



Protection of human rights defenders at risk must be strengthened

The situation of human rights defenders has constantly been deteriorating in many countries – also in the EU and its neighbouring areas – although the UN's declaration of 1998 obligates countries to protect human rights work¹. Persons facing threats include especially those defending climate and environmental rights, LGBTI rights, workers' rights, the rights of indigenous people and women's rights, or women human rights defenders. In many countries, the national human rights institutions are also targets of different kinds of harassment and influencing.

Finland has adopted several international political commitments to protect human rights defenders. One of them is the recommendation of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe (CM/Rec(2018)11)², according to which states must protect especially those human rights defenders who are at risk. The EU published guidelines on the protection of human rights defenders in 2008³ and Finland its own instructions, which are currently being updated, for the first time in 2014⁴. Supporting the activities of human rights defenders has also been highlighted as a priority of Finland's human rights policy in the Report on Human Rights Policy (2021).⁵

At the same time, the Human Rights Delegation has been following with great concern how difficult it is for human rights defenders to receive protection from Finland. Either there is no entry at all or the processes are slow and complicated. The circumstances of a human rights defender may become critical rapidly, which requires a swift response from the helpers. However, there is no specific visa procedure or other mechanism enabling human rights defenders at risk to receive temporary protection in Finland.

The Human Rights Centre, the members of its Human Rights Delegation and many other parties have long been highlighting the urgent need to develop the protection of human rights defenders.⁶ The Human Rights Delegation emphasises that, when the situation of human rights

¹ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-human-rights-defenders/declaration-human-rights-defenders>

² https://search.coe.int/cm/pages/result_details.aspx?objectid=09000016808fd8b9

³ https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-guidelines-human-rights-defenders_en

⁴ https://um.fi/publications/-/asset_publisher/TVOLgBmLyZvu/content/suomen-ulkoasiainhallinnon-julkiset-ohjeet-euroopan-unionin-ihmisoikeuspuolustajia-koskevien-suuntaviivojen-kaytannon-toteuttamisessa

⁵ https://valtioneuvosto.fi/-/valtioneuvoston-ihmisoikeuspoliittinen-selonteko-painottaa-ihmisoikeuksien-yleismaailmallisuutta-ja-yhdenvertaisuuden-vahvistamista?languageld=en_US

⁶ The Ministry for Foreign Affairs' Advisory Board for International Human Rights Affairs issued an opinion in 2014 (in Finnish): <https://valtioneuvosto.fi/-/ionk-n-kannanotto-ihmisoikeuspuolustajien-viisumikaytannon-uudistamiseksi> The development of the protection mechanisms was also a central recommendation in the report published in 2017 (in Finnish):

https://um.fi/documents/35732/0/UM_Ihmisoikeuspuolustajat_FI%20%281%29.pdf/92c5bd3e-9b15-c571-adc2-2aad239d2daa?t=1529498114547



defenders becomes more difficult, Finland must have the preparedness and expertise for acting swiftly and consistently to protect them. The credibility of Finland's international human rights policy requires immediate measures.

The Human Rights Delegation considers it positive that Finland's guidelines for supporting human rights supporters are being updated and work on a humanitarian visa has been initiated. However, new measures for protecting human rights defenders at risk will not be included in the guidelines and the preparations for a humanitarian visa are carried out as a process separate from the guidelines.

The entry of a human rights defender to Finland must be safeguarded with a visa procedure that is as fast and flexible as possible, and the person must be supported even after they have entered the country. A comprehensive program for protection is therefore needed. It is particularly important to establish well-functioning coordination in the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, with diplomatic missions and between the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of the Interior. Coordination with other parties engaged in defending human rights, such as NGOs and universities, is also needed.

In addition to the protection provided in Finland, it would be important for the human rights defender to also receive fast and flexible support in the country in which they work. Even a small amount of financial support may help a lot in an acute situation. This kind of help could be offered through the network of Finland's diplomatic missions.

As part of the comprehensive development of the protection of human rights defenders, it must be remembered that human rights defenders face not only physical harassment and threats but also similar threats in the digital environment. Technology is also used in illegal spying of human rights defenders. When protecting a human rights defender who is at risk, the person's family members must also be taken into account as the threat is often not targeted only at the person concerned but at their entire family.

It is time Finland turned the commitments and principles concerning human rights defenders into concrete action. The Human Rights Delegation calls on the Government to take the following measures to protect human rights defenders at risk

- develop a comprehensive model to support the human rights defender both in the country of origin and in Finland
- secure the human rights defender's entry to Finland with a fast and flexible visa procedure, and
- guarantee sufficient resources for protection.

The Human Rights Delegation of the Human Rights Centre serves as a national cooperative body for actors in the sector of fundamental and human rights and deals with fundamental and human rights matters that are of far-reaching significance and principal importance. The Human Rights Centre and its Human Rights Delegation together with the Parliamentary Ombudsman form the Finnish National Human Rights Institution (NHRI).