

On the Front Line in Latin America

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Abstract

This article offers a brief historical account of the efforts made by Front Line Defenders to protect and support human rights defenders in Latin America. It chronicles a range of Front Line Defenders' activities and support mechanisms in three countries, Colombia, Guatemala and Mexico, as well as highlighting the different struggles faced by individuals and organisations working to promote human rights in the region. Research for this article was conducted by referencing online publications from Front Line Defenders and other human rights organisations such as Amnesty International, Alliance for Global Justice, The International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), as well as Latin American sources, including the Latin America Solidarity Centre (LASC) and ABColombia. This article does not aim to be a critique or an analysis of the work of Front Line Defenders; it is simply an account of continued violations against human rights defenders that Front Line Defenders work to alleviate.

Who are human rights defenders (HRDs)?¹

Human rights defenders are individuals working for all or any of the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights including women's rights, LGBTI rights (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Equality), the rights of Indigenous Peoples, and economic, social and cultural rights. HRDs can be community leaders, lawyers, journalists,

¹ The term, human rights defender, has no strict definition in international mechanisms but it is described through certain rights in the 'Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms' such as 'Everyone has the right, individually and in association with others, to promote and to strive for the protection and realisation of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the national and international levels'. The EU Guidelines on HRDs does have a definition of HRDs but strictly excludes those who commit or use violence. <http://www.unhchr.ch/huridocda/huridoca.nsf/%28symbol%29/a.res.53.144.en> , <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cmsUpload/16332-re01.en08.pdf>

trade unionists; anybody who works peacefully to promote or protect the human rights of others.

There are so many examples of great organisations and individuals promoting and protecting human rights in small corners of Latin America that one can only feel inspired by their work. Proof of their continued work in the constant face of adversity can arouse people out of despair and encourage small acts of commitment to enhance the promotion, protection and the eventual full realisation of all human rights.

This article focuses on Front Line Defenders' work in Latin America as an example of implementing small steps in the hope of strengthening civil society and supporting strong spirits in the face of wide-spread repression. The examples outlined below were chosen because they offer a glimpse into the work undertaken by Front Line Defenders since its establishment through a range of protection needs identified by HRDs.

What does Front Line Defenders do?

Front Line Defenders was founded in Dublin in 2001, and works exclusively for the protection of HRDs at-risk worldwide.² It aims to protect HRDs by addressing the protection needs identified by defenders themselves through trainings in personal and digital security, international advocacy and lobbying, security grants, rest and respite, and opportunities for networking and exchange. While Front Line Defenders aims to support HRDs by assisting them to work in a more secure environment, owing to the lawlessness that exists in parts of the world and being the target of those who rebuff dissenting voices, HRDs sometimes also find themselves in need of temporary internal or external relocation.

Since its founding, Front Line Defenders has paid much attention to the plight of HRDs throughout the Americas, with a particular focus on Latin America. In this region, urgent appeals and reports on specific incidents of violations from a number of sources show that the current situation for HRDs is of serious concern.³ According to Front Line Defenders' 2012 annual report, the prevalence of killings, physical attacks, targeting of home and offices and smear campaigns combined with impunity and the

² Front Line Defenders defines HRDs as people who work, non-violently, for any or all of the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>

³ <http://www.ishr.ch/council/428-council-not-in-feed/1278-human-rights-defenders-in-latin-america-are-still-at-grave-risk-new-reports-show>, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/01/201219818067139.html>, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/stories-defiance-rights-activists-speak-out-2012-05-25>,

manipulation of criminal justice systems indicates the continued risks faced by HRDs.⁴

A year after its establishment in 2001, Front Line Defenders and a partner organisation in Brazil, *Justiça Global* (The Global Justice Centre), published a report entitled *Front Line Brazil: Murder Death Threats and other Intimidations of Human Rights Defenders 1997-2001*. This was one of Front Line Defenders' first publications bringing international attention to the seriousness of risks faced by HRDs in Brazil. According to a more recent study on the general situation of HRDs in Latin America by the Inter- American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), there is still a clear pattern of risk experienced by HRDs throughout Latin America that constitute human rights violations.⁵ Although the report, published in December 2011, does not focus specifically on Brazil, parallels can be drawn with the seriousness of risks identified in Front Line Defenders' report in 2001 and the prevalence of suppression over a decade later.

