

WAR, CENSORSHIP  
AND PERSECUTION  
PEN INTERNATIONAL CASE LIST  
2023/2024

**pen**  
INTERNATIONAL



# AUTHORS AND SPECIAL THANKS

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**SPECIAL THANKS TO:** PEN Centres across regions. All PEN International staff.

PEN International is a non-political organisation that holds Observer Status with the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, Special Consultative Status at the United Nations, and Associate Status at UNESCO. PEN International is a registered charity in England and Wales with registration number 1117088.

## ABOUT PEN INTERNATIONAL

PEN International promotes literature and freedom of expression. It is a forum where writers meet freely to discuss their work; it is also a voice speaking out for writers silenced in their own countries.

Founded in London in 1921, PEN International – PEN's Secretariat – connects an international community of writers. Governed by the PEN Charter, PEN operates across five continents with over 130 Centres in over 90 countries.

The Writers in Prison Committee (WiPC) of PEN International was set up in 1960 as the result of mounting concern about attempts to silence critical voices, globally. The WiPC works on behalf of those who are detained or otherwise persecuted for their opinions expressed in writing, including writers who are under attack for their political activities or for exercising their profession, provided that they did not use violence or advocate violence and racial hatred.

Over time, the work of the WiPC in documenting persecution of writers resulted in the development of PEN International's Case List – an annual record of attacks, imprisonment, and persecution of those who use the written word to express themselves. Every year, PEN members campaign and lobby relevant governments for an improvement in the conditions of persecuted writers and journalists and/or for their release, as well as for investigations into cases of torture and killings. Through writing to prisoners, where possible, or to their families, they provide encouragement and hope. PEN International and its Centres also advocate for systemic change to restrictive laws and practices, including by submitting concerns and recommendations about freedom of expression issues to various international and regional human rights bodies.

[pen-international.org](https://pen-international.org)

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# THE PEN CHARTER

The PEN Charter is based on resolutions passed at its International Congresses and may be summarised as follows:

PEN affirms that:

- Literature knows no frontiers and must remain common currency among people in spite of political or international upheavals.
- In all circumstances, and particularly in time of war, works of art, the patrimony of humanity at large, should be left untouched by national or political passion.
- Members of PEN should at all times use what influence they have in favour of good understanding and mutual respect between nations and people; they pledge themselves to do their utmost to dispel all hatreds and to champion the ideal of one humanity living in peace and equality in one world.
- PEN stands for the principle of unhampered transmission of thought within each nation and between all nations, and members pledge themselves to oppose any form of suppression of freedom of expression in the country and community to which they belong, as well as throughout the world wherever this is possible. PEN declares for a free press and opposes arbitrary censorship in time of peace. It believes that the necessary advance of the world towards a more highly organised political and economic order renders a free criticism of governments, administrations and institutions imperative. And since freedom implies voluntary restraint, members pledge themselves to oppose such evils of a free press as mendacious publication, deliberate falsehood and distortion of facts for political and personal ends.

# CASE LIST METHODOLOGY

PEN International gathers its information from a wide variety of sources and seeks to confirm its information through at least two independent sources. Where its information is unconfirmed, it will either take no action, or word its outputs to reflect the fact that the information is as yet incomplete. Sources include press reports, reports from individuals in the region in question, reports from other human rights groups, PEN members themselves, embassy officials, academics, prisoners' families, lawyers and friends, and exile groups. It also partners with other international NGOs, such as ARTICLE 19, the Committee to Protect Journalists, Freedom House, Index on Censorship, and Reporters without Borders. It is a founder member of IFEX – the International Freedom of Expression Exchange, a collaborative, online service in which national, regional, and international organisations involved in the campaign for free expression pool information and amplify each other's voices.

Writers are frequently also journalists and media commentators, and vice versa, so PEN International will also include a person on the list whose primary role is as a writer, but who may be under pressure for their journalism. A journalist who is threatened for writing a book may also become a PEN concern, such as where crime reporters publish books based on their investigations into criminality. Similarly, PEN International will on occasion take up visual artists, including filmmakers and cartoonists.

Rather than attempting to duplicate the work of its media rights colleagues, this list features those cases that are either unique to PEN International and are not within other organisations' remits, such as writers of literature and poets, or where there is a crossover between journalism and literature. It should also be noted that the Case List can only provide a snapshot of what is likely to be a larger phenomenon: offences are often not reported, writers may self-censor, and other obstacles arise in terms of documenting the silencing of writers. This is highly likely to be the case for women writers as the full extent of censorship of women must be seen within the wider context of gender-based violence, and lack of access to education, civil, political, and cultural rights. The Case List is intended to provide an overview and an indication of global trends, and a guide to the type of challenges writers face, in which countries, and the kind of actions that other writers worldwide are taking in support of their colleagues.

# FOREWORD

MATHIDA

CHAIR OF PEN  
INTERNATIONAL'S  
WRITER IN PRISON  
COMMITTEE



Freedom of expression is a foundational right, on which all others are dependent. PEN International's response to the evolving nature of threats to the right to freedom of expression are driven by external realities. And in times of war, heightened persecution, and protracted emergencies, the complexity of this right is acutely tested. But collective historical reflection only reiterates and reinforces the critical need for unfettered dialogue and debate, to find equitable and non-discriminating solutions especially at times riven with anger and polarization, and particularly when narratives are dangerously imperilled by misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda.

Protecting and promoting all forms of literary heritage and storytelling remain critical to our cultural memories and building our collective, global consciousness. Political projects that attempt to restrict linguistic identities, or deliberately seek to erase, tamper, expunge, destroy cultural memories – including through the deliberate targeting of cultural institutions – inevitably deprive societies the ability to proffer solutions for all. Likewise, efforts to censor literary text and its creators, or policies that give credence to book banning, cripple our collective perception and critical reflection on how to seek solutions for all lived realities. The pernicious jeopardy it propels, if unchecked, only paves a dangerous trajectory.


This year's instalment of the Case List unfurls the complex terrain of freedom of expression, in which writers also continue to face a deepening onslaught on their work but also their lives. It reinforces the message that those documenting and bearing witness are often also deliberately targeted precisely because of the role their work plays. It also reflects on growing institutional concerns that the deliberate targeting of writers – and in which writers from marginalized communities face distinct and aggravating acts of discrimination, intersecting with their multiple layers of identity – is deepening in scope. PEN International continues to witness a burgeoning pattern and number of states exerting extraterritorial pressure, which is commonly brokered through bilateral engagement. Increasingly not only are writers targeted, but their loved ones, their families, their friends, to amplify the threat.

Working at the intersection of rights and culture, PEN International's annual Case List testifies to the specific challenges faced by writers in enabling critical, vibrant societal dialogue. However, our analysis has also reinforced festering evidence that urgent and critical protections necessary for cultural actors are substantively lacking in law, policy, and practice.

Literary expression, often seen as controversial, and less equated with journalistic integrity

and crucial reporting, lacks critical institutional safety nets needed to fully protect the right to freedom of expression for all. The role that writers can play in times of uncertainty, diligently curating narratives to nourish empathy, encompassing glimpses of joy and ultimately offering the gift of hope, lacks formal recognition, and this lack of acknowledgement or coherent protections can ultimately decimate expression and propel rampant self-censorship.

This vulnerability of and risk to creatives, including writers, whose writerly outputs inevitably jettison them onto the frontline, akin to those working in journalism or those defending human rights, requires urgent attention. Their deliberation and provocation of thought, opinion, ideas, and exchange may be inherently complex. However, it means that when faced with palpable threat, writers are disproportionately impacted and challenged by their lack of institutional recognition and access to rapid assistance. And this vulnerability only amplifies in a broader context of economic insecurity and uncertainty in which publishing deals and financial certainty remain – for the vast numbers – a rarity.



‘THIS VULNERABILITY OF AND RISK TO CREATIVES, INCLUDING WRITERS, WHOSE WRITERLY OUTPUTS INEVITABLY JETTISON THEM ONTO THE FRONTLINE, AKIN TO THOSE WORKING IN JOURNALISM OR THOSE DEFENDING HUMAN RIGHTS, REQUIRES URGENT ATTENTION.’

## WHAT IS THE PEN INTERNATIONAL CASE LIST? A BRIEF EXPLANATION

PEN International has for nearly a century monitored and advocated for writers who have suffered repression of their right to write freely, and to comment on the world around them without fear of arrest, violence and even death. In 1961 it began to formally record these attacks in what eventually became the ‘Case List’ summarising who has suffered attack, where and by whom, the legal processes and the motivations behind them. Previously produced twice and even four times a year, the now annual Case List focusses on writers of fiction and non-fiction, poets, playwrights, song writers, translators – anyone who works with the written word.

This report firstly provides a global analysis of the cases monitored by PEN International between January to December 2023, providing a summary of the wider context under which writers and those who use the written word to express themselves are challenged. This is followed by the ‘list’ itself, divided into regions, each starting with an overview of key events that have impacted on freedom of expression in the region, then followed by a summary of cases of writers of concern to PEN International. At the end of each regional overview is a summary of the actions that PEN International took for journalists and others, such as human rights defenders, including in collaboration with other freedom of expression NGOs, and giving links to sources providing fuller details.

The PEN International Case List’s primary role is to inform its membership and others engaged in advocacy for free expression and serves to enable PEN Centres to identify where their focus could be. It does not, therefore, attempt to be a comprehensive list of attacks on writers, but an indication – a weather vane – of where the problems lie in any given year, enabling reflection on patterns and trends that can serve to inform future actions. It is up to date as of 31 December 2023 and as events can move rapidly, readers who wish to know more about a case listed in this document are advised to look for updates on PEN International’s website, and PEN International’s Facebook, Twitter and Instagram pages.

# GLOBAL OVERVIEW

The year 2023 once again witnessed old and new forms of censorship, with the shadow of war looming large in Europe, where the Russian Federation continued its aggression against **Ukraine**, armed conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa, including **Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)**, and in the Middle East, where the 7 October bloody attack by Hamas on southern **Israel** launched a conflict that risked a genocide in **Gaza** and a spill over into other parts of the MENA region. The impact of that war on freedom of expression also reached to other regions, where, in the context of deeply disturbing news of rising antisemitism and islamophobia which must be effectively countered, pro-Palestinian protests and commentary were banned or excessively restricted.

As highlighted in the regional entries, conflict has a devastating impact on the writing and wider artistic community, from killings both of those who participate in the conflict and of civilians caught in the crossfire to internal and cross border displacement which removes writers from their communities and access to tools of their trade. Future generations' ability to participate in artistic endeavours as well as critically and collectively reflect is also

highly impacted, through death, disruption to education, malnutrition, starvation, and disease, as well as the deliberate targeting of or loss of cultural heritage through displacement. In the face of this enormous threat, PEN International's advocacy for peace is an important response by writers globally, as has the project with PEN Ukraine, English PEN and Book Aid International to build resources for education, writing and art through its unbreakable libraries project in **Ukraine**.

Planning needs to start for how Palestinian writers in all parts of **Palestine** – including those in the next generation – can be supported once a lasting ceasefire is in place. PEN International is well positioned through its global network of Centres, including some in post-conflict societies who could have useful experiences to share and build on, to develop guidance and resources for rebuilding a writing community after war has ended. Reflections from PEN International's resolution on the **Western Balkans**, based on its October report *Toxic Narratives: Silencing Expression in the Western Balkans*, could provide useful input on the importance of preventing hate speech and glorification of war crimes in order to reduce tensions.

PEN International continued to mourn the killings of writers, the ultimate form of censorship, with the reported 14 deaths of writers – many killed alongside family members – in missile strikes in Gaza a dismal record. As in previous years, it is a particular concern in the Americas region where journalists are often targeted for killing by criminal gangs or their agents who operate as part of the state apparatus, especially in **Haiti, Colombia, Mexico, Honduras, and Guatemala**, but worryingly we are also seeing ongoing impunity for such killings in **Malta** and **Türkiye**. There are also extremely disturbing reports of the possibly deliberate targeting of journalists reporting on the war in **Gaza** and on military attacks in Lebanon by **Israel**, while PEN Ukraine member, writer and war crimes investigator Victoria Amelina died on 1 July 2023 from injuries sustained in a Russian missile strike in Kramatorsk, eastern **Ukraine**, on 27 June 2023. It is imperative that the international community lays down a red line regarding the absolute prohibition on attacks on journalists and the media during times of war. In this regard, supporting the calls by the International Federation of Journalists for an International Convention on the safety and independence of journalists and other media professionals is an important step.

The persecution of writers could also put their lives at risk in other ways. In **Iran**, writer, journalist, human rights defender, and Nobel Peace Laureate Narges Mohammadi whose unjust prison sentence was increased during the year for her tireless activism from within prison on behalf of women's rights was denied medical treatment. Writer and journalist Marko Vidojković left **Serbia** after receiving death threats, a form of persecution particularly prevalent in Europe and the Americas regions. In June, the sad news reached us of the death from a heart attack in **Myanmar** of writer, activist, and president of PEN Myanmar Nyi Pu Lay, who had been unable to access adequate medical treatment from his place in hiding where he had taken refuge after the coup of 2021.

