

SET THEM FREE

**CALL FOR THE RELEASE OF
11 UNJUSTLY IMPRISONED
HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS**



f FRONT LINE
DEFENDERS

Updated June 2019

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THE 11 CASES

AZIMJAN ASKAROV, KYRGYZSTAN

Sentenced to life imprisonment after an unfair trial for documenting interethnic violence

ILHAM TOHTI, CHINA

Sentenced to life imprisonment for defending the political and cultural rights of the Uyghur people

ATENA DAEMI, IRAN

Sentenced to 14 years in prison (reduced to seven on appeal) after a trial lasting 15 minutes for campaigning against the death penalty and supporting the families of political prisoners

NARGES MOHAMMADI, IRAN

Sentenced to 17 years in prison for campaigning for peace, human rights and the abolition of the death penalty

NASRIN SOTOUDEH, IRAN

Sentenced to 38 years in prison and 148 lashes because of her work as a human rights lawyer

ABDULHADI AL-KHAWAJA, BAHRAIN

Sentenced to life imprisonment for demanding democracy and human rights in Bahrain

MOHAMED AL-ROKEN, UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

Sentenced to 10 years in prison because of his work as a human rights lawyer in the United Arab Emirates

DAWIT ISAAK, ERITREA

Held for 16 years without charge in a secret prison for publishing open letters calling for reform

PABLO LÓPEZ ALAVÉZ, MEXICO

Sentenced to 30 years in prison, after an unfair trial, because of his work defending the environmental rights of the Zapoteco indigenous people

GERMAIN RUKUKI, BURUNDI

Sentenced to 32 years in prison for campaigning for an end to torture and the death penalty

TRAN THI NGA, VIETNAM

Sentenced to nine years in prison plus five years house arrest for defending the rights of migrant workers and women's rights

Set them free

IT IS A PRIVILEGE FOR ALL OF US IN FRONT LINE DEFENDERS TO WORK WITH SOME OF the most courageous people in the world, whose idea of development does not depend on the ruthless exploitation of the natural and human resources of the planet, or the elimination of those who challenge injustice or inequality.

But now the struggle for human rights for all is entering a critical period, as the gains made over the last 70 years are threatened by the rising tides of populist authoritarianism, corruption and extremism. It seems we have entered a new age of repression.

Eleanor Roosevelt wrote, “You gain strength, courage and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You are able to say to yourself, ‘I have lived through this horror. I can take the next thing that comes along.’” Human rights defenders face fear every day and find ways through it. Too many human rights defenders languish in prison because of their selfless and legitimate activities.

The following 11 emblematic cases are illustrative of the way in which repressive governments around the world consistently use the law in an attempt to smear and silence HRDs. Despite this relentless pressure HRDs refuse to be silent and continue to fight for their rights, even from within prison.

Our former colleague, **Abdulahdi Al-Khawaja**, played a key role in developing our support for human rights defenders across the Middle East and North Africa, and much of our work to support human rights defenders around the world today is based on his pioneering work. Abdulhadi was arrested and tortured during the crackdown on pro-democracy protests in Bahrain in 2011, subjected to a sham trial, and sentenced to life imprisonment.

Azimjan Askarov is serving a life sentence in Kyrgyzstan because of his peaceful advocacy for human rights. **Ilham Tohti** is serving life imprisonment in China because he defended the political and cultural rights of the Uyghur people. **Dawit Isaak** set up the first independent newspaper in post-independence Eritrea. When he published articles critical of authoritarian rule, he was seized and taken to a secret prison where he has been held ever since, without charge or trial.

Atena Daemi, **Nasrin Sotoudeh** and **Narges Mohammadi** are all serving long prison terms in Iran because of their work defending human rights, campaigning against the death penalty and supporting the families of political prisoners. **Germain Rukuki** worked to end torture and the death penalty in Burundi and in April 2018 he was sentenced to 32 years in prison on charges of “rebellion” and “breach of state security”.

In Mexico, **Pablo López Alavéz** has been held in preventive detention since 2010 on spurious charges of murder because of his work defending the rights of the indigenous Zapoteco people. **Mohamed Al-Roken** has been sentenced to 10 years in prison in the United Arab Emirates because of his work as a human rights lawyer defending other activists during a

government crackdown. In Vietnam, **Tran Thi Nga** is serving a nine year prison term, to be followed by five years house arrest because of her work defending land and labour rights.

What all these cases have in common is that the power of the state has been employed to silence courageous human rights defenders who articulate visions of their societies – and the world – in which fundamental freedoms and rights must be enjoyed equally by all citizens, regardless of ethnicity, religious belief, political ideology, wealth or political power.

Front Line Defenders pays tribute to all those who work at the local and national level to make these basic rights a reality for all and calls on governments to free all human rights defenders currently in prison, including those named in this report. Additionally, governments should put an end to the threats, harassment, defamation, criminalisation, torture and killings which human rights defenders face in too many countries.

Just recently a human rights defender in Guatemala whose community has been evicted from their land four times, and who faces constant harassment and threats, said after the most recent eviction, “They have taken everything from us – even our fear”.



Andrew Anderson
Executive Director
Front Line Defenders

AZIMJAN ASKAROV – KYRGYZSTAN

SENTENCED TO LIFE IMPRISONMENT AFTER AN UNFAIR TRIAL FOR DOCUMENTING INTERETHNIC VIOLENCE

AZIMJAN ASKAROV IS A PROMINENT HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDER in Kyrgyzstan who worked for twenty five years documenting human rights abuses in the country before his arrest and imprisonment in 2010. In 2002 he founded the human rights organisation *Vozdukh* (Air) which focused on investigating cases of police abuse, ill-treatment of prisoners, and poor prison conditions in Kyrgyzstan, making him a target of those authorities he criticised. Following ethnic violence in Kyrgyzstan in 2010, in which a policeman was killed, Azimjan was charged with several offences, including killing the policeman, and sentenced to life in prison.

