



Human Rights in Asia '16

8th annual conference
Human Rights Defenders

30th April 2016
University of Essex



8th Annual Asia and Human Rights Conference 2016

(30th April 2016, University of Essex)

Human Rights Defenders

Final Report



The “Human Rights in Asia” conference has been annually organized by a team of LL.M and M.A human rights students since 2009 to discuss current human rights practices, challenges and perspectives in the region. It is recognized and supported by the Human Rights Centre of the University of Essex as an important platform to exchange ideas on a wide range of issues related to human rights in Asia, which are often not in media. This year (2016), ten enthusiastic students worked on the organization of the conference. The theme of this year’s conference was: “Human Rights Defenders in Asia”. Although the term “human rights defenders (HRDs)” can be quite broad, it was chosen in order to shed a light on the struggles of and efforts made by numerous unknown rights defenders in Asia, with a particular regard to the challenges of their work and how international community protects or should protect them from hostility and suppression. It also seemed to be relatable for the students in the human rights courses at Essex, and possibly students of other universities studying similar subjects, as many aspire to fight for human rights themselves in the future.

The conference was structured around three panels: 1) General session (the overview of the issue); 2) Regional issues (what are the specific issues and challenges in different countries in Asia?); and 3) Female human rights defenders (what are the unique challenges faced by female HRDs?). A student presentation session was held between the main sessions, where 9 students both from the University of Essex and other universities gave a presentation related to HRDs. Conference participants included legal practitioners, academics, activists and students. The conference clearly encouraged the exchange of views and opinions, and gave insights to the under-represented issue that is so important for the future of HRDs in Asia.



8th Human Rights in Asia Conference

Opening remarks

The 8th Annual Asia Conference was opened with the welcome speech of **Amanda Sophie Georgsson**, the Chair of the committee organizing this conference. Amanda first thanked everyone who attended the conference and expressed the committee's hope to broaden everyone's understanding of the issue of HRDs in Asia. She went on to talk about some major disputes we had among the committee members. She also explained how overcoming these splits was crucial in developing the team's solidarity and for the success of the conference, and thanked the committee members.



Then, she thanked Dr. Fujita for her guidance throughout the preparation and the Human Rights Centre and many of its members, including Dr. Shaheed, Ms. Castagnino, Professor Sir Nigel Rodley and Ms. Agnes Venema, for providing the team with great assistance, tips, and new in-puts, as well as logistical support. Particularly, she was extremely grateful for the assistance we received and the budget we were allowed by Professor Lorna McGregor. She also thanked all the volunteers, including the note-takers. Finally, she thanked all the speakers who showed their interest in participating in this conference and for the dedication of their time, especially mentioning President Nasheed and Mr. Golog Jigme for the inspiration they brought by their participation.



After Amanda's opening speech, **Dr. Sanae Fujita** provided an overview of the human rights situation in Asia, highlighting that, despite the significance of the world's large Asia population, people's human rights issues in Asia have not been given enough attention by academic institutions. She emphasised that, in recent years, the difficulty of the human rights situation in Asia is increasing; even in Japan, which is the oldest democratic country on the continent, freedom of expression and information have deteriorated. She pointed out the need to have such a conference so as to promote awareness regarding the human rights situation in Asia both within and outside the University of Essex community.

During her speech, she mentioned that the idea to have a conference on human rights in Asia was first raised by a number of students from Asia eight years ago. The specific focus of these conferences has varied each year and has been influenced by their relevant timeliness to current events. Dr. Fujita expressed the hope that this student-led event will continue in the coming years.

Finally, **Professor Lorna McGregor**, Director of the Human Rights Centre gave the official opening remarks. She extended appreciation towards Dr. Fujita, colleagues and the conference committee, also thanking the people who travelled from outside Colchester for the event. She recognized the importance of and inspiration this annual conference on Asia brings, building on Dr. Fujita's speech, and expressed her joy at seeing international students joining this conference.



General session

➤ Speakers

- Professor Sir Nigel Rodley
- Video message from Mr. Michel Forst: Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders
- Ms. Karen Bennett
- His Excellency President Mohamed Nasheed



This session provided a general overview of the situation of human rights defenders today.

➤ Sir Nigel Rodley

Professor Rodley is an Emeritus Professor of Law and Chair of the Human Rights Centre at the University of Essex. He has various experiences as the UK-nominated Member of the UN Human Rights Committee since 2001 and as a former UN Special Rapporteur on Torture. In the beginning of his talk, he briefly reviewed the history of the development of human rights and UN-related frameworks, but warned that there has been ongoing push-back against human rights. As such, he said, it was appropriate to choose the topic of human rights defenders for this conference. Highlighting the pressure on and burdens of human rights defenders around the world is a push-back to the push-back.

Next, he discussed the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, the drafting of which began in 1987 but did not conclude until 1998. Difficulties arose when the global south realized they could no longer depend on the global east, so various members of the global south started organizing to resist human rights. If human rights defenders are on the frontline of all human rights work, then human rights defenders rely essentially on a very limited range of human rights recognized in the Declaration, notably the fundamental freedoms of assembly, association and expression. Countries that did not want the Declaration to be too strong pushed for the norms to be subject to national legislation. In this connection, he emphasized the infrastructural importance of Article 3 of the Declaration for the protection of human rights defenders. Article 3 states that domestic law and the judicial system must be consistent with international human rights law so as to ensure that human rights and fundamental freedoms are protected, and that all activities for the promotion, protection and effective realization of these rights are properly conducted.



At the end of his speech, he mentioned financing human rights defenders. Human rights defenders cannot operate on their own resources because it costs a lot of money to do work in the public domain. Due to this necessity of fundraising, civil society has sought to raise funding from all sources including international ones; however, less-friendly governments do not want human rights defenders to have access internationally funds, and thus make them unavailable or deny defenders access to them at the national level. Fortunately, Article 13 of the Declaration says everyone

has the right individually and in association with others to solicit, receive and utilize resources for the purpose of acting and protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms in accordance with Article 3 (having national law that is *consistent* with international law).

➤ Mr. Michel Forst

Mr. Forst was appointed by Human Rights Council as the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders in 2014. His video message, which he kindly recorded for this conference, was projected to the audience. In this video message, he explained his job as a Special Rapporteur and why protection of human rights defenders is important.

In his role, Mr. Forst seeks and provides information to members of the Human Rights Council on the main threats and challenges facing protection of human rights defenders. He has had seven consultations and met with more than 500 defenders from over 110 countries to gather information. Through this process, his group has identified and provided recommendations to the UN on the current challenges for defenders and what means should be utilized to improve protection of defenders. He also talks to governments and other stakeholders in various countries, and he conducts an assessment of states' practices to report to the Human Rights Council in Geneva.



