

Venice Statement: Reconceptualising Exile for Human Rights Defenders at Risk

August 2024

We, the Global Campus of Human Rights and Right Livelihood, convened members of the global human rights community in Venice on 24 and 25 May 2024 for the **fourth annual Conference on the Global State of Human Rights**. Among them was a group of Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) courageously continuing their important work despite being forced outside of their countries of origin by repressive governments and an increasingly perilous environment. These HRDs joined us not only as important voices during our conference discussions but as a group participated in further workshops and discussions which are the basis of this following Statement. Our shared aim was to reflect and deepen our collective understanding of the lived experiences of at-risk HRDs in the promotion of a rights-based and peaceful world order. This aim was our priority for 2024, while we reaffirm and recommit to the findings set out in the **Venice Statement: Towards a New Era of Human Rights** issued at the third Global State of Human Rights Conference held in 2023.¹

Today, we are faced with the urgency of responding to a **polycrisis**, where various current crises interact, creating complex and devastating consequences that are difficult to effectively address. In 2024, most prominently is the rise of authoritarianism worldwide and shrinking civic spaces, the intersection of the increasing number of **armed conflicts** causing untold horrors and suffering to communities in various parts of the world, and **human-induced climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental pollution** causing irreversible destruction to our planet home. Cumulatively, these lead to systemic, grave, and widespread human rights violations today that will carry on having a serious impact on future generations.

We acknowledge the continuing contributions and **positive impact of HRDs** to protect human rights, uphold the rule of law, and call for accountability. These individuals and groups of HRDs include but are not limited to indigenous groups, women, girls, children, LGBTIQ, and Environmental HRDs. Professionals, including artists, who actively engage in defending human rights also play an essential role in shedding light on injustices, challenging oppressive systems, and inspiring others to stand up for their rights. Despite the achievements made in the past 25 years since the adoption of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, the **environment** in which HRDs conduct their work has **increasingly deteriorated** over the last years in all parts of the world, including increased frequency of killings, threats to life, being deprived of physical and mental safety and wellbeing, attacks on property, and similar threats to their families, friends, and colleagues. At the same time, we note the increased **impunity** with which certain state and non-state actors continue to violate international human rights law, humanitarian law, environmental law, and other established principles of international law. This leads to further distrust in institutions to effectively protect our international legal order, which has severe and partly irreversible consequences across generations.

We highlight three aspects related to the work of HRDs which stand out to us in relevance and gravity today: the experience of at-risk HRDs forced into exile, the work of HRDs in conflict contexts, and the work of Environmental HRDs.

¹ Venice Statement 2023: Towards a New Era for Human Rights, see <https://gchumanrights.org/news-events/latest-news/news-detail-page/venice-statement-towards-a-new-era-for-human-rights-outcome-of-the-global-state-of-human-rights-conference.html>

Reconceptualising Exile for Human Rights Defenders at Risk

While some mechanisms are in place for the protection and support of at-risk HRDs and those who are close to them, including relocation programmes, there is still much to learn from their lived experiences. We commit to adopting a meaningful human rights-based process of learning and research, following the principles of 'do no harm', conflict sensitivity and gender equality, and special consideration for the mental and physical health and wellbeing of HRDs. Despite certain general and shared experiences and conditions, each HRD faces unique circumstances which need attention.

We start from the understanding that exile has, within its colloquial meaning, negative connotations, carrying notions of stigma, marginalisation, and discrimination. Improving our understanding of this concept, however, may pave the way for a deeper appreciation of the challenges and suffering at-risk HRDs often face when moving into exile, and how to remedy and overcome them as adequately as possible. There are numerous practical challenges at least at three stages: 1) when evaluating the option to leave, 2) during the passage to a new country or location, and 3) integrating successfully in the new country or location. These include but are not limited to lack of access to comprehensive risk assessment, health insurance and access to medical services, access to travel authorisations, visas, and possibly emergency travel documentation, as well as clarification on educational and skills certification to find meaningful employment opportunities once relocated. Developing an understanding of how to design and improve mechanisms to effectively support at-risk HRDs at all stages of the process is a powerful tool to fight against the pain and stigma of exile and build a transnational support structure.

Defending Human Rights during Times of War and Conflict

We deeply regret to note that despite the gains made by humanity, especially over the past 125 years since the first Hague Peace Conference of 1899, which articulated the Means and Methods of Warfare and established the Principles of Humanity, the 21st century continues armed conflict as a tool for dispute resolution. This 'tool' is already bringing untold suffering and sorrow to millions of lives and irreversible destruction to our planet and carries the potential of complete destruction through the possible use of weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear weapons.

