



Factsheet: Advice for Human Rights Defenders on How to Engage with the US Government June 2020

Human rights defenders who are under threat often turn to the international community for support. Foreign embassies can be an important resource. Based on our interviews with human rights defenders around the world, we have prepared this factsheet to help you engage effectively with the U.S. embassy in your country.

Which country's embassies should I contact?

If you face a threat, don't rely on a single embassy to help. Talk to officials from different embassies, the United Nations, international organizations and parliamentarians. Look for the people who might have the most influence over the situation.

U.S. embassies often have a designated human rights officer and resources available to support human rights defenders, so it is usually worthwhile to meet with them.

What kind of support can U.S. embassies provide?

U.S. embassies, like other foreign embassies, can support a human rights defender in a number of ways. For example, embassies can:

- Make public statements in your support, sometimes jointly with other embassies.
- Conduct field visits to your office or community to raise your visibility.
- Raise concerns through diplomatic channels to the host government or military.
- Physically accompany you in dangerous situations.

- Provide emergency visas and relocation support.
- Put pressure on the host government to investigate and prosecute crimes.
- Monitor your trial if you are being criminalized.
- Visit you in prison to make sure you have access to food and medical support.
- Mention your case in the U.S. government's annual Human Rights Report.
- Provide funding to build capacity of civil society.

If I need emergency support, who should I contact?

If you need emergency support, we recommend that you start by talking to a national or international NGO that specializes in protecting human rights defenders. If you do not know who to contact, you can ask the U.S. embassy's human rights officer for help in identifying someone.

Freedom House's Emergency Assistance Program (EAP) provides short-term support to human rights defenders and civil society organizations, including those working on land, indigenous rights and environmental issues, who face threats due to their work. EAP provides emergency assistance grants to those who experienced a verified threat in the past three months. Grants can cover needs such as relocation, medical expenses, secure transportation, legal fees and humanitarian assistance. For more information, please email: info@hrdassist.org.

As part of this program, Freedom House manages the **Lifeline Embattled CSO Assistance Fund**, established in 2011 by the U.S. and eleven other governments. Lifeline provides rapid response assistance grants to civil society organizations that face threats due to their human rights work, as well as short-term grants for advocacy and resiliency projects that defend freedom of association and assembly rights. To apply for help from Lifeline, please contact info@csolifeline.org. They recommend that you send an encrypted message, using the instructions available on this website: <https://www.csolifeline.org/emergency-assistance>.

How can I request a meeting with a U.S. embassy?

There are several ways to contact a U.S. embassy in nonemergency situations:

- If you already know someone at the U.S. embassy, ask that person to connect you to the embassy's human rights officer.
- Contact your country's U.S. embassy through its website.
- Email the State Department in Washington, DC at civilsociety@state.gov to ask for help in identifying the appropriate point of contact.¹

Who should I ask to meet with at the U.S. embassy?

Every U.S. embassy assigns an official to serve as the human rights officer. In most cases, you will meet with this person. If your case relates to a business activity, you should also request that the economic officer join the meeting. If your case involves abuses by security forces, other embassy officials who work on defense, intelligence or law enforcement issues might also join. In high-profile cases, you might also meet with senior officials of the embassies, such as the ambassador or the deputy chief of mission.

What information should I provide to the embassy?

Be prepared to tell the embassy (1) your specific request for help; (2) the facts of your case, preferably with a timeline of events; and (3) any previous outreach you've done to the U.S. government on this issue.

Embassies make political calculations before deciding whether to help in a specific case. They might need to balance competing political, economic and security interests. They are more likely to help if the case has a clear nexus to U.S. interests. Before meeting with the embassy, talk to other NGOs and look at the embassy's social media accounts to better understand its foreign policy priorities. During your meeting, your goals should be to convince embassy officials that your case is a priority and to clearly communicate your request for help.

How will the embassy evaluate my request?

When you meet with a U.S. embassy official, you should assume that any information that you share will be circulated within the embassy and possibly within the broader U.S. government. It's important to recognize that embassy officials will also evaluate your credibility and motivations for providing this information. Embassies have to verify the facts on the ground before they can help.

Whenever possible, establish contact with an embassy before an emergency situation arises. This provides embassy officials with more time to evaluate your case. They will be better prepared to take rapid action in an emergency if they already know that your request is genuine. If you engage frequently with the embassy, you are more likely to be treated as a reliable source of information.

I want to request that the U.S. government place sanctions or visa restrictions on someone who has committed human rights violations. How do I do this?

If you have evidence of “gross human rights violations” or kleptocracy, you can submit that evidence to the State Department in Washington, DC using the email address 7031c@state.gov.² The U.S. government has several foreign policy tools that it can use to hold people and businesses accountable for egregious cases of human rights violations — extrajudicial killings, torture, enforced disappearances, arbitrary detention and rape under color of law — and for significant acts of corruption.

For example, **Section 7031(c) visa restrictions** can prevent foreign government officials and their families from traveling to the United States. Other types of visa restrictions can be used for nongovernment officials. **Global Magnitsky sanctions** can freeze assets and cut off access to the U.S. financial system.

For more information, please contact Kirk Herbertson, Senior Policy Advisor, EarthRights International, at kirk@earthrights.org. [Please also read our report.](#)

What should I do after I meet with the U.S. embassy?

After your meeting with the U.S. embassy, always follow up with your point of contact to check on progress. Many embassy officials will not contact you after a meeting; it is up to you to stay in regular contact.

You should encourage the point of contact to tell you whether he or she has taken any action in response to your request. Often, embassy officials cannot tell you exactly what actions they take on behalf of your case, but should be able to indicate if they are doing something.

Remember that many embassy officials rotate to new countries every three or four years, so be sure to ask for a new point of contact when your contact is leaving.

¹ The U.S. State Department’s Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor in Washington, DC monitors this email address. When they receive your message, they will forward it to the relevant points of contact in the State Department, U.S. embassies or other U.S. government agencies, as appropriate. This email address should not replace existing NGO email contacts for emergency assistance requests. When sending a request to this email address, please include specific details about your case and your request for help, so that the State Department can identify the best point of contact.

² When you submit information to this email address, the State Department will consider it both for sanctions and visa restrictions. You need to provide: (1) identifying information — the name, country of birth, approximate or actual date of birth and any additional information that can help to avoid accidentally placing restrictions on someone with a similar name; (2) credible information that demonstrates direct or indirect involvement in gross violations of human rights or kleptocracy.

The State Department will treat all of the information that you submit as confidential. It will not be able to inform you if it uses the information, but sometimes the State Department makes public announcements when sanctions or visa restrictions have been put in place. Remember that this process can take months, or even years.