

PROVIDING SECURITY FOR HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS AT RISK

STORIES AND FINDINGS FROM
CIVIL RIGHTS DEFENDERS'
EMERGENCY FUND 2023



CIVIL RIGHTS DEFENDERS IS A POLITICALLY AND RELIGIOUSLY INDEPENDENT HUMAN RIGHTS ORGANISATION. FOR MORE THAN 40 YEARS, WE HAVE SUPPORTED AND WORKED WITH HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS IN SOME OF THE WORLD'S MOST REPRESSIVE COUNTRIES. WE OPERATE ON FOUR CONTINENTS, WITH OUR HEADQUARTERS IN STOCKHOLM. THROUGH ADVOCACY, LITIGATION, AND CAMPAIGNS, WE DEFEND PEOPLE'S CIVIL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS.

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THE EMERGENCY FUND

RAPID SUPPORT TO HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS AT RISK

Defending human rights is a dangerous job in many parts of the world. When a threatening situation towards a human rights defender arises, Civil Rights Defenders' Emergency Fund provides rapid assistance to improve their security as quickly as possible. Receiving immediate support when threatened is crucial for human rights defenders' ability to continue their work.

Since 2012, The Emergency Fund provides short-term support to human rights defenders facing various levels of danger. The goal is to make human rights defenders feel safe enough to continue their work. Our global mandate allows us to respond to the diverse challenges faced by civil society organisations and human rights defenders across various regions and to the impact of global geopolitical shifts. The ability to assess commonalities in the threats posed by violence, repressions, and human rights violations, while at the same time tailor strategies to meet the specific needs of different regions is crucial in addressing the risks human rights defenders face. At the core of our approach, we aim to build resilient human rights defenders, supporting their psychological wellbeing, improving their security, and reigniting the spirit of activism.

HOW WE SUPPORT

If a human rights defender or organisation is threatened due to their work, we can provide different types of tailored support. We can build up an organisation's capacity through trainings and consultations and provide both organisations and individuals security measures and improvements. We can provide psychological support to those who have been attacked and legal aid to help human rights defenders facing arrest or other legal harassment. If necessary, we can help a human rights defender temporarily relocate. We can even provide humanitarian support to the families of imprisoned human rights defenders. Frequently, we provide multiple types of support through a combined intervention.

WHO WE SUPPORT

Emergency Fund resources go to any human rights defender who are at risk because of the work they do. A human rights defender can apply individually, or as a human rights organisation. We support human rights defenders who work with all types of human rights issues, from LGBTI+ rights to freedom of expression. We also acknowledge the differentiated threats and violence that human rights defenders face based on their gender and intersection of different aspects of their identities, and we work to make the funds accessible and inclusive for the most vulnerable groups.

We support those who are able to stay in their countries by increasing their security capabilities and giving them the tools and psychological support to continue their work. For those who must leave, we provide funds to relocate. Once relocated, we provide the support they need to both continue their human rights work and protect themselves from further acts of aggression, such as transnational repression.



WE KNOW THAT WHEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS FEEL SAFE, THE FIGHT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS CONTINUES.

