



 International Service
for Human Rights

A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO THE UN SPECIAL PROCEDURES 2025

ABOUT ISHR

The International Service for Human Rights (ISHR) is an independent, international non-governmental organisation (NGO) that promotes and protects human rights by supporting human rights defenders and strengthening human rights standards and mechanisms. We achieve this through a strategic combination of research, advocacy, monitoring, coordination, and capacity building.

ISHR has worked closely for many years with the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders and other Special Procedures directly related to the work of defenders. We continue to support NGOs in engaging strategically with Special Procedures experts and advocate for the appointment of highly qualified, independent experts, as well as for the effective implementation of their recommendations by States.

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CREDITS

Authors: Original version by Helen Nolan. Updated by Fabiana Leibl, Lee Chung Lun and José Luis Treviño Illsley.

Translation: Doni

Graphic design: Nadia Joubert

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

About the handbook	4
--------------------	---

I. WHAT ARE THE SPECIAL PROCEDURES AND WHAT DO THEY DO?

Who are the Special Procedures?	6
What do the Special Procedures do?	7
1. Send communications on human rights violations	7
2. Conduct country visits	8
3. Publish thematic reports	8
4. Engage in public advocacy and awareness-building	9
5. Contribute to standard setting	9
6. Adopt legal opinions on arbitrary detention and engage confidentially with governments on cases of enforced disappearance	9

II. HOW CAN SPECIAL PROCEDURES SUPPORT YOUR HUMAN RIGHTS WORK?

Key features of the Special Procedures	14
How do the Special Procedures differ from other UN mechanisms?	15

III. HOW CAN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS WORK WITH THE SPECIAL PROCEDURES?

Communications	17
1. What kinds of Communications can be sent?	17
2. Who can submit information?	19
3. Where should information be sent?	19
4. What can be expected after submission?	21
5. What can be done to follow up on a communication?	22
Country visits	23
Reporting	24

IV. HOW CAN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS ENGAGE SAFELY WITH THE SPECIAL PROCEDURES?

Ensuring safe engagement	26
Understanding reprisals	27



Special Rapporteur on the rights of Indigenous Peoples Albert K. Baruma, and participants in the Women Human Rights Advocacy Week co-hosted by ISHR and partners address the Human Rights Council at a side event during its 60th session. © ISHR

ABOUT THE HANDBOOK

The Special Procedures are independent human rights experts appointed by the United Nations (UN). These experts – whether their title is ‘Special Rapporteur’, ‘Independent Expert’, or members of a ‘Working Group’ – are assigned to report on the protection and promotion of certain thematic rights around the world, or on the human rights situation in specific countries.

They are one of the most effective international instruments for confronting violations of the rights of individuals and groups. They have intervened in cases involving the killings of people defending environmental and land rights; highlighted the challenges faced by women human rights defenders; shone a light on the situation of LGBTI persons; and helped expose risks of detention and torture faced by civil society actors in highly restrictive environments. Often, their

independence allows them to discuss issues directly with governments that are otherwise deemed too 'sensitive' for internal discussion. It also enables them to act swiftly – and, often publicly – to address the situation of a person or community at risk, or draft legislation that does not align with international human rights standards.

This handbook is intended as a practical guide for civil society and human rights defenders who believe Special Procedures can support their human rights work. We hope the information provided here will help non-governmental organisations (NGOs) engage more strategically with the Special Procedures to increase the impact of their work around the world.



Mary Lawlor at side event. © ISHR

I. WHAT ARE THE SPECIAL PROCEDURES AND WHAT DO THEY DO?

Who are the Special Procedures?

'Special Procedures' is the collective term used for a group of human rights experts appointed by the United Nations (UN) to monitor and report on the situation of human rights around the world. They also provide advice and recommendations for the implementation of those rights. Most Special Procedures are individuals (Special Rapporteurs or Independent Experts), though some are Working Groups made up of five members (one from each official UN region). The different titles mostly reflect how the mandates were created, but in practice their working methods are very similar. The Special Procedures are established by resolutions of the UN Human Rights Council (HRC).

There are two broad categories of Special Procedures: country mandates and thematic mandates. The term ‘mandate’ can be understood as a kind of job description set out by the HRC. ‘[Country mandates](#)¹’ report on human rights in a specific country, while ‘[thematic mandates](#)²’ focus on a particular issue, for example torture or the right to education, around the world. As of June 2025, there are 46 thematic and 14 country mandates.

These experts (sometimes also known as ‘mandate holders’) are not UN staff and their posts are unpaid, both of which are intended to underline their independence. However, this also means they usually cannot dedicate all their time to the position, and often have an additional job (for example, as an academic or lawyer).

What do the Special Procedures do?

The specific tasks assigned to any given Special Procedure vary according to the HRC resolution establishing the mandate. The official webpage for each Special Procedures expert provides more detailed information on those resolutions and the scope of their work. For the most part, however, the tools available to the Special Procedures are the same:

1. Send communications on human rights violations

Special Procedures can send formal communications to governments and, in some cases, businesses or other actors. These letters highlight alleged violations of human rights and request clarification or action. They are often based on information submitted by civil society and those affected by human rights violations.

Communications for governments are sent from the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in Geneva to the country’s Permanent Mission to the UN in Geneva, which will then forward the communication to relevant actors within their government for action and response.

It is common for communications to be sent jointly by two or more Special Procedures mandates, particularly when the situation involves several human rights concerns. In such cases, one mandate typically takes the lead and invites others to contribute. For example, a case involving the arbitrary detention of a human rights defender who organised a protest could lead to a joint communication by mandates focused on human rights defenders, arbitrary detention, and freedom of assembly and association.

