



Submission in response to “Call for inputs to the report of the
Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders to the 64th
Human Rights Council”

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This submission is made by **Humanists International** (NGO with Consultative Status at UN ECOSOC)

Humanists International is an international non-governmental organization (NGO) and the global representative body of the humanist movement, uniting a diverse community of non-religious organizations and individuals. Inspired by humanist values, we are optimistic for a world where everyone can have a dignified and fulfilling life. We build, support, and represent the global humanist movement and work to champion human rights, equality, and secularism. We campaign on humanist issues and defend humanists at risk of persecution and violence. We work to promote human rights priorities based on humanist values at international institutions, including the United Nations. Our Members and Associates include humanist, rationalist, secular, ethical culture, atheist, and freethought organizations from all over the world. Our community also includes many individual supporters who share our vision and values.

Introduction

1. Humanists International welcomes the opportunity to provide inputs for an upcoming thematic report to the 64th session of the Human Rights Council on the mental health and psychosocial well-being of human rights defenders.
2. The questions that have been posed have been central to our work for many years. Through our annual Freedom of Thought Report we document discrimination and persecution against humanists, atheists, and the non-religious in every country in the world. We work closely with human rights defenders (HRDs) defending the right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) who identify as humanists or non-religious. For the purposes of this submission, we will use the term FoRB defenders or FoRB HRDs to refer to those individuals.
3. This submission draws on the experiences of those we work with and on our own research. It is informed by our engagement with FoRB HRDs in the humanist community, our casework, the research undertaken annually in our Freedom of Thought Report,¹ and our advocacy.

Factors affecting the mental health of FoRB defenders

4. For FoRB defenders, the principal factors affecting mental health and psychosocial well-being often overlap. FoRB defenders can already be vulnerable before undertaking any human rights work. Their identity - as humanists, atheists or non-religious individuals – can result in ostracization or threats the moment their non-religious identity becomes known or suspected. They are often rejected by their families or communities, and targeting by State and non-State actors can become a very real possibility. When undertaking their human rights work, FoRB defenders often face discrimination, the risk of arbitrary arrest and detention, and harassment and death threats – both in-person and online. Such threats have materialized, as tragically occurred in Bangladesh in 2015 when Avijit Roy was murdered following a barrage of death threats.²
5. Potential legal targeting is a significant factor affecting FoRB defenders. So-called “apostasy” and “blasphemy” laws – and vaguely worded laws purportedly intended to uphold “morality,” “religious harmony”, and “public order” - are weaponized against FoRB defenders.³ Such laws are also often used in tandem with repressive cyber-crime laws to surveil and build legal cases against FoRB defenders for their human rights work.

¹ Humanists International, ‘Freedom of Thought Report’,
<https://humanists.international/what-we-do/freedom-of-thought-report/>

² Humanists International, ‘Humanists appalled at the murder of secular activist and writer Avijit Roy’ (26 February 2015),
<https://humanists.international/2015/02/humanists-appalled-at-the-murder-of-secular-activist-and-writer-avijit-roy/>

³ Ahmed Shaheed, ‘Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief’ (5 March 2019) UN Doc A/HRC/40/58, paras 25, 27–28, 33, 35, 44.

6. Threats against FoRB defenders are rarely isolated incidents. Death threats, threats of physical and sexual violence, hostile online campaigns, surveillance, and legal targeting can create an environment in which FoRB defenders must continually assess whether their daily activities - leaving home, attending an event, posting online, or speaking to another HRD - may expose them to risk.

Documented cases and their psychosocial impact

7. Rishvin Ismath, a Sri Lankan humanist featured in our 2022 Freedom of Thought Report,⁴ described living in hiding following threats and attempts on his life connected to his advocacy, explaining that much of his life had effectively moved online. The threats he received made him fearful for both his life and the lives of those he worked with. He had to reduce his public visibility and involuntarily self-isolated to ensure his safety. Doing so resulted in a reduction of social interaction, a reduced ability to carry out his work, and a constant state of uncertainty about his future.
8. Narendra Nayak, a prominent Indian rationalist, faced persistent death threats and was placed under police protection after evidence emerged that individuals connected to the murder of journalist Gauri Lankesh had monitored his movements.⁵ Police protection was removed in 2023 despite ongoing threats, intensifying the anxiety that he had already been experiencing.⁶
9. The experience of Maldivian humanist and democracy activist Mohamed Rusthum Mujuthaba provides another illustration. After State authorities publicly disseminated identifying information about him, Humanists International reported threats to his life severe enough that he was unable to go to work and remained at home for his safety, leaving him further isolated.⁷
10. Nigerian humanist Mubarak Bala was arrested in 2020 in connection with allegations of “blasphemy” relating to social media posts. He was detained without charge for more than a year and ultimately spent more than four years in prison. Humanists International documented restrictions on access to his lawyers and family, inadequate medical care, and periods of solitary confinement.⁸

⁴ Rishvin Ismath, ‘Foreword to the 2022 edition’, in Humanists International, *The Freedom of Thought Report 2022: Key Countries Edition*, page 9,

<https://fot.humanists.international/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/FOTR-2022-webview.pdf>

⁵ Humanists International, ‘India’ (*Freedom of Thought Report*, Humanists International), <https://fot.humanists.international/countries/asia-southern-asia/india/> accessed 4 September 2026.