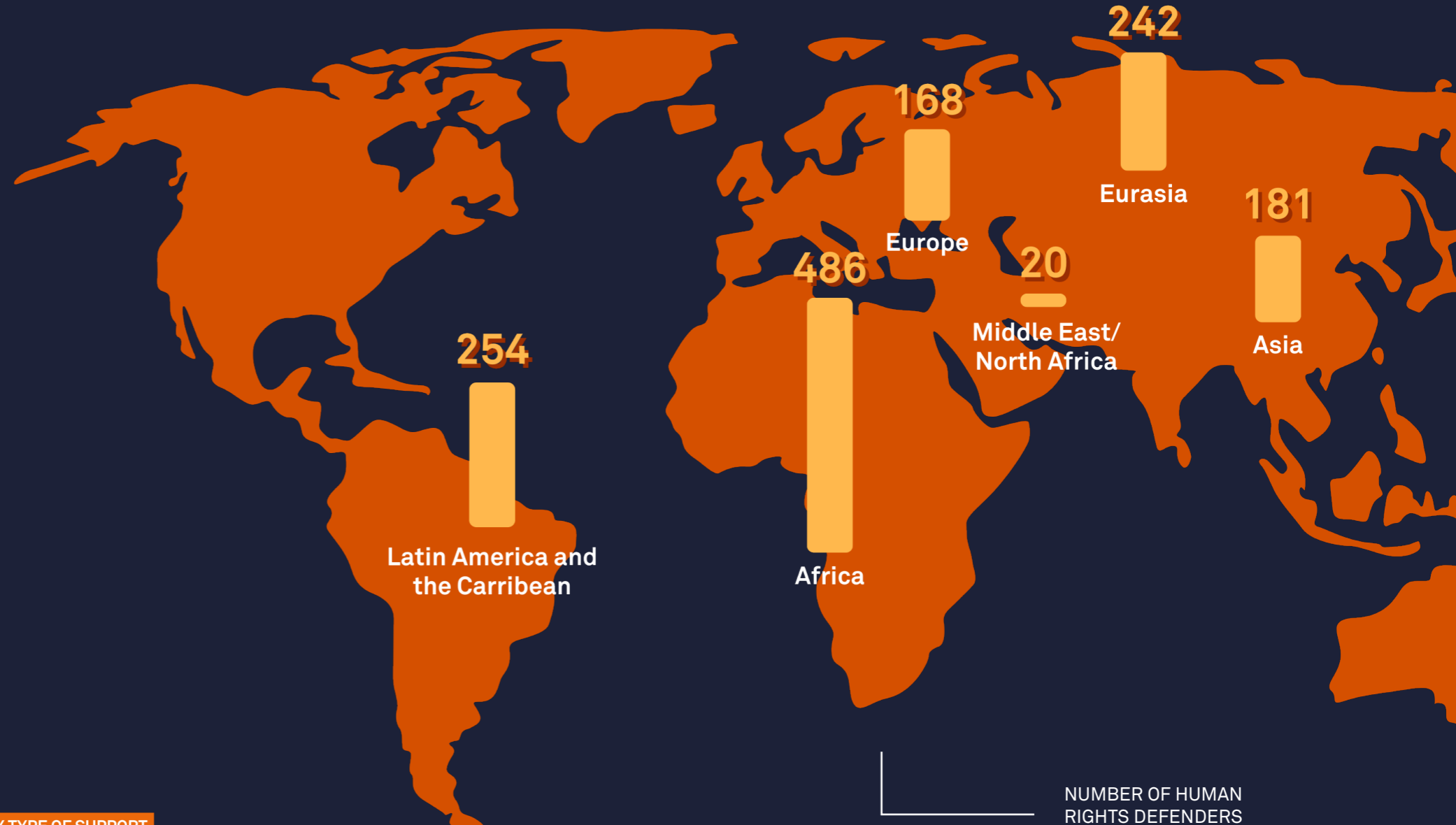
— Zinaida Muradova, Head of Rapid Response at Civil Rights Defenders



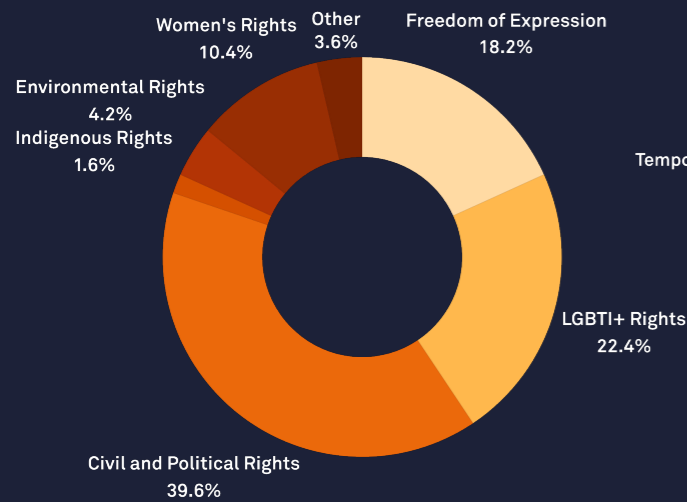
EMERGENCY SUPPORT IN 2023

During 2023, the Emergency Fund provided support to 1 351 human rights defenders and members of their families in 39 countries in five different regions, through a total of 192 grants. Out of the recipients 52 percent were women, 36 percent men and 12 percent non-conforming.

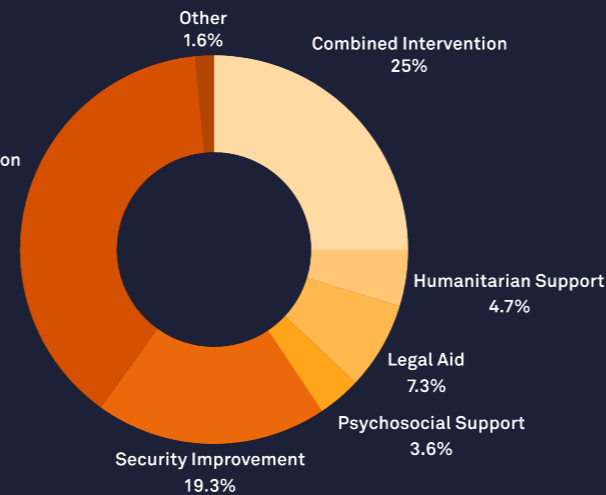
Over the past year, countries all over the world have become more repressive. According to the latest Democracy Report by V-Dem Institute*, 71% of the world's population live in autocracies. We have seen an ongoing trend of increased repression towards human rights defenders, and of more human rights defenders being forced into exile. The needs of exiled communities continue to grow and are becoming increasingly complex. Human rights defenders and civil society organisations in exile face urgent need of assistance at early stages of relocation, but also support to establish their work long-term. At the same time, countries are increasingly using transnational repression to attack human rights defenders beyond their borders including, but not limited to, illegal deportations, digital threats, and family intimidation.



