



Brief by Front Line Defenders at the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence

Tuesday, 28th September 2021, 12.30pm

1. Who we are and what we do

Front Line Defenders is an international organisation based here in Ireland, but with staff in all regions of the world, that works exclusively for the protection of human rights defenders. Human rights defenders are regular people who work non-violently for any or all of the human rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and because of their bravery and conviction to stand up for the rights of others, many of them are at risk.

To begin, I would first like to share the words of woman human rights defender Claudelice Santos, from Brazil:

"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"

Claudelice Santos, Brazil, 2020

Front Line Defenders provides practical support to human rights defenders [or HRDs] through a security grants programme, digital and personal trainings and consultations, and advocacy efforts with national governments and intergovernmental bodies, amongst other programme areas. To date this year we have awarded more than 641 emergency protection grants totalling almost €1,800,000 across 89 countries. 108 of those grants have been recently awarded to HRDs in Afghanistan. Other countries receiving the most protection grants in 2021 are Nicaragua, Belarus, Turkey and Colombia.

I'd like to take this opportunity to publicly thank the Irish Government for the commitment and leadership it has shown on the international stage vis-à-vis the protection of human rights defenders at risk. I'd also like to acknowledge Irish Aid as key partners of Front Line Defenders, which further reflects the commitment of the Irish Government to supporting human rights defenders at risk.

It is essential that human rights defenders' protection remains a key component of Irish Foreign Policy. Against a backdrop of increased political extremism, a global backlash against civil society and the erosion of human rights norms, human rights defenders are

vital actors pushing for more progressive, inclusive societies, where civil and political rights, and economic, social and cultural rights for all can be a reality.

International support to human rights defenders at risk can enhance their resilience and their capacity to manage risks, foster a more enabling environment, dissuade attacks, facilitate recovery and enable them to continue to carry out their work.

Countries like Ireland, working both bilaterally and through its membership of the EU and the UN, have an opportunity to show even greater leadership on the issue of human rights defenders protection by putting the voices of defenders and their protection needs at the heart of Ireland's international foreign and domestic policy agendas.

2. Overview of situation for human rights defenders globally

It is fair to say that the universal nature of human rights is being increasingly challenged. Democratic values are under threat as authoritarianism, unaccountable governance, systemic corruption, and extremist politics are all on the rise. Furthermore, there is a concerted ideological effort to undermine human rights, as well as a high priority focus on repressing and discrediting human rights defenders across the globe.

While defenders have always been attacked in certain quarters, these attacks have broadened in scope and have also started to occur in societies that were previously deemed more liberal. The severity, intensity and range of threats faced by defenders have increased dramatically in the last ten years. Physical attacks, detention, arrest and imprisonment remain all too frequent in the daily work of defenders, and women human rights defenders and LGBTIQ+ rights defenders face the additional risks of gender based violence and defamation.

Yet, despite the increasingly restrictive environment, human rights defenders continue to be active in every part of the world, standing up to injustice, adapting and continuing their work and bringing about real change through their conviction, their energy and their tenacity.

3. Focus areas

I would like to take the opportunity today to highlight three priority focus areas for Front Line Defenders, and to discuss what actions Ireland can take to help to bring about positive impact.

A particularly distressing trend that Front Line Defenders has been actively tracking since 2016 is the numbers of killings of human rights defenders reported across all regions of the world. At this juncture I would like to invite our HRD Memorial Project Coordinator to give you a brief overview of the HRD Memorial project, with a particular focus on the phenomenal rate of killings of human rights defenders in Colombia in recent years. We will also have an opportunity to hear from Colombian woman human rights defender Diana Sánchez via a pre-recorded video link.

(a) HRD Memorial, with a particular focus on Colombia and Ireland's seat at the UN Security Council

Through the HRD Memorial network, Front Line Defenders, working with international NGOs including Amnesty International and Global Witness, as well as local partners in the countries most affected by killings, has been actively tracking and verifying the killings of human rights defenders since 2016, and gathering and verifying the data on killings dating back to the adoption of the UN Declaration on human rights defenders in 1998.

In February of this year, the work of the HRD Memorial project was profiled in the Front Line Defenders' Global Analysis report, including the names of the 331 human rights defenders who were killed in 25 different countries for carrying out their peaceful human rights work in 2020.

Of these 331 human rights defenders, the most at risk groups were those working on land, environmental or indigenous peoples rights, who made up 69% of the overall figure, and the sub-group of defenders working specifically on indigenous peoples' rights, who accounted for 26% of the global figure, despite indigenous peoples only making up approximately 6% of the world's population. Many of these defenders are the first line of defence in the fight against climate change and the resulting instability and insecurity.

While killings took place in 25 different countries, the vast majority took place in 7 countries – namely, Colombia, the Philippines, Honduras, Mexico, Afghanistan, Brazil, Guatemala, and there is no denying that it is the figures from Colombia that are truly abhorrent and demand urgent action.

El Programa Somos Defensores, our HRD Memorial partner in Colombia gathered and verified the instances of killings of 199 human rights defenders because of their peaceful work in 2020.¹ This figure accounts for well-over 50% of all the human rights defenders documented as killed across the globe in 2020. In consultation with defenders on the ground, we conducted an extensive analysis of the specific context which is allowing these killings to take place and we have shared this with the Minister for Foreign Affairs and the Department of Foreign Affairs, highlighting the stalled implementation of the Colombian Peace Accords, and what human rights defenders tell us they need from the Colombian Government and the international community to bring real and sustainable peace and security.

Ireland, as a long-standing supporter of the Colombian peace process, including but by no means limited to the role played by former Minister Eamon Gilmore as the EU's Special Representative to the Colombian Peace Process, is in a unique position to address this issue. With Ireland currently holding a seat at the UN Security Council, and indeed currently sitting as President, it is opportune and timely for Ireland to champion peace-building, human rights and security in Colombia as a key priority area for the Security Council.

We'll now have the opportunity to hear from Diana Sánchez of la Asociación Minga on why human rights defenders are being killed at such a rate in Colombia, the impending elections and the expected rise in violent attacks, and what the international community and UN Security Council needs to do.

¹ By February 2021, El Programa Somos Defensores had gathered and verified the instances of the killing of at least 177 human rights defenders because of their peaceful work in 2020 – this figure that was revised upwards to 199 defenders as cases from the last quarter of 2020 became fully verified in the following months.

(b) Long term imprisonment cases, with a particular focus on the case of Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja in Bahrain

While the killing of a human rights defender is undoubtedly the most extreme violation, far too many human rights defenders are currently serving long term prison sentences, upward of 10 years +, for their peaceful, legitimate human rights work and these long prison terms essentially produce the same result – that of violently silencing the defender's voice, and threatening and intimidating the community they represent.

Front Line Defenders' long term cases campaign endeavours to shine a spotlight on a dozen or so emblematic long term imprisonment cases, including that of our former colleague Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja in Bahrain. Abdulhadi played a key role in developing Front Line Defenders' support for human rights defenders across the Middle East and North Africa region, and much of our work to support human rights defenders around the world today is based on his pioneering work. Abdulhadi was violently arrested and tortured during the crackdown on pro-democracy protests in Bahrain in 2011, subjected to a sham trial, and sentenced to life imprisonment. April 2021 saw him mark both his 60th birthday behind bars, and the 10th anniversary of his brutal arrest.

It is our experience that sustained pressure at the international level can lead to very real, tangible results for human rights defenders in prison, including improved prison conditions, increased access to medical care and increased access for family visits. In some cases, it can also lead to reduced sentences or early release. Yet, for Abdulhadi, we have yet to see the level of consistent international support and action by Governments that is needed to apply sufficient pressure to the Government of Bahrain to achieve this. In effect, the Government of Bahrain think the international community does not care that much about the torture and imprisonment of human rights defenders.

I would also like to take a moment to acknowledge the death in custody of Jesuit priest and human rights defender Fr. Stan Swamy in India in July of this year. Fr. Stan was a dedicated advocate for the rights of Adivasi people and a prominent voice against the forced displacement of Adivasi communities, typically occurring in the context of development and mining. His case is particularly haunting as at 84 years of age, already suffering from Parkinson's disease and significant hearing loss in both ears, he spent 9 months in jail under the anti-terror law. Despite being in the middle of a global pandemic, he was repeatedly denied bail and critical medical assistance.

Sadly Fr. Stan's case is emblematic of the many cases we have seen of human rights defenders in India, and elsewhere, who are arrested under broad, ill-defined anti-terror laws, and languish in prison without access to legal remedies or adequate medical treatment. 15 other defenders, many of them over 60 years of age, have been jailed in the same case as Fr. Stan. We are also monitoring the cases of over 30 defenders in India who are similarly jailed without charge as reprisal for their human rights work. As a member of the UN Human Rights Council and UN Security Council, India must be held to account by its peers for these blatant violations of fundamental human rights norms.

Clearly there is a need for concerted, sustained actions by individual Governments such as Ireland, and also through the EU, to ensure these human rights defenders, like Abdulhadi and Fr Stan, are not forgotten, and that offending Governments face political and economic consequences for their continued denial of human rights. With regard to Fr. Stan it is tragically too late, but there are many more human rights defenders, including his colleagues, who need your support and action.

(c) Afghanistan

Now, turning to Afghanistan... the situation in Afghanistan continues to deteriorate. There is no trust in the Taliban's assurances on human rights protection, amnesty, and peaceful, inclusive governance. Their actions belie their public statements. In a recent report Amnesty International, FIDH and OMCT documented a litany of human rights abuses including targeted killings of civilians, blockading of humanitarian aid to the Panjshir Valley, reprisals and restrictions against women and attacks on human rights defenders on a near daily basis². There has been no accountability for documented human rights violations to date.