⁶ Humanists International, ‘Narendra Nayak’, Cases of Concern, 30 March 2023, <https://humanists.international/case-of-concern/narendra-nayak/>.

⁷ Humanists International, ‘Mohamed Rusthum Mujuthaba’, Cases of Concern, 26 March 2024, <https://humanists.international/case-of-concern/mohamed-rusthum-mujuthaba/>

⁸ Humanists International, ‘Mubarak Bala’, Cases of Concern, 29 April 2025 <https://humanists.international/case-of-concern/mubarak-bala/>

11. These impacts are also reflected in our own casework. We have worked with and supported a FoRB defender for more than six years who has experienced persistent abuse and repeated death threats because of his human rights work. His name has not been cited for security reasons. For his safety, he has had to relocate temporarily on several occasions, including to safe houses and outside his country, with assistance from us and trusted partners. His life has progressively closed around the focus to remain safe and secure. As a result, he rarely leaves his accommodation, has very limited face-to-face interaction, and has had to close social-media accounts that previously enabled both his activism and social contact.
12. The psychological impact of living under these conditions has accumulated over years. The HRD has expressed feelings of hopelessness and uncertainty about the direction of his life. There has also been very little genuine respite: temporary relocations have reduced the risk of immediate physical harm but have compounded fears of returning to the same - or a similar – situation. The lack of genuine and realistic long-term options for defenders in such circumstances significantly exacerbates feelings of hopelessness and uncertainty.

Recognition of FoRB Defenders

13. A wider concern for Humanists International is about the recognition of FoRB defenders as HRDs. To exemplify this, the anonymous defender referred to in para 11 repeatedly sought assistance from organizations supporting HRDs at risk but was repeatedly turned down, despite extensive evidence of his human rights work and the severe threats against him.
14. Furthermore, the HRD has expressed fatigue and exhaustion from having to repeatedly explain his situation and complete different application processes for multiple organizations. This has required him to revisit and relive past trauma on numerous occasions, often followed by further disappointment when support does not materialise or applications are rejected.
15. The impact is noticeable: the HRD's experiences have damaged his trust in the wider human rights protection system and he has questioned the value of applying for shelter initiatives or emergency assistance beyond the humanist movement - thereby narrowing the support available to him further.
16. It is our experience that some organizations supporting HRDs at risk appear to perceive FoRB defenders as humanists, atheists or non-religious first and as HRDs second, which makes it harder for them to reach protection mechanisms designed for defenders at risk. Repeated rejection by the system established to protect defenders carries its own psychological cost, distinct from the original targeting.

Intersecting identities

17. FoRB defenders can experience mental health impacts simply as a result of their identity, independently of the human rights work they undertake. Humanists, atheists and other non-religious people can be excluded from employment, rejected by their families and communities, and targeted by state and non-state actors because of their identity. This can result in profound isolation and loneliness, the breakdown of family and social relationships, loss of economic livelihoods, and a persistent sense of insecurity and exclusion.
18. These impacts can be further compounded by gender and other intersecting identities. Indian filmmaker and WHRD Leena Manimekalai was accused of "outraging religious feelings" and subjected to an enormous volume of orchestrated digital violence, including death and rape threats, alongside multiple police complaints following the release of her film *Kaali*.⁹ The 2024 Freedom of Thought Report documents the severe psychosocial toll of these campaigns, including her description of how the hostility can isolate defenders by extending threats and abuse to their personal networks and loved ones.¹⁰
19. FoRB defenders who are part of the LGBTIQ+ community can also face overlapping hostility based on both their identity as non-religious and their sexual orientation or gender identity. This can be particularly acute where dominant religious rhetoric is used to justify discrimination and can compound existing feelings of insecurity, exclusion and isolation.

Safe Spaces, Support Networks and Online Risks

20. Humanists International and its members provide safe spaces for FoRB defenders to engage, collaborate and support one another where possible. Yet in many environments, creating and maintaining such safe spaces is extremely difficult.
21. Shrinking civic space, restrictions on organizations and gatherings, and legal targeting can limit defenders' ability to organize, engage in advocacy, participate in public life and maintain the social connections that sustain their work. These pressures can affect not only their activism, but also their personal and social lives – particularly as humanist, atheist and non-religious defenders may be forced to conceal their identities or expression for their own security. This can significantly contribute to their isolation and make sustained activism particularly challenging.