DISTRIBUTION BY TYPE OF ACTIVISM



DISTRIBUTION BY TYPE OF SUPPORT



1,351

TOTAL NUMBER OF DEFENDERS SUPPORTED IN 2023

7,110

TOTAL NUMBER OF DEFENDERS SUPPORTED SINCE 2012

90%

90 PERCENT COULD CONTINUE THEIR WORK AFTER RECEIVING SUPPORT

*<https://www.v-dem.net/publications/democracy-reports/>

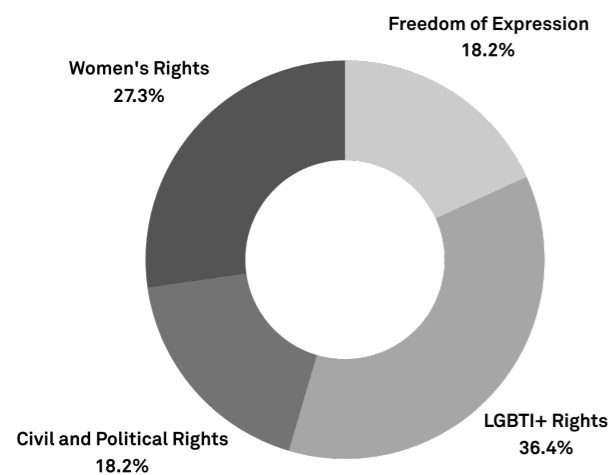
EUROPE AND MENA

During 2023, the fund provided support to 188 human rights defenders and members of their families in six different countries in Europe and the Middle East/North Africa, through a total of 11 grants. 60 percent of the recipients were women, 30 percent men, and 10 percent non-conforming.

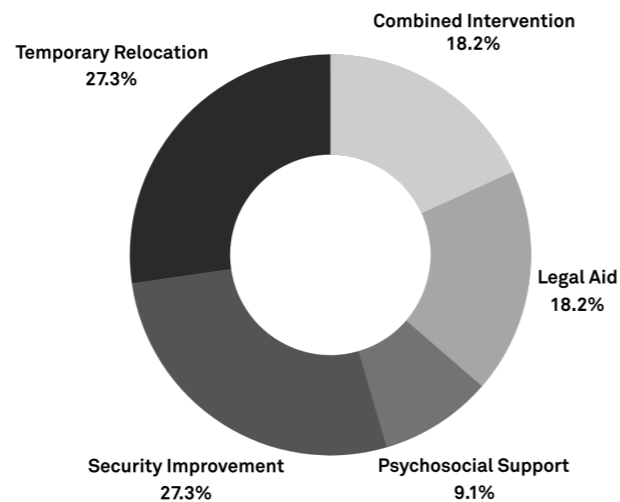
- LGBTI+ rights and security.** In Europe, particularly in the Western Balkans, Emergency Fund support most often went to LGBTI+ organisations. Far right supporters regularly attack Pride events, peaceful protests and LGBTI+ organisations, and investigations by public authorities rarely bring perpetrators to justice. In response, Emergency Fund grants have been provided for legal support, enhancing physical security, and supporting the psychosocial wellbeing of those affected by these violent attacks.
- Relocation of LGBTI+ individuals.** The Emergency Fund has helped a significant number of LGBTI+ individuals temporarily relocate both within and outside their countries, due to the repression and violent attacks to the community. This sensitive issue has been handled with utmost care, prioritising the safety and wellbeing of the individuals involved.
- Violation of freedom of expression.** Freedom of expression is increasingly under attack in Europe and the Middle East/North Africa. When journalists and authors who have received death threats from far-right extremists reach out to the Emergency Fund, we offer tailored support to the specific context of the countries they are in, and the security needs of the applicants. This includes a wide range of measures from temporary relocation to providing security tools for their daily work.



DISTRIBUTION BY TYPE OF ACTIVISM



DISTRIBUTION BY TYPE OF SUPPORT



! Disclaimer: For Europe and the Middle East/North Africa, the number of cases received per region individually are comparably low in relation to the other regions we report on. Thus, for the purpose of this report, we decided to merge them.

