

JOINT REAFFIRMATION STATEMENT FROM THE INTERNATIONAL NETWORK OF SHELTER CITY RESPONDING TO SITUATION AND NEEDS OF HRDS IN TIMES OF COVID-19

- The international network of Shelter City envisions a world where human rights defenders are recognised as legitimate actors defending and promoting human rights and fundamental freedoms, and are thus able to carry out their work and activism freely and in peace, without intimidation, harassment or other forms of repression.
- The international network of Shelter City is a global movement that creates safe and inspiring spaces for human rights defenders at risk where they re-energise, receive tailormade support and engage with allies in order to reinforce their local actions for change.
- The international network of Shelter City consists of 17 Shelter Cities worldwide, including partner organisations, municipalities, volunteers and other individuals, representing a global solidarity movement for human rights defenders.
- The international network of Shelter City was created out of an expressed need from defenders for temporary relocation outside of their own country.
- We adhere to a holistic approach to protection and care, recognising the intersectionality of human rights defence and how different and overlapping identities shape and influence the work and activism of defenders and the level of risk they are exposed to.
- Extending the network globally was born out of not only a need for more safe spaces but also out of the realisation that in many cases, relocation in the defender's own geographical region is preferable for cultural, linguistic and logistical reasons.
- The network shares resources, expertise and knowledge and coordinates on a regular basis to evaluate and improve our services to defenders, including with other temporary relocation initiatives (e.g. The Barcelona Guidelines on Wellbeing and Temporary International Relocation of Human Rights Defenders).

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

Besides the dire situation with regard to public health and safety in many countries, the COVID-19 pandemic has also exposed and in many cases exacerbated the injustices and inequalities already present. In addition, many governments have misused the situation to implement emergency decrees to justify increased surveillance, restrictions on the freedom of movement, assembly and association, and expression and opinion, further tightening their grip on civil society. In some countries, journalists and academics that have published reports about COVID-19 deemed not in line with the official state narrative have been intimidated, arrested and in some cases even disappeared.

Human rights defenders (HRDs) have been tied to their homes, feeling paralysed not being able to support their communities and victims of human rights violations. In the case of many women HRDs moreover, being locked down has meant increased exposure to gender-based violence. To sustain themselves and their families or communities, many defenders complement their income with activities not related to their activism. Due to lockdowns and emergency measures, many have found themselves in a situation where even basic humanitarian needs can no longer be met.

Many LGBTIQ rights defenders feel unsafe in their family homes and have not been allowed to gather in the safe spaces they created with their communities. Access to healthcare facilities for LGBTIQ people relying on life-saving medicine and treatment has been severely restricted due to the priority given to treatment of COVID-19, when this access was already limited given the stigma attached to their needs and conditions.

Increased reliance on online communication tools has both adverse psychological and physical impacts on HRDs. The use of software and communication tools that are neither secure nor privacy-friendly has increased the risk of online surveillance and harassment. Excluded from online spaces, defenders with unreliable or limited connectivity are at risk of being increasingly isolated.

RESPONSE FROM THE INTERNATIONAL NETWORK OF SHELTER CITY

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, travel and in-country restrictions have severely curtailed our ability to relocate and host defenders. Despite the fact that their needs for temporary refuge remain and in many cases have in fact increased, we have had to cancel the arrival of most of our guests because they were unable to travel and because local restrictions would have hampered them to a degree where

we would not be able to guarantee their wellbeing and safety while in relocation. In some of our Shelter Cities the defenders were able to come.

In cases where we have still been able to host defenders or where defenders were already in country before restrictions were enforced, we have successfully adapted activities and continued our support. Where selected defenders were unable to travel to a Shelter City, we have kept in close communication, monitoring their situation and trying to accommodate their needs for support. We have shifted capacity building activities online, offering training on topics such as holistic security, wellbeing and stress management and advocacy and policy influencing, including to some Shelter City alumni. Where possible we have found alternative local or regional relocation options to protect HRDs, and several Shelter Cities are working with local partners to do local relocation in home countries.

However, we have also noticed a shift in requests for assistance as many defenders have asked for support to meet basic humanitarian needs for themselves, their families and their communities. Challenges related to online work and the misuse of emergency legislation and increased authoritarian rule call for additional support to improve security measures.

We acknowledge that in most cases our current activities do not and cannot replace the opportunity that temporary relocation in a Shelter City provides and, once global and regional travel and other restrictions allow us to do so, we will continue to host defenders in need of temporary relocation to rest, re-energise and enhance their capacity in line with our mission as the international network of Shelter City. In the meantime we continue to develop alternative support strategies to respond to the needs of HRDs to support and enable them to continue their work promoting and defending human rights.

This statement is co-written and signed by the partners in the international network of Shelter City, including:

