



**Report to Congress on
Protection of Civil Society Activists and Journalists
Section 7019(e) of the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related
Programs Appropriations Act, 2022 (Div. K, P.L.117- 103) (FY 2022 SFOAA)
and the Joint Explanatory Statement (JES)**

Pursuant to Section 7019(e) of the FY 2022 SFOAA and the JES, the Department of State is publishing this report on diplomatic engagement and programs to promote the protection of civil society activists, including human rights defenders, and journalists who are harassed, threatened, and attacked for their legitimate advocacy activities. For the purposes of this report, civil society activists include human rights defenders, including those advocating for indigenous peoples and persons with disabilities, and those exercising their rights when working on environmental matters. This report includes information on “the specific processes by which such individuals can request protection and other assistance from U.S. embassies, including in areas where the United States does not maintain a diplomatic facility.” This report also includes information on “internal protocols and training on engagement with and protection of, such individuals, to include strengthening interagency sharing of data on reprisals against such individuals on a regular and timely basis.” The Department of State prepared this report in conjunction with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

Introduction

Promoting the protection of civil society activists and journalists is a core component of U.S. foreign policy. A robust and active civil society is the bedrock of any fully functioning democracy. Civil society activists and journalists are key partners for advancing democracy, human rights, and good governance and for developing solutions to global challenges. Both are essential for effectively promoting respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, strengthening democratic institutions, and fostering resilient societies that are peaceful, prosperous, and inclusive. Around the world, the work of activists and journalists helps support transparency and accountability, promote rule of law, and expose corruption. Where their ability to work freely is undermined, human rights abuses and violations, discrimination, and corruption often flourish.

These individuals often work in the face of threats, harassment, intimidation, physical attacks, and killings from autocratic governments and illiberal actors. Some governments impose foreign funding restrictions or misuse national security laws to clamp down on activists' and journalists' exercise of their rights to freedoms of expression, association, and peaceful assembly. Internet shutdowns and the unlawful or arbitrary use of surveillance technologies can further undermine the ability of activists to advocate and journalists to report freely on critical matters of public interest. The challenges can extend beyond stifling dissent to threats and reprisals when activists or journalists participate in international dialogues on human rights.

The United States is committed to supporting activists and journalists throughout the world facing intimidation, harassment, and violence, as well as economic and legal challenges, that seriously impede their ability to work freely and safely. As laid out in the Department of State and USAID Joint Strategic Plan (2022-2026):

We will ensure that protection of human rights and promotion of democratic values remain at the center of future innovation and technological advances. In all these efforts, the Department of State and USAID will work hand in hand with their likeminded partners

This report describes how the United States seeks to address challenges and strategic objectives outlined in the Joint Strategic Plan and promote the protection of civil society activists and journalists through both diplomatic and programmatic efforts.

Diplomatic Engagement Plan

The United States will continue to engage at all levels of bilateral and multilateral diplomacy to bring attention to the significant challenges facing civil society activists, including human rights defenders, and journalists and advocate for their protection and empowerment. This will include continuing to partner with individuals and communities outside of government. We will continue to use a range of public and private actions against those who seek to target, harass, or harm civil society actors and journalists, including, as appropriate, by working to impose visa restrictions and financial sanctions.

The United States will speak out against those who target, harass, or harm activists and journalists. We will underscore the counterproductive effects that such actions have not only on civil society and media but also on good governance, societal stability, and economic development. We will emphasize that the ability of civil society and journalists to work freely leads to an informed and active citizenry able

to meaningfully engage in political decision-making and hold their governments accountable. The United States will partner with civil society and independent media to resist attacks by hostile actors, support fact-based, professional reporting, and counter disinformation campaigns. We will provide opportunities for civil society and journalists from abroad to exchange best practices and build partnerships with their counterparts in the United States. The Department of State will continue to highlight the difficulties facing civil society and journalists in our annual Country Reports on Human Rights Practices and the International Religious Freedom Report.