Long-term imprisonment and detention without trial of writers – the reason for the creation of PEN International's Writers in Prison committee – continued to top the list of forms of persecution in terms of numbers of writers affected, with the largest numbers of detained or imprisoned writers featured in the 2023/2024 Case List in **Eritrea (12), China (7), Belarus (5) and Cuba (4)**.

The ongoing detention and trial of veteran human rights activist, writer, and newspaper publisher Jimmy Lai in **Hong Kong**, and the ongoing arbitrary detention of Galal El-Behiry, serving an unjust sentence imposed for his poetry in **Egypt**, exemplify this trend, while the continued detention of 12 Eritrean writers for over 20 years without information about their fate or current situation is emblematic of **Eritrea's** record of impunity for human rights violations that the international community must address as a matter of urgency.

As in previous years, and across all regions, governments abused national security legislation to persecute peaceful dissent, including in **Bangladesh, Belarus, China, India, Iran, Israel, Morocco, Myanmar, Saudi Arabia, Spain, Türkiye, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the United Kingdom, and Vietnam**. Others in **Belarus**, and in the **Russian Federation**, have faced trumped-up criminal charges, while writers in **Morocco** are serving prison sentences after smear campaigns and conviction of sexual assault based on spurious charges. Alleged 'dissemination of false news' charges were also used to prosecute writers in **Nicaragua** and **Egypt** – including in at least one case the father of an Egyptian journalist in an apparent attempt to put pressure on his son to stop his critical reporting.

Criminal defamation and lèse-majesté laws, which are inherently incompatible with international free expression standards, continued to be used in many countries to harass or silence writers in **Italy**, as well as in **Cuba, Egypt, Iran, Lebanon, Peru, Thailand, Togo** and **Türkiye**, while the **Republika Srpska** National Assembly in **Bosnia and Herzegovina** went against the trend for decriminalization by adopting a law recriminalizing defamation. Other writers were judicially harassed with multiple or repeated lawsuits (sometimes called strategic lawsuits against public participation) or onerous restrictions brought by private individuals or government officials for their investigative reporting or commentary on social issues, a phenomenon seen in **Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Belarus, Cuba, Peru, the Philippines, and Türkiye**, where, disappointingly, the apparent judicial vendetta against French-Turkish sociologist, feminist, writer, and PEN member Pınar Selek continued, as she went on trial on charges of which she has been acquitted on four previous occasions.



Online platforms continued to be contested spaces, with many countries including **Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, Ethiopia, Gabon, Guinea, India, Israel, Lebanon, Mauritania, Myanmar, Senegal, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, Vietnam, and Zimbabwe** restricting digital expression, including internet shutdowns in the context of conflict and elections. **Cuba** introduced a new law in the year to further curtail online criticism and debate while the **DRC** enacted legislation enabling the prosecution of journalists for their work if posted on social media, mirroring legislation in place in **Togo** that was used to persecute journalists. In **Mexico**, confirmation of spying on journalists by the Mexican government through the installation of Pegasus spyware on their phones added to concerns about the safety of journalists in that country. Yet as evidenced by #PENsarLibres (ThinkingFree), our joint campaign with partners to highlight the importance of freedom of expression in **Honduras**, social media is a crucial space for fighting back against censorship.

Severe discrimination against minorities continued in most regions, including in **Belarus, China, India, Iran, Myanmar, and Türkiye**. Uyghur writers and poets are among the thousands of victims of state repression in **China's** Xinjiang region. In Tibet too, the ongoing policy of cultural assimilation continued to undermine mother tongue education, with a number of writers serving long prison terms for their defence of Tibetan cultural rights.

In **Belarus**, writer and journalist Andrzej Poczobut, remained held in connection with his work and statements he made in support of the Polish minority in Belarus. In **India**, anti-caste activists who advocate for the rights of Dalits and other marginalised communities, remained detained pending trial, in poor conditions that continue to raise fears for their health.

Authorities in **Iran** also continued their crackdown in the wake of widespread protests at the death in custody in 2022 of Mahsa Amini, a member of the Kurdish minority, which expanded to wider demands of 'Women, life, freedom.' Several members of Iran's Ahwazi Arab, Kurdish and Baluch minorities were executed after unfair trials, in a likely attempt to deter further protests. The Baha'i community remained under severe pressure.



'IT IS IMPERATIVE THAT THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY LAYS DOWN A RED LINE REGARDING THE ABSOLUTE PROHIBITION ON ATTACKS ON JOURNALISTS AND THE MEDIA DURING TIMES OF WAR.'

In **Türkiye**, since the breakdown of the peace process between the Turkish authorities and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in July 2015 authorities have repeatedly cracked down on Kurdish literary and cultural symbols, language, and media outlets. Many Kurdish writers and journalists are languishing behind bars on trumped-up terrorism charges.

In some countries, laws and policies to restrict or repress minority languages, cultures and activities were put in place or intensified. The decades-long policy in **Belarus** to stigmatize and repress Belarusian language and literature continued apace, with scores of independent publishing houses shut down for promoting books by Belarusian writers and in the Belarusian language. Public LGBTQI -related activity was effectively outlawed in the **Russian Federation** with the passage of a bill branding the 'international public LGBTQI movement' as 'extremist'.

The situation for women writers was particularly severe in **Afghanistan**, where women and girls, faced restrictions aiming to eliminate them from the public sphere and to deny them access to education, with those challenging the Taliban authorities, including PEN Afghanistan members, subject to arbitrary arrest and detention.

As in previous years, the number of women writers on the Case List remains low overall, at around 22 per cent. Yet currently the statistics show that women writers constitute a larger percentage of those on trial or facing forms of judicial harassment, and of forms of harassment including brief detention, threats, and death threats than imprisonment or detention or some other forms of persecution. PEN International's efforts at integrating a more robust gender and diverse lens through our research methodology continue. In doing so, we want to better understand and grasp how different groups are impacted by the same violations differently, and whether groups are targeted through the use of specific violations because of their identities.

As might be anticipated, civic space continued to shrink during the year, with attempts to replicate the Russian Federation's infamous 'Foreign Agents law' in **Hungary** and the **Republika Srpska (Bosnia and Herzegovina)**, while in rare piece of good news, an attempt to enact a similar law in **Georgia** was shelved in the face of mass public protest. In **Nicaragua**, the attempts to eliminate civil society continued, with further use of methods of banishment of writers and others, and we saw a new type of persecution in the form of 'civil death' where citizens deemed to be 'traitors' were stripped of their citizenship, their birth and other civil records erased and their property confiscated. PEN Nicaragua members are now almost all living in exile. Watch this space to see if other countries start using similar methods to persecute their own writers.

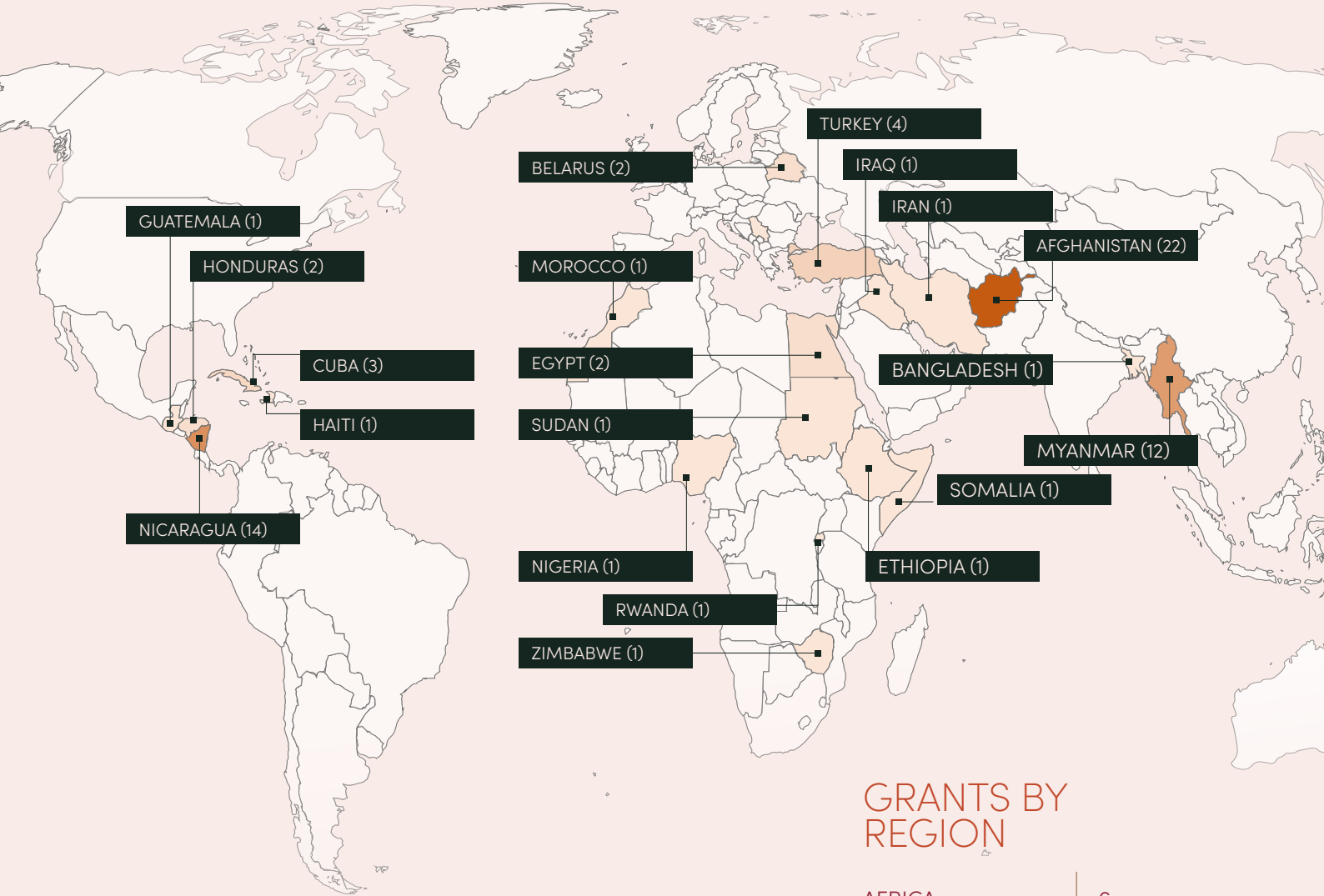
Yet again, we have seen book bans on the rise. In countries such as **Belarus**, as well as in Hong Kong in **China**, **El Salvador**, **Hungary**, the **Russian Federation** and **Türkiye**, these were imposed by authorities using national security pretexts to censor political opposition, writing about human rights violations, or discriminatory legislation to undermine the rights of minorities, including LGBTQI individuals. In others, including **Brazil** and the **USA** (where there has been a staggering rise in the scale of book bans, including many classic titles from Aristophanes to Alice Walker imposed in schools in some states), discriminatory views, often in the context of 'cancel culture' prevailed to result in books being withdrawn from public or educational libraries. Such bans on literature

must be vigorously opposed as they will not only impoverish the education of students but will also entrench discriminatory views that will escalate tensions and pose a security risk to writers whose work is banned, by opening them up to smear campaigns, abuse and potentially physical attack that could put their lives at risk.

The information in this Case List provides a sobering overview of the persecution writers and artists face around the world. Sometimes it is directly in connection with their work, but on others it is related to the exercise of their freedom of expression, often because their writing or other art gives them a public profile. Working closely with PEN Centres, the [PEN Emergency Fund \(PEF\)](#) and partner NGOs, PEN International provided life-saving support to writers and their families, including emergency relocation and the provision of emergency financial aid through a one-off grant of up to €2000 for a range of urgent needs such as safe passage, medical assistance and general support towards living expenses. In 2023, the largest number of grants went to assist 22 writers from **Afghanistan** to leave the country, work supported through a partnership with the Sigrid Rausing Trust. The devastating attack on civil society in **Nicaragua** also placed heavy demand for emergency support, helping 14 writers, many of them members of PEN Nicaragua. The 12 PEF grants to writers from **Myanmar** also reflect the parlous state of free expression in the country in the wake of the coup and the ongoing censorship in **Bangladesh** led to a request for support from one writer. In Europe, writers from **Türkiye** were the most in need (4), but support was also provided to writers from **Belarus** (2) and **Serbia** (1). Not surprisingly, writers in **Cuba** (2), **Honduras** (2) and **Egypt** (2), also needed support, while there were also grants to one writer from each of **Ethiopia**, **Guatemala**, **Haiti**, **Iraq**, **Iran**, **Morocco**, **Rwanda**, **Somalia**, **Sudan**, and **Zimbabwe**, reflecting ongoing freedom of expression restrictions in those countries. The ongoing hostility and persecution of LGBTQI individuals in **Nigeria** led to support for a non-binary identifying writer from that country. This Case List demonstrates the ongoing need for this support, and for fundraising to enable PEN International and the Fund to support even more writers in the future.