According to Mr. Forst, the main challenge for defenders is isolation. Many are isolated or living in remote areas, and, as a result, they lose their relationship with the people who could help and protect them. Various threats come from states, state's official media, foreign agents and terrorists. They are labelled "enemies" of the state and are not recognized as defenders. Even their families are targets for attacks. The most sophisticated attacks against human rights defenders come through social media phone calls targeting them or their families, such as saying, 'we know the name of your child, their school and address'. Defenders also are threatened by arbitrary arrest, unfair trials and enforced disappearances. The most vulnerable groups of human rights defenders are women, those living in remote and isolated areas who do not have possibilities to seek assistance, people fighting against governments and companies and indigenous peoples.

He gave a simple answer to the question of why protecting defenders is important. They are "agents of changes", who are able to realize human rights for so many people and who fight for so many causes. They promote human rights as recognized in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, which should be promoted because it affects everyone's lives. *That is why defenders should be protected.*

To answer the question of how defenders' rights can be protected, he explained that there have been good practices developed by the UN and EU. Under the EU guidelines, ambassadors are scattered across EU countries, supporting human rights defenders and relocating them if they are in heightened danger. Mr. Forst also explained good practices developed by NGOs and civil society organizations, which can also provide technical and physical support, as well as opportunities to broadcast internationally testimonies of defenders. Defenders have developed tools to protect themselves as well.

In conclusion, he suggested opportunities for how people in the audience can also contribute to the protection of defenders. We can individually invite defenders to our meetings or conferences to learn from them and spread their testimonies. At a municipal level, we can conduct good practice as a shelter city. Furthermore at a university level, we can offer opportunities for defenders to visit and can provide medical and technical help cooperating with NGOs.



➤ **Ms. Karen Bennett**



Ms. Karen Bennett is a Senior Research Fellow in Human Rights and Director of the Human Rights and Social Justice Research Institute (HRSJ) at London Metropolitan University. She gave an interesting talk regarding EU policies, mechanisms and rights-based approaches for human rights defenders protection.

Human rights defenders are increasingly targeted by state and non-state actors. For example, LGBTI defenders may be at risk because of their sexual identity in patriarchal, heteronormative, and religious fundamentalist societies. Defenders operating in conflict environments, militarized zones, and in remote areas suffer from specific risks that occur in isolation, often when distanced from protection networks. Ms. Bennett also described a dangerous trend where defenders (in regions across the globe) are criminalized because of their practices or suffer through legislative and administrative hurdles. She stressed tactics of defender protection increasingly must be 'diverse, creative and highly adaptive to their context'.

The EU has been at the forefront globally for human rights defender protections. The *EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders* is a policy tool to be utilized by EU diplomats in third country missions. The objective of the Guidelines is to foster an environment in which human rights defenders can operate freely. They provide operational guidelines, which are to be reviewed at appropriate intervals by the EU to ensure the policy and actions are meeting their aim to support and protect defenders. The EU also contributes globally with financial support to human rights defenders through the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights.

Referring to findings from her research, Ms. Bennett emphasized the need for further strengthening a 'human rights defenders protection regime' through EU policies. According a study in 2013 in Tunisia, Thailand and Kyrgyzstan, the Guidelines were often not operationalized and not well-known to diplomats. Research findings showed no technical directives are set by missions to document their actions of implementing the Guidelines, even though many EU missions interact with human rights defenders regularly. The majority of human rights defenders who were living outside capital cities and took part in the study did not know how to engage with EU designates for their support and were not aware that emergency schemes for their protection were available through EU diplomatic missions.

Some EU member states have strengthened their actions toward defenders, such as publishing their own human rights defender guidelines, and they have worked to actively implement



recommendations of the EU Guidelines. These steps have been welcomed and are strengthening visibility to defenders, but stakeholders call on governments to step up even more to stop threats and violations against defenders. Ms. Bennett highlighted the need to address inconsistent approaches in implementing the EU Human Rights and Democracy Action Plan 2015-2019, and presented other specific EU programs that have recently been evaluated and would benefit from strengthening human rights defender engagement to meet project objectives.

In her conclusion, she emphasized the necessity for further EU action. In addition to the need for a coherent approach to implementing the recommendations elaborated in the Guidelines, EU ministers at the highest level should create an action plan for outreach to remote areas and to their diplomatic approach when addressing vulnerable groups. She offered a few recommendations for operationalizing commitments made in the EU Guidelines to better protect human rights defenders.

➤ **His Excellency President Mohamed Nasheed**

His Excellency President Nasheed spoke about South Asian human rights defenders, reflecting on his own experience as a human rights defender in the Maldives.

President Nasheed started his talk with one simple question, 'What does a human rights defenders look like?' He emphasized that human rights defenders are not only defending, but also attacking. They do not necessarily just stay in riot gear and defend themselves. While he said that he does not recommend anyone going into dangerous and risky environments, he has done so and would actually want human rights defenders to embrace it. Of course it is difficult to be tortured, killed, separated from family, and watch loved ones also be abused. These just happen to you while others are having good lives free of such danger. However, defending human rights is not just attending seminars, giving short speeches and writing essays, but actually standing up against a dictator and not blinking. He emphasized, 'you will be so scared, but just bear it'.



President Nasheed then related his life history, composed of repeated arrests and imprisonments. As a journalist by profession, he reported on torture, corruption and human rights abuses in the Maldives. He pushed the boundaries of freedom of expression in a dictatorship, which resulted in his imprisonment. After his first arrest in 1989, he was placed in solitary confinement for eighteen months and tortured for the first time. Those who arrested him wanted him to confess, and they argued that he was a terrorist trying to overthrow the state. He insisted, 'You are never charged with being a human rights defender'.

After two years and nine months, he was released, and he continued to write, resulting in his second arrest. This time, Amnesty International declared him a prisoner of conscience, and this, perhaps, helped in his release. With the second arrest, jailers tried to force a confession from him and imprisoned him for a long time. He started to think that to protect himself and others doing this work, it would be best to organize themselves into a political party.

He tried to get elected as an MP to gain more protection; however, he was arrested again. After this arrest, one incident occurred in the capital city: a boy died after being heavily beaten and tortured. His body was covered with many bruises. People living in capital city did not like what was done to this boy, which resulted in a riot. Upon President Nasheed's arrest, he received a chance to be exiled to Sri Lanka and subsequently to the UK. During his exile, he founded the Maldivian Democratic Party.



Although he was rearrested a few months after his return to the Maldives, he continued to lead opposition against the government. Cooperating with Dr. Ahmed Shaheed, who was the foreign minister at that time, he finally achieved support to amend the constitution. This led to the first multi-party free and fair election in the Maldives, and finally he won the presidency in 2008. His government ratified eleven human rights conventions, adopted a social protection programme for elderly people, and a wide-ranging programme of action addressing climate change and focusing on both economic, social, and cultural rights and civil and political rights.

However, he was forced to resign in 2012, under circumstances that he and his party have labelled a coup d'état. According to him, when the former regime toppled his democratic government and removed him from power, the international community did very little to condemn it. He lost in the presidential election in 2013, which are widely criticized by elections commissions for judiciary and police interference. He was arrested and charged under the Terrorist Act. By the time he lost the controversial election, the whole country had become very polarized. He thought that if

he did not concede his loss even though the elections commissioner was saying the election was wrong, then the country could fall into civil war.