1 List of country mandates available here: <http://spinternet.ohchr.org/Layouts/SpecialProceduresInternet/ViewAllCountryMandates.aspx>.
 2 List of thematic mandates available here: <http://spinternet.ohchr.org/Layouts/SpecialProceduresInternet/ViewAllCountryMandates.aspx?Type=TM>.

All communications and any government responses are made available in a database³ on the OHCHR website, and may be included in aggregate form in a report⁴ presented at each regular session of the Human Rights Council (HRC).

2. Conduct country visits

Special Procedures conduct country visits to assess the human rights situation first-hand. These visits may be official (carried out at the invitation of the government) or informal (often related to a conference or event organised by non-State actors, such as an NGO or a university).

At the end of an official visit, the expert issues an end-of-mission statement outlining key preliminary findings. A more comprehensive report follows, including recommendations on how to improve the promotion and protection of rights. This report is then presented to the Human Rights Council (HRC). The number of official visits undertaken by each expert varies, but typically no more than three are conducted in a year.

Informal visits may also take place, but they do not result in a report and their costs are not covered by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). There is no fixed limit on the number of informal visits an expert may undertake in a year.

3. Publish thematic reports

All Special Procedures submit an annual written report to the HRC. The reports usually include a summary of the year's work and address emerging thematic issues. They are issued with annexes covering any country visits made and, in some cases, summaries of communications sent and replies received. Reports are usually made available on the HRC website⁵ in the weeks leading up to the HRC session at which they will be presented.

The experts also deliver an oral presentation of their report to the HRC and engage in **interactive dialogues** with States and NGOs. During these dialogues, comments and questions can be addressed to the experts on their present and future work, as well as on the normative development of the rights within their mandate. Experts may also be called upon to update the HRC outside their usual reporting cycle, particularly in response to urgent human rights situations that fall within their mandate.

Most experts also report to the Third Committee of the UN General Assembly. In this setting, they engage in an interactive dialogue with States only. However, NGOs can still influence the discussion by engaging in bilateral or informal advocacy with States in the weeks leading up to the Committee's meeting.

3 Database of communications sent and government replies available here: <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/>.

4 Reports (the 'Joint Communications Reports') available here: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/SP/Pages/CommunicationsreportsSP.aspx>.

5 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/sessions>.

4. Engage in public advocacy and awareness-building

Special Procedures often work in the public domain to foster better understanding of the rights they protect or to draw attention to specific concerns. A key example of this kind of work is the issuing of **press statements**, which are typically released in response to situations the expert considers urgent or serious enough to merit a public reaction. As with communications, these statements are often issued jointly.

Experts may also engage in public education or advocacy by giving media interviews, using social media, writing articles, or taking part in conferences and events to raise awareness. Some experts launch thematic campaigns or join educational initiatives — for example, partnering with schools, universities or NGOs to promote understanding of the rights within their mandate. NGOs and other stakeholders can invite experts to speak at events, participate in panel discussions or give keynote addresses. These opportunities not only help educate the public, but also give experts the chance to hear directly from communities — especially valuable when an official country visit is not possible due to a lack of government invitation.

5. Contribute to standard setting

Several Special Procedures have also made significant contributions to **standard-setting** in their respective fields, both by engaging in debates on new standards and by drafting them directly. A recent example is the involvement of experts in drafting and endorsement of the Declaration +25 in 2024, a landmark document that complements the 1998 UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders. The updated declaration reflects regional and international jurisprudential developments from the past 25 years.

6. Adopt legal opinions on arbitrary detention and engage confidentially with governments on cases of enforced disappearance

Two Special Procedures mandates – the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (WGAD) and the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances (WGEID) – carry out additional, distinct functions, in addition to those shared with other mandates as explained in previous sections.

The WGAD can adopt legal ‘Opinions’ determining whether an individual’s detention is arbitrary under international human rights law. These Opinions are based on a quasi-judicial adversarial procedure that considers information provided by the source and the State, and make recommendations to the States concerned, including the release of the individuals arbitrarily detained. While not legally binding, they carry strong legal and moral authority and have led to changes in detention practices and the release of detainees. The WGAD requests governments concerned to respond within six months with information about the

steps taken to implement the Opinion. The Opinions are available on WGAD's [webpage](#)⁶ and its database⁷. For more information, refer to OHCHR's [Fact Sheet No. 26: Working Group on Arbitrary Detention](#)⁸ and [WGAD's methods of work](#)⁹.

The WGEID has a distinct 'humanitarian mandate' by which it receives information from families or organisations regarding cases of individuals who have been forcibly disappeared, establishes a communication channel between the families and the governments concerned, and transmits these cases to the relevant governments to clarify the fate or whereabouts of the disappeared.

While the WGEID reports annually¹⁰ on the number of cases considered under this mandate, it does not disclose the identity or any detail of the cases; this approach is intended to improve cooperation with State authorities and increase the chances of a positive outcome. The WGEID provides a crucial channel for families seeking answers where legal remedies may be absent and remains engaged with the case until it is clarified, that is, until the fate or whereabouts of the disappeared person is established.¹¹ For more information, refer to OHCHR's [Fact Sheet No. 6: Enforced Disappearances](#)¹² and [WGEID's methods of work](#).¹³

Cases under both procedures are considered during the three sessions of each Working Group every year: the WGAD meets in March/April, August/September and November; the WGEID in February, May and September.