# EMERGENCY GRANTS 2023

NUMBER OF EMERGENCY GRANTS 2023



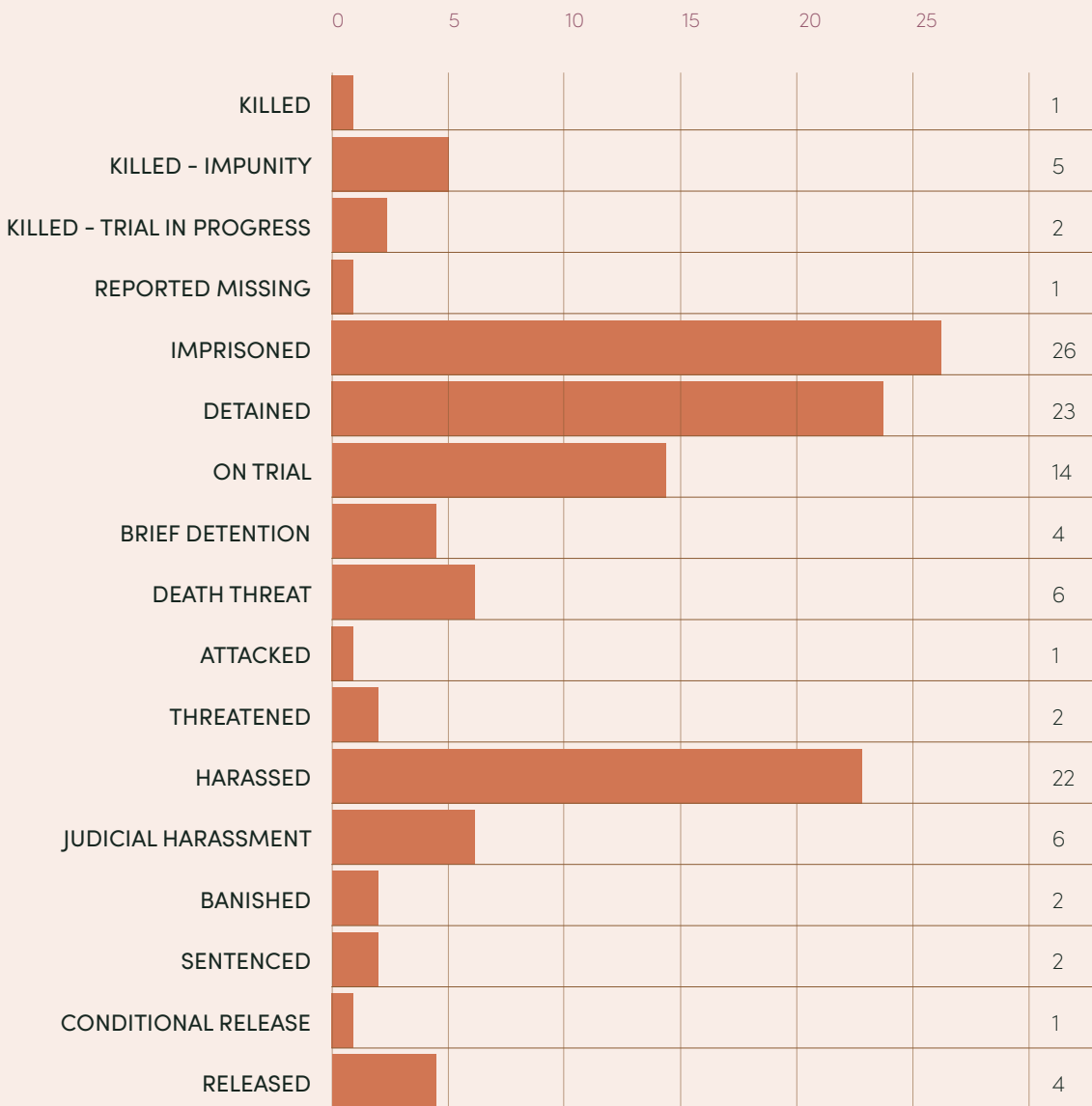
## GRANTS BY REGION

AFRICA	6
AMERICAS	21
ASIA	35
EUROPE	7
MENA	5
TOTAL	74

# THE CASE LIST IN NUMBERS

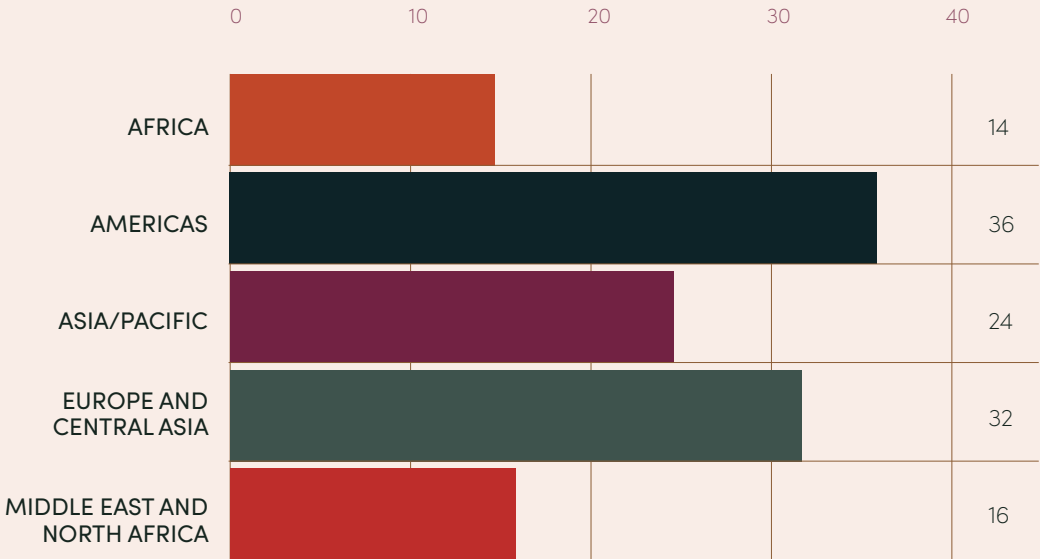
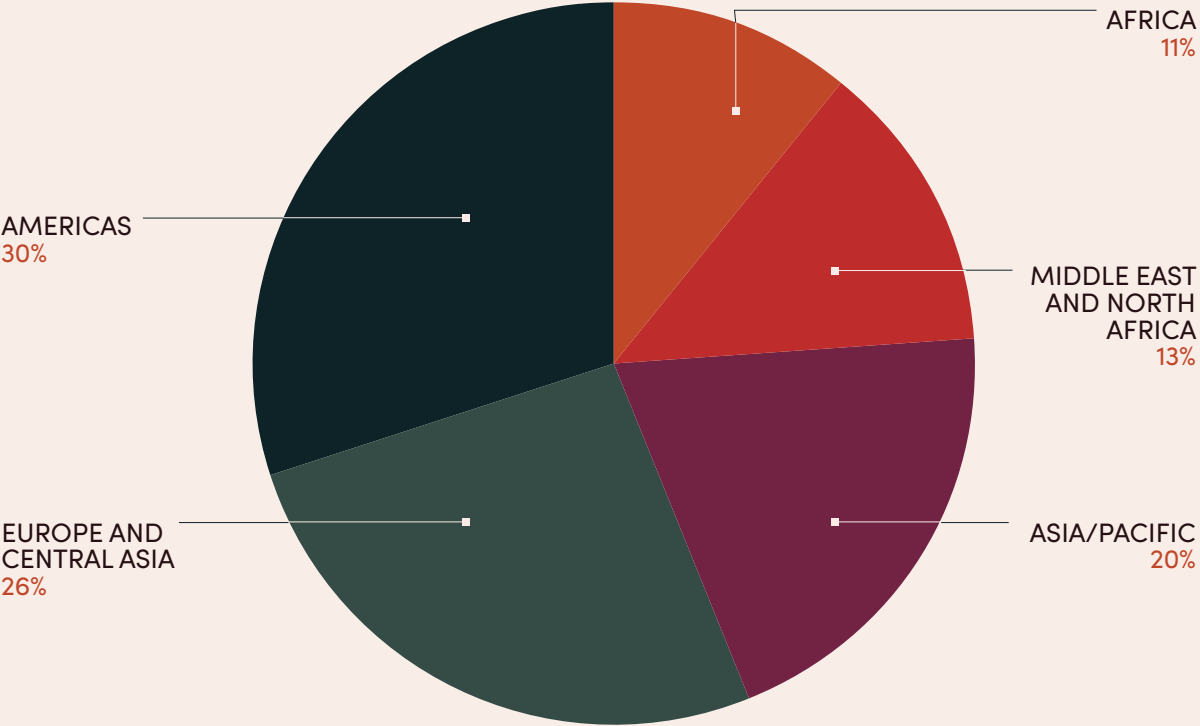
The PEN Case List records 122 attacks on writers that were reported in 2023. However, these figures reflect only those instances where the information is proven, and where there are no restrictions on making the details public. It should also be noted that in countries where freedom of expression is repressed it is more difficult to gather and verify information on abuses. The following data should therefore be seen as illustrative of general patterns of attacks – and where they occur – and not a definitive record.

## ATTACKS BY TYPE 2023/2024



122

# ATTACKS BY REGION 2023/2024



## EXPLANATION OF TERMS USED

**EXECUTED** (Put to death by the state after a final conviction by a court)

**KILLED** (Killed in the period of this Case List and PEN is certain the individual was a writer targeted for their writing)

**KILLED: MOTIVE UNKNOWN** (Killed in this period, but it is unclear if the individual was targeted for their writings)

**KILLED: IMPUNITY** (Killing did not occur in the period of this Case List but there is ongoing impunity for the killing i.e. there has been no conclusion of the case or no investigation has taken place)

**KILLED: TRIAL IN PROGRESS**

**DEATH IN CUSTODY** (including cases where authorities are responsible for failure to provide adequate medical care, or cases where a writer unjustly imprisoned or detained died of natural causes)

**ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCE** (PEN is certain the individual was a writer and that their disappearance was carried out by the authorities or with their acquiescence)

**ABDUCTION** (PEN is certain the individual was a writer and that non-state actors are responsible for their disappearance)

**REPORTED MISSING** (Individual may have been abducted but it is unclear who was responsible. May include cases where the individual was killed, but a body has never been found)

**IMPRISONED** (PEN is certain they are a writer who is serving a prison sentence after conviction in relation to their writings or their freedom of expression – for example, for making speeches, and as far as we know has not used violence or advocated racial hatred. Includes writers appealing against a sentence if they are in prison)

**DETAINED** (PEN is certain they are a writer and is being detained in connection with their writing pending charge/trial or where there is no intention to charge them. Includes those held in administrative detention and unofficial house arrest. Can also include individuals in detention who are facing charges or are under judicial investigation)

**ON TRIAL** (Including individuals facing charges, appealing sentence, but not currently detained or imprisoned)

**JUDICIAL CONCERN** (PEN has no position on the criminal charges against the writer in question but is concerned about reported irregularities in the trial or legal process or about torture allegations or the death penalty)

**BRIEF DETENTION** (There is no definite time limit, but it could be up to a couple of months, depending on the region and context. Will be recorded as a brief detention where they were held for over 48 hours, but the individual is released without charge. If less than 48 hours, and there is information suggesting it is intended to intimidate the writer or prevent them from continuing to write, it should be recorded as harassment)

**DEATH THREAT**

**ATTACKED** (Indicates a use of force or violence causing physical damage to the individual or destruction of personal property e.g. arson)

**THREATENED** (including 'in hiding' where individuals have received threats intended to make them desist from writing)

**HARASSED** (Including intimidation, brief detentions of fewer than 48 hours, and restrictions on civil and political rights, such as stripping of citizenship, confiscation of property, dismissal from employment where it is linked to their work, etc.)

**JUDICIAL HARASSMENT** (e.g. repeated arrests or summons for questioning where the period of detention is less than 48 hours or investigations open or suspended which can be reopened at any time, acting as a form of deterrence on the writer. Includes writers whose works are banned individually and collectively from sale or access, but not writers whose books are subject to removal from educational study or school libraries)

**FORCED DEPORTATION** (Writers who have been forcibly expelled by their governments or prevented from returning. Does not include writers who have fled their countries and sought asylum or other forms of protection abroad)

**SENTENCED** (Has reached the end of the judicial process, has been sentenced, but has not yet been imprisoned)

**CONDITIONAL RELEASE** (Including suspended sentence or enforced residency order where an individual can leave their home for specified purposes)

**RELEASED** (including acquitted, end of sentence, released from detention)

15 NOVEMBER 2023

# DAY OF THE IMPRISONED WRITER



**María Cristina Garrido Rodríguez (Cuba), Iryna Danylovysh (Ukraine/occupied Crimea), Go Sherab Gyatso (China- Tibet), and Soulayman Raissouni (Morocco)** were the faces of the Day of the Imprisoned Writer 2023, PEN International's annual campaign on behalf of writers who are imprisoned or facing persecution.

