



Actions for U.S. Embassy Human Rights Officers to Protect Environmental & Land Rights Defenders

What can you, as a U.S. Embassy human rights officer, do to protect human rights defenders, including environmental & land rights activists?

As the U.S. human rights officer in a country where human rights defenders, often especially environmental and land rights defenders, are at risk, you have a vital role in helping protect their lives. You can also help ensure that the U.S. Embassy at large, the business sector, and the government in question listen to their concerns and encourage better host-government policies towards them and the communities they represent. Human rights defenders strengthen the rule of law, so your actions protecting them help do so, too.

What you do matters.

Here are some ideas of what has been helpful when defenders have been at great risk.

Get to know defenders

As the U.S. human rights officer, when first arriving in the country, reach out to environmental and land right defenders as well as other human rights defenders. This means far more than meeting with established capital-city human rights lawyers, although you should certainly do that too. It means meeting with indigenous and other ethnic minority rights and community organizations, women's organizations, and many others, in the countryside as well as in cities and towns.

- ➔ Visit them in their offices—don't only have them come to the embassy.
- ➔ Reach out to networks of nongovernmental and ethnic community groups as well as to individual organizations. Those networks may share with you the overarching concerns and recommendations developed together by organizations, which can help you understand and raise these issues with the host government, businesses, and within the embassy. Taking these networks seriously also helps to encourage more effective joint civil society strategies.
- ➔ Once you establish those relationships, continue to reach out proactively when possible as well as responding to requests for meetings.

Show support for defenders at risk

The visible presence of U.S. Embassy staff can confer protection and show the host government, businesses, and other actors that defenders have international support.

- ➔ Include information directly from and about environmental and land rights defenders as well as other human rights defenders in the annual State Department human rights report. But don't stop at that.
- ➔ Attend events at the invitation of defenders. These can be public meetings, vigils, conferences, or artistic events. These can also be trials of defenders facing specious accusations or trials of people accused of harming defenders, or funerals or memorials. You can visit imprisoned human rights activists in jail or visit their families. Attend human rights prize ceremonies if there is one in your country or other events that celebrate defenders.
- ➔ Engage the rest of the U.S. Embassy where needed. Having the ambassador attend an emblematic trial or visit the office of defenders at a moment of great risk, having the political officer join an event, or having the economic officer known to the business sector attend an event on environment and business, for example, can be powerful.
- ➔ Encourage the embassy to make public statements, press statements, and social media in order to protect defenders and journalists covering these issues. This may mean taking a tough stance, like condemning the actions of host government security forces for using excessive force against indigenous communities protesting a dam project carried out without consultation. Often defenders feel that the U.S. Embassy is silent on the life and death matters they face. A public statement, a tweet can make a world of difference.
- ➔ Encourage the embassy to join with other embassies where useful. There often is a particular group of embassies, including European embassies, particularly engaged on human rights issues. Having a united front can be powerful.

Conduct advocacy with host-government officials & businesses

- ➔ You can add weight to defenders' concerns by meeting with host-government officials and businesses and raising both general policy issues and specific cases. You can raise concerns about lack of progress in investigating threats and abuses, lack of previous consultation of communities on projects, use of force by official or private security forces against communities or defenders, words by a cabinet minister or governor that put human rights defenders at risk, or lack of effective protection of defenders.
- ➔ Institutions you will likely want to meet with include the Attorney General's office, national ombudsman's office, human rights defender protection program if there is one, the government's human rights point person, indigenous affairs bureau, or environmental ministry. Some proactive human rights officers have made it a practice to meet periodically with a range of institutions to bring up a set of cases. Keep hammering home the need for progress on the same set of emblematic or otherwise important cases. Having the ambassador focus on an emblematic case can make a huge difference.
- ➔ As the human rights officer, you are the most likely embassy official to hear about human rights violations involving host government security forces. If these cases are raised, make sure that relevant information is conveyed to the Leahy Law unit at the State Department. Provide the human rights organization's and staff person's name only if they are comfortable providing it for that purpose—reporting on violations by specific security force units is a risky act for defenders. Share serious concerns with the ambassador and relevant staff.

- ➔ Be aware of the role that some businesses play in the risks facing environmental and land rights defenders. Monitor the relationship of businesses to private and official security forces if these links are leading to human rights violations. Raise these issues within the embassy to encourage action as needed. Consult with the [Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#).
- ➔ Criminalization of defenders is one of the most powerful strategies to undermine their rights and power to defend their communities. It is important that human rights officers and embassies increase their advocacy on behalf of defenders who are being criminalized for legitimate activities to defend rights.
- ➔ When possible, let the affected defender or organization know that you are doing something. Diplomacy is often behind closed doors and there will be much you cannot say. But whenever possible, give some indication that you are acting and not turning a deaf ear.