These procedures are not mutually exclusive, and they can be undertaken in parallel with the submission of a communication by any Special Procedures. For example, Special Procedures can issue a communication on an individual case to States while the WGAD or WGEID undertakes the above-mentioned procedures.

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- 6 Opinions adopted by the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/wg-arbitrary-detention/opinions-adopted-working-group-arbitrary-detention>.
 - 7 Database of Opinions adopted by the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, <https://wgad-opinions.ohchr.org/>.
 - 8 OHCHR's Fact Sheet No. 26: Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/publications/fact-sheets/fact-sheet-no-26-rev-1-working-group-arbitrary-detention>.
 - 9 Methods of work of the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, <https://docs.un.org/A/HRC/36/38>.
 - 10 Annual reports of the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/wg-disappearances/annual-reports>.
 - 11 The individual may still be arbitrarily detained and therefore under the purview of the WGAD.
 - 12 OHCHR's Fact Sheet No. 6: Enforced Disappearances <https://www.ohchr.org/en/publications/fact-sheets/fact-sheet-no-6-rev-4-enforced-disappearances>.
 - 13 Methods of work of the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances <https://docs.un.org/A/HRC/WGEID/1>.



ISHR Academy illustration. © Attic Media for ISHR

II. HOW CAN SPECIAL PROCEDURES SUPPORT YOUR HUMAN RIGHTS WORK?

The Special Procedures possess a range of tools that can support human rights defenders, but engaging with them requires time and strategic focus. For defenders working under pressure and with limited resources, collaborating with Special Procedures experts in Geneva may seem distant or disconnected from their daily work. Special Procedures do not have enforcement power. What they do have is the ability to influence through expertise, visibility, and public pressure.

So, why work with them?

1. They can help stop or reverse violations

Governments do sometimes change behaviour in response to communications from Special Procedures. In some circumstances, such as when individuals are at risk of torture or are being detained illegally, urgent recourse to the UN system can save lives.

Example: During Guatemala's 2023 election season, anti-corruption lawyer Claudia González was jailed on abuse-of-authority charges linked to her work with the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG).

On 18 September 2023, the Special Rapporteur on independence of judges and lawyers issued a [press release](#) praising her record and urging an end to reprisals. The statement contributed to efforts to obtain her transfer into house arrest 82 days after military detention.

2. They contribute to the release or better treatment of HRDs

Special Procedures can make a difference in cases where HRDs face arbitrary detention, politically motivated prosecution, or unfair trial proceedings. Even when a defender is not released immediately, their involvement can contribute to meaningful improvements, such as access to medical care, legal representation or better detention conditions.

Example: In 2021, Bangladeshi investigative journalist Rozina Islam was detained and charged under the Official Secrets Act for her reporting on alleged government mismanagement during the COVID-19 pandemic. From 2023 to 2024, several Special Procedures issued communications and public statements calling on the Bangladeshi authorities to drop the charges and respect press freedom. In August 2024, the court acquitted her of all charges. Her release came after years of legal harassment and was widely viewed as a result of both domestic advocacy and sustained UN pressure.

3. They amplify local voices and concerns

A statement or letter from Special Procedures experts can reinforce messages that local activists are already voicing, but with the added weight of an UN expert. In some situations, Special Procedures can publicly address issues that local groups cannot safely raise themselves, or that governments refuse to discuss domestically. By doing so, they amplify local concerns on the international stage.

Example: In January 2025, a group of Special Procedures experts publicly [called on](#) Thailand to repeal its *lèse-majesté* laws, citing their chilling effect on free expression. The statement echoed long-standing demands from Thai civil society and helped elevate the issue at a moment when domestic actors faced significant risk in raising it publicly. In Thailand, individuals criticising the monarchy have faced harsh criminal penalties, making open advocacy on this issue dangerous and often impossible for local organisations.

4. They offer expert advice or technical assistance

Special Procedures can support legal reforms, provide detailed guidance, or suggest policy changes to States, helping them to meet their human rights obligations. This kind of support may be more easily considered by governments, who sometimes see such assistance as being more ‘constructive’ than public statements criticising their human rights records, or who may be seeking expert guidance on the actions they should take to meet their human rights obligations in a particular situation.

Example: In 2016, ISHR, in collaboration with over 500 human rights defenders and legal experts, launched a Model National Law for the Recognition and Protection of Human Rights Defenders, designed to guide States in developing or strengthening their legal protections for defenders. The Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders contributed to its development, actively promoted the Model Law, and encouraged its adoption. This collaborative effort has since influenced national legislation in several countries, including Burkina Faso (2017) and Mongolia (2021).

5. Building support through international engagement

Even when an appeal to the UN does not lead to obvious progress, the act of appealing and having representatives of the international community take up the case can lend credibility to local groups and offer vital support and solidarity. It sends a clear message that victims are not alone in their struggle. This is particularly important in areas of human rights considered sensitive or controversial — for example, sexual and reproductive health rights — where such struggles can often feel both isolated and isolating. Working at the international level can also give activists the chance to broaden the reach of their organisations: to meet others, form alliances and coordinate their efforts more effectively.

Example: In early 2025, the US government imposed a 90-day halt on all US foreign aid, shuttering 80% of USAID programmes and threatening millions of lives. Within days, civil society networks across regions coordinated to document the fallout—sharing data through surveys, national platforms, and emergency briefings. Their joint inputs helped trigger a landmark move: 35 UN Special Procedures jointly issued a [communication](#) to the US, warning of devastating impacts on displaced people, women-led NGOs, and diversity projects.