Started in 1981 by PEN International's Writers in Prison Committee, observed every year on **15 November**, the Day of the Imprisoned Writer campaign highlights **cases that are emblematic of the type of threats and attacks writers and journalists around the world are often subjected to, for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of expression.**

From 15 to 22 November 2023, the entire PEN movement called for urgent international action to release and protect María Cristina Garrido Rodríguez, Iryna Danylovysh, Go Sherab Gyatso, and Soulayman Raissouni, and ensured that they and their families felt solidarity. PEN Centres, members and supporters worldwide campaigned for these writers, including by sending advocacy letters to governments and taking part in demonstrations, coordinating social media storms and press conferences, and organising panel discussions and exhibitions.

Internationally renowned writers sent letters of support to their colleagues in prison or under threat:

- **J.M Coetzee, Nina George** and **Geert Mak** wrote to Iryna Danylovysh
- **Andrey Kurkov** wrote to Soulayman Raissouni
- **Jennifer Clement** wrote to Go Sherab Gyatso

For more information about the four focus cases, see the regional overviews below. To read the letters by J.M Coetzee, Nina George, Geert Mak, Andrey Kurkov, and Jennifer Clement, visit [PEN International Day of the Imprisoned Writer 2023](#).

# AFRICA REGIONAL OVERVIEW 2023/2024

NDUKO O'MATIGERE,  
HEAD OF AFRICA REGION

National contexts characterized by pseudo-democratic governance and autocratic state conduct, turbulent political systems and prolonged armed conflicts in at least 14 countries continued to form the setting for restrictions on freedom of expression across many countries in sub-Saharan Africa.

In respect to democratic governance, the 2023 Freedom House Democracy in the World Report, ranks only nine Sub-Saharan African countries as 'Free' based on a criteria that assesses trends in political rights and civil liberties. The rest of the countries in the region are ranked as either 'Partly Free' (18 countries) or 'Not Free' (24 countries).



State authorities' failure to implement national commitments and international obligations to promote, protect, and fulfill human rights meant that critical expression on- and offline through writing, music, art, or journalism, as well as through peaceful protest, continued to be dangerous undertakings across Africa. As with previous years, suppression of freedom of expression was implemented through suspicious killings; use of repressive press laws affecting both traditional and digital media platforms; arbitrary arrest and detention; misuse of the rule of law to punish critics; threats, intimidation and harassment; often driving writers and artists into exile abroad. All of these tactics are usually carried out by security forces or non-state actors operating on the orders of powerful individuals.

In respect to violations of freedom of expression in the context of peaceful protest, authorities across African countries continued to use unlawful violence, including deadly force by security forces to repress peaceful protests over diverse public grievances, including in **Angola, Democratic Republic of Congo, Guinea, Kenya, Mozambique;** and **Uganda**, among others. The shadow of the Israel/Gaza war also reached **Kenya**, where authorities arbitrarily arrested and briefly detained pro-Palestinian activists at a solidarity vigil organized at a private residence and violently dispersed peaceful protests called to condemn Israel's war on Gaza.

PEN International's support for individual writers in the region reconfirms previous observations that the existence of democratic constitutions, complete with bills of rights, did not deter authorities from suppressing critical voices, particularly independent journalists for simply doing their work of reporting and informing the public. This work also reveals the dire limitations of national, regional and international institutional frameworks in their response to widespread armed conflict in the region.

In almost all cases highlighted in the Africa region, the personal (often mischaracterized as national) interests of state officials to suppress media reporting or public commentary on 'uncomfortable' topics like allegations of corruption, human rights violations, abuse of office, the conduct of state and non-state actors

in contexts of armed conflict, and impunity, eclipsed constitutional essentials like separation of powers, rule of law, fair administration of justice, and the obligation of the state to actualize them. This way, capture of state institutions and would-have-been democratic governance systems, and their repurposing for personal political survival underlined the repressive behavior of state authorities in the region.

The repressive tactics used by authorities across Africa are all forms of systemic censorship. As would be expected, the desired outcome of authoritarian states is a constrained civic environment in which their abusive conduct and actions go unchallenged and impunity for the powerful is guaranteed.

PEN International did not allow these tactics to go unchallenged. In addition to campaign actions, statements and direct support to individual writers, we engaged (jointly with PEN Eritrea in Exile) with international and regional human rights mechanisms. We highlighted concerns at the UN Human Rights Council about freedom of expression in Eritrea ahead of the country's Universal Periodic Review set for May 2024, and re-engaged with the African Commission on Human and Peoples Rights (ACHPR) to strengthen our advocacy and to connect and deepen relationships with civil society groups across Africa. We also visited PEN Centres in the Southern African sub-region (Zimbabwe, Malawi, Zambia, Afrikaans and South Africa) in March 2023 to jointly explore opportunities to strengthen PEN's work in the sub-region.



'WITH AUTHORITIES INCREASINGLY ADOPTING MORE SOPHISTICATED, OFTEN SUBTLE BUT LETHAL METHODS TO INTIMIDATE OR SILENCE CRITICAL VOICES, LEGITIMATE FEAR OF REPRISALS HAS ENTRENCHED SELF-CENSORSHIP AS AN EVERYDAY REALITY AND CHALLENGE FOR WRITERS ACROSS AFRICA, INCLUDING MEMBERS OF AFRICA PEN CENTRES.'

## ARMED CONFLICT

In regard to instability and conflict trends, armed conflict dominated events in at least 14 countries across the region, with major escalations in **Sudan** since the April 2023 outbreak of war in a power struggle between the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF). PEN International echoed fears of another genocide in the Darfur region. In **Burkina Faso, Mali, Mozambique, Nigeria, and Somalia**, armed clashes between government forces and jihadist groups. In the **Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)**, a prolonged, multilayered armed conflict centered around competition over control of the country's vast mineral resources persisted throughout the year, with the participation of multiple non-state militias and rebel groups – some with the backing of regional and international actors. In **Ethiopia**, a new armed conflict erupted between federal government soldiers and their erstwhile regional Amhara militia allies in August after months of tensions arising from a fallout after the federal government and leaders of the Tigray region signed a peace agreement that ended the 2020-2022 Tigray war.

Armed conflict has a dire impact on freedom of expression, both in terms of access to information and artistic expression. For example, access to the internet in **Ethiopia** and **Sudan** was severely limited, both through telecommunications blockades and destruction of signal distribution infrastructure. In these conflicts, journalists and media workers faced restrictions on access to conflict or humanitarian crisis zones, beatings while covering events, confiscation of equipment and destruction of footage and occupation of media stations by armed combatants. Writers and artists are imperiled by the disruptions that come with sudden displacement, including loss of manuscripts, lack of access to materials, as well as prolonged restraints on their ability to create imposed by war. Resources and platforms for cultural and artistic expression continued to be under attack in the Sudan war, with reports of destruction of cultural assets, including universities and libraries and heritage sites including museums and archeological sites.

## KILLINGS AND DEATH THREATS

The safety and security of critical voices, including writers and journalists remained precarious across Africa. PEN International received confidential reports from, and offered different forms of support to writers, artists and journalists facing various forms of risks, including death threats and involuntary displacement in **Eritrea, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Rwanda, Somalia, Sudan, Togo, Uganda, and Zimbabwe** during the year. Across Africa, according to International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), eight journalists were killed in relation to their work in **Cameroon** (2) and **Lesotho, Mali, Mozambique, Nigeria, Rwanda, Somalia, and Sudan**, (1 each). In all these cases, states failed to investigate the killings fully or transparently, heightening concerns about state involvement.

## IMPRISONMENT OF WRITERS AND JOURNALISTS

Attacks on press freedom and free speech continued unabated, with the Committee to Project Journalists (CPJ) 2023 Prison Census reporting 47 journalists jailed across Africa for their work. **Eritrea** accounted for the largest number (16, among them writers, poets, playwrights, and dramatists), **Ethiopia** (8), **Cameroon** (6), and **Senegal** (5), with **Angola, Burundi, DRC, Madagascar, Nigeria** and **Zambia** jailing one journalist each. Except for Eritrea where authorities continued to imprison journalists and writers without trial, the rest of the countries used rule of law pretexts to criminalize the work of journalists.

In October, PEN Eritrea in Exile and PEN International jointly engaged with both the UN Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review of Eritrea through a shadow report and through a joint oral statement before the ACHPR to raise awareness of the collective case of detained Eritrean writers and journalists and to call for their release.

## REPRESSIVE LEGISLATION AND MISUSE OF RULE OF LAW

Use of parallel legislation to claw back on constitutional protections of personal freedoms, including freedom of expression remained a major concern in 2023. Some laws, now commonly branded by authorities as legitimate measures to address concerns like cybercrime, hate speech, misinformation and disinformation, spread of fake news, threats to national security, terrorism, and regulation of the media, appear to have been deliberately developed to stifle free speech and expression. In **Uganda**, authorities continued to prosecute exiled novelist Kakwenza Rukirabashaija, author Norman Tumuhimbise and journalist Farida Bikobere under the defunct section 25 of the Computer Misuse Act. Used to punish critical voices for ‘offensive communication’, the section of the law was declared unconstitutional, and therefore null and void by Uganda’s Constitutional Court on 10 January 2023.

In the **DRC**, the case of journalist Stanis Bujakera Tshiamala, widely reported by CPJ, Amnesty International and Reporters Without Borders (RSF), illustrates misuse of rule of law practices by authorities. Bujakera, who has been in detention was arrested on 8 September and accused of the spurious offences of ‘forgery’, ‘forging state seals’, ‘spreading rumors’ and ‘transmitting erroneous messages contrary to the law’ under the DRC’s penal code and digital law in relation to an article he did not write that was published on the news website, *Jeune Afrique* where he works. The article alleged the involvement of military intelligence in the murder of a former government minister turned opposition politician.

## ONLINE REPRESSION

In the **DRC**, authorities enacted legislation that makes it an offence for a journalist to post any news reports on social media platforms, with stringent jail terms and financial penalties if convicted. **Togo** used similar legislation to arrest and charge two journalists for the odd offences of ‘defamation’, ‘breach of honor’ and ‘incitement to revolt’ in one instance and prosecute another two for ‘insult’ and ‘false news’ – all because they had commented on allegations of a home burglary in which a large sum of cash was stolen and corruption involving a government minister.

In **Tanzania**, two comedians were arrested for posting their artistic works on their YouTube channels without a license from the country’s film industry regulator and not paying government levies for all videos they had posted. Tanzania operates stringent internet content regulations through state registration of online and offline communication platforms and the imposition of prohibitive license fees.

Yet online censorship is neither an isolated example for Tanzania nor an exception in the region. According to a report by Surfshark, eight countries in sub-Saharan Africa implemented internet restrictions to suppress online information exchange, communication or debate during periods of protest or political unrest, or in some cases, conflict, at an estimated cost of USD 237.4 million to the regional economy. These countries are **Ethiopia** and **Tanzania** (February); **Mauritania** (March); **Sudan** (April); **Guinea** (May); **Senegal** (June); **Gabon** and **Zimbabwe** (August). In **Uganda**, access to Facebook remained blocked by a 2021 presidential order issued after the tech giant deleted hundreds of accounts found to be linked to the ruling party for the purpose of spreading of fake news.

‘CRITICAL EXPRESSION ON- AND OFFLINE THROUGH WRITING, MUSIC, ART, OR JOURNALISM, AS WELL AS THROUGH PEACEFUL PROTEST, CONTINUED TO BE DANGEROUS UNDERTAKINGS ACROSS AFRICA.’

## HARASSMENT AND SELF-CENSORSHIP

With authorities increasingly adopting more sophisticated, often subtle but lethal methods to intimidate or silence critical voices, legitimate fear of reprisals has entrenched self-censorship as an everyday reality and challenge for writers across Africa, including members of Africa PEN Centres. Self-censorship emerged as a central issue in PEN International's work of protecting writers at risk – many who have experienced arbitrary arrests and detention, judicial harassment, death threats, violence, disruption of livelihoods, and involuntary exile for views they expressed online or themes they explored in books they authored or articles they published.

In some cases, like two that PEN International monitored in **Cameroon** and **Mauritania**, a compounded nature and driver of censorship was observed, but with no option for public advocacy. In these situations, members of the writers' communities joined forces with state authorities to apply social, cultural, legal and religious pressure on the writers for issues and themes they had explored in their academic and literary works. Existence of blasphemy laws in at least 20 countries in sub-Saharan Africa and steps by countries like **Ghana**, **Kenya**, and **Uganda** towards more stringent anti-LGBTQ legislation remain major concerns for the exercise of the right to freedom of expression.

## GOOD NEWS

On 11 January 2023, the **Uganda** Constitutional Court declared section 25 of the Computer Misuse Act (2011) unconstitutional, and therefore null and void. This followed a petition filed by litigants in 2016 that sought the Court's determination that the law contradicted the Uganda Constitution's guarantees of free speech and freedom of expression for all citizens. The section was used by authorities to arrest and prosecute individuals for the offence of 'offensive communication'. Academic, poet and activist **Dr. Stella Nyanzi**, novelist **Kakwenza Rukirabashaija** for whom PEN International has campaigned in the past; author **Norman Tumuhimbise**, journalist **Farida Bikobere**, TikTok user **Teddy Nalubowa** and radio presenter and comedy scriptwriter, **Julius Serwanja** have all been prosecuted under the article for 'offensive communication'. Although the Ugandan state continues to prosecute individuals under the nullified law, the ruling paved the way for other litigants to challenge other sections of the Computer Misuse Act, including further draconian amendments introduced by the legislature in 2022.

