



# SHELTER CITY – TEMPORARY RELOCATION FOR HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

PROGRAMME OF JUSTICE AND PEACE NETHERLANDS

Shelter City is a country-wide initiative by Justice and Peace Netherlands, in cooperation with Dutch cities and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which aims to protect human rights defenders. Human rights defenders stand up for their own rights and those of others. This is a difficult struggle. Often, they run a great risk: they are silenced, arrested, tortured, and sometimes simply disappear.

When human rights defenders are severely threatened because of their work, they are eligible for a three-month stay in one of the Dutch Shelter Cities: The Hague, Middelburg, Maastricht, Utrecht, Amsterdam, Nijmegen, Groningen or Tilburg. The Shelter City program can (from 2016) accommodate at least 15 human rights defenders per year.

Besides providing rest and respite, their stay in the Netherlands allows human rights defenders to continue their work in a safe environment. In addition, they enlarge their professional network of civil society organizations and political connections in The Hague, Brussels, and elsewhere. The human rights defenders further participate in training courses to develop relevant skills. Finally, through public events and workshops, they contribute to raising awareness about human rights among the citizens of the Shelter Cities.

## THE ORIGINS OF SHELTER CITY

In September 2012, the project “The Hague: Shelter City Initiative” was launched. At a meeting with human rights defenders from the international network of Justice and Peace (December 2010), it became clear that such a project could contribute significantly to increase their security. The Hague became the first Shelter City. The pilot project was executed by Justice and Peace, at the

request of the city council of The Hague.

Justice and Peace selected four human rights defenders and accommodated them in The Hague for a period of three months.

For all these human rights defenders, coming from all over the world, protection and shelter were necessary, and they looked back at the time they spent in the Netherlands as valuable. They felt relieved from a heavy burden, not having to look over their shoulder continuously and being able to lead normal lives. They could keep working on their projects in their home countries. Moreover, through meetings and talks with non-governmental organizations, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and members of parliament, they were able to expand their networks. At the end of the Shelter City period, each of them returned to their country of origin.

The programme garnered great interest among high school and university students, as well as the general public and the media. As such, the project strengthened the image of the city of The Hague and of the Netherlands as championing human rights, and increased the involvement of the citizens of The Hague with regard to this topic. After a positive evaluation, it was decided to carry on with the project for three years, and to expand it to other cities in the Netherlands. Since then, it has grown to 8 cities. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is an important proponent and sponsor of this initiative.

## HOW DOES SHELTER CITY WORK?

Shelter City offers cities the opportunity to strengthen their reputation and engage their citizens in the area of human rights. The national coordination of Shelter City lies with Justice and Peace Netherlands, including the selection procedure, in cooperation with an independent selection committee. The travel and visa of the human rights defenders are arranged and paid for by Justice and Peace. Justice and Peace also provides a health insurance and is responsible for both the travel and stay of each human rights defender. The human rights defenders can reach an employee of Justice and Peace by telephone at any time.

Justice and Peace collaborates with each participating municipality as well as with local organisations, such as universities. The participating municipality is asked to provide for accommodation for the human rights defenders. In every city, local partner organisations take care of supporting the human rights defenders and prepare an interesting and valuable program for them.

The human rights defenders are selected by an independent selection committee. The members of this committee come from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Faculty of Law of the University of Amsterdam, Hivos, and Free Press Unlimited.

Candidates for the program are sought through the international network of Justice and Peace Netherlands and other human rights organisations, as well as the network of Dutch embassies and consulates, and European representations. The importance and necessity of the Shelter City project is evidenced by the growing number of applications received for each calls.

## EFFECTIVENESS

Most of the HRDs were able to return to their country of origin after the programme, and for all of them their sense of security was improved upon returning. The network built during the programme has provided useful support to one of the HRDs, who received new threats after his return. Both the Dutch government and nongovernmental organisations raised the issue with the government that was threatening him and subsequently, the threats ceased.

Some human rights defenders who came under the programme were also able to establish partnerships to develop new projects in their countries, and the majority of them reports to have come back with new ideas and

energy to improve their work for human rights. Very importantly, the human rights defenders also feel morally supported in their work as a wide range of people abroad knows about and follows their daily struggle for human rights.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION:

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