Know how to encourage protection for human rights defenders

- ➔ Visible support for human rights defenders is often an effective strategy, but it can also put people at risk. Always, first ask the human rights defender or community leaders what they feel is most effective.
- ➔ Similarly, always urge that host government officials regularly meet with human rights defenders on issues of protection, because defenders know best how they can be protected.
- ➔ Be clear that for environmental and land rights defenders, the kinds of protection measures needed are often collective protection rather than individual measures. Communities, not just leaders, may be at risk. Host country governments often do not understand or resist the idea of collective protection. Collective protection can be a range of measures—just to give an example, anything from providing electricity to darkened roads, to removing military officials linked to threats, to empowering non-armed indigenous guards, to ensuring previous consultation processes are respected. They must be developed by the communities at risk. For the U.S. Embassy to encourage implementation of such collective measures can be transformative.
- ➔ While some countries have protection programs that offer physical protection measures, which can save lives, physical protection is not enough. Human rights defenders often say that their best defense is the investigation and prosecution of attacks and threats against them. Police and prosecutors generally should investigate these incidents in the context of patterns of threats and attacks against defenders, not as isolated cases.
- ➔ Encourage governments to commit to serious investigations and prosecutions of threats. Justice systems rarely successfully investigate threats, and governments often downplay the ways threats can derail the work of defenders and lessen their impact. Threats often lead to attacks and assassinations.
- ➔ Help connect environmental and land rights defenders and other human rights defenders with international protection programs, including the USG's CSOs Assistance Fund, and coordinate with the consular section to facilitate visas where needed.

Be an advocate within the embassy so that the ambassador & other staff listen to & act to protect environmental & land rights defenders

- ➔ Often the work of interacting with human rights defenders is left to the human rights officer alone. Where there are particularly serious problems regarding defenders, try to ensure that the ambassador,

political officer, economic officer, and so on have the occasional opportunity to meet with and listen to defenders. You are the person who most knows what is going on and, even though your position is subordinate, you can ask for attention to these important issues.

- ➔ At critical moments, try to involve the ambassador. For example, if the president of a country is verbally attacking environmental and land rights defenders, or other defenders, in ways that make them targets of threats and attacks, or if there are grave problems with excessive use of force by the host government military, a word from the human rights officer is not enough to do the trick. You need your ambassador to act.
- ➔ Encourage and help arrange a regular meeting, perhaps monthly, with key embassy staff and human rights defenders, including environmental and land rights defenders, to review the human rights situation and recommend actions to take. It is best if there is a certain level of formality so that there can be follow-up on commitments made.
- ➔ Help to vary the kinds of defenders and organizations that have access to Embassy consultations, events, meetings with CODELS, etc. Those who are invited should not be limited to organizations in the capital city, defenders who speak English, or organizations receiving U.S. government funding.
- ➔ Make sure that your knowledge and contacts are shared with your successor through an exit memo or other method. It takes years to develop the knowledge, trust, and relationships to protect human rights defenders at risk—it should not start from zero every two to three years.

Network with & work with organizations that help defend defenders

- ➔ Accompaniment organizations are helpful contacts for you. Organizations like Peace Brigades International and other nongovernmental and faith organizations with a mission to protect defenders via providing peaceful accompaniment know defenders and groups well and can help you establish relationships and provide vital information about the issues facing them.
- ➔ U.S. nongovernmental environmental, indigenous rights, and human rights groups can help you identify concerns and trends and point out useful actions you can take to defend defenders. Meet with them before you go to your post and keep in touch with them throughout your time.
- ➔ To have a presence in the countryside, sometimes international and national humanitarian agencies conduct verification missions to different areas. If the embassy permits, you could join such a mission. If this is not possible, do interact with the international and national humanitarian organizations that are able to travel to areas affected by social conflict or war.
- ➔ If the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has an office in the country, this can be a crucial source of diplomacy in favor of human rights. Do rely on the analysis of and support the office. Visiting special rapporteurs particularly on human rights defenders have an impact and the U.S. Embassy can help by reinforcing their reports and recommendations. In Latin America, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights plays a vital role and U.S. embassies can reinforce the recommendations of the commission when it does country missions.

Thank you. Remember: What you do matters.

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