On 8 May 2023, the Court of Appeal in Harare, **Zimbabwe** acquitted writer, playwright, and filmmaker **Tsitsi Dangarembga**, an emblematic case in the Case List 2022 and winner of the 2021 PEN International Award for Freedom of Expression as well as English PEN's 2021 PEN Pinter Prize, of all the charges used to sentence her to a six-month jail term and a fine, suspended for five years on condition that she does not repeat the same 'offence'. Tsitsi's victory followed a long-drawn-out trial after her arrest in August 2020 while peacefully protesting government corruption with a friend on a street in Harare. However, the authorities charged her for the offence of 'inciting violence' making her case emblematic of authorities' tactics of criminalizing dissent and non-violent protest. Tsitsi's victory reinforces hope in sections of the Zimbabwean Judiciary as a countervailing force against the Executive's persistent misuse of rule of law and judicial harassment to persecute critics.

# EMBLEMATIC CASES



ERITREA

## DAWIT ISAAK

WRITER AND JOURNALIST DETAINED WITHOUT TRIAL AND HELD INCOMMUNICADO SINCE 2001

Dawit Isaak (b.1964) is a Swedish-Eritrean journalist, writer, poet and playwright. He is the co-owner and editor of Eritrea's independent newspaper, ሰቲት (Setit) and co-founder of Shewit Children's Theatre. He is the author of the book (in verses) ባና፤ ታሪኽ ፍቅራ-ሙሴን ማናን (1988) (Bana: The Affair of Mussie and Mana), and the short story “አተን ሰላሳ ሺሕ” (The Thirty Thousand) which was serialized on national radio in the early days of Eritrea's independence. Security forces arbitrarily arrested Isaak in Asmara on 23 September 2001 in a massive crackdown on the free press and dissent. Authorities have detained him without trial since then.

Dawit Isaak. Photo credit: PEN Eritrea in Exile



RWANDA

## INNOCENT BAHATI

SUSPECTED ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCE OF POET REMAINS UNRESOLVED FOR THIRD YEAR

Innocent Bahati (b. 1993) is a popular Rwandan poet known for his open and critical expression on social issues affecting ordinary Rwandans. He has been missing since 7 February 2021. Bahati published his poetry on YouTube and Facebook and regularly performed at poetry events in Rwanda. His poems include 'Mfungurira' (Open); 'Rubebe', a satire about the church; and 'Uwenda Ngomba u Rwanda' (The Debt I Need for Rwanda) among others. His whereabouts remain unknown and Rwanda authorities continued to be evasive and non-committal about investigations they claim to have conducted.

Innocent Bahati. Photo credit: Andrea Grieder

## ERITREA

### DETAINED

#### Collective case of writers and journalists detained without trial for 22 years.

September 2023 marked 22 years of the incommunicado detention without trial of a group of Eritrean journalists and writers, including **Dawit ISAAK; Amanuel ASRAT; Said Idris 'ABU ARE'; Temesegen GHEBREYESUS; Methanie HAILE; Fessehaye 'Joshua' YOHANNES; Yousif Mohammed ALI; Seyoum TSEHAYE; Dawit HABTEMICHAEL; Said ABDELKADIR; Sahle 'Wedi-Itay' TSEFEZAB; and Matheos HABTEAB.**

In September 2001, Eritrean authorities launched a massive crackdown on regime critics in which security forces arrested and detained a group of dissenting members of the ruling party, the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PDFJ). The politicians, popularly known as the G-15 had earlier published an open letter in which they called for peaceful democratic reforms and denounced president Isais Afwerki's abuse of power, calling the president's actions 'illegal and unconstitutional'. Authorities also shut down all independent newspapers, including the weeklies *Meqaleh*, *Setit*, *Tsigenay*, *Zemen*, *Wintana* and *Admas*, for publishing the G-15 statement and conducting related interviews.

Between September and October that year, more than 10 journalists - among them writers associated with the banned media outlets were rounded up by security forces and detained. Along with the dissenting politicians, they have been detained incommunicado and without trial for the last 22 years. There have been unverified reports that several of them have since died in custody due to ill-treatment and neglect.

Eritrean authorities have ignored all calls for justice for the detainees made by human rights organizations as well as human rights mechanisms of the African Union and the UN. Oddly, officials have repeatedly denied that a clampdown took place in 2001, saying that the detainees had merely been sent to perform their national service duties.

On 26 July 2023 the UN Human Rights Council's Working Group on Arbitrary Detention published an [opinion](#) on the case of one of the detained writers and journalists, Dawit Isaak. This was in response to a [complaint](#) filed in 2022 by an international coalition of NGOs, including PEN International. The Working Group found Isaak's detention to be arbitrary, and in violation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). The Working Groups also referred the case of Dawit Isaak and his colleagues to the UN Human Rights Council's Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, and the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment for their action. This opinion vindicated previous conclusions by PEN International and other human rights and media freedom organizations that the detained individuals are being held by the Eritrean authorities in circumstances amounting to enforced disappearance.

For the last two decades, PEN International has persistently [campaigned](#) on behalf of the detained writers – who are all now aged over 54 years - including through public statements, sometimes [jointly](#) with other organizations, advocacy at the UN Human Rights Council through [Universal Periodic Review](#) joint submissions, advocacy at the African Commission on Human and Peoples Rights (ACHPR) through a [joint oral statement](#) with PEN Eritrea in Exile and contribution to resolutions of the NGO Forum during the 77<sup>th</sup> Ordinary Session of the ACHPR held in Arusha, Tanzania in October 2023. PEN International has also made solidarity appeals on behalf of the imprisoned writers and featured their cases during key PEN [events](#).

## RWANDA

### REPORTED MISSING

#### Innocent BAHATI

Poet Innocent Bahati remains [missing since his disappearance on 7 February 2021](#) after he reportedly went for a dinner meeting with an unnamed person at a hotel in Nyanza district in the Southern Province of Rwanda. He did not return to Kigali as expected. His associates tried to reach him on phone that evening but found Bahati's phone was off. After two days of trying to establish

his whereabouts, his disappearance was reported to the Rwanda Investigations Bureau (RIB). The RIB spokesperson denied that the agency was holding him; that investigations were ongoing, and that no information would be revealed at the time. PEN International believes that his disappearance is in relation to his critical poetry.

In 2017, Bahati had similarly disappeared for several days after he posted a critical comment on Facebook, only to reappear in police custody. Although he was not charged with any offence, he was detained without trial and freed after three months.

Whenever PEN International has spotlighted the case of Bahati through statements and campaigns, Rwandan authorities responded with unsubstantiated remarks, mostly reported by government affiliated news outlets. These include claims of an ongoing investigation and promises to publish a full report 'soon' and claims attributed to the Rwanda Investigations Bureau (RIB) that Bahati had left Rwanda to join an armed group in Uganda. PEN International believes that these responses are typical of Rwanda's frequent use of disinformation, denial, and silence to avoid accountability.

Innocent Bahati (age 31 years) published his poetry on YouTube and Facebook and regularly performed at poetry events in Rwanda. His poems include 'Mfungurira' (Open) 'Rubebe', which Bahati described as a satire about the church in a newspaper article; and 'Uwenda Ngomba u Rwanda' (*The Debt I Need for Rwanda*) among others.

## ■ UGANDA

### ON TRIAL

#### Kakwenza RUKIRABASHAIJA

Authorities continued to prosecute exiled novelist, Kakwenza Rukirabashaija (b.1988) for 'offensive communications' under a law (section 25 of the Computer Misuse Act) which was declared null and void by the Constitutional Court of Uganda in January 2023.

Since 2020, security forces have arbitrarily arrested and detained Rukirabashaija three

times for his writing. In the latest incident, he was violently arrested in December 2021 by security forces and detained incommunicado for close to three weeks during which he was subjected to torture over remarks he had posted on Twitter about President Yoweri Museveni and his son who was at the time the commander of Uganda's Land Forces. On 11 January 2022, Rukirabashaija was secretly arraigned before a Kampala Magistrates Court and denied access to a lawyer. Charged for offensive communications and committed to remand custody, he was released two days later on stringent bail terms, including a requirement to deposit his passport with the authorities. Fearing for his life, without a chance for a fair trial and in urgent need of specialised medical attention for injuries inflicted by torture, he fled into exile in late January 2023.

Kakwenza Rukirabashaija is the author of *The Greedy Barbarian* (published by Kisana Consult in 2020 and TheWorldIsWatching in 2023) - a satirical novel covering themes of corruption and patronage; *Banana Republic: Where Writing is Treasonous* (also published by Kisana Consult in 2020) which recounts Rukirabashaija's detention experience, including torture, during his arrest and detention in April 2020; and *The Savage Avenger* (published by Books on Demand in 2023).

## PEN ACTIONS IN AFRICA

In addition to its advocacy for the writers referred to in this list, PEN International also acted on behalf of journalists and others at risk in the Africa region, including through emergency humanitarian support and joint statements with other organisations, details of which can be found in the links provided below:

### Rwanda

**John Williams NTWALI:** *Suspicious death of an investigative journalist after receiving death threats.*

### Action:

**31 January 2023:** Joint statement: [Rwandan Authorities Should Ensure an Independent Investigation into John Williams Ntwali's Death](#)

# AMERICAS REGIONAL OVERVIEW 2023/2024

ALICIA QUIÑONES,  
HEAD OF THE  
AMERICAS REGION

The Americas faced one of the most critical years for writers and artists: we witnessed a large number of Latin American authors driven abroad to seek refuge and protection and a massive increase in the censorship of books.

Art, literature and cultural spaces are often repressive governments' favourite targets for censorship. Art has the power to name things when there is silence in societies. As historical experience has shown, the arts and their different forms of expression have been a priority focus of censorship when authoritarian political forces gain power.

The high number of stories of violence against creators on the continent led to the opening of a discussion at the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) on the possible creation of a set of Principles on Artistic Freedom in the coming years. PEN International, together with other regional organisations, participated in these initial discussions in 2023 that could set a precedent in terms of protection for writers and artists in the region, through the Inter-American system.



# INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM UNDER ATTACK

Our work in the Americas throughout 2023 has also brought to light the state violence and increasing judicial harassment that journalists continue to face. **Colombia, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, and Mexico**, continue to see numbers of murders and harassment of the press rising, as well as the closure of spaces for debate and analysis.

In countries such as **Haiti** and **Mexico**, the influence and strength of criminal groups, as well as government and police corruption, along with pervasive impunity, significantly limit the exercise of freedom of expression. Journalists face countless threats, harassment, censorship, and all too frequently, brutal murders. Many of their colleagues or family members, are prevented from reporting these crimes due to fear of retaliation.

In **Haiti**, journalists suffer from a severe lack of financial resources and face difficulties in accessing information. They are targeted by criminal gangs, kidnapped or killed with impunity, and despite these adverse conditions, PEN Haiti continues its activities on behalf of literature and writers, while raising its voice against criminal violence against journalists.

**Mexico** continues to face a deep crisis of violence against journalists. Every day, stigmatising discourse from official channels becomes more frequent, which opens the door for authors, artists, and cultural spaces to suffer smear campaigns, threats and violence in social networks or other channels, promotes disinformation and violence, and facilitates attacks against reporters. One such example is the writer Guillermo Sheridan, who was stigmatised on public channels by the president of Mexico as a result of his investigations.

In March 2023, it was reported that the Mexican Armed Forces used NSO's Pegasus surveillance software to spy on the communications between journalists at the newspaper *El Universal*, and human rights defender Raymundo Ramos. This important revelation was added to by the outcome of a lawsuit brought in December 2023 by Mexican journalist Carmen Aristegui.

The judge in charge of the case concluded that the journalist's phone was indeed tapped with Pegasus and that the spying was motivated by her journalistic activity on corruption cases.

But amidst all the depressing news are some green shoots of hope. In November in **Honduras**, PEN International, the Embassy of the United Kingdom in Guatemala, PEN Honduras and the Association for Democracy and Human Rights in Honduras (ASOPODEHU) launched #PENsarLibres (ThinkingFree), a 10-week campaign about the role of journalism in creating healthy societies and functioning democracies, and the role of states in guaranteeing the full exercise of free expression. Carried out on regional and international social media networks and on Honduran radio and television channels, #PENsarLibres aims to raise awareness about the importance of free journalism.

