



WORLD ANTI EXTREMISM  
**NETWORK**  
BUILDING A FREE WORLD



# UNCENSORED WATCH

*Defending Freedom, Challenging Extremism and Authoritarianism*

Issue 20 | August 2026

## **Issue 20 | August 2026**

*Defending Freedom, Challenging Extremism and  
Authoritarianism*

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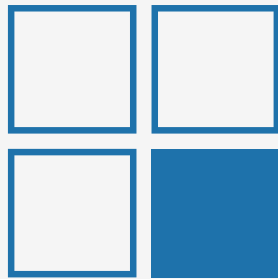
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# **SECTION-1**

**Welcome to Uncensored Watch - A Project of  
World Anti-Extremism Network**

## ***Welcome to Uncensored Watch - A Project of World Anti-Extremism Network***

Dear Readers, welcome to the August edition of Uncensored Watch!

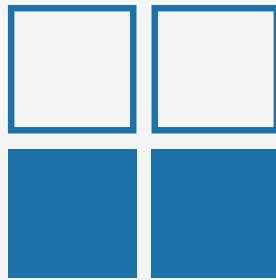
This month, we examine a range of human rights concerns unfolding across the world, from growing restrictions on freedom of expression and artistic freedom in Iran and China to the detention of civil society workers in Afghanistan and the criminalization of peaceful remembrance in Hong Kong. We also explore concerns over discrimination against vulnerable communities in India, renewed concerns over torture and deaths in detention in Syria, and the continued use of executions and the death penalty in Iran.

Across these stories, a common concern emerges: the shrinking space for people to speak, report, organize, seek justice, and defend human rights without fear of retaliation. We also feature a contribution from a graduate of our International Human Rights Certificate Program, examining the use of “white torture” and psychological abuse in Iran.

Join us as we uncover the stories, voices, and struggles shaping today’s human rights landscape.

Enjoy Reading!

The Uncensored Watch Team



# **SECTION-2**

Global Crisis in Focus

## Iran Advances Law That Could Punish Citizens for Speaking to International Media

Iranian authorities have moved toward imposing stricter controls on communication with international media outlets, a development that human rights advocates argue could significantly restrict the exchange of information between Iranian citizens and the outside world. A draft measure currently under consideration by lawmakers would potentially classify interactions with foreign news organizations, international institutions, and certain online platforms as criminal offenses. Critics contend that such provisions could affect journalists, academics, researchers, activists, and ordinary citizens by exposing them to legal penalties for sharing information with audiences beyond Iran's borders. The proposal has generated particular concern because it could limit reporting on sensitive events, including the large-scale [anti-government demonstrations that erupted in January](#). According to Moein Khazaeli, an Iranian human rights attorney affiliated with Dadban, a legal support organization for activists, the proposed legislation could extend beyond traditional media outlets. He noted that social networking platforms viewed by Iranian authorities as receiving support or backing from foreign governments, including Instagram and X, might also be covered by the law. Khazaeli explained that individuals could face prison sentences ranging from several months to two years for providing interviews, photographs, or information to foreign media organizations or institutions without prior notification to intelligence authorities. He warned that the measure could dramatically expand state oversight of communications between Iranian citizens and international entities.

Recent developments involving Iranian photojournalists have further intensified concerns. One prominent case is that of Yalda Moaiery, an award-winning photographer who received a 15-year prison sentence after documenting events connected to [the brief twelve-day military confrontation between Iran and Israel](#). Although her prosecution was reportedly linked to espionage-related legislation enacted after the conflict, observers believe the proposed media-contact law reflects a broader governmental effort to regulate and punish engagement with foreign organizations and news outlets. Khazaeli suggested that such policies could contribute to a more isolated and tightly controlled information environment. Moaiery, 44, has spent many years documenting social and political realities in Iran. Her work has included coverage of the Woman, Life, Freedom movement in 2022 and the nationwide demonstrations during which [thousands reportedly lost their lives](#) earlier this year. She gained international attention in 2019 after objecting to the use of one of her photographs by former U.S. President Donald Trump. At the time, she argued that sanctions imposed on Iran were harming ordinary people, including those close to her, and criticized the political use of her image.

In a development she described as deeply ironic, Moaiery stated that she was later convicted in absentia for her reporting on the Iran-Israel conflict and accused of media activities allegedly benefiting the United States and Israel. She strongly rejected those allegations, emphasizing that she has consistently criticized both Israeli government policies and American political actions. [Bahar Ghandehari](#), Director of Advocacy at the Center for Human Rights in Iran (CHRI), argued that the proposed legislation could further isolate the country by restricting access to information and discouraging communication with the international community. She warned that the measure goes beyond targeting professional journalists and could affect ordinary citizens as well. In her view, routine academic collaboration, professional engagement, and civic participation could increasingly be framed as matters of national security, creating a climate of fear and self-censorship.

