

# SUMMARY REPORT

## AHRDF 2018



The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) has been organising the Asian Regional Human Rights Defenders Forum (AHRDF) since 2001. This year the 8<sup>th</sup> AHRDF took place in September 2018 in Bali, Indonesia. It provided a platform for human rights defenders (HRDs) and women human rights defenders (WHRDs) to discuss work and advocacy efforts, and share experiences and the challenges they face. Below is a short summary of what occurred in this Forum as well as main outcomes and recommendations.

## PLENARIES

### Opening Session & Keynote Speech

The 8<sup>th</sup> AHRDF began with the organisers of the event (FORUM-ASIA, YLBHI, and KontraS) introducing AHRDF and outlining key logistical and security information. This was followed by a key note speech by the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of HRDs, Mr. Michel Forst, wherein he discussed:

- The increasingly challenging environment in Asia where more countries are adopting repressive attitudes and laws against HRDs
- The trends of harassment against HRDs in the region, such as the increasing judicial harassment of HRDs under the guise of protecting national security; the restriction of FoAA; and the use of digital surveillance

- His desire to have an official visit in Asia under his mandate and to collect important findings that he can take back to the UN and his appreciation of how the AHRDF enabled him to engage with HRDs and learn about the situation of HRDs in Asia
- The 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the UN Declaration on HRDs and how important it is to take this opportunity to promote the declaration

HRDs recommended the Special Rapporteur to use his position to encourage Asian governments to:

- *Seek solutions to political problems that adversely affect HRDs;*
- *Hold perpetrators of human rights violations accountable for their actions and put an end to impunity;*
- *Establish formal and effective protection mechanisms for HRDs and WHRDs.*

It was also recommended that the Special Rapporteur strengthen and promote the building of networks between individuals and groups.



At the end of the session, FORUM-ASIA officially launched its posters marking the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders. FORUM-ASIA produced 7 posters to raise awareness of the declaration in Asia. Each poster highlights and explains a specific area or part of the declaration. The posters were translated into four Asian languages – Burmese, Tagalog, Mongolian and Urdu.

### Regional overview of current challenges of Asia and reflection on 20th anniversary of UN Declaration on HRD



This session was held to discuss the current challenges that HRDs in Asia face. FORUM-ASIA presented an analysis about the types of harassment that face HRDs in the region. It was revealed that 2,601 individual W/HRDs including CSOs in 17 Asian countries were affected by human rights abuses in 2017-2018 and the most affected types of defenders are Pro-democracy defenders (165 cases); Community-based HRDs including land & environmental rights defenders (117 cases); NGOs/ NGO staff (111 cases); Women defenders (WHRDs), and LGBTI defenders (99 cases); and Journalist (65 cases). The most common type of harassment was judicial harassment followed closely by arbitrary arrest and detention.

In this session, HRDs also shared their own views on the challenges in the region as HRDs working in Myanmar and South Korea. A representative from the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) Regional Office for South-East Asia also contributed to the discussion by sharing their overview of the situation in Asia; as well as a representative from the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD) shared the struggle of WHRDs in Asia.

Through this discussion, the following lesson-learned and recommendations were made:

- *There should be connection between national strategies developed by local CSOs and HRDs to regional and international advocacy efforts on protection of HRDs and human rights;*
- *The UN should proactively respond to reports of human rights violations against HRDs, and find innovative ways to addressing reprisals against HRDs for engagement with the UN;*
- *HRDs should collaborate and put more efforts in collective solidarity actions to strengthen their work;*
- *HRDs and civil society should respond directly to situations rather than relying on inter-governmental organisations like the UN.*

### How to build strong national and regional level protection mechanisms in Asia and beyond

A panel discussion was held on building strong national and regional level protection mechanisms in Asia and beyond. A panelist from Mongolia shared their experience in drafting a law on HRD protection through constructive engagement with key allies such as National Human Rights Commission. A HRD from the Philippines shared his experience of developing a strong and dynamic national human rights network using innovative channels. The speaker from India shared his organisation's efforts in protecting defenders at risk. A WHRD from Defend Defenders shared their experience of setting-up, developing, and sustaining a HRD protection network involving over seventy different organisations in Africa.

Here are some key lesson-learned and recommendations about building protection mechanisms in Asia:

- Hold meaningful consultations with local HRDs and map-out available or needed resources (incl. funding) for them;
- Engage with key actors such as National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs), UN, universities, local governments, companies/businesses (if necessary);
- Make human rights education in schools and universities part of the curriculum to foster next generations of HRDs, and increase public knowledge on human rights issues;
- Strengthen, develop and sustain a reliable network of HRDs so that HRDs can support each other



## DISCUSSIONS

As part of the AHRDF8, a series of discussion on different topics were organized. The thematic focus of each are outlined below.

### Judicial harassment against W/HRDs in Asia

This workshop brought together defenders that have faced judicial harassment, and those that work on judicial harassment.

The key lessons that emerged from this session include:



- There are two key perpetrators – governments as well as businesses and corporations;
- Need to build the capacity of lawyers to work on judicial harassment cases of HRDs as well as security issues;
- Providing paralegal training for HRDs particularly for communities is a good step to fight against judicial harassment;
- Need to strengthen supportive and vocal networks of HRDs and its allies for rapid response and support for HRDs at risk;
- There should be recognition of and support for the emotional impacts judicial harassment have to HRDs, their reputation and their family;
- Need to have adequate financial resource for legal aid.

### Land and environment rights defenders in Asia

This session offered a space for defenders working on land and environmental rights to learn from one another.

It revealed a number of key lessons, which included the importance of:

- Global and local alliance building and sharing of learnings amongst one another;
- Conducting a strategic litigation, and highlighting emblematic cases of HRDs;
- Conducting stakeholder mapping and advocacy mapping to utilise potential support and decision-makers for HRD protection;



- Important to ensure that well-being and psycho-social support is available for HRDs;
- Important to think about what will be next plans after temporary relocation if HRD is unable to go back and provide different modes of relocation support or solidarity for long-term;
- Work together with different stakeholders such as universities, local governments and students/ volunteer to build safe community for HRDs;
- Be aware of the logistical factors involved with relocation assistance (e.g. visa conditions, passport restrictions and altering political climates in different countries);
- Important to increase capacities of hosting organisations for sustainable relocation assistance by providing administrative and operational support.

## SECURITY SESSIONS

The AHRDF offered participants an opportunity to attend introductory sessions on psycho-social wellbeing, physical and digital security. These were kept to small groups of less than twenty persons and focused upon identifying threats and vulnerabilities before looking at practical, pragmatic and appropriate responses that could improve and maintain the safety and wellbeing of an HRD at risk.

The sessions were participatory and HRDs were able to actively engage and practice methods for dealing with stress, strategies to recognize threats and bolster physical security, and ways to secure and protect sensitive information and digital equipment or devices. Key takeaways from each sessions are:

### **Psycho-social wellbeing session**

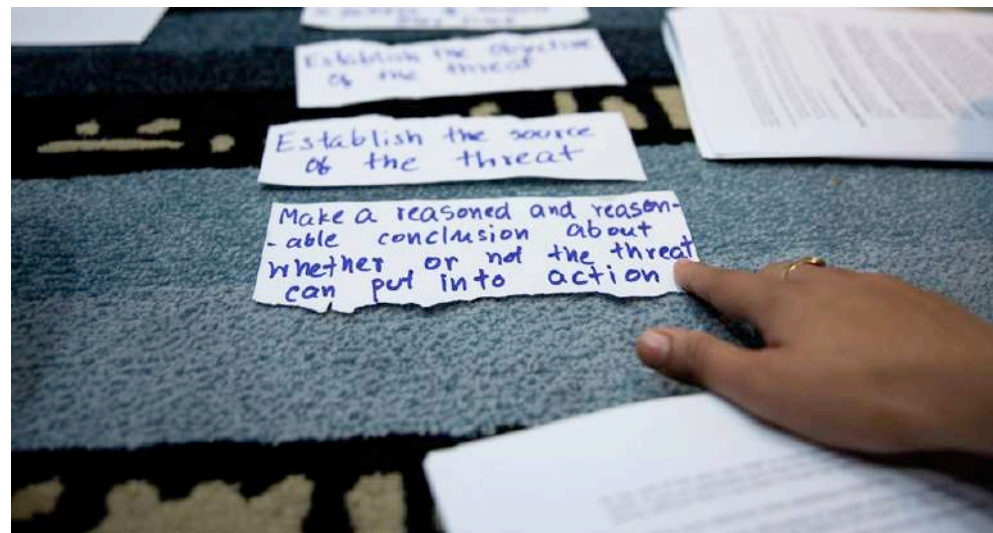
- Important to differentiate between stress and trauma, and need to be aware of potential psychological problems for HRDs such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in long-term;
- Having a trusted social support network to share feelings and difficulties is important;
- Security and protection of HRDs should be approached as holistic ways to consider well-being of HRDs.

### **Digital security session**

- Need to make a conscious shift of daily practices to reduce the risk of being hacked;
- Moving from passwords to passphrases, or using encrypted communication channel such as Jitsti instead of Skype or Facebook chat.

### **Physical security session**

- Need to regularly review and update organisations' security plans;
- Understand and assess the threats to HRDs by exercising stakeholders mapping.



## TEDx TALKS

The Tedx Talks took place throughout the AHRDF. These were short five-minute sessions in which HRDs would share their experiences, skills and knowledge with other participants. Over the period of the AHRDF8 there were a variety of speakers and this included HRDs from India, Taiwan, Thailand, Pakistan, Bangladesh, the Philippines, Nepal, and Japan. The focus of the sessions ranged from stories about inspirational HRDs operating in the midst of extremism, the struggle for women's

rights in the face of patriarchy and conservatism, technology and human rights, and the invisible workforce of domestic workers..



## COMMUNITY FAIR

The community fair was an opportunity for HRDs to showcase their work and initiatives with fellow defenders but also provided the space for HRDs to meet other attendees to build their networks, share best practices and offer solidarity. At the Community Fair various publications and materials were distributed to other participants.

## DECLARATION DRAFTING

The final session of the AHRDF was aimed at providing HRDs with the opportunity to collaboratively identify and debate potential calls to key influential actors and jointly advocate through the medium of the 2018 AHRDF Declaration. The HRDs split into different working groups to review a proposed draft declaration that FORUM-ASIA prepared before hand. Groups had the opportunity to review the draft declaration and contribute their thoughts and opinions about what should be included, removed or amended. All inputs and suggestions have been collected contributed to a finalized declaration from the participants of the AHRDF.

