

BRIEFING PAPER

Universal Periodic Review

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THE SITUATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS IN LIBERIA

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Liberia was last reviewed under the UPR during the 22nd session in May 2020. During Liberia's 2020 Universal Periodic Review (UPR), the country received 218 recommendations, of which 166 were accepted, and 52 were noted.¹ Notably, recommendations were made to strengthen the institutional capacity of the Independent National Commission on Human Rights (INCHR), which plays a pivotal role in protecting HRDs. These included ensuring adequate resources and compliance with the Paris Principles.²

A. RISKS FACING HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

1. Human rights defenders (HRDs) in Liberia face numerous risks and challenges in their efforts to promote justice, accountability, and human rights. While Liberia does not have specific laws that directly target HRDs, the lack of political will, insufficient legal frameworks, and social resistance create an environment where HRDs face significant threats. These risks range from threats and harassment by government actors and political groups to violence, arbitrary arrests, and even forced exile. HRDs advocating for justice for victims of the civil war, environmental protection, and the rights of marginalized groups, including the LGBTQ+ community, are especially vulnerable to reprisals.³
2. Despite advocacy efforts, human rights defenders continued to face significant risks. The absence of a formal protection policy leaves many defenders vulnerable, particularly those confronting powerful entities or individuals with substantial political or financial influence. The push for the establishment of a war and economic crimes court further heightened tensions, as activists advocating for accountability encountered increased threats.⁴
3. HRDs in Liberia, especially those involved in advocating for justice for victims of the country's civil wars, have faced direct threats and intimidation. In August 2020, a coalition of nine human rights organizations, including the Global Justice and Research Project (GJRP), Human Rights Watch, Civitas Maxima, and the Civil Society Human Rights Advocacy Platform of Liberia, reported credible threats against HRDs, such as Hassan Bility, Director of the Global Justice and Research Project (GJRP) and Adama Dempster, secretary general of the Civil Society Human Rights Advocacy Platform of Liberia, who were targeted for their work related to war crimes and transitional justice. These threats escalated after the return of Agnes Reeves Taylor, the ex-wife of former Liberian President Charles Taylor, who had been accused of committing acts of torture during Liberia's first civil war (1989–1996). The threats included harassment, death threats, intimidation, and surveillance threats, online harassment, and in-person intimidation targeted at both Hassan Bility and Adama Dempster. Despite calls for action, the government has failed to fully protect HRDs from such threats, signalling a lack of commitment to safeguarding human rights defenders from state-sponsored or state-tolerated harassment.⁵
4. Between 2016 and 2024, human rights defenders in Liberia faced a range of violations from law enforcement agencies in the exercise of their fundamental rights to freedom of assembly. In December 2024, amidst anti-government protests in Monrovia, the Liberian parliament building caught fire. The protests were sparked by the removal of the opposition party's parliament speaker, leading to public unrest. During these events, police arrested dozens of protesters, including Sekou Kalasco, an aide of former President George Weah. They also used tear gas to disperse crowds, which reflects the volatile environment in which HRDs operate.
5. On Thursday, March 25, 2025, students from public schools staged a peaceful protest demanding the payment of teachers' salaries. In response, the Liberia National Police arrested, flogged, and arbitrarily detained the students. Some students sustained injuries as a result of the police's actions, which constitutes a violation of the students' right to peaceful protest.⁶
6. These incidents illustrate the multifaceted challenges faced by human rights defenders in Liberia during this period, encompassing police brutality, forced exile, arbitrary arrests, and risks associated with opposing powerful industries.

B. OFFICIAL RESTRICTIONS ON THE SPACE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

7. HRDs in Liberia face societal and political challenges. The absence of specific protective laws, combined with public and political resistance to human rights advocacy, exacerbates the risks for HRDs. Activists are often stigmatized, and their work is undermined by political groups or individuals aligned with those in power. This hostile environment not only threatens HRDs' physical safety but also hampers their ability to advocate for justice, transparency, and accountability. The government's failure to address these challenges highlights the systemic barriers to the effective operation of HRDs in Liberia.⁷

C. HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS FACING PARTICULAR RISKS

8. LGBTQI+ human rights defenders (HRDs) in Liberia face severe risks, including threats, physical attacks, and forced displacement due to their advocacy for the rights of LGBTQI+ individuals. Despite international human rights protections, these defenders operate in a hostile environment where discrimination and violence are pervasive. The following cases illustrate the dangers faced by LGBTQI+ HRDs in Liberia.
9. In June 2023, Mr. and Mrs. Nyanti (the Nyanti's), an activist couple, faced severe threats and physical attacks due to their open support for the LGBTQ+ community. After posting photos on social media wearing LGBTQ+ supportive apparel, they endured night-time assaults on their home by groups of men shouting anti-LGBTQ+ slogans and causing property damage. Subsequent attacks included physical assaults, with local authorities offering little protection and advising them to cease their advocacy to avoid further harm.
10. On March 6, 2024, two women in the SKD Boulevard Community of Oldest Congo Town were assaulted by residents after being accused of engaging in same-sex relations. The attackers, primarily young men, forcibly entered the couple's home, inflicted severe injuries, and threatened their lives. The victims sought medical treatment and eventually fled Liberia due to on-going death threats.
11. A 2024 report by The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, an organization dedicated to supporting women's rights and peacebuilding initiatives globally, titled *"The Space for Women Human Rights Defenders and LGBTQI Activists in Liberia"*, provides valuable insights into the adversities faced by these groups. The study, which includes a desk review, a survey with 77 respondents, and 19 key informant interviews, highlights the various risks that Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) and LGBTQI activists in Liberia encounter. These risks negatively impact their physical, mental, and emotional well-being, thereby further restricting the space within which they can operate. Furthermore, the report emphasizes a critical gap in research on how gender and sexual identity dimensions affect HRDs in Liberia, underscoring the need for greater attention and action to address these challenges.⁸
12. It can be recalled that in 2019, a party hosted by members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community in Liberia ended in violence when they were attacked by a mob in the early hours of Sunday morning. Speaking under strict conditions of anonymity, Clarisse, a young transgender woman from Monrovia, said that members of the general community started forcing open the gate of the private venue where they the party was being held. "The party was hosted as a way of mobilising the transgender community in order to increase HIV testing rates as well as to raise awareness on HIV in our community," she said.
13. Human rights activists opposing extractive industries with links to international companies faced brutal reprisals. A 2024 report by Peace Brigades International highlighted cases where HRDs suffered severe consequences for their advocacy against environmental destruction and human rights abuses associated with these industries.⁹
14. For instance, the Salala Rubber Corporation (SRC), a subsidiary of the multinational Socfin Group, has been implicated in serious human rights violations against local communities and activists opposing its operations. The SRC holds a concession of over 40,000 hectares in central Liberia, which has been marred by allegations of land grabs, destruction of livelihoods, and environmental degradation. In 2019, 22 affected communities, represented by organizations including Green Advocates International, filed a complaint with the International Finance Corporation's Compliance Advisor Ombudsman (CAO). The complaint detailed issues such as forced evictions, lack of consultation, loss of livelihoods, labour rights violations, water pollution, gender-based violence, and threats against HRDs. Notably, community organizers faced arbitrary detention and criminal charges, while SRC allegedly monitored and restricted access to legal assistance by controlling plantation roads.¹⁰
15. In January 2020, violence escalated when SRC employees and contractors reportedly attacked community members and Green Advocates staff during meetings about the IFC complaint. These attacks forced some activists to flee for their safety. Green Advocates filed a lawsuit against the perpetrators, leading to arrests and on-going legal proceedings.¹¹
16. In 2016, environmental lawyer Alfred Brownell, founder of Green Advocates International, faced severe intimidation, harassment, and death threats due to his opposition to deforestation for palm oil production. These threats came after the Liberian government leased approximately 543,600 acres of land to Golden Veroleum Liberia (GVL), a Southeast Asia-based agro-industrial company, for palm oil cultivation in Sinoe County. GVL's operations led to the clearing of rainforests and

encroachment on community lands without proper consent, affecting sacred sites and ancestral graves. Communities reported destruction of farmlands and pollution of water sources, jeopardizing their livelihoods. In response, Alfred Brownell, collaborated with local communities to challenge GVL's practices. In October 2012, they filed a complaint with the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), leading to a "stop work" order that protected approximately 513,500 acres of forest. This area is part of the Upper Guinean biodiversity hotspot, home to endangered species like chimpanzees and pygmy hippopotamuses.¹² His advocacy led to the protection of over 500,000 acres of tropical forest, but also resulted in death threats, forcing him and his family to flee Liberia. Brownell's efforts were internationally recognized when he received the Goldman Environmental Prize in 2019.¹³