PEN International also continued its advocacy on behalf of murdered writers and journalists. Our Day of the Dead campaign 2023 honoured nine journalists killed in the year since 2 November 2022. PEN International believes that these reporters (four in **Mexico**, two in **Colombia**, one in **Haiti**, one in **Paraguay**, and one in the **United States of America**) were likely attacked in retaliation for their critical journalism, particularly regarding issues such as corruption, the environment, organised crime, drug trafficking, public security, or their activism. We called on Latin American governments to end impunity for these crimes and ensure justice. With great sadness, we received the news that during December, two journalists were killed in **Guatemala** and one more in **Honduras**, indicating the ongoing urgent need for the international community to demand change in the levels of protection for writers and journalists in the region.



'ART, LITERATURE AND CULTURAL SPACES ARE OFTEN REPRESSIVE GOVERNMENTS' FAVOURITE TARGETS FOR CENSORSHIP. ART HAS THE POWER TO NAME THINGS WHEN THERE IS SILENCE IN SOCIETIES.'

## NEW AND OLD RESTRICTIVE LEGISLATION

Authorities in the region continued to introduce new legislation which restricted freedom of expression, including in digital spaces, while also resorting to existing laws, especially those relating to national security, to imprison journalists for their work.

Online expression poses challenges to authoritarian governments that want total control of the media. In May 2023, the government in **Cuba** passed the Law on Social Communication that seek to further close civic space in Cuba and criminalise those who express dissent online. Article 28 of the law stipulates that the media are ‘socialist property of the entire people or of political, social and mass organisations, and cannot be the object of any other type of ownership’.

In **Nicaragua**, journalist Víctor Ticay was sentenced in April to eight years’ imprisonment for ‘disseminating false information and conspiracy to destabilise national integrity’. In **Cuba**, journalist Lázaro Yuri Valle Roca remains in prison. He was sentenced on 28 July 2022 to five years’ imprisonment for the offences of ‘enemy propaganda of a continuing nature’. Cuba has the highest number of artists in the region imprisoned or otherwise persecuted for their artistic freedom and, as in Nicaragua, there are no guarantees of due process and there is no independent legal defence.

‘EVEN THOUGH HAVING A NATIONALITY IS FIRMLY ANCHORED IN HUMAN RIGHTS LAW, IT IS INCREASINGLY BEING TREATED AS A PRIVILEGE AGAINST A BACKDROP OF RISING AUTHORITARIANISM, MISUSE OF ‘COUNTER-TERRORISM’ LAWS AND INCREASING POPULISM, XENOPHOBIA AND RACISM. THE AMERICAS REGION IS NO EXCEPTION.’

## JUDICIAL HARASSMENT AND EXILE

Lengthy investigations and trials, often on charges that are later thrown out, not only drain financial resources and detract from a journalist’s credibility, but judicial harassment is itself often a method of silencing critical voices, either through self-censorship, imprisonment or by leaving them no option but to flee the country.

2023 was a notable year in the region for the unexpected number of writers, journalists, and artists in countries such as **Cuba, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala** who were driven to leave their countries as the only means of freedom as a result of persecution by rulers or criminal groups. Others resorted to internal displacement, another means for writers and journalists to seek protection from threats and harassment, occurs in places such as **El Salvador, Honduras, and Mexico** where violence against writers, journalists and the media has other patterns.

The vast majority of PEN **Nicaragua** members have left their country under threat or as the only means for the safety of themselves or their families; other writers and book publishers were not allowed to re-enter Nicaragua for publishing books critical of President Ortega’s vision. At least 23 journalists left the country this year. Among them were Kalúa Salazar, who was persecuted by the police for her journalism, and Kastalia Zapata, a journalist and member of PEN Nicaragua, who worked clandestinely as a reporter until she was driven to flee in May 2023.

Another high priority country for our work in this area is **Cuba**, where many writers have left the country, believing that it offers them the only means of freedom to continue with their art. To shine a light on their stories, PEN International and PEN America’s Artists at Risk Connection (ARC), in partnership with Civil Rights Defenders (CRD), launched a campaign ‘Voces Presas’ (Incarcerated Voices) which ran throughout the year. This online campaign calls for the release of all imprisoned artists and political prisoners in Cuba and the respect and guarantee of artistic freedom on the

island. Among the stories featured this year are those of graffiti artist Jessica Torres Calvo and visual artist Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara. The escalation of violence by criminal groups in **Ecuador** affected the work of at least 343 journalists, communicators, media workers and activists. The insecurity and death threats they faced were so serious that, according to Fundamedios, at least nine journalists left their country due to threats against their personal integrity. PEN International was in contact with some of these journalists, who chose not to reveal details or their identities so as not to put their lives, or those of their families, at risk.

In **Guatemala**, during the last year of President Alejandro Giammattei's term, a high number of journalists left the country, fearing for their safety. Many were threatened with criminal prosecution and imprisonment for their investigations. Such persecution of journalists by the government of Alejandro Giammattei is exemplified by the judicial harassment of journalist José Rubén Zamora Marroquín, director of *elPeriódico*. Detained in 2022 (see Case List 2022), in June he was sentenced to six years in prison and fined GTQ300,000 (approximately USD38,000) for money laundering. His conviction was overturned in October, but the Appeal Court ordered a retrial which is scheduled to begin in February 2024.

Among them is Julia Corado, a journalist and director of *elPeriódico*, which closed its operations after government harassment of José Rubén Zamora Marroquín. When Zamora was arrested, Corado was named director of *elPeriódico*. In June 2023, the Guatemalan Public Prosecutor's Office requested a criminal investigation into seven journalists and columnists, including Corado, whom they accused of obstructing justice, due to articles she published about Jose Rubén Zamora's trial. Corado left Guatemala due to the high risk of being arrested, leaving her family behind.

PEN International received other reports in 2023 of judicial harassment of journalists who are not included in this document because they did not want to reveal their identity, some of whom had to be placed in safe houses and protect their identity to avoid arrest, while others, who received direct assistance from PEN, had to go into exile under threat of imprisonment or prosecution.

## BANISHMENT AND STRIPPING OF CITIZENSHIP

Even though having a nationality is firmly anchored in human rights, law, it is increasingly being treated as a privilege against a backdrop of rising authoritarianism, misuse of 'counter-terrorism' laws and increasing populism, xenophobia and racism. The Americas region is no exception. In 2023, we saw arbitrary deprivation of nationality and confiscation of property being applied to writers and journalists in Nicaragua as a new means of repression, in violation of the Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness, ratified by Nicaragua in 2013, which prohibits the deprivation of nationality on political grounds.

On 9 February, the National Assembly amended Article 21 of the Constitution and approved Special Law No. 1145 regulating the loss of Nicaraguan nationality, allowing those who are considered 'traitors to the homeland' to be deprived of their nationality. The reform was approved without any previous publicity or debate, in a session lasting less than 30 minutes. Later the same day, the Nicaraguan government stripped 317 critics of President Daniel Ortega of their citizenship, including 222 political prisoners (32 women and 190 men) who were released and forcibly transferred to the United States by deportation – a form of banishment, among them writer Oscar René Vargas Escobar and journalists Miguel Mora, Miguel Mendoza Urbina, Juan Lorenzo Holmann Chamorro, Cristiana Chamorro, Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, Pedro Joaquín Chamorro and Miguel Mendoza Urbina, among others. In at least one case, deportation was also applied to family members of writers. Gabriel Alfonso López del Carmen, son of PEN Nicaragua Director of International Programmes, Andrea Margarita del Carmen, who was arrested in October 2022 in retaliation for his mother's work, was released and deported in February as part of the group of 222 political prisoners to which this measure was applied.

Others were also banished by being denied permission to re-enter the country from abroad as happened to writer, literature promoter and editor of children's books Gloria Maria Carrión Cruz in April.

In March, the nationality and property of writer **Gioconda Belli**, president of the PEN Nicaragua Centre, and her son, Camilo de Castro Belli, as well as other writers and artists critical of the Nicaraguan authorities, were withdrawn and confiscated.

In addition to being stripped of their nationality, their birth certificates and all their academic records were erased from the public system – a form of ‘civil death’. They were also denied their pensions and the right to exercise their professions in Nicaragua.

These measures were widely condemned internationally, including by the [UN Office of the Commissioner for Human Rights](#), with calls for the government to restore the nationality of all persons deprived of it, and allow the safe return of all Nicaraguans who wish to return to the country. The [UN Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua](#) found these acts of forced displacement to be part of a pattern of violations by the Nicaraguan government that amount to [crimes against humanity](#).

## CANCEL CULTURE AND BOOK BANS

Acts of censorship against books and individuals, in a rising atmosphere of ‘cancel culture’, intensified in the Americas.

Book bans were on the rise in countries such as **Brazil**, **El Salvador**, and the **United States of America**. Such censorship not only restricts individuals’ freedom of expression by limiting their access to information, but also risks stigmatizing authors and putting them at risk of smear campaigns, physical and online harassment and attacks, and even potentially endangering their lives.

In April, the University of Rio Verde, in Goiás, **Brazil**, [removed](#) the book *Eu recebia as piores notícias dos seus lindos lábios* (*Your Beautiful Lips Would Give Me the Worst News*) by author, poet, screenwriter and journalist Marçal Aquino from the list of compulsory reading of the school. The [order to withdraw the book](#), though not containing any reason, followed a post by an extreme right-wing deputy attacking the book for having pornographic content. In September, a concert by musician Johnny Hooker was shut down

over a 2018 video controversy in which he said, ‘Jesus is a transvestite’, in an attempt to defend the play *The Gospel According to Jesus, Queen of Heaven* (see Case List 2018). Also in Brazil, in November, the governor of Santa Catarina [ordered](#) the removal of nine literary books by non-Brazilian writers from the library collections of the state’s public institutions. His 7 November letter ordered the removal of books from circulation and stored in a place ‘not accessible to the school community’. The banned books were: *The Chemistry Between Us*, by Larry Young and Brian Alexander; *Satanic Heart*, by William Hjortsberg; *Donnie Darko*, by Richard Kelly; *Ed Lorraine Warren: Demonologists - Supernatural Files*, by Gerald Brittl; *Exorcism*, by Thomas B. Allen; *It: The Thing*, by Stephen King; *Clockwork Orange*, by Anthony Burgess; *The 13 Whys*, by Jay Ascher; *The Devil’s Diary: The Secrets of Alfred Rosenberg*, by Robert K. Wittman and David Kinne.

In July, the government of **El Salvador** [asked](#) a Guatemalan Book Fair to remove from its programme a book of short stories by writer and journalist Michelle Recinos, threatening to withdraw the participation of all El Salvadorean partners from the fair should the request not be complied with. Recinos’ book, entitled *Sustancia de hígado* (*Liver Substance*), addresses human rights abuses, disappearances, and deaths in El Salvador through literature.

In the **United States of America**, we are experiencing a massive censorship of books, particularly in schools where bans increased by 33 per cent over the last school year from 2022-2023. At least, 3,362 instances of book bans were recorded in public school classrooms and libraries between July 2022 and June 2023, affecting 1,557 different titles on diverse topics and themes for young audiences, with more than 40% of all cases in Florida, which overtook Texas as the state with the most bans. Other states with high levels of book banning cases are Missouri, Utah, and Pennsylvania. Thirty per cent of banned books included characters of colour and themes of race and racism, 30 per cent represented LGBTQ+ characters or themes, and six per cent included a transgender character. Other themes in banned books included physical abuse; health and well-being; as well as grief and death. On 20 December, 673 more books were [removed](#) from Orange County (Florida) classrooms for fear they violate new state rules under Florida’s [HB 1069 law](#).

But these bans are not going unchallenged. PEN America has launched a research and advocacy project [Book Bans](#). It has documented this tragedy through the reports [Banned in the USA: State Laws Supercharge Book Suppression in Schools](#), [Banned in the USA: The Mounting Pressure to Censor](#) and [Spineless Shelves. Two years of Book Banning](#), and has joined Penguin Random House, a diverse group of authors and parents and students from Escambia County, Florida, to [file a federal lawsuit](#) challenging removals and restrictions of books from school libraries that violate their rights to free speech and equal protection under the law.

## NORTH AMERICA: CENSORSHIP UNDER THE LONG SHADOW OF WAR

The shadow of the war in Gaza reached North America. In the **United States of America**, hundreds of Jewish activists were [arrested](#) during a sit-in outside the Congress building in Washington, DC, where they demonstrated against 'Israel's continuous oppression of Palestinians'. Palestinian and pro-Palestinian writers and commentators were [censored](#) on TV stations and at literary events.

The conflict has impacted freedom of expression of professors and [students](#) in [universities](#), [artists](#) and at cultural events. In October 2023, PEN America [registered](#) cancellations of books and cultural events, awards, exhibitions, and promotions, both regarding Palestinian writers and artists, and on Jewish and Israeli topics and events, some apparently in connection with security concerns. According to the results of a poll in Academia, many academics in the US [self-censor](#) when talking about Israel-Palestine. [Some American campuses](#) are making it harder for [Israelism](#), a documentary about the political transformation in the thinking of Simone Zimmerman, a former Zionist who now advocates for an end to the Israeli occupation, to be shown on campuses.

In **Canada**, the impact of the conflict between Israel and Hamas has also reached universities, media, students, journalists, and activists.