Moaiery was previously detained and sentenced to prison in 2022, though she later benefited from an amnesty. Following the latest ruling, however, she expressed concern that the sentence could be enforced. She acknowledged feeling apprehensive about the possibility of imprisonment, explaining that her greatest fear is losing years of her life behind bars. If required to serve the full term, she noted, she would be approximately sixty years old upon release. The photographer also criticized some foreign correspondents who visited Tehran to report on the funeral ceremonies held in July for former Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. In her opinion, many journalists focused on the symbolic significance of being present rather than examining the broader realities facing the Iranian population, including economic hardship and the experiences of families affected by recent unrest.

Many Iranians already live under significant restrictions on expression, and this proposed law could make people even more hesitant to speak about what they see and experience. For journalists, photographers, researchers, and ordinary citizens, sharing information with the outside world may become a source of fear rather than a normal part of civic life. The sentence against Yalda Moaiery reflects the personal cost that individuals can face for documenting events of public importance. Beyond politics, the measure risks creating a society where people feel increasingly isolated, unheard, and afraid that everyday communication could be treated as a security offense.



*Photo by Akbar Nemati on Unsplash*

# Afghanistan: Taliban Detain and Conceal Location of Six NGO Employees

[Human Rights Watch](#) stated on August 12, 2026, that Taliban authorities in Afghanistan have allegedly subjected six employees of the Women and Children Legal Research Foundation (WCLRF) to enforced disappearance, with their whereabouts remaining unknown for several weeks. The six individuals, all members of the organization's leadership and operational team, were reportedly taken into custody in Kabul on July 18, 2026. Since then, Taliban officials have not disclosed where they are being held, their condition, or whether any formal accusations have been brought against them. Human Rights Watch called on the authorities to allow access to legal representatives and family members and to release the detainees unless legitimate criminal charges are presented.

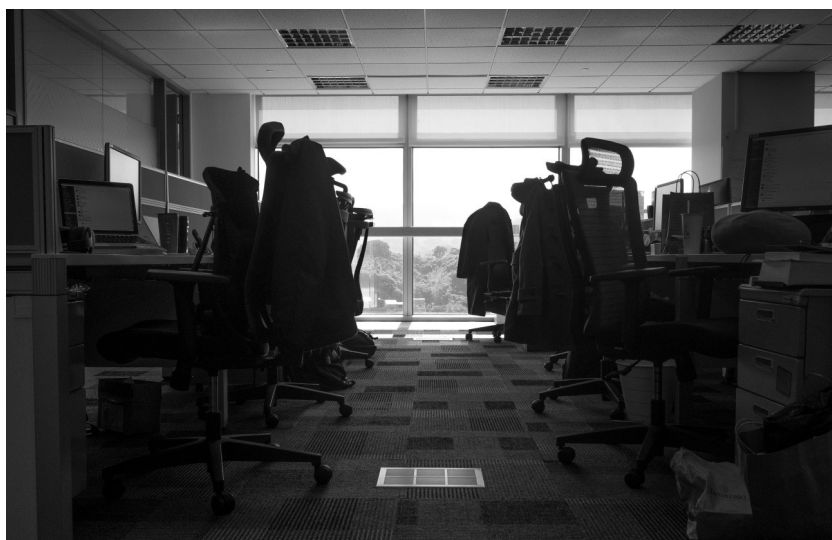


Photo by [Kenzo Tu on Unsplash](#)

Macarena Sáez, Director of Women's Rights at Human Rights Watch, said the Taliban continue to view efforts aimed at supporting women and girls as a challenge to their authority. She urged officials to reveal the location of the detained staff and ensure their immediate freedom if they are being held without legal grounds. The Women and Children Legal Research

Foundation is known for providing services, conducting studies, and advocating on issues affecting women and children. According to information obtained by Human Rights Watch, Taliban security personnel raided the organization's office in Kabul on June 21. During the operation, computers, mobile phones, and other equipment were confiscated. Sources familiar with the incident reported that officials thoroughly searched the premises, closed the office, and later questioned employees regarding the organization's activities. In the weeks that followed, staff members were reportedly summoned and interrogated about their work. On July 18, Taliban representatives instructed six male employees to return to the office to retrieve the electronic devices previously seized. Upon arrival, however, they were detained and taken away. Relatives of those arrested stated that they have received no information regarding the men's location, health status, or the legal basis for their detention. Zarqa Yaftali, the foundation's former director who now oversees a related

organization in Canada, said the families have been left in a state of ongoing anxiety and uncertainty due to the absence of information.

Since regaining control of Afghanistan in August 2021, the Taliban have implemented a wide range of restrictions affecting women and girls. These measures have included preventing girls from continuing education beyond the sixth grade, limiting employment opportunities for women, imposing strict mobility restrictions, removing safeguards related to child marriage, and weakening legal protections against domestic abuse. Authorities have not publicly explained the reason behind the arrests of the six employees. However, rights organizations have repeatedly documented actions against female journalists, [advocates for women's rights](#), and [women demonstrating in defense of their freedoms](#). Many have reportedly been detained without due process, held incommunicado for extended periods, subjected to mistreatment, and, in some cases, tortured. According to [international legal standards](#), enforced disappearance occurs when state authorities or de facto governing bodies deprive an individual of liberty and subsequently deny information about the detention or conceal the person's whereabouts, effectively putting them beyond legal protection.