The Kyrgyz Human Rights Ombudsman Mr Tursunbek Akun, who carried out a parallel investigation, said that there was no evidence to link Azimjan Askarov to the crime – and that the charges against him were clearly politically motivated.

In May 2010 tensions between ethnic Kyrgyz and ethnic Uzbeks (of whom Azimjan is one) in the southern part of the country turned into violent clashes during the wider Kyrgyz Revolution of 2010. Azimjan had been collecting information on who had been killed or injured during the clashes in the village of Bazar-Korgan. According to the Jalalabad-based non-governmental organisation, *Spravedlivost* (Justice), Azimjan's data included video footage of the violence which showed police officers failing to intervene, a fact of which the police were aware. On 15 June Azimjan was arrested in Bazar-Korgan in connection with the death of a police officer during violence in the area which had led to the deaths of the officer and up to twenty three civilians. Along with his documentation of police responses to the violence, the fact that he is an ethnic Uzbek and that he had previously taken cases against corrupt police officers was part of the motivation for his arrest.

It is also worth noting that out of 32 criminal cases relating to the violence, there was only one case where an ethnic Kyrgyz was tried.

At his trial on 6 September in the local town of Nooken, Azimjan was charged with several offences under the Criminal Code of Kyrgyzstan including: hostage taking, illegal

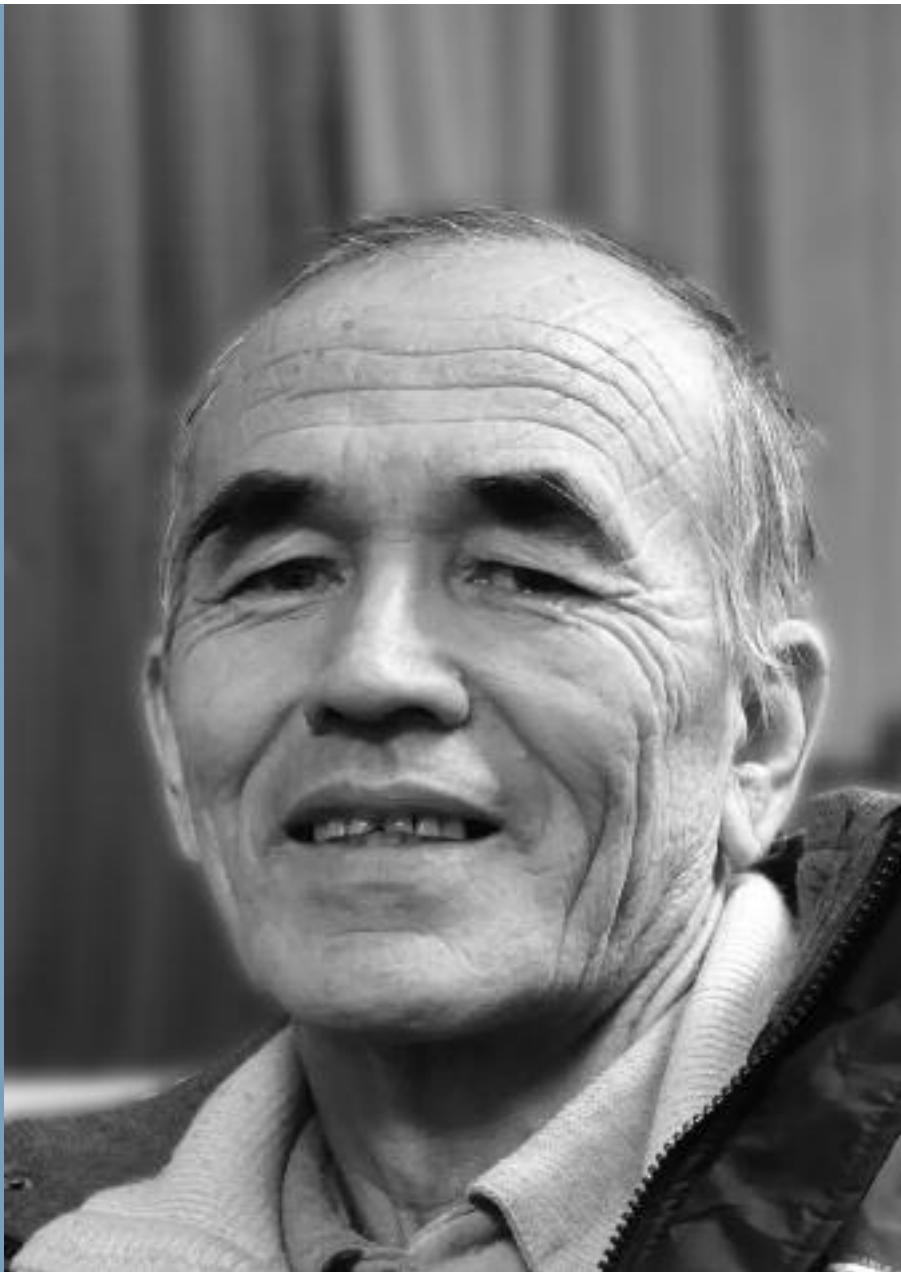
acquisition and storage of ammunition, storage of extremist information, inciting ethnic hatred, rioting, participation in murder, and participation in the murder of a policeman. No credible evidence was presented against him.