Key features of the Special Procedures

The working methods of the Special Procedures offer several key features that make them particularly useful to NGOs and human rights defenders:

Urgency: The ability to issue urgent appeals is unique to the Special Procedures and is crucial in cases of ongoing violations or where violations are imminent. This capacity has, in some cases, saved lives.

Accessibility: The UN system of NGO accreditation¹⁴ (to obtain consultative status with the UN – also known as ECOSOC status) requires a significant investment of time and resources. It can be particularly difficult for NGOs working on issues that are politically sensitive.¹⁵ **No accreditation is required** to submit information to the Special Procedures — any victim or group can engage with the mechanism.

Universal coverage: Another key strength of the Special Procedures is that they operate independently of whether a State has ratified specific human rights treaties. They can address violations in any country in the world within the scope of their mandate.

No need to exhaust domestic remedies: Unlike some international human rights mechanisms, the Special Procedures do not require victims to exhaust all domestic avenues of redress before actions can be taken.

Independence: A crucial characteristic of the Special Procedures is their independence from governments once appointed. This allows them to work on politically sensitive issues and to challenge governments in ways other bodies may be unable or unwilling to. They can also propose and support progressive interpretations of international laws, reinforcing human rights standards and keeping specific issues on the international agenda, even when States are hostile or hesitant due to pressure.

14 Guide on how to navigate the UN system of accreditation available here: https://academy.ishr.ch/upload/resources_and_tools/ishr_3rd_com_handbook_en.pdf.

15 More information and updates available here: <https://academy.ishr.ch/learn/accessing-the-un-1/ecosoc-accreditation>.

How do the Special Procedures differ from other UN mechanisms?

	Universal Periodic Review (UPR)	Special Procedures (SPs)	Treaty Bodies (TBs)
What kind of monitoring is it?	Countries: The UPR reviews the entire human rights record of countries.	Countries/topics: SPs either monitor the human rights situation in a country or focus on human rights themes as part of a general overview.	Countries: TBs review how a State has implemented its obligations that are set out in a treaty the State has ratified or acceded to.
Who makes the recommendations?	States: States make recommendations to each other.	Experts: An individual or small group makes recommendations primarily to States, but also to other actors, like businesses.	Experts: A committee of experts makes recommendations to States.
Which human rights are covered?	All: All human rights are covered by the UPR.	Some: SPs focus either on countries or specific topics, as mandated by the Human Rights Council.	Some: TBs focus only on those rights that are covered by the treaty for which that TB monitors compliance.
Can they undertake country visits?	No: There are no country visits as part of the UPR process.	Yes: All SPs can go on country visits, but 'official' visits are only possible if the State has invited them to do so.	Yes: Some TBs can visit countries, e.g. Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture.
How frequent is the monitoring?	Every 4-5 years , with voluntary mid-term reporting in between.	Ongoing. Each SP publishes one or two annual reports on their country or topic (to the HRC and the GA). They can also issue communications during the year, if there are serious human rights violations occurring in a country.	Varies: States are reviewed roughly every 4 years, but usually less frequently. This is because the process depends on when a country submits information and the TB's own backlog.
Which countries are covered?	All	All: Though some SPs are mandated to examine the situation in one specific country.	Some: TBs can only review the countries that have ratified the treaty for which that TB monitors compliance.
How authoritative are the recommendations?	Political: UPR recommendations are always political because States review each other. Some can be specific, action-oriented and in line with international human rights standards, but others tend to be quite vague. States choose to accept recommendations or to simply note them, but there are no sanctions if the State fails to comply.	Expert: The recommendations are made by independent experts, making them quite authoritative. The recommendations themselves are not binding, which means that States are only encouraged to implement them.	Binding: TB recommendations are authoritative statements of what States should do to implement their binding legal obligations, meaning that States must implement them. However, there are no sanctions if States do not do so. The recommendations are usually framed in legal language and can be very specific.

Role of OHCHR

OHCHR supports all Special Procedures, effectively acting as their secretariat. It provides assistance in several areas, such as legal and regional expertise, research, analytical support and fact-finding.

Each expert is directly supported by OHCHR staff based in Geneva — usually just one or two staff members per mandate. They help with research for reports, drafting communications and press releases, and meeting with civil society organisations in Geneva when the expert is not present. They also organise the logistics and agenda for official country visits and, occasionally, informal visits.

Because OHCHR resources are limited, staff may struggle to keep up with the flow of information from civil society and States. In some cases, experts may also receive support from external staff or institutions.

Role of the HRC

Special Procedures are independent experts appointed for their knowledge and experience, with the aim of providing substantive advice to the HRC. However, they are created by the HRC — a body made up of States — which means political negotiations and tensions between governments shape the creation, powers, renewal or termination, and future direction of each mandate.

This also makes the HRC the biggest potential threat to the independence of the experts. Even after a Special Procedure is established, some States may attempt to interfere with its work through follow-up resolutions or the creation of ‘competing’ or ‘counterbalancing’ mandates. Increasingly, States use interactive dialogues with the experts to question the legitimacy of a mandate or criticise the conduct of the expert themselves.

Despite these risks, the fact that the HRC — the UN’s top body with exclusive competence on human rights — grants the mandate gives the Special Procedures political weight. This can increase their influence, encourage State cooperation, and contribute to meaningful human rights change.



HRDAP25 participants working on engagement with SPs. © ISHR

III. HOW CAN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS WORK WITH THE SPECIAL PROCEDURES?

Each of the tools available to the Special Procedures offer opportunities for human rights defenders. This section outlines how to make the most of those openings.

Communications

Communications are one of the most effective tools available to Special Procedures, especially for human rights defenders facing urgent risks. This section explains how to submit a communication, what happens after, and how to follow up for maximum impact.

1. What kinds of Communications can be sent?

There are three main types of communications used by the Special Procedures. Each type may be sent by an individual expert or jointly by several experts.

Urgent appeals are emergency tools used to stop ongoing violations or prevent those that are imminent. The Special Procedures aim to send these quickly after receiving credible information. They request clarification from the government on the status of affected individuals or groups and remind authorities of their human rights obligations.

Example: In 2023–2024, Special Procedures sent seven urgent appeals concerning human rights violations to Saudi Arabia, raising alarm over a recurring pattern of arbitrary detention, torture, enforced disappearances, and the application of the death penalty, often in violation of international law. Several cases involved individuals sentenced to death for acts committed as minors or for offences such as drug-related crimes.

Allegation letters, by contrast, address human rights violations that have already occurred. They outline the relevant allegations and request information from the government on those allegations, as well as on any measures taken to provide redress to victims. They may also include recommendations on actions the government should take in response. Allegation letters can relate to violations affecting individuals or groups, and may also raise broader concerns about the human rights situation in a given country.

Example: In Ecuador, workers at Furukawa Plantaciones C.A. alleged decades of forced labour on abacá plantations. In 2019, Special Procedures sent a [communication](#) describing the conditions as contemporary slavery. A follow-up press release in 2024 renewed pressure. That same year, Ecuador’s Constitutional Court [ruled](#) the company responsible and ordered over \$41 million in compensation. The Court cited the UN communication – showing how allegation letters can strengthen legal accountability.

Tip: Don’t worry if you are not sure whether you should be requesting an urgent appeal or an allegation letter – in practice there is no difference for your advocacy as they are both letters sent to your government. Once the experts have the information they need, they will decide what label to put on the letter.



Policy or legislative communications (often referred to as ‘other letters’) are sent to express concern that an existing or proposed law, policy or practice may negatively affect the enjoyment of rights by certain individuals or communities.

Example: In June 2023, the Special Rapporteur on freedom of expression sent a [communication](#) to Kyrgyzstan, warning that the draft Mass Media Bill risked undermining media freedom and urging its revision. As public concern mounted, the letter reinforced the position of civil society actors campaigning against the bill. On 13 March 2024, following sustained domestic opposition, the President of Kyrgyzstan withdrew the draft law.

2. Who can submit information?

In most cases, anyone may submit information to the Special Procedures. There is no requirement for organisations to be registered with the UN, and individuals may also submit information. However, the Working Groups on arbitrary detention and on enforced or involuntary disappearances have slightly more formal requirements and accept information from the individuals concerned, their families or representatives (including lawyers and NGOs).

3. Where should information be sent?

To help ensure submissions are considered, an **online form**¹⁶ is available for anyone wishing to contact any of the Special Procedures. Submissions are also accepted via email. Information about the individual criteria used by each Special Procedure — including the kinds of details they find most useful when preparing communications — can be found on the webpages for **thematic**¹⁷ or **country**¹⁸ mandates. Submissions should be made in English, French or Spanish.

Tip: If you are particularly interested in a joint action by various Special Procedures, it is important to share information with all of the relevant mandates and to explain why it is important for them to act together (i.e. why would there be a greater impact?). If you specifically do not want joint action, you should also explain why.



The information that human rights defenders already hold can often be turned into a strong submission with relatively limited resources. To ensure your submission is taken into account, avoid relying solely on media sources. Wherever possible, use first-hand accounts or direct documentation as the basis for your information.

¹⁶ Online questionnaire for submitting information to Special Procedures available here: <https://spsub-mission.ohchr.org/>.

¹⁷ List of thematic mandates available here: <http://spinternet.ohchr.org/Layouts/SpecialProceduresInternet/ViewAllCountryMandates.aspx?Type=TM>.

¹⁸ List of country mandates available here: <https://spinternet.ohchr.org/ViewAllCountryMandates.aspx>.

When preparing a submission, be sure to address the following questions — most of which are also included in the online submission form:

1. **Who is sending the information?** Provide contact details.
2. **Is the situation urgent?** Why? Is there a specific moment or window to influence policy or to prevent further violations?
3. **What is/are the name, age, gender, place of origin and/or residence of the victim(s)?** If the allegation concerns a large group, then you can combine multiple victims into one submission.
4. **Do you have consent?** This can come from the victim personally, or from his/her family or lawyer. In some cases, the staff may ask for this information in writing.
5. **What happened?** Include dates and locations. If it concerns a law or policy, provide the document in an annex (with a translation into English, French or Spanish if available).
6. **Who are the perpetrators?** If possible, give names, titles/functions, and any possible motive.
7. **What is the context?** What should the experts know about the legal framework – particularly important for submissions concerning a general situation.
8. **What action has been taken to address the situation?** This refers to actions at the national or international level, and include remedies already sought by victims or their representatives.
9. **What action should the Special Procedure(s) take?** Suggest steps or measures the experts could take to best address the situation, including questions they should ask, as well as whether you want them to consider a press release (and why).

4. What can be expected after submission?

Once OHCHR receives a submission, staff will assess whether it contains enough information — and whether that information is credible — for an expert to issue a communication to the relevant government. Staff may contact the source to request further details. They must also ensure the issue falls within the mandate of one or more Special Procedures. Due to limited capacity, not all submissions result in action.

Tip: Some experts receive hundreds of submissions each week. To increase the chances of the submission getting their attention and action, you should present the information in a concise manner; focus on very recent or upcoming events; demonstrate why action at that specific moment is necessary (especially if you are also hoping for a press release); and consider compiling a number of cases to show a trend. It is crucial to show that you have the consent of any individual victim or organisation mentioned.



If a communication is sent, it will be published in the communications database¹⁹ once the government's response deadline has passed. This deadline is usually stated in the text of the communication: typically 60 days for allegation letters and urgent appeals, or as little as 48 hours when the issue concerns draft legislation or policy and the communication is primarily legal in nature.

One limitation of the system is that it can be difficult to track the status of a submission. Not all Special Procedures acknowledge receipt, which can make it unclear whether any action has been taken. If you want to follow up, you may need to send a second message. It is also important to inform OHCHR if there are any updates or changes to the situation described in your original submission.

Tip: You can sometimes find out who is the OHCHR staff member supporting the relevant mandate by looking at the contact details given at the end of the most recent press releases²⁰ issued by that Special Procedure. Double check if it's a joint press release because the contact details might be for someone supporting a different mandate! If you have the opportunity to meet in person, make sure to get the business card or contact details of the staff member, as it can be more effective to write to them directly than to the generic email of the mandate. It is important to note that staff rotate between mandates frequently, so double check before submitting information.



¹⁹ <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/Tmsearch/TMDocuments>.

²⁰ Press releases of all Special Procedures available here: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/NewsSearch.aspx>.

5. What can be done to follow up on a communication?

Once a communication has been made and a government reply requested, it may feel as though the process is no longer in the hands of NGOs. However, there are several ways to follow up and remain engaged.

First, if a government response is received by OHCHR, they may contact the original source of the communication to request comments or explore possible next steps. Even when no contact is made, any government response to the Special Procedures' communication will be accessible once it has been published in the online database. Comments on the government's response, especially where it differs from the experience of victims or sources, can be submitted directly to OHCHR.

Tip: You don't have to wait until a communication has been published by the Special Procedures to draw attention to the case. The very fact that you've submitted information can be a powerful basis for advocacy. You might consider launching a civil society campaign or engaging the media, for example by highlighting that the situation has become so serious that you had no choice but to bring it to the UN.



Second, the facts contained in the communication, as well as any government response (even if inadequate or vague), can be used for both international and domestic advocacy. They can support efforts to press the government to fulfil promises made to Special Procedures experts, or to challenge false or misleading claims. Governments can also be urged to issue a response, and a lack of reply can be publicly highlighted.

Once a communication is made public, you can use it to reinforce advocacy through media or diplomatic channels. Sharing the communication with trusted journalists can help expose violations and increase public scrutiny. Likewise, presenting the communication to diplomatic missions can prompt them to raise the case directly with the government, either in private or through statements at the Human Rights Council. Highlighting that a UN expert has formally addressed the issue can add weight to civil society demands and increase pressure on authorities to respond meaningfully.

Country visits

There are a number of ways in which human rights defenders can engage with country visits to strengthen both their own work and that of the Special Procedures. It is helpful to consult the OHCHR website²¹ to check whether any visits to your country have been requested or scheduled.

First, civil society can encourage Special Procedures experts with mandates relevant to their work to undertake a country visit, with the aim of drawing international attention to the situation on the ground. This can be done by writing to the relevant expert and explaining why a visit would be timely and useful. When seeking to carry out a visit, Special Procedures experts request an invitation from the host government. If no invitation is forthcoming, NGOs can lobby their government to issue one. Some governments have issued a so-called 'standing invitation'²², allowing visits from all Special Procedures experts. While each visit still requires a formal request and negotiation, such States are under greater pressure to cooperate.

At the same time, Special Procedures experts may have their own priorities about when and where they wish to visit and may submit a request without engaging local civil society beforehand. Less commonly, governments themselves may encourage a visit. In some cases, this is done in good faith and reflects a genuine interest in improving human rights protections. In others, it may be an effort to promote areas where the government believes it has a positive story to tell.

Tip: In some countries, it is highly unlikely that a government will agree with a request of a Special Procedure to visit. One way to get around this difficulty is for civil society or an academic institution to invite a particular mandate holder to attend a conference or event, allowing for an unofficial visit. A Special Procedure can't issue a full report with recommendations after an unofficial visit, but it can help to build a relationship with the expert and draw their attention to grave situations or cases. It can even pave the way for an official invitation if there is a good dialogue with government representatives.



Second, once a visit has been agreed, NGOs can submit information to help the expert prepare and highlight priority issues for investigation. Civil society can also help publicise the visit. While the agenda is negotiated between the mandate holder and the State, NGOs can influence both the topics addressed in formal meetings and the inclusion of informal ones. This is where the expert's independence and 'unfettered access' are crucial.

²¹ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures-human-rights-council/country-and-other-visits>.

²² <https://spinternet.ohchr.org/StandingInvitations.aspx?lang=en>.

Third, during the visit, NGOs can meet with the expert to raise concerns and answer questions. These meetings can be arranged by contacting the OHCHR staff coordinating the mandate. Since visits are often short, it is useful for domestic NGOs to coordinate among themselves to ensure broad and diverse input.

Where security is a concern, defenders may need to consider meeting with the mandate holders in private locations or secure virtual spaces. If there is little or no space for independent civil society in the country, these can be held in other countries or in Geneva. They can occur before, during or – in certain cases – after the visit, and can be facilitated by international partner NGOs.