He concluded his speech with his concern about the present Yameen government in the Maldives. Under Yameen's regime, several journalists and members of Parliament have been routinely imprisoned. After he lost the election, he was also arrested again. He then founded a human rights defenders team with lawyer Amal Clooney that reports cases in a UN working group on arbitrary detention. This shocked governments, and he was finally released. He said, 'We need your help, please help us'. Pointing to Burma and India, he emphasized that former regimes can return to power, which works against people who believe in democracy and human rights.

Regional issues session

➤ Speakers

- Mr. Golog Jigme
- Ms. Sara Barnes
- Ms. Natalia Utesheva



This session provided country- and region-specific information about HRDs.

➤ Mr. Golog Jigme

Mr. Golog Jigme began his talk by expressing his gratefulness for the opportunity to share with people worldwide his experiences and the situation of people suffering in Tibet. He said that it is not only in Tibet that people are suffering, but also in areas throughout the whole region. He proclaimed that human rights issues are not personal individual issues but are about everyone, and everyone has a responsibility in ensuring that human rights are protected. He emphasized that while institutions like the UN often speak of human rights, the topic tends to take a back seat due to economic and political issues.



He further explained that for activists like him, life can be very difficult and even dangerous as they are many times arrested and tortured. Today, there are approximately 300 human rights activists jailed in Tibet, without adequate legal basis. He urged students and people everywhere to fight back "with a pen": to write about the injustices that are occurring and raise awareness about them. As a final note, he urged students to be critical of news outlets from China and Tibet and to be mindful of the severe human rights abuses that are happening there, which have also stunted education and development in Tibet. Asia and particularly China is one of the main places where human rights abuses are occurring. However, Mr. Golog Jigme emphasized, we are all interdependent, and 'we must all work together to ensure human rights for everyone on this planet'.

➤ Ms. Sara Barnes

Ms. Sara Barnes is a researcher at TAPOL, which is a UK-based human rights organization. Its geographical focus is West Papua and in her statement, she thus gave insights into the regional issues of human right defenders in West Papua. West Papua is the western part of the island of New Guinea. It became part of Indonesia in 1969. In 2003, West Papua was separated into two parts by the Indonesian government.

Within West Papua, the human rights defenders are both from the region and elsewhere. In general, the human rights defenders consist firstly of lawyers and non-governmental human rights organizers, secondly of activists



and community organizers, who keep social and environmental justice consistent with international human rights law, and lastly of journalists, artists and civilians.

There are several well-known lawyers in West Papua who defend students and environmental or social activists. For example, in 2014, they had to represent two students who were arrested during the demonstration of Gia Cula, detained for 24 hours, and forced to sign statements that they had not been subjected to violence by the police and that they were not going to partake in future demonstrations. Besides having to be involved in cases like this, they themselves are subjected to threats, harassment and intimidation by the police and military. Most of these well-known human rights lawyers have been threatened while representing clients or have been subjected to criminal investigations. They are arrested just for taking part in human rights activities and their rights of criminal expression are not guaranteed.

The second group, human rights activists and community organizers, are often denied the ability to voice their opinion and call for justice. They are often denied access to fulfil their plans, resulting in a limited capacity to do their work. Support in the form of grants to finance their work or nominations for prizes to help them raise the profile of their human rights work.



The work of journalists is highly important in communicating the message of human rights defender groups. In West Papua, however, it is very difficult to gain access to information. Although the president of Indonesia announced that he was going to open access of the public to journalism in January 2015, the experience of journalists on the ground has not reflected this. In fact, local journalists continue to be intimidated and face difficulties in verifying the credibility of information they have received. Collaborations with internally-based human rights organizations can help these journalists in finding resources and increase their capacity to verify information or print reports in other languages.

Additionally, civilians face risk of arrest in their quests to demand justice. In 2015, more than 1,083 Papuans were arrested in Indonesia; 80% of them were arrested because of peaceful demonstrations. The criminalization of peaceful demonstrations and of activism is thus affecting all levels and types of defenders.

After outlining the main problems and issues faced by human rights defenders in West Papua, she continued to provide several solutions that can aid the development of the situation of human rights defenders. First, like in 2012 and 2014, Papuan human rights defenders can themselves fight to contribute to their work environment by creating forums for discussion and conversation. Next, it is vital to open access to Papua for foreign journalists as well as human rights organizations and to aid



in capacity building of individual human rights defenders and organizations. Lastly, the addition of community and security forces can help in the protection of activists.

There are several things that we ourselves can also do: write and talk about the problem, nominate a human rights defender for a prize to enhance his or her visibility, and put pressure on our own government to aid human rights defenders. Also, anyone can submit a complaint or concern directly to the UN or contribute to shadow reports.

➤ **Ms. Natalia Utesheva**



Ms. Utesheva presented about HRDs and National Human Rights Institutions in Kyrgyzstan. She first gave the country context of Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyzstan is considered “partly free” with some positive developments, such as the partial transparency of the government, a strong civil society, freedoms of association and expression, and legal provisions that provide some freedom for NGOs, excluding the requirement of NGO registration for civil activities. On the other hand, there are serious human rights violations. Human rights defenders, the US State Department, and Human Rights Watch have repeatedly reported violations of fundamental requirements in all stages of the judicial process, the use of arbitrary arrests, attacks and threats to LGBT, women and minority ethnic groups, and harassment against NGOs, HRDs and journalists.

Next, she explained the main challenges that HRDs in Kyrgyzstan face. One of the challenges is the Draft Law on Foreign Agents, which aims to restrict the work of NGOs that receive funding from foreign sources. The law covers a wide range of “political activities”, defined as activities aimed to influence decisions of state bodies and change policies. These amendments to the law will make it easier for the government to inspect, request and check internal documents of, as well as suspend NGO activities. Another challenge is the Draft Law on the Prevention of Gay Propaganda. This prohibits “propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations” and aims to keep anyone seeking to promulgate information about same-sex relations silent. Further, there is ongoing denial of justice to victims of the June 2010 interethnic violence in southern Kyrgyzstan. Searches of human rights lawyers of the human rights organisation Bir_Duino has occurred, but were deemed illegal by the Supreme Court. However, impunity of officials is persistent, as no prosecutions have been brought against the public officials who conducted these illegal searches.

Lastly, Ms. Utesheva talked about a case that exemplifies the current status of HRDs in Kyrgyzstan. Azimjan Askarov, an ethnic Uzbek HRDs and journalist, worked many years documenting human rights violations by law enforcement agencies in southern Kyrgyzstan. He was arrested in 2010 in the aftermath of the ethnic clashes, tortured and denied medical treatment. He was found guilty



of instigating ethnic hatred, inciting disorder and being complicit in the murder of a police officer, and he is currently serving a life sentence. He received the US State Department Human Rights Defender Award in 2015, but the Kyrgyz government consequently denounced a

cooperation treaty with the US to protest the award. The UN Human Rights Committee recognized violations of Articles 7, 9.1, 10.1, 14.3 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in April 2016. The Supreme Court will review the case in accordance with their constitutional provision, which requires the government to implement decisions of treaty bodies. It also requires the release of Askarov with full reparations. However, it is still unclear what the result will be, and the individual petition process that the Supreme Court requires is complicated, particularly for him to complete from jail, and there is a risk that the process will not focus on the procedural violations recognised by the UN Committee.

Female human rights defenders session

➤ Speakers

- Dr. Natasha Ezrow
- Ms. Mandira Sharma
- Ms. Indria Fernida

While many challenges faced by female HRDs are common to all human rights defenders irrespective of gender, this session was aimed at understanding the unique challenges faced by female HRDs.



➤ Dr. Natasha Ezrow

As an expert in political science, specialising in authoritarian regimes, corruption and institutional decay, Dr. Ezrow gave an overview of the political situation surrounding the specific field of being a female human rights defender.



The late 1990s and early 2000s saw increased recognition of female HRDs as key in human rights defense. However, there is still much to be done as thousands of women remain at risk both from the state and non-state actors. The biggest threat is from their own families, communities, and illegal armed actors. Poor support from their community renders them vulnerable to stigmatisation and criminalisation, resulting in poor access to justice. Women face verbal abuse and rape and sexual abuse. They are susceptible to kidnapping and are often victims of defamation campaigns, with slanderous allegations appearing in state-controlled media attacking their integrity and morality. They are often alleged to be prostitutes, just because they act independently.

Dr. Ezrow highlighted that many female HRDs face unique challenges as the main caretaker within a family, especially when incarcerated, referring to the case of Narges Mohammadi, an independent female journalist in Iran.

As many women have day-to-day responsibilities, it is difficult to continue human rights work knowing that, if arrested, they may be prevented from ever seeing their children again. Also, most female HRDs are not well-known. Only a few female HRDs like Aung San Suu Kyi avoid harsh fates because they have high profile cases, which put her and her family in a better position to avoid imprisonment and abuse. By contrast, there are many HRDs who are unknown and have very little hope for help.

At the state level, the police are one of the biggest hindrances to female HRDs – particularly in Southeast Asia where they cannot be trusted. Police corruption is often why women pragmatically position themselves to protect women's rights. A Nepali activist, Shyam Sah, working on cases of witchcraft accusation, domestic violence, rape, and dowry demand cases, was attacked in full view of the police when she intervened in a polygamous marriage. Further, the criminalisation of female HRDs is fuelled by judicial impunity and by the parallel lack of state accountability. Judicial institutions, such as courts and judges that are needed to implement frameworks, are weak and underfunded, and the court system is particularly slow. In many cases, countries lack courts, attorneys, infrastructure or trained judges.

At the international level, the UN system is slow and bureaucratic. More must be done to ensure that the current international protection framework is accessible and timely to those in need. This includes access to diplomatic protections and emergency funding, in addition to international criminal courts and other justice channels. There is a need to provide emergency help to female HRDs and courts. In addition, the implementation of human rights policies is a difficult issue. Although states sign some human rights treaties such as CEDAW, they do not implement it.



Female HRDs do not simply fit into the standard development paradigm but also have specific needs: many female HRDs may be financially dependent on families, may be unable to work due to threats, or may be in exile. Most threats come from members of their own community, and it is very hard for the international community to intervene. Asian women make up a rapidly growing group of activists fighting for their families and communities. In Asia, more and more female HRDs are fighting, such as factory workers whose pay has been withheld by human drug trafficking gangs, mothers whose children have been

kidnapped with the complicity of the police, and lawyers who refuse to accept political complacency. Many are under the age of 30.

Dr. Ezrow concluded that there remain great challenges in part because the system moves very slowly. The priority in institutional development is not with building judicial institutions or infrastructures for female HRDs, but with election supervision and monitoring. Also, the agenda for female HRDs and HRDs in general needs revision.

➤ **Ms. Mandira Sharma**

Ms. Sharma shared her perspectives on the challenges faced by HRDs in general and female HRDs in particular, based on her own experience as a female HRD in Nepal. She founded an organisation called Advocacy Forum – Nepal (AF) and led a team of more than 150 lawyers and HRDs working to promote human rights and the rule of law in the country. She also faced threats and intimidation and has been the subject of smear campaigns. She explained that the effectiveness of human rights defenders' work is also tied up with the threat. The more effective your work, the more threats you must face.



According to Ms. Sharma, the gap between international standards and practice is huge, and mitigating this gap is a challenge for HRDs in general. This gap exists also in the context of the protection of HRDs. She stated that there were a limited number of existing protection mechanisms for HRDs. Despite the global debate, comprehensive and practical protection programmes are far from the reality.

She then explained the important roles that HRDs played in Nepal, paving the grounds for a peaceful resolution of Nepal's 10 years long conflict, highlighting the cases of human rights violations and bringing Nepal into the UN agenda. A comprehensive peace agreement was signed, promising a new Nepal where structural inequalities, the rule of law and human rights would be addressed.

She explained how she built sustained efforts challenging impunity for those in power in Nepal. She highlighted how AF investigated cases of human rights violations and initiated litigations demanding criminal investigations of high-ranking officials involved in serious human rights violations such as torture, sexual abuse and summary executions. Remarkably, they pushed boundaries and brought forth 128 cases by filing First Information Reports (known as FIRs) demanding criminal investigations against people in power, brought forth more than 10 cases before the UN Human Rights Committee and even built a case in the UK under universal jurisdiction.

She highlighted the challenges that NGOs like AF faced. She pointed out that many countries in Asia have enacted legislation restricting NGO funding. Some countries have laws requiring NGO to get prior approval for foreign funding and projects, which are then never approved by the government. These kinds of laws have been used to effectively curtail the work of HRDs.

Female HRDs face double challenges: in Asia, there are many social taboos for certain kinds of work, especially when demanding accountability of the power. As female HRDs often depend on support from their families for their work, threats are made against family members of female HRDs. She highlighted the increased criminalisation of HRDs. Many HRDs also face allegations of being supporters of terrorists, money laundering and corruption. Especially, for female HRDs, smear campaigns and character assassinations have been common tactics.

The cases of threats, intimidations, and attacks on female human rights defenders are rarely investigated, and almost no one is held accountable. As the HRDs are threatened because of their work, the protection of HRDs should also be seen from a holistic perspective by analysing the environment for their work.

➤ Ms. Indria Fernida



Ms. Fernida presented her perspectives on female HRDs based on her work in Indonesia. Indonesia was under an authoritarian military regime for 32 years until 1998, during which time there were many abuses of power, corruption, crimes against humanity, including torture and sexual abuse, and human rights violations. From 1998, the country had 18 years of a reform era and multi-party and fair elections.

The freedoms of expression and association are especially important to HRDs work, and they are included in the Indonesian Constitution. Indonesia has a relatively free media and strong civil society, but repression does still exist. There are regulations to justify interventions under the law. Also, any expression and activities that are considered to be against the state can be limited. Moreover, religious fundamentalist groups have political influence, often enjoying immunity, and consequently limit any expression or activity that can be considered as religious defamation, such as LGBT issues.

Despite the crucial role that civil society organisations have played in the reformation of the country since 1998, they are receiving less and less protection. For example, the country's criminal code includes treason and blasphemy. Also, Sharia law was introduced after reformation and has been applied in several provinces. Further, the mass organization law limits activities of civil society organisations. Access to Papua for international journalists and NGOs is limited.

Female HRDs fulfill many roles in Indonesia – including as human rights activists, lawyers, journalists, community organizer, village volunteers, survivors of human rights violations, teachers, peasants, and religious leaders. They face many problems, such as harassment, intimidation, criminalization, physical and psychological abuse, character assassinations, surveillance in conflict areas, stigmatization as separatists or communists, homophobia, and rejection in the name of morality and religion. These abuses are mostly committed by non-state actors, such as religious fundamentalists, militia groups, identity groups (ethnic or religious), companies, family



members, and religious and community leaders. They also face the conventional perpetrators of state actors, such as the police, the army, and the state intelligence agency.

Ms. Fernida explained the situation of female HRDs in Aceh, an area in western Indonesia, as an example of how Sharia law affects the activities of female HRDs. The implementation of Sharia law represses free expression - those who criticise Sharia law are considered to be speaking against the religion. Female HRDs are victims of the law due to a limited idea of what the role of women should be under sharia law. The main problem in Aceh is social pressure and stigma from the community.



Many female survivors of human rights abuses in Indonesia become HRDs in their struggles to achieve justice. They often become leading actors in campaigns for justice through public advocacy. A research on female HRDs in the context of Papua, Aceh and 1965 atrocities found that female HRDs often struggle financially, that children are also trapped in violence and poverty but they are also the inspiration for female HRDs, and that they need specialized programs to deal with health and trauma.

The National Human Rights Institution and Women's Human Rights Commission should develop legal frameworks and mechanisms to better protect HRDs. The violence female HRDs experience needs to be recognised, and they need to be provided long-term support. The Ministry of Law and Human Rights should strengthen the role of the Committee on the National Plan of Human Rights Action to protect HRDs. Strengthening the role of Asean Intergovernmental Commission of Human Rights (AICHR) as a regional human rights mechanism is also crucial for the future. Of course, using international human rights mechanisms and forming solidarity and advocacy networks are also important.

Concluding remarks by Dr. Ahmed Shaheed



Dr. Shaheed started his concluding remarks by thanking the organizing team, and Dr. Fujita and Ms. Sharma for their advice. Then, he reflected on the conference, reminding us that anyone who questions and challenges the standards and practices and who pushes the boundaries are all human rights defenders, regardless of their profession or status.

He talked about his experience as a government official and the government's spokesperson in his country, the Maldives, noting that human rights defenders are often labelled as a traitor or a folk devil. When the supreme council of Islamic affairs in Maldives declared the prohibition of Universal Declaration of Human Rights in the country, he issued a statement saying that the Declaration is a perfectly legal document and the international standard. He argued that everything contained in the Declaration was fully in accordance with Islamic

Sharia law, and that Sharia law therefore could not be used as a reason to ban the Declaration. Due to this position, he was attacked by Islamists and had to flee the country as a folk devil.

He noted that this conference every year does more than addressing the gap in the curriculum. It is true that there is a gap in terms of not having a module on human rights in Asia. However, the role of the conference goes beyond the gap, by giving students an opportunity to develop many transferrable skills through the organization of a conference.

He also asserted that the topic of human rights defenders was a wise and timely choice. Reflecting on the panel speeches, he talked about some of the main challenges faced by Asian HRDs. First, he mentioned the lack of visibility. In remote parts of Asia, it is not very easy for local HRDs to reach out or to be covered in the media, compared to developed countries where independent media outlets are available and approachable, such as the BBC. Ultimately, lack of visibility hinders the work of HRDs.



Second, he mentioned the lack of domestic source of funds. People are scared to invest in an NGO which could be against the country's interests and/or risks compromising the interests of their customers or investors. HRDs therefore seek international assistance. However, receiving foreign funds implies a tie with a foreign actor, and is associated with the idea of folk devils working for an outsider. Therefore, the lack of domestic funds not only hinders the performance of the work but also endangers the credibility of the work.

He mentioned some other challenges, such as the lack of civic space, the rule of law, the issue of corruption and the lack of awareness of what rights are all about. However, he stressed that cultural relativism is the biggest obstacle in the context of Asia in implementing human rights standards, which the conference did not talk about much. One way of saying local culture trumps human rights is labelling those who advocate for human rights as devils who are trying to destroy the culture.



Dr. Shaheed was called a traitor for insisting that the government should abide by international law and for signing treaties that are said to undermine national sovereignty. Human rights treaties do not undermine national sovereignty, but rather strengthen much needed safeguards.

Another difficulty involves the people who work for human rights. There are many who take part in political fights, and many who compete over limited resources, which leads to fragmentation and competition rather than coalition. Also, a normative compromise is another difficulty.

A common way of thinking in Asia is often "let us do what is possible" and "we cannot push the boundaries". Moreover, obtaining credible source of information is vital.

Lastly, he thanked all the panellists, speakers and contributors of this conference, participants, organizers, and colleagues who supported them, for making this event a success.



Student session – presentation abstracts

Student presentations took place after the General Session. Nine students from the University of Essex and other UK universities were divided into three panels and gave presentations on various topics related to human rights defenders or human rights activism more broadly. We greatly appreciate the contribution of these students in adding inspiring perspectives to the conference. Below are the presentation abstracts submitted to the committee.

Panel 1

➤ Sof Akbar (University of Essex)

“Future of Human Rights Defenders”

This presentation is about human rights defenders from Thailand. A few human rights defenders will be mentioned in order to honour their lives and commitments that they have dedicated towards the journey of defending human rights. It is also an important platform to raise awareness on the protection for human rights defenders everywhere in the world, including in Thailand. The presentation is divided into three parts. The first part concerns the terminology of who is a defender, using the term given by the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. This is to set out an understanding of who human rights defenders are and what kind of work that they do. The second part is aimed at introducing and honouring the human rights defenders in Thailand. This section will also explore the line of their works as well as the challenges they have faced.

The selection of human rights defenders in Thailand in this presentation all have different backgrounds, emphasising the fact that a human rights defender can be any person who 'acts to address any human right (or rights) on behalf of individuals or groups. Human rights defenders seek the promotion and protection of civil and political rights as well as the promotion, protection and realisation of economic, social and cultural rights.' The last part concludes the presentation by emphasising the importance of advocating for the protection of human rights defenders.



➤ Pankhuri Agarwal (The School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London)

“Human Trafficking in India: Challenges and Experiences”



The presentation will include the following from my experience of working in the field against human trafficking in India from 2012-2015 with human rights defenders, academics, activists and the Government of India.

1. The state of human trafficking in India including recent developments in law and policy.
2. Challenges in fighting human trafficking during my own experiences in the field, including but not limited to:
 - a. Working with sex workers at Delhi's red light area, GB Road (India) as part of 'Targeted Intervention Project' of the NGO Shakti Vahini involving skills development and prevention of HIV/AIDS – challenges of working against and with the pimps and brothel managers;
 - b. Rescuing of women and children from commercial sexual exploitation, forced marriage and child labour – challenges of working with limited resources and understanding perspectives of different stakeholders in the process;
 - c. Working with the police, medical professionals and other stakeholders in the post-rescue process – challenges of implementation and insights into the modus operandi of the traffickers;
 - d. Working with children of sex workers in a shelter in Delhi's red light area, GB Road – challenges in preventing second-generation forced prostitution;

- e. Independent documentary film to highlight action points which anyone can take irrespective of their educational and professional background – challenges of communicating about the issue, demystifying myths, the impact and response until now.

Details available at: aht-freedommatters.blogspot.com;

- f. What keeps them going? Stories of inspiration and change in fighting the largest transnational crime across the world.



Note: This presentation has not been published anywhere. However, this will include verifiable evidence on data, pictures, statistics, related research, primarily based on personal experience and the making of an independent documentary film released on January 26, 2016 (details available through the link provided above).

➤ **Cia Yee Goh (University of Nottingham)**
“Slacktivism: An evolution of Protest”

As I am writing this, I am reflecting on my current tenure as the president of the Nottingham Malaysian Society (NMS), which is currently involved in the debate of a motion for NMS to lobby to the university to remove the Malaysian Prime Minister’s portrait tomorrow at our Annual General Meeting. I have had personal experience in the government’s attempt to curtail the right to free speech of our members in discussing the motion from phone calls to threats. The motion which began from a simple online petition by one of our members has caused a significant amount of media attention gaining over 4000 signatures within two days.



This raises an interesting question regarding the utility and effectiveness of "slacktivism" in combating violations of human rights. The actions of Malaysians today in sharing, posting and signing petitions, such as the one calling for the removal of the portrait, has been a growing example of a form of activism known today as slacktivism. The presentation aims at taking a critical look at slacktivism and its criticisms as well as to put forward arguments in favour of slacktivism. Did KONY 2012 expose the flaws of slacktivism or did it possess a greater message regarding the power of social media? Recent studies from papers will be referenced in my research and they seem to indicate that slacktivism might be more effective than initially thought to be. As an Asian in charge of a human rights internship programme in Malaysia known as ASASI and with prior experience in presenting, I believe I have much to share regarding the effectiveness of slacktivism in Asia in the protection of human rights.

Panel 2



➤ **Aliya Duganova (University of Essex)**
“Access to Information Initiative in Kazakhstan”

I would like to share my opinion and experience from the process of drafting legislation on access to information in Kazakhstan: what were the various and most successful approaches taken. Secondly, I will review the pluses and minuses of the adopted legislation. Finally, I will conclude with the current ideas for next steps.

➤ **Muthanna Saari (University of Sussex)**

“Screening documentary film is an offence: Freedom of expression under threat in Malaysia”

Freedom of thought and expression is a guaranteed right in Article 19 of the Universal Declarations of Human Rights 1948. Likewise, this right is guaranteed in Article 10 of the Malaysian



Constitution. The failure to provide an adequate space in order to practise this right could possibly lead to a regressive society which would disable a smooth flow of information and healthy growth of freedom of expression. In 2013, Lena Hendry, a human rights activist and a staff member of KOMAS, an NGO in Malaysia promoting human rights, democracy and equality by using creative media was arrested and charged under the Malaysia's Film Censorship Act 2002 for screening "No Fire Zone: The Killing Fields of Sri Lanka" a documentary on war crimes in Sri Lanka. Screening a film which has not been passed through the censorship board in Malaysia is an offence which carries a jail term up to three years or a fine up to MYR30,000, or both upon conviction. This prosecution was a clear violation of human rights and an infringement on the Malaysian Constitution. Moreover, it signalled that even non-commercial films and small group screenings for advocating purposes are deemed to be a criminal offence under this act. In a country where democracy is cherished, such an obstacle in accessing information and discussing the issues in a responsible way is not acceptable. The era of one-way communication when the information was fed to the society without any mechanism to have a second thought has ended. Nevertheless, the utilisation of creative media must be adopted as an effective tool to promote democracy and human rights. Hence, it is of utmost importance that freedom of thought is fostered and the freedom of expression is given due regard in a democratic society to uphold basic human rights.

➤ **Aapurv Jain (The School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London)**
"Challenges and Possibilities of LGBT Youth Activism in India"

My presentation aims at looking at the challenges and possibilities of LGBT Youth Activism in India. In this presentation, I wish to talk about my own experience of working as a young LGBT activist in Delhi, India both within a university space as well as outside of it. I worked as the coordinator of an independent group in Delhi University called the Gender Studies Group, that aimed at raising awareness on gender and sexuality issues in Delhi University. As part of the group, I organized some of the first events on LGBT issues in the university, like, a panel discussion and workshop on LGBT issues on campus, a Lesbian Film Festival and a campaign to make the university a safe space for LGBT people. I also organized and participated in various campaigns outside the university on gender and sexuality issues like the anti-rape movement, pride march, campaign against section 377. I also worked as an intern in a consultancy NGO in Delhi called Kiti Team, which made it possible for me to engage with broader civil society in India. I wish to present the challenges and dangers of working on an issue that is criminalized by the law in India and that the society at large does not wish to talk about (including some of its 'progressive' sections), especially at a time when there is a conservative government in power. The presentation will also highlight various efforts being made by young LGBT activists across India to make their voices heard as well as the challenges they face in their struggles.



Panel 3

➤ Camille Gauter (University of Essex) “Human Rights Defenders from Kyrgyzstan”



Azimjon Askarov is a prominent human rights defender from Kyrgyzstan from the Uzbek minority and founder of the NGO Vozdukh ("Air"). His activism focuses on the investigation of police violence, prison conditions and discrimination against minorities. While documenting police violence during the ethnic clashes of June 2010 in the south of the country, he was arrested, tried and is now serving a life sentence for incitement of ethnic hatred. Several local and international NGOs documented the denial of his right to a fair trial and due process, with numerous flaws in terms of access to lawyers,

medical care, threat of the defense lawyers and witnesses, and allegations of torture. In spite of this, the Kyrgyz Courts have been denying his attempts to review his case. The local NGO defending Azimjon Askarov's case, "Bir Duino" ("One World"), and its prominent director and human rights defender Tolekan Ismailova, have been regularly threatened and targeted by Kyrgyz nationalists and their activities restrained by the government. The case of Azimjon Askarov is illustrative of the broader human rights issues in Kyrgyzstan: flaws in the judiciary, impunity, discrimination against minorities, pressure and constraints on civil society.

➤ Golan Suanzantung Naulak (The School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London)

“Mothers as Human Rights Defenders in North-East India”

The north-eastern states of Manipur and Nagaland in India have seen an internecine cycle of violence between the Indian State and numerous armed movements. The imposition of the draconian act--the Armed Forces Special Powers Act in 1958 in the Naga Hills to quell the Naga rebellion against India--was the first of many experiences of human rights violation in the region. The Act was subsequently imposed in all the north-eastern states and later in Jammu and Kashmir.



At the heart of the debate on human rights and the excesses of the State is this very Act, which, human rights activists claim, is both exclusionary and undemocratic. It is considered exclusionary because it being used only in the frontier states of Jammu and Kashmir as it is in the northeast region. The considerable rise of armed movements in the region and the militarization by Indian security forces has led to a number of human rights abuses from both sides in this volatile, multi-ethnic region.

This paper is an attempt to look at the role played by community associations and groups, which are in no way full-time human rights defenders or organizations, in fighting against human rights



violations. I would be focusing on two case studies of the Naga Mother's Association in Nagaland and the Meira Paibis in Manipur to argue that, despite the proactive role played by these women groups in raising human rights issues, they are limited by the community boundaries of their constituencies. Therefore, the community that provides them their effectiveness, which most human rights activists or non-governmental organizations do not enjoy, also happens to be the factor causing their limitation.

➤ **Marc Titus Cebreros (Queen Mary University of London)**

“Defending indigenous rights in the Philippines: human rights perspectives on dichotomy, identity and consent”

This presentation analyzes the claims and strategies being used by indigenous peoples in the Philippines to defend native title and other rights. Native title is particularly problematic because even though its validity has been affirmed as early as 1909, the corresponding administrative infrastructure began to be put in place only recently, and under an extremely challenging context at that. Official policy remains grounded on the doctrine of jura regalia with the result that the discourse on land rights – the bedrock of indigenous life – has not only been circumscribed by the law on property but pitted against sovereign interests enshrined in constitutional law. In a situation where the State exercises ownership not only over lands within the public domain, but over all minerals wherever these are to be found, native title is bound to conflict with subsurface rights. Facing multifaceted challenges that threaten to sever their cultural connection to land, indigenous peoples are starting to shift from private to public legal discourses, coalescing around the idea of human rights. The three case studies that will be presented will explore the advantages and risks of human rights approaches, and advance three core propositions: first, there is a dichotomous treatment of indigenous peoples in international law and at national level, which human rights discourses like those surrounding the principle free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) can help surmount; second, FPIC entail specific risks which indigenous peoples and those who advocate on their behalf must consider; and third, a dynamic concept of indigenous identity may be more effective in mitigating these risks and advancing indigenous rights.



***(Photos credit to Zofia Wojcik, Dr. Sanae Fujita and University of Essex)**

Acknowledgments

The organizing committee of 8th Annual Human Rights in Asia Conference would like to take this opportunity to wish our heartfelt appreciation and congratulations to everyone who made this conference very successful. Firstly, the team would like to thank Dr. Sanae Fujita and Dr. Ahmed Shaheed for all their assistance, advice and support to the team. Secondly, we would like to convey our appreciation to the Human Rights Centre and Law Department as well as the administrative staff of the Law Department and all other university staff for their kind assistance and patience throughout the preparation of the conference. Finally, our thanks and gratitude to all our volunteers and to all those who attended from the University of Essex as well from other universities. We hope the discourse on Asia will continue for many years to come and hopefully a module on Asia and Human Rights will be developed as part of the LL.M. or M.A. courses.

Thank You.

2015/2016 8th

Annual Asia and Human Rights Conference Organizing team

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(Advisors)

Dr. Sanae FUJITA
Dr. Ahmed SHAHEED



Speakers' biographies

➤ **Sir Nigel Rodley**

Sir Nigel Rodley KBE, PhD (Essex) is Emeritus Professor of Law and Chair of the Human Rights Centre at the University of Essex where he has taught from 1990 to 2015. He has been the UK-nominated Member of the UN Human Rights Committee since 2001 (Chair 2013-2014) and a former UN Special Rapporteur on Torture (1993-2001). He is President of the International Commission of Jurists and member of the Council of its British Branch, JUSTICE. He serves as a Board member of Penal Reform International. He is also a Patron and former trustee of Freedom from Torture (Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture) and of REDRESS. He is a member of Foreign Secretary's Advisory Group on Human Rights (established November 2010). He is Co-Editor-in-Chief of the *Israel Law Review*.

He was the founding head of Amnesty International's Legal Office (1973-1990). A former Research Fellow at New York University's Center for International Studies (1970-73), he has taught at Dalhousie University (1965-68), the New School for Social Research Graduate Faculty (1969-72) and the London School of Economics (1973-1990), where he was also a Research Fellow in 1983. He served at UN Headquarters in New York as an Assistant and then Associate Economic Affairs Officer (1966, 1968-69).

Honours: knighted in 1998 for 'services to human rights and international law'; honorary LLD, Dalhousie University (2000); American Society of International Law Goler T Butcher Medal for distinguished work in human rights (2005); Honorary Fellow, Royal College of Physicians Faculty of Forensic Law and Medicine (2008); Docteur (honoris causa), Université Panthéon-Assas Paris II (2015). His publications include the landmark and now standard work *The Treatment of Prisoners under International Law* (Oxford University Press; 3rd edn, 2009, with Matt Pollard).

➤ **Mr. Michel Forst**

In 2014, Mr. Michel Forst was appointed as the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders. Mr. Forst has extensive experience on human rights issues, including human rights defenders, the rights of children with disabilities, extreme poverty, and the elderly. He has held a number of leading positions within the field of human rights, including the French National Consultative Commission on Human Rights, the Cimade, UNESCO, the first World Summit on Human Rights Defenders, and Amnesty International. From 2008 to 2013, Mr. Forst was the UN Independent Expert on the situation of human rights in Haiti, and between 2012 and 2013 he was the Chair of the Coordination Committee of the Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council. He is also a former member of the Board of the International Service for Human Rights and a founding member of Front Line Defenders.

➤ **Ms. Karen Bennett**

Ms. Karen Bennett is Senior Research Fellow in Human Rights and Director of the Human Rights and Social Justice Research (HRSJ) Institute at London Metropolitan University. She has led a research work stream on evaluating effective mechanisms in support of human rights defenders at risk since 2006 and designs rights-based capacity building training programmes for lawyers and other human rights defenders internationally with a focus on Central Asia and Darfur, Sudan. Her research interests include mechanisms for protection of human rights defenders and rights-based approaches to human rights monitoring.

➤ **His Excellency Mohamed Nasheed**

Mr. Mohamed Nasheed became the President of Maldives in 2008 after defeating a 30-year old dictatorship in the country's first free and fair elections. In February 2012, he was forced to resign the presidency in an alleged coup d'état perpetrated by security forces. President Nasheed has been arrested, imprisoned and tortured in the Maldives on numerous occasions for his political beliefs, and was named an Amnesty International "Prisoner of Conscience" in 2001. He won the 2009 Anna Lindh Prize, in recognition of his work promoting human rights, democracy and environmental protection and in August 2010, Newsweek named President Nasheed in its list of 'World's Ten Best Leaders'. President Nasheed has also been presented with the James Lawson Award for the practice of non-

violent action in June 2012. Further, in November 2014, President Nasheed was presented with the Mission Blue Award, which Dr. Sylvia Earle honoured for his distinguished work on climate change advocacy. He is a graduate of Liverpool John Moores University and a journalist by profession.

➤ **Mr. Golog Jigme**

Mr. Golog Jigme, aka Jigme Gyatso, is a Buddhist monk and human rights activist who was jailed and tortured for making the documentary "Leaving Fear Behind" in 2008 together with Dhondup Wangchen. He was arrested in March 2008 and released after months of torture. In 2009, he was arrested again without charges and kept in custody for several months. However, he suffered from continued harassment by the police and then disappeared in 2012. A few months after he escaped a police detention centre, the police started a hunt for him under false charges. Mr. Golog Jigme was listed by Reporters Without Borders among their list of "100 Information Heroes" on World Press Freedom Day.

Jigme Gyatso is the most high profile former Tibetan political prisoner and torture survivor to have escaped Tibet recently. After escaping from Tibet, he arrived in Switzerland in January 2015 and was granted political asylum. Ever since, he has continued to be a strong advocate for the Tibetan people's rights. He is a part of the Tibet Advocacy Coalition where he works together with supporters and Tibetans to hold China accountable for its human rights violations in Tibet through engagement with UN mechanisms such as the UN Human Rights Council and the UN Committee Against Torture in Geneva.

➤ **Ms. Sara Barnes**

Ms. Sara Barnes is a Researcher at TAPOL, a UK based organisation that campaigns to raise awareness of human rights issues in Indonesia. TAPOL works to support Human Rights Defenders throughout Indonesia and have recently been focused on the struggles of Human Right Defenders in the contested territory of West Papua. She is also currently completing an MA in Gender Studies at SOAS. Her research interests include the politics and theory of gender, race, violence and nonviolence in liberation struggles. She will present her work on the issue of human rights defenders in West Papua, Indonesia.

➤ **Ms. Natalia Utesheva**

Ms. Natalia Utesheva is currently a masters student in Human Rights at Kingston University. Having 20 years of experience defending human rights in the Kyrgyz Republic, she worked in the area of human rights in the Youth Human Rights Group, in the National Centre on prevention of torture, in the Coordination Council on Human Rights under the Government, and in the OHCHR regional office.

➤ **Dr. Natasha Ezrow**

Dr. Natasha Ezrow is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Essex, where she directs the International Development Studies Program and teaches courses international development as well as the politics of the Middle East, Asia, Latin America and Africa. She specializes in authoritarian politics, institutional decay, corruption and democratization, and has recently published several books on these topics, including *The Politics of Dictatorships*, *Dictators and Dictatorships*, and *Failed States and Institutional Decay*. Her most recent book, *Development and the State in the 21st Century*, tackles the issues facing developing countries. She has been featured as an analyst on BBC World, BBC News, the BBC Breakfast show, Al Jazeera and Globo News Brazil. She also currently works as a consultant for the United Nations Economic and Social Commission of Western Asia (UNESCWA) and the European Union External Action Service.

➤ **Ms. Mandira Sharma**

Ms. Mandira Sharma is a graduate of University of Essex (LL.M. in International Human Rights Law), currently pursuing her PhD at the University. She is a leading human rights activist from Nepal. She is the founder of Advocacy Forum – Nepal, a leading human rights organization in the country. Taking enormous challenges, she lead the team of more than 100 lawyers and human rights activists,

monitoring and documenting cases of human rights violations during Nepal's conflict. She is known for her voice against impunity in Nepal. Despite constant threats and pressure, she continued to monitor places of detention documenting incidences of torture, helping victims challenge the atrocities, playing instrumental role in empowering victims groups and advocating for justice for those victims of human rights violations in Nepal. She has received the Human Rights Defenders Award from Human Rights Watch, Australian Leadership Award from Australian Aid, and Future Leader Award from UNIFEM for her struggle to promote human rights in Nepal.

➤ **Ms. Indria Fernida**

Ms. Indria Fernida is an Indonesian human rights lawyer who has gained many experiences on human rights advocacy on national and international levels. At the Conference, she will talk about the current situation of human rights in Indonesia. Currently, she is working at Asia Justice and Rights. Prior to that, she worked at the Commission for the Disappeared Victims of Violence (KontraS) for 14 years. She also undertook several internship programmes at international NGOs, including the Asian Human Rights Commission and Amnesty International Netherlands. She graduated with a Masters of Philosophy in Theory and Practice of Human Rights at the University of Oslo, Norway. She wrote her thesis on the issue of the mass killings of 1965/6 in Indonesia.

➤ **Dr. Sanae Fujita**

Dr. Sanae Fujita is a member of the Human Rights Centre at the University of Essex and has been an adviser for the annual student-led Human Rights in Asia conference since the first year it was organised. Previously at Essex, she taught the postgraduate course entitled 'Human Rights in the Asia-Pacific Region' as a module director. Her areas of research are human rights and development, with a particular focus on the activities of International Financial Institutions. Dr. Fujita has been leading a project of freedom of expression and information of Japan by assisting the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression. She teaches her area of expertise regularly both in the UK and Japan. She holds a PhD in Law and an LLM in International Human Rights Law from the University of Essex as well as an MA in International Development from Nagoya University, Japan.

➤ **Prof. Lorna McGregor**

Prof. Lorna McGregor is a Professor in the Law School and Director of the Human Rights Centre. She researches and teaches in the areas of public international law, particularly international human rights law, international criminal law and transitional justice. She is the Co-Director of an ESRC Large Grant on Technology, Big Data and Human Rights. She is also a Co-Chair of the European Society of International Law's Interest Group on Human Rights, a Commissioner of the UK Equality and Human Rights Commission and a member of REDRESS' Legal Advisory Council.

Prior to joining the Law School, Prof. McGregor was the International Legal Adviser at REDRESS where she litigated cases on behalf of torture survivors before the UN treaty bodies and regional human rights commissions and courts. She has previously held positions as a Programme Lawyer at the International Bar Association, the State Immunity Project Coordinator at REDRESS and in Sri Lanka at the International Centre for Ethnic Studies.

➤ **Dr. Ahmed Shaheed**

Dr. Ahmed Shaheed is the Deputy Director of the Human Rights Centre and Lecturer in the School of Law, and visiting Lecturer at the City University of New York. He has twice held the Office of Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of the Maldives, a position he used to promote human rights standards and norms. He played a leading role in the Maldives democratic transition and in its human rights reform process over a period of transition from a thirty-year-old autocracy with widespread human rights abuses, to a democracy in 2008. In 2011, Amnesty International described him as the 'leading human rights defender' in the Maldives. He has been serving as the UN Special Rapporteur for human rights in Iran since 2011. He is the founding Chair of the Geneva-based human rights think-tank, Universal Rights Group. In 2015, he was awarded the Leo Nevas Human Rights Global Leadership Award by the UN Foundation for a 'lifetime of achievement advancing human rights in his own country and abroad' and 'for his courage and conviction and his steadfast support for human rights for all'.