Azimjan's lawyer, Nurbeck Tokaktunov, was denied access to Azimjan before the trial and Azimjan was refused permission to see his defence in private for approximately two months. In addition to being attacked when attempting to visit Azimjan, Tokaktunov received a number of death threats. Between December 2012 and February 2013 Azimjan's lawyers travelled to the village of Bazar-Korgan, where the violence had taken place. There they found seventeen independent witnesses whose testimonies proved the innocence of Azimjan.

However, as a result of the threat of violence, the defence felt unable to bring witnesses to the trial. At the trial, where Azimjan was tried with seven other human rights defenders, members of the public threatened the defendants and their lawyers, as well as directing questions from the floor to the defendants without the authorisation of the Judge. Azimjan was tortured while in custody and at one point appeared in court showing signs of having been badly beaten. Azimjan also gave evidence of having seen other prisoners being tortured to force them to give evidence against him. The allegations of torture were never investigated.

The sentence of life in prison was upheld on appeal, including by the Supreme Court.

On 21 April 2016, the UN Human Rights Committee (UNHRC) called on the Kyrgyz authorities to release Azimjan and to quash his conviction. According to the UNHRC statement, Azimjan was arbitrarily detained, held in inhumane conditions, tortured, mistreated, and unable to get proper treatment for serious medical conditions. Authorities also failed to carry out an immediate, effective and impartial investigation into Azimjan's allegations of torture. Both the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights and the European Union's External Action service have also called repeatedly for Azimjan's release.



**AZIMJAN WAS ARBITRARILY DETAINED,
HELD IN INHUMANE CONDITIONS,
TORTURED, MISTREATED, AND UNABLE
TO GET PROPER TREATMENT FOR
SERIOUS MEDICAL CONDITIONS**

ILHAM TOHTI – CHINA

SERVING LIFE IMPRISONMENT FOR DEFENDING THE POLITICAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS OF THE UYGHUR PEOPLE

A RENOWNED UYGHUR INTELLECTUAL AND HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDER, Ilham Tohti was an economist at Central University for Nationalities in Beijing prior to his arrest in 2014. Rejecting separatism and violence, he worked for over two decades to build understanding between Chinese Han and Uyghurs, a mainly Muslim Turkic ethnic group residing primarily in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). Despite Xinjiang's nominal status as an "autonomous region," the Chinese state has exerted increasingly draconian control over the region and its inhabitants. Over the past decade, Chinese authorities have expanded a campaign to disrupt the exercise of all aspects of Muslim culture, including religion, language, dress, hairstyle, and public assembly. In 2018, reports emerged documenting the incarceration of over one million Uyghur citizens detained in co-called re-education centres throughout the region.

Through his writing and lectures, Ilham defended the political and cultural rights of the Uyghur people and highlighted government policies that limit the use of the Uyghur language, prevent Muslim religious practice, block access to employment, and encourage Han migration into the region. In 2006, Ilham set up the Uyghur Online website to criticise government policy abusive to Uyghurs and to promote better Uyghur-Han relations.

When violence erupted in Xinjiang in 2009, the human rights defender posted information online about Uyghurs who had been detained, killed, or disappeared during and after protest activities. Chinese authorities soon alleged that Ilham and his website had played a role in instigating the conflict. The website was shut down, and Ilham was detained for several weeks. In the following years, he was placed under travel ban and house arrest for various periods.

In January 2014, following a raid on his home by over 20 police officers, Ilham was detained yet again. One month later, this detention was upgraded to formal arrest on charges of "separatism" despite the defender's extensive work attempting to heal societal rifts between Uyghur and Han citizens. On 23 September 2014, Ilham was sentenced to life imprisonment on charges of separatism by the Urumqi People's Intermediate Court after a two day trial.

Ilham is now serving this sentence in No.1 Prison in Urumqi, Xinjiang's capital city. During his detention, the defender was shackled and kept in solitary confinement, denied family visits and access to legal counsel, deprived of food, and suffered intimidation by prison officers. Ilham's wife, Guzelnur, has not been able to visit her husband for two years.

In July 2014 the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention ruled that Ilham's arrest was arbitrary. The group called for his release and that he should be compensated for the time spent in prison.

On 10 October 2016, Ilham was granted the Martin Ennals Human Rights Award. Upon his nomination as a finalist for the Martin Ennals Award his daughter, Jewher, stated: "My father Ilham Tohti has used only one weapon in his struggle for the basic rights of the Uyghurs of Xinjiang: Words; spoken, written, distributed, and posted. This is all he has ever had at his disposal, and all that he has ever needed. And this is what China found so threatening. A person like him doesn't deserve to be in prison for even a day."



“I WILL DEVOTE MYSELF TO XINJIANG’S SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT, TO INTERETHNIC UNDERSTANDING, AND TO FINDING THE WAY TO ACHIEVE HARMONIOUS ETHNIC COEXISTENCE AMIDST THE SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION TODAY.”

ATENA DAEMI, NASRIN SOTOUDEH AND NARGES MOHAMMADI – IRAN

ALL THREE WOMEN ARE SERVING LONG PRISON SENTENCES BECAUSE OF THEIR PEACEFUL HUMAN RIGHTS WORK

Atena Daemi a 31-year-old anti-death penalty activist, has been imprisoned in Iran since November 2016, after being convicted on fabricated charges that criminalised her human rights activities.

Atena was first arrested on 21 October 2014, and held for several months in Evin prison, including 51 days in solitary confinement before being released on bail in February 2015. She was charged with: propaganda against the regime, collusion against the regime on the basis of holding demonstrations in support of the children of Kobane in Syria, opposition to the execution of Reyhaneh Jabbari (hanged for murdering in self defence the man who raped her), insulting the Supreme Leader of Iran, and blasphemy in connection with listening to Iranian rapper Shahin Najafi's protest songs.