Some of the most serious crimes outlined by the IACHR are murder, extra-judicial killings and forced disappearances. Such violations not only target the victims but send threatening messages to members of society discouraging them from exercising their right to freedom of expression. Also, a variety of different actors are responsible for carrying out these attacks, and in Brazil many murders committed since 2006 were perpetrated by private security firms, death squads and other concerned parties.⁶ As the existence of such non-state actors play a big role in the challenges faced by HRDs in Latin America, there is a need for distinct governmental obligations to provide security and protection to HRDs.⁷

Owing to the persistence of grave violations and the complex roles of state and non-state actors throughout Latin America, Front Line Defenders continue to work with HRDs to develop protection strategies against threats from all actors through research missions, regular contact with national NGOs, trainings based on the Workbook on Security and consistent international and national advocacy.⁸ The implementation of particular protection strategies since 2001 is outlined here, drawing on examples from three different countries, Colombia, Guatemala and

⁴ http://www.frontlinedefenders.org/files/front_line_defenders_2012_annual_report_inspiring_hope_and_provoking_a_backlash.pdf; 4

⁵ <http://www.oas.org/en/iachr/defenders/docs/pdf/defenders2011.pdf>

⁶ Ibid., 10.

⁷ Such examples can especially be found in Brazil, Colombia and Mexico. Ibid.; 11-13.

⁸ http://www.frontlinedefenders.org/files/Workbook_ENG.pdf

Mexico. Such cases demonstrate the openness of Front Line Defenders' philosophy since its establishment through financial and educational support as well as relentless commitment to apply strategic political pressure.⁹

Colombia

One of Front Line Defenders' earlier cases from Latin America was that of Luz Perly Córdoba Mosquero, an indigenous Colombian political and social activist. She is President and Secretary-General of the Arauca Peasants Association (ACA), which works for justice and social change in the oil rich department of Arauca in the North East of Colombia. It has long been a region affected by the armed conflict in Colombia where many paramilitary groups act outside the law by assassinating and intimidating communities without the authorities doing enough to protect people or to investigate the crimes committed.¹⁰

Members of ACA have also been the subject of constant threats and harassment, reportedly from paramilitary groups with links to the army, and between October and December 2009, four members of ACA were murdered.¹¹ ACA has mainly been a target as a result of their reports on arbitrary detentions and other crimes against peasant farmer communities because of their work on issues relating to agrarian reform and social and economic equality.¹² Owing to the seriousness and unyielding nature of these attacks, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) granted precautionary measures on behalf of Luz Perly and other members of the ACA on 19 April 2002.¹³ The granting of precautionary measures follows a request by the IACHR to a particular government to adopt measures in order to prevent irreparable harm to persons because of their work or association with an organisation, group or community.¹⁴ In September 2003, Luz Perly attended Front Line Defenders' Second

⁹ One of Front Line Defenders' successful political lobbying actions was the adoption of the European Guidelines for HRDs in 2004 under Ireland's presidency of the EU. During a discussion in Dáil Eireann, a week after the adoption, Tom Kitt, then Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs, publicly referred to the director of Front Line Defenders, Mary Lawlor's 'promotion of the idea'. <http://debates.oireachtas.ie/dail/2004/06/24/00017.asp>

¹⁰ <http://www.justiceforcolombia.org/news/article/995/assassinations-continue-in-arauca>

¹¹ <http://afgj.org/focus-areas/labor>

¹² <http://www.prensarural.org/spip/spip.php?article2133>

¹³ <http://www.cidh.org/medidas/2002.eng.htm>

¹⁴ <http://www.oas.org/en/iachr/decisions/precautionary.asp>

Dublin Platform where she made a presentation on the politicisation of human rights and anti-terrorism security for HRDs under attack. The Dublin Platform is a biennial three-day event that invites over 100 HRDs from all over the world to participate in different workshops and panel discussions in order to network and exchange ideas on issues relating to security and protection.

