

International Human Rights Defenders Day 2020

Human rights defenders continue fighting for rights amid mounting challenges

(Bangkok, 9 December 2020) — The COVID-19 pandemic has put human rights defenders further at risks, especially in countries where they are vilified for carrying out their legitimate work, the Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) said in conjunction with the International Human Rights Defenders Day today.

In the over two decades since the adoption of the 1998 UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders¹ which recognises the crucial role of human rights defenders in protecting and promoting their rights and the rights of others, human rights defenders have carried on working despite insurmountable odds.

‘From calling out state abuses and violations, to advocating for the rights of marginalised communities, human rights defenders are powerful agents of social change, and it is because of their relentless resistance and their commitment to justice that our freedoms and rights can be realised,’ said Shamini Darshni Kaliemuthu, FORUM-ASIA’s Executive Director.

The declaration also outlines the duties of States and the responsibilities of everyone, including non-state actors, in protecting human rights defenders.

However, human rights defenders are often subject to multiple forms of attacks and harassment for their identity and their work in defending rights.

Trends of violations against human rights defenders in Asia

From 1 January to 31 October 2020, FORUM-ASIA has documented² 525 cases across 22 Asian countries, affecting at least 1,305 human rights defenders, including their family members. India (83 cases), the Philippines (52 cases), and Thailand (50 cases) are among the countries that have recorded the highest number of violations against human rights defenders.

The most common forms of violations include judicial harassment - which often goes hand in hand with arbitrary arrests and detention - intimidation, threats, and physical violence. Those violations, perpetuated against human rights defenders and/or members of their families or communities, often result in the killing of the defender.³

¹ The Declaration’s full name is the ‘Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms,’ accessible at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/issues/srhrdefenders/pages/declaration.aspx>

² The statistics do not represent all cases of violations in Asia, but a snapshot of the situation in the region based on FORUM-ASIA documentation only. For more information, please visit the Asian HRD Portal at: <http://i.forum-asia.org/AHRDPortal>

³ More information at: <http://i.forum-asia.org/HRDstat2020>

Groups affected the most

Specific groups of defenders have particularly been affected by these violations. Most at risk are women human rights defenders, who are harassed not only for their work but also on the basis of their gender; while the second most at-risk group are media workers, followed by community-based defenders, including land and environmental defenders and indigenous peoples' rights defenders, who are often based in remote areas with limited access to protection mechanisms.

Pro-democracy defenders are also among those most targeted, reflecting the continuously shrinking civic space in the region.

COVID-19 exacerbates rights violations

In Asia, the situation has only continued to worsen over the last few months, as many governments have been using the pandemic as a pretext to further justify violations against human rights defenders, especially those who speak out against government's handling of the outbreak. The enforcement of emergency laws or other COVID-19 related measures are often abused to restrict defenders' fundamental rights and freedoms.

Protection mechanisms for defenders

The concerning situation that defenders face highlights the importance of developing and strengthening the mechanisms for their protection at both national and international level.

'Comprehensive protection mechanisms for human rights defenders mean that policies and measures are in place to prevent violations and effectively provide immediate assistance and remedy to defenders who suffered from violations. These shall be applied at all levels, both national and international and requires everyone to play an active role to in recognising and respecting the important contribution of defenders. We need to create a safe environment for defenders to conduct their work without fear of reprisal.' said Shamini.

Note to Editor:

To commemorate the International Human Rights Defenders Day, FORUM-ASIA has launched an infographic series to raise awareness on the important role of human rights defenders, and on available protection and support mechanisms for defenders at risk in Asia and beyond. The infographics are available at FORUM-ASIA's social media and website.

The Booklet 'The Declaration on Human Rights Defenders and Other Resources' is accessible at:
http://l.forum-asia.org/booklet_declarationHRD

We welcome all interested in taking part in the movement to share and re-purpose them – for advocacy, campaign, training or otherwise – with their communities and networks.

About FORUM-ASIA:

The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) is a Bangkok-based regional network of 81 member organisations across 21 Asian countries, with consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council, and consultative relationship with the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights. Founded in 1991, FORUM-ASIA works to strengthen movements for human rights and sustainable development through research, advocacy, capacity-development and solidarity actions in Asia and beyond. It has sub-regional offices in Geneva, Jakarta, and Kathmandu. www.forum-asia.org

For media inquiries, please contact:

- Melissa Ananthraj, Communication and Media Programme, FORUM-ASIA,
communication@forum-asia.org