

**10TH ASIAN
HUMAN RIGHTS
DEFENDERS
FORUM**

KUALA LUMPUR 2023

**SUMMARY
REPORT**



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The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) has been organising the biennial Asian Regional Human Rights Defenders Forum (AHRDF) since 2001. From 1 to 3 November 2023, FORUM-ASIA alongside its Malaysian member organisations Pusat Komnas and SUARAM co-organised the tenth edition of AHRDF (AHRDF10) in Kuala Lumpur, coinciding with the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 25th anniversary of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders.

AHRDF10 provided a platform for human rights defenders (HRDs) from Asia and beyond to connect, share their experiences, and discuss their work and common issues. It facilitated an exchange of learnings, discussed the protection of all defenders, and celebrated the resiliency of HRDs as they navigate increasingly challenging contexts in the region. The forum also examined the usefulness of international and national human rights mechanisms to protect defenders as well as how human rights movements in Asia could collectively reclaim civic space.

This publication, 'Summary report: 10th Asian Regional Human Rights Defender Forum,' illustrates the forum's main themes and key recommendations.





Opening Session

AHRDF10 commenced with opening remarks from Jerald Joseph, Chairperson of FORUM-ASIA's Executive Committee, and Mary Aileen Diez-Bacalso, Executive Director of FORUM-ASIA. Following the initial round of thematic sessions, Malaysian Minister of Science, Technology, and Innovation, YB Chang Lih Kang, delivered a keynote speech and addressed diverse human rights concerns through a Q&A session. The minister acknowledged the need for a stronger protection mechanism for human rights defenders in Malaysia, discussing ongoing efforts to facilitate dialogue between local communities and decision-makers. Likewise, the minister pledged stronger collaboration with related ministries as well as better assistance for non-governmental organisations (NGOs) facing challenges.

A plenary panel discussion followed, featuring prominent defenders from across the region,

including Peter Kallang, Chonthicha Jangrew, and Melani Gunathilaka. Panellists shared successes and challenges in their work, motivations for defending human rights, and aspirations for their communities. Since Mary Lawlor—the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on the situation of HRDs—could not make it to the event, she sent a video message highlighting success stories from HRDs across the region—such as youth HRDs in Bangladesh raising awareness to prevent child marriage, and defenders in Afghanistan and Myanmar whose perseverance prevails over their respective countries' difficult circumstances.

The importance of collaboration and unity among HRDs emerged as the discussion's key highlight. Collective action and solidarity-building at grassroots, national, and international levels are crucial in sustaining human rights movements and enhancing the protection of HRDs.

'Many people have been persecuted and detained. As a young generation, we must stand up and fight for our future. My commitment to human rights work is because I live in fear of dictatorship.'

'Even after the coup, some narrative came out that the young generation should not engage in politics and stand out on the stage to protest the dictatorship. We have witnessed that once you ignore or avoid engaging in politics, we end up facing more human rights violations.'

'We all are Human Rights Defenders; everyone can be HRDs. Being an HRD is not a hero, we are just normal human beings, and we do not need to sacrifice ourselves to be HRDs as well. We do not need to torture ourselves because the government has already treated us badly, so we do not need to treat ourselves badly. Most importantly, we need to take care of our well-being and love ourselves, so that we will not let anyone violate our rights and freedom.'



Chonthicha Jangrew

'My experience is we cannot do this alone: we need to connect with other NGOs and other communities, we connect with those who have more experience on these issues.'



Peter Kallang

'We need to stand up, collectively asking for justice and fighting against impunity. Otherwise, we will not find justice and people who committed injustice will continue to harass others.'

'The biggest takeaway is unity, what can we achieve if we forget our differences, if we can remember that all human life is equally sacred. I think this is what we currently see in Palestine as well.'

'If we can remember that we are all living on this earth and it is one ecosystem that we share, all the pain that one sort of people go through is equally felt by someone else at some point. Like the very popular saying: A threat to justice somewhere is a threat to justice everywhere.'



Melani Gunathilaka

'HRD survival is a success: defenders in Afghanistan and Myanmar continue to document violations, provide lifesaving services, and inform the world of what is going on despite the most difficult circumstances.'



Mary Lawlor



Field Visits: HRDs Understanding Malaysia's Human Rights Situation

Ahead of AHRDF10, FORUM-ASIA, Pusat Komnas, and SUARAM co-organised field visits with pre-selected participants. The visits offered participants an opportunity to engage with and learn from Malaysian human rights defenders, allowing them to see similarities as well as differences in their struggles, goals, and advocacies. Participants were divided into three groups: 1) a visit to an Orang Asli (indigenous people) community in Bukit Lagong; 2) a visit to the University of Malaya to meet with student activists; and 3) a meeting with family members of political detainees under the Security Offences Special Measures Act (SOSMA).

During AHRDF10, participants shared their reflections on Malaysia's various human rights issues and made connections based on their own work and experiences. The field visits fostered a sense of regional solidarity among participants.

- **Indigenous rights:** The group that visited the Orang Asli village in Bukit Lagong learned of the community's long history of internal displacement and discrimination. At the same

time, the group learned about the Orang Asli's collective efforts and solidarity amidst challenges. Participants and community members also discussed broader issues surrounding land and indigenous rights in Asia.

- **Student activism:** The group that met with the University of Malaya Association of New Youth learned about the achievements as well as challenges faced by Malaysian student activists. The latter are advocating for campus democracy and student autonomy, while also struggling to mobilise Malaysian youth for the wider awareness of social justice issues. As many of the participants were youth activists themselves, they were able to make connections from their own countries' youth and student movements.
- **Political rights and SOSMA detainees:** The group that met with a former SOSMA detainee and the families of other detainees discussed the legal challenges and social stigma attached to a SOSMA conviction. Participants discussed legal and advocacy strategies involving both national and international mechanisms.



1.1 A dialogue on human rights defenders' resilience in the context of Asian conflicts

This session highlighted the resilience of human rights defenders (HRDs) in Asian conflicts. HRDs from Pakistan, Afghanistan, Myanmar, and the Philippines shared insights on the challenges and strategies they employ to protect human rights in their respective countries.

The growing tendency towards authoritarianism which governs through force and violence poses escalating threats to HRDs. Under such governments, HRDs often face persecution such as extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detentions, enforced disappearances, cyber-surveillance, sexual harassment, and financial restrictions, to name a few. In particular, LGBTQIA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and people of diverse gender) defenders face more discrimination and heightened challenges. In addition, human rights organisations are often subjected to scrutiny and threatened with the suspension of their registrations.

This session discussed the deteriorating human rights situation in Afghanistan and Myanmar, resulting from the Taliban's and the military junta's dissolution of legitimate governments. The situation has further increased threats of detentions, tortures, sexual harassment, and even fatalities among women and girls.

In Myanmar, family members and children of HRDs are targeted as 'bait' to justify attacks and arrests. Meanwhile in Pakistan and the Philippines, the restriction of civic space through the implementation of repression laws has exacerbated obstacles for the human rights movement. To prosecute HRDs, authorities often label HRDs as 'terrorists' and 'extremist groups.'

HRDs are trying to overcome such challenges by building strong grassroots networks, encouraging partnerships with regional and global organisations, and emphasising the importance of community engagement and proactive preparedness. In addition, they are advocating for stronger HRD protection laws and policies, along with the provision of holistic security training to enhance awareness and mitigate risks.

Key suggestions made during breakout sessions:

- Enable changes for knowledge sharing

among HRDs, including sharing resources, offering technical assistance, and providing psychosocial support.

- Improve support accessibility through localised resource translations and simplified application procedures.
- Enhance HRD networks in neighbouring countries to facilitate cross-border relocation efforts.

1.2 Countering online attacks against HRDs and advancing digital rights in Asia

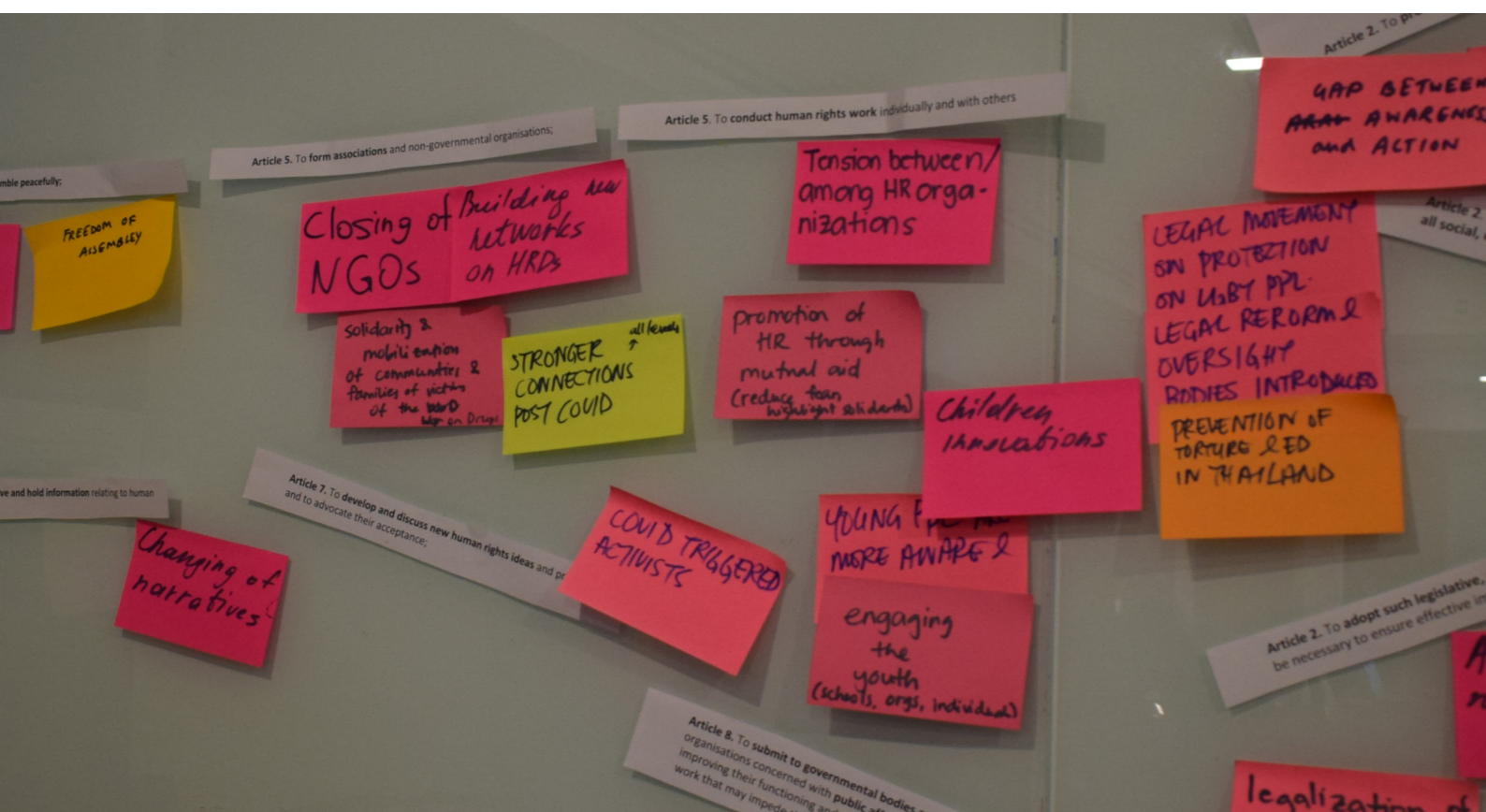
Online freedoms are increasingly under threat as government censorship and surveillance persist across the region. Hate speech, smear campaigns, and judicial harassment are used to discredit and silence HRDs, civil society organisations (CSOs), and journalists. Unfortunately, legislation on digital rights in many Asian countries exhibits weaknesses, both in its clauses and implementation.

This session explored strategies for strengthening civil society's resilience and capacity to combat digital repression and online attacks against HRDs, promote corporate accountability among tech

companies, and address the trend of shrinking online civic space in Asia.

Reflecting on their work and experience, panellists expressed how digital rights restrictions and content censorship have been escalating in many Asian countries. One prime example is the case of internet shutdowns in India. Privacy and surveillance concerns are worsened by advancements in artificial intelligence. Meanwhile, disinformation challenges across the region persist since many national laws do not conform to international standards. These digital threats impact HRDs, creating a climate of fear both online and offline.

Despite facing dangers from the weaponization of laws and technology, CSOs are courageously advocating for digital rights through legal challenges; documenting repression trends; and demanding transparency and accountability. However, they cannot do this alone. Cooperation from tech companies and state actors are also crucial in ensuring a safe and vibrant online civic space. Likewise, collective action from all stakeholders is a prerequisite to securing digital rights for all.



Key recommendations from the discussion:

- Establish guidelines, such as the zero trust approach, to filter bad actors.
- Adopt strategies to hold perpetrators accountable and to regulate digital platforms.
- Encourage tech companies to create preventive and responsive measures against digital threats, to engage openly with civil societies, and to join coalitions like the Global Network Initiative while following its principles.
- Encourage CSOs to bridge knowledge and data gaps, to engage in dialogues with tech companies, and to promote a human rights-based approach.

1.3 Human rights movement building and solidarity

This session was conceived in response to various calls for regional solidarity on the plight and human rights violations endured by HRDs in Asia. It provided a safe space for HRDs to raise awareness on the different human rights issues they are working on. Likewise, the session served to amplify the participants' respective advocacies and calls for action.

An additional 'Solidary Sharing' session was held the next day to give HRDs more opportunity to express support for one another. Participants from Thailand, Pakistan, Mongolia, Malaysia, Kyrgyzstan, the Philippines, Bangladesh, India, Myanmar and Nepal as well as representatives from regional and international organisations spoke during these two sessions.

Participants shared the following concerns:

- The Myanmar military junta's atrocities, mass killing of civilians, and suppression of civic space.
- Pakistan's enforced disappearances and persecution of HRDs who have spoken against such violations.
- Human rights and environmental violations

affecting community-based and environmental defenders in Mongolia. Such violations mostly stem from irresponsible mining activities.

- How restrictions on freedom of movement in Sarawak, Malaysia are affecting human rights work and CSOs.
- The repression of gender identity, sexual orientation, and gender expression (SOGIE) rights defenders in Asia.
- The lack of legal protection paired with volatile political unrest put HRDs in vulnerable positions, thereby disrupting their invaluable work.
- HRDs are facing harassment and reprisals from corporations. Some of these reports of harassment on HRDs arose from projects financed by development banks.
- The impact of media censorship on human rights work.
- Academic freedom and activism.

While some of these issues are specific to certain countries, others were prevalent within and even beyond the region. This session highlighted how the power of collective action, resistance, and solidarity transcends borders.

1.4 HRD Declaration +25 Consultation

The year 2023 marked the 25th anniversary of the UN Declaration on human rights defenders



('the Declaration'). To mark this special occasion, a coalition of CSOs held consultations and surveys with HRDs around the world in order to develop a supplementary document to the Declaration.

The supplementary document reflects the needs and wants of HRDs, seeks to enhance awareness of the Declaration, clarifies existing rights and duties in the Declaration, and builds on gaps in the Declaration.

During AHRDF10, FORUM-ASIA—alongside the International Service for Human Rights, which is leading the initiative—conducted a consultation that would feed into the development of the supplementary document. The interactive consultation divided participants into smaller groups, asking them to identify risks, challenges, trends, successes, and innovations related to their human rights work.

Risks and challenges identified by HRDs:

- Threats to one's digital and physical security
- Stigmatisation
- Red-tagging and criminalisation of human rights work
- Arbitrary arrests
- Difficulties in accessing resources
- Impacts of human rights work on one's mental health

Recent trends related to security and safety as



identified by HRDs:

- The rise of radicalism and extremism
- The use of social media to attack HRDs
- Targeted attacks on specific groups, such as LGBTQIA+ communities and environmental HRDs
- The decline of an HRD's well-being due to burnouts and traumas

Successes and innovations identified by HRDs:

- Unwavering international support for HRDs in exile.
- Systematisation of relocation mechanisms for HRDs.
- Solidarity and mobilisation of communities, such as the Milk Tea Alliance.
- The development of HRD protection bills (especially in Mongolia where it is already legislated, and in the Philippines and Nepal where it is in the works).
- Narrative change.
- The positive use of social media for public awareness campaigns on legal reforms, increased protection of youth HRDs, and self and collective care.

1.5 Beyond emergency support: Fostering holistic support for human rights defenders

This session featured panellists from Thailand, Nepal, Uganda, and Afghanistan, who then discussed existing emergency assistance for HRDs and available avenues for strengthening ongoing strategies for better protection of HRDs.

The discussion highlighted how CSOs have employed collaborative strategies and mechanisms to counter the widespread persecution of HRDs. It further delved into the provision of legal aid and psychosocial support which are necessary for ensuring the mental well-being, and the needs of family members and dependents of HRDs. It also emphasised the



urgent need for an effective relocation mechanism for HRDs facing crisis situations, especially for those in exile who might need long-term support in terms of cultural adjustment, education, and employment.

The session also stressed the critical role of feminist and intersectional approaches in dealing with crisis support and prioritising collective care for HRDs. The need to redefine 'risk' and 'emergency' within the context of diversity among support-provider organisations was also highlighted.

Breakout sessions reinforced the significance of holistic support systems that should be adaptable, timely, and resilient in facing the evolving threats faced by HRDs.

Key recommendations formulated during the session:

- Expand the definition of HRDs, encompassing all individuals who advocate for human rights.
- Enhance collaboration between donors and CSOs. Donors must actively collaborate with CSOs to ensure their commitment to long-term assistance and inclusive protection policies.
- Apply an intersectional approach to support. There is a lot to learn from women-led and indigenous communities in terms of assessing threats, identifying safe spaces, and utilising appropriate support mechanisms.
- Strengthen coordination among CSOs to ensure the provision of long-term digital,

physical, and psychosocial support for all HRDs.

1.6 Asian NGO Network on NHRI: A report launch

During AHRDF10, the Asian NGOs Network on National Human Rights Institutions (ANNI) launched its 2023 Report. ANNI—with FORUM-ASIA as its Secretariat—has been advocating for more effective National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) for over 15 years through its members which consist of CSOs and HRDs across various Asian countries.

The ANNI report is a biennial publication on the performance and establishment of NHRIs in Asia. Since 2007, ANNI has undertaken this collaborative research alongside member organisations.

The 2023 ANNI Report covers the performance assessment of 13 either established or yet to be established NHRIs in Asia from 1 January 2021 to 31 December 2022. It consists of country chapters authored by ANNI member organisations from Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, South Korea, Sri Lanka, and Taiwan.

Over the years, the ANNI report has provided a critical assessment of how NHRIs have been performing on human rights issues; the challenges they face; what can be done better or differently; and how NHRIs can be established in countries

that lack such institutions. The report also offers recommendations on how NHRIs can become more credible, independent, legitimate, and effective in protecting and promoting human rights in their respective countries.

The year 2023 marked the 30th anniversary of the adoption of the Paris Principles, which set the standards for NHRIs. This commemoration provided the opportunity to reflect on how NHRIs have fared in the last three decades. For the first time since its publication, in addition to a qualitative analysis, the 2023 ANNI Report features a quantitative assessment of the performance of NHRIs. This was done through a dedicated scoring index which measures an NHRI's compliance with various facets of the Paris Principles.

As the Paris Principles requires, an NHRI is supposed to be the bridge between the government and the civil society. And also, to be the bridge between the international standards and local practices.'

Speaker of the session

'We look forward to working and strengthening partnerships with civil society in the Philippines and also working with our fellow NHRIs.'

Speaker of the session

1.7 Defending human rights and the environment: Confronting irresponsible business practices and development projects

Irresponsible business operations and development projects can negatively impact the environment and disrupt the flow of natural resources. Likewise, they can cause a range of human rights violations to the detriment of local communities.

This session explored business and human

rights as well as the multifaceted implications of harmful business and development initiatives. It also provided a platform for HRDs to discuss the challenges they face when confronting business actors and the good practices they employ in holding businesses accountable.

Across Asia, it is not uncommon to find how certain policies and laws which are meant to safeguard the environment are actually prioritising business interests over human rights. There is also a lack of inclusive consultation and access to information regarding projects affecting the rights of communities to a healthy and safe environment. Oftentimes, ethnic and marginalised groups are excluded from public participation to decision processes where they are supposed to be involved. Those who speak up against harmful business and development operations face judicial harassment, physical violence, intimidation and threats, and in extreme cases, killings.

Key reflections from the discussion:

- National Action Plans (NAPs) and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives are ineffective due to their voluntary nature. There is a need for stronger mechanisms that place people and the environment at the centre of all decision-making processes. Likewise, there is a need to enhance accountability mechanisms for environmental damages and violations against HRDs.
- The Escazú Agreement, a legally binding instrument, is a good practice which ought to be replicated. Monitoring the performance of companies in terms of upholding of human rights can contribute to ensuring responsible business operations. There is a need to urge companies to create and implement their own mechanisms in ensuring that their business activities respect human rights and the environment. Conducting advocacy in the destination countries of a company's goods or services allows communities to share their grievances and claim their rights.

Communities are facing environmental issues like floods, while companies make promises and plans with governments. There is a lack of transparency and public consultation.'

Breakout group of the session

'The corporate – state nexus has become a big problem, laws have been diluted based on recommendations by powerful corporations. This has also resulted in the loss of independence of the judiciary.'

Speaker of the session



2.1 Advancing national protection mechanisms for human rights defenders

This session discussed various national protection mechanisms—or the lack thereof—available to human rights defenders. The speakers shared their personal experiences in trying to establish such mechanisms in their respective countries.

In Mongolia, CSOs have successfully campaigned, through evidence-led advocacy and public mobilisation for the enactment of a special law on HRD protection. In the Philippines, CSOs conduct mobilisation efforts and prepare draft legislations. In Kazakhstan, CSOs actively rally for such mechanisms and use quantitative documentation to press for legislations. While the situation in Nepal is somewhat better than its South Asian neighbours, its Protection Bill has been pending. Breakout groups delved into the challenges of national protection mechanisms in South and Southeast Asia.

Participants highlighted the following factors affecting the protection of HRDs:

- The lack of recognition of HRDs.
- Negative narratives against HRDs.
- Repressive and draconian laws.
- Challenges in passing protection policies.
- Political instability.
- need of advocacy for HRDs inside the country and in exile.
- Surveillance and other threats.

Key recommendations:

- Expand the definition of HRDs, making it more inclusive and emphasising the need for defending not just the individual but also their invaluable work.
- Collective advocacy from CSOs in drafting HRD protection policies. Mobilise community, support existing networks and establish new ones in local, national, regional levels.

- Collaborate with NHRIs in advocating for national action plans for HRD protection.
- Strengthen regional cooperation to enhance HRD protection.
- Engage with the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) and ACWC on the recognition of HRDs, especially among rural areas.

2.2 Dialogue among NHRIs, AICHR, and CSOs

This session is a follow-up to the virtual conference, 'Human Rights in the Time of COVID-19: Addressing the Crisis in Southeast Asia,' held by FORUM-ASIA in 2021. Following the conference, a position paper was submitted to ASEAN discussing how human rights principles and a human rights-based approach could be adopted in ASEAN's guidelines in recovering economic, socio-cultural, and political security in the region post-pandemic. This session reflected on Southeast Asia's post-pandemic human rights landscape, particularly on what has been achieved since 2021, the emerging challenges, and ways to move forward.

Panellists included representatives from an NHRI in Southeast Asia, the AICHR, and ANNI. They shed light on post-pandemic human rights challenges in Asia, such as the tightening grip over civic space and the exploitation of the COVID-19 pandemic by certain political and economic actors in Indonesia; the military's abuse of pandemic measures to restrict fundamental freedoms in Myanmar; and the surge of violence against women, children, and HRDs in the Philippines.

Key recommendations and best practices shared during the dialogue:

- Develop a safe journalism ecosystem by fostering collaboration between NHRI, press councils, and media entities to establish mutual understanding on handling cases related to press freedom and violence against journalists.
- Create tools to monitor human rights situations



through engagement with grassroots HRDs, CSOs, state institutions, and other stakeholders.

- Encourage NHRIs to establish community-based dialogue mechanisms and to collaborate with other NHRIs in amplifying their voices and achieving a common understanding on specific human rights issues.
- Review the AICHR's Terms of Reference and enhance its framework and structure.
- Strengthen cross-border collaboration and dialogue among AICHR representatives as well as with the Southeast Asia National Human Rights Institution Forum.

2.3 Well-being of defenders: How far have we come?

The discourse around HRDs' well-being is important albeit still relatively new.

In their pursuit of truth, justice, and accountability, HRDs are often met with threats, violence, and many other forms of harassment. All these may take a toll on one's mental health. Amidst such challenges, HRDs not only worry about their personal safety but also that of their families, colleagues, and loved ones. This may bring high levels of stress and anxiety.

Counselling and well-being trainings are usually practised at the individual level rather than collectively, and for short terms. Not all HRDs can access mental health services, especially since many Asian countries do not provide such services for free.

Both the speakers and participants agreed that caring for one's mental health is important in human rights organisations. It also stressed the need for significant changes in the traditional perception of mental health of human rights workers, reflecting the needs of the younger generations.

Key reflections from the discussion:

- Excessive workload remains a major issue among HRDs. Funding uncertainty and different communication styles among colleagues in the workplace can also contribute to an HRD's burnout.
- Although some countries have already adopted policies and instruments to better protect HRDs, their implementation remains weak. Defenders continue to face violations and stigma, especially around their SOGIE and

cultural identities.

- The concept of well-being safeguarding should be incorporated in the policies and decisions of funders. In terms of grants, donors started to allocate budget for the well-being of staff. Examples include the coverage of life insurance costs for the HRD's family members and advanced payments for NGO staff salaries.
- There is a need for more trainings on peer-to-peer support and community well-being. Such collective processes are normally longer, but can be effective for self and community care.
- Organisational policies play a role in ensuring an HRD's mental well-being. For example, NGOs can organise counselling sessions and wellness activities for staff.
- When staff work over-time during emergencies or crisis situations, there should be a staff rotation system as well as additional leaves.

'We witness both old fashion working leadership, and young feminists emerging. If we are ready to accept the changes and listening to young people, it will be a big relief to both sides.'

Participant of the session

'Our recommendation in communicating with more senior colleagues is to emphasise that care is a shared responsibility of individual and community, and to say that if anyone experiencing burnout leaves the organisation, then the organisation suffers too.'

Speaker of the session

2.4 Leveraging international mechanisms: Risks, opportunities, and strategies

The UN human rights mechanisms constitute the main avenue for civil society to conduct advocacy work at the international level and to seek accountability for violations of human rights in Asia. Domestic institutions in most Asian countries lack capacity, Asia does not have a functioning

regional mechanism that can ensure justice and accountability.

The speakers of this session, mostly from NGO backgrounds, have had a long experience of engaging with the UN system. Together with the participants, they collectively reflected on the value of existing UN mechanisms and explored innovative approaches to UN engagement, taking into account its limitations and the increasing risks of reprisals against defenders.

Speakers and participants discussed the bureaucratic nature of the UN system, which oftentimes leads to lengthy operating processes regardless of the gravity of human rights situations. The discussion also noted that the approach and importance given to particular issues and/or countries can be different. From a donor's perspective, the deliberation on UN engagement is ongoing. There is the understanding that diplomats can interact with civil society and comprehend its issues to different extents. Likewise, the group agreed that meaningful change requires patience.

Among the good practices highlighted were the decreased dependence on UN mechanisms and the adoption of a more strategic engagement focused on specific issues or mechanisms. Participants also shared success stories such as the creation of a country-specific UN special procedure mandate-holder; the adoption of a report by a Special Rapporteur that contributed to the cut of funds to a certain Asian government responsible for mass human rights violations; and the reduction of the number of killings in the said country, at least in the medium-term.

'One of the greatest achievements is that they managed to have a Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan.'

Speaker of the session

2.5 Narrating change

This session addressed the proliferation of negative narratives against HRDs in Asia, wherein traditional methods of advocacy are increasingly challenged by 'cultural wars' that undermine public support for HRDs and their causes.

Shifting the Focus: Empowering Citizen Storytellers
To shape public narratives, there is a need to shift the focus from solely defending HRDs to empowering a broader range of actors including educators, artists, media workers, and community leaders. They can all play a vital role in amplifying positive stories about HRDs and human rights work. The session also highlighted the importance of storytelling as a powerful tool for building public support and mobilising action.

Collaboration is Key: Building a Stronger Movement
Collaboration across sectors is vital for creating a more robust human rights movement. Sharing strategies for surviving attacks and fostering solidarity among HRDs is crucial. Participants

were encouraged to appreciate the value of collaboration and the unique capacities of each actor in challenging dominant narratives.

Interactive Learning: Putting Knowledge into Practice

The session incorporated an interactive learning component. Following a brief lecture, participants engaged in focus groups where they played a board game specifically designed to facilitate understanding of narrative change tactics.

Key recommendations made in the session:

- Empower Citizen Storytellers: Equip educators, artists, media workers, and community leaders with skills and resources to create and share positive narratives about HRDs and human rights work.
- Embrace Powerful Storytelling: Integrate compelling storytelling techniques into campaigns, educational materials, and mobilisation efforts.
- Collaborate Across Sectors: Foster strong partnerships across different sectors to build



a more unified and effective human rights movement in Asia.

- Share Strategies and Support: Develop mechanisms for sharing best practices and fostering solidarity among HRDs facing attacks, helping them survive and continue their invaluable work.

'Curating stories and crafting key messages in shifting narratives, we were presented with the strong need to empower ordinary tours of human rights. Empowered and politically, economically, culturally, and socially, we need to gather as many features (as possible), alternative educators, media workers, community leaders, artists and other cultural workers on countering negative narratives.'

Facilitator of the session

2.6 Relocation mechanisms for HRDs

HRDs often encounter security risks and wellbeing challenges due to the nature of their work. For physical security, rest, and respite, HRDs can opt to relocate to a relatively safer space. Different relocation mechanisms—either ad hoc or systematic—were developed across Asia to support HRDs.

This session features panellists who have worked on diverse relocation mechanisms, such as the operation of temporary relocation mechanisms in the Maldives, Malaysia, the Thai-Myanmar border, and Costa Rica. They shared their own personal experiences, challenges, and best practices in relocating HRDs. The session brainstormed on how to make relocation mechanisms more sustainable in Asia.

The panellists highlighted various challenges associated with implementing relocation mechanisms for HRDs. Some of these challenges were more practical such as the administrative difficulties of arranging travels and managing

funds, while others were more holistic in nature such as ensuring the HRDs' psychosocial well-being and the sustainability of their human rights work.

Moreover, the panellists reflected on the challenges associated with the HRDs' return after relocation. In many countries, HRDs face obstacles preventing their return home, leading them to either seek an extension of their stay in the host country or a relocation to another one.

Considerations and ways forward in implementing relocation mechanisms for HRDs, as discussed in the session:

- Collaborate with diverse entities, including academic institutions, to provide more opportunities and security for HRDs.
- Navigate difficult country contexts—such as in the cases of Afghanistan and Myanmar where temporary relocation usually leads to long-term relocation—and proactively seek alternatives such as resettlement in a third country.
- Better coordination of different relocation mechanism initiatives as well as the diversification and sustainability of funds for such mechanisms.
- Incorporate mental health and psychosocial well-being components into relocation mechanisms for HRDs.

2.7 Workshop on research and documentation of civic space and repressive laws in East and Southeast Asia

Due to the prevalence of repressive laws, Asia's human rights situation has deteriorated over the past few years.

Governments in the region continue to employ colonial-era laws to suppress civil society, restricting people's freedom of expression as well as many other aspects of their lives. These laws often align with

economic systems, prioritising industrialisation over social welfare and environmental protection. The youth are particularly vulnerable, with many activists facing incarceration.

This workshop discussed the essential role of documentation in identifying human rights violations and advocating for change. For example, in Indonesia, CSOs' documentation efforts led to the successful passage of the anti-sexual violence bill after nearly a decade of advocacy.

Panellists stressed the importance of distinguishing between the design and implementation of laws, highlighting abuses like SLAPP (strategic lawsuit against public participation) lawsuits targeting HRDs. Monitoring trials for discriminatory patterns and recognising the use of administrative bodies to hinder communities and CSOs are crucial.

Monitoring and documenting repressive laws can bring an emotional toll, hence the need for maintaining morale, emphasising positive changes, and leveraging data for broader objectives.

The workshop included a breakout session where participants discussed repressive laws; enabling factors; targets; responses from national, regional, or global mechanisms; and advocacy opportunities benefiting from monitoring and documentation.

Key points for improving research and documentation on repressive laws:

- Ensure inclusive monitoring and documentation: Address social and cultural stigma, examine colonial and subjective criminal laws, and recognise threats to public participation.
- Analyse trends in law design and implementation as governments tend to replicate repressive laws, noting that international standards are often overstepped.
- Prioritise strategic advocacy and partnerships while also understanding the political landscape. At times, raising awareness and

fostering solidarity may be more impactful than directly challenging laws.

2.8 Navigating a narrowing landscape: Strategies to counter judicial harassment against HRDs

Judicial harassment against HRDs occurs throughout Asia. It can also happen out of court. It strains an HRD's resources, thereby silencing them and the organisations they represent.

Examples include the Bangladesh Government's prolonged judicial harassment against Odhikar and its leadership; the Philippine Government's attempts to silence Karapatan and Filipino defenders associated with the organisation; the Kyrgyz Government's repressive laws that intrude upon CSOs' work; and the Malaysian Government's targeting of student activists and dissenting voices. Across Asia, many governments are increasingly using repressive laws on security, sedition, and counter-terrorism to target HRDs. The weaponization of such laws can create a chilling effect on all HRDs and human rights organisations.

The speakers discussed advocacy strategies that were effective in countering judicial harassment:

- Trial monitoring from diplomatic missions to create pressure on the court.
- Case submissions to UN Special Procedures.
- Writing to diplomatic missions to reconsider providing visas to members and families of parliament members who were initiating drafts of repressive laws.

Calls to action which emerged from the discussion:

- Repeal repressive laws that are used to harass HRDs and CSOs.
- Conduct capacity building for HRDs so that they can better understand their rights.
- Engage with UN and international mechanisms.
- Mobilise people and communities and raise awareness against judicial harassment against

D Cultural & Gender Influences

EXPECTATION FOR WOMEN TO
FOCUS ALSO IN THE WORKPLACE
WITHOUT CONSIDERATION OF OTHER

HRDs.

- Engage with media and social media companies to change the narrative around HRDs.
- Empower and train judges and lawyers on human rights to ensure fair trial.
- Connect legal experts and gather stakeholders.

'The purpose of judicial harassment is to suppress HRDs and create a chilling effect.'

Speaker of the session

2.9 Breaking boundaries: Gender and intersectionality in human rights work

Women human rights defenders (WHRDs) and sexual orientation and gender identity and expression (SOGIE) rights defenders have long been fighting against the patriarchy and traditional gender norms in Asia.

This session featured a panel of women and non-binary HRDs who spoke from their experience of working on gender rights issues as well as the challenges that women and the LGBTQIA+

community face.

The panellists highlighted their experiences of working on the sensitive subject of gender and intersectionality in their respective countries, where women's and LGBTQIA+ rights often do not align with the dominant culture and are not recognised nor respected. The panel also flagged the importance of adopting an intersectional approach to the complex and nuanced discussion on gender and identities. Indigenous voices, for example, should be included in the gender discourse, considering that indigenous peoples who are also from the LGBTQIA+ community face additional layers of vulnerabilities.

The panel also pointed out that fragmentations within the movement result from the fact that some groups do not want to align with others. Women with disabilities, for example, do not necessarily want to align with feminists, and transgender persons do not want to align with non-inclusive women's rights groups. Such divisions create difficulties in developing a more holistic, inclusive, and diverse social movement.

Key strategies for stronger solidarity and advocacy:

- Increase community awareness on gender-related issues. Those who identify as men should also be involved in such dialogues.
- Increase media engagement and allyship.
- Consciously position the LGBTQIA+ community at all levels of dialogues and decision-making. This also applies to indigenous communities and persons with disabilities.

'We face arbitrary arrests, self-censorship and self-isolation, and the anti-LGBTQIA+ sentiment is increasing as anti-gender and anti-rights movements are becoming more influential.'

Speaker of the session

'I knew nothing about women's rights until I had a chance to join the women's empowerment movement. Even my parents were not pleased when I became a WHRD, but now they understand my meaningful work. This is why community awareness is important, and we need to practise what we preach.'

Speaker of the session

2.10 Connecting the dots: Amplifying collaborations between HRDs and artists

This session explored how collaboration between artist communities and HRDs can promote human rights and artistic freedom in Asia. The discussion also highlighted the challenges faced by artists in Southeast Asia, particularly on censorship and limitations on artistic expression. Such limitations can be broader than just political censorship and include restrictions imposed by social and cultural norms in different contexts.

Case studies showcased successful collaborations between artists and HRDs, such as the use of film and media to raise public awareness on freedom of expression.

The session emphasised the need for stronger networks and support structures for both artists and HRDs. Building knowledge and resources can empower them to collaborate more effectively.

Key takeaways from the session:

- Bridging the Gap: Effective communication and collaboration can lead to more dynamic human rights advocacy efforts.
- Artists as Allies: Respecting artistic freedom and creative expression ensures that artists are valued partners—not mere subjects—in advocacy.
- Strategic Collaboration: Planning, audience research, and strategic messaging are crucial for successful projects.
- Understanding Needs: Artists often lack support structures and knowledge of resources. Meanwhile, HRDs may benefit from artistic storytelling techniques for better public engagement.
- Reshaping Definitions: The session highlighted a need to reframe how artists perceive themselves in relation to activism. Artists may not identify as HRDs, but their work can actually contribute to human rights movements.

2.11 #WhatshappeninginAsia: Documenting the state of HRDs in the region

Throughout Asia, defenders face a wide range of violations and encounter recurring challenges. HRDs mostly operate in hostile environments.

In 2021 and 2022, FORUM-ASIA recorded 1,636 violations against defenders across 22 monitored Asian countries. At least 4,450 HRDs, their family members, organisations, and communities were affected. These findings are reflected in the fifth edition of *Defending in Numbers*, FORUM-ASIA's biennial publication based on data from its Asian HRDs Portal.

This session delved into the monitoring and documentation of human rights violations in Asia, illustrated the main patterns of violations, and identified at-risk groups. The panel included FORUM-ASIA's members and partners, who then shared their personal experiences, methodologies at work, good practices, and challenges.

Documentation is instrumental to the success of research and advocacy. Stakeholders include governments, donors, and UN bodies. In recent years, civil society actors have employed new techniques and methods to collect and present data and information resulting from documentation.

Recurring challenges related to documentation:

- Obtaining data from remote areas.
- Bias or political affiliation of media.
- Recurrence of hoaxes.
- Documenting violations committed by non-state actors.
- Difficulties in showcasing positive stories.
- The use of multiple languages across Asia.

Recommendations and good practices:

- A publicly available and transparent methodology that ensures data credibility and consistency.
- Using data from diverse actors and sources, which allows for a holistic understanding and an accurate and reliable collection of facts. Sources may include verified news from social media, interviews, open-source intelligence, and local networks that make use of community and citizen participation.
- Producing documentation outputs in local languages.
- Networking and capacity building to strengthen the skills of documentation workers.

'Data from documentation help to conduct advocacy as a tool for the organisation, and to assist other stakeholders in reporting human rights violations.'

Speaker of the session

2.12 Challenges on access to resources

This session discussed the financial difficulties faced by HRDs and CSOs.

In Bangladesh, Odhikar has been repressed and had its funding restricted, limiting its ability to report on human rights violations. People's Watch in India, for example, faces arrests and threats to its staff due to legislative restrictions. Government agencies have resorted to deregistering CSOs and freezing their bank account to stop them from receiving foreign funds. Vietnam's activists are increasingly marginalised, yet their dire situation lacks international attention. In Vietnam and India, governments weaponize tax evasion and tax laws to shut down the operations of CSOs. Meanwhile in Afghanistan, CSOs are using alternative channels to transfer funds, including the Hawala system.

Participants stressed the need to provide more active and long-term support to organisations that are persecuted and deregistered. Clement Voule—Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association—urged donors to move from merely funding project activities to funding the core organisation as a whole. Voule stressed the importance of adaptability and flexibility among donors.

Recommendations for addressing funding restrictions:

- Donors must find creative solutions such as flexible grants, bilateral grants, re-granting, finding intermediary funders, and utilising networks.
- International Mechanisms like UN mandate holders—such as the special rapporteurs on the Freedom of Association and Expression—can hold closed and open-door consultations as well as academic visits to better identify patterns of repression and to raise international awareness.
- Increase flexibility when providing small grants



to unregistered bank accounts.

- Donors must invest in building the accounting capability of partners.
- For the purpose of fund transfers, donors can help CSOs open an entity in Europe or bank accounts abroad.

'Donor creativity is a must to mitigate these restrictions as these are a reality for the foreseeable future as the repressive laws are not going anywhere.'

Speaker of the session

Security sessions

During AHRDF10, participants also had the opportunity to attend sessions on security, tailored to the work and needs of HRDs. The sessions intended to increase the awareness on physical and digital security. Overall, the sessions seek to increase awareness on and enhance the safety of HRDs.

The session on physical security illustrated the basic concepts of physical security management,

namely the related notions of risk, threat, vulnerability, and capacity that relate to the work of HRDs. Participants were trained on context analysis, actor mapping, and preparing security plans. The latter enhances their security, includes preventive actions, and reduces or eliminates threats under specific contexts.

Meanwhile, the session on digital security provided an overview of practices that can be enforced on a daily basis in order to achieve a more responsible use of digital devices and online communications. This covers secure browsing, data storage and back-up, and the secure use of social media. Participants also shared their experiences and concerns over digital attacks—such as surveillance and hacking—within the context of HRD work. Likewise, the sessions explored effective strategies for addressing such challenges.



Closing session: Participants' reflections

AHRDF10 conducted a total of 28 parallel sessions on the diverse set of issues faced by HRDs across Asia.

The thematic issues ranged from countering online attacks and judicial harassment against HRDs, to advancing protection mechanisms, documentation of human rights situations, international advocacy, and holding a holistic security workshop.

Participants actively shared their own personal experiences, ideas, and best practices during the sessions. On the third and final day of AHRDF10, five participants shared insights from key selected sessions that they attended. The speakers emphasised the challenges encountered by HRDs while also highlighting the importance of hope, solidarity, and collaboration for the enhancement of society and Asia's human rights situations.

One speaker said, 'I feel recharged for being with my fellow activists, this is an opportunity to meet wonderful human beings. Doing human rights work can feel lonely, being around you all warms my heart, and I am not alone.'

AHRDF10 served as a platform for HRDs to learn, network, reconnect, share experiences, and strengthen their resilience as they collectively strive for human rights protection.

Among the key takeaways emphasised by many speakers is the need for a holistic security approach in supporting and protecting HRDs and their work. It is important to note that such an approach includes well-being components. The speaker highlighted, 'The discourse of well-being is still very new in the social justice community. It has been found that HRDs truly value stress management training programs. However, it would remain at the individual level if it were not given priority.' This holistic support is crucial for both individual and collective efforts, highlighting how necessary it is for donors and organisations to continue funding and recognising its significant contribution to the advancement of HRDs work.

Participants also expressed immense gratitude towards FORUM-ASIA, Pusat Komnas, SUARAM, and everyone who made AHRDF10 a truly transformative and inspiring learning experience. All participants were invited to assess the event through an evaluation form. A summary of the responses is shown on the following page.

Most valuable learnings

Getting hands-on information from the challenges of defenders across the region. It was also great to listen to the demands/ideas of HRDs and organisations how donor agencies can support them better in their important struggles.

Hearing a diversity of views from the region was a great learning experience!

Great networking, unique and fantastic opportunity to share my vision and practical experience with participants and discuss really important issues regarding the situation with human rights and freedoms in our countries.

I'm happy that we are starting to recognise the importance of the holistic well-being of HRDs.

Knowing that we are not alone in this fight.

I loved everything but in particular the session on narrative change and the opportunities to network, meet amazing defenders from across the region, and explore possible collaborations!

Our struggles vary in context but are similar in nature.

Knowledge and skills learnt to use in day-to-day human rights work

I'm taking back some new ideas, so I hope these will help me creatively think about the work I/we do!

Will help me develop better informed strategies as a donor.

Will look into exploring the use of narratives change techniques.

Creative tools from other regions that I can adopt in my organisation as well as more in depth analysis about both the organisation and the work we do.

Provided me with a framework to think about documenting human rights violations.

Gained further information and support on addressing physical security and risk analysis. This is the most needed info in my context.

As a donor it is extremely important to hear, as directly as possible from HRDs themselves, where and how their challenges can be supported.

I will be using the information in strengthening our documentation, verifying our data and collaborating on advocacy.

Especially on the topic of building a culture of wellbeing, I will share some practices with my organisation basic items.

AHRDF in the media

The Forum gained media traction in Malaysia. Some of the news articles that talked about AHRDF10 can be accessed through these QR codes.