Despite Luz Perly's international profile and her strong connections with a large international network, she and the treasurer of ACA, Juan de Jesús Gutiérrez Ardila, were arrested and accused of rebellion shortly after she accompanied members of the Colombia Solidarity Campaign on a human rights mission to Arauca in February 2004.¹⁵ At the same time, the ACA office in Arauca was raided by members of the Government's Department of Administrative Security (DAS) who confiscated computer equipment, photographs and other sensitive material. Front Line Defenders immediately sent out a series of urgent appeals demanding the immediate release of Luz Perly and Juan de Jesús Gutiérrez Ardila, and the return of confiscated documents and materials. These appeals were sent to both the Colombian Government and other strategic recipients who could try to exert influence over the Colombian government, including the IACHR, the United Nations and the European Union. On 23 March 2004, the Executive Director of Front Line Defenders, Mary Lawlor, met with the Colombian Vice President Francisco Santos in Dublin and adamantly requested the release of Ms. Cordoba. The Vice President emphasised to the Colombian Attorney General the need for concrete evidence of subversive activities on Luz Perly's part, but stressed the separation of powers and the Attorney General's independence.¹⁶ Through its monitoring and research, Front Line Defenders identified a pattern of detention of HRDs without tangible evidence and their subsequent release without trial, which Colombia is obliged to address under its commitment to the UN Declaration on HRDs (Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms).

On 31 March 2004, Luz Perly was awarded Denmark's Peace Prize for outstanding work as a defender of peasants' rights in Colombia but she was unable to receive the award in person as she remained in detention in Bogotá.¹⁷ In May of the same year, Front Line Defenders granted financial assistance to Luz Perly for her medical treatment in prison and for assistance for her husband and two children.

¹⁵ <http://www.frontlinedefenders.org/taxonomy/term/677>

¹⁶ <http://www.frontlinedefenders.org/taxonomy/term/766>

¹⁷ <http://www.frontlinedefenders.org/node/518>

In October of the same year, the European Parliament held a round table discussion about HRDs from Arauca, Colombia. The cases of Luz Perly Córdoba and Juan de Jesús Gutiérrez Ardila were raised, and as a result, a significant group of European Parliamentarians decided to address the cases through follow-up actions. After the meeting the Council of the European Union urged the Colombian Government to implement the specific recommendations of the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), including the recommendations to publish a plan of action on human rights with a timetable for implementation.¹⁸ After nine months in prison, Luz Perly's case was finally scheduled for a preliminary hearing in February 2005. In that same year, Front Line Defenders issued a grant, which provided security and protection training for the staff of *Federación Nacional Sindical Unitaria Agropecuaria* (FENSUAGRO-CUT), an agrarian federation regrouping different trade unions, social associations and committees working for justice and social change in Colombia, of which Luz Perly was Secretary General. This grant also provided for the emergency evacuation of Luz Perly from Bogotá.

Since the time of this case, Colombia has remained one of the most dangerous places for HRDs to work in Latin America.¹⁹ Front Line Defenders continues to support HRDs in Colombia through trainings on physical security, risk and stress management and digital security²⁰ and in October 2007, Front Line Defenders undertook a research mission to Colombia visiting Bogotá, Medellín and Barrancabermeja. The mission culminated in a report, *Living in Fear: The Situation of HRDs in Colombia*, which is based on first-hand information from HRDs at risk. In addition to interviews with HRDs, Front Line Defenders met and lobbied representatives of the Colombian government and representatives of the UN and European embassies.²¹

In 2009, Front Line Defenders supported a report written by ABColombia entitled, *Colombian HRDs under Threat*. This documented different threats and human rights violations suffered by HRDs ranging from break-ins and information theft, death threats, attacks and killings. It also included recommendations for the Colombian government to improve the security

¹⁸ <http://94.76.253.103/node/506>

¹⁹ <http://reliefweb.int/node/355706>

²⁰ <https://security.ngoinabox.org/>

²¹ <http://www.frontlinedefenders.org/files/en/Colombia%20Living%20in%20Fear%20report%20by%20Front%20Line.pdf>

situation.²² As a follow-up to such findings, in November Front Line Defenders jointly organised a digital security workshop and training in Bogotá.