In August 2025, United Nations human rights experts, including members of the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, expressed alarm over increasing human rights violations in Afghanistan, particularly incidents resembling enforced disappearances. While a new UN-backed investigative mechanism was launched in October 2025 to scrutinize ongoing and previous human rights abuses in Afghanistan, meaningful action from the broader international community has not matched the scale or urgency of the crisis. The organization also highlighted concerns regarding neighboring countries and other governments. Iran and Pakistan have compelled [vast numbers of Afghan refugees](#) to return to Afghanistan despite ongoing risks of persecution and abuse. Germany has likewise resumed deportation flights and pursued expanded returns even as concerns persist regarding the safety of those sent back. In addition, European Union officials met with a Taliban delegation in Brussels in June 2026 to discuss migration-related matters, marking a significant diplomatic engagement.

The disappearance of six staff members from the Women and Children Legal Research Foundation is more than a human rights concern, it is a painful reminder of the uncertainty and fear many activists and aid workers in Afghanistan face today. For their families, the lack of information about their loved ones' whereabouts has meant weeks of anxiety and distress. The case also highlights the growing risks faced by those who work to support women and children, even through legal research and community assistance. As civic space continues to narrow, many Afghans worry that speaking up for vulnerable groups is becoming increasingly dangerous. Greater international pressure, independent monitoring, and sustained diplomatic engagement are needed to secure the detainees' release and protect human rights defenders in Afghanistan.

# Hong Kong Activists Found Guilty Over Tiananmen Commemoration Efforts

Human Rights Watch has condemned the conviction of three prominent Hong Kong democracy advocates linked to annual commemorations of the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown, arguing that the verdict further undermines fundamental freedoms in the city. Three former members of Hong Kong's disbanded Tiananmen commemoration group are facing possible prison sentences after being prosecuted under the city's National Security Law. Chow Hang-tung and Lee Cheuk-yan were convicted on August 21, 2026, while Albert Ho had already entered a guilty plea. The three could receive sentences of as long as a decade. According to Human Rights Watch, the case reflects the increasing criminalization of peaceful remembrance and political expression in Hong Kong. The organization argued that honoring victims of past state violence has been redefined as a threat to national security.

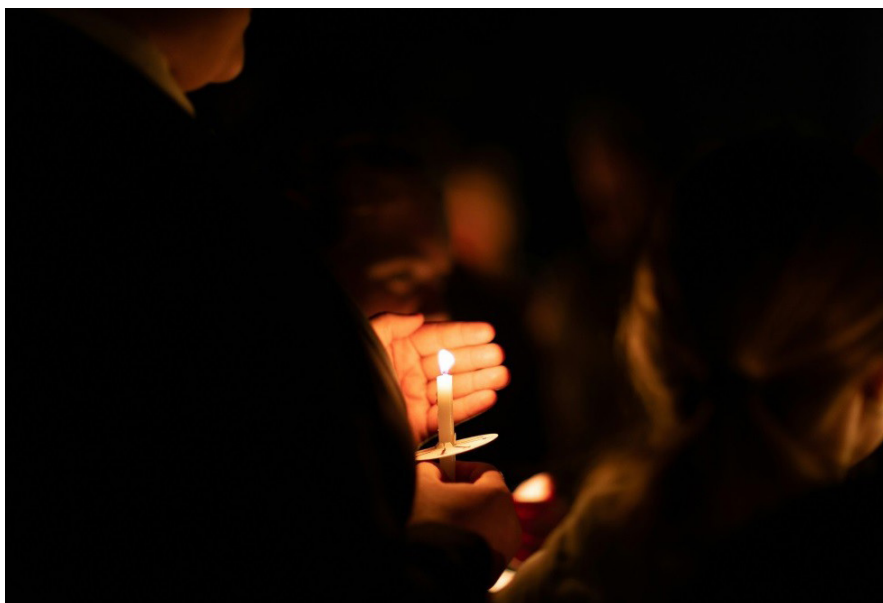
The National Security Law defines subversion as actions intended to undermine or overturn state authority through force, threats, or other unlawful methods. The [court determined](#) that the Alliance's long-standing objective of ending one-party rule in China amounted to an effort to challenge the existing political system. Although the judges acknowledged that the group neither promoted nor engaged in violence, they concluded that its political advocacy constituted unlawful conduct because it conflicted with constitutional principles that recognize the Chinese Communist Party's leadership. The decision emphasized that China's constitutional

framework does not provide for multiparty electoral competition or a transfer of power between rival political parties. The judgment further asserted that the activists encouraged public resentment toward the ruling party by drawing parallels between the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown and Hong Kong's 2019 pro-democracy demonstrations, which authorities claimed weakened public confidence in the government. Defense lawyers argued that calls to end one-party governance represented a peaceful vision for democratic reform rather than an attempt to unlawfully overthrow the state. They maintained that the defendants were exercising rights protected under freedom of expression.

