Alarm Bells Ring as UK Support for Human Rights Defenders Takes a Back Step

At a time when the targeting of those bravely defending human rights and the environment has reached crisis point, the UK Government's pledge last year to "stand shoulder to shoulder" with human rights defenders was hugely welcome. But the government's new guidance on supporting human rights defenders, published yesterday 17th December 2025, suggests a worrying disengagement.

The Government's updated guidance is far weaker than its predecessor from 2019—several practical components and strong commitments have been stripped from the previous guidance. The weakened guidance contrasts with the UK's pledge to "Defend civic space and fundamental freedoms" as one of its four priorities for its seat on the UN Human Rights Council.

The new guidelines lack clarity on how the UK will guarantee consistent implementation, meaning defenders have less knowledge on what they can expect and request from UK diplomatic missions.

From engaging the police to ensure the release of unlawfully detained climate activists, to facilitating meetings between communities and companies accused of targeting them, there are ample examples of where UK support for defenders can be life-saving and empowering. It is not clear that defenders themselves were consulted effectively on the policy update.

As organisations which work to support a wide range of threatened human rights defenders around the world, we call upon the FCDO to:

- Make a public statement to accompany the publication, explaining that the published guidance does not contain an exhaustive list of actions embassies can take to support defenders, including private actions. In fact embassies are encouraged to work together with defenders to identify support that would be impactful.
- Publish this statement and the guidance itself in local languages and ensure that it reaches local defenders, particularly in remote regions.
- Ensure that embassies consult defenders and organisations that support them to develop local implementation plans, and swiftly develop a roadmap for this.
- Develop a plan for consistent monitoring and public reporting on implementation of the guidance, and a clear strategy for its regular review and strengthening.
- Heed the call from 50 organisations to make holistic support, protection and engagement of civil society a central pillar of an impactful and cost-effective foreign policy; transforming the nature and scale of funding for civil society and developing protection mechanisms, respite schemes and rapid response support for defenders in line with the UK's commitments to implementing the OECD DAC Recommendation

on Enabling Civil Society in Development Co-operation and Humanitarian Assistance.

Human rights defenders are agents of change who can ensure the sustainable impact of a range of UK foreign policy priorities. They are experts in their communities whose objectives often mirror those of progressive foreign policy: combating the climate crisis, upholding free speech and rule of law, tackling poverty, and empowering women. Yet at least 324 defenders were killed in 2024. Countless more were threatened, smeared and imprisoned.

Key commitments removed from the previous guidance in the updated version include:

- To ensure regular two-way thematic exchanges between defenders and embassies.
- To support and promote responsible practice by extractive businesses.
- To visit defenders in their workplaces and build relationships in rural regions.
- To raise issues with authorities, including with formal demarches and via ministers.
- To raise concerns with companies where a UK business is implicated.
- To use multilateral efforts to elaborate and enforce the responsibilities of third parties.
- To disseminate the policy in local languages, distribute it to other governmental departments, monitor and regularly assess impact in consultation with defenders.

This government promised to "stand shoulder to shoulder" with human rights defenders and that it will "not waver in its defence of human rights," standing "with all those whose voices are silenced, whose identities are criminalised, and whose dignity is denied." By applying this commitment to defenders, the government will improve both the UK's standing internationally and their own chances of meeting their foreign policy goals.