An additional report was published a year later entitled, *Strategies for Survival: Protection of Human Rights defenders in Colombia, Indonesia and Zimbabwe*. The chapter on Colombia focuses on the different types of HRDs such as trade unionists, *campesino* leaders, women HRDs, indigenous defenders, journalists, lawyers and LGBTI activists and the threats they face. The second half of the chapter illustrates the survival strategies employed by different HRDs in Colombia and the ways in which international and national organisations can also assist in improving security.²³

Front Line Defenders continue to issue many urgent appeals on HRDs in Colombia, including the case of Abelardo Sánchez Serrano, who is a member of the board of directors of Corporación Regional para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos - CREDHOS (the Regional Corporation for the Defence of Human Rights) and who attended the sixth Dublin Platform in 2011. CREDHOS conducts trainings and human rights education programmes. It also collects complaints on human rights violations perpetrated by paramilitary groups and members of the security forces. Front Line Defenders has worked closely with the organisation since the detention of their spokesperson Mr David Rabelo Crespo in 2010. Front Line Defenders also issued a series of urgent appeals after Abelardo Sánchez Serrano was threatened on his way to his office on 13 January 2012 by two men holding a gun to his chest stating that he has 72 hours to leave the city²⁴ The threat seems to be a direct result of a press conference held 24 hours before announcing a commemoration for the La Rochela massacre in 1989, where 12 investigators of crimes committed by paramilitaries and members of the armed forces were killed.

On 29 March 2012, the Vice President of CREDHOS found two envelopes in his office each containing a nine millimetre calibre bullet accompanied by a death threat from a paramilitary group declaring him and his three other colleagues military targets.²⁵ And again on the 29 April, three persons were reported to have travelled in the vicinity looking for the location of Mr. Sanchez's house but they left once they realised

²² http://www.abcolombia.org.uk/downloads/F45_281009_Climate_of_Fear_Report_for_web.pdf

²³ http://www.frontlinedefenders.org/files/strategies_for_survival_english.pdf

²⁴ <http://www.frontlinedefenders.org/node/17082>

²⁵ <http://www.frontlinedefenders.org/node/18508>

police patrol was in the area. The following day, Mr. Sanchez' security guard reported that unidentified individuals had been seen photographing his home, including inside the window shutter.²⁶

As a result of the continuation of such serious violations, Front Line Defenders consistently lobbies the Colombian government to uphold their obligations under the Declaration on HRDs. It also lobbies EU member states, including Ireland, to put pressure on the Colombian government to ensure protection for HRDs and to facilitate a free and secure environment in which they can carry out their legitimate and peaceful human rights activities.²⁷

Guatemala

In Guatemala, Front Line Defenders undertook a mission in 2005 to discuss the possibility of commissioning a report on the situation of HRDs there. The aims of the mission were to gather firsthand knowledge of cases through establishing and further developing direct contact with HRDs in the field. As an outcome, Claudia Samayoa of the Human Rights Defenders Unit of the National Movement for Human Rights in Guatemala,²⁸ wrote a report entitled, *Front Line Defenders Guatemala: Attacks Against HRDs 2000-2005*, which illustrated an increase in attacks on HRDs over the five year period, including a dramatic surge in attacks against defenders of economic social and cultural rights.²⁹ The report exemplified the premeditated nature of a number of these attacks on HRDs, shedding light on the struggles faced by individuals, especially those who defend women's rights, indigenous rights and freedom of religion. It also highlighted the situation of lawyers and judges who are working to uphold justice, a true indication of the failure of the rule of law in Guatemala. Subsequently both Front Line Defenders and the Human Rights Defenders Unit of the National Movement for Human Rights in Guatemala arranged a number of meetings with the Office of the Presidency, the Ministry of the Interior, the Attorney General's Office and the Office of the Human Rights Ombudsman. These meetings were an effort to improve the structural and institutional framework for the protection and promotion of human rights, and demand a risk free environment for the work of HRDs in Guatemala.