During proceedings, Chow, [a legal professional who represented herself in court](#), faced restrictions in presenting her case. Judges declined requests to call several witnesses and limited certain evidence related to the Tiananmen events. In her [final remarks](#) before the court, Chow criticized the proceedings as politically motivated, arguing that truth-telling, demands for accountability, and calls for democratic governance were being portrayed as criminal acts. Sentencing is expected following a mitigation hearing. Depending on how authorities classify the offense, penalties under the National Security Law range from several years' imprisonment to a maximum of

ten years. [Human Rights Watch](#) stated that prosecuting individuals for peaceful expression and assembly is inconsistent with international human rights obligations, including protections guaranteed under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which remains part of Hong Kong's legal framework. Additional concerns emerged regarding Chow's treatment while in custody. Reports indicated that she was transported to court under highly restrictive restraints that allegedly caused significant physical discomfort, raising concerns about potential violations of international standards prohibiting cruel or degrading treatment. For three decades, the Hong Kong Alliance organized annual candlelight vigils commemorating those killed during the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown. The gatherings became one of the most significant symbols of Hong Kong's democratic movement, attracting large crowds each year. Similar commemorations have long been prohibited in mainland China.

Following Beijing's imposition of the National Security Law in 2020, authorities progressively dismantled many civil society organizations and curtailed political freedoms in Hong Kong. The annual vigil was prohibited in 2020 and 2021, officially citing pandemic restrictions, and the Alliance was later forced to dissolve. Since then, numerous individuals attempting to publicly mark the anniversary have faced arrest, prosecution, or imprisonment. The convictions show how little room remains in Hong Kong for people who openly challenge the authorities. Chow Hang-tung, Lee Cheuk-yan, and Albert Ho were targeted over their association with efforts to remember the victims of Tiananmen. With prison sentences of up to a decade possible, the case sends a troubling message that even peaceful acts of remembrance can now carry severe consequences. It also risks discouraging others from speaking openly about one of China's most sensitive historical events.



*Photo by [Carly Hendrickson](#) on [Unsplash](#)*

## Israeli Killing of Lebanese Journalist Draws War Crime Allegations From Rights Groups

An Israeli attack that killed Lebanese journalist Amal Khalil and seriously wounded photojournalist Zeinab Faraj in April 2026 should be investigated as a war crime, according to Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and Legal Agenda. The organizations concluded that the evidence indicates the Israeli military knew, or should have known, that the two women were civilians when they were targeted. They also accused Israeli forces of obstructing rescue efforts, potentially contributing to Khalil's death. [The attack occurred on April 22](#), when Khalil, 42, and Faraj, 21, travelled to al-Tiri in southern Lebanon to report on claims that Israeli troops had withdrawn from the area. The journalists were near a vehicle carrying two local officials when an Israeli strike killed the men. Khalil subsequently contacted Lebanese emergency services for assistance. While waiting for rescuers to obtain Israeli authorization to enter the area, the two journalists moved into a nearby building for protection. Israeli forces later struck their vehicle, injuring both women. Shortly afterward, another strike hit the building where they were sheltering, trapping them beneath the rubble.

Faraj was eventually evacuated after suffering severe injuries, but rescue teams were unable to reach Khalil. Human Rights Watch said rescuers faced further obstruction and apparent attacks, including the dropping of a stun grenade near Lebanese Red Cross personnel and gunfire that reportedly damaged ambulances. It was also said Israeli [drones appeared to have tracked](#) the journalists as they sought shelter, while the Lebanese Red Cross had requested their evacuation through UNIFIL. Despite the appeal, the building where they were sheltering was later struck. The Legal Agenda's separate investigation likewise



*Photo by [Matt C on Unsplash](#)*

concluded that the attack amounted to war crimes and serious violations of international humanitarian law.

Authorization to return to the area was eventually granted several hours later, but Khalil's body was not recovered until around 11pm. A medical examination indicated that she may have remained alive for hours after the final strike and likely died at approximately 7pm. The three organizations said the incident reflects wider concerns over attacks against journalists and civilians in Lebanon. According to the [UN human rights body](#), at least 15 journalists have been killed in Lebanon and 210 in Gaza since 2023. Israel said it regretted harm caused to journalists and maintained that the deaths occurred during military operations in which Hezbollah members were also killed. However, the rights groups called for an independent investigation and urged governments to take stronger measures against officials responsible for unlawful attacks, including imposing an arms embargo on Israel. Amnesty International argued that continued lack of accountability for civilian deaths has contributed to the persistence of unlawful military attacks and called for international action to prevent further violations.

The killing of Amal Khalil and the wounding of Zeinab Faraj raise deeply disturbing questions about the value placed on civilian lives during conflict. If Khalil survived for hours beneath the rubble while rescuers were prevented from reaching her, the tragedy goes beyond the initial strike, it raises questions about whether lives were knowingly left at risk. Journalists should not have to choose between telling the truth and protecting their lives, nor should humanitarian workers face danger while trying to save them. The allegations demand more than expressions of regret; they require an independent investigation capable of establishing responsibility and ensuring accountability.

