



VMUN 2026

# United Nations Human Rights Council

BACKGROUND GUIDE





## Vancouver Model United Nations

The Twenty-Fifth Annual Session | January 23<sup>rd</sup>-25<sup>th</sup>, 2026

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Dear Delegates,

My name is Lara Hamzavi, and I will be serving as your Director for the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) at VMUN 2026. Entering my final year at Rockridge Secondary, and I am incredibly excited to meet each one of you and facilitate what I know will be a productive committee room. Alongside my Chair Hassan Jina and my Assistant Director Brandon Yu, I would like to officially welcome and guide you forward to the conference that awaits us.

My first large conference was VMUN 2023, and I still vividly remember the inspiring, high-energy atmosphere. At the time, I never imagined I'd be confident enough to give a speech or make an impact in the committee room. Since then, Model UN has become a defining part of my high school experience, and it is now incredibly fulfilling for me to watch delegates become motivated and enjoy the hard work they put into debating important world issues.

This iteration of UNHRC will explore the topics of *Mass Surveillance and the Right to Privacy* and *Protection of Human Rights Advocates*. During this conference, I implore you to speak out and not to worry about what others think of you, but rather to hone your countless diplomatic skills. Although you may think others are constantly judging you for every word you utter, I can assure each and every one of you that your speeches can be inspiring and create the environment where debate flows best. Always remember, we, the Dais, have gone through that same nerve-racking feeling when you have to address a committee of unfamiliar faces, and we will always be there to support each and every one of you throughout the weekend.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at [unhrc@vmun.com](mailto:unhrc@vmun.com) if you have any questions. I look forward to meeting you all!

Sincerely,

Lara Hamzavi  
UNHRC Director

# Position Paper Policy

## What is a Position Paper?

A position paper is a brief overview of a country's stance on the topics being discussed by a particular committee. Though there is no specific format the position paper must follow, it should include a description of your positions your country holds on the issues on the agenda, relevant actions that your country has taken, and potential solutions that your country would support.

At Vancouver Model United Nations, delegates should write a position paper for each of the committee's topics. Each position paper should not exceed one page and should all be combined into a single document per delegate.

For UNHRC, position papers, although strongly recommended, are not required. However, delegates who wish to be considered for an award must submit position papers.

## Formatting

Position papers should:

- Include the name of the delegate, his/her country, and the committee
- Be in a standard font (e.g. Times New Roman) with a 12-point font size and 1-inch document margins
- Not include illustrations, diagrams, decorations, national symbols, watermarks, or page borders
- Include citations and a bibliography, in any format, giving due credit to the sources used in research (not included in the 1-page limit)

## Due Dates and Submission Procedure

Position papers for this committee must be submitted by **January 12, 2026, at 23:59 PT**. Once your position paper is complete, please save the file as your last name, your first name and send it as an attachment in an email to your committee's email address, with the subject heading as "[last name] [first name] — Position Paper". Please do not add any other attachments to the email. Both your position papers should be combined into a single PDF or Word document file; position papers submitted in another format will not be accepted.

Each position paper will be manually reviewed and considered for the Best Position Paper award. The email address for this committee is [unhrc@vmun.com](mailto:unhrc@vmun.com).

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# Mass Surveillance and the Right to Privacy

## Overview

In an era where data is as powerful as currency, the rise of mass surveillance has begun to blur the line distinguishing security from personal freedom. The modernization of digital technology has transformed how data is collected and stored, and governments have capitalized on these new developments. Mass surveillance refers to the systems that gather, examine, and possibly create “[sic] data on indefinite or large numbers of people.”<sup>1</sup> Advocates of mass surveillance have promoted the technology as a tool for addressing national threats related to terrorism and crime. Concerningly, commercial spyware has been reported within private devices.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the rapid development of surveillance technologies poses a new complex layer to upholding this right.

Mass surveillance is often justified in the name of security.<sup>3</sup> Despite this, many surveillance-heavy countries are using this technology to censor increasing amounts of information.<sup>4</sup> Studies from nations such as Uganda and Zimbabwe have shown that in select countries where surveillance technology is increasingly prevalent, citizens have begun to self-censor themselves.<sup>5</sup> Citizens within these regions have avoided sensitive topics online and have refrained from participating in protests or online discussion.<sup>6</sup> Thus, a chilling effect has begun to erode freedom of expression and suppress dissenting voices.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, the debate over mass surveillance is expected to become more intense as technology continues to evolve faster than international organizations can regulate.<sup>8</sup> Artificial intelligence and the use of biometric tracking may allow for further state monitoring of individuals, creating an uncertain precedent for security and human rights.<sup>9</sup> Ultimately, preserving fundamental freedoms will become increasingly challenging in an increasingly digital age.

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<sup>1</sup> International. 2021. “Mass Surveillance.” Privacyinternational.org. 2021. <https://privacyinternational.org/learn/mass-surveillance>.

<sup>2</sup> “Managing Commercial Spyware through Export Controls.” n.d. Accessed July 8, 2025. [https://cltc.berkeley.edu/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Managing\\_Commercial\\_Spyware\\_Export\\_Controls.pdf](https://cltc.berkeley.edu/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Managing_Commercial_Spyware_Export_Controls.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Shahbaz, Adrian, and Allie Funk. 2019. “Social Media Surveillance.” Freedom House. 2019. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-on-the-net/2019/the-crisis-of-social-media/social-media-surveillance>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Murray, Daragh. 2023. “The Chilling Effects of Surveillance and Human Rights: Insights from Qualitative Research in Uganda and Zimbabwe.” *Journal of Human Rights Practice* 16 (1): 397–412. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jhuman/huad020>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Schuster, Stefan, Melle van den Berg, Xabier Larrucea, Ton Slewe, and Peter Ide-Kostic. 2017. “Mass Surveillance and Technological Policy Options: Improving Security of Private Communications.” *Computer Standards & Interfaces* 50 (February): 76–82. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.csi.2016.09.011>.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

## Timeline

**April 26, 1933** — Nazi Germany creates the Gestapo as a political secret police force. The Gestapo enforces National Socialism and has the ability to intercept different modes of communication, such as physical letters or telephone calls.<sup>10</sup>

**December 10, 1948** — The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) is adopted by the United Nations General Assembly. Article 12 states that "no one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with [their] privacy, family, home or correspondence."<sup>11</sup> This becomes the global standard for privacy.

**November 4, 1952** — The United States secretly creates the National Security Agency (NSA), a defense organization operating outside of public knowledge.<sup>12</sup> The NSA is responsible for the collection and analysis of foreign intelligence, primarily through signal intelligence (SIGINT).<sup>13</sup>

**March 13, 1954** — The Komitet Gosudarstvennoi Bezopanosti (KGB) is established in the Soviet Union to conduct surveillance on Soviet citizens and foreigners within the nation and ensure compliance with communist ideals.<sup>14</sup>

**November 1957** — The Ministerium für Staatssicherheit (Stasi) in Eastern Germany conducts one of the largest mass surveillance operations in history. The Stasi relied on approximately 100,000 official employees and an estimated 2,000,000 civilian informants who reported on friends, neighbors, and colleagues, ultimately monitoring around 6,000,000 East German citizens.<sup>15</sup>

**1971** — ECHELON, a secret global surveillance program, is formally launched. It is composed of the member states of the Five Eyes alliance: Australia, Canada, United Kingdom, United States, and New Zealand. ECHELON utilized SIGINT to intercept digital communication on a global scale.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. 2021. "The Gestapo: Overview." Ushmm.org. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. March 10, 2021. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/gestapo>.

<sup>11</sup> United Nations. 1948. "Universal Declaration of Human Rights." United Nations. 1948. <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>.

<sup>12</sup> "A Transparent Top Secret Organization?" 2015. Columbia.edu. 2015. <https://www.law.columbia.edu/news/archive/transparent-top-secret-organization>.

<sup>13</sup> Patrizio, Andy, and Kathleen Richards. 2021. "What Is the NSA and How Does It Work?" SearchSecurity. May 2021. <https://www.techtarget.com/searchsecurity/definition/National-Security-Agency>.

<sup>14</sup> Pringle, Robert W. 2017. "KGB | Agency, Union of Soviet Socialist Republics." In Encyclopædia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/KGB>.

<sup>15</sup> Cameron, Joel D. 2016. "Stasi | East German Government." In Encyclopædia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Stasi>.

<sup>16</sup> Piodi, Franco, and Iolanda Mombelli. 2014. "The ECHELON Affair the EP and the Global Interception System 1998 -2002 EPRS | European Parliamentary Reserch Service STUDY European Parliament History Series." [https://historicalarchives.europarl.europa.eu/files/live/sites/historicalarchive/files/03\\_PUBLICATIONS/03\\_European-Parliament/01\\_Documents/the-echelon-affair-en.pdf](https://historicalarchives.europarl.europa.eu/files/live/sites/historicalarchive/files/03_PUBLICATIONS/03_European-Parliament/01_Documents/the-echelon-affair-en.pdf).

**January 28, 1981** — The Convention for the Protection of Individuals with regard to Automatic Processing of Personal Data (Convention 108) is adopted by the Council of Europe. This becomes the first legally binding document in data protection.<sup>17</sup>

**April 30, 1993** — CERN publicizes the World Wide Web, changing the way that information is shared. This creates new opportunities to collect digital data for state and non-state actors.<sup>18</sup>

**October 26, 2001** — Following the September 11th attacks, the United States passes the USA PATRIOT Act, granting significant power to government surveillance systems. These systems include the Planning Tool for Resource Integration, Synchronization, and Management (PRISM) program.<sup>19</sup>

**April 2009** — Leaked documents from Baidu disclose previously censored information, including the topics of ‘Rights’ and ‘Letters’. The documents reveal China’s implementation of The Golden Shield Project, managed by its Ministry of Public Security. The project aims to monitor and censor China-based online networks. Sites such as Google, YouTube, and all Western social media sites are completely blocked.<sup>20</sup>

**June 6, 2013** — Edward Snowden, a former National Security Agency (NSA) intelligence contractor, leaks classified information to *The Guardian* and *The Washington Post*, revealing how vast the NSA’s global surveillance programs have become. These revelations are a watershed moment for this topic, inspiring debates around mass surveillance.<sup>21</sup>

**April 23, 2014** — Brazil enacts the Marco Civil da Internet, establishing legal protections for Brazilian internet users, with the objective of promoting net neutrality and freedom of expression online.<sup>22</sup> It was introduced as a response to the concerns over surveillance practices and safeguard users in the digital world.<sup>23</sup>

**May 25, 2018** — The European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) is enacted, strengthening data protection within the EU.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Council of Europe. n.d. “Convention 108 and Protocols.” Data Protection. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/data-protection/convention108-and-protocol>.

<sup>18</sup> Mortillaro, Nicole. 2016. “The World Wide Web Turns 25: How It Changed Everything.” Global News. Global News. August 23, 2016. <https://globalnews.ca/news/2897780/the-world-wide-web-turns-25-how-it-changed-everything/>.

<sup>19</sup> Wadsworth, Madison. 2020. “The Patriot Act: How It Hurts Democracy the Patriot Act: How It Hurts Democracy.” <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1878&context=honors>.

<sup>20</sup> Chan, Conrad. 2011. “China’s Great Firewall.” Cs.stanford.edu. Stanford University. 2011. [https://cs.stanford.edu/people/eroberts/cs181/projects/2010-11/FreeExpressionVsSocialCohesion/china\\_policy.html](https://cs.stanford.edu/people/eroberts/cs181/projects/2010-11/FreeExpressionVsSocialCohesion/china_policy.html).

<sup>21</sup> Smith, David. 2023. “What’s Really Changed 10 Years after the Snowden Revelations?” The Guardian, June 7, 2023, sec. US news. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/jun/07/edward-snowden-10-years-surveillance-revelations>.

<sup>22</sup> Patry, Melody. 2014. “Brazil: Towards an Internet ‘Bill of Rights’ - Index on Censorship.” Index on Censorship. June 12, 2014. <https://www.indexoncensorship.org/2014/06/brazil-towards-internet-bill-rights/>.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> European Union. 2018. “General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).” GDPR. 2018. <https://gdpr-info.eu/>.

**October 12, 2023** — The UN General Assembly adopts Resolution 54/21 on The Right to Privacy in the Digital Age. This resolution acknowledges the challenges with new technology, including emotion recognition and biometric surveillance; it calls for stronger digital human rights standards.<sup>25</sup>

## Historical Analysis

Mass surveillance emerged with the rise of totalitarian regimes in the 20th century. The governments of the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany used novel pervasive surveillance systems—the KGB and Gestapo respectively—to monitor their populations at all times and prevent mutiny.<sup>26</sup> This entailed any form of dissent or organized opposition towards the regime.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, political activism and protests were categorized as attempts to overthrow any state authority.<sup>28</sup> Such surveillance systems heavily relied on human networks, where informants and secret police would provide intelligence based on what they observed in the population.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, telephone tapping and mail interception was also employed to further intimidate citizens and control the consciousness, or perception, of the public.<sup>30</sup> The addition of widespread government propaganda further aided in influencing public opinion and supporting specific agendas.<sup>31</sup> As a result, privacy was transformed from a personal freedom into a dangerous privilege, and governments gained unchecked state power.