U.S. embassies around the world engage regularly with stakeholders from civil society, the private sector, and the public sector to share information, strengthen collaboration, and support overall efforts to advance human rights and support civil society activists, including human rights defenders, and journalists. Embassies support human rights defenders by: 1) designating officers to cover human rights; 2) encouraging host governments to engage constructively with civil society; 3) connecting at-risk human rights defenders with resources for emergency assistance; and 4) supporting human rights defenders through diplomatic engagement. The 2021 U.S. Support for Human Rights Defenders publication outlines the many ways in which human rights officers work to support and advocate for civil society. This publication was followed by internal guidance supplying missions with a robust list of tools and resources available to them to support and empower civil society.

We will also continue to engage in multilateral fora to support and protect civil society, human rights defenders, and journalists. We are firmly committed to ensuring civil society has a voice in UN bodies and high-level meetings, as it plays an important role in addressing and responding to many global challenges, including human rights abuses. At the 49th session of the UN Human Rights Council in March, for instance, the United States led a side event with the European Union to shine a light on and call for accountability for the online threats faced by women human rights defenders. We also supported a resolution on human rights defenders in conflict and post-conflict situations and a joint statement signed by 68 countries on the need to protect human rights defenders working on environmental issues. At the 76th session of the UN General Assembly in November 2021, the United States supported the resolution on the need to provide a safe and enabling environment for human rights defenders.

Unfortunately, certain UN member states seek to stifle civil society voices and prevent their participation in UN meetings. We will continue promoting open and transparent processes for the participation of civil society and journalists in UN

meetings and for nongovernmental organizations to obtain UN accreditation at the Economic and Social Council's Committee on Nongovernmental Organizations.

We will also continue to strengthen efforts to promote the protection of civil society activists and journalists through multi-stakeholder initiatives. These forums foster the whole-of-society approach necessary to effectively respond to the most pressing challenges faced by societies by leveraging government collaboration with non-government stakeholders. Key multistakeholder initiatives where the United States will continue to engage include:

- Community of Democracies (CoD): a multistakeholder initiative the United States and Poland cofounded in 2000 to foster global cooperation in supporting emerging democracies. The CoD's work is guided by the Warsaw Declaration, which reflects a shared commitment to the promotion and protection of democratic principles. The CoD operates through the Governing Council – its core body comprising 29 states – and the Executive Committee – a steering body of six states elected from the Governing Council. The CoD Civil Society Pillar – comprising approximately 50 representatives from global civil society – plays a key role in the CoD's work.
- Freedom Online Coalition (FOC): A forum for likeminded governments to coordinate efforts and work with civil society, the private sector, and other Internet stakeholders to protect and promote human rights online.
- Media Freedom Coalition (MFC): An initiative dedicated to bolstering global efforts to promote media freedom and the safety of journalists.
- Open Government Partnership (OGP): An initiative that promotes transparency and strengthening of citizen engagement as a means of making governments more effective, responsive, and accountable.
- Voluntary Principles on Security and Human Rights Initiative (VPI): An initiative in which governments, companies, and nongovernmental organizations promote implementation of principles that guide companies in the industries of extracting, harvesting, or developing natural resources or energy on providing security for their operations in a manner that respects human rights.

The Department of State is also looking at collaborating with other U.S. departments and agencies to establish protocols and training on the protection of civil society activists and journalists. We aim to take a robust approach to sharing information within the U.S. government on reprisals against such individuals, to include, leveraging all available platforms. This will better enable a whole-of-U.S. government approach to identify trends of reprisal against civil society

activists and journalists and apply best practices for the protection of these individuals.