## Syria Sees Protests Following Reported Death and Torture of Detainee

[The death of a 29-year-old Syrian man](#) after he was reportedly beaten while in police custody has sparked protests and renewed fears that torture remains a problem in the country despite the fall of Bashar al-Assad. Mohammad Ghamira, a father of two and former White Helmets volunteer, went to a police station in Latakia province last week after being accused of theft. He was reportedly in poor condition when he left the station and later died in hospital on Sunday from bleeding in his brain and gastrointestinal tract, which officials said resulted from injuries sustained during his detention. Images showing Ghamira healthy before his arrest and later unconscious in hospital with visible bruises spread rapidly online, prompting widespread public anger. His family had reportedly

warned police that he suffered from haemophilia, a condition that can cause serious bleeding, and asked authorities not to beat him.

The Interior Ministry has opened an investigation and detained seven ministry personnel for questioning. Interior Minister Anas Khattab pledged that anyone found responsible would face punishment under the law. The official response, however, has not eased public outrage. Protesters in Aleppo called for those responsible to be held accountable, while further demonstrations were planned in Damascus. Many Syrians see the allegations as a disturbing reminder of the abuses associated with the former regime. Under Assad, arbitrary detention, torture and abuse were widely used as tools of repression, particularly after the uprising began in 2011. His government was overthrown in December 2024 by an offensive led by the former Islamist rebel organisation [Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham \(HTS\)](#). The new authorities pledged to dismantle the security structures associated with the previous government and end its system of abuse.

Yet reports indicate that mistreatment in detention has not disappeared. Syrians for Truth and Justice [recorded 14 cases](#) involving alleged torture or deaths in custody between June 2025 and June 2026. Its findings described beatings, electric shocks, humiliation, threats and denial of basic necessities across several security agencies. The group argued that the continuing abuse appears to be linked more to weak oversight and limited accountability for security personnel and armed groups than to a centrally directed policy comparable to that of the Assad government. Some of the reported abuses also appeared to involve sectarian discrimination. The findings are consistent with a March report by the UN Commission of Inquiry, which documented allegations of torture and mistreatment in dozens of official and makeshift detention facilities during 2025.

For many Syrians, Ghamira's death has therefore become more than an isolated case. Civil society groups say those who suffered and died during years of repression did so in the hope that such practices would end. Ghamira's death shows



*Photo by [Sushil Nash](#) on [Unsplash](#)*

that changing the government does not automatically change the culture of impunity that allows abuse to continue. If Syria is serious about leaving Assad-era repression behind, accountability must go beyond promises: detainees need access to lawyers and families, detention facilities should face independent monitoring, and alleged perpetrators must be investigated and prosecuted openly, regardless of their position. Most importantly, the government must make clear that torture is not an acceptable tool of policing under any circumstances. A real political transition will be measured not by who holds power, but by whether ordinary Syrians can trust that the state will no longer abuse that power.

# UN Anti-Discrimination Committee Raises Concerns Over Rights Violations in India

Concerns over the treatment of vulnerable communities in India have been raised by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), which called for stronger safeguards against discrimination and abuse. The committee pointed to reports suggesting that Indigenous groups, Dalits, tribal communities, and certain ethnic and religious minorities continue to face serious rights violations, including mistreatment by security personnel and law enforcement agencies. Among the issues highlighted were allegations of custodial abuse, unlawful detention, excessive use of force, sexual violence, and deaths linked to police actions. CERD stressed that authorities should ensure impartial investigations into such claims and hold perpetrators accountable where wrongdoing is established.

The committee also drew attention to the situation of [Bengali-speaking Muslims](#), expressing concern about reports of hostility, discriminatory treatment, and targeted violence. It urged the government to take more effective steps to protect affected communities and address inflammatory rhetoric that may contribute to social tensions. Long-standing inequalities associated with India's caste hierarchy were another area of concern. Although legal protections exist, caste-based disadvantage continues to affect access to education, employment, economic opportunities, and social advancement for many people. CERD, which is made up of 18 independent specialists, oversees implementation of the international treaty aimed at eliminating racial discrimination. States that have joined the convention are expected to promote equality, prevent discrimination, and ensure that all individuals receive equal protection under the law.

India recently appeared before the committee for a periodic review, its first in almost twenty years. During the assessment, experts examined reports concerning Rohingya refugees, migrants, asylum seekers, and other vulnerable populations. The committee noted allegations that identity checks and security operations have, in some cases, disproportionately affected particular groups and may have resulted in unjustified arrests, prolonged detention, and mistreatment. Questions were also raised about deportation practices and the return of individuals who could face risks if removed. CERD encouraged India to ensure that migration policies are implemented in a manner consistent with human rights obligations and international protection standards. While the committee's observations do not create legal obligations, they are often viewed as an important indicator of a country's human rights record. Responding to the review, India's representatives

highlighted the country's democratic institutions, constitutional protections, cultural diversity, and ongoing efforts to expand equality and opportunity for its population.

For many people from marginalized communities, these concerns are not just policy issues, they affect their safety, dignity, and ability to live without fear. A country as diverse as India is strongest when every person, regardless of caste, ethnicity, religion, or background, feels equally protected by the law. Meaningful accountability, fair treatment, and efforts to address discrimination can help bridge divisions and build greater trust between communities and state institutions.