Psychosocial support to LGBTI+ activists after an attack

BiH Pride March Organising Committee, an initiative from Bosnia and Herzegovina, was established five years ago in order to organise Pride March events in Sarajevo. The Committee has so far organised four pride marches and continues to prepare for more.

The Committee also organises educational and social events for LGBTI+ persons in different cities, including Sarajevo, Banja Luka, Mostar, and Tuzla. They also advocate to change legislation, policies, and institutional practices.

In March 2023, the Committee hosted an informal event with its fifteen members in a private setting. The gathering was right after a public event which was cancelled due to security reasons. After being alerted by the authorities that their security was compromised, the group was leaving the building when 34 civilians violently attacked them, chanting hateful statements. Some activists were injured, and almost all of them were left traumatised.

After the attacks, the Emergency Fund immediately provided the Committee with a grant to support their psychosocial wellbeing and increase the emotional resilience of the activists who were attacked, giving their staff the tools they need to continue their work.

THE EMERGENCY FUND SUPPORT WAS CRUCIAL FOR US AFTER THE ATTACK. IT HELPED US INCREASE THE PSYCHOLOGICAL AND EMOTIONAL CAPACITIES WE NEED TO CONTINUE OUR WORK.

— Member of the BiH Pride March Organising Committee, Bosnia and Herzegovina

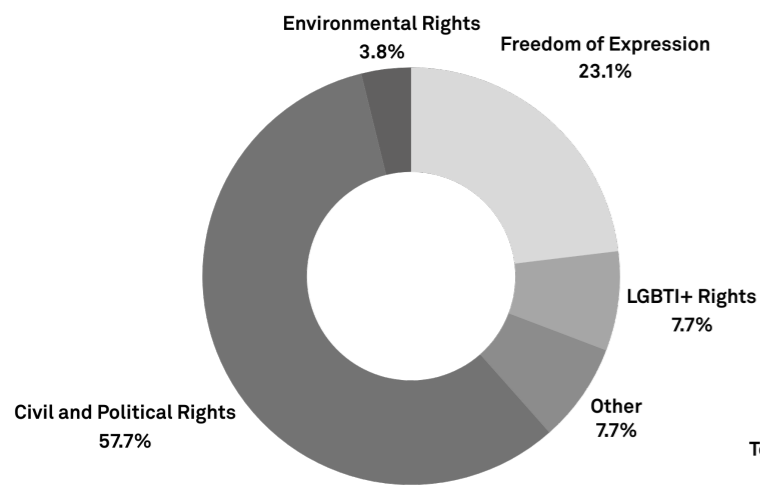
ASIA

During 2023, the fund provided support to 181 human rights defenders and members of their families in seven different countries in Asia, through a total of 26 grants. 52 percent of the recipients were women, 46 percent men, and two percent non-conforming.

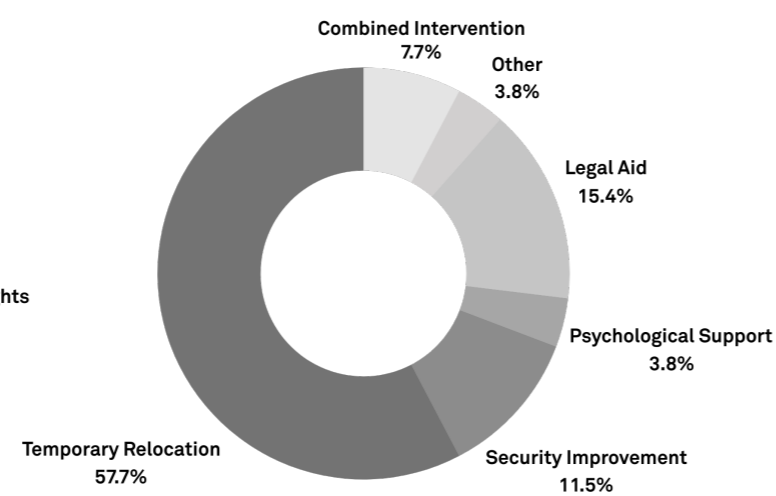
- **Support in Burma after the coup.** Since the 2021 military coup in Burma and during the ongoing struggle against the military junta, a steep rise in human rights violations has forced many human rights defenders to seek support to relocate to neighbouring countries. Emergency Fund grants have assisted human rights defenders in Burma with relocation, security measures, communication, and well-being.
- **Rise in transnational repression.** Authoritarian governments in South and Southeast Asia are increasingly targeting human rights defenders beyond their own borders. In order to combat this worrying trend, the Emergency Fund has provided support for legal aid, digital and physical security enhancements, and psychosocial support.
- **Increased assistance for exiled human rights defenders.** The developments during last year have signalled a change in the type of support required for human rights defenders in exile, whose temporary relocations have become more permanent than expected. This has necessitated a shift in thinking about their needs, which now include both security concerns and psychosocial and community-building requirements.



