

Action Plan for Human Rights Defenders

Introduction

Enhancing security and prosperity and promoting freedom are the three interlocking pillars of Dutch foreign policy. The Dutch human rights strategy has five priorities: freedom of expression (including internet freedom and freedom of religion and belief), equal rights for all, support for human rights defenders, corporate social responsibility and a focus on tackling the most serious violators. The Netherlands supports human rights defenders.¹ Human rights defenders and their organisations work to advance fundamental freedoms in their societies, and in doing so they support further democratisation from the inside out. In many cases they are able to work with government authorities, but in a significant number of countries, human rights defenders are threatened on account of their work by both the authorities and non-state actors like armed groups, private companies (including security firms) and individuals. Often such attacks go uninvestigated and offenders are never prosecuted. Support for human rights defenders remains one of the top priorities of Dutch human rights policy.

The Netherlands works to ensure that human rights defenders are physically safe and free from intimidation, so that they can carry on protecting and promoting human rights and fundamental freedoms in their own countries and regions. We pay particular attention to two vulnerable groups of human rights defenders: women and LGBTs.²

Dutch efforts in aid of human rights defenders are largely undertaken through multilateral forums, particularly the EU. One of the aims of the Treaty of Lisbon was to ensure a more unified and dynamic EU policy. Whenever necessary, action is also taken bilaterally or at national level, making use of the various instruments that the Netherlands has at its disposal.

Cooperation within the European Union

1. The Netherlands plays an active role in the task force on human rights defenders, a subdivision of the EU's Working Party on Human Rights (COHOM). Our active participation contributes to the implementation of the EU Guidelines on Human

¹ 'Human rights defenders are those individuals, groups and organs of society that promote and protect universally recognised human rights and fundamental freedoms. Human rights defenders seek the promotion and protection of civil and political rights as well as the promotion, protection and realisation of economic, social and cultural rights. Human rights defenders also promote and protect the rights of members of groups such as indigenous communities. The definition does not include those individuals or groups who commit or propagate violence.' (from the EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders)

² Lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgenders

Rights Defenders and the inclusion of human rights defenders in implementing country strategies, via the EU human rights dialogues and in broader EU human rights policy.

2. The Netherlands presses to maintain and, if possible, expand the number of EU coordinators for human rights defenders at EU delegations and the annual meetings between the EU, member states and human rights defenders in the countries concerned. The Netherlands frequently sponsors and supports declarations on human rights by the High Representative. This increases the visibility of the work of human rights defenders.
3. The Netherlands supports the European Shelter City Initiative, which was formulated during the Czech Presidency in 2009, to provide coordinated support to human rights defenders in emergencies by sheltering them in one of a network of cities or regions. The Netherlands is making an active contribution to the European Commission's preliminary research which explores the options for fleshing out the initiative. The Dutch government is in regular contact with municipalities and NGOs and actively contributes to the exchange of ideas and specific initiatives related to Shelter Cities. This increases the number of available options when a human rights defender in need of help actually arrives in the Netherlands.
4. The Netherlands strives to maintain the independence of the UN's special procedures, including the Special Rapporteur (SR) on the situation of human rights defenders. By way of reports to the Human Rights Council and the General Assembly, the SR provides valuable information on the situation of human rights defenders worldwide, which can be used to formulate Dutch policy.
5. The SR indicates that human rights defenders who work with the UN (including the SRs themselves) are experiencing problems. The Netherlands continues to bring this to the attention of the UN and its member states, for example during sessions of the Human Rights Council. Embassies provide support to human rights defenders wherever possible (ideally through the EU), to protect them from intimidation and bolster their security.
6. In negotiations on UN resolutions relating to human rights defenders, the Netherlands endeavours to ensure that their rights are paramount and that the final

text contains as few provisions as possible that might interfere with their work. In this way they can continue to make important contributions to promoting human rights.

OSCE

7. The Netherlands encourages dialogue within the 'human dimension' of the OSCE between human rights defenders from the OSCE region and their governments, and facilitates the work of human rights defenders who are interested in taking part in OSCE meetings and/or in organising a forum.

Bilateral

8. Human Rights Fund (MRF): up to the end of 2013, the Netherlands is using its MRF to support six organisations that work to support human rights defenders regionally or globally.³ The Fund also finances projects that help protect human rights defenders on the internet.⁴ After 2013 projects will continue to be financed from the MRF in support of human rights defenders, provided suitable proposals are submitted in accordance with existing tendering procedures.
9. Visits: Members of the Dutch government and senior civil servants continue to meet here with human rights defenders based in the Netherlands and visiting from abroad. When members of government and senior official delegations travel abroad, individual cases are raised whenever suitable, and meetings are held with human rights defenders, so as to focus additional attention on their work.
10. In addition, the Dutch Human Rights Ambassador meets and maintains contact with NGOs and individual human rights defenders, both in the Netherlands and when abroad. This provides information for the formulation of Dutch policy and heightens

³ (1) Frontline Defenders is dedicated to ensuring the safety and digital security of human rights defenders and offering protection and temporary accommodation in Ireland or in the region where the individual works. (2) The International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) is committed to ensuring that human rights defenders can work in safety and to boost their national capacity and their influence on international organisations. (3) The International Service for Human Rights (ISH) offers courses to human rights defenders to increase their effectiveness within the UN and regional organisations. (4) The Martin Ennals Award is sponsored by a large number of well-known human rights NGOs (e.g. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch) and given each year to a worthy human rights defender. (5) The East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project (EHAHRD) aims to expand the capacity of human rights defenders in that region and reduce their vulnerability to persecution. Over the next several years the Netherlands will contribute to the Lifeline Fund, which was established by the US to help NGOs to continue their work in crises.

⁴ One such project, which is being financed by Hivos, is concerned with professionalising bloggers, activists and human rights defenders on the internet. A project by Free Press Unlimited has led to the development of a 'wireless reporting app' which offers courses on safe observation practices, recording techniques and methods for uploading data.

the visibility of human rights defenders, thereby giving them some protection if they need it. The Human Rights Ambassador travels to a wide variety of the regions and countries where a visit is deemed to be warranted due to the seriousness of human rights violations, and the situation of human rights defenders is a major factor in deciding on his travel schedule. The Broad Consultation on Human Rights (BMO), which was set up in 1979, is a collaborative venture of NGOs in the Netherlands. Many of these organisations also operate abroad and stay in frequent contact with human rights defenders and their organisations. The BMO meets with the Minister of Foreign Affairs once a year and with foreign ministry officials around four times a year.

11. Statements and demarches: where appropriate, alongside EU declarations, the Netherlands makes additional demarches at country level and issues statements on the general situation of human rights defenders in a particular country, or the situation of individual human rights defenders, with a view to drawing attention to their work and offering them support.

12. Embassies: thanks to their direct contact with human rights defenders and NGOs in the field, embassies are a key player in implementing policy on human rights defenders. In some countries embassies can play a pioneering role – wherever possible in connection with the EU⁵ – and visibly back human rights defenders at public gatherings and in the media. Every year embassies are requested to organise an activity on or around Human Rights Day (10 December) that spotlights the work of human rights defenders and human rights in general. Embassies are charged with monitoring local authorities' adherence to the EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders, actively participate in local, EU-sponsored meetings with NGOs and human rights defenders, raising individual situations and attending trials of human rights defenders. In Europe Dutch embassies do pioneering work in protecting the rights of LGBTs. Wherever necessary they support the organisation of gay pride events being organised in European countries. The Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights recently published a report on LGBTs, with Dutch support.

⁵ In Mexico there is a region-based division of responsibilities between the EU Delegation and the missions of individual EU member states. The responsible mission is tasked with monitoring certain cases, raising them within the EU human rights consultation (involving the Union and the missions of member states) and discussing them with the relevant authorities. If necessary, an initiative is taken to issue a local EU declaration or urge Brussels to make a declaration of its own.

13. Since 2008 the Human Rights Defenders Tulip has been awarded to a human rights defender who has shown exceptional moral courage by standing up for human rights in his/her country. The Tulip's winner is a symbol of the important work of human rights defenders around the world. The ways this prize is awarded and used are being reviewed.

14. Temporary visas: In accordance with the letter of 2 May 2011 to the House of Representatives the Ministry of Foreign Affairs will facilitate the expedited issue of Schengen short-stay visas for human rights defenders in distress who are seeking a temporary stay in the Netherlands. The initiative for applying to the Dutch embassy for a visa lies with the human rights defender him- or herself. Civil society groups and, in some cases, municipalities and other partners take responsibility for hosting and financially supporting the individual after arrival in the Netherlands.