*Photo by [Anurag Jamwal](#) on [Unsplash](#)*



# UN Raises Alarm Over 56 Executions Reported in Iran Since March



Iran has executed at least 56 people on national security charges since March 19, according to UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Turk, who warned that the [death penalty](#) is increasingly being used as a tool to silence opposition. Of those executed, 27 were reportedly connected to cases arising from the nationwide protests earlier this year. He said that [more than 100 others](#) could face the death penalty, while drug-related executions continued to rise at an alarming pace. Turk urged Iranian authorities to stop carrying out executions and reconsider the continued use of capital punishment. He said the recent increase in death sentences was particularly concerning because executions appear to be contributing to an atmosphere of fear intended to discourage further dissent.

[The UN also raised serious questions](#) about the fairness of Iran's judicial proceedings. According to information received by the rights office, some people sentenced to death allegedly confessed after being subjected to torture or other forms of mistreatment. Officials have also reportedly moved unusually quickly in some cases, with certain executions taking place only weeks after arrest. The secrecy surrounding some trials has added to the concerns. The UN said 12 defendants were reportedly given death sentences after a single closed hearing lasting just three hours, raising questions about whether defendants had a meaningful opportunity to defend themselves. Amnesty International similarly warned in July that executions had intensified following Iran's major anti-government uprising in January. The organization said Revolutionary Courts had imposed numerous death sentences without providing defendants with essential procedural protections.

[The protests began in late December](#) and spread rapidly across the country during January. Initially driven by economic hardship, including the collapse of the Iranian currency,

inflation, and rising food costs, the unrest soon developed into broader demands for political change. UN experts have repeatedly urged Tehran to address arbitrary detention and revise laws that enable serious human rights violations. Iranian authorities, however, have dismissed criticism of their judicial practices, arguing that executions are permitted under Iranian law and religious principles.

The growing use of executions in Iran is deeply troubling because the death penalty appears to be moving beyond punishment and becoming a means of frightening people into silence. When people can face death after rushed or closed trials, especially where allegations of torture and forced confessions exist, the justice system itself becomes a source of fear rather than protection. The answer is not simply to call for fewer executions, but to demand fair trials, independent investigations, and accountability for abuses in detention. A government should be able to face public criticism without treating dissent as a crime worthy of death.

## Gao Zhen Case Highlights Growing Pressure on Artistic Freedom in China

Chinese artist Gao Zhen has been sentenced to three years in prison in a case that Amnesty International says reflects growing pressure on artists whose work challenges the government's version of history. The Sanhe City People's Court in Hebei Province convicted Gao on August 25, 2026, under a law concerning the alleged defamation of national heroes and martyrs. [Enacted in March 2018](#), the legislation allows authorities to penalize expressions deemed to dishonor historical figures connected to China's Communist Party. The 70-year-old artist was detained in August 2024 over artworks created years earlier that authorities claimed insulted revolutionary figures. Gao has appealed both his conviction and sentence. Amnesty International's China Director [Sarah Brooks](#) said the case could discourage other artists from producing work that questions official accounts or encourages debate about the country's past. She also criticized the use of broadly framed laws to penalize peaceful artistic and political expression, particularly when legislation is applied to conduct that took place years before prosecution.

Gao is one half of the internationally recognized Gao Brothers, whose work has explored subjects including Chinese history, political authority, social transformation, and the relationship between individuals and the state. The concerns extend beyond Gao's imprisonment. His wife and son have reportedly faced intimidation despite not being accused of an offense. His wife is also reportedly subject to an exit restriction on national security grounds, preventing her and their son from leaving China. Amnesty has described

such measures as a form of pressure against family members and has called for the restrictions to be lifted. Gao's health has also become a concern during his detention. He reportedly has several medical conditions, including problems affecting his lower spine and fluid buildup in his knees, and has collapsed on multiple occasions. His ability to communicate with his family has allegedly been severely limited since May 2025.

[Amnesty is calling for Gao's conviction to be overturned](#), the charges to be withdrawn, and his immediate release. It has also urged Chinese authorities to stop intimidating his family and reconsider legislation protecting the reputations of officially recognized heroes and martyrs unless it can be brought into line with international human rights standards. The organization has separately raised concerns about the use of exit restrictions against human rights defenders and their relatives, including in a letter sent to European Union leaders in August 2026.

Gao Zhen's case shows how quickly artistic expression can become dangerous when governments treat criticism of history as a threat to political authority. An artist should be able to question, reinterpret, or challenge the past without fearing prison, especially when the work itself poses no physical harm. The pressure reportedly placed on his family makes the situation even more troubling, as punishment appears to extend beyond the person being prosecuted. Protecting artistic freedom requires clear laws, independent courts, and an end to using criminal penalties to silence peaceful expression.



*Photo by [Palash Jain on Unsplash](#)*

## Rights Group Reports Mass Civilian Deaths in Darfur Drone Strike

A drone attack in Sudan's North Darfur region reportedly left [at least 35 people dead](#) and several others injured after a gathering at a local dispute-resolution court was struck, according to the rights organization Emergency Lawyers. The incident occurred on Sunday in Garra al-Zawaya, a village located in an area controlled



*Photo by Sherwin Ker on Unsplash*

by the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). Emergency Lawyers said residents had assembled for hearings related to community and tribal disputes when the strike hit. The targeted site served as a traditional forum where local leaders and residents addressed conflicts and settled grievances. According to reports, the session was being conducted outdoors beneath a tree when the attack occurred. The strike also caused significant damage to the court facility. A local witness told AFP that several prominent figures were among the dead, including tribal representatives and members of the RSF. The witness requested anonymity due to security concerns.

Sudan has been engulfed in conflict since April 2023, when fighting erupted between forces loyal to army chief Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and the RSF, led by Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo. The war has claimed tens of thousands of lives and devastated large parts of the country. Garra al-Zawaya is situated near Kabkabiya, west of el-Fasher, a strategically important city in Darfur. El-Fasher remained under army control for much of the conflict before falling to the RSF following a major offensive last year. UN investigators have previously stated that violence connected to the siege and capture of the city showed indicators consistent with genocidal acts. The RSF, which traces its origins to the Janjaweed militias that operated in Darfur during the early 2000s, expanded its influence across much of the region after taking control of el-Fasher. As the conflict has evolved, both the Sudanese military and the RSF have increasingly turned to drones and other aerial weapons. UN figures indicate that drone attacks alone [caused more than 1,000 civilian deaths](#) during the first months of this year. Beyond the direct loss of life, the war has uprooted millions of people and deepened a

humanitarian emergency that the United Nations describes as the largest currently facing the world.

This attack is a stark reminder that civilians continue to bear the heaviest burden of Sudan's war, even in places meant to resolve disputes and maintain community stability. The growing use of drones by both sides has expanded the battlefield into everyday civilian spaces, increasing the risk of indiscriminate harm and loss of life. Protecting civilians requires not only adherence to international humanitarian law but also credible investigations into attacks that may have violated it. Without stronger accountability and renewed efforts toward a political solution, Sudan's humanitarian crisis is likely to deepen further.

## Adoption Reform in Ecuador Comes Under Fire for Discriminatory Measures

[Ecuador's new adoption reform](#) has triggered concern among rights advocates, who argue that measures presented as child welfare reforms may instead introduce additional barriers for LGBT individuals and families. Although the legislation was promoted as a way to simplify adoption procedures and shorten the time children spend in state institutions, critics say several provisions could have far-reaching consequences for both prospective parents and transgender youth. Human Rights Watch and other advocates contend that the law prioritizes ideological considerations over evidence-based child protection policies.

One of the most debated aspects of the reform involves eligibility to adopt. While Ecuador already excludes same-sex couples from adoption despite recognizing marriage equality, the new legislation expands those restrictions by limiting single-person adoptions to heterosexual applicants. Rights groups argue that this approach shifts attention away from a [candidate's ability](#) to provide a caring and secure environment and instead places undue emphasis on sexual orientation. They maintain that decisions about adoption should be based on individual suitability and the needs of children rather than broad categorical exclusions.

The law has also generated concern because of provisions affecting families with transgender children. Certain forms of parental support for treatments related to gender transition may now be interpreted as grounds for removing parental authority. Critics warn that the language used in the legislation is broad and could create uncertainty for parents seeking medical guidance or attempting to support their children. In situations where parental rights are revoked and no family member is able to assume responsibility, a child could ultimately become eligible for alternative care arrangements, including adoption. Different standards are applied to medical interventions involving children born with

variations in sex characteristics. While the legislation does not penalize parents who authorize certain procedures in those cases, human rights advocates argue that many such interventions are performed before children are old enough to participate in decisions affecting their own bodies. Medical and rights organizations have long raised concerns about the potential physical and psychological consequences of irreversible procedures carried out without informed consent.

The debate surrounding the adoption reform is unfolding against a wider backdrop of disagreements over gender identity and LGBT rights in Ecuador. In recent years, [government officials](#) have taken positions opposing the inclusion of what they describe as “gender ideology” in schools, while court decisions have increasingly recognized protections for transgender



*Photo by [Markus Spiske](#) on [Unsplash](#)*

adolescents. Constitutional Court rulings in 2026 affirmed that age alone should not automatically prevent young people from seeking legal recognition of their gender identity, decisions that have since become the subject of political scrutiny and public debate. The legislation was approved overwhelmingly by Ecuador’s National Assembly before receiving presidential approval and entering into force in August 2026.

This debate is ultimately about whether adoption laws should expand opportunities for children to find loving homes or create new barriers based on identity. When governments allow prejudice or political ideology to influence family policies, it is often children who bear the consequences through reduced opportunities for care and stability. Protecting children’s best interests requires decisions grounded in evidence, fairness, and individual circumstances rather than assumptions about sexual orientation or gender identity. A more inclusive approach would strengthen both children’s welfare and equal rights for families.

# Trump's ICC Sanctions Draw Legal Challenge From Human Rights Groups

Four major US human rights organizations have taken legal action against the Trump administration, arguing that its sanctions against the International Criminal Court (ICC) are obstructing international efforts to hold perpetrators of war crimes and crimes against humanity accountable. The American Friends Service Committee, Center for Constitutional Rights, Human Rights Watch, and Open Society Institute filed a lawsuit in federal court challenging the administration's [presidential executive order](#) authorizing punitive measures against ICC officials, judges, and individuals supporting the court's investigations into alleged Israeli crimes in Palestine. The organizations described the sanctions as an unlawful attempt to interfere with international justice. They argue that targeting people and groups connected to the ICC violates constitutional protections for freedom of expression and association, while also conflicting with US responsibilities under international law.