DISTRIBUTION BY TYPE OF ACTIVISM



DISTRIBUTION BY TYPE OF SUPPORT



WITH SUPPORT FROM CIVIL RIGHTS DEFENDERS, OUR BROADCASTING OF HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUES IN BURMA CONTINUES.

— Journalist at Than Lwin Khet News, Burma

Legal aid to Burmese human rights defenders in exile

Than Lwin Khet News (TLK) is a multimedia news agency established in 2016 to put a spotlight on human right issues, human rights defenders, and marginalised groups during the ongoing Myanmar peace process.

Since the military coup, TLK has reported on human rights issues in various formats like talk shows, radio features, interviews and written text. TLK not only broadcasts the voices of the victims of human rights violations and highlights the difficulties and challenges faced by human rights defenders, but also creates advocacy programs for people to know about their rights.

To continue their reporting and stay safe, TLK employees were forced to flee to the Burma-Thailand border area. Upon fleeing, TLK's journalists struggled to obtain the paperwork needed to live and work legally in the border area. An editor and a journalist of TLK News were taken to the police station due to their lack of legal status in the country. TLK journalists were facing daily physical and psychological threats, and risked being arrested by the police and immigration officers. In the weeks leading up to their request to the Emergency Fund, the situation had worsened due to the crackdown of authorities on undocumented people living along the border.

The Emergency Fund supported TLK in obtaining the legal aid needed to apply for work permits and gain a secure living status in Thailand. This has allowed TLK team to continue the production and broadcasting about human rights issues, as well as training of human rights defenders and staff on topics such as safety, security and technical skills needed for news reporting.

AFRICA

During 2023, the Emergency Fund provided support to 486 human rights defenders and members of their families in 12 different countries in Africa, through a total of 52 grants. 43 percent of the recipients were women, 30 percent men, and 27 percent non-conforming.

- Sudanese human rights defenders in a conflict zone.** The outbreak of the civil war in Sudan in April 2023 has deteriorated the working conditions for human rights defenders, whose efforts to document human rights violations and support victims are needed now more than ever. They face serious risks, including kidnapping, arbitrary detention, and torture. Women human rights defenders face additional dangers like sexual violence, harassment, and discrimination. Our Emergency Fund has been crucial in providing immediate support to Sudanese human rights defenders facing threats.
- Increasing threats to the LGBTI+ community.** In 2023, there was a notable increase in emergency grant requests coming from the LGBTI+ community in Africa, who are facing increasing challenges due to discriminatory legislation and societal stigma. LGBTI+ human rights defenders face harassment, blackmail, arrests, kidnapping, torture, assault, evictions and job loss. The Emergency Fund has, for example, provided temporary relocation, security measures, transportation, medical aid, psychosocial support, and rest and respite to enhance overall security for LGBTI+ activists and organisations.
- Attacks on journalists and freedom of speech in Ethiopia.** The war that started in Tigray in November 2020 and spilled over to the neighbouring regions of Amhara and Afar, has had severe consequences for civilians and human rights defenders in Ethiopia. Among the most at-risk groups are journalists, who have been affected by a media blackout and the destruction of communications infrastructure. The warring parties have targeted journalists to prevent them from reporting on human rights violations as a deliberate attempt to control the war narrative. Several journalists have had to abandon their homes, while others have faced threats, coercion, and unlawful arrests, leading to a surge in requests for emergency grants.



Support to woman human rights defenders during Sudan's civil war

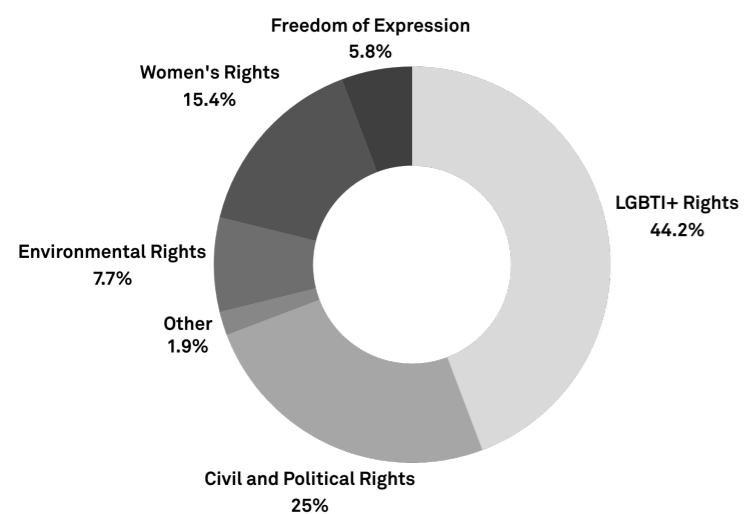
Tayseer Elbedawi helped found and was a board member of the Human Rights and Development Organisation (HUDO), a Sudanese NGO dedicated to the promotion and protection of human rights, peace building and development. She actively took part in the organisations' work on human rights monitoring, documenting and reporting on human rights violations aimed at ensuring that human rights standards are met in Sudan.