It is the duty of the global human rights movement to continue its fight towards ending the use of weapons and violence as a means to resolve conflict, and, instead, resort to peaceful means including through a strengthened international judicial architecture. This route also allows us to honour the collective memory of those who lived through the pain and suffering which armed conflict carries without exception.

We urgently call upon all states and non-state actors engaged in armed conflict to cease fire, enter negotiations, and pursue peaceful means of resolving their disputes respecting international law, human rights law and humanitarian law. This action includes respecting the decisions and integrity of international judicial institutions, such as the International Court of Justice, the International Criminal Court, the European Court of Human Rights, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, and the African Court of Human and People's Rights.

Using Human Rights to Prevent Environmental Disasters

We acknowledge the important contributions made by EHRDs to the protection of our environment and toward strengthening the best available sciences in addressing environmental challenges, including climate change. We also highlight the valuable contributions of indigenous knowledge and legal systems and approaches in this context, by linking the principles of interconnectedness, interdependence, and inalienability of human rights with those of the planetary rights and duties. This approach is an essential component of understanding the role of humanity as being part of the community of life with Mother Earth.

Despite the landmark development of a Human Right to a Clean, Healthy and Sustainable Environment in 2022, there continues to be limited implementation of it, especially in consideration of the rights of children and future generations. We need to work harder on the development of human rights protection mechanisms that understand and respect the integrity of Earth systems.

We are alarmed by the considerable increase in killings and enforced disappearances of Environmental HRDs, as well as the increasing frequency of cases of harassment, intimidation, and malicious prosecution aimed at (Environmental) HRDs with the pretext of safeguarding the security of the state. These include specific cases brought against those who protect the natural environment using methods such as strategic litigation against public participation (SLAPPS). Whilst denouncing such methods, we call upon members of the global human rights community to publicly stand against such tactics and call out those who use such methods.

Climate litigation and environment movements are heralded as key tools for developing accountability for human-induced climate change as well as crimes against the environment, including ecocide. However, it is crucial that we urgently tackle the challenges of climate litigation, including the costs and time duration of such litigation, and the gaps in its application and implementation by relevant stakeholders, including by states and the private sector. Therefore, we must continuously work on further developing and refining the toolbox available for climate action. We require an urgent radical collaboration across generations as a call to action to use human rights to prevent environmental disasters and call for accountability from all responsible. This is an intergenerational imperative for achieving justice.

Examining Our Values and Imagining our Futures

We acknowledge that in times of this polycrisis, we are required to act and work outside the box and develop new tools and methods to document and illustrate the power, humanity, perseverance, courage, and dedication of HRDs.

Showcasing their successes and resilience when faced with difficulty, through methods and platforms for collective memory such as documentaries, movies, songs, poems, and other artistic and educational methods, will continue to inspire many working toward realising human rights at all levels of society, generations here and now and generations yet to come.

A Call for Radical Collaboration

We reiterate the six core messages set out in the Venice Statement of 2023 and call for a radical collaboration on:

1. **Reconceptualising the concept of exile for HRDs**, by undertaking a detailed learning journey, including through collective memory and research, building on lived experiences, and respecting established approaches and principles for the protection of safety and wellbeing. The ultimate goal is to facilitate HRDs' work effectively while in exile through improving structures and processes, raising awareness, and building a transnational support base.
2. **Communicating effectively and efficiently on the role of HRDs** and their contribution to the furtherance of international human rights standard-setting and implementation. This includes expressing public support for (Environmental) HRDs when they are targeted by state and non-state actors simply for carrying out their peaceful human rights work.
3. **Effectively facilitating engagement of HRDs with multilateral, regional, and national institutions in the human rights architecture**, including the international judicial system set up for the peaceful resolution of disputes and providing justice for survivors of human rights violations.
4. **Holding national, transnational and non-state actors, including the private sector, accountable to international human rights and environmental standards**, including the protection of Environmental HRDs in conforming to the UN Guiding Principles on the Protection of Environmental Human Rights Defenders (2023) and other recent developments.
5. **Furthering opportunities for information sharing and learning for HRDs** in the hope that the deteriorating situation and severe risks faced by them, and those close to them, can be mitigated through exchange and learning from best practices. Such publicly available information should also serve to inform key duty-bearers in order to strengthen joint capacities for assessing and preventing such risks in the future.