Washington has historically opposed the ICC, which the United States has never joined. Tensions intensified after the court issued [judicial arrest orders](#) in November 2024 for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and former Defense Minister Yoav Gallant over alleged crimes in Gaza. The US subsequently imposed sanctions on ICC personnel, Palestinian rights organizations, and UN Special Rapporteur Francesca Albanese. US pressure on the court increased further this year when Secretary of State Marco Rubio announced an effort aimed at [breaking up the ICC](#) by encouraging member countries to withdraw. The lawsuit argues that the sanctions have consequences well beyond the individuals directly designated. Sanctioned officials have faced restrictions on travel, banking, and access to digital services. Because American financial and technology companies play such a dominant global role, those restrictions can affect access to services even outside the United States.

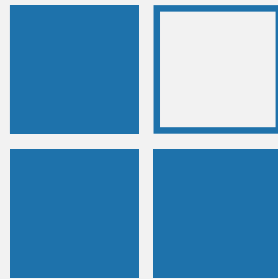
The plaintiffs say their own work has also been disrupted. Sanctions and the threat of severe penalties have made it more difficult for rights organizations and lawyers to represent victims before the ICC, submit legal materials, conduct advocacy, and cooperate with Palestinian organizations targeted by Washington. Katherine Gallagher of the Center for Constitutional Rights, who represents victims before the ICC, said the sanctions had forced her to scale back her legal work before the court. She argued that the government should not determine which victims lawyers may represent or which institutions can be used to pursue accountability. The sanctions have also severely affected Palestinian rights organization Al-Haq. Its director, Shawan Jabarin, previously said the group lost access to its banking facilities and faced difficulties processing donations, leaving dozens of employees without salaries. He also described a broader chilling effect, with former partners becoming reluctant to communicate or cooperate openly because of the potential legal consequences.

[The latest case](#) follows other legal challenges against the sanctions, including a lawsuit brought by Democracy in the Arab World Now (DAWN) and the Taxpayer Alliance Against Genocide, along with cases involving sanctioned individuals, including Francesca Albanese's family members and three sitting ICC judges. James Goldston of the Open Society Justice Initiative said the sanctions threaten judicial independence and the ability of civil society organizations to operate without political intimidation. He argued that accountability mechanisms must apply impartially and that governments should not use political pressure to shield alleged perpetrators of international crimes from scrutiny. The lawsuit ultimately contends that an independent ICC is essential for victims seeking justice, including those affected by conflicts in Palestine, Sudan, Ukraine, and Afghanistan, and that efforts to punish those cooperating with the court risk weakening the broader international system of accountability.

The lawsuit shows how sanctions against the ICC can have consequences far beyond the court itself, making lawyers, rights groups, and even their partners afraid to continue their work. By restricting access to banking, technology, and international cooperation, the measures can make it harder for victims to seek justice. More broadly, the case raises concerns about whether political pressure is being used to weaken independent efforts to hold powerful actors accountable.



Photo by [Sasun Bughdaryan](#) on [Unsplash](#)



## **SECTION-3**

**Multimedia Update: Voices Against  
Authoritarianism**

## Write-up by an International Human Rights Certificate Program Participant

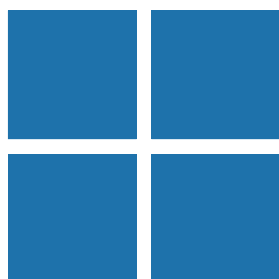
This September, we are pleased to share the work of a graduate from the International Human Rights Certificate Program. This article examines the use of prolonged solitary confinement, psychological abuse, and sensory deprivation in Iran, highlighting concerns surrounding “white torture,” arbitrary detention, forced confessions, and the treatment of political prisoners and human rights defenders.

### Shekanjeh Sefid (White Torture): Torture Under the Islamic Republic of Iran by Breanna Baghaee

Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979, Iran’s detention and prison system has remained a major source of concern for human rights advocates. Despite changes in political institutions, allegations of torture, arbitrary detention, and the suppression of political dissent have continued, with prisoners and activists reporting severe forms of physical and psychological abuse.

In this insightful [article](#), Breanna Baghaee, a graduate of the International Human Rights Certificate Program, examines the practice of “white torture” (shekanjeh sefid) and its impact on detainees in Iran. The article explores prolonged solitary confinement, sensory deprivation, psychological abuse, forced confessions, and the denial of due process, with particular attention to conditions reported at Tehran’s Evin Prison. It also highlights the experiences of human rights defender and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Narges Mohammadi, as well as Iranian rapper and activist Toomaj Salehi, while examining how these practices may violate international human rights standards, including the United Nations Nelson Mandela Rules.

To learn more about these human rights concerns and the continued use of psychological and physical torture in Iran, read the latest publication on our [website](#).



## SECTION-4

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