



Defenders for Human Rights Defenders

On December 9, 1998 - on the eve of the 50th anniversary of *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* - the UN General Assembly adopted *The Human Rights Defenders Declaration*. Some 15 years of work, with disappointment as well as promising moments, were successfully brought to an end. The human rights community, NGOs as well as states, was surprised and pleased. The Declaration was seen as yet another milestone in the struggle for universal respect for human rights.

I was working with this project from the very beginning. First, as the Norwegian representative to the Working Group, which was mandated to draft the Declaration; then, during the last five years of the exercise, as Chairman-Rapporteur. I wished to invest time and energy into this process because to me human rights defenders have always been instrumental in the promotion and protection of human rights. While the prime responsibility always lies with the states, the individuals do have *"the right and responsibility to promote respect for and foster knowledge of human rights and fundamental freedoms"*, as expressed in the Preamble of the Declaration.

Listen to the wise words of the UN Secretary General, at the time of the adoption of the Declaration: *"The Declaration rests on a basic premise: that when the rights of human rights defenders are violated, all of our rights are put in jeopardy and all of us are made less safe."* (Kofi Annan, 1998).

This is what *The Human Rights House Network* is all about. *The Human Rights House Network* defends the human rights defenders. *The Human Rights Houses* provide shelter - both in a metaphysical and in a physical sense - to those who are in need of shelter, because of their struggle for human rights.

Sadly, shelter is still needed; a decade after the Declaration was adopted. This decade has even brought new challenges, new hardship. The tragic terrorist attacks worldwide, as well as the global war on terrorism, have hardened the climate. The attitude of many states and regimes has changed: they claim that the human rights defenders are trespassing on the democracy.

The European Commission for Democracy through Law, better known as *The Venice Commission*, is founded on two pillars: democracy and the rule of law. As the President of this Commission, I operate at a theoretical, legal and political level. *The Venice Commission* provides opinions on issues involving these basic values: democracy and the rule of law.

The human rights defenders, and *The Human Rights Houses*, operate at the practical level. They fight and provide support, in the field, for exactly the same basic values: democracy and the rule of law.

I see quite clearly the line leading from *The Human Rights Defenders Declaration* to the *Venice Commission*. But I also observe that this line takes us even further. This line leads from the beautiful, prestigious halls in Geneva, New York and Venice to the, sometimes, grim and dangerous countryside or cities where the struggle for respect for human rights is fought by courageous women and men.

These courageous women and men need our strong support. They are supported by *The Human Rights House Network*.

It is my sincere hope that *The Human Rights House Network* is provided with the necessary financial resources to be able to continue to support the human rights defenders. By doing so, we reduce the risk that *"all of our rights are put in jeopardy and all of us are made less safe"*.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Jan E. Helgesen'. The signature is fluid and cursive, written over a light background.

Jan E. Helgesen
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University of Oslo
President of *The Venice Commission*