Lastly, once a visit has been completed, the expert will issue a report and recommendations, which are then presented to the HRC. As this process can take up to a year after the visit occurs, many experts issue a detailed end-of-mission press statement, which can indicate the main focus or concerns that are likely to be included in the report.

The country visit report can be a valuable advocacy tool. National NGOs can use it to press for implementation of key recommendations, especially where governments appear reluctant. It can also be shared with the media and diplomatic contacts — particularly important in contexts where civil society cannot safely or openly engage with government officials.

Example: In 2022, the Special Rapporteur on freedom of assembly and association Clément Voule visited Brazil to assess the degree of respect for the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association. Indigenous, trade unions and Afro-Latino women-led groups shaped the itinerary, met the expert nationwide and saw their concerns featured in the [2023 HRC report](#) which stressed the key role of civil society in transforming Brazil into a more equal and just society.

Reporting

During the interactive dialogue that follows a Special Procedures expert's oral presentation to the HRC, ECOSOC-accredited NGOs have the opportunity to make statements and ask questions. These interventions can be used to encourage the experts to look at new issues, draw attention to specific countries or groups of concern, or ask for more detail of their work. Since the experts usually attend the HRC in person, this is also an opportunity to meet with them and their staff in Geneva.

In addition, experts can be lobbied in advance to highlight particularly serious situations in their oral presentations, or to include civil society concerns in their thematic reports by referencing specific country examples.

Some Special Procedures experts also present a thematic report to the UN General Assembly once a year. Civil society cannot speak during those sessions, but if you are able to travel to New York, the experts often organise side events and hold private meetings with civil society organisations.

Tip: Even if your organisation is not ECOSOC-accredited or you cannot travel to Geneva, you can still work with an NGO that has ECOSOC status to jointly prepare a statement that you or they can deliver during the interactive dialogue with the Special Procedures expert. Since 2020, it has also been possible for individuals to deliver statements remotely via pre-recorded video. Keep in mind that these statements have a strict time limit of 90 seconds!





ISHR Academy illustration. © Attic Media for ISHR

IV. HOW CAN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS ENGAGE SAFELY WITH THE SPECIAL PROCEDURES?

Being in contact with a UN expert or their staff can sometimes increase the risk a human rights defender faces. As a result, it is important that you are fully aware of the potential dangers, the steps you can take to mitigate them, and the ways you can respond if you suffer intimidation or reprisal because of your contact with the Special Procedures.

Ensuring safe engagement

Generally, the identity of those who provide information to Special Procedures is kept confidential from the State or non-State actor to whom the communication is sent. You can also request another NGO to submit information on your behalf to enhance confidentiality.

Tip: If you are concerned about digital security, some Special Procedures also use encrypted emails or messaging platforms such as Proton Mail and Signal. Trusted partners may also be able to help get this information.



You can further indicate if parts of your submission should remain confidential and not to be shared with the government concerned. However, as the process is based on specific violations and individuals or groups, it can be difficult for Special Procedures to act without being able to share sufficient details with the government concerned.

This means that in sensitive cases, a careful balance must be struck: on the one hand, providing enough information for Special Procedures to take meaningful action, and on the other, avoiding an increased risk of retaliation or further harm to those involved.

When making a submission, it is crucial to consider the potential impact on those named. For this reason, **consent** is a central concern for Special Procedures. Organisations submitting information should clearly state whether they have obtained the consent of the individuals or families concerned.

Special Procedures are fully aware of the potential risks involved in their communications and follow a 'do no harm' approach. If they assess that the danger is too great, they may decide not to act.

Tip: Risk is not always limited to individuals. Family members, colleagues, or entire organisations can be affected. Before submitting a case to the Special Procedures, consult with everyone who may be impacted, assess the possible consequences, and prepare a response plan in the event of reprisals. See ISHR's [toolkit](#)²³ on assessing and mitigating risks.



Understanding reprisals

Raising your voice in any context against a State or other powerful bodies can put you at risk. 'Reprisals'²⁴ is the term used to describe any act of intimidation or attack suffered by a person or group who cooperate, have cooperated or seek to cooperate with the UN or a regional human rights body. In recent years there has been increased concern at threats, intimidation and reprisals experienced by human rights activists and defenders, whether at the local, regional, or international levels.

Reprisals are often carried out by powerful State agents, such as the police, military or security forces, or the judiciary, who act to protect the State from criticism. They are also frequently carried out by non-State actors, such as businesses, members of criminal groups, or armed groups, whose links to the State are direct, indirect, or totally absent.

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- 23 ISHR toolkit for assessing and mitigating risks of reprisals for UN engagement: <https://ishr.ch/defenders-toolbox/resources/toolkit-on-assessing-and-mitigating-risks-of-reprisals-for-un-engagement/>.
- 24 Guide on how to leverage UN mechanisms to respond to reprisals and promote accountability available here: <https://ishr.ch/defenders-toolbox/resources/reprisals-handbook-for-human-rights-defenders/>.

These abuses range from defenders having their activities unreasonably restricted and their organisations unfairly scrutinised, to being spied on or defamed, denied access to funding, or being subjected to arbitrary arrest, physical violence, and death. In addition to being used to punish, reprisals often take place as a deterrent measure.

There are specific moments when the level of risk of reprisals is increased. These are situations when the authorities have more at stake in having a poor human rights record exposed. There may also be an increased risk when a defender brings a domestic issue before a UN human rights body, shining a light on the government's human rights record. Governments have no desire to be portrayed as human rights violators on a regional or international stage. Backlash against human rights defenders who expose the government can be harsh, particularly in cases in which the State enjoys impunity.

Special Procedures have a responsibility to react to cases of reprisals suffered by defenders who have engaged with them, for example during a country visit or in the context of communications. They can respond [in a number of ways](#),²⁵ both confidential and public, and the action taken is decided on a case-by-case basis:

- Special Procedures can send a communication to the relevant State and/or issue a press release on the specific case. They can also mention the case in their reports to the HRC and the General Assembly, or during their interactive dialogues with these two bodies. They can also work with other human rights mechanisms at the international or regional level to coordinate a response.

Example: After the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty visited China, Jiang Tianyong, one of the human rights lawyers he met with was arbitrarily detained and charged with 'subverting state power.' The Special Rapporteur made a specific [reference](#) to the human rights defender during his presentation of his country mission report to the HRC, stating 'the Chinese government has made it clear to me that it would prefer me not to pursue these issues, but my obligation as an independent expert is to present a balanced overall view and these problems need to be acknowledged.' The country visit [report](#) explicitly referred to actions taken by the Special Rapporteur to respond to reprisals against human rights defenders who had met or were planning to meet with the mandate holder during the country visit, which included a communication and press release. The Special Rapporteur continued to raise concerns at the situation of lawyer Jiang Tianyong in public statements in [2017](#) and [2019](#).

²⁵ More information on different kinds of responses available here: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/SF/Pages/Actsofintimidationandreprisal.aspx>.

Example: Special Procedures experts released statements in 2014²⁶, 2019²⁷ and 2024²⁸ to call for justice and full investigation into the death of Chinese human rights defender Cao Shunli, who faced reprisals for engaging with the UN in 2013. The statements show a consistent follow-up by Special Procedures on the case over a decade. However, there has been no official response by the Chinese government and no steps towards an independent investigation into her death.

- Special Procedures may decide to meet with Government officials, to discuss cases confidentially and seek action by the State. They may also raise the case with UN representatives in the field and at headquarters, including the Secretary-General, the High Commissioner for Human Rights, and the President of the HRC.
- The [Coordination Committee](#)²⁹ of the Special Procedures (designed to enhance coordination among mandate holders and act as a bridge between them, governments, the rest of the UN system and civil society) appoints a focal point on reprisals every year, who is responsible for keeping a comprehensive record of all cases of reprisals submitted to the Special Procedures. The Coordination Committee is meant to raise the issue of reprisals with the HRC, the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights (ASG) and the Secretary-General. When necessary and in consultation with the mandate holder(s) concerned, the Coordination Committee may take additional action such as contacting the State or stakeholder concerned, issuing a press statement, etc.
- The Assistant Secretary-General (ASG)³⁰, who is designated to lead UN efforts to put an end to intimidation and reprisals and to ensure a unified UN response to acts of intimidation and reprisal. The ASG can raise cases of reprisals with States either in private meetings or through correspondence. In responding to allegations of reprisals, the ASG generally communicates privately with the State in question, however s/he is encouraged to respond publicly where appropriate with relevant States.

26 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2014/03/deadly-reprisals-un-experts-deplore-events-leading-death-chinese-human>.

27 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/news/2019/03/china-un-experts-renew-calls-probe-death-cao-shunli>.

28 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/03/china-un-experts-renew-calls-accountability-cao-shunli-death>.

29 More information on the Coordination Committee available here: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/SP/CoordinationCommittee/Pages/CCSpecialProceduresIndex.aspx>.

30 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/reprisals>.

- Actions taken by the ASG to address cases of reprisals are generally, but not all the time, included in the Secretary-General's annual [reprisals report](#)³¹ that is presented to the HRC each September. Civil society can submit cases of reprisals as a result of their engagement with Special Procedures to the ASG. The annual reprisals report also includes follow-up information on past cases and global trends of reprisals.

Tip: You can submit your case to the annual report of the Secretary-General on reprisals. Inputs should include information on incidents or trends during the reporting period (1 May–30 April) and should be sent to ohchr-reprisals@un.org by 15 April every year. The report is typically presented to the Human Rights Council in September of the same year.



- The annual report³² of the Special Procedures contains a section on reprisals which reflects the main concerns of, and actions taken by mandate holders over the past year.

Tip: If you have suffered an act of intimidation or reprisal as a result of your engagement with the Special Procedures, you can contact:

- The Special Procedures you engaged with
- OHCHR reprisal team: ohchr-reprisals@un.org (other secure channels available upon request)
- President of the HRC: hrcpresidency@un.org



³¹ A list of the annual reports of the Secretary-General on intimidation and reprisals for cooperation with the UN in the field of human rights is available here: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Reprisals/Pages/Reporting.aspx>.

³² Annual reports of the Special Procedures available here: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/SP/Pages/Annualreports.aspx>.

DECLARATION+25 ACTIVIST GUIDE



A guide to using, building on, and amplifying the standards in the Declaration +25 to protect the right to defend rights. It seeks to facilitate a deeper understanding of the Declaration +25 and encourage its use and promotion.



REPRISALS HANDBOOK



ISHR's Reprisals Handbook is an essential resource for all stakeholders concerned about intimidation and reprisals against those cooperating with international or regional human rights systems. In the moment of printing it is available in English, Uyghur, Tibetan, Simplified and traditional Chinese.



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@ISHRGlobal

GENEVA OFFICE

Rue de Varembe 1, 5th floor, P.O. Box 16,
CH-1211 Geneva 20 CIC, Switzerland

NEW YORK OFFICE

777 UN Plaza, 7th floor, New York,
NY 10017, USA