After the civil war between Sudanese Army Forces (SAF) and Rapid Support Forces (RSF) erupted in April 2023, Tayseer was forced to flee from Sudan together with her two children, after RSF vehicles and troops made presence in her neighbourhood, exposing her work, her and her family to more danger. Through the support of the Emergency Fund and after a perilous journey, they managed to get safely to Uganda at the end of last year. Finding a source of income has been a challenge for Tayseer, but she stayed committed and has taken different trainings to improve her skills and increase her chances of securing a job. Aided by our support to stabilise her livelihood and secure education to her children, Tayseer has recently taken a position in an organisation that works to empower refugee women and girls.

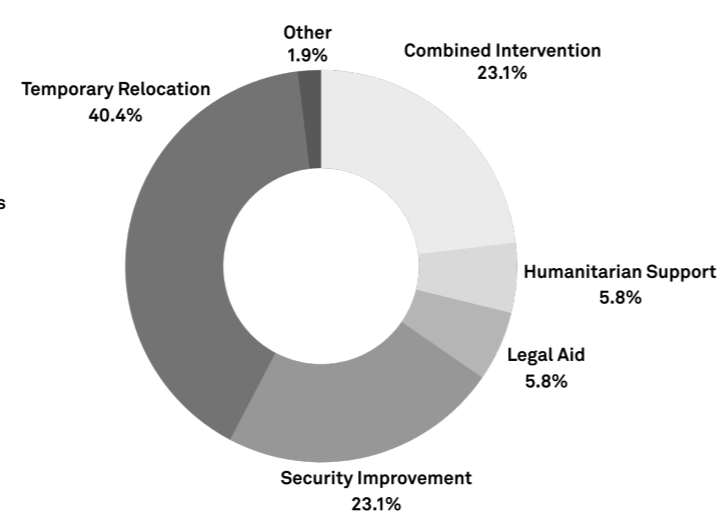
THANKS TO CIVIL RIGHTS DEFENDERS SUPPORT I AM SAFE HERE IN UGANDA. I AM ABLE TO MOVE FREELY, AND CAN CONTINUE TO TRAIN AND SUPPORT WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS.

— Tayseer Elbedawi, Sudanese human rights defender

DISTRIBUTION BY TYPE OF ACTIVISM



DISTRIBUTION BY TYPE OF SUPPORT



LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARRIBEAN

During 2023, the fund provided support to 254 human rights defenders and members of their families in 5 different countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, through a total of 47 grants. 62 percent of the recipients were women, 38 percent men.

- Democratic backsliding.** Latin America is experiencing a rise in regressive policies that undermine the rule of law, leading to political fragmentation and authoritarian populism. This trend includes restrictions on freedom of expression and association, crackdowns on NGOs, and restrictive laws that hinder the defence of human rights. Particularly in Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua, human rights defenders face systematic oppression, persecution, and stigmatisation. In response, the Emergency Fund has provided crucial support, including legal aid, temporary relocation, and digital and physical security measures to those facing threats, including those forced into exile, due to their fight for democracy and human rights.
- Rising violence and criminalisation.** In 2023, violence against human rights defenders in Latin America intensified, with the region having the highest number of killings of human rights defenders. Those defending land and environment, alongside indigenous and social leaders are particularly targeted. This physical violence is accompanied by increased criminalisation and government harassment through unfounded legal actions, threatening defenders' freedom, mental well-being, and family security. The Emergency Fund provided tailored support to address these challenges, improving the safety and well-being of human rights defenders and their families.
- Human rights defenders and civil society organisations in exile.** Given the elevated levels of violence and repression, there is a growing demand for assistance to human rights defenders in exile across the region. Even in exile, they remain vulnerable to transnational repression, facing threats like arbitrary deportations, abductions, and targeted violence. While the Emergency Fund extends support to these individuals and groups to address their security concerns, there is a pressing need for more comprehensive support and protection mechanisms to sustain their crucial work.



Improving the security of women human rights defenders in rural Colombia

The Asociación de Mujeres Campesinas de Argelia (AMAR) is a Colombian women-led organisation based in Argelia, Cauca. Consisting of approximately 170 women, they work to empower and protect the rights of rural women through peacebuilding, social and cultural development, and gender equality.

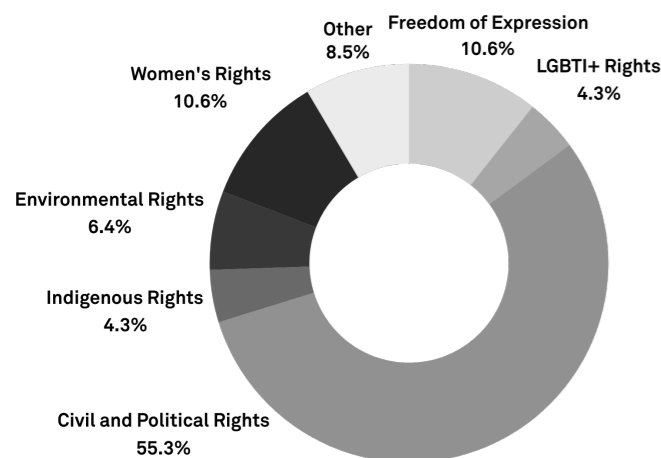
The organisation was established in 2015 within the framework of the peace talks between the ex-FARC and the Colombian government to represent the rights and needs of rural women in one of the regions most affected by the conflict.

In 2018, following the signing of the Peace Agreement in 2016, AMAR started receiving threats and experiencing violent attacks both against the organisation and its members. Members of the committee have been subject to femicides, forced displacement, harassment, intimidation, and death threats both online and physically. Due to their precarious security situation, the Emergency Fund provided them with a grant to strengthen their organisational security. Thanks to the support, they were able to vastly increase the digital security of the organisation and its members, focusing on minimising the risks and threats they faced online. The grant helped AMAR to increase its members' sense of security and they feel that they now have the necessary tools to respond to future threats and be able to continue their human rights work.

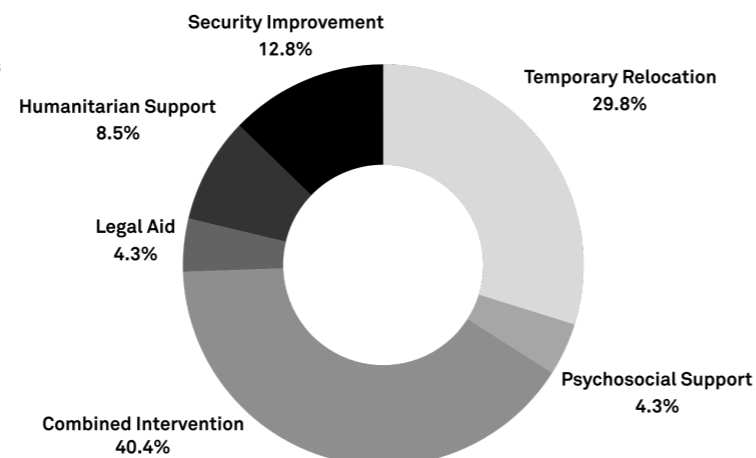
THANKS TO THE SUPPORT, WE WERE ABLE TO HOLD A TRAINING SESSION WITH EXPERTS IN DIGITAL SECURITY. WE NOW HAVE THE PRACTICAL SKILLS TO HELP HELP OUR RURAL WOMEN PROTECT THEMSELVES AND THEIR FAMILIES.

— Woman human rights defender of Asociación de Mujeres Campesinas de Argelia, Colombia

