



Human Rights House of Sarajevo



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Member and partner NGOs of the Human Rights House Network are concerned by the threats against human rights defenders in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Authorities have the responsibility to take pro-active measures to ensure the security of human rights defenders in general – and in this recent case the members of the Human Rights House Sarajevo, especially the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Your Excellencies,

We, members and partners of the Human Rights House Network, have been informed by the recent verbal attacks against the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Bosnia and Herzegovina, its current president, Vera Jovanovic, and its former president, Srdan Dizdarevic. We call upon authorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina to publicly denounce defamation of human rights defenders and support human rights NGOs and their work. Political leadership should publicly state the importance of the promotion of human rights. In addition, State authorities need to assess the security situation and follow it closely, in direct contact with the Helsinki Committee.

On 10 and 12 January 2012, the daily newspaper *Oslobodenje* published two press releases of the Public Relations service of the Ryiasat of the Islamic Community containing large-scale allegations according to which "... the Helsinki Committee in Bosnia and Herzegovina had gone into moral bankruptcy a long time ago because they protect the violation of fundamental rights of Muslims by supporting the discrimination against Muslims, especially covered Muslim women..." Furthermore, the mentioned press releases falsely argue that "... the characteristics of this [Helsinki] Committee is to take the opposite side or remain silent in cases of violation of the Muslims' rights..."

Both press releases decrease the respect, regard, and confidence in which the organisation and its members are held and induce hostile opinions against the Helsinki Committee and its members. By pointing out prominent human rights defenders, they increase the risk of harassment and other attacks on those defenders and their relatives.

Human Rights House Sarajevo is a member of the international Human Rights House Network for the past 15 years. The Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Bosnia and Herzegovina is one of the founders of the Human Rights House Sarajevo. During both the war and after the war period, the Helsinki Committee gained the reputation in Bosnia and Herzegovina and abroad to be an organisation that values tolerance and multiculturalism and consistently fights for the rights of every individual, regardless of their ethnicity or religion.

As a member of the United Nations and the Council of Europe, Bosnia and Herzegovina committed itself to recognise the right and the responsibility of individuals, groups and associations to promote respect for and foster knowledge of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the national and international levels. As stated in the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, Bosnia and Herzegovina has the duty to “take all necessary measures to ensure the protection by the competent authorities of everyone, individually and in association with others, against any violence, threats, retaliation, *de facto* or *de jure* adverse discrimination, pressure or any other arbitrary action as a consequence of his or her legitimate exercise of the rights referred to in the present Declaration”.¹

Members and partners of the Human Rights House Network are concerned about the attempts to silence and intimidate human rights defenders in Bosnia and Herzegovina, knowing that their organisations have a significant role in the establishment of the rule of law and culture of human rights.

Human rights defenders have to be able to raise critical issues and to promote human rights without the fear of public retaliation from political or religious leadership with defamation campaigns or other attacks. Members and partners of the Human Rights House Network are concerned that various interests groups, religious communities or political parties tend to use media to attack human rights NGOs in Bosnia and Herzegovina when those groups do not share the values and work of those human rights defenders.

In consideration of the above, we, members and partners of the Human Rights House Network, urge the authorities of Bosnia and Herzegovina to guarantee the right of all human rights defenders and NGOs, including the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights, to exercise its activities, including freedom of expression, without the fear of retaliations, libel, threats, pressure and any other attack.

Therefore, authorities have the responsibility to take pro-active measures to ensure the security of all human rights defenders, including the members of the Human Rights House Sarajevo, especially the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Sincerely,

- Armenian Helsinki Association
- Belgrade Centre for Human Rights
- Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia
- Human Rights Center Georgia (HRIDC)
- Human Rights House Baku
 - Human Rights Centre of Azerbaijan
 - Legal Education Society

¹ Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, United Nations, General Assembly, 8 March 1999, Article 12, Paragraph 2.

- Media Rights Institute
 - Society for Humanitarian Research
 - Women's Association for Rational Development (WARD)
- Human Rights House Belarus in exile (Vilnius)
 - Belarus Watch (ByWatch)
 - Belarusian Association of Journalists
 - Belarusian Helsinki Committee
 - Human Rights Centre Viasna
 - Public Association "Centar Supolnasc"
- Human Rights House Sarajevo
 - Association of Female Citizens "Renaissance"
 - Foundation CURE
 - Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Bosnia and Herzegovina
 - Regional Co-ordinator for Youth Groups
 - Serb Civic Council - Movement for Equality - The Council of the Sarajevo Canton
 - Woman and Society Centre
- Human Rights House Zagreb
 - APEO/UPIM Association for Promotion of Equal Opportunities for People with Disabilities
 - B.a.B.e.
 - CMS - Centre for Peace Studies
 - Documenta - Centre for Dealing with the Past
 - GOLJP - Civic Committee for Human Rights
 - Svitanje - Association for Protection and Promotion of Mental Health
- Human Rights House Oslo
 - Health and Human Rights Info
 - Human Rights House Foundation
 - Norwegian Helsinki Committee
 - Norwegian PEN
- Lawyers' Committee for Human Rights YUCOM Serbia
- The Rafto Foundation for Human Rights / Norway
- HURNIT-Uganda
- Ukrainian Helsinki Human Rights Union
- Article 19 / UK
- Index on Censorship / UK

Copies to:

- United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders
- Directorate General of Human Rights and Legal Affairs of the Council of Europe
- Office of the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe
- Relevant bodies and members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe
- Delegation of the European Union in Bosnia and Herzegovina
- Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Norwegian Embassy in Bosnia and Herzegovina
- Standing Committee for Foreign Affairs of the Norwegian Parliament
- Swiss Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Swiss Embassy in Bosnia and Herzegovina
- Permanent Mission of Bosnia and Herzegovina to the United Nations in Geneva
- Newspaper *Oslobodenje*

About the Human Rights House Network (www.humanrightshouse.org)

The Human Rights House Network is a forum of cooperation between established and emerging Human Rights Houses, uniting 70 NGOs in 15 countries in Western Balkans, Eastern Europe and South Caucasus, East and Horn of Africa, and Western Europe. The Human Rights House Sarajevo is a member of the Network. HRHN's aim is to protect, empower and support human rights defenders and their organizations. The Human Rights House Foundation, based in Oslo (Norway) and Geneva (Switzerland), is the secretariat of the Human Rights House Network.