

Human Rights House Foundation Annual Report 2001

Introduction

A human rights defender may be a peasant, environmental activist, member of an ethnic, religious or sexual minority, student, teacher, intellectual, journalist, lawyer, trade unionist or member of a human rights organisation - in fact it may be anyone working for human rights. In essence, human rights defenders are ordinary citizens. The international knowledge and focus on human rights have increased tremendously the last decade, and so has the number of human rights defenders. However, in many countries they are regarded as obstacles to government control or treated as agents for foreign interests. Both state and non-state bodies try to impede human rights defenders in their daily work. Hence, a human rights defender may run a great personal risk.

Our international network of Human Rights Houses and associates embraces human rights defenders in Russia, Poland, Bosnia Herzegovina, Turkey, Croatia, Kenya, Norway, Albania and Belarus. Some are subjected to campaigns of harassment and intimidation by state and state controlled media attacking their integrity and morals. Offices are searched and shut down by officials, documents are confiscated, telephone lines are cut or tapped and peaceful demonstrations are met with force by the police resulting in arrests and arbitrary violence against activists.

Through restrictive laws and administrative practice regarding registration, financing and conduct of non governmental organisations, governments curtail basic human rights such as the freedoms of belief, expression, association, assembly and movement. All with the objective to harass, intimidate and threaten human rights defenders.

In the wake of terrorist attacks of 11 September, some governments use the global war on terrorism as a pretext to infringe on human rights and clamp down on human rights defenders. Hence, promoting, protecting and defending human rights defenders becomes even more crucial in the coming years. Providing a Human Rights House for human rights defenders is one concrete way of reducing risk, providing visibility and honouring the civil courage of human rights defenders.

Maria Dahle
Executive Director
Human Rights House Foundation

Network

The Human Rights House Network

Worldwide, independent human rights organisations defend individuals from human rights violations. In doing this, human rights organisations face a number of challenges: They often lack adequate funding and working facilities, and they are often persecuted. A Human Rights House can provide a solution to these challenges.

The Human Rights House Network is an international forum of cooperation between independent human rights houses. Established in 1989, it works to strengthen cooperation and improve the security and capacity of the 50 human rights organisations in the network. The Human Rights House Foundation (HRH) is the secretariat of this network. Currently there are houses in Oslo, Moscow, Warsaw, Tirana (associated member), Sarajevo, and Bergen (Norway).

Support to houses

HRH provides support to members of the Human Rights House Network through capacity building and information transfer. This includes support to strengthen civil society, human rights monitoring and -education, mainly in Russia, Albania and Bosnia.

Network meeting

Representatives from all human rights houses meet annually to discuss joint actions and future co-operation. In June 2001, the network met in Warsaw, Poland, and prepared new strategies to make the network more visible and effectively

integrated, and to strengthen the work of the member organisations so that these may help victims of human rights abuse in a better and more efficient way. The network members also met representatives of Polish human rights institutions such as the Jagellonian University and the Young Journalist Association "POLIS", and visited Auschwitz. The network meeting in 2002 will be organised by the Human Rights House in Moscow.

New Houses

The main task for the Human Rights House Foundation is to help create new houses for human rights organisations worldwide. We are presently engaged in these countries:

Kenya

Kenya's human rights record is stained by repression and lack of accountability. Government critics are being harassed and intimidated, and torture is widespread. According to a study presented by Chief Government Pathologist Dr Kirasi Olumbe, up to 90% of people in Kenya shot dead in 2001 were victims of police.

Hope appears to be in the countervailing force of civil society. Kenyan NGO's have waged a spirited battle against the state on matters of human rights and good governance. Operating in a hostile environment, the sector has persistently stood up to the government, with increasing success.

The Human Rights House Foundation (HRH) assists the establishment of a Human Rights House in Nairobi, Kenya, in co-operation with seven Kenyan human rights organisations: Kenya Human Rights Commission (KHRC), Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA), Center for Law and Research International (CLARION), Release Political Prisoners (RPP), People Against Torture (PAT), Center on Violence against Women (COVAW), and Child Rights Advisory and Legal Center (CRADLE).

The Foundation visited Kenya in March, July, and October 2001, and discussed a financial proposal with donors from six interested countries: Norway, Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands, Canada, and Ford Foundation. Construction of the House is scheduled to take place after the Kenyan Presidential Elections in late 2002.

Turkey

A group of six Turkish human rights NGOs wish to establish a Human Rights House in Ankara: Human Rights Foundation of Turkey, Human Rights Association, Contemporary Lawyers' Association, Contemporary Journalists' Association, Helsinki Citizens' Assembly and Amnesty International Ankara Branch. Norwegian partners in the project are the Norwegian Helsinki Committee and the Norwegian Forum for Freedom of Expression. In 2001, the dialogue continued, but HRH has not had sufficient resources to follow it up actively.

Croatia

The first Human Rights House in the Balkans was established in 1998, in Sarajevo. In 2001, Croatian NGO's signed a letter of intent demonstrating their commitment to establishing a human rights house in Zagreb.

Croatia faces a number of human rights concerns, among these the return of refugees. To reconstruct the country and build a culture of human rights, it is important to strengthen civil society. The Human Rights House Foundation (HRH) co-operates with three Croatian human rights organisations: The Croatian Helsinki Committee for Human Rights (CHC), the Croatian Law Center, and B.a.b.e. These also want to include other NGO's in the Human Rights House. HRH had talks with Croatian NGO representatives in June 2001, and in November the Foundation visited Zagreb. On behalf of the City of Zagreb, the Deputy Mayor has generously offered to provide a location to a symbolic rent. Donors from several countries have expressed an interest in supporting the establishment.

Belarus

Often referred to as "Europe's last dictatorship", Belarus continues to face grave human rights violations. A prominent journalist and several oppositional politicians have "disappeared", Presidential Elections in September 2001 were far from free and fair, and journalists and human rights defenders continue to be harassed.

Organisations at the Human Rights Houses in Warsaw (The Helsinki Foundation) and Oslo (The Helsinki Committee) have for several years co-operated with NGOs in Belarus, and also with the Human Rights House Foundation (HRH). In June, HRH visited Belarus and had meetings with several human rights NGO's in Minsk and Grodno. Establishment of a Human Rights House and future cooperation was discussed. HRH also had talks with representatives from several Belarusian

human rights organisations in Oslo in May and in November. Three of these organisations (Viasna, Legal Initiative, and Belarusian Association of Journalists) have also initiated a joint project on legal education for NGO activists and independent media. The project is supported by HRH.

Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia, Senegal and Guatemala

In 2001, HRH also had talks with human rights groups in Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia, Senegal, and Guatemala, to mention some, to discuss cooperation and possible establishment of Human Rights Houses in the future.

Information

New Website for 50 NGO's

In December, a new website for the Network was published on <http://www.humanrightshouse.org>. On average, the new web had 120 hits per day that month. The website provides information on activities, projects and publications of around 50 human rights organisations in Norway, Russia, Poland, Bosnia and Herzegovina, with links to all member organisations. It also contains external human rights links as well as news.

Documentary

HRH is developing a documentary film together with a Norwegian TV production company. The aim is to make an international production of minimum six programmes presenting different themes on human rights, e.g. torture, freedom of expression, the right to life, slave labour etc. Focus will be on the following countries/regions: Tibet/China, Chechnya/Russia, the Balkans, Kenya, Guatemala, and Turkey.

Brochures

New information brochures were produced by HRH in English, Russian and Bosnian versions.

Voice of Tibet

"This is the only radio service in [the] Tibetan language with a Tibetan editorial board in charge, allowing us [Tibetans] to comment on events of Tibetan interest from our perspective. Voice of Tibet is highly appreciated by Tibetans in Tibet as well as those in the free world."

His Holiness the Dalai Lama

The radio station Voice of Tibet was founded in 1996 by HRH in partnership with the Norwegian Tibet Committee and Worldview Rights. The purpose of the station is to relay reliable news and to boost Tibetan culture in the face of Chinese repression. HRH continued to assist the running and funding of the Voice of Tibet in 2001. Chairperson of the Board is Ms Maria Dahle, Executive Director of HRH.

Voice of Tibet broadcasts news and cultural programs daily in Tibetan language. The signals can be picked up in Tibet, Nepal, Northern India, and Bhutan. Studios are found in Dharamsala, Kathmandu and Oslo. News is also available at <http://www.vot.org>. Throughout 2001, Chinese authorities continued to jam radio signals from Voice of Tibet. This represents a serious challenge to the freedom of expression.

Education

Norwegian Portal: <http://www.menneskerettigheter.no>

In November 2000, HRH published the Norwegian human rights portal <http://www.menneskerettigheter.no>. The portal was designed and developed by HRH, and contains searchable news and background on human rights. In 2001, the portal had

up to 3257 hits daily. HRH intensified the effort to spreading information on human rights to secondary schools and continued to adapt the human rights portal to Norwegian youth.

Cooperation with the Norwegian Board of Education

HRH cooperated with the Norwegian Board of Education on two projects:

Operation Day's Work 2001

Through the portal <http://www.menneskerettigheter.no> HRH provided information on the internet to Norwegian secondary schools in relation to the annual aid project Operation Day's Work (Operasjon Dagsverk) in October. Around 120.000 pupils participated in the campaign to support education on human rights and the environment in South East Asia. More than 26 million Norwegian Kroner (over 3 mill US Dollars) was collected to help save the rainforest and protect the rights of the indigenous population.

Christmas Calendar on Human Rights

A Christmas Calendar on Human Rights was produced and published on the Internet (<http://www.skolenettet.no>) for Norwegian secondary schools. For each of the 24 days, an issue like racism, torture, etc. was presented through a celebrity engaged in the cause. The pupils were to solve a rebus. To do this, they had to learn the Universal Declaration on Human Rights.

Administration

Staff

Ms Maria Dahle, Executive Director, has worked at HRH since 1994. She is currently Chairperson at the Board of the Radio station Voice of Tibet. Maria holds a Post-graduate degree from the Norwegian School of Economics and Business Administration in Bergen, Norway. She has previously worked as a Journalist, and helped establish the Norwegian newspaper Finansavisen. Maria has also worked as a Theatre Instructor.

Ms Borghild Krokan, Project Manager, started working at HRH in May 2001 with the establishment of Human Rights Houses worldwide and coordination of information activities. She has two Masters Degrees: One in Political Science from the University of Oslo, and one in Media and Communications from the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). Both dissertations were on human rights. She has previously worked as a Journalist and as Information Director.

Mr Magnar Naustdalslid, Project Manager, completed his engagement at HRH in April 2001. He has a Masters Degree in Political Science from the University of Oslo, and wrote his thesis on democratization in Tanzania. He has previously worked in the Norwegian Helsinki Committee and has been an Election Observer in Central and Eastern Europe.

Mr Erik Giercksky has been associated with HRH since February 2001. He assists the work on an international TV documentary on human rights, which is a co-operation between HRH and a Norwegian TV production company, and has also assisted in other information activities at HRH. Erik holds two Masters Degrees: One in History of Religions from the University of Oslo, and one in International Relations from the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE).

Ms Marit Hernæs works with human rights education at HRH, mostly on a voluntary basis. Marit was the main organizer of the human rights festival "Dugnad -98", and has also evaluated human rights education in Albania for HRH. Worked recently for the UNHCR in Kenya, and for the Norwegian People's Aid in Sudan. She has worked 30 years as a Teacher, including 20 years in the Norwegian Union of Teachers.

Mr Erik Thorstensen worked with accounts, administration and information until August 2001, as a Civilian Worker (conscientious objector who is assigned civilian work in place of military service). Masters Degree in History of Religions from the University of Oslo, and has previously worked at the Norwegian Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development with youth policy issues.

Board

Chairman of the board was Lars A. Christensen, Supreme Court Lawyer and a Senior Partner of the law firm Wikborg, Rein & co. Vice-Chairman was Hans-Christian Magnus, Sales Director of ResidenSea. The other Board members were Bernt Hagtvet, Professor of political science at the University of Oslo; Knut Kloster jr., Chairman of Navimar Holding; Svein Wilhelmsen, CEO Basecamp Explorer; and Stein-Ivar Aarsæther, Senior Vice-President of ABB, President of the Norwegian Helsinki Committee and Treasurer of the International Helsinki Federation.

Funding

The HRH activities was once again supported by the contributions of dedicated Norwegian individuals. Our projects received generous support from various sources including the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The expenses totalled 1,73 million Norwegian Kroner (approximately 203 500 US Dollars).