⁹ Leena Manimekalai, 'Foreword to the 2024 edition', in Humanists International, *The Freedom of Thought Report 2024: Key Countries Edition*, page 10, <https://fot.humanists.international/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/FOTR-PAGE.pdf>

¹⁰ *Ibid*

22. For isolated FoRB defenders, online spaces may be the only place in which they can express themselves freely, connect with other like-minded individuals, and undertake their activism. The same platforms can also expose them to surveillance, harassment, death threats and criminal prosecution. Physical and psychological harm can be deliberately used as part of broader strategies to discourage FoRB defenders from undertaking their work and silence their exercise of freedom of expression.
23. Humanists International has often encountered cases in which individuals have been “outed” online and their names, photos or other identifying information have been shared in an attempt to incite hatred or violence. In some instances, defenders’ accounts have subsequently been blocked or banned; in others, their online expression has preceded arrest, detention or physical threats.

Impact on service providers

24. The impact can also extend to those supporting FoRB defenders. This can take, and has taken, the form of vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue and burnout. Repeated exposure to cases involving threats, detention, and violence - combined with limited resources and few avenues to secure long-term options for HRDs - does lead to stress, anxiety, and exhaustion. From our experience and our engagement with partners, we have found these impacts to be common among human rights organizations providing emergency assistance to HRDs at risk.
25. Where safe and appropriate professional support is lacking, those providing direct assistance can become not simply a provider of assistance but a crucial support figure on whom HRDs depend. This can make some HRDs more hesitant to seek professional mental health support, and in turn increases the emotional burden on those providing assistance.

Legal, financial, and psychosocial security

26. Legal and psychosocial insecurity reinforce one another. “Blasphemy” and “apostasy” laws represent the most obvious legal threats, as they attach criminal consequences to a FoRB HRD’s identity or expression. Yet social conditions are equally significant. In some settings, a FoRB defender can be at risk of violence from non-state actors even if there are no “blasphemy” or “apostasy” laws in place.
27. SLAPPs and other forms of judicial harassment can also significantly affect FoRB defenders. Humanists International has, for example, raised concerns about repeated judicial proceedings and smear campaigns against Greek humanist defender Panayote

Dimitras over a period of years, resulting in financial costs and reducing the time he is able to spend on his human rights work.¹¹

28. Financial insecurity is also easily overlooked. A FoRB defender forced into hiding may be unable to work, a person publicly identified as atheist may be dismissed from their job, and legal defense costs can absorb money and time while placing additional strain on their families and support networks.

Support services and the weaponization of mental health services

29. Significant barriers prevent FoRB defenders from accessing adequate mental health or psychosocial support. Defenders exposed to “blasphemy” laws or other repressive instruments already live in fear of being identified. Disclosing their thoughts, experiences and work to someone they do not know feels unsafe, because in these contexts disclosure is a security risk rather than a therapeutic step.
30. Provision itself can be part of the problem. In many of the countries where FoRB defenders work, hospitals, counselling services and community support are delivered by religious institutions or by practitioners embedded in religious communities. A humanist or atheist defender approaching such a service may reasonably fear judgement, unsolicited religious counsel or disclosure of their non-religious identity to their family or community. The absence of a confidential, non-religious option is not a marginal gap, but is the reason some defenders do not seek mental health support.
31. We have also witnessed the weaponization of mental health services against FoRB defenders. Years before his arrest, and after he publicly renounced Islam, Mubarak Bala’s father arranged his involuntary confinement in a psychiatric institution in Kano because of his atheism, where he was held for eighteen days.¹² Where psychiatric detention can be used to punish non-religious belief, mental health services are not a neutral resource, and defenders are rational to distrust them.
32. Professional standards vary significantly between jurisdictions, and trauma-informed, belief-sensitive practice cannot be assumed. This leaves very few avenues open, and is one reason the humanist community itself functions as a lifeline for so many.
33. Taken together, these experiences describe defenders whose psychosocial needs are shaped as much by their belief identity as by the risks of their work, and who remain largely invisible to the systems built to protect defenders. The recommendations below are directed at that gap.

Recommendations

¹¹ Humanists International, ‘Greece: cease judicial harassment of human rights defender’ (11 August 2022), <https://humanists.international/2022/08/greece-cease-judicial-harassment-of-human-rights-defender/>

¹² Humanists International, ‘Mubarak Bala’, Cases of Concern (n 8).

34. To States: repeal so-called “apostasy” and “blasphemy” laws, and vaguely worded provisions on “morality”, “religious harmony” and “public order”; prohibit involuntary psychiatric detention on the basis of religion or belief, or its absence, and provide effective remedies where it occurs; ensure that publicly funded mental health provision includes confidential, non-religious options; and extend anti-SLAPP protections to proceedings brought against defenders in connection with religion or belief.
35. To national human rights institutions, protection mechanisms and civil society organizations: recognize FoRB defenders, including humanists and atheists, as human rights defenders in their own right; reduce avoidable sources of retraumatization; and endeavor to provide rejected applicants with support.
36. To donors: fund psychosocial support as a core cost rather than a project add-on, and extend it to the staff and partners who deliver emergency assistance.
37. To the United Nations system and regional organizations: record belief identity in data on defenders at risk, and treat the psychological dimension of prolonged judicial harassment as part of the harm to be addressed.