

# Engaging with UN Special Procedures

## A GUIDE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS



### WHAT ARE THE UN SPECIAL PROCEDURES?

Special Procedures are independent human rights experts appointed by the UN Human Rights Council. They are individual experts (**Special Rapporteurs or Independent Experts**) or groups of five experts (**Working Groups**), with similar tools to advance human rights. They monitor and report on human rights situations, focusing either on countries or themes. They can:



- Send **letters** (known as '**communications**') to governments, businesses or other actors to report alleged violations and abuses
- Publish **thematic reports** at the Human Rights Council and the General Assembly
- Conduct **country visits**, at the invitation of governments, to assess human rights situations and engage with authorities and national actors
- Engage in **public advocacy** through press statements and social media
- Contribute to the **development of human rights norms and standards**



The Special Procedures are **one of the most accessible UN human rights tools** for civil society and human rights defenders. Anyone can engage with them without needing UN accreditation.



Thematic mandates can take up **cases from any country**, they do not require a country to be party to a specific treaty or for you to exhaust domestic remedies first, and they can act quickly, even in emergencies.



They are supported by staff from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).

### WHAT IS A COMMUNICATION AND WHY ARE THEY IMPORTANT?



**Communications** are letters sent by Special Procedures to governments (and occasionally business or other actors). These letters are triggered by submissions of credible information of alleged human rights violations or risks made by individuals, organisations or national human rights bodies.

There are three types of communications:

Type	When used
<b>Urgent appeal</b> (referenced as UA in letters, or JUA when issued jointly)	Address cases of extreme urgency where lives are at immediate danger, most often affecting a specific individual or group
<b>Letter of allegation</b> (referenced as AL in letters, or JAL when issued jointly)	Address ongoing or past violations, most often affecting a specific individual or group
<b>Other letter</b> (referenced as OL in letters, or JOL when issued jointly)	Address bills, legislation, policies or practices that do not comply with international human rights law and standards

#### Examples:

- A joint **letter of allegation** addressed the transnational repression of exiled Egyptian investigative journalist and human rights defender Basma Mostafa in Germany, Switzerland, and other countries, by Egyptian State agents.



- A joint **other letter** on the 2024 Safeguarding National Security Ordinance raised concerns about its impact on freedoms of expression and association in Hong Kong.



All communications include **specific questions to the government** or actor concerned. These responses sometimes include information previously unknown to the victims.



While communications are not legally binding and cannot provide physical protection to victims, they carry **strong political and social influence**. They can:

- Open a channel of communication with the concerned authorities and seek clarifications.
- Put issues on record and increase visibility
- Help prevent imminent harm or halt ongoing violations
- Provide protection to defenders by harnessing international attention
- Influence existing and future legislation and policy-making
- Support national, regional and international level efforts for victims' redress and reparation.

### HOW TO MAKE A SUBMISSION EFFECTIVELY



This section provides you with the different steps of putting together your submission. A copy of this submission can be shared via email with the relevant mandates, as all their emails are publicly available on their websites. Remember that this is generally part of a larger advocacy strategy and can complement your ongoing actions: consider these [reflection questions](#) before engaging.



#### Step 1: Identify relevant mandates

You can address your submission to one or several Special Procedures mandates depending on the issue (for example, arbitrary detention and torture). Joint submissions often carry more visibility and lead to stronger action, although they might take longer to coordinate.

Check the [list of current mandate holders](#) to map mandates you could submit to.



#### Step 2: Secure consent and respect 'do no harm'

You need to obtain **consent from the victims, their relatives or legal representatives** (Special Procedures have a template consent form). They must understand and consent that the letter containing their names will be sent to the concerned government, business or other actors, published in Special Procedures public reports and on the communications [database](#).



#### Step 3: Gather information for your submission

Include the following details:

- **Who you are:** name, contact details, organisation (if any).
- **Victim details:** name, age, gender, place of origin and residence.
- **Consent:** consent from victims, representatives, or families.
- **What happened:** facts, dates, places, types of violations and context in chronological order, as detailed as possible.
- **Who is responsible:** names, titles, affiliations, or other identifying details.
- **Actions already taken:** complaints filed, domestic proceedings, or advocacy efforts, and actions already taken by the competent authorities, if any.
- **What you ask for:** measures you want the experts to take. For example, a request for a communication or press release and questions they could raise.
- **Possible patterns and trends:** explain as part of the context in which the violations have occurred.



#### Step 4: Draft your submission strategically

Your submission will be received alongside hundreds of others that are sent through this mechanism each week. A clear, evidence-based, well-organised and concise brief helps experts act quickly and effectively.

#### Tips to strengthen your submission:

- **Language.** English and French are the working languages of the UN. Submissions in other official UN languages (Arabic, Chinese, Russian and Spanish) may require translation, which may take additional time and not be processed, depending on existing capacity.
- **Be factual and concise.** Describe what happened using verified information. Avoid emotional language. Short, precise sentences help experts understand the urgency fast.
- **Support your claims with evidence.** Attach relevant documents, photos, medical reports, or links that substantiate your account.
- **Base your information on first-hand or direct sources.** Avoid relying only on media reports unless no other information is available and clarify your source when possible.
- **Suggest specific questions to be asked in the communication and patterns to be raised.** Providing the background and root causes of the alleged human rights violations allows for Special Procedures to contextualise their allegations and highlight patterns.
- **Include the full text of laws and policies**, along with an assessment explaining how they fail to meet international human rights standards when providing information on legislation and policies.
- **Refer to previous communications.** Check the communications database for any prior mentions of this case or similar cases. If such cases exist, indicate them. This will help ensure continuity in the work of the Special Procedures and allow them to act more quickly on your case.



#### Step 5: Submission and follow-up

Submit your information through the [OHCHR online form](#). Special Procedures teams have limited capacity, and not all submissions lead to action. If you receive no reply after several days (depending on the urgency of your submission), send a follow-up email with any updates. Email addresses can be found on each mandate's [webpage](#).

Once a communication or response is made public, use it for advocacy and awareness at national and international levels.

### HOW TO GET SPECIAL PROCEDURES TO ISSUE PRESS RELEASES?

Press releases are usually issued when a situation is **urgent, systemic**, or **ignored by the authorities**. They are a powerful tool to raise visibility, generate diplomatic pressure, and protect those at risk.



You can **encourage them to consider issuing a press release** when submitting information or following up on a case. Explain **why publicity would help** – for example, to prevent imminent harm or draw attention to a broader pattern – and suggest the key points or message you hope it will convey. Note that a press statement on a case or issue can only be issued after a communication was previously sent.

#### Special mandates: Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (WGAD) and Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances (WGEID)



The **Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (WGAD)** adopts '**opinions**' determining if the detention of specific individuals is arbitrary under international law by considering and contrasting information provided by the source and the State. Although its opinions are not legally binding, they have led to the release of many detainees and have influenced national courts and reforms. All opinions are published on the [WGAD opinion database](#).

The **Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances (WGEID)** helps families and organisations to establish the fate and whereabouts of people who have been forcibly disappeared. Acting under a **humanitarian mandate**, it facilitates confident communications between victims' families and governments concerned and keeps each case open until the fate or whereabouts of the victim is clarified.

Both Working Groups also send communications and have at their disposal the same tools as other Special Procedures.

While these are similar to communications, cases under both procedures are only considered during the three sessions of each Working Group every year.

- The WGAD meets in March/April, August/September and November
- The WGEID in January/February, April/May and September

You can plan your advocacy around these sessions by sending follow-up information before a session to update the experts on the case, informing them of new risks, developments or government actions. You can also arrange in-person or online meetings with the experts.

### ACCESSING AND FOLLOWING UP ON SPECIAL PROCEDURES ACTIONS

Special Procedures **communications, opinions, press releases, and reports** are **powerful advocacy tools**. They can help strengthen campaigns, pressure governments, and protect those affected.



Before engaging with Special Procedures, take some time to plan your advocacy strategy and decide how you will make the best use of what you can get from Special Procedures.

Communications are published **48 hours** after being issued for Other Letters or **60 days** after transmission for Urgent Appeals and Allegation Letters.

Once communications – and the response of governments or other actors they were sent to – are published on the [OHCHR database](#), you can:

- Build and strengthen **media campaigns**
- Use them to **pressure governments** to respond, investigate, or reform
- **Encourage supportive States** to raise the issue publicly and privately with the government, or at the Human Rights Council or the UN General Assembly.
- Cite them in **advocacy briefs or policy debates**

Make sure to also **provide regular updates** to Special Procedures on the information you submitted. They may issue follow-up communications if the situation remains unresolved or deteriorates.

### SAFETY AND REPRISALS



Though the source of information is not shared with the governments or non-State actors concerned, engaging with the UN can sometimes increase risk of retaliation (known as 'reprisals' at the UN). Always assess and mitigate risks of reprisals before you act. Obtain informed consent from anyone named, and plan what to do if threats arise. To do this, you can use [ISHR's reprisals risk assessment and mitigation tool](#).

If reprisals occur, **report** them immediately to the Special Procedures mandate concerned and to [OHCHR's Reprisals Team](#) ([ohchr-reprisals@un.org](mailto:ohchr-reprisals@un.org)).

There are ways to stay safe while continuing to use UN mechanisms. You can reach out to trusted organisations such as ISHR for guidance.

#### Learn more

- Online course: [Special Procedures on ISHR Academy](#)
- Publication: [A practical guide to the UN Special Procedures, ISHR](#)
- Explainer: [The United Nations Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances](#)