On 28 November, PEN Canada released a [statement](#) expressing their concerns about a growing chill on criticism and debate about the Israel-Hamas war and the humanitarian crisis in Gaza. The statement highlighted reports of individuals in Canada, including [media workers](#), being [investigated, suspended and/or fired](#) by their employers for expressing views in support of Palestinian rights on social media, including Zahraa Al-Akhrass, a Canadian journalist of Palestinian origin who was [fired](#) from her job due to her pro-Palestinian social media posts concerning Israel's attacks on Gaza. PEN Canada called on public agencies, institutions of higher learning and members of civil society to respect Canadians' right to freedom of expression, and to resist intolerance of critical discussions of the war.

## GOOD NEWS

Some important steps towards ending impunity for the persecution of journalist and author Lydia Cacho Ribeiro occurred in **Mexico** in 2023 (for details of her persecution, see Case Lists [2010](#), [2011](#), [2012](#), [2017](#), and [2019](#)). She was arrested and tortured in December 2005 for alleged defamation in connection with her 2005 book *Los Demonios del Edén: el poder detrás de la pornografía* (*The Demons of Eden: the power behind pornography*). The case against her was later dropped. On 13 July 2023, almost 18 years after her illegal arrest and torture, the Attorney General's Office arrested the former Director of the Judicial Police of the State of Puebla, Adolfo Karam, who remained in [custody](#) at the end of the year for the crime of torture against the journalist. The former official is linked to an organised power structure within the local government, whose members planned and executed the attack against Cacho in retaliation for the publication of her book.

The arrest of Karam is an important step in the fight against impunity for the human rights violations Cacho suffered. However, more needs to be done to provide Cacho with redress, including payment of compensation, as demanded by the United Nations [Human Rights Committee](#).

# EMBLEMATIC CASES



NICARAGUA

## FREDDY ANTONIO QUEZADA

### WRITER DETAINED

Writer, sociologist, philosopher and academic Freddy Quezada was arrested at his home on 29 November 2023. He was arrested hours after writing social media posts, articles and essays critical of the Nicaraguan government. His family has not been able to speak to him since his arrest. He has no access to any legal defence or fair trial. One of the last posts he wrote before he was detained criticized the detention of a prominent bishop. On 27 December 2023, The Inter-American Commission of Human Rights granted Quezada precautionary measures. In 2018, Quezada is said to have been dismissed from his academic role at the National Autonomous University of Nicaragua due to his outspoken criticism of the Nicaraguan government's violent repression of student protests.

Freddy Antonio Quezada. Photo credit: Maje



CUBA

## ALINA BÁRBARA LÓPEZ HERNÁNDEZ

### WRITER SENTENCED

Prominent essayist, editor and academic Alina Bárbara López Hernández was sentenced to pay a fine in November 2023 after she was convicted of 'disobedience' for not attending extrajudicial summonses from State Security. She had refused to comply with a June 2013 summons as she believed it was outside the framework of a legitimate criminal or administrative investigation, after which she was placed under house arrest. During the trial, the judge was unable to provide any clarification as to why the writer was summoned for questioning by State Security. López refuses to pay a fine for a crime she did not commit. As long as she does not pay the fine, she is also prohibited from leaving the country and she could be imprisoned.

Alina Bárbara López Hernández.

Photo credit: Alina Bárbara López Hernández

# CASE LIST 2023/2024

## ■ BRAZIL

### KILLED - IMPUNITY

#### Dom PHILLIPS

On 17 June 2022, two bodies found two days earlier were confirmed as those of British journalist and author Dom Phillips and Indigenous issues expert Bruno Pereira, who went missing on 5 June during a fact-finding trip in the Indigenous territory of the Javari Valley in the Brazilian Amazon. Phillips was working on a book about sustainable development entitled *How to Save the Amazon*, and Pereira, who had close contacts with local Indigenous groups, was providing support with interviews. Both men had been shot several times.

On 22 July 2022, public prosecutors charged three individuals, outlining that two of the men had confessed to the crime, while witness testimony confirmed the involvement of the third man. On 23 January 2023, the Brazilian police named the alleged mastermind behind the murders of Phillips and Pereira, as Rubens Villar Coelho (nicknamed Colômbia), who has been accused of running an illegal fishing racket in the remote border region. In June 2023, it was revealed that Villar was charged with the crime of murder and concealment of the bodies of Bruno and Dom, together with another illegal fisherman, Jânio Freitas de Souza, also detained.

On 11 August 2023, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) created a Joint Working Group on the implementation of precautionary measures issued in 2022 in favour of Dom Phillips, Bruno Pereira and 11 more people threatened for their work on protection of Indigenous peoples and their direct participation in the search for Phillips.

Dom Phillips, born on 23 July 1964, worked as a freelance journalist for many international media outlets including the *Guardian*, the *Financial Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times* and the *Intercept*. Most of his investigations were about environmental issues. In 2018, Phillips

reported on the threats posed by illegal mining and cattle ranchers to uncontacted indigenous peoples in the Brazil's Javari Valley. He is the author of the book *Superstar DJs Here We Go!: The Rise and Fall of the Superstar DJ*.

**Update:** In January 2024, Brazilian police announced the arrest of another suspect, said to have close links to the alleged mastermind of the murders.

## ■ COLOMBIA

### DEATH THREAT

#### Daniel SAMPER OSPINA

In May 2023, the journalist and writer Daniel Samper Ospina publicly reported receiving hundreds of derogatory and aggressive messages on social media, accusing him without evidence of crimes such as rape or corruption. On 5 and 24 May 2023, the threats on his Instagram and email accounts escalated to threats of violence and death. One message warns that he will be beaten for defaming [the president of Colombia, Gustavo] Petro with ... false arguments'. The other threat says that the sender expects 'his death soon' and that he 'should be imprisoned like the uribestias' (referring to supporters of former president Álvaro Uribe).

In previous years, Samper Ospina has received threatening messages and smear campaigns from different political leaders, but in 2023, in his words, he received the first death threats of his entire career as a critic of power spheres in Colombia. La Fundación para la Libertad de Prensa – FLIP- (Foundation for Press Freedom), called on the Colombian Attorney General's Office to diligently investigate the origin of the death threats against the journalist.

Daniel Samper Ospina, born on 15 August 1974, is a Colombian comedian, journalist, YouTuber and writer. He was director of *Soho* magazine from 2001 to 2014, and a columnist for *Semana*

magazine until 2020. He is the author of eight books, including *La noche que humillaron a mi padre* (*The Night They Humiliated my Father*), *Jota, caballo y rey* (*Jota, Horse and King*), *Les Luthiers de la L a la S* (*Les Luthiers from L to S*) and the winner of a dozen journalism awards.

## HARASSED

### Rodrigo UPRIMNY YEPES

In September 2023, former Colombian President Álvaro Uribe and his lawyer repeatedly smeared columnist and jurist Rodrigo Uprimny Yepes after he published an article on 24 September 2023 entitled ‘Los falsos positivos, la JEP y Uribe’ (‘False positives, the JEP and Uribe’) in the newspaper *El Espectador*. In the article, the academic argues that Uribe had a clear moral and political responsibility and possible criminal command responsibility for the false positives during his government.

The former president’s legal representative published a statement on 24 September which described Uprimny as a “contractor columnist”, suggesting that he was paid by the former president’s political opponents to write it. The following day, the former president said that the columnist ‘could be one of those morally and politically responsible for terrorism because of his positions’.

Rodrigo Uprimny Yepes is a legal scholar and Director of Dejusticia, a Colombian human rights NGO and think tank. He is a former member of the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and a member of the Assembly of the Foundation for Press Freedom. He has authored or edited more than a dozen books on human rights, constitutional law, judicial systems and transitional justice, such as *Beyond the Binary: Securing Peace and Promoting Justice after Conflict* (2019) and *Addicted to Punishment: the Disproportionality of Drug Laws in Latin America* (2013).

## ■ CUBA

## IMPRISONED

### Randy ARTEAGA RIVERA

Randy Arteaga Rivera, a musician and rapper, is continuing to serve a five-year sentence after being arrested while participating in peaceful protests against restrictions on rights, scarcity of food and medicines, and the government’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic, on 11 July 2021 in Santa Clara province. He was violently dragged into a police bus in the street. In April 2022, he was sentenced to five years’ imprisonment for the alleged crimes of ‘contempt’ and ‘public disorder’. His family deny that he was a ringleader of the demonstration. He was fired from his job as a security guard after his arrest.

Randy Arteaga, born on 3 December 1990 and better known as Randy AR, is currently in the prison camp ‘La Guanajera’, where he can earn a minimum income through work in the fields or camp, but this leaves his mother and daughter in a precarious economic situation. Due to the stress of prison and his glaucoma, Arteaga Rivera’s family reports that he needs surgery to treat glaucoma, made worse by his poor prison conditions.

Randy Arteaga Rivera’s music is critical of the Cuban government. In his songs he criticises the repression and the situation of Cuban society.

### Maykel CASTILLO PÉREZ

On 24 June 2022, Cuban authorities sentenced the Cuban musician and rapper Maykel Castillo Pérez, widely known by the name ‘Maykel Osorbo’, to nine years in prison after conviction of charges believed to include ‘assault’, ‘resistance’, ‘evasion of prisoners and detainees’ and ‘public disorder.’

Osorbo, born in 1983, was detained on 18 May 2021 while at home in relation to his refusal to be arrested on 4 April 2021 as he was trying to reach the headquarters of the Movimiento San Isidro (MSI), a group of Cuban artists and intellectuals he co-founded in 2018 to protest state censorship of artistic, literary or journalistic



works and defend freedom of expression in Cuba. Subjected to enforced disappearance for 14 days, on 31 May 2021, he was transferred to the high security 5 y Medio prison in Pinar del Río, where he remains. His provisional detention did not comply with international legal requirements or the Cuban Criminal Code. Osorbo has suffered no less than 121 acts of police harassment, including multiple arrests.

According to his family members, during 2023, Osorbo received threats in prison by other prisoners and the authorities installed a camera in April 2023. In May 2023, Osorbo sewed his lips together and tattooed 'Patria y Vida' ('Homeland and life') in protests for the threats and ill-treatment in prison. The authorities removed the stitches the next day. He sent some verses to be sung: 'While injustice strikes, I will not close my arms, nor close my mouth, I will sew it shut in any case'.

Osorbo was granted precautionary measures on 11 February 2021 by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention has concluded that Osorbo is detained arbitrarily solely for his pro-democracy activism and has urged his immediate release.

Osorbo is co-author, alongside other Cuban musicians, of 'Patria y Vida' ('Homeland and Life'), a song that, since its release in February 2021, has served as an anthem during anti-government demonstrations across the island. The song received two Latin Grammy Awards.

## María Cristina GARRIDO RODRÍGUEZ

Cuban poet and activist María Cristina Garrido Rodríguez is continuing to serve a seven-year prison sentence imposed after she was convicted on 10 March 2022 of 'public disorder,' 'contempt,' and 'resistance'. She was arrested with her sister on 12 July 2021 after participating in peaceful protests.

Garrido is held in poor conditions in detention, including solitary confinement and lack of food and water and unhygienic sanitary conditions. She has also been beaten. Together with her sister Angélica Garrido, she went on hunger strike for five days on 20 September 2022 in

protest at their sentence and continued detention. On November 2023, Garrido sent an audio message to the PEN community talking about censorship in Cuba and the power of art.

Maria Cristina Garrido Rodríguez was born in Quivicán, Mayaquebé in 1982. In 2008 she won the First National Prize in the Carlos Baliño Tobacco Competition. Her poetry and artistic vision have led her to reflect and write about her daily life, while her career as an activist has led her to join the Cuban Women's Network, where she supports the visibility of women in various spaces. Garrido is a member of the Vuelta abajo por Cuba Foundation and a member of the Latin Federation of Rural Women (FLAMUR). She is the author of *Examen de tiempo (Time examination)*, published in 2022. Her most recent book *Voz cautiva: poemas escritos desde la cárcel (Captive Voice: poems written from prison)* was published in 2023 by the Spanish publishing house Deslinde and highlights the challenges faced by Garrido during her political imprisonment, including ill-treatment, isolation, surveillance, and depression, among others.

## Marco Antonio PINTUELES MARRERO

Cuban rapper and activist Marco Antonio Pintueles Marrero, born in August 2003, is serving a five-year sentence of correctional labour in the 'La Aguada' camp for the crime of 'sedition'. He was arrested on 11 July 2021 in reprisal for his participation in peaceful protests, sentenced to seven years in prison in February 2022, and released in April 2022. On 9 June 2022, he was informed that he would have to serve five years of correctional labour.

In November 2023, Pintueles released his song 'Basta' which criticises the censorship, poverty and the general crisis in Cuba under President Miguel Díaz-Canel. On 2 November, immediately after the song was made public, the rapper was transferred to the State Security Criminal Instruction Centre in Holguín, where he was held incommunicado for six days and, according to his relatives, is threatened with further charges for writing the song.

## DETAINED

### Alejandro GUILLEUMA IBÁÑEZ

On 1 October 2022, rapper Alejandro Guilleuma Ibáñez was arrested in Havana. Initially held in pre-trial detention in the notorious 100 and Aldabó Detention Centre run by the Technical Department of Investigations, he was later transferred on an unknown date to Valle Grande Prison where he remains held, charged with contempt of court and public disorder. His exact legal status is unknown. Friends and family members report that Guilleuma Ibáñez' health continues to deteriorate in prison.

Cuban authorities detained at least five artists and writers, including Guilleuma Ibáñez and the poet Damián Pérez Gutiérrez in the aftermath of Hurricane Ian for their participation in peaceful protests that began on 29 September 2022. One of them reportedly suffered injuries during arrest.

### Yasmani GONZÁLEZ VALDÉS

Yasmani González Valdés (also known as 'Libre Libre') is held awaiting trial on charges of 'propaganda against government bodies', for which his wife believes he could receive a six-year prison sentence. He was arrested at his home on 20 April 2023 for alleged involvement in painting anti-Cuban Communist Party graffiti. His arrest involved 15 police officers, who confiscated his belongings, including his phone and a paintbrush. González was transferred to the State Security Investigation Office (Villa Marista).

On 29 May 2023, the artist was transferred to the Combinado del Este Prison and his wife reported in August 2023 that his health was deteriorating. In November he was confined in a punishment cell under unsanitary conditions. Previously, in 2022, Yasmani González Valdés was fined 3,000 pesos under Decree Law 370 for posting denunciations against the Cuban government on social media.

Yasmani González was born in Artemisa on 2 September 1992. He is a rapper and activist.

## ON TRIAL

### Alina Bárbara LÓPEZ HERNÁNDEZ

On 28 November 2023, writer, essayist, editor, academic and activist Alina López Hernández was sentenced to pay a fine of 7,500 Cuban pesos (about USD313) after she was convicted of 'disobedience' for not attending extrajudicial summons from State Security. She had refused to comply with a 13 June 2023 summons as she believed it was outside the framework of a legitimate criminal or administrative investigation, after which she was placed under house arrest.

López said that during the trial, the judge was unable to provide any clarification as to why the writer was summoned for questioning by State Security. López refuses to pay a fine for a crime she did not commit. As long as she does not pay the fine, she is also prohibited from leaving the country and she could be imprisoned.

López believes that the summons relate to her peaceful activism, such as a peaceful demonstration in a park on 6 April 2023, in support of the writer Jorge Fernández Era, detained for his criticism of the government. At the protest, López walked holding a sign calling for the release of Fernández.

Alina Bárbara López Hernández, born in Matanzas in 1965 is an essayist, editor, and researcher. She holds a PhD in Philosophical Sciences and studies the political and cultural thought of the republican intelligentsia in Cuba. She works for Ediciones Matanzas. She is the author of several books of essays such as *En tiempos de blogosfera (In times of blogosphere)*, and *El (des) conocido Juan Marinello (The (un)Known Juan Marinello)*. She has been awarded prizes such as the 2008 Juan Marinello National Essay Prize and the 2013 Matanzas City Foundation Prize.

**Update:** On 23 January 2024, the municipal court of Matanzas dismissed López's appeal against her conviction and sentence.

## ATTACKED

### Didier Eduardo ALMAGRO TOLEDO

On 6 April 2023, musician Didier Eduardo Almagro Toledo was released after completing a three-year prison sentence imposed after conviction of contempt of court and public disorder following an unfair trial in which he was reportedly denied access to court documents and a lawyer. He was accused of participating in an anti-government demonstration protesting power cuts in his neighbourhood on 4 August 2021, when he was violently arrested and his home was raided and ransacked by a massive political police operation.

Two days after his release, Almagro was involved in an altercation near his house in which he was hit on the head with a machete causing a deep wound that required 23 stitches and in which he injured one of his assailants. He was then arrested by police and released later. After the attack, Almagro continued to receive threats from security agents. He subsequently left Cuba and has been granted asylum in the USA.

Didier Eduardo Almagro Toledo, born in 1997, is a protest artist who, through his music, denounces the Cuban government.

## HARASSED

### Tania BRUGUERA

In November 2023, Cuban authorities launched a smear campaign against Cuban artist and academic Tania Bruguera with the intention of undermining her work and the IV INSTAR Film Festival, organised in seven countries in December 2023 by the Instituto de Artivismo Hannah Arendt (INSTAR) which she had founded.

For well over a decade, Bruguera has faced persistent harassment by the Cuban government, causing her to leave the country in 2021. This campaign to delegitimise her work has continued during her exile, with state-controlled media outlets suggesting that the festival and its accompanying activities constitute an attack on Cuban culture and an endorsement of terrorism, as well as allegations that she and some artists or movies shown in the festival have links or received funds from foreign intelligence agencies.

Coordinated social media attacks on the festival and its participants were made by various public officials and others close to the government, including the Minister of Culture Alpidio Alonso Grau and Cuba's First Lady Lis Cuesta Peraza. Cuban cultural institutions also launched a mass mailing campaign to institutions and individuals around the world, seen by PEN International, in an attempt to discredit the festival.

Tania Bruguera, born in Havana on 18 July 1968, is a renowned multidisciplinary artist and author. Currently a senior lecturer and affiliate faculty at Harvard University, Bruguera is the founder and director of the Hannah Arendt Institute of Artivism (INSTAR). Bruguera is author of several books, including *The Francis Effect*, *Tania Bruguera: Let Truth Be, Though the World Perish*; *Portrait of an Artist* (coauthor), *Tania Bruguera in Conversation with Claire Bishop*.

### Alexander HALL LURARDO

### Dmitri PRIETO-SAMSONOV

### Raymar AGUADO HERNÁNDEZ

Historian and writer Alexander Hall reported that on 27 November 2023, following his public support for Alina López Hernández, he was subjected to police surveillance at his home; on the same day, academic researcher and author Dmitri Prieto-Samsonov reported that police prevented him from leaving his home, threatening him with the crime of disobedience. Pietro attributes the police harassment to his support for the writer Alina López. The writer, student and art critic Raymar Aguado Hernández, as part of this wave of arrests, announced that the Cuban police had summoned him on 27 November for incurring a 'possible crime', police harassment which he links to his support for the academic Alina López.

Alexander Hall Lujardo, born in Havana in 1998 is an historian and Afro-descendant activist. He writes for magazines such as *Sin Permiso* and *Rialta Magazine*, and is the co-author and coordinator of the book *Cuba 11J: Perspectivas contrahegemónicas de las protestas sociales*. (Cuba 11J: *Counter-hegemonic perspectives on social protests*.)

Dimitri Prieto-Samsonov is a Cuban biochemist and lawyer. He is the author of *Spiritual War in*

*Havana? and Transdominación de Haití (1791-1826) (Transdomination of Haiti)*, for which he received the 2010 Pinos Nuevos prize.

Raymar Aguado Hernández is a student at the Centro de Estudios Eclesiásticos Padre Félix Varela. He also works as an art critic and writes for media outlets such as Rialta Magazine, Hypermedia and La Joven Cuba. In 2023, he published *¿(Des)aciertos críticos? La obra de cinco artistas visuales cubanos (Critical (mis)successes? The work of five Cuban visual artists)*, by Aquiescencia Editorial.

## Rodolfo PAEZ

### Juan PIN VILAR

On 26 April 2023, the Ministry of Culture (MINCULT) suspended the screening of the film *Fito's Havana*, written and directed by Juan Vilar, in which the Argentine singer-songwriter, better known as Fito Paez, questions the official version of the death of the revolutionary guerrilla fighter Camilo Cienfuegos and criticises the shooting of three young men in 2003 who hijacked a boat to flee to Miami.

On 10 June 2023, without the authorisation of its director or producers, the official television in Cuba showed the documentary *Fito's Havana* but not in its final version, which sparked complaints from the authors.

Juan Pin Vilar, born in Havana in 1963, is a Cuban art historian and film director. He is the author of books such as *Carlos Varela* and *Santiago Feliú: un hippie en el comunismo (Santiago Feliú: a hippie in communism)*.

Fito Paez, born in Rosario in 1963, is an Argentinean musician and composer. He is the author of several books, including: *Infancia y juventud (Childhood and Youth)*, *Los días de Kirchner (The Days of Kirchner)*, *Diario de viaje (Travel diary)*, and *La puta diabla (The Devil's Bitch)*.

## JUDICIAL HARASSMENT

### Jorge FERNÁNDEZ ERA

Since January 2023, journalist and author Jorge Fernández Era has been harassed by State Security, mainly in retaliation for the humorous texts he writes. After he refused to appear for two police summonses in that month for not complying with the requirements of Cuban law, he was fined CUP3000 (about 126 USD), which he refused to pay, as he had not committed any offence. He was placed under 39 days of house arrest in April.

Police surveillance intensified after he published an article and demonstrated peacefully for an hour in Havana's Central Park on 6 April 2023. He was arrested the same day and charged with 'disobedience', 'defamation', 'disrespect for state leaders' and 'sedition', and released five hours later under a precautionary measure prohibiting him from leaving the country and the threat of trial for the aforementioned offences. Due to the request to edit a text he had written, the comedian resigned from the magazine *La Joven Cuba*.

Since then, harassment has continued, including further brief arrests on 28 April, 18 June, 18 September and 28 November 2023, among other threats and arrests. Family members have also received threats.

Author of four books of short stories such as *Cincuenta cuentos de nuestra Era (Fifty Stories of our Era)* and *Cada cual a lo mío. Humor en bruto para gente no tan bruta (Each to my own. Raw humour for not-so-raw people)*, Jorge Fernández Era, born in 1962, graduated in journalism from the University of Havana. He has worked in Cuban cultural institutions such as the Ministry of Culture, the José Martí National Library, the New Latin American Film Foundation, the Centre for Martí Studies, the José Martí Publishing House and the Juan Marinello Cuban Institute for Cultural Research. He has won more than 20 prizes in national and international journalism and literature competitions, including First Prize in the Dinosaurio International Mini-Story Competition, which he won twice, and the Aquelarre National Humorous Literature Prize, which he won for ten years.

## CONDITIONAL RELEASE

### Richard Adrián Z AMORA BRITO

Rapper and musician Richard Adrián Zamora Brito, better known as ‘El Radikal’, continued to serve an 18-month sentence of ‘restriction of liberty’ at the end of the year, which was due to end in January 2024. He was also sentenced to a fine of CUP30,000 (approximately USD1,200).

Arrested on 12 July 2021 by police officers in relation to his peaceful participation in the nationwide protests, he was detained in the unit known as ‘El Técnico de Bellotex’, Matanzas. He faced charges of ‘public disorder and ‘sabotage’ for allegedly destroying shops belonging to the armed forces. As a result, the investigation was conducted by the Military Prosecutor’s Office which meant he was not allowed access to a lawyer of his choice.

On 22 August 2021, the IACHR issued a precautionary measure in favour of Zamora Brito.

El Radikal was released after 40 days in detention and was later sentenced by the Military Court #826 of Matanzas to 18 months of house arrest on charges of ‘public disorder’ (Article 200 of the Penal Code), allowing him only to leave the house for work. The ‘sabotage’ charges were dismissed.

El Radikal is a member of the Council for Racial Integration and Demóngeles, a dissident group of artists, rappers, filmmakers, writers, and artists. For years, El Radikal has suffered multiple forms of repression and harassment as a result of his music and *artivism*, such as police surveillance at his home, which has prevented him from attending hip-hop festivals such as Potaje Urbano in Matanzas.

## ■ ECUADOR

### DEATH THREATS

#### Karol Estefanía NOROÑA CALVACHI

On Friday 24 March 2023, the directors of media outlet *GK* announced that they had activated a security protocol and an emergency operation for journalist Karol Estefanía Noroña Calvachi to flee Ecuador, due to death threats against her in retaliation for her journalistic investigations. According to Fundamedios, a press freedom organization based in Quito, this was yet another example of threats against journalists by criminal groups that are silencing the press in the country.

Within 24 hours, Noroña had left country and will not return until there are guarantees for her return. *GK* called the death threat against Noroña ‘another example of the security crisis and the penetration of drug trafficking in the country that affects all sectors of society’.

Noroña continues to work in exile as a journalist investigating human rights abuses and organized crime.

Karol Estefanía Noroña is a journalist and writer who was born in Quito in 1994. She tells stories about women’s rights, the effects of organised crime networks in the country, the prison system and the struggle of families searching for their missing relatives. She has written for printed and independent media, both national and international. She was granted second place in the European Union’s Journalists for your rights 2021 award in Ecuador and received an Honourable Mention in the 2021 Eugenio Espejo Awards for her chronicle *Los hijos invisibles de la coca* (*The Invisible Children of Coca*). Co-author of the books *Periferias: Crónicas del Ecuador invisible* (*Peripheries: Chronicles of the Invisible Ecuador*) and *Muros: voces anticarcelarias del Ecuador* (*Walls: Anti-prison voices from Ecuador*).

## THREATENED

Andersson BOSCÁN

Mónica VELