



#CourageousVoices: 10th Asian Regional Human Rights Defenders Forum

For immediate release

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- *Judicial harassment was the most common violation experienced by human rights defenders (HRDs) in Asia from 2021 to 2022.*
 - *State actors—such as the police—were the top perpetrators.*
 - *The forum coincides with the 25th anniversary of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, which requires states to protect HRDs. Nevertheless, violations against HRDs still persist in Asia.*
 - *HRDs call for stronger mechanisms for protecting and creating an enabling environment for human rights work.*

KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia – Together, we are stronger.

This collective call echoed throughout the 10th Asian Regional Human Rights Defenders Forum, which brought together some of Asia’s most courageous voices.

Held from 1 to 3 November 2023 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, the forum provided a platform for over 200 human rights defenders (HRDs) to discuss their shared advocacies, struggles, and hopes for promoting and protecting fundamental rights and freedoms across Asia and beyond.

The forum expressed deep concern on the situation in Occupied Palestine Territory and Israel, particularly the indiscriminate bombing and military operations in Gaza by Israel that bears hallmarks of genocide. Participants called for an immediate ceasefire and end to the ongoing siege of Gaza by Israel as well as for unfettered access for humanitarian aid to Gaza. Likewise, defenders called for accountability and an investigation into the alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by both Israeli military forces and Palestinian armed groups.

The forum also celebrated the invaluable work of HRDs, emphasising the need for innovative ways of supporting them amid increasingly hostile environments in the region.

In addition, an art exhibit was set up to commemorate the courageous acts of Asian human rights defenders while also showcasing the creativity of young Asian artists, highlighting the power of arts and storytelling as advocacy tools.

The three-day forum was organised by the Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) alongside Pusat KOMAS and Suara Rakyat Malaysia (SUARAM).

Violations against human rights defenders

This year's forum coincided with the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and the 25th anniversary of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders. The latter requires states to protect HRDs in recognition of their crucial contributions to 'peace, sustainable development, and human rights.'

Unfortunately, violations against HRDs still persist in Asia.

In 2021 and 2022 alone, [FORUM-ASIA documented](#) 1,636 cases of violations which affected 4,440 defenders—alongside their families, organisations, and communities—across 22 monitored Asian countries. The exact numbers, however, may be higher as cases often go unreported.

Judicial harassment was the most common violation, followed by arbitrary arrests and detention, physical violence, and intimidation and threats. At worst, such cases may result in enforced disappearances, killings, and deaths. Other violations included administrative harassment, restrictions on movement, surveillance, vilification, and abduction.

Among all HRDs, pro-democracy defenders were at most risk. Meanwhile, women human rights defenders and sexual orientation and gender identity rights defenders often experienced gender-based harassment. Community-based defenders—including land and environment defenders, indigenous peoples' rights defenders, and grassroots activists were the third most affected group. Other targeted HRD groups included media workers, students and youth, non-governmental organisations, and minority rights defenders.

Most violations were committed by state actors, with the police topping the list of perpetrators.

Among those who have experienced judicial harassment are FORUM-ASIA members Khurram Parvez in Kashmir, Adilur Rahman Khan in Bangladesh, Cristina Palabay in the Philippines, among many others. FORUM-ASIA is in solidarity with all the defenders facing harassment.

'I want to emphasise that the government recognizes that human rights defenders and civil society organisations play an indispensable role in advocating for the rights and concerns of marginalised communities. They act as watchdogs, exposing injustices, discrimination, and human rights violations that might otherwise go unnoticed,' Malaysian Minister of Science, Technology, and Innovation YB Chang Li Kang said during the forum.

Hopeful for Asia

Despite the many challenges, HRDs in Asia are not giving up.

'Indeed, we are stronger together. This year alone, human rights defenders and organisations have overcome tremendous challenges in the region. We are never keeping silent, we will continue to demand justice and accountability not only here in Malaysia but across Asia and beyond,' said Jerald Joseph, Chairperson of FORUM-ASIA and Director of Pusat KOMAS.

Since 2001, FORUM-ASIA has been organising the biennial forum with the goal of fostering meaningful collaborations among HRDs as well as enhancing HRDs' engagement with the United Nations special procedures mandate holders and other regional and sub-regional human rights mechanisms.

'FORUM-ASIA envisioned this event to serve as a safe space, where each and every one of us can freely express our ideas and opinions regarding Asia's latest human rights situation. Together, let us renew our commitment to respond to the imperatives of the times. We need stronger mechanisms for protecting and creating an enabling environment for human rights work,' said Mary Aileen Diez-Bacalso, Executive Director of FORUM-ASIA.

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About FORUM-ASIA

The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) is a network of 85 member organisations across 23 countries, mainly in Asia. 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 consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council, and consultative relationship with the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights. The FORUM-ASIA Secretariat is based in Bangkok, with offices in Jakarta, Geneva and Kathmandu. www.forum-asia.org

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About Pusat Komas

Pusat Komas Komas is a human rights civil society organisation that advocates against racism and racial discrimination in Malaysia. www.komas.org

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About SUARAM

Suara Rakyat Malaysia (SUARAM) is a non-governmental organisation established in 1989 to monitor and advocate for the respect of human rights in Malaysia. Through its consistent and uncompromising work, it has established itself as one of the key human rights organisations, one to which Malaysians turn for information and support. www.suaram.net

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