²⁶ <http://www.frontlinedefenders.org/node/18215>

²⁷ <http://www.frontlinedefenders.org>

²⁸ Claudia is now Coordinator of the Unit of Protection of Human Rights Defenders, Guatemala – UDEFEGUA.

²⁹ <http://www.frontlinedefenders.org/files/en/Front%20Line%20Guatemala%20Attacks%20against%20human%20rights%20defenders%202000-2005.pdf>

In September 2006 Front Line Defenders also held a series of training workshops on electronic communications and security in Guatemala, which were based on the tools and materials outlined in the *NGO in a Box – Security Edition*.³⁰ HRDs from seventeen organisations participated in the training and it was co-organised with two local partner organisations, *Privaterra* and *Asociación Para el Estudio Promoción de la Seguridad en Democracia* (SEDEM), focussing on security concepts for physical and electronic protection, information encryption backup, antiviral protection and free software equivalents. A follow-up meeting took place in Guatemala in October in order to assist participants in implementing the workshop tools.

In November of the same year, a further training was held in Antigua, Guatemala, based on the Protection Manual for HRDs. The manual, which was written by Peace Brigades International, and published by Front Line Defenders, aims to assist in developing capacities to analyse risks, threats and security incidents, thus aiding the development of practical security strategies.

A particular case in Guatemala which exemplifies the intimidation faced by HRDs working on indigenous rights is that of Dr. Yuri Melini, who received the Front Line Defenders Award in 2009.³¹ He also attended the Fifth and Sixth Dublin Platform in 2010 and 2011.³² He is the director of The Centre for Legal, Environmental and Social Issues in Guatemala (CALAS), which concentrates on the rights of indigenous people who are often manipulated by the ruthless interests of logging and mining companies for the sake of profit. It also works to promote environmental issues, community participation and the respect for collective rights of indigenous communities. Since 2006, Dr. Melini had documented 128 attacks on environmental activists; himself surviving a vicious assassination attempt in 2008 when he was shot seven times after leaving his home. He spent twenty-two days in intensive care.

On 29 August 2011, Dr. Yuri Melini again received death threats, which also targetted his colleague Pedro Rafael Maldonado Flores, in the form of an envelope containing a threatening message in relation to the dismissal of Federico Guillermo Alvarez Mancilla from his position as Executive Secretary of the Consejo Nacional de Áreas protegidas – CONAP

³⁰ <http://ngoinbox.org/>

³¹ <http://www.frontlinedefenders.org/node/2503>. The award, which has been acknowledging defenders since 2005, aims to give international focus and raise the profiles of certain individuals or organisations, and includes a cash reward of fifteen thousand euro for the continuation of their work.

³² Prior to attending the Fifth Platform in 2010, Yuri participated in a Wellness Workshop organised by the Garrison Institute as a one-day event prior to the Fifth Dublin Platform to look at stress, trauma and wellness for human rights defenders at risk.

(National Council of Protected Areas). His dismissal was as a consequence of the pressure mounted by environmental organisations including CALAS. The note stated, ‘Yuri, Yuri, Yuri, do you never learn that life should be lived in peace. This that we send you is to verify that everything happens in sequence, and is serious, very serious. You will both be part of the eco chain. Anonymous or as you like)’.³³

A few days after Mr. Mancilla’s dismissal he gave an interview on the radio and referred to Yuri Melini as an eco-hysteric, a phrase subsequently picked up by other media sources to coin environmentalists, and alluding to the fact that this hysteria caused the dismissal of Mr. Mancilla.

Besides receiving the Front Line Award and attending two Dublin Platforms, Front Line Defenders have issued a number of urgent appeals on the case of Yuri Melini and his colleagues, and continue to highlight the security situation in Guatemala through visits and international advocacy.

Mexico

Mexico’s dedicated and well established civil society³⁴ is continually seen as a threatening force by the government and other actors resulting in efforts to suppress and restrict individuals from realising their rights.³⁵ HRDs are often the subject of acts of intimidation, continuous surveillance, judicial harassment, arbitrary arrests, death threats, forced disappearances and killings as a result of their activities in defence of human rights.³⁶

In November 2009, Front Line Defenders undertook a trip to Mexico combining a research mission with a regional Training of Trainers workshop as well as an EU Guidelines workshop. The research mission entailed meetings with HRDs from different regions of Mexico as well as meetings with the authorities. Front Line Defenders visited the state of Chihuahua as a matter of priority as it is one of the most dangerous regions in Mexico for HRDs to work.³⁷ There are very serious concerns

³³ <http://www.frontlinedefenders.org/node/15897>

³⁴ <http://civilsocietyindex.wordpress.com/2011/03/30/a-snapshot-of-civil-society-in-mexico/>

³⁵ Ibid, Note 5; 20.

³⁶ <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G11/132/51/PDF/G1113251.pdf?OpenElement>

³⁷ <http://staging.awid.org/Women-in-Action/Appeals-Urgent-Actions/Take-Action-Front-Line-Mexico-Fire-at-the-home-of-human-rights-defender-Malu-Garcia-Andrade-as-she-supports-a-protest-against-femicide-in-Chihuahua-State>

relating to organised criminal activity, narco-trafficking and femicide in Chihuahua.³⁸ While there, Front Line Defenders attended meetings organised by the Centre for Human Rights of Women that invited a range of different HRDs such as journalists, young activists, *campesino* organisations and women's organisations. As an indication of the prevailing attacks against women in the region and the extraordinary risks they face, seven females were killed in separate attacks during the week of Front Line Defenders' mission. One week later the twenty-three-year old niece of the head of the *Centro de Derechos Humanos de las Mujeres* (Centre for Human Rights of Women), Alma Caballero, was killed. Despite the high levels of violence and killings, there was (and is) limited international attention focussed on this region.

A specific case on those who defend the victims of femicide in Mexico is that of human rights lawyer, Lucha Estela Castro Rodríguez. Lucha works with the *Centro de Derechos Humanos de las Mujeres* in Chihuahua City, Mexico, and is also a legal advocate for *Justicia para Nuestras Hijas* (Justice for Our Daughters). She is very involved in representing families of murdered women and has often filed cases with the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. Through her work on these cases she denounces the widespread crimes committed by members of the army or drug cartels and as a result faces many threats. As she is the public face of the Centre, she faces additional risks for also strongly condemning Government officials and institutions and demanding for demilitarisation of the region.

At the beginning of Lucha's career fifteen years ago, she worked as a women's human rights defender (WHRD) with *El Barzón, Chihuahua*. *El Barzón* worked with those who faced illegal forced eviction because they were unable to repay their debts, and called for fair negotiations and to deal with arrangements. She thereafter became a lawyer and established her NGO, *Justicia para Nuestras Hijas* defending mothers of daughters who disappeared or were murdered in Ciudad Juárez and the city of Chihuahua. During her work on this issue for the past ten years she has been detained, beaten and persecuted by the police.

However, the last four years has seen an increase in the number of threats and security incidents against Lucha Castro, her family and her new organisation, the *Centro de Derechos Humanos de Las Mujeres*. On 14 May 2008, she filed a complaint with the State Attorney General's Office after she received threatening messages on her mobile phone. It is believed the

³⁸ Chihuahua is one of the most dangerous states in the country, and particularly the city of Ciudad Juárez where the combined problems of rival drug cartels and organised criminal groups, increased military presence and absolute impunity, led to a situation of acute violence.

threats were related to her public statements criticising the military presence in the region. In her complaint she demanded protection measures, and a full investigation but this did not materialise. In October 2008, Lucha visited Front Line Defenders Office in Brussels during a European Advocacy Tour and subsequently coordinated the Front Line Defenders' visit to Chihuahua in 2009. In the same year, Lucha received death threats over the phone. In one phone call an unidentified man threatened to destroy the Centre and soon after a military command came to her house. On another occasion, neighbours of the human rights defender reported seeing hooded military men in the vicinity of her home. Once Lucha Castro found out, she contacted the Ministry of the Interior to inquire about the 'visit'. The Ministry first denied knowledge but subsequently told her that the military presence was because of a complaint from her neighbour. No investigation was undertaken to discover the reason behind this incident. Following on from this, the Inter-Commission on Human Rights recommended precautionary security measures and two officers were required to accompany Lucha Castro during the day. On two occasions the officers failed to fulfil their obligations and the Centre asked for a withdrawal of the protection measures because they were ineffective.³⁹

Lucha Castro and the Centre then asked for more permanent protection measures. This request was met but with ineffective facilities such as a panic button outside the building on the street, an intercom system which does not work, a one-way mirror system, encrypted telephone lines where some are too expensive to use on a daily basis and some broke down after a few weeks. Although Lucha Castro requested a follow-up meeting with the government to discuss such measures, she has not yet received a response.

