS

## GLOBAL ANALYSIS 2020

### DUBLIN

Front Line Defenders – Head Office  
Second Floor, Grattan House  
Temple Road, Blackrock, A94 FA39  
Co. Dublin, Ireland

Tel: +353 1 212 37 50  
Fax: +353 1 212 10 01  
Email: [info@frontlinedefenders.org](mailto:info@frontlinedefenders.org)

### BRUSSELS

Front Line Defenders – EU Office  
Square Marie-Louise 72  
1000 Brussels  
Belgium

Tel: +32 230 93 83  
Fax: +32 230 00 28  
Email: [euoffice@frontlinedefenders.org](mailto:euoffice@frontlinedefenders.org)

Follow Front Line Defenders on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram

[www.facebook.com/FrontLineDefenders](https://www.facebook.com/FrontLineDefenders)  
[twitter.com/FrontLineHRD](https://twitter.com/FrontLineHRD)  
[www.youtube.com/FrontLineHRD](https://www.youtube.com/FrontLineHRD)  
[www.instagram.com/frontlinedefenders/](https://www.instagram.com/frontlinedefenders/)



Front Line Defenders subscribes to the Dóchas Code of Conduct on Images and Messages.



[WWW.FRONTLINEDEFENDERS.ORG](http://WWW.FRONTLINEDEFENDERS.ORG)



The ideas, opinions and comments in this publication are entirely the responsibility of Front Line Defenders and do not necessarily represent or reflect Irish Aid policy



This document has been produced with the financial assistance of the European Union. The contents of this document are the sole responsibility of Front Line Defenders and can under no circumstances be regarded as reflecting the position of the European Union



Responsibility for the content lies entirely with Front Line Defenders. The Government of Sweden does not necessarily share the expressed views and interpretations.