Following World War II, and throughout the Cold War, surveillance was a practice employed by both authoritarian and democratic states.<sup>32</sup> While comprehensive monitoring and censorship were still present in authoritarian states, many democratic nations began to expand their intelligence and surveillance as well.<sup>33</sup> Primarily driven by national security concerns, agencies including the United States National Security Agency (NSA) in 1952 and the Five Eyes (FVEY) alliance in the West created a new precedent in the way intelligence was gathered.<sup>34</sup> The FVEY alliance served as a way for the five countries that participated in the agreement—the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand—to share information through signals intelligence (SIGINT).<sup>35</sup> SIGINT refers to the collection and analysis of information from electronic signals and communications.<sup>36</sup> In the Five Eyes alliance, SIGINT was utilized confidentially to intercept and analyze any electronic communications, such as telephone calls or text messages.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Resolution 54/21, "Right to privacy in the digital age", (12 October 2023), A/HRC/RES/54/21.

<sup>26</sup> Hubbard-Hall, Claire M. n.d. "Totalitarian Surveillance Societies." Sage Publishing. <https://sk.sagepub.com/ency/edvol/the-sage-encyclopedia-of-surveillance-security-privacy/chpt/totalitarian-surveillance-societies>.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Marius Mehrl, and Ioannis Choulis. 2023. "Secret Police Organizations and State Repression." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 68 (5). <https://doi.org/10.1177/00220027231188895>.

<sup>30</sup> The New York Times. 1973. "Paris Says Bugging Phones Is Its Right," June 20, 1973.

<https://www.nytimes.com/1973/06/20/archives/paris-says-bugging-phones-is-its-right-charges-by-newspapers.html>.

<sup>31</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. 2021a. "Nazi Propaganda and Censorship." *Holocaust Encyclopedia*. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. January 15, 2021. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/nazi-propaganda-and-censorship>.

<sup>32</sup> Spannos, Chris. n.d. "Mass Surveillance and 'Smart Totalitarianism.'" *ROAR Magazine*. <https://roarmag.org/magazine/mass-surveillance-smart-totalitarianism/>.

<sup>33</sup> Volinz, Lior. 2025. "Authoritarian Surveillance: An Introduction." *Surveillance & Society* 23 (1): 112–16. <https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v23i1.18975>.

<sup>34</sup> "Eyes Wide Open Special Report." n.d. <https://privacyinternational.org/sites/default/files/2018-02/Eyes%20Wide%20Open%20v1.pdf>.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

Following the rise of the People's Republic of China in 1949, mass surveillance was implemented through 'word-of-mouth' systems.<sup>38</sup> Specifically, citizens, including coworkers and family members, were encouraged to monitor and report on each other.<sup>39</sup> This system succeeded due to either persistent fear or loyalty to the Communist party and in exchange for social favor.<sup>40</sup> Consequently, vast numbers of people were accused of being spies or conspiring against the state, resulting in severe consequences in the form of formal executions and vicious beatings. During this period of surveillance, it is estimated that between 1 to 5 million Chinese citizens were killed.<sup>41</sup>

In 2013, former NSA intelligence officer Edward Snowden leaked classified documents detailing the extensive and highly classified mass surveillance programs the NSA had been operating.<sup>42</sup> Alongside previous programs similar to PRISM, it was revealed that the NSA had been collecting metadata directly from major internet companies such as Google, Apple, and Facebook.<sup>43</sup> Additionally, telecommunication companies including Verizon and AT&T had been complicit in allowing the NSA to intercept and analyze phone calls and text messages flowing in and out of the United States.<sup>44</sup>

Following the Snowden leaks, the issue of mass surveillance was put under the spotlight.<sup>45</sup> Countries began to defend their surveillance as a matter of national security and counterterrorism, attempting to excuse their widespread monitoring of their citizens.<sup>46</sup> This, along with growing public dissent in some countries, led many governments to change their definitions of privacy and freedom of expression.<sup>47</sup>

## Past UN/International Involvement

### **The Right to Privacy in the Digital Age (Resolution 68/167)**

In response to the Snowden leaks, the United National General Assembly (UNGA), a vital UN body where all members have the same voting power, adopted Resolution 68/167: *The Right to Privacy in the Digital Age* in

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<sup>38</sup> Lovell, Joseph. 2022. "The Maoist Soundscape: Sonic Politics in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1976." Escholarship.org. 2022. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/978012mz>.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Tanner, Harold. 2007. "China's Law and Government in the Mao Years (1949-1976)." Association for Asian Studies. 2007. <https://www.asianstudies.org/publications/eaa/archives/chinas-law-and-government-in-the-mao-years-1949-1976/>.

<sup>42</sup> "NSA Spying: Overview | EBSCO." 2024. EBSCO Information Services, Inc. | [Www.ebsco.com](http://www.ebsco.com). 2024. <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/politics-and-government/nsa-spying-overview>.

<sup>43</sup> Electronic Frontier Foundation. 2024. "NSA Spying." Electronic Frontier Foundation. February 22, 2024. <https://www.eff.org/nsa-spying>.

<sup>44</sup> Taitz, Sarah. 2023. "Five Things to Know about NSA Mass Surveillance and the Coming Fight in Congress." American Civil Liberties Union. April 11, 2023. <https://www.aclu.org/news/national-security/five-things-to-know-about-nsa-mass-surveillance-and-the-coming-fight-in-congress>.

<sup>45</sup> Pilkington, Ed. 2021. "'Panic Made Us Vulnerable': How 9/11 Made the US Surveillance State – and the Americans Who Fought Back." The Guardian. September 4, 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/sep/04/surveillance-state-september-11-panic-made-us-vulnerable>.

<sup>46</sup> Guariglia, Matthew, Cindy Cohn, and Andrew Crocker. 2023. "10 Years after Snowden: Some Things Are Better, Some We're Still Fighting For." Electronic Frontier Foundation. May 19, 2023. <https://www.eff.org/deeplinks/2023/05/10-years-after-snowden-some-things-are-better-some-were-still-fighting>.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

December 2013.<sup>48</sup> The resolution affirmed that protections for human rights must extend equally to the online world, marking a huge step in human rights advocacy.<sup>49</sup> For example, both Germany and Brazil in 2014 led a follow-up resolution calling for stronger oversight of spying and digital surveillance practices.<sup>50</sup> This resolution received widespread support and brought continued attention to the pervasive nature of digital surveillance.<sup>51</sup> The resolution also urged all member states to respect the right to digital communication privacy and requested the UNHRC to create a report on the protection of online privacy.<sup>52</sup> In summary, Resolution 68/167 created a unified, albeit superficial, agreement amongst all UN member states for human rights, as outlined in Article 12 of the UDHR and Article 17 of the ICCPR. These articles, which protect against arbitrary interferences on an individual's privacy and safeguard the right to privacy respectively, are also applicable online and in the digital world.<sup>53</sup>

The 2014 High Commissioner's report building on Resolution 68/167 criticized the lack of transparency in governmental surveillance and called for better protection of privacy rights in the digital age.<sup>54</sup> However, all UNGA resolutions are non-binding, meaning that states are not legally compelled to implement policies outlined within the resolution.<sup>55</sup> Thus, many nations ignored these recommendations, favoring political control and national security over individual rights in areas where surveillance is essential to preserving state authority.<sup>56</sup>

### **The Mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Privacy**

The UN Special Rapporteur is an independent expert or group of experts appointed by the UNHRC to monitor and report on global human rights issues.<sup>57</sup> Currently, the UNHRC has 60 special procedural mandates, including 14 country mandates and 46 theme mandates. Country mandates focus on the human rights situation within specific nations, while theme mandates address broader global issues such as freedom of expression or privacy rights.<sup>58</sup> Currently, there are 87 mandate-holders, appointed experts highly skilled in international law, who act as impartial human rights specialists in carrying out these mandates.<sup>59</sup> The Special Rapporteur engages directly with states and is able to give an external perspective regarding government methodology in monitoring citizens.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Tikik, Eneken. 2017. "Privacy Online: Up, Close and Personal." *Health and Technology* 7 (4): 489–99.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12553-017-0197-z>.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> BBC News. 2013. "Brazil and Germany Draft Anti-Spy Resolution at UN," November 2, 2013, sec. Europe.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-24781417>.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> United Nations General Assembly. Resolution 68/167, "The right to privacy in the digital age." A/RES/68/167. December 18, 2013

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> "UN Rights Chief Warns of 'Disturbing Lack of Transparency' for Digital Mass Surveillance." 2014. UN News. July 16, 2014.

<https://news.un.org/en/story/2014/07/473142>.

<sup>55</sup> "How Decisions Are Made at the UN." United Nations. 2024. <https://www.un.org/en/model-united-nations/how-decisions-are-made-un>.

<sup>56</sup> "New UN Resolution Amplifies Call for Right to Privacy in the Light of Mass Surveillance." n.d. Ccdcoe.org.

<https://ccdcoe.org/incyder-articles/new-un-resolution-amplifies-call-for-right-to-privacy-in-the-light-of-mass-surveillance/>.

<sup>57</sup> Heller, Leo. n.d. "Being a Special Rapporteur." OHCHR

[https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Water/10anniversary/Being\\_a\\_Special\\_Rapporteur.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Water/10anniversary/Being_a_Special_Rapporteur.pdf).

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> "Directory of Special Procedures Mandate Holders." 2024. OHCHR. 2024. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/procedural-documents/directory-special-procedures-mandate-holders>.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

In 2015, the UN Special Rapporteur built on the aforementioned UNGA resolution, establishing the *Mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Privacy*, also known as Resolution 28/16.<sup>61</sup> This mandate created an independent expert position dedicated to monitoring and reporting on the protection of the right to privacy, emphasizing new technologies with potential or proven usage of monitoring citizens globally.<sup>62</sup> The establishment of this mandate has yielded promising results, providing independent views on often secretive state operations.<sup>63</sup> For example, the Special Rapporteur's reports, such as the Report on Neurotechnologies and Neurodata by Ana Brian Nougères, have addressed new and pressing issues regarding mass surveillance.<sup>64</sup> However, as the Special Rapporteur's recommendations are not legally binding, success regarding this mandate is limited to increasing awareness of certain surveillance methods.<sup>65</sup>

## General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)

The European Union's (EU's) General Data Protection Regulation, which came into effect on May 25, 2018, is widely regarded as one of the most influential legal frameworks on data protection at the international level, reshaping standards not only within the EU but also influencing privacy legislation in other nations.<sup>66</sup> It replaced the EU's 1995 Data Protection Directive, aiming to create standardized data privacy laws across all EU nations while giving individuals more control over their personal data.<sup>67</sup> The GDPR introduced very strict requirements for organizations worldwide that protected the data of EU citizens regardless of the organization location.<sup>68</sup> Notable mandates in this framework include mandatory breach notifications within 72 hours, the right to data erasure, and consent requirements.<sup>69</sup> Any company found in violation of these mandates faced consequences of fines up to €20 million or 4 percent of their income.<sup>70</sup> The GDPR has been highly successful in increasing data protection globally, which is indicative of the 'Brussels Effect'. However, further regulation requires international implementation of these same mandates to avoid compliance issues.<sup>71</sup> Such issues may result in conflicting national laws and legal uncertainty for multinational companies, which could lead to penalties or difficulties in data transfers across borders.<sup>72</sup> The GDPR has also led many countries to update their own data protection laws.<sup>73</sup> This includes Brazil (LGPD), Australia, and India (DPDPA), and California, which has introduced their own Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA).<sup>74, 75</sup> These laws indicate the promising features of the GDPR, introducing stricter accountability measures for organizations handling personal data.

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<sup>61</sup> "OHCHR | Special Rapporteur on the Right to Privacy." n.d. OHCHR. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-privacy>.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> United Nations. Human Rights Council. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Privacy. A/HRC/37/62. Geneva: United Nations, 2018. <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/37/62>.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> "The Special Rapporteur's Mandate: Protecting Assembly & Association Rights Worldwide - Former UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association (2011-17)." 2024. Former UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association (2011-17). September 23, 2024. <https://freeassembly.net/about/mandate/>.