We have previously raised serious concern regarding the deliberate, targeted attacks against human rights defenders that intensified since 2020. In the months prior to the capture of Kabul, Front Line Defenders was supporting groups on the ground providing protection and support to HRDs fleeing violence in captured provinces. We have made repeated calls for urgent action from the international community including ensuring safe external relocation for those most at risk.

The situation on the ground is dire. The majority of defenders at risk, who worked tirelessly and at great personal risk to promote and protect rights, remain in the country without recourse to help and support. The ability of human rights defenders to continue their work safely is extremely limited. Incidents of raids on homes and offices of defenders, arrests and torture, and threats of violence against defenders are increasing at an alarming rate. We also know that the reported incidents do not reflect the full scale of attacks.

Over a month on, we continue our urgent appeals for more visas and safe evacuation options for those seeking to leave. While challenging and complex to obtain, visas have been a crucial and life-saving support to Afghan human rights defenders. Land and air options for safe exit must be open for all defenders at risk including those without valid travel documents. The crisis is far from over and the initial urgency and solidarity expressed post August 15th, must continue and improve. The international response and support must be commensurate to the scale of the crisis.

To date we have secured the evacuation of approximately 168 human rights defenders, and their families, however visas for defenders remain critical. Front Line Defenders would like to commend and thank the Irish Government for the leadership it has demonstrated throughout: in particular its generous commitment to providing visas to Afghan human rights defenders through the Irish Refugee Protection Programme. We commend the staff at the Department of Foreign Affairs, in particular in the Human Rights Unit, who have worked tirelessly ensuring the ongoing diplomacy needed to secure safe passage of human rights defenders.

Crossing the border into Pakistan and other neighbouring countries is extremely difficult and with some borders officially closed, defenders cross these at great risk. Front Line Defenders is providing support to defenders in neighbouring countries and in other countries of transit. Those without onwards visas are particularly vulnerable and are in need of solutions.

In parallel, we are continuing to prioritise support to human rights defenders who remain inside the country. Emergency institutional support including for psychosocial care has

² <https://www.amnestyusa.org/press-releases/taliban-stamping-out-human-rights-in-afghanistan-says-new-briefing/>

been provided and more pledged over the course of this year. The aim is to provide flexible and accessible funds to defenders and organisations while they strategise a safe path forward. It is our role to support these defenders and their voices as they try to sustain their organisations and their work.

Several donors including the EU and the Swedish, Dutch and Norwegian governments have approached us offering additional financial support, which has helped us scale up our response and provide this critical protection support to Afghan defenders.

We are also happy to be partnering with the Canadian government on a new resettlement stream for human rights defenders and we are working with them to see how a specific Afghan programme can be added to this. These dedicated resettlement streams will enable Afghan and other defenders to access international protection and are initiatives that we hope the Irish government might consider replicating in the future.

This is an ongoing crisis and defenders - both those who have remained and those who still wish to leave - require sustained political commitment from the international community to ensure their safety and that of their family members, to secure the space to continue their work, to arrest a further slide in human rights gains, and to ensure accountability.

We are now very honoured to have the opportunity for Hassan Ali Faiz to address you today. Hassan, an Afghan human rights defender, recently arrived in Ireland after a dangerous and traumatic journey, together with his wife and young child as they were fleeing Afghanistan. He was aided by Front Line Defenders, and the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs, who provided a visa through the Irish Refugee Protection Programme and assisted in ensuring their safe passage.

7. Specific Requests for their action

Just before I pass to Hassan, I would like to share our three specific requests to the Committee today which are;

1. On the issue of the inexcusable killings of human rights defenders in Colombia we request the Committee to recommend Ireland prioritise this issue for the remainder of the 2021-2022 Membership Term at the UN Security Council and to specifically express your support to the Minister for Foreign Affairs for Ireland to host an Arria Formula meeting on this theme, with the explicit request for the voices of human rights defenders to be championed in this space.
2. We ask the Committee to express your solidarity with human rights defenders currently serving long term prison sentences, and specifically request that you adopt the case of Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja and urge the Irish Government to work bilaterally and through the EU to hold Bahrain accountable and ensure his release.
3. On Afghanistan we ask the Committee to recommend that the Irish Government expand the Irish Refugee Programme to enable more at risk Afghan human rights defenders to seek safety in Ireland.

And finally in conclusion I would like to share one more quote, this time from Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.

“My hope lies in a set of people not widely known internationally, but familiar to those in the human rights community. Unlike the self-promoters – the elected xenophobes and charlatans – these people do have courage. They have no state power to hide behind: instead, they step forward. They are the leaders of communities and social movements, big and small, who are willing to forfeit everything – including their lives – in defence of human rights.”