DISTRIBUTION BY TYPE OF ACTIVISM



DISTRIBUTION BY TYPE OF SUPPORT

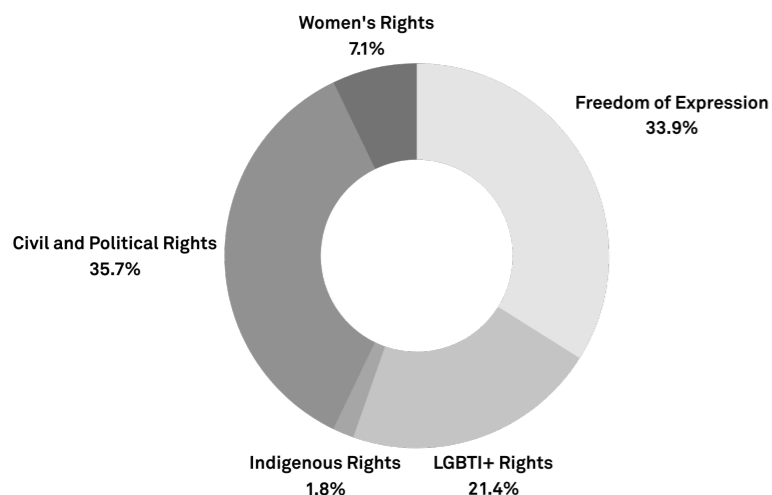


SPOTLIGHT
EURASIA

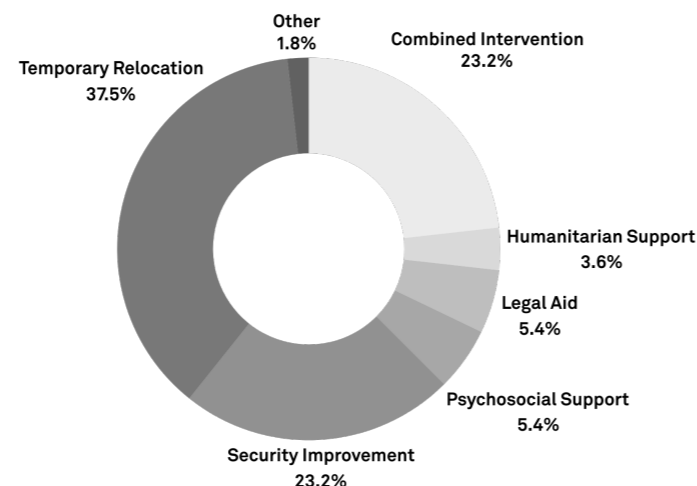
During 2023, the fund provided support to 242 human rights defenders and members of their families in nine different countries in Eurasia, through a total of 56 grants. 55 percent of the recipients were women, 42 percent men and three percent non-conforming.

- **Rising authoritarianism.** Over the past years, many Eurasian countries have become increasingly authoritarian, where regimes abuse existing legislation and introduce new repressive laws to target human rights defenders and independent voices. This has been particularly the case in the Central Asian Republics, prompting Emergency Fund support for several human rights defenders in 2023 who were either forced to flee their country or chose to resist via legal means in court. Countries like Azerbaijan saw relentless crackdowns, resulting in more human rights defenders seeking safety abroad. Activists involved in feminist and LGBTI+ movements often suffered the pain of these crackdowns, as local authorities exploit public “conservative values” to suppress civil society. The Emergency Fund provided support to many individuals and organisations affected in 2023, but these concerning trends are expected to persist and increase into 2024.
- **Human rights defenders in exile.** Human rights defenders across Eurasia are increasingly forced into exile due to repression and conflict, emphasising the need for mental and emotional well-being support and long-term sustainability. The Emergency Fund has been instrumental in providing support to these individuals, particularly providing psychosocial support so they can have the means to adapt and rebuild their lives.
- **Impact of war on human rights defenders.** Human rights defenders in Eurasia face the impact of war on their work, notably due to ongoing conflicts like full-scale invasion of Ukraine and Azerbaijan’s military offence in Nagorno-Karabakh. The Emergency Fund has been supporting human rights defenders, particularly independent journalists and media organisations in Ukraine, with various forms of support including psychosocial support, and security improvements for those working at the frontlines.

DISTRIBUTION BY TYPE OF ACTIVISM



DISTRIBUTION BY TYPE OF SUPPORT



Improving capacity for independent media in a war zone

Radio Era is a part of the New Voice of Ukraine media group founded in 2014, that besides a radio station includes a weekly magazine and news websites, producing content on a wide range of topics like politics, economy, tech, business, lifestyle.

Since the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Radio Era has been providing access to information in areas that otherwise could not be reached due to the lack of internet connection and electricity. Particularly, they have provided information access close to the frontlines and occupied territories and regions on the border area, where Russian propaganda is more widespread and verified information is less accessible.

Radio Era’s broadcast and transmission sites are located close to the frontlines and occupied territories and often get damaged by the rocket fire and shelling. Their staff has been responsible for repairing such damage and securing uninterrupted broadcasting, thus finding themselves at risk when travelling to those sites close to places of active fighting.

The Emergency Fund therefore provided Radio Era with a grant to pay for secure transportation and accommodation costs for their staff who needed to travel to transmission sites in order to repair them and secure uninterrupted broadcasting. The support also helped them install new transmitters and purchase other technical equipment to ensure stable operation, enabling them to continue their work.

THANKS TO THE SUPPORT, WE CAN PROVIDE CREDIBLE INFORMATION TO AREAS IN UKRAINE LACKING ELECTRICITY AND INTERNET.

— Staff member at Radio Era, Ukraine

LET'S NOT LEAVE THE WORLD'S BRAVEST PEOPLE ALONE IN THE FIGHT FOR DEMOCRACY

As democracy declines around the world, more and more human rights defenders and organisations are seeking help from our Emergency Fund.

Due to the increase in requests, **we were forced to refuse 45% of them last year.** This is a problem.

Without our help, more human rights defenders are forced to give up their work in many of the countries where the respect for human rights is at its worst.

With your help, we can support them.


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