The case against her was partly based on posts she made on Facebook. She was denied access to a lawyer during her entire time in detention, even though she was repeatedly interrogated. On 14 May 2015, a Revolutionary Court in Tehran sentenced Atena to 14 years in prison after an unfair trial lasting only 15 minutes. This sentence was reduced to seven years on appeal.

Narges Mohammadi is Deputy Director of the Defenders of Human Rights Centre (DHRC). She was also elected President of the Executive Committee of the National Council of Peace in Iran, a broad coalition against war and for the promotion of human rights. She has campaigned for the abolition of the death penalty and was awarded the Per Anger Prize by the Swedish Government for her human rights work in 2011.

Narges was first arrested in 1998 for her criticism of the Iranian government and spent a year in prison. In April 2010, she was summoned to the Islamic Revolutionary Court because of her membership of the DHRC. She was briefly released on \$50,000 bail but re-arrested several days later and detained at Evin Prison. Narges's health declined while in custody, and she developed an epilepsy-like illness causing her to lose muscle control. After a month, she was released and permitted to go to hospital.

On 21 October 2014, Narges made a speech demanding an investigation into the death under torture of blogger Sattar Behesti. She was immediately summoned before Evin Prison Court. On 18 May 2016, Branch 15 of the Revolutionary Court sentenced Narges to 16 years' imprisonment on sev-

eral counts including "membership in the [now banned] Step by Step to Stop the Death Penalty" group, "taking part in assembly and collusion against national security" and "committing propaganda against the state." Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, then UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, condemned the judgement saying, "We are appalled by the sentencing of a prominent Iranian anti-death penalty campaigner, Narges Mohammadi, to 16 years' imprisonment on charges that stem from her courageous human rights work".

Nasrin Sotoudeh, a prominent human rights lawyer who has represented opposition activists including women prosecuted for removing their mandatory headscarf, was arrested in June 2018 and charged with spying, spreading propaganda and insulting Iran's supreme leader.

On 11 March 2019, Nasrin was sentenced to 33 years in prison and 148 lashes and was denied access to a copy of the verdict against her. She was only permitted to see the text of the sentence and to note the charges of which she was convicted. According to Andrew Anderson of Front Line Defenders "Nasrin Sotoudeh has bravely stood up for women's rights. For children's rights. For a safer, fairer Iran. Despite this, she is serving 38 years in prison and will be flogged 148 times".

Nasrin was previously imprisoned in Iran from 2010 to 2013, after defending protesters who had been arrested during the 2009 demonstrations against the contested re-election of ex-president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The state put her behind bars, in this case, for "acting against national security" and "propaganda against the regime". She was sentenced to six years in prison but was released after serving half the term.

Nasrin Sotoudeh also worked extensively with young prisoners sentenced to death for crimes they committed when they were under 18. Prior to her arrest, Nasrin had reported harassment on the part of the authorities. On 28 August 2010 her home and office were searched, and her assets were frozen. On 1 September 2010, she described how the authorities were creating falsified allegations of tax irregularities against human rights lawyers as a means of impeding them from carrying out their human rights work.

In a letter from prison Nasrin wrote "It goes without saying that I was not seeking in any way to "act against national security" and that, as a lawyer, my only objective has always been to defend my clients under the law".



“I AM GRATEFUL TO THOSE WHO WERE KIND TO US IN ANY WAY THEY COULD DESPITE THEIR OWN AGONY AND PAINS IN THAT DARK DUNGEON. I REPEAT THAT I AM HUMBLE BEFORE EACH AND EVERY ONE OF THOSE PRISONERS, EVEN IF THEY WERE FORCED TO SWEAR AT US OR BEAT US!”

ATENA DAEMI



“HOW MANY TIMES DO WE HAVE TO HEAR THAT INTERROGATORS THREATENED TO KEEP SUSPECTS IN DETENTION UNTIL THEY ‘CONFESSED?’ HOW MANY PRISONERS HAVE TO BE HOSPITALISED AND SUFFER INCURABLE DISEASES BEFORE SOMEONE SHOWS MERCY?”

NARGES MOHAMMADI



“IT GOES WITHOUT SAYING THAT I WAS NOT SEEKING IN ANY WAY TO “ACT AGAINST NATIONAL SECURITY” AND THAT, AS A LAWYER, MY ONLY OBJECTIVE HAS ALWAYS BEEN TO DEFEND MY CLIENTS UNDER THE LAW.”

NASRIN SOTOUDEH

ABDULHADI AL-KHAWAJA – BAHRAIN

SENTENCED TO LIFE IMPRISONMENT FOR DEMANDING DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN BAHRAIN

ABDULHADI AL-KHAWAJA WAS ARRESTED IN APRIL 2011. He was beaten, tortured and sentenced to life imprisonment in an unfair trial following the April 2011 crackdown on protesters calling for democracy and human rights in Bahrain.

Abdulhadi co-founded and was the first President of the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights, a renowned human rights institution that has served as a model for other such institutions in the Middle East. He previously worked for Amnesty International, and was named 'Activist of the Year' in 2005 by the Arab Programme for Human Rights Activists. From 2008 to 2011, Abdulhadi served as Front Line Defenders Middle East and North Africa Protection Coordinator, supporting human rights defenders. More than 120 HRDs from across the region signed an appeal for his release within days of his arrest.

In February 2011, protests and demonstrations broke out across Bahrain calling for greater political freedom. As part of the government's crackdown on these protests, opposition leaders and leading human rights defenders, including Abdulhadi, were arrested. On 9 April 2011, up to twenty armed and masked policemen broke into the Al-Khawaja family's apartment in the middle of the night. Abdulhadi was dragged down the stairs and was beaten by up to five officers. During this beating he was repeatedly kicked in the head.

As a result of this beating, Abdulhadi required four hours of surgery to repair damage to his face. He spent seven days in hospital, where the surgery left him with permanent damage and metal plates in his face to hold his jaw together. He was then moved to the Al-Qurain Prison where he was put in solitary confinement in a cell measuring 2.5 x 2 metres. Abdulhadi was subjected to physical and mental torture while in detention, including threats of sexual violence, all of which was documented by the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI).

On 8 May 2011, Abdulhadi was brought by the Military Prosecutor before the National Safety Court to face a trial presided

over by a military judge. The trial fell far short of international standards, and did not even meet Bahraini legal standards. On 22 June 2011, Abdulhadi was sentenced to life imprisonment on charges of "organising and managing a terrorist organisation," "attempts to overthrow the government by force and in liaison with a terrorist organisation working for a foreign country," and the "collection of money for a terrorist group." All of these charges were filed based on emergency legislation that the Bahraini government introduced during the wave of protests earlier in the year. No credible evidence was presented to support any of these charges, and the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry report subsequently conclusively ruled out any foreign involvement in the pro-democracy protests.

On 4 September 2012, Abdulhadi's sentence of life in prison was upheld by the High Criminal Court of Appeal and on 7 January 2013, the Court of Cassation, the highest court in Bahrain, also upheld the decision, thus exhausting his legal avenues for appeal. Commenting on the initial military trials, the spokesperson for then UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay, said that there were "serious concerns that the due process rights of the defendants had not been respected and the trials appeared to bear the marks of political persecution." In its September 2012 decision, the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention concluded that "Mr. Al-Khawaja's arrest was due to his exercise of the fundamental rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, and association." The Working Group also concluded that throughout Mr Al-Khawaja's arrest, detention, and trial, "the government violated numerous international norms to the right to a fair trial."

Abdulhadi is a citizen of both Denmark and Bahrain and the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs has repeatedly asked for him to be allowed to travel to Denmark for medical treatment. On 9 April 2012, UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon also called for Bahrain to "consider transferring Al-Khawaja to Denmark for medical treatment," but these requests were denied.



“I HAVE NO REGRETS THAT I HAD TO PAY A PRICE FOR MY WORK TO PROMOTE HUMAN RIGHTS. IT IS A SERIOUS BUSINESS TO ADDRESS ISSUES SUCH AS CORRUPTION, INEQUALITY, AND DISCRIMINATION IN ORDER TO PROMOTE THE INTERESTS OF MEMBERS OF THE RULING FAMILY, AND DOCUMENTING ARBITRARY DETENTION AND TORTURE BY THE BRUTAL NATIONAL SECURITY APPARATUS.”

MOHAMED AL-ROKEN – UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

MOHAMED AL-ROKEN IS A LEADING HUMAN RIGHTS LAWYER WHO HAS PROVIDED LEGAL ASSISTANCE TO VICTIMS OF HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSE

SINCE 2011, THE UAE AUTHORITIES HAVE SYSTEMATICALLY CRACKED DOWN ON THEIR CRITICS, including activists, judges, lawyers, academics, students and journalists by way of arbitrary detentions, enforced disappearance, torture and other ill-treatment. On 2 July 2013 the Federal Supreme Court of Abu Dhabi sentenced 56 people, including human rights defender Dr Mohamed Al-Roken to 10 years in prison.

Mohamed Al-Roken is a leading human rights lawyer who has provided legal assistance to victims of human rights abuse in the UAE, including to fellow human rights defenders. He is a former president of the UAE's Association of Jurists, holds a PhD in Constitutional Law from the UK's University of Warwick and is a member of the International Bar Association. He has written several books on human rights, counter-terrorism laws and freedom of expression. He has also represented the UAE government in several legal conferences.

In 2011 Al-Roken was one of 133 UAE citizens who signed an open letter to the government calling for more democratisation and asking that the UAE's Federal National Council (FNC), an advisory body that reviews legislation, be fully elected rather than part elected and part appointed. In April 2011, five members of this group, including human rights defender Ahmed Mansoor, were arrested and tried. Mohamed Al-Roken was their lawyer.

In July 2012, State Security personnel initiated a major round-up of human rights activists and critics of the government, including Al-Roken. He and the other members of the "UAE 94" were accused of plotting to overthrow the government.

"The reasons for his arrest are very clear. The authorities did not want Dr Al-Roken doing his work as a HRD and as a human rights lawyer. To me he embodies the central qualities of a HRD, compassion and humanity. He believes that the best way of improving his country is by making sure that the authorities respect human rights", said Noemi Crottaz, Alkarama Foundation.

The trial of the 'UAE 94' was considered a turning point in the country's history as it represented the most serious attempt to date to silence calls for democratic reform. The trial was grossly unfair and marred by a catalogue of human rights violations. The authorities denied defendants access to a lawyer while they were detained incommunicado awaiting trial. All were held in solitary confinement in secret detention facilities, some for up to a year; many told the judge they had been tortured; 'confessions' obtained after the use of torture or other ill-treatment were used in court as evidence of their guilt (some defendants said their signatures had been forged on 'confession' papers; detainees were only taken out of secret detention after their trial had begun and after the judge had ordered them to be transferred to 'official' prisons.

Some of the defendants were brought to court blindfolded, showing clear signs of malnourishment and ill-treatment. While the UAE acceded to the UN Convention Against Torture in July 2012, it still refuses to allow the UN Committee to investigate individual allegations of torture. Mohamed Al Roken has additionally been denied the right to appeal his sentence as the Federal Supreme Court acts as a state security court and its decisions are not subject to appeal.

When selected as a finalist for the 2014 Front Line Defenders Award, Mohamed Al-Roken said: "I am an optimist by nature. I imagine that the future is built on this idea of human rights and its culture. He who does not feel that he lives in a free society that makes him feel equal to others will feel that his humanity is incomplete. There is a saying that in a confrontation between the river and the rock, the river always wins. Not because of its strength, but because of its perseverance. Those working for human rights in the GCC region are not strong, but they have perseverance".

The government of the UAE has declared 2019 to be the "year of tolerance". In that context it would be appropriate to release Mohamed Al-Roken who is imprisoned simply for using his experience as a lawyer to defend the rights of others.



“I AM AN OPTIMIST BY NATURE. I IMAGINE THAT THE FUTURE IS BUILT ON THIS IDEA OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND ITS CULTURE. HE WHO DOES NOT FEEL THAT HE LIVES IN A FREE SOCIETY THAT MAKES HIM FEEL EQUAL TO OTHERS WILL FEEL THAT HIS HUMANITY IS INCOMPLETE.”

DAWIT ISAAK – ERITREA

HELD FOR 17 YEARS WITHOUT CHARGE IN A SECRET PRISON FOR PUBLISHING OPEN LETTERS CALLING FOR REFORM

DAWIT ISAAK IS A SWEDISH-ERITREAN JOURNALIST and human rights defender who has been held incommunicado, without charge or trial, in Eritrea since 2001. His whereabouts are unconfirmed, but it is believed that since 2008 he has been held in the maximum-security Eiraeiro prison, outside the capital, Asmara. In 1993 Dawit returned to his native Eritrea when the country finally gained its independence and helped launch Setit, the first independent newspaper in Eritrea. He was an outspoken critic of authoritarian rule in the country following independence.

In 2001, a group of politicians, known as the “G15,” published a series of open letters in which they criticised President Isaias Afwerki and called for democratic reforms. Dawit reported on these letters in his newspaper, as his motto was “If you have the opportunity to write, do it.” The government response was immediate. IsaaK was arrested along with ten other journalists, and eight independent newspapers were shut down. To this day, Dawit and at least five other print journalists, as well as all of the politicians, remain detained incommunicado without charge or trial. He has had no contact with relatives, no access to Swedish consular officials, and no recourse to a lawyer.

In 2003, Dawit was awarded the Reporters Without Borders Freedom of the Press Prize and in 2011 he received the Golden Pen of Freedom Award from the World Association of Newspapers. In 2017, Dawit received the 2017 UN-ESCO/Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Prize which “honours a person, organisation or institution that has made an outstanding contribution to the defence and, or promotion of press freedom anywhere in the world, and especially when this has been achieved in the face of danger.”

Meanwhile, despite increased engagement with the EU and the signing of a development aid agreement worth €200 million, which theoretically includes human rights conditions, there has been no sign of any improvement on the ground.

According to the 2015 report of the United Nations Commission of Inquiry into the Situation of Human Rights in Eritrea “the initial promises of democracy and rule of law, incarnated in the never-implemented Constitution of 1997, were progressively suppressed and then extinguished by the government.” It details how the government has created and sustained repressive systems to control, silence and isolate individuals in the country, depriving them of their fundamental freedoms.

In her June 2017 report to the Human Rights Council, the outgoing Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea (Ms Sheila Keetharuth) stated, “I regret to report that, as of now, the government has made no effort to end ongoing human rights violations, which the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea described as amounting to crimes against humanity.” She also stressed that “the time for Eritrea to take bold action for human rights protection is long overdue, and the government has not delivered on any of its promises.” In meetings with government representatives since early 2013, the Special Rapporteur repeatedly asked the Eritrean authorities to confirm whether or not the journalists and the former government members are still alive. She did not receive any response to these questions.

Dawit’s case is particularly urgent because of concerns about his health. He suffers from diabetes and prison conditions in Eritrea are grim, with poor sanitation and no adequate medical care. Seven of Dawit’s colleagues have reportedly died in captivity due to the harsh conditions and ill-treatment. It is not known if Dawit is still alive; the last ‘proof of life’ was in 2010, when a former prison guard reported that he was being kept in conditions exposed to ‘terrible heat’. The Swedish government has repeatedly called for Dawit’s release and in July 2017 the European Parliament passed a resolution calling for his release. Dawit’s wife and three children currently live in exile in Sweden.



“EACH DAY AND EVERY MINUTE FOR DAWIT IS A SEVERE VIOLATION OF HIS HUMAN RIGHTS. NO ONE DESERVES THIS KIND OF TREATMENT. EVERY DAY I AM REMINDED OF THE VITAL SIGNIFICANCE OF FREEDOM – SOMETHING THAT WE USUALLY JUST TAKE FOR GRANTED. I OFTEN WONDER WHAT DAWIT IS DOING. IS HE STILL SANE AFTER ALL THESE YEARS OF UNCERTAINTY? WHERE DOES HE GET THE STRENGTH TO PERSEVERE? AT THE MOMENT THERE ARE NO ANSWERS TO THESE QUESTIONS, BUT UNTIL WE GET THEM IT IS OUR DUTY TO SUPPORT HIM AND TO SPREAD INFORMATION ABOUT DAWIT’S TRAGIC FATE.” ESAYAS ISAAK, DAWIT’S BROTHER.

PABLO LÓPEZ ALAVÉZ – MEXICO

SENTENCED TO 30 YEARS IN PRISON BECAUSE OF HIS WORK DEFENDING THE ENVIRONMENTAL RIGHTS OF THE ZAPOTECO INDIGENOUS PEOPLE

PABLO LÓPEZ ALAVÉZ IS A MEXICAN ENVIRONMENTAL RIGHTS DEFENDER AND ZAPOTECO INDIGENOUS LEADER who has been arbitrarily imprisoned for almost nine years in the state of Oaxaca. He was sentenced to 30 years imprisonment after an unfair trial.

Over the past twenty years, Pablo López Alavéz has worked to ensure the rights to a safe environment and access to water by the community of San Isidro Aloapam. As a consequence of his work against human rights violations deriving from illegal logging in the region, Pablo López Alavéz has been criminalised and subjected to arbitrary detention since 2010. The defender exercised a number of community leadership roles, reported on the illegal logging of trees and raised awareness on environmental protection and sustainability. As a consequence, he has faced a number of criminalisation procedures since 2000.

In August 2010, Pablo López Alavéz was arbitrarily and violently detained by a group of more than 15 unidentified men wearing hoods, who also assaulted a number of his relatives that accompanied him. He was taken to a prison in Etlá, Oaxaca, on spurious charges of murder. The investigation and trial of Pablo López Alavéz were riddled with inconsistencies, and, despite the absence of any credible evidence against him, the human rights defender was sentenced to 30 years in prison.

The case of Pablo López Alavéz represents the endemic use of criminalisation as a reprisal against indigenous leaders who work for the defence of land and territory, and, in particular, those who struggle to protect environmental resources from illegal exploitation. The prosecution of Pablo López Alavéz fits a pattern of criminalisation of indigenous leaders in Oaxaca in which prosecutions are often marked by the use of incommunicado detention, torture and other serious violations of human rights.

The Human Rights Ombudsman of the State of Oaxaca (*Fiscalía General del Estado de Oaxaca*), who had expressed concern at the lack of due process at the time of the trial, has called on the government to address issues highlighted in the 23/2017 Opinion of the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, which recognised as arbitrary the detention of Pablo López Alavéz, due to the Mexican State's failure to provide him a fair trial. The Working Group recommended the release of Pablo López Alavéz, as well as his full compensation and reparation according to international standards.

The arbitrary detention and criminalisation of Pablo López Alavéz also resulted in human rights violations of his family members. Yolanda Pérez Cruz, his wife and also a human rights defender, had her life threatened by anonymous messages on a number of occasions, which forced her to leave her house. In January 2015, the Ombudsman's Office of the People of Oaxaca (*Defensoría de los Derechos Humanos del Pueblo de Oaxaca*) issued precautionary measures on her behalf, which have not been implemented.

Despite the international community's concern over the years following the arbitrary detention of Pablo López Alavéz, Mexican authorities have repeatedly failed to ensure and implement the defender's rights to freedom, justice and reparations, as well as those of his family members. The case of Pablo López Alavéz evidences the discriminatory treatment of indigenous defenders in Mexico, especially in the state of Oaxaca, who are often neglected and criminalised by authorities. In recent years, cases of gross human rights violations such as killings, disappearances and torture have increased in the region of Oaxaca, where an endemic situation of impunity remains unaddressed by local and national authorities. Since 2010, the state of Oaxaca has been one of the three most dangerous places for human rights defenders in Mexico.

Despite positive achievements such as the release of human rights defenders Damián Gallardo and Enrique Guerrero, as well as the Tlanixco 6, Mexican authorities still insist on offering Pablo López Alavéz an Amnesty proposal instead of declaring his immediate release. This shows that the Mexican government insists on refusing to acknowledge the series of human rights violations perpetrated against Pablo López Alavéz and his family members, and, as a result, on denying them integral justice and recognition for the State's wrongdoings.

Front Line Defenders urges Mexican authorities to immediately and unconditionally release Pablo López Alavéz, and to ensure his and his family members' protection and integral reparation for the human rights violations they suffered.



THE CASE OF PABLO LÓPEZ ALAVÉZ IS ILLUSTRATIVE OF THE ENDEMIC USE OF CRIMINALISATION AS A REPRISAL AGAINST INDIGENOUS LEADERS WHO WORK FOR THE DEFENCE OF LAND AND TERRITORY, AND, IN PARTICULAR, AGAINST THOSE WHO STRUGGLE TO PROTECT ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES FROM ILLEGAL EXPLOITATION.

GERMAIN RUKUKI – BURUNDI

SENTENCED TO 32 YEARS IN PRISON FOR CAMPAIGNING FOR AN END TO TORTURE AND THE DEATH PENALTY

GERMAIN RUKUKI IS A HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDER working for the Association des juristes catholiques du Burundi – AJCB, (Association of Catholic Jurists of Burundi). He previously worked for Action des chrétiens pour l’abolition de la torture – ACAT-Burundi, (Action by Christians for the Abolition of Torture) which works for the abolition of torture and the death penalty. ACAT-Burundi was suspended by the government in November 2015, as part of its clampdown on civil society organisations.

On 13 July 2017, Germain was arrested without a warrant and held by the Service National de Renseignement – SNR, (National Intelligence Service), before being transferred to Ngozi Prison on 26 July 2017, where he has been held ever since. Germain was charged with “having participated in the killing of soldiers, police and civilians,” “carrying out an attack with the goal of changing the constitutional system,” “inciting citizens to arm themselves against the authority of the state,” “the destruction of public and private buildings,” “resistance to a ministerial order,” as well as having directly participated in “the erection of barricades, trenches or other structures designed to impede or halt the exercise of law enforcement”. He was also charged with having received funds from foreign organisations “which are likely to undermine the loyalty that citizens owe to the state and institutions of Burundi.”

During his trial, Germain became a symbol of the repression and judicial harassment faced by Burundian HRDs since the beginning of the crisis in April 2015. All of the judicial proceedings against him were marred by numerous irregularities. Following his initial arrest, Germain was illegally detained within the national intelligence premises (SNR) before being transferred to Ngozi prison and being brought to court. He faced systematic violations of his right to a fair trial including:

being tried behind closed doors within Ngozi prison; charges being presented at the last minute without corroborating evidence; and lawyers being prevented from accessing parts of the file. Neither Germain nor his lawyers were present while the sentence was read out. No concrete or convincing proof of his guilt was ever presented and foreign diplomats were prevented from observing the trial.

On 26 April, 2018, the Ntahangwa High Court sentenced Germain to 32 years in prison on charges of “rebellion,” “breach of state security,” “participation in an insurrectional movement” and “attack on the Head of State.”

The prosecution of Germain is taking place in the context of daily human rights violations committed by the Burundian authorities who are systematically targeting all human rights defenders in the country through the adoption of legislation aimed at controlling civil society organisations, enforced disappearances, arrests and illegal detention of HRDs, and the imposition of heavy sentences. In its report published on 5 September 2018, the United Nations Commission of Inquiry on Burundi describes “summary executions, arbitrary arrests and detentions, acts of torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, sexual violence and forced disappearances”. The Commission also stated that “The fate of human rights defenders is a cause of serious concern, as indicated by the recent sentencing of Germain to 32 years in prison, following an unfair trial.”

On 26 November 2018, Germain appeared in court in Ngozi, before the Bujumbura Court of Appeal. No decision was made before the hearing was adjourned. Germain continues to be held in prison.



DURING HIS TRIAL GERMAIN RUKUKI BECAME A SYMBOL OF THE REPRESSION AND JUDICIAL HARASSMENT TARGETING BURUNDIAN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS SINCE THE BEGINNING OF THE CRISIS IN APRIL 2015.

TRAN THI NGA – VIETNAM

SENTENCED TO NINE YEARS IN PRISON PLUS FIVE YEARS HOUSE ARREST FOR DEFENDING THE RIGHTS OF MIGRANT WORKERS AND WOMEN’S RIGHTS

TRAN THI NGA IS A HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDER and advocate for migrant workers, women’s rights, and the rights of the victims of the 2016 Formosa environmental disaster. She was arrested on 21 January 2017 and charged under Article 88 of the Vietnamese Penal Code with “using the Internet to spread propaganda videos and writings that are against the government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.” On 25 July 2017, the People’s Court in Ha Nam, south of Hanoi, sentenced Nga to nine years’ imprisonment, followed by an additional five years’ house arrest.

Her trial was closed to independent journalists and foreign diplomats. The defender’s husband and young children were not allowed to attend the trial, nor were activists who came to the province to support her. A large number of police officers and plainclothes agents were deployed around the court premises, and some supporters reported being physically accosted as they tried to approach the building.

Nga is from Ha Nam province in northern Vietnam and worked as a domestic labourer while a migrant in Taiwan. She suffered a traffic accident in 2005 and while convalescing, she became aware of the extent to which migrant workers were being exploited and denied their basic human rights. Following her return to Vietnam, she became an advocate for the rights of migrant labourers. She is a member of Vietnamese Women For Human Rights, a group that includes overseas Vietnamese wishing to lend support, training, and encouragement to those who stand up to defend human rights in Vietnam. Nga’s human rights work

has included providing assistance to victims of land appropriation by local authorities and supporting demonstrations calling for democratic reform.

Nga has been a frequent target of attack. On one occasion she suffered a broken leg when she was beaten by government supporters. On another occasion she was physically dragged off a bus by the police.

Nga was initially being held in Ha Nam province and her partner was later informed that she would be transferred to Dak Trung prison. However, when he travelled to Dak Trung prison he found out that Nga had been transferred a month previously to Gia Long province, which is over 1,000 km (620 miles) from Ha Nam province. He was not permitted to visit her there. Nga reported to her family that during her imprisonment in Gia Trung, she has been “terrorised, beaten, and threatened with death” by a fellow inmate. Prison officials have taken no action to protect Nga from these threats and it seems that Nga is being deliberately targeted to punish her for her activism. Gia Trung officials have repeatedly prevented Nga from seeing her family during their visits to the prison. The defender’s husband, children, and brother have been turned away on multiple occasions over the past three months, and the family has received no communication from her during that time.

Nga has two children, four and seven years old. Her home has been vandalised and her children have been attacked with food waste.



“I WAS ATTACKED BY PLAINCLOTHES POLICE OFFICERS. THEY USED METAL STICKS TO ATTACK ME WHEN I WAS HOLDING MY CHILD IN MY ARMS. THEY BROKE MY LEG AND CAUSED MANY WOUNDS ALL OVER MY BODY. I REPORTED THE INCIDENT TO THE POLICE DEPARTMENT AND THE SUPREME PEOPLE’S PROCURATOR. THEY TOLD ME: ‘BECAUSE YOU ADVOCATED FOR HUMAN RIGHTS THE POLICE HAVE RIGHTFULLY BEATEN YOU UP: IT IS UP TO THE STATE AND THE PARTY TO ADDRESS HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUES.’”