D. THE RESPONSE OF THE STATE REGARDING THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

17. Between 2016 and 2024, the Liberian government's response to protecting human rights defenders (HRDs) exhibited both initiatives and notable gaps.¹⁴
18. In collaboration with over 30 human rights institutions under the Liberia Coalition of Human Rights Defenders (LICHRD), the civil society organisations formulated a Draft Human Rights Defenders Policy aimed at safeguarding activists across the country. As of June 2024, this policy remained pending approval by the Ministry of Justice, prompting LICHRD to urge its formal adoption and implementation to ensure HRDs can operate without fear of retribution.¹⁵
19. In August 2023, the Liberia National Police, in partnership with the United Nations Office for the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), initiated a three-day training program focusing on human rights and policing in the

electoral context. This initiative aimed to prepare security personnel to uphold human rights during elections, thereby indirectly supporting a safer environment for HRDs.¹⁶

20. In early 2024, President Joseph Boakai signed an executive order to establish a War and Economic Crimes Court, aiming to deliver justice to victims of Liberia's civil wars. While the court had not begun operating as of November 2024, this move signified a step towards addressing past human rights violations, a cause often championed by HRDs.¹⁷
21. Despite these initiatives, the absence of a formalized Human Rights Defenders Policy has left HRDs vulnerable to threats and attacks. LICHRD emphasized that, despite constitutional provisions on fundamental rights, specific protections for HRDs were lacking, making them susceptible to threats and attacks.¹⁸
22. The Liberian Government accepted and made meaningful progress on implementing numerous UPR recommendations to ratify and report to international human rights treaties, issue standing invitations to all special procedures, and to bring its Constitution and domestic legislation into compliance with international human rights standards and the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.¹⁹
23. Liberia ratified both the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment and the Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, offered a standing invitation to special procedures in 2015, and has maintained a moratorium on the Death Penalty since 2000. The State has not, however, fulfilled its international obligations to prosecute war crimes and serious violations of human rights or to implement the right to a remedy for victims.²⁰

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE GOVERNMENT OF LIBERIA:

- Adopt and implement the draft Human Rights Defenders policy to provide legal recognition and ensure the protection of defenders against threats, harassments and attacks, including by investigating threats, attacks and killings of HRDs and ensuring accountability;
- Align Liberia's national laws and policies, such as the Penal Code (1976), the Public Order Act (2005), with regional and international human rights instruments including the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights' Guidelines on Freedom of Association and Assembly in Africa (2017) and the Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information in Africa (2019);
- Provide adequate funding and independence to the INHRC including to monitor and address violations against HRDs;
- Create a dedicated unit within the Ministry of Justice to promptly deal with threats and attacks against HRDs and provide protective measures;
- Conduct regular trainings for law enforcement agencies on the rights and roles of HRDs to prevent arbitrary arrest and excessive use of force;
- Adopt specific laws that protect LGBTQ+ individuals and HRDs advocating for LGBTQ+ rights from violence, discrimination, and harassment. This includes enforcing laws against hate crimes and providing a safe legal framework for LGBTQ+ advocacy;
- Implement protections for environmental and corporate accountability defenders facing threats from powerful industries. This includes enforcing existing environmental regulations, ensuring corporate accountability, and protecting activists from reprisals from extractive industries.

ABOUT THIS BRIEFING PAPER

ISHR and LICHRD – Liberia Coalition of Human Rights Defenders encourage States to consult UPR submissions by local activists and make recommendations to Liberia regarding the protections of HRDs. This paper is a result of compiling public information and direct contact and experience in the protection of HRDs. Readers should consult the sources provided for additional information.

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⁶ Statement by the Liberia National Students Union (LINSU)

⁷ Ibid

⁸ The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation (n.4)

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¹⁴ Liberia Coalition of Human Rights Defenders (LICHRD)

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ United Nations Liberia, UN supports Liberia National Police through training on Human Rights and Policing in Electoral Context, 2023, <https://liberia.un.org/en/240585-un-supports-liberia-national-police-through-training-human-rights-and-policing-electoral?utm>

¹⁷ Human Rights Watch, Hearing on Liberia: Next Steps Towards Accountability for War and Economic Crimes, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/06/13/testimony-liz-evenson-us-house-tom-lantos-human-rights-commission?utm>

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²⁰ Ibid