Lucha Castro attended the Fifth Dublin Platform in 2010, where she gave a heart-warming and somber testimony on the struggles she faces because of her work.⁴⁰ She was also one of five human rights defenders from all over the world nominated for the 2010 Front Line Defenders award.⁴¹

Front Line Defenders also hosted a regional Training of Trainers on security and protection in Mexico City for HRDs from eight countries throughout Latin America. From the attendees' experiences it was apparent that apart from the physical effects caused by working in a high

³⁹ This information on Lucha Castro was taken from different biographies and articles on her work in Front Line Defenders' archive.

⁴⁰ http://www.frontlinedefenders.org/files/Dublin%20Platform%202010%20Book%20of%20Testimonies%20web%20version_0.pdf.

⁴¹ <http://www.frontlinedefenders.org/node/2535>

risk environment, HRDs also reported considerable effects on their stress levels and mental health. Quoting a poignant statement from one participant, ‘in the thirty-seven years we have been working here, we have saved many lives but also buried many people...we are kind of dead – alive, living dead’.⁴² The most essential point of security to emerge from the workshop was that local knowledge is crucial, especially when many participants spoke about their feeling of vulnerability while travelling in rural areas. If one knows who the intimidators are, one can better assess the risk and react appropriately.

Conclusion

Front Line Defenders continue to report many cases of death threats, surveillance, harassment of family members, raids on offices and homes, and violent attacks including enforced disappearances and killings of human rights defenders from across Latin America. Those being targeted come from a broad range of human rights work from civil and political to social, economic and cultural rights. Front Line Defenders works to support human rights defenders who are at risk as a result of the legitimate and peaceful work they do in defending and promoting the rights of others. The aforementioned case studies are specific examples of different types of risks faced by HRDs, and different actors who can be engaged in violating rights, and whilst not intended to astonish, although some do, they aim to show different levels of repression that do not always fit the traditional idea of state versus society.

There are many actors who feel threatened and challenged by the work of HRDs, as in the case of Luz Perly Córdoba Mosquero and Abelardo Sánchez Serrano, which demonstrates the close relationship between state-run institutions and paramilitaries, an element distinctive in Colombia’s political landscape. Also, the struggles faced by Dr. Yuri Melini in Guatemala are symbolic of state and non-state actors coexisting in a country where prevailing impunity benefits both groups and encourages continued violations for the sake of profit. Furthermore, the persecution of Lucha Castro, ensuing from her efforts to challenge the climate of impunity in Mexico through evidencing human rights violations perpetrated by members of the military and drug cartels is also proof of how strong voices are perceived as threatening forces against a government. All these specific cases share the common need for protection from the government. This need often works against the interests of the government especially when human rights defenders are calling for accountability of certain governmental actors or revealing corruption among local authorities, officials and private companies.

⁴² http://www.frontlinedefenders.org/files/en/Dispatches%202009_0.pdf

When governments fail in their duties and obligations, it takes organisations such as Front Line Defenders to raise the national and international consciousness to the plight of HRDs. More than that, Front Line Defenders' practical support has ranged from financial assistance for physical protection to training in digital security and personal security, and lobbying in order to garner support from major regional powers. These different areas of support are an indication of both the subtle and obvious needs for protection of HRDs in Latin America, which focuses not only on reactionary measures but also preventative measures like training and networking. Until governments across Latin America uphold their international human rights obligations, Front Line Defenders will continue to apply its unique and sadly necessary spectrum of tools to empower and protect HRDs and to remind them that they are not alone in their cause.

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