Finally, at the first Summit for Democracy in December 2021, the United States and other governments made concrete commitments as part of the Presidential Initiative for Democratic Renewal to bolster the promotion and protection of civil society and independent media, including through commitments such as deepening engagement with the Media Freedom Coalition. We also underscored the importance of collective action through multilateral and multistakeholder efforts. In the Year of Action in advance of the second Summit for Democracy, the United States is using bilateral diplomacy and multilateral and multistakeholder engagements to drive progress on the commitments we and others made and to ensure these efforts endure following the second Summit.

Programmatic Engagement Plan

The United States will continue to provide foreign assistance to support and protect civil society and journalists in restrictive environments. This assistance includes rapid response programs – some of which provide direct financial emergency assistance to activists and organizations in distress – and technical assistance programs that build the operational capacity of these groups. We will use consultative processes and analytical tools to accurately identify problems, develop evidence-based responses to needs, develop resilient networks, and counter restrictions.

The Department of State's rapid response emergency assistance programs, largely managed through its Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL), directly support civil society actors and journalists who face threats, attacks, detention, prosecution, or are otherwise at risk due to repression from state or nonstate actors for their activities. These direct assistance programs, such as the Lifeline Embattled Civil Society Organization (CSO) Assistance Fund, are designed to address immediate threats and enable civil society and journalists to return to their work safely. Assistance may cover costs associated with medical treatment, legal representation, prison visits, trial monitoring, temporary relocation, security (physical and digital), equipment replacement, and psychosocial and dependent support. The Department has complemented such direct assistance with preventative security support to thwart attacks. Commitments made as part of the Presidential Initiative for Democratic Renewal during the Summit for Democracy support these efforts and mobilize additional funding from international partners. Additionally, DRL funds programs that target specific countries and regions where civil society activists and journalists are facing increasing risks.

USAID's rapid response mechanisms, such as the Human Rights Support Mechanism and Illuminating New Solutions and Programmatic Innovations for Resilient Spaces (INSPIRES) Program, complement the Department of State's assistance while leveraging USAID's expansive field presence and in-country relationships to provide targeted, short-term assistance to local actors and organizations as they respond to urgent human rights crises or limited windows of opportunity within difficult environments. These mechanisms, which are centrally managed through USAID's Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance Center, leverage and support its in-country programs, and focus on operational support rather than protection assistance. This includes support to ensure that threatened actors, organizations, or institutions are able to continue their work in times of crisis, addressing their physical and digital security needs, building capacity to push back against authoritarianism, and providing surge support during politically sensitive periods. For example, with these funds, USAID activities helped Belarusian journalists replace equipment confiscated or damaged by state security actors during their reporting on election-related protests and helped a coalition of CSOs in Morocco learn about how to improve the legal enabling environment. USAID also provided legal assistance to Serbian journalists who had come under politically motivated investigations due to critical reporting of the government's COVID response.

Both agencies will continue to provide rapid response support for targeted, timely advocacy interventions (at the local, national, and international levels) allowing local civil society and journalists to push for reforms and change. Furthermore, both State and USAID will continue to provide capacity-building technical assistance to civil society and journalists through programs such as the Department of State's Securing Access to Freedom of Expression program, State's and USAID's global internet freedom programs, and USAID's Civil Society Innovation Initiative. This assistance includes programs that increase the capacity of civil society and independent media on digital safety and exercise of their rights in the digital sphere as well as create a network of regional hubs that promote and strengthen a vibrant civil society. Further, USAID will continue its work on systems-level support to ensure legal and regulatory frameworks are in place and institutions strengthened to address abuses of power and empower individuals to exercise their civil and political rights and expand its efforts to pilot innovative approaches. Together, our technical assistance programs will continue to support individuals, networks, and coalitions of actors to build and expand life-sustaining connections with other actors, both regionally and globally. Such partnerships are critical during times of crisis and help to focus international attention.

Conclusion

We will continue our robust diplomatic and programmatic engagement to protect civil society and journalists, supporting them to continue their important work, and raising global awareness of the legitimate and critical role these actors play in healthy and robust democracies.