

FRONT LINE DEFENDERS: 'THE SCALE OF THE CHALLENGE IS HUGE'

By Wendy Ide

The scope of the NGO Front Line Defenders is an extensive one. Founded in 2001, with headquarters in Dublin but a global reach, the organisation has one aim: to support people who engage with human rights in one way or another – Front Line Defenders refers to them using the umbrella term “Human Rights Defenders” – when they are facing risks because of that engagement. But in practice, the nature of the human rights engagement, the risks entailed and the support offered by Front Line Defenders can vary widely.

Deputy director Andrea Rocca explains, “We use the term ‘Human Rights Defenders’ in the broadest possible sense. It can be someone working in a human rights NGO, but can also be journalist writing about human rights issues, it could be lawyers taking on human rights cases, it could be people who are in filmmaking.” Over the course of each year, the majority of people that are assisted would be human rights lawyers or would work with NGOs; a much smaller percentage would be connected to the arts.

Rocca gives two recent examples of film-related cases: Lena Hendry, the Malaysia-based former programme co-ordinator for Pusat KOMAS, a human rights organisation, was targeted for screening a documentary on the Sri Lankan civil war; and David Sheen, a journalist and filmmaker based in Israel, whose work on racial discrimination has led to a civil suit filed against him.

The risks facing Human Rights Defenders include criminal charges and imprisonment. “There are also physical threats: death threats, threats of physical harm or threats targeted at family members. There is a whole range of risks within the digital sphere – risks of monitoring or surveillance. But also, broader risks in terms of stigmatization, smear campaigns and defamation, which may seem less grave, but very often are only the first step before more serious risks. And unfortunately some are killed as well.”

Rocca adds that the organisation also tries to offer emotional support. “For people who work for a very long time under that type of pressure, that obviously has an impact on their emotional well-being.”

Support offered by Front Line Defenders can be divided into two approaches: one is reactive to an incident or situation, the other is preventative and aims to coach Human Rights Defenders in order to better manage risks and security, both in the physical sphere and in the digital one.

Rocca elaborates, “We can offer practical support through funding. We have a grant programme which, for example, can pay for a lawyer if someone has been arrested or charged. Also medical care, if a person can’t otherwise access it. It can pay for security measures for the office or an NGO or the home of an activist. And also, through this programme, where there are very immediate and serious risks, we can support people who are basically going into hiding or relocating.

“Another element is advocacy work, trying to do public campaigns and mobilising people who can influence a particular case. For us, that means sometimes working with European embassies in the country concerned, working with the UN and other international human rights organisations and working directly with the authorities in the country concerned.”

In both of the film-related cases that Rocca cites, the approach was tailored to react to a legal challenge. In the case of Hendry, “There was a risk of a prison sentence of up to three years and a fine. This went on for two years, which obviously means that your other work is heavily affected. You have to devote your resources to fighting a criminal charge. We supported her through public advocacy. The final outcome, after an appeal, was a fine, but it was smaller than feared and there was no detention, which was a positive outcome.” Sheen’s case, meanwhile, is still ongoing.

Rocca sees much potential in the newly formed International Coalition for Filmmakers at Risk, “Increasingly, in many societies, dissent is crushed, whether it is expressed through the arts by filmmakers, musicians or writers; or through political mobilisation by grassroots protest movements; or through documentation of violations by human rights workers. It is imperative that we support and protect those people. Unfortunately the scale of the challenge is huge, and any new initiative like the International Coalition for Filmmakers at Risk is going to strengthen the existing collective system for protection and solidarity.”

He adds, “I think there could be different areas of collaboration between Front Line Defenders and the International Coalition for Filmmakers at Risk, from reactive work in relation to specific cases of individuals at risk to exchanging expertise and supporting each other’s work.”

Front Line Defenders, which is funded in part by governments and in part by private philanthropic foundations, can be approached directly by Human Rights Defenders in need of assistance. Alternatively, cases can be referrals and recommendations from a network of other organisations.

Like many other organisations, Front Line Defenders is on high alert due to the COVID-19 pandemic. “Obviously there are concerns about the human rights implications of the restrictions which have been introduced in many countries. The biggest worry for us is that in some countries, the pandemic has offered opportunities for governments which are already undemocratic to have more powers by passing emergency legislation.”

Rocca adds that they have already encountered instances of targeted actions against human rights activists, and of journalists penalised because of their reporting of the crisis. In Colombia, the collapse of state protection mechanisms has resulted in the deaths of community leaders. Now, more than ever, organisations like Front Line Defenders are providing essential support even though, as Rocca admits, “Maintaining our organisation remotely is a logistical challenge.”

Wendy Ide is a film critic and feature writer who works for The Observer, Screen International and Ekko, among others. She has also served as a programme advisor for several film festivals.



Andrea Rocca

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