<sup>66</sup> Wolford, Ben. n.d. "What Is GDPR, the EU's New Data Protection Law?" GDPR.EU. <https://gdpr.eu/what-is-gdpr/>.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> "What Is the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)?" 2024. Digital Guardian. 2024. <https://www.digitalguardian.com/blog/what-general-data-protection-regulation-gdpr>.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Birnhack, Michael Dan, and Guy Mundlak. 2025. "The Brussels Effect(S) and the Rise of a Privacy Profession." International Data Privacy Law, May. <https://doi.org/10.1093/idpl/ipaf005>.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Team, CookieYes. 2024. "GDPR Countries: 10 Regions Enforcing the Strictest Data Protection Laws - CookieYes." CookieYes. December 19, 2024. <https://www.cookieyes.com/blog/gdpr-countries/>.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

## Current Situation

### National Security and Individual Privacy

In an increasingly digital world, mass surveillance has grown from limited specialized intelligence gathering into the monitoring of global citizens. Governments have gradually increased their reliance on surveillance technology to prevent crime and protect countries from terrorism.<sup>76</sup> Simultaneously, advocacy groups have voiced their concern over how these practices infringe on human rights, specifically Article 12 of the UDHR and Article 17 of the ICCPR. In April of 2025, a group of human rights organizations submitted a report to the UNHRC with their concerns over the repression of free speech and dissent under the guise of national security.<sup>77</sup> These organizations included the Center for Constitutional Rights (CCR), Muslim Advocates, Asian Law Caucus, International Justice Clinic at the University of California at the Irvine School of Law, and the Community Justice Project.<sup>78</sup>

The report emphasized how national security frameworks have been used with increasing frequency to justify the increase of crackdowns on political dissent and expression.<sup>79</sup> Furthermore, the report illuminated how surveillance against dissent has been exemplified in countries such as Saudi Arabia, Thailand, China, and Turkey.<sup>80</sup> These cases reinforced the report's central argument, that leaving legal safeguards unchecked can lead to a widespread system of speech repression. Consequently, it argues this practice is concerningly used not just by authoritarian governments, but by all types of governments to engage in surveillance threatening civilian rights.

Currently, many states that face threats from terrorism or organized crime explain that large surveillance capacities are essential to protecting national security and public safety.<sup>81</sup> As such, the government requires access to communications and metadata for preventative measures.<sup>82</sup> For example, following the September 11th attacks in the United States, the USA PATRIOT Act was passed as a means of counterterrorism; however, it was later revealed that the NSA had been given excessive power, as they could access the private information of United States citizens.<sup>83</sup> This finding inspired widespread public backlash and defined debates surrounding the balance between national security and civil liberties.<sup>84</sup> It also drew attention to how surveillance mechanisms intended for public protection can be misused and lead to serious violations of privacy rights.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> "New Report: Human Rights Organizations Urge United Nations to Address U.S. Violations of Free Expression, Calling Global Attention to Entrenching Authoritarianism." 2025. Center for Constitutional Rights. 2025. <https://ccrjustice.org/home/press-center/press-releases/new-report-human-rights-organizations-urge-united-nations-address>.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> "New Report: Human Rights Organizations Urge United Nations to Address U.S. Violations of Free Expression, Calling Global Attention to Entrenching Authoritarianism." 2025. Center for Constitutional Rights. 2025. <https://ccrjustice.org/home/press-center/press-releases/new-report-human-rights-organizations-urge-united-nations-address>.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> "Issues on the Frontlines of Technology and Politics." 2021. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. 2021.

<https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2021/10/issues-on-the-frontlines-of-technology-and-politics?center=russia-eurasia>.

<sup>81</sup> Heinrichs, Rebecca, and Artemus Ward. n.d. "Does the Threat of Terrorism Justify Increased Surveillance?" Bill of Rights Institute. <https://billofrightsinstitute.org/activities/does-the-threat-of-terrorism-justify-increased-surveillance>.

<sup>82</sup> Wadsworth, Madison. 2020. "The Patriot Act: How It Hurts Democracy the Patriot Act: How It Hurts Democracy." <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1878&context=honors>.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> United Nations. 2022. "Spyware and Surveillance: Threats to Privacy and Human Rights Growing, UN Report Warns." OHCHR. September 16, 2022. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/09/spyware-and-surveillance-threats-privacy-and-human-rights-growing-un-report>.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

## Digital Rights Disparities

In the early 21st century, there was an increase in digital technologies with the capability to transform surveillance practices.<sup>86</sup> Public access to the internet, smartphones, and biometric devices came with the ability to track and monitor users of these devices.<sup>87</sup> In India, the Aadhaar biometric ID system, which serves over 1.2 billion people, has introduced numerous legal privacy issues.<sup>88</sup> Introduced in 2009, the Aadhaar card is a 12-digit card that collects citizens' biometrics, such as fingerprints, retina scans, and face photos.<sup>89</sup> As a result, the Aadhaar database is one of the world's largest biometric databases and poses a potential security risk of 89 percent of the Indian population.<sup>90</sup> The project's extensive use of AI software has raised ethical questions with critics warning that the system could evolve into an oppressive surveillance tool used by the government, threatening citizens' civil liberties as protected under Article 12 of the UDHR.<sup>91</sup>

While many developed nations have begun to create sophisticated data protection laws and have the resources to provide oversight to digital privacy, many developing nations are unable to safely implement advanced surveillance technology due to their lack of resources.<sup>92</sup> This technological gap endangers these countries' citizens, as governments operate these devices unchecked by regulation or privacy rights of their citizens.<sup>93</sup> Thus, these disparities must be addressed with increases in awareness, regulation, and capabilities of implementation.<sup>94</sup>

### Case Study: Kenya's "Safe City" Surveillance

In 2014, Huawei launched its "Safe City" project in Nairobi in an effort to enhance national security and lower crime rates.<sup>95</sup> The Kenyan and Chinese government signed a USD 665.4 million agreement to deploy thousands of CCTV and facial recognition cameras in major cities.<sup>96</sup> After approval, Huawei, which owned most of the project's infrastructure, placed a communications network linking 1,800 surveillance cameras with 195 police bureaus and 7,600 police officers under president Kenyatta.<sup>97</sup> As the program was marketed as a crime prevention tactic, these advanced cameras were implemented without proper data protection laws, which made citizens susceptible to privacy rights violations.

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<sup>86</sup> Buonocore, Filomena. 2024. "Digital Transformation and Social Change: Leadership Strategies for Responsible Innovation." *Journal of Engineering and Technology Management* 74 (101843): 101843–43. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jengtecman.2024.101843>.

<sup>87</sup> Geist, Michael. 2013. "20th Century Laws Meet 21st Century Surveillance: Why Metadata Surveillance Is a Serious Concern - Michael Geist." Michael Geist. June 11, 2013. <https://www.michaelgeist.ca/2013/06/metadata-surveillance-post/>.

<sup>88</sup> Jain, Mardav. 2019. "The Aadhaar Card: Cybersecurity Issues with India's Biometric Experiment - the Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies." The Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies. May 9, 2019. <https://jsis.washington.edu/news/the-aadhaar-card-cybersecurity-issues-with-indias-biometric-experiment/>.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Dixon, Pam. 2017. "A Failure to 'Do No Harm' -- India's Aadhaar Biometric ID Program and Its Inability to Protect Privacy in Relation to Measures in Europe and the U.S." *Health and Technology* 7 (4): 539–67. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12553-017-0202-6>.

<sup>92</sup> "Data Protection Regulation in the Global South." n.d. Carnegiendowment.org. <https://carnegiendowment.org/posts/2024/02/data-protection-regulation-in-the-global-south?lang=en>.

<sup>93</sup> Ragossnig, Arne M, and Goran Vujić. 2015. "Challenges in Technology Transfer from Developed to Developing Countries." *Waste Management & Research* 33 (2): 93–95. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0734242x15569403>.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Wangari, Njeri. 2023. "In Africa's First 'Safe City,' Surveillance Reigns." Coda Story. November 8, 2023. <https://www.codastory.com/authoritarian-tech/africa-surveillance-china-magnum/>.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> "Safe Cities: Using Smart Tech for Public Security | a Better Connected World | Huawei | BBC Worldwide." 2013. Bbc.com. 2013. <https://www.bbc.com/future/bespoke/specials/connected-world/government.html>.

In an effort to promote the initiative further, Huawei reported that crime rates from 2014 to 2015 had decreased by up to 46 percent in targeted locations.<sup>98</sup> However, this early success was not reflected in long-term trends. In fact, Kenya's National Police Service reported an increase in crimes from 2017 to 2018.<sup>99</sup> Critics of this system accuse China of 'exporting authoritarianism' and bringing oppression to other states, asserting that the Safe Cities initiative has maliciously digitalized Nairobi.<sup>100</sup> Kenya's case demonstrates an increasing trend in developing countries where advanced surveillance technologies are brought in and widely implemented without proper legal structures.<sup>101</sup>

## Government Transparency

One current area of debate is to what extent governments should be transparent about their surveillance activities and the level of accountability that they should take for the actions of their intelligence systems.<sup>102</sup> Governments often argue that revealing operating specifics of a surveillance system defeats the purpose of said system, rendering intelligence gathering useless.<sup>103</sup> However, that has led to an erosion of public trust.<sup>104</sup>

Without proper oversight, mass surveillance can become an oppressive tool for state leaders. This has become evident in Russia, whose Systema Operativno-Razyskikh Metropolitan (SORM) surveillance system allows authorities to easily intercept communications without external oversight, leading to immense censorship and reduced public awareness of how citizens can protect themselves from government monitoring.<sup>105</sup>

## Possible Solutions and Controversies

### Universal Digital Privacy Standards

One solution to clarify the methods in which mass surveillance occurs is to create a rights-based international UN framework on digital privacy. This could be based on already existing frameworks, such as the EU's GDPR. Additionally, these laws should align with the current international human rights standards, such as those in the UDHR. A framework would establish the global minimum for data collection and civil consent, ensuring citizens are given rights according to legislation.<sup>106</sup> States would be encouraged to actively promote public awareness by mandating transparency around surveillance practices and comprehensively informing citizens about methods

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<sup>98</sup> "Watching Huawei's 'Safe Cities.'" 2019. Csis.org. 2019. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/watching-huaweis-safe-cities>.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Masinde, Johnson, Franklin Mugambi, and Daniel Wambiri Muthee. 2025. "Big Data and Personal Information Privacy in Developing Countries: Insights from Kenya." *Frontiers in Big Data* 8 (April). <https://doi.org/10.3389/fdata.2025.1532362>.

<sup>102</sup> Westerlund, Mika, Diane A. Isabelle, and Seppo Leminen. 2021. "The Acceptance of Digital Surveillance in an Age of Big Data." *Technology Innovation Management Review* 11 (3). <https://timreview.ca/article/1427>.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Sherman, Justin. 2022. "Russia's Internet Censor Is Also a Surveillance Machine." Council on Foreign Relations. September 28, 2022. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/russias-internet-censor-also-surveillance-machine>.

<sup>106</sup> Wang, Xukang. 2024. "Beyond Surveillance: Privacy, Ethics, and Regulations in Face Recognition Technology." *Frontiers in Big Data* 7 (1337465). <https://doi.org/10.3389/fdata.2024.1337465>.

of data collection and purposes of data usage. For instance, revelations about the NSA's mass surveillance programs illuminated a need for greater transparency, as citizens were largely unaware of the extent to which their data was being collected and analyzed.<sup>107</sup> This would help control the extent to which private technology companies can provide intelligence to intelligence services and ensure that both telecommunication metadata and online citizen activity is secure. Incorporating these measures would allow for individuals to better understand their digital rights and hold governments and corporations accountable.

However, implementing a global framework presents the challenge of defining nation-specific limits.<sup>108</sup> Authoritarian regimes in particular may reject implementing specific mandates that democratic countries are comfortable with accepting.<sup>109</sup> Furthermore, different states have nuanced interpretations of the term "necessity", creating inconsistencies between countries regarding 'necessary' surveillance.<sup>110</sup> Thus, a penalty system could be implemented as enforcement of this new framework. For this solution to succeed, it would require a degree of flexibility and open-mindedness as different nations require different standards of security.<sup>111</sup>

### **Promoting Transparency**

This solution would allow for governments to be more open regarding their surveillance and the methodology in which they utilize to gather intelligence. This requires intelligence agencies and law enforcement to publish periodic reports detailing the types of surveillance conducted while protecting classified information. It also involves educating the public about their digital rights, and how they can protect their privacy online. While previous efforts at transparency have lacked meaningful public involvement, this approach could differ by embedding transparency into mandates and offering practical models to implement, sensitive to a country's capacity. For example, higher-income nations including Germany could mandate and hire oversight bodies with the power to audit surveillance programs and publish annual transparency reports, similar to how many NGOs and the Special Rapporteur already do. In lower income countries including Cuba, governments could partner with NGOs to increase digital rights education.

Increased transparency would build public trust; governments would be able to operate within legal boundaries and take accountability for the way they monitor their citizens.<sup>112</sup> This solution would mainly impact the way democratic countries conduct their surveillance, since a level of transparency already exists in these nations.<sup>113</sup> Moreover, further transparency would also allow for more judicial oversight, granting judges the ability to review surveillance activities before or while they occur.<sup>114</sup> For example, France's Council of State serves as a judicial body that can review intelligence activities, and the United Kingdom's Investigatory Powers Tribunal similarly

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<sup>107</sup> Gao, George. 2015. "What Americans Think about NSA Surveillance, National Security and Privacy." Pew Research Center. May 29, 2015. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2015/05/29/what-americans-think-about-nsa-surveillance-national-security-and-privacy/>.

<sup>108</sup> Schrepferman, Will. 2020. "Supervising Surveillance: International Law and the Surveillance State." Harvard International Review. November 11, 2020. <https://hir.harvard.edu/global-surveillance-state/>.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Alessandro, Martin. 2021. "Transparency and Trust in Government. Evidence from a Survey Experiment." World Development 138 (105223): 105223. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2020.105223>.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Toomey, Patrick, and Ashley Gorski. 2021. "The Privacy Lesson of 9/11: Mass Surveillance Is Not the Way Forward | News & Commentary." American Civil Liberties Union. American Civil Liberties Union. September 7, 2021. <https://www.aclu.org/news/national-security/the-privacy-lesson-of-9-11-mass-surveillance-is-not-the-way-forward>.

functions as a judicial oversight body for intelligence agencies.<sup>115, 116</sup> Expanding these agencies to review and approve surveillance legislations would restrain surveillance and uphold human rights standards.

Nevertheless, governments often resist transparency, arguing that it compromises national security and renders the classified nature of surveillance obsolete.<sup>117</sup> Implementing this solution also raises the risk of incomplete transparency which would create a false sense of security and oversight.<sup>118</sup> Finally, countries may falsify their reports, further decreasing the realism of such transparent reporting.<sup>119</sup> Despite these challenges, transparency remains an important hurdle in defining legal boundaries and increasing accountability. While implementation of promoting transparency may be a daunting goal, international engagement shows potential to gradually build trust and encourage accountability.

### **Privacy Enhancing Technologies (PETs)**

This solution focuses more on the protection of citizens than the regulation of government monitoring. As most surveillance is now digitized, it is imperative to both promote the development of privacy protecting technologies, such as data anonymization techniques, and ensure said technology is safe and accessible for developing nations.<sup>120</sup> This approach calls for technology companies to integrate privacy protections directly into their products and services, rather than adding security measures after releasing goods.<sup>121</sup> For instance, Apple has increasingly emphasized how their designs prioritize privacy, integrating features such as end-to-end encryption and on-device data processing into the core of its technology.<sup>122</sup> This means that users are protected without additional safeguards including biometric scans or passwords.<sup>123</sup> Hypothetically, a similar model could be adapted by manufacturers of smartphones distributed in low-income countries that could have privacy integrated into the model itself in order to avoid skyrocketing costs and maintenance.

PETs allow individuals to protect their own communications and data, creating barriers for unauthorized users to “their devices and collect personal information.”<sup>124</sup> Data minimization is a practice that lessens the impact of

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<sup>115</sup> “Conseil d’État | Highest Court in France.” n.d. Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Conseil-dEtat>.

<sup>116</sup> “Investigatory Powers Tribunal: Oversight of Surveillance and Secret Powers – Legal Lens.” 2025. Legallens.org.uk. March 12, 2025. <https://legallens.org.uk/investigatory-powers-tribunal-oversight-of-surveillance-and-secret-powers/>.

<sup>117</sup> Abdulafees Akanji. 2025. “BALANCING INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS vs. NATIONAL SECURITY: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS.” SSRN Electronic Journal, January. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5087795>.

<sup>118</sup> Nguyen, C. Thi. 2021. “Transparency Is Surveillance.” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 105 (2). <https://doi.org/10.1111/phpr.12823>.

<sup>119</sup> Bateman, Jon, and Dean Jackson. 2024. “Countering Disinformation Effectively: An Evidence-Based Policy Guide.” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Carnegie Endowment For International Peace. January 31, 2024. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/01/countering-disinformation-effectively-an-evidence-based-policy-guide?lang=en>.

<sup>120</sup> “How to Protect Government Data with Privacy-Enhancing Technology.” 2019. New America. 2019. <https://www.newamerica.org/oti/reports/how-to-protect-government-data-with-privacy-enhancing-technology/>.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Tran, Bao . 2024. “How Apple’s Patents Address Privacy and Security in Technology.” PatentPC. August 11, 2024. <https://patentpc.com/blog/how-apples-patents-address-privacy-and-security-in-technology>.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

breaches and makes systems inherently more secure.<sup>125</sup> By limiting access to sensitive data, PETs can improve public trust in information security.<sup>126</sup>

However, intelligence services and law enforcement argue that strong device encryption makes it difficult to investigate crimes that require infiltrating a password-protected device. This makes tracking metadata and mapping out potential terrorist plans much more challenging and less transparent.<sup>127</sup> Considering that some developing countries have barely begun to create infrastructures granting citizens access to technology, adding security features onto these digital devices would make technology more expensive and less accessible, slowing digital universality.<sup>128</sup> As a result, this solution could widen the technological gap between industrialized and developing nations.

## Bloc Positions

### Western Democracies

This bloc prioritizes individual privacy rights; it has already increased surveillance transparency especially within the EU, Canada, and Australia. Many of these countries already have strict data protection laws—namely, the EU’s GDPR—and strong judicial oversight of surveillance systems. These nations are likely to support international frameworks and emphasize the importance of privacy laws.<sup>129</sup> These states also push for global transparency reports, which demonstrate strong government accountability. However, these countries may resist regulations that interfere with already established intelligence-sharing alliances, such as the Five Eyes alliance as an alternative measure.

### Authoritarian Regimes

Nations in this bloc justify heavy surveillance on citizens as a means of ensuring national security and the protection of the government’s interests, such as China, Russia, and Iran, such as China, Russia, and Iran. These countries often oppose transparency and have little to no regulation regarding surveillance.<sup>130</sup> For instance, in place of data protection, China loosely outlines privacy rights in laws and legislations such as the Personal Information Protection Law.<sup>131</sup> This bloc is unlikely to support judicial oversight or external audits and will resist

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<sup>125</sup> Kiteworks. 2025. “What Is Data Minimization and Why Is It Important?” Kiteworks | Your Private Content Network. 2025. <https://www.kiteworks.com/risk-compliance-glossary/data-minimization/>.

<sup>126</sup> “The Power of PETs: Building Trust through Privacy Enhancing Technologies.” 2025. Information and Privacy Commissioner of Ontario. February 10, 2025. <https://www.ipc.on.ca/en/media-centre/blog/power-pets-building-trust-through-privacy-enhancing-technologies>.

<sup>127</sup> Jain, Pragya. 2021. “Encryption: A Tradeoff between User Privacy and National Security.” American University. July 15, 2021. <https://www.american.edu/sis/centers/security-technology/encryption.cfm>.

<sup>128</sup> Sanders, Cynthia K., and Edward Scanlon. 2021. “The Digital Divide Is a Human Rights Issue: Advancing Social Inclusion through Social Work Advocacy.” *Journal of Human Rights and Social Work* 6 (2): 130–43. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41134-020-00147-9>.

<sup>129</sup> World Bank. 2023. “Data Protection and Privacy Laws | Identification for Development.” The World Bank. 2023. <https://id4d.worldbank.org/guide/data-protection-and-privacy-laws>.

<sup>130</sup> Ünver, H. Akin. 2024. “Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Human Rights: Using AI as a Weapon of Repression and Its Impact on Human Rights.” [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2024/754450/EXPO\\_IDA\(2024\)754450\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2024/754450/EXPO_IDA(2024)754450_EN.pdf).

<sup>131</sup> “Data Protection Laws in China - Data Protection Laws of the World.” 2024. [Dlapipe-dataprotection.com](https://www.dlapipe-dataprotection.com/index.html?c=CN). 2024. <https://www.dlapipe-dataprotection.com/index.html?c=CN>.

external management, regarding it as a breach of national sovereignty.<sup>132</sup> Transparency in these nations is often limited, and accountability is internal.<sup>133</sup> Members of this bloc will often oppose mandates for PETs or any type of data minimization, as such measures could hinder their ability to monitor communication. Instead, they may lean towards developing domestic surveillance infrastructure through private or foreign technology firms.

## Emerging Digital Economies

This bloc includes countries undergoing rapid digitalization and economic development, which bring a plethora of security challenges and a need for various legal frameworks in order to regulate its development. These countries face significant privacy threats, which results in the prioritization of surveillance over individual privacy for overall public benefit. This increase in surveillance capabilities is evident in India with its Aadhaar card, and in various African countries that have begun to implement foreign surveillance measures, such as the Huawei Safe Cities initiative. In response, this bloc would be open to seeking international cooperation and financial support to develop their data protection. Furthermore, they would pursue a flexible solution that would enhance their ability to combat crime, while also keeping their citizens safe. These countries may view PETs as a hindrance due to pre-existing technological disparities and would primarily be focused on balancing national security and digital rights. To do this, they may advocate for a gradual implementation of any potential mutually agreed-upon program; this would decrease the systemic stress of implementation and allow for sustainable infrastructure development.

## Discussion Questions

1. How can governments maintain transparency and accountability in surveillance programs without putting national security or its security in jeopardy?
2. To what extent is state surveillance justified in protecting security, and at what point does it infringe upon international human rights standards?
3. How should the international community hold countries accountable when surveillance practices infringe on the UDHR?
4. How can the UN work toward establishing a universal framework regulating surveillance technologies while accounting for the political and technological disparities between member states?
5. How can citizens in surveillance-heavy states gain trust in their governments?
6. How can the UN sustainably introduce digital surveillance safely to developing nations, specifically regarding proper judicial oversight and protection for marginalized communities?
7. What role should digital rights education and public awareness campaigns play in empowering citizens to understand their right to privacy in the digital age?

## Additional Resources

Social Science Research Network: Balancing Individual Rights Vs. National Security, A Critical Analysis  
<https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5087795>

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<sup>132</sup> Volinz, Lior. 2025. "Authoritarian Surveillance: An Introduction." *Surveillance & Society* 23 (1): 112–16.  
<https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v23i1.18975>.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

Oxford Academic: The Brussels effect(s) and the rise of a privacy profession  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/idpl/ipaf005>

Harvard International Review: Applying International Law to the Global Surveillance State  
<https://hir.harvard.edu/global-surveillance-state/>

Privacy International: Mass Surveillance <https://privacyinternational.org/learn/mass-surveillance>

Surveillance & Society: Authoritarian Surveillance, An Introduction <https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v23i1.18975>

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# Protection of Human Rights Advocates

## Overview

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) declares that all individuals are born free and equal in dignity and rights.<sup>134</sup> Human rights defenders (HRDs) are individuals that take initiative to promote the protection of human rights in group or individual settings.<sup>135</sup> HRDs play a critical role within both exposing social system injustices and advocating for vulnerable populations.<sup>136</sup> Furthermore, HRDs have expanded their presence globally through roles such as journalism, lawyers, and whistleblowers.<sup>137</sup> Notably, this pursuit of justice often puts human rights advocates (HRAs) at risk, as regimes strive to suppress dissent and prevent an uprising.<sup>138</sup> Facing criminalization, defamation, and the prospect of trafficking, HRAs have adapted the methods they use to uphold justice and human rights.<sup>139</sup>

The need to protect HRDs is outlined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; specifically, it permits the right to hold opinions freely and without interference.<sup>140</sup> Historically, the repression of HRDs was physically violent and overt, often employing the use of detention, torture, and even murder in order to intimidate those devoted to such advocacy.<sup>141</sup>

Over time, the tactics used to repress HRAs have evolved in many societies, often taking on a more subtle and systemic form, rather than overtly violent methods.<sup>142</sup> Such systems are weaponized by governments and large corporations in order to silence HRAs.<sup>143</sup> These methods include specific government actions, such as the Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs), and specific government inaction in the form of vague definitions of national security that are used to financially exhaust HRA groups.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> United Nations. 1948. "Universal Declaration of Human Rights." United Nations. December 10, 1948. <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Canada, Global Affairs. 2017. "Voices at Risk: Canada's Guidelines on Supporting Human Rights Defenders." GAC. February 21, 2017. [https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues\\_development-enjeux\\_developpement/human\\_rights-droits\\_homme/rights\\_defenders\\_guide\\_defenseurs\\_droits.aspx?lang=eng](https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues_development-enjeux_developpement/human_rights-droits_homme/rights_defenders_guide_defenseurs_droits.aspx?lang=eng).

<sup>137</sup> "Human Rights Defenders & Whistle-Blowers | National Action Plans on Business and Human Rights." 2017. 2017. <https://globalnaps.org/issue/human-rights-defenders-whistle-blowers/>.

<sup>138</sup> York, University of. 2025. "The Protection of Human Rights Defenders at Risk." University of York. 2025. <https://www.york.ac.uk/research/impact/protection-of-hrds/>.

<sup>139</sup> "Criminalization of Human Rights Defenders 101 - Avocats sans Frontières Canada." 2022. Avocats sans Frontières Canada. November 8, 2022. <https://asfcanada.ca/en/medias/criminalization-of-human-rights-defenders-101/>.

<sup>140</sup> United Nations. 1948. "Universal Declaration of Human Rights." United Nations. December 10, 1948. <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>.

<sup>141</sup> "Canada's Guidelines on Supporting Human Rights Defenders." n.d. [https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/assets/pdfs/issues\\_development-enjeux\\_developpement/human\\_rights-droits\\_homme/rights\\_defenders-guide-defenseurs\\_droits\\_en.pdf](https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/assets/pdfs/issues_development-enjeux_developpement/human_rights-droits_homme/rights_defenders-guide-defenseurs_droits_en.pdf).

<sup>142</sup> Schiavon, Alessia, 2025, "How to Better Protect HRDs from SLAPPs: A Practical Defense Guide for European Lawyers," Gchumanrights.org, May 6, 2025. <https://www.gchumanrights.org/preparedness/how-to-better-protect-hrds-from-slapps-a-practical-defence-guide-for-european-lawyers/>.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

These key violations of the UDHR infringe on the basis of UNHRC principles, such as Article 19 and Article 5, which dictates that “no one shall be subjected to torture” or to “[sic] cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment.”<sup>145</sup> The UNHRC is also responsible for implementing the United Nations’ 1998 Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, which mandated the protection of HRDs, emphasizing their function in conserving fundamental human rights.<sup>146</sup> However, the protection of HRDs raises questions regarding national sovereignty and the international community’s jurisdiction regarding specific civilian affairs.<sup>147</sup> HRDs have been, and continue to be, the most vulnerable in authoritarian states and conflict zones—specifically, in areas where civil rights have been significantly restricted and citizens are constantly under surveillance.<sup>148</sup> Countries such as Russia, China, Saudi Arabia, and Ethiopia have faced backlash for repressing HRDs not in their country, subjecting them to unjust detention and torture.<sup>149</sup> The diverse array of perspectives remain central to ongoing international dialogue surrounding the responsibilities of state and the preservation of HRAs worldwide.

## Timeline

**December 10, 1948** — The United Nations General Assembly adopts the United Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), creating the foundation for modern international human rights laws.<sup>150</sup> Within the UDHR, it establishes the fundamental right to freedom of expression and opinion.<sup>151</sup>

**May 28, 1961** — Amnesty International, an NGO, becomes one of the first major international bodies that publishes reports on the status of human rights and HRDs in each country.<sup>152</sup> This sets a precedent for future HRD organizations by establishing a model for monitoring human rights abuses globally.<sup>153</sup>

**April 1985** — In Latin America, the military juntas that have been ruling Argentina, Chile, and Brazil are prosecuted due to the large amount of forced disappearances, murders, and torturing of HRAs during the dictatorships, indicative of a general disregard for human rights.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> United Nations. 1948. “Universal Declaration of Human Rights.” United Nations. December 10, 1948. <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>.

<sup>146</sup> United Nations. 1998. “OHCHR | Declaration on Human Rights Defenders.” OHCHR. 1998. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-human-rights-defenders/declaration-human-rights-defenders>.

<sup>147</sup> Marcinkutė, Lina. 2011. “The Role of Human Rights NGO’s: Human Rights Defenders or State Sovereignty Destroyers?” *Baltic Journal of Law & Politics* 4 (2). <https://doi.org/10.2478/v10076-011-0012-5>.

<sup>148</sup> Zingeris, Emanuelis. 2025. “Situation of Human Rights Defenders and Whistleblowers in Europe.” Parliamentary Assembly. January 24, 2025. <https://rm.coe.int/as-jur-inf-2025-03-situation-of-human-rights-defenders-and-whistleblow/1680b3f719>.

<sup>149</sup> Amnesty International. 2024. “The State of the World’s Human Rights: April 2024.” Amnesty International. April 23, 2024. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/pol10/7200/2024/en/>.

<sup>150</sup> United Nations. 1948. “Universal Declaration of Human Rights.” United Nations. December 10, 1948. <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> Amnesty International. 2021. “60 Years of Humanity in Action.” Amnesty International. May 28, 2021. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/05/60-years-of-humanity-in-action/>.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Esparza, Gabrielle. 2021. “The Trial of the Juntas: Reckoning with State Violence in Argentina.” *Notevenpast.org*. April 7, 2021. <https://notevenpast.org/the-trial-of-the-juntas-reckoning-with-state-violence-in-argentina/>.

**November 9, 1989** — The Berlin Wall is collapsed by civilians, marking the beginning of the reunification of Germany.<sup>155</sup> This event is a significant shift towards greater political freedom and the subsequent increase of HRAs in Eastern Europe.<sup>156</sup>

**June 25, 1993** — The Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action is adopted at the World Conference on Human Rights, calling for the protection of HRDs.<sup>157</sup>

**December 9, 1998** — The UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders (A/RES/53/144) is adopted by the UN General Assembly.<sup>158</sup> This is the first time the United Nations outlines their rights and responsibilities in a dedicated HRD resolution.<sup>159</sup>

**April 2000** — The UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders is created.<sup>160</sup> This becomes a central resource on the state of HRDs in different nations.<sup>161</sup> The HRD Special Rapporteur reports on the citation of HRDs worldwide, serving as an advisor to institutions and states alike on how to better protect the work of HRAs on a global scale.<sup>162</sup>

**September 11, 2001** — Terrorist attacks in the United States prompted the launch of the War on Terror, a global counterterrorism campaign.<sup>163</sup> In the years that followed, many countries expanded their national security infrastructure and used it to justify restricting civil liberties, with some governments targeting HRDs by labeling them as members or supporters of terrorist organizations.<sup>164</sup>

**December 2010** — With widespread protests against authoritarian regimes during the Arab Spring across the Middle East and North Africa, a new wave of HRDs and journalists emerge.<sup>165</sup> As a result, many regimes intensify their suppression policies and actions.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> United Nations. 1993. "Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action." OHCHR. June 25, 1993.

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/vienna-declaration-and-programme-action>.

<sup>158</sup> United Nations. 1998. "OHCHR | Declaration on Human Rights Defenders." OHCHR. 1998. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-human-rights-defenders/declaration-human-rights-defenders>.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> "OHCHR | Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders." n.d. OHCHR. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-human-rights-defenders>.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Human Rights Watch. 2012. "In the Name of Security | Counterterrorism Laws Worldwide since September 11." Human Rights Watch. June 29, 2012. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2012/06/29/name-security/counterterrorism-laws-worldwide-september-11>.

<sup>165</sup> The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. 2015. "Arab Spring." In Encyclopædia Britannica.

<https://www.britannica.com/event/Arab-Spring>.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

**August 2016** — Energy Transfer Partners files a major SLAPP lawsuit against Greenpeace.<sup>167</sup> This lawsuit is a response to the protests against the Dakota Access Pipelines, in which Greenpeace is found liable for USD 660 million in damages.<sup>168</sup> This case signifies an increase in the use of SLAPP lawsuits to intimidate environmental HRDs and activists.

**October 2, 2018** — Saudi Arabian journalist Jamal Khashoggi is brutally murdered at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, Turkey.<sup>169</sup> This unprecedented extraterritorial killing of a journalist highlights the Saudi Arabian government's geopolitical strategies, which damaged its reputation.<sup>170</sup>

**December 12, 2020** — The Yellow Vest protests, caused by economic hardship, occur in France.<sup>171</sup> During the demonstrations, authorities use force, including tear gas and rubber bullets against protestors and HRAs, leading to injuries and restrictions on a formerly peaceful protest.<sup>172</sup> This violent response raised concerns over the protection of human rights in developed states.<sup>173</sup>

**April 27, 2022** — The European Union (EU) adopts an Anti-SLAPP directive that protects journalists and HRDs from SLAPPs, which are lawsuits intended to burden HRAs with legal costs, gradually reducing dissent.<sup>174</sup> This directive equips these advocates with the proper tools to fight against SLAPP court cases.<sup>175</sup>

**February 1, 2023** — Environmental HRA Manuel “Tortugita” Páez Terán is shot and killed by Georgia state troopers while protesting the construction of a training facility near Atlanta.<sup>176</sup> This marks the first recorded case in modern United States history of a protester being killed by police in connection with climate activism.<sup>177</sup> This death brought attention to the growing militarization of law enforcement and the treatment of Indigenous land defenders in the United States.<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Ferguson, Christy. 2025. “Jury Finds Greenpeace Entities Liable for More than \$660 Million in Energy Transfer’s Baseless Lawsuit.” Greenpeace . March 25, 2025. <https://www.greenpeace.org/canada/en/story/69031/jury-finds-greenpeace-entities-liable-for-more-than-660-million-in-energy-transfers-baseless-lawsuit/>.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> Treisman, Rachel. 2023. “5 Years after Khashoggi’s Murder, Advocates Say the Lack of Justice Is Dangerous.” NPR. October 2, 2023. <https://www.npr.org/2023/10/02/1202937036/jamal-khashoggi-mbs-murder-saudi-arabia-human-rights>.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> “France: Authorities Silence Dissent against Controversial Global Security Bill.” 2021. Amnesty International. February 8, 2021. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2021/02/france-authorities-silence-dissent-against-controversial-global-security-bill/>.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> “Protecting Journalists and Human Rights Defenders from Strategic Lawsuits against Public Participation (SLAPPs).” 2024. European Commission. 2024. [https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/democracy-eu-citizenship-anti-corruption/democracy-and-electoral-rights/protecting-journalists-and-human-rights-defenders-strategic-lawsuits-against-public-participation\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/democracy-eu-citizenship-anti-corruption/democracy-and-electoral-rights/protecting-journalists-and-human-rights-defenders-strategic-lawsuits-against-public-participation_en).

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

<sup>176</sup> Pratt, Timothy. 2023. “‘Cop City’ Activist’s Official Autopsy Reveals More than 50 Bullet Wounds.” The Guardian, April 20, 2023, sec. US news. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/apr/20/manuel-paez-teran-autopsy-cop-city>.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

## Historical Analysis

It has only been recently that HRDs have been internationally recognized for the important role they play in upholding civil rights.<sup>179</sup> The origins of government reprisals against individuals fighting for human rights can be traced back to the rise of totalitarian regimes in the 20th century.<sup>180</sup> With such regimes including the Soviet Union's KGB and East Germany's Stasi committing crimes such as surveillance, imprisonment, and physical violence on a regular basis, human rights became an ideological battle between the East and the West.<sup>181</sup>

During the Cold War, the Soviet Bloc often dismissed human rights concerns as interference with internal affairs, while the Western Bloc fought to introduce political and civil liberties to all nations.<sup>182</sup> However on August 1, 1975, the Helsinki Accords unintentionally weakened the USSR's tight grip on civil liberties as Helsinki Watch groups began to form.<sup>183</sup> At the same time, Western countries such as the United States and its allies faced domestic challenges in protecting human rights.<sup>184</sup> Movements such as the American Civil Rights movement were often targeted by government-funded surveillance that attempted to suppress activism, namely COINTELPRO.<sup>185</sup> Both blocs engaged in heavy espionage and intelligence gathering to monitor dissidents and HRDs, showcasing how all parts of the world during this time period had issues with preserving human rights.

The Helsinki Accords were an international political agreement signed by 35 countries that sought to improve relations between the Eastern and Western bloc by addressing issues of security and respect for human rights globally.<sup>186</sup> Eventually, in May 1976, the Moscow Helsinki Group (MHG) attempted to hold USSR governments accountable for the numerous human rights violations they had facilitated within the Soviet Union.<sup>187</sup> Many early HRDs faced government imprisonment, exile, and psychiatric incarceration for the purpose of discrediting the MHG.<sup>188</sup>

During the 1970s and 1980s, Latin American countries such as Brazil, Argentina, and Chile faced systematic oppression from military juntas, which were authoritarian governments led by a group of military leaders. These juntas had formed dictatorial regimes across the continent.<sup>189</sup> Not only did the juntas use violent tactics to suppress human rights, but they also targeted political opponents and activists through abductions, torture, and

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<sup>179</sup> "OHCHR | about Human Rights Defenders." n.d. OHCHR. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-human-rights-defenders/about-human-rights-defenders>.

<sup>180</sup> Kohn, Jerome. 2015. "Totalitarianism, the Inversion of Politics | Articles and Essays | Hannah Arendt Papers | Digital Collections | Library of Congress." Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. 20540 USA. 2015. <https://www.loc.gov/collections/hannah-arendt-papers/articles-and-essays/totalitarianism-the-inversion-of-politics/>.

<sup>181</sup> Patenaude, Bertrand M. 2012. "Regional Perspectives on Human Rights: The USSR and Russia, Part One." Stanford.edu. 2012. [https://spice.fsi.stanford.edu/docs/regional\\_perspectives\\_on\\_human\\_rights\\_the\\_ussr\\_and\\_russia\\_part\\_one](https://spice.fsi.stanford.edu/docs/regional_perspectives_on_human_rights_the_ussr_and_russia_part_one).

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

<sup>183</sup> Alexeeva, Ludmilla. n.d. "Helsinki Committees." <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/6/4/73223.pdf>.

<sup>184</sup> Hoban, Virgie. 2021. "'Discredit, Disrupt, and Destroy': FBI Records Acquired by the Library Reveal Violent Surveillance of Black Leaders, Civil Rights Organizations." UC Berkeley Library. January 18, 2021. <https://www.lib.berkeley.edu/about/news/fbi>.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid.

<sup>187</sup> Chary, Frederick B. 2023. "Soviets Crack down on Moscow's Helsinki Watch Group | EBSCO." EBSCO Information Services, Inc. | [www.ebsco.com](http://www.ebsco.com). 2023. <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/politics-and-government/soviets-crack-down-moscows-helsinki-watch-group>.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

<sup>189</sup> ADST. 2014. "Argentina's Dirty War and the Transition to Democracy - Association for Diplomatic Studies & Training." Association for Diplomatic Studies & Training. October 23, 2014. <https://adst.org/2014/10/argentinas-dirty-war-and-the-transition-to-democracy/>.

murder.<sup>190</sup> In Argentina, an estimated 30,000 people disappeared under suspicious circumstances facilitated by the government between 1976 and 1983.<sup>191</sup> These juntas viewed dissent as a direct threat to their national authority; the subsequent blatant disregard for citizens signified a need for change.<sup>192</sup>

In South Africa, the apartheid regime, in place from 1948 to 1994, implemented systematic segregation and promoted racial discrimination, leading to widespread human rights abuses. Consequently, human rights defenders were targeted and repressed for any form of activism. Activists including Nelson Mandela, Steve Biko, and countless others were arrested numerous times, tortured, and even murdered.<sup>193, 194</sup> Rather than being protected, any HRAs were often criminalized or violently suppressed, exemplifying a lack of international accountability.<sup>195</sup> Forms of activism included organizing mass protests, leading labor strikes, distributing banned literature, and providing underground political education.<sup>196</sup> Furthermore, HRD groups in South Africa such as the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan African Congress (PAC) were banned by the apartheid government, which deemed their activities as illegal and issued warrants for the arrest of their members.<sup>197</sup> Rather than being safeguarded, many HRAs faced criminalization and violent repression, representing the gap between international human rights standards and their actual implementation.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, democracy and the demand for human rights expanded across Eastern Europe. This symbolized a shift in global political priorities, creating greater emphasis on international cooperation which allowed more protections to be made. The 1993 Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action (VDPA) at the World Conference on Human Rights called for the protection of HRDs, referring to the implementation of legal safeguards to ensure HRDs could operate without fear of retaliation.<sup>198</sup> Soon after the VDPA, the UN released the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders in 1998, which became the first international framework detailing the rights and responsibilities of individuals in human rights work.

Although this period of time signified great progress in the protection of HRDs, there were soon larger threats facing human rights. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States, democratic and authoritarian governments alike expanded surveillance measures and tightened restrictions on civil liberties under the guise of national security. While this was primarily aimed at preventing terrorism, these measures provided legal loopholes that could be, and often were, used to target HRDs. For example, the United Kingdom passed the *Terrorism Act 2000*, which contained a vague definition of terrorism and gave authorities the power to prosecute

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<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> Kay, Kira. 2025. "Search for Justice Continues for Argentina's Disappeared, Nearly 50 Years Later." PBS News. July 12, 2025. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/search-for-justice-continues-for-argentinas-disappeared-nearly-50-years-later>.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

<sup>193</sup> Elnaiem, Mohammed. 2020. "The Death of Steve Biko, Revisited." JSTOR Daily. September 17, 2020. <https://daily.jstor.org/the-death-of-steve-biko-revisited/>.

<sup>194</sup> McRae, Matthew. 2018. "The Story of Nelson Mandela." Canadian Museum for Human Rights. Canadian Museum for Human Rights. July 17, 2018. <https://humanrights.ca/story/story-nelson-mandela>.

<sup>195</sup> Mottiar, Shauna. 2025. "South Africa's Protest Tactics: Evolution and Expansion." Politikon, April 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02589346.2025.2487321>.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

<sup>197</sup> Office of the Historian. 2019. "Milestones: 1989–1992 - Office of the Historian." State.gov. 2019. <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1989-1992/apartheid>.

<sup>198</sup> United Nations. 1993. "Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action." OHCHR. June 25, 1993. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/vienna-declaration-and-programme-action>.

any speech that was found ‘supportive’ of terrorist ideals.<sup>199</sup> These laws were later used to detain journalists and unjust monitoring of Muslim organizations, primarily using the ‘stop and search’ mechanism. This mechanism, outlined in Sections 43 and 44 of the *Act*, permitted police to stop any person or vehicle if there was ‘reasonable suspicion’ that the person was a terrorist.<sup>200</sup>

## Past UN/International Involvement

### The UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders

On December 9, 1998, the United Nations adopted the UN Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, a significant step forward in protecting HRDs.<sup>201</sup> This declaration marked the first time a UN Resolution was entirely dedicated to recognizing HRDs and the importance of their protection.<sup>202</sup>

An HRD is defined as an individual or group that uses peaceful methods in order to protect and promote human rights, including NGOs, lawyers, and journalists.<sup>203</sup> Similarly, a human rights activist is an individual who actively works to create political or social change founded on respect for human rights, such as the abolition of the death penalty.<sup>204</sup> This means that all HRDs are human rights activists, but all human rights activists do not have to be HRDs.<sup>205</sup>

The Declaration states that HRDs have the right to seek and receive information as well as the right to communicate with international bodies.<sup>206</sup> Furthermore, states are obligated to protect HRDs within their own jurisdiction from violence and other forms of harassment.<sup>207</sup> Ultimately, the Declaration gave HRDs the rights to demand for state action and the guidelines to conduct themselves without state interference.<sup>208</sup> However, as a UN General Assembly Declaration, it was not legally binding and therefore not mandated across the signatories; although it provided a well-thought-out framework for HRDs, many countries failed to implement its recommendations despite its unanimous adoption.<sup>209</sup> To illustrate global inaction following the declaration, over 70 percent of all murders of environmental HRDs in 2021 occurred in Brazil, Mexico, and Honduras, totaling 196

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<sup>199</sup> Choudhury, Tufyal, and Helen Fenwick. 2011. “Equality and Human Rights Commission Research Report 72 the Impact of Counter-Terrorism Measures on Muslim Communities.” <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/research-report-72-the-impact-of-counter-terrorism-measures-on-muslim-communities.pdf>.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

<sup>201</sup> “25th Anniversary of the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders: What’s next for This Crucial Instrument? - Protection International.” 2023. Protection International. December 9, 2023. <https://www.protectioninternational.org/news/25th-anniversary-declaration-on-human-rights-defenders/>.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

<sup>203</sup> “3.1.3. Human Rights Defenders, Activists, and Lawyers.” 2025. European Union Agency for Asylum. 2025. <https://euaa.europa.eu/country-guidance-iran-2025/313-human-rights-defenders-activists-and-lawyers>.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

<sup>206</sup> United Nations. 1998b. “Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms.” OHCHR. December 9, 1998. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/declaration-right-and-responsibility-individuals-groups-and>.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid.

deaths.<sup>210</sup> The ongoing mistreatment of HRDs will continue despite current UN involvement if further action is not taken.<sup>211</sup>

## Amnesty International

Amnesty International is a global movement with more than 10 million people who advocate for human rights. Founded in 1961, it is one of the oldest and most influential human rights organizations, bringing awareness to the mistreatment of HRAs and general human rights violations worldwide.<sup>212</sup> Amnesty International holds consultative status from UNESCO and ECOSOC, and it also holds participatory status at the Council of Europe, allowing it to input recommendations to the listed organizations.<sup>213</sup>

Awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1977 for its work, Amnesty International has been conducting extensive research on human rights violations in more than 150 countries.<sup>214, 215</sup> Its reports, often sourced directly from HRAs and their communities, help organize campaigns and raise awareness.<sup>216</sup> At the same time, Amnesty provides valuable insights into the global situation of HRDs and draws international attention to human rights issues.<sup>217</sup>

In 2017, Amnesty International's Tech Security Lab discovered that two well-known Moroccan HRDs, Maati Monjib and Abdessadak El Bouchattaoui, were targeted with Pegasus spyware, a sophisticated surveillance tool that infiltrates devices through SMS messages and network attacks to secretly monitor communications.<sup>218, 219</sup> This was a direct invasion of their fundamental right to privacy.<sup>220</sup> Through digital analysis, it was confirmed that the cyberattacks were conducted by the Moroccan authorities in order to silence these HRDs facing legal prosecution.<sup>221</sup> After Amnesty International released this report detailing the silencing of the two HRDs, Monjob was released from arbitrary detention.<sup>222</sup> This demonstrates how organizations including Amnesty International play a critical role in exposing digital repression and advocating for the protection of HRDs worldwide.

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<sup>210</sup> Global Witness. 2024. "The Violent Erasure of Land and Environmental Defenders." Global Witness. 2024. <https://globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/land-and-environmental-defenders/missing-voices/>.

<sup>211</sup> "Global Analysis 2022." 2023. Front Line Defenders. April 4, 2023. <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/resource-publication/global-analysis-2022>.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid.

<sup>213</sup> Amnesty International, Written observations to the European Union Court of Justice (Case C-493/10), IOR 61/010/2011 (June 30, 2011), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/ior61/010/2011/en/>.

<sup>214</sup> "The Nobel Peace Prize 1977." n.d. NobelPrize.org. <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1977/summary/>.

<sup>215</sup> Amnesty International. 2024a. "Amnesty International." Amnesty.org. 2024. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/>.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid.

<sup>217</sup> Amnesty International, Written observations to the European Union Court of Justice (Case C-493/10), IOR 61/010/2011 (June 30, 2011), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/ior61/010/2011/en/>.

<sup>218</sup> "Morocco: Human Rights Defenders Targeted with NSO Group's Spyware." 2019. Amnesty International. October 10, 2019. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/research/2019/10/morocco-human-rights-defenders-targeted-with-nso-groups-spyware/>.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

<sup>222</sup> Lysanne Louter. 2021. "OUTCOME: Morocco: Prisoner of Conscience Provisionally Released." Amnesty International Canada. August 9, 2021. <https://amnesty.ca/features/outcome-morocco-prisoner-of-conscience-provisionally-released/>.

## Current Situation

### Escalating Threats

Contrary to expectations, following the 1998 UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, there has been an increase in the frequency and severity of the attacks against HRDs. Front Line Defenders' annual reports have shown an increasing number of HRDs being killed each year.<sup>223</sup> In 2023, 300 HRDs from 28 countries were reportedly killed while defending human rights, and this number increased in 2024 to 324 HRDs from 32 countries.<sup>224</sup> This is indicative of a wider growing risk of persecution for those advocating for human rights.

### Forms of Advocacy

HRAs operate through many different methods of advocacy, with each posing different risks and requiring different methods of protection.<sup>225</sup> Legal advocates often endeavour to protect human rights through courts and international tribunals, often facing legal action from governments which frequently include SLAPP lawsuits.<sup>226</sup> Grassroots advocacy utilizes the support of communities through protests and education, often encountering police brutality or detention.<sup>227</sup> In many Western democracies, this form of activism remains a predominant way for citizens to influence policy and garner support for social change.<sup>228</sup> Additionally, media journalists and advocates use their platforms as a 'digital pulpit', allowing them to sway public opinion and put pressure on governments or large corporations.<sup>229</sup> Tailoring protections to these different advocacy groups ensures a comprehensive defense of all forms of HRAs worldwide.

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<sup>223</sup> Front Line Defenders, *Global Analysis 2023/24* (Dublin: Front Line Defenders, May 22, 2024), [https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/sites/default/files/1578\\_fld\\_ga23\\_online\\_u03.pdf](https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/sites/default/files/1578_fld_ga23_online_u03.pdf).

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>225</sup> "Manual on Monitoring." n.d. <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Publications/Chapter31-24pp.pdf>.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>229</sup> Burge, Ryan P., and Miles D. Williams. 2019. "Is Social Media a Digital Pulpit? How Evangelical Leaders Use Twitter to Encourage the Faithful and Publicize Their Work." *Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture* 8 (3): 309–39. <https://doi.org/10.1163/21659214-00803004>.



Figure 1: A (2023–2024) HRD Memorial documents the killings of 324 HRDs in 32 countries.<sup>230</sup>

In 2024, HRD extrajudicial killings occurred most frequently in Columbia (157), Mexico (32), and Guatemala (29), encompassing 79.3 percent of all HRD murders in the Americas.<sup>231</sup> Between 2015 and 2024, HRDs were most often killed in the industries of mining, agribusiness, and fossil fuels.<sup>232</sup> Additionally, 21 percent of all attacks were directed at Indigenous peoples, who represent only 6 percent of the global population.<sup>233</sup> Furthermore, HRDs constantly face backlash and harassment from the government and large corporations that forcibly silence these advocates, most commonly through detention, torture, and smear campaigns, which are coordinated efforts to damage a person’s reputation through false or misleading information.<sup>234</sup> In recent years, this repression has escalated through the increased use of digital surveillance tools, such as spyware, to monitor and intimidate HRDs.<sup>235</sup> This effort to silence essential voices and decrease HRA credibility is a direct violation of previously established fundamental rights such as the freedom of expression, the right to privacy, and the right to peacefully advocate for justice.<sup>236</sup>

<sup>230</sup> “Manual on Monitoring,” n.d. <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Publications/Chapter31-24pp.pdf>.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid.

<sup>232</sup> “Landmark Research: More than 6,400 Attacks on Human Rights Defenders Protecting Communities and Environments from Corporate Abuses in Past Decade - Business & Human Rights Resource Centre.” 2025. Business & Human Rights Resource Centre. 2025. <https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/from-us/media-centre/landmark-research-more-than-6400-attacks-on-human-rights-defenders-protecting-communities-and-environments-from-corporate-abuses-in-past-decade/>.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid.

<sup>234</sup> Front Line Defenders, Global Analysis 2023/24 (Dublin: Front Line Defenders, May 22, 2024), [https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/sites/default/files/1609\\_fld\\_ga24-5\\_output.pdf](https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/sites/default/files/1609_fld_ga24-5_output.pdf).

<sup>235</sup> Ibid.

<sup>236</sup> United Nations. 1948. “Universal Declaration of Human Rights.” United Nations. December 10, 1948. <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>.

## UN Sustainable Development Goals

The United Nations created the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.<sup>237</sup> These goals allow organizations and governments worldwide to target issues with a global focus. Most importantly, it emphasizes that potential solutions to any one of these solutions are interconnected with all other goals; no issue can be left behind on the path to a more sustainable future.<sup>238</sup>

Human rights defenders have been directly involved with achieving the UN SDGs.<sup>239</sup> All HRD work can be tied to the 17 goals, as they represent advocacy for each goal in various forms.<sup>240</sup> For example, HRDs advocating for environmental justice are linked to SDG 13 and SDG 15, and HRDs fighting against societal injustices can be linked to SDG 5 and SDG 16.<sup>241, 242</sup> Preventing HRDs from achieving their goals directly hinders the progression of SDGs, and consequently, the United Nations' goal of a sustainable future.<sup>243</sup> For instance, SDG 10, which strives for reduced inequalities, relies on the protection of civic voices and advocates. When these advocates are silenced rather than protected, global development stagnates across the entire framework of these SDGs.

## Conflict Zones

HRDs are significantly more at risk in conflict zones and regions experiencing civil unrest, as affected governments often invoke rights-violating emergency powers to suppress dissent and restrict civic space, deepening existing instability.<sup>244</sup> For example, in Myanmar, the military junta has repeatedly used emergency decrees to detain journalists, HRAs, and political opponents, effectively silencing dissent.<sup>245</sup> Civic space refers to the ability of individuals and organizations to operate freely and independently. In contexts where civic space is heavily restricted, the ability to advocate for human rights becomes extremely limited or practically nonexistent.<sup>246</sup>

## Case Study: Myanmar

In 2024, Myanmar's civil war reached a heightened level of violence, primarily due to increased military airstrikes and ground assaults that targeted specific ethnic communities.<sup>247</sup> The roots of this conflict originate from a military coup in February 2021, where the Myanmar military Tatmadaw, led by Senior General Min Aung Hlaing,

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<sup>237</sup> United Nations. 2015. "Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development." United Nations. 2015. <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid.

<sup>239</sup> "OHCHR | the Contributions Made by Human Rights Defenders to Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and the Challenges They Face in This Work." 2024. OHCHR. 2024. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/calls-for-input/2024/contributions-made-human-rights-defenders-achieving-sustainable-development>.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid.

<sup>241</sup> "Human Rights Defenders Are Helping States Make Sustainable Development a Reality." 2024. UN News. October 26, 2024. <https://news.un.org/en/interview/2024/10/1156081>.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid.

<sup>245</sup> Koh Ewe. 2024. "How Myanmar's Civil War Could Actually End." TIME. Time. October 31, 2024. <https://time.com/7160736/myanmar-coup-civil-war-conflict-timeline-endgame-explainer/>.

<sup>246</sup> "OHCHR | OHCHR and Protecting and Expanding Civic Space." n.d. OHCHR. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/civic-space>.

<sup>247</sup> Koh Ewe. 2024. "How Myanmar's Civil War Could Actually End." TIME. Time. October 31, 2024. <https://time.com/7160736/myanmar-coup-civil-war-conflict-timeline-endgame-explainer/>.

used force to overthrow the democratic government.<sup>248</sup> Myanmar's conflict particularly targeted civilians and ethnic minorities, such as Chin, Kachin, and Karen states.<sup>249</sup> This was a consequence of years of systemic repression, including the 2017 Rohingya crisis, known as a widespread ethnic cleansing.<sup>250</sup> Over 3 million citizens were displaced and more than 6,000 were killed.<sup>251</sup>

HRDs, such as journalists, educators, and political opponents, were specifically singled out. The Myanmar government permitted arbitrary arrest, torture, and unjust detention under anti-terrorism laws.<sup>252</sup> Most notably, journalists Myo Myint Oo and Aung San Oo were sentenced to life and 20 years, respectively.<sup>253</sup> The exact reason the two were arrested has not been disclosed; however, their detention is likely part of extensive media suppression within the nation.<sup>254</sup>

The media in Myanmar is essential in bringing the voices of human rights activists to the attention of the international world, doing so through grassroots coverage, revealing events ranging from power abuses to war crimes.<sup>255</sup> Meetings between international observers and repressed populations are frequently enabled by journalists and citizen reporters.<sup>256</sup> This type of exposure is a threat to governments that aim to stay in power, since it encourages international attention and inspires internal rebellion.<sup>257</sup> Thus, the infringement on the basic right to freedom of expression demonstrates the blatant disregard for HRDs in conflict zones and the need for more attention towards innocent civilians in these areas.<sup>258</sup>

## Targeted Communities

While all HRDs face risks, certain groups of HRDs have a much higher risk of targeted harassment due to both the nature of their work and long-lasting discrimination.<sup>259</sup> This is a globally recognized issue, though the degree and type of threat may vary by region depending on political and cultural contexts.<sup>260</sup> Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs), in particular, face gender-specific threats that their male counterparts often do not experience.<sup>261</sup> Threats of sexual violence are often used as tools to silence WHRDs.<sup>262</sup> Additionally, smear

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<sup>248</sup> Ibid.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid.

<sup>252</sup> "Report Exposes Arbitrary Detention, Torture of Myanmar Activists." 2020. [www.aljazeera.com](http://www.aljazeera.com). April 23, 2020.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/4/23/report-exposes-arbitrary-detention-torture-of-myanmar-activists>.

<sup>253</sup> Amnesty International. 2023. "Everything You Need to Know about Human Rights in Myanmar 2020." Amnesty International. 2023. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/asia-and-the-pacific/south-east-asia-and-the-pacific/myanmar/report-myanmar/>.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid.

<sup>255</sup> "Understanding Media Audiences in Post-Coup Myanmar." 2023. IMS. March 2023.

<https://www.mediasupport.org/publication/news-is-life-and-death-to-us-understanding-media-audiences-in-post-coup-myanmar/>.

<sup>256</sup> Ibid.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid.

<sup>259</sup> "African Defenders | #Resilience4Peace: Human Rights Defenders Working in Conflict Areas." 2021. [africandefenders.org](http://africandefenders.org). 2021. <https://africandefenders.org/resilience4peace/>.

<sup>260</sup> Ibid.

<sup>261</sup> "Diplomatic Support for Women Human Rights Defenders." n.d. Accessed July 21, 2025. [https://ishr.ch/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/ishr\\_19\\_dg\\_diplomats\\_whrd\\_vs3\\_forweb.pdf](https://ishr.ch/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/ishr_19_dg_diplomats_whrd_vs3_forweb.pdf).

<sup>262</sup> Ibid.

campaigns are often utilized to debase these activists' reputations, aiming to discredit WHRDs on a personal level.<sup>263</sup>

Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs) are also frequently targeted because their work directly challenges large and powerful corporations that can afford to use SLAPPs to silence activists.<sup>264</sup> For instance, Energy Transfer, an essential transport company for crude oil, filed a USD 660 million lawsuit against Greenpeace for increasing opposition towards the Dakota Access Pipeline.<sup>265</sup> EHRDs face increased levels of violence as they are often Indigenous to the land they defend.<sup>266</sup> One example of this is demonstrated in Columbia, where 611 environmental activists were killed as of September 2021; 332 of the 611 individuals were Indigenous.<sup>267</sup> These patterns signify a need for protections that address the specific risks faced by different types of HRDs.

## Possible Solutions and Controversies

### International Accountability

Strengthening international legal procedures to guarantee that states and non-state actors are held responsible for their targeting of HRDs is a solution that would ensure accountability, directly benefitting these advocates.<sup>268</sup> Targeted violations can be prevented by increasing the current enforcement capabilities of the International Criminal Court (ICC) and other regional courts.<sup>269</sup> For example, by expanding the definition of universal jurisdiction, countries could, within their own borders, gain the ability to prosecute individuals or groups that commit crimes against HRDs, regardless of where the crimes occurred.<sup>270</sup>

Although this solution would require significant cooperation to both extradite said individuals and provide evidence for their prosecution, this solution would create a feasible framework to increase international accountability. On October 16, 1998, Chilean military leader and dictator Augusto Pinochet was arrested under an international arrest warrant issued by Spanish judge Baltasar Garzón.<sup>271</sup> Following his extradition, Garzón was charged with crimes against humanity, including torture, abduction, and murder.<sup>272</sup> This was permitted because

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<sup>263</sup> Ibid.

<sup>264</sup> "The Impact of SLAPPs on Human Rights and How to Respond." 2024. OHCHR. 2024.

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/brochures-and-leaflets/impact-slapps-human-rights-and-how-respond>.

<sup>265</sup> Ferguson, Christy. 2025. "Jury Finds Greenpeace Entities Liable for More than \$660 Million in Energy Transfer's Baseless Lawsuit." Greenpeace. March 25, 2025. <https://www.greenpeace.org/canada/en/story/69031/jury-finds-greenpeace-entities-liable-for-more-than-660-million-in-energy-transfers-baseless-lawsuit/>.

<sup>266</sup> Fernández, Belén. 2023. "The Murders of Indigenous Activists Mark the Death of the Planet." *Www.aljazeera.com*. August 9, 2023. <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2023/8/9/the-murders-of-indigenous-activists-mark-the-death-of-the-planet>.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid.

<sup>268</sup> "The UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights: Guidance on Ensuring Respect for Human Rights Defenders." n.d. [https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/Formatted-version-of-the-guidance-EN\\_0.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/Formatted-version-of-the-guidance-EN_0.pdf).

<sup>269</sup> International Criminal Court. 2020. "Understanding the International Criminal Court." International Criminal Court. <https://www.icc-cpi.int/sites/default/files/Publications/understanding-the-icc.pdf>.

<sup>270</sup> Guild, Elspeth. 2024. "Enhancing the Protection of Human Rights Defenders (HRDs): Facilitating Access to the EU and Supporting HRDs from Third Countries."

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2024/754445/EXPO\\_STU\(2024\)754445\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2024/754445/EXPO_STU(2024)754445_EN.pdf).

<sup>271</sup> Human Rights Watch. 1998. "The Pinochet Precedent | How Victims Can Pursue Human Rights Criminals Abroad." Human Rights Watch. November 1998. <https://www.hrw.org/report/1998/11/01/pinochet-precedent/how-victims-can-pursue-human-rights-criminals-abroad>.

<sup>272</sup> Ibid.

Spain incorporated the phrase “universal jurisdiction over human rights atrocities” into its national law, and was consequently permitted to prosecute Garzón.<sup>273</sup> Should all countries agree on the idea of universal jurisdiction, accountability would not solely be limited to state actors—corporations could be prosecuted as well.

However, this poses the risk of wrongful conviction. A state might unjustly internally or externally accuse state leaders based on weak evidence. To prevent this, the UNHRC could establish an independent, international, and temporary panel of legal experts to fairly prosecute HRA-offending actors. Another key challenge lies in the tension between national sovereignty and international jurisdiction. Although the goal of international accountability is to uphold universal human rights, many countries dislike external interference within their internal affairs. Therefore, involving legal experts aligned with each nation’s legal and cultural context can ensure that international accountability can be effective.

It is not always possible or acceptable to strike a balance between local legal customs and political systems and international standards in order to adopt such measures in a way that has cultural significance. Local laws and political agendas may conflict with universal human rights, making the implementation of these rules potentially risky. Furthermore, creating a committee with such a broad scope would be very challenging, as it would require coordination across multiple countries, and even for some legal systems to become reformed. Despite these hardships, this solution would allow for a very comprehensive review of violations against HRAs and bring about massive social change.

### **Anti-SLAPP Protections**

Anti-SLAPP laws are an effective legal tool to protect journalists and whistleblowers.<sup>274</sup> Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) are civil lawsuits—often brought forward by corporations or powerful individuals—with the intent of financially exhausting outspoken advocates.<sup>275</sup> Following a SLAPP, there is often less activism and advocacy surrounding that topic. Known as the “silencing” effect, it especially impacts countries where judicial processes are costly and lack impartiality. By creating a legal framework that prohibits SLAPPs, HRDs can advocate for human rights without the fear of years-long legal battles that drain financial resources and discourage support.

Recently, the European Union has introduced EU-wide anti-SLAPP standards, and some areas within North America have implemented these anti-SLAPP laws as well. Correctly identifying common SLAPP practices can often dismiss a case in the early litigation process and can shift the economic stress onto the prosecution.<sup>276</sup> In support of this effort, some large corporations have stated that they will stand against SLAPPs and their associated

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<sup>273</sup> Ibid.

<sup>274</sup> “The Use of SLAPPs to Silence Journalists, NGOs and Civil Society Policy Department for Citizens’ Rights and Constitutional Affairs Directorate-General for Internal Policies PE.” 2021.  
[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/694782/IPOL\\_STU\(2021\)694782\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/694782/IPOL_STU(2021)694782_EN.pdf).

<sup>275</sup> Ibid.

<sup>276</sup> “Anti-SLAPP Legislation: A Backgrounder.” 2024. Centre for Free Expression. February 23, 2024.  
<https://cfe.torontomu.ca/guidesadvice/anti-slapp-legislation-backgrounder>.

practices.<sup>277</sup> Notable corporations include Patagonia, Yelp, and The Body Shop.<sup>278</sup> By expanding anti-SLAPP legislation worldwide, HRDs can advocate confidently without unjust legal retaliation.

While anti-SLAPP laws are important for protecting HRDs from lawsuits designed to silence them, this legislation is only useful towards lawsuits and legal matters. As such, anti-SLAPP laws cannot protect HRDs from torture, abduction, and murder. It should be noted that this solution does not ameliorate violence against HRDs.<sup>279</sup> Therefore, anti-SLAPP laws are best suited for countries with stable legal systems and low rates of political violence towards HRAs.

## Domestic Legal Systems

In 2015 Pakistan's government ordered the closure of the offices of Save the Children, an international NGO focused on child welfare and education, forcing its staff to leave the country.<sup>280</sup> It was alleged by the Pakistani government that the NGO was engaging in anti-state-aligned activities to further foreign surveillance.<sup>281</sup>

Many regimes that criminalize HRDs often do so under the guise of national security and counterterrorism laws.<sup>282</sup> These vague guidelines can be manipulated to discriminate against HRD groups and commit forced arrests. Thus, reworking legal definitions can help decriminalize HRDs and foster advocacy.<sup>283</sup> The UNHRC and regional organizations within each country can help with offering model legislations. Furthermore, legal reform can facilitate long-term internal protection for HRDs. If HRDs are disadvantaged from their domestic legal systems, this solution would enable them to seek legal external assistance regarding their issue.

Despite this solution offering a variety of options for HRDs, it is not always in a state's best interest to redefine their established legal system. Thus, internal resistance will hinder this process, with legislative proceedings—especially within conflict zones—can be difficult to initiate.<sup>284</sup> This solution would require significant international cooperation and time in order to decriminalize HRDs in all nations.

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<sup>277</sup> Artz, Jaxx. 2023. "These 5 Companies Pledge to Stand against SLAPPs — Lawsuits That Aim to Silence the Voices of Human Rights Defenders." *Global Citizen*. October 23, 2023. <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/these-companies-stand-against-slapps/>.

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>279</sup> Krain, Matthew, Amanda Murdie, and Abigail Beard. 2023. "Silencing Human Rights Defenders Once and for All? Determinants of Human Rights Defenders' Killings." *Political Research Quarterly* 77 (1): 401–16. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10659129231217282>.

<sup>280</sup> BBC News. 2015. "Pakistan Orders Save the Children to Leave Country," June 12, 2015, sec. Asia. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-33105128>.

<sup>281</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>282</sup> Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. 2007. "Human Rights, Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism." <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Publications/Factsheet32EN.pdf>.

<sup>283</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>284</sup> Boon, Kristen. 2022. "Legislative Reform in Post-Conflict Zones: Jus Post Bellum and the Contemporary Occupant's Law-Making Powers." *McGill Law Journal* 50 (2): 285. <https://www.canlii.org/en/commentary/doc/2005CanLIIDocs80#>.

## Bloc Positions

### Western Democracies

Western democracies are often supporters of HRDs, offering them asylum and public support towards funding HRDs and civil rights organizations worldwide.<sup>285</sup> Countries in this bloc, including the United States, Canada, and members of the EU, usually prioritize the legal protection of HRDs and anti-SLAPP legislation.<sup>286</sup> In addition to domestic legal measures, these nations are typically strong advocates for expanding UN Declarations, strongly supporting ICC investigations. However, countries in this bloc have faced international criticism for encouraging double standards. While it is important to promote HRDs abroad, it is also imperative to address human rights issues within their own nations. For example, the United States has been criticized for being a main advocate for human rights abroad and encouraging democratic values, while facing ongoing domestic issues regarding police brutality and mass surveillance, contradicting the UDHR.<sup>287</sup> Overall, Western democracies tend to prioritize international cooperation and legal protections for HRDs while promoting continued transparency through global institutions.

### Authoritarian States

These nations often frame their actions towards HRDs as necessary for national security and counterterrorism. However, in practice, many of these governments use these regulations in order to control political activity and manage dissent.<sup>288</sup> As a result, they often hesitate to self-incriminate regarding international investigations or sanctions on human rights violations.<sup>289</sup> These states tend to reject external interference on the basis of preserving national sovereignty.<sup>290</sup> These countries include Russia, China, Iran, and Saudi Arabia.<sup>291</sup> For instance, Russia capitalizes on anti-Western and anti-interference ideologies within their messaging, portraying democracy as an externally imposed mechanism.<sup>292</sup> Authoritarian states tend to prioritize maintaining full political control, using any type of method to silence dissent, and protecting national sovereignty over human rights.

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<sup>285</sup> “Defending Democracy and Human Rights in the Western Hemisphere.” 2019. National Defense University Press. February 19, 2019. <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/1943451/defending-democracy-and-human-rights-in-the-western-hemisphere/>.

<sup>286</sup> Prather, Laura. 2023. “SLAPP Suits: An Encroachment on Human Rights of a Global SLAPP Suits: An Encroachment on Human Rights of a Global Proportion and What Can Be Done about It Proportion and What Can Be Done about It.” *Northwestern Journal of Human Rights* *Northwestern Journal of Human Rights* 22 (2): 12–15. <https://scholarlycommons.law.northwestern.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1256&context=njihr>.

<sup>287</sup> German, Michael. 2020. “Hidden in Plain Sight: Racism, White Supremacy, and Far-Right Militancy in Law Enforcement.” *Brennan Center for Justice*. August 27, 2020. <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/hidden-plain-sight-racism-white-supremacy-and-far-right-militancy-law>.

<sup>288</sup> Amnesty International. 2024b. “The State of the World’s Human Rights: April 2024.” *Amnesty International*. April 23, 2024. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/pol10/7200/2024/en/>.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid.

<sup>290</sup> Siegle, Joseph. 2024. “Winning the Battle of Ideas: Exposing Global Authoritarian Narratives and Revitalizing Democratic Principles.” *National Endowment for Democracy*. February 5, 2024. <https://www.ned.org/winning-the-battle-of-ideas-exposing-global-authoritarian-narratives-and-revitalizing-democratic-principles/>.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid.

## Latin America and The Andean Region

Many countries across Latin America, specifically in the Andean region and Central America, have been identified as higher-risk areas for HRDs.<sup>293</sup> Countries including Colombia, Honduras, Mexico, and Guatemala have ongoing incidents involving threats and violence against advocates, particularly environmental activists.<sup>294</sup> HRDs have been targeted by paramilitaries and armed groups in certain nations, while some governments have criminalized political dissent and consistently jailed activists under broadly defined and vague anti-terrorism laws.<sup>295</sup> Furthermore, connections between political leadership and independent corporations have resulted in prolonged violence towards activists, particularly women and Indigenous people.<sup>296</sup> Despite international interference, this bloc continues to grapple with significant challenges in protecting HRAs. Governments in this region tend to prioritize economical and political interests instead of promoting HRD protection, due to ongoing violence and weak enforcement of human rights standards in conflict zones.

## Middle East and North Africa

Across the Middle East and North African region, countries such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Syria participate in direct and often violent repression of HRDs and journalists.<sup>297</sup> In these countries, legal systems are not directed towards conserving human rights, but rather criminalizing free speech and activism.<sup>298</sup> HRDs are often prosecuted on national security charges and held in inhumane conditions. In places including Iran and Saudi Arabia, even social media activism can lead to prolonged prison sentences and even killings.<sup>299</sup> States in this bloc may put the stability of the regime first and resist political and social change, often using severe legal and extra judicial measures to suppress any HRDs that try to implement change.

## Discussion Questions

1. To what extent are states obligated to protect HRDs?
2. How should the international community define the role of an HRD, and in what ways does this differ from being a general advocate for human rights? Should there be a criteria to determine this distinction?
3. Why are HRDs often seen as threats to their own governments? How can the UNHRC help redefine this relationship?

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<sup>293</sup> Cochran, Lexi Lonas. 2022. "Latin America among Most Dangerous Regions for Human Rights Defenders: Report." The Hill. February 3, 2022. <https://thehill.com/latino/592696-latin-america-among-most-dangerous-regions-for-human-rights-defenders-report/>.

<sup>294</sup> Granados, Juan Carlos . 2023. "Latin America Had the Most Attacks on Environmental Defenders in 2022, Says Report." Mongabay Environmental News. May 5, 2023. <https://news.mongabay.com/2023/05/latin-america-had-the-most-attacks-on-environmental-defenders-in-2022-says-report/>.

<sup>295</sup> Human Rights Watch. 2024. "Venezuela: Brutal Crackdown on Protesters, Voters." Human Rights Watch. September 4, 2024. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/09/04/venezuela-brutal-crackdown-protesters-voters>.

<sup>296</sup> "CPI 2022 for the Americas: Fertile Ground for Criminal Networks And..." 2023. Transparency.org. January 31, 2023. <https://www.transparency.org/en/news/cpi-2022-americas-corruption-criminal-networks-human-rights-abuses>.

<sup>297</sup> Amnesty International. 2022. "Everything You Need to Know about Human Rights in Human Rights in Middle East and North Africa - Review in 2020." Amnesty International. 2022. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/middle-east-and-north-africa/report-middle-east-and-north-africa/>.

<sup>298</sup> "Human Rights in the Middle East and North Africa." n.d. Accessed July 21, 2025. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/MDE0113572020ENGLISH.pdf>.

<sup>299</sup> Lipkind, Simone. 2023. "Mahsa Amini, Media, and the Saudi-Iranian Détente." Council on Foreign Relations. July 10, 2023. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/mahsa-amini-media-and-saudi-iranian-detente>.

4. How can the international community differentiate legitimate national authority concerns and erroneous concerns which use state-permitted powers to silence dissent?
5. What are the ethical implications of HRDs operating in areas of conflict, and to what point should the international community have the ability to interfere with the manner in which HRDs are treated in these zones?
6. To what extent should the UN enforce protections for HRDs when doing so may conflict with national sovereignty?
7. What specific protections should be provided for different types of HRAs (EHRDs, Indigenous, WHRDs), and how can these protections all be incorporated into an international framework?

## Additional Resources

Amnesty International: The State of the World's Human Rights

<https://amnesty.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/24-April-en-screen.pdf>

Centre For Free Expression: Anti-SLAPP Legislation: A Backgrounder

<https://cfe.torontomu.ca/guidesadvice/anti-slapp-legislation-backgrounder>

National Endowment for Democracy: Winning the Battle of Ideas, Exposing Global Authoritarian Narratives and Revitalizing Democratic Principles

<https://www.ned.org/winning-the-battle-of-ideas-exposing-global-authoritarian-narratives-and-revitalizing-democratic-principles/>

Human Rights Watch: Counterterrorism Laws Worldwide since September 11

<https://www.hrw.org/report/2012/06/29/name-security/counterterrorism-laws-worldwide-september-11>

Political Research Quarterly: Silencing Human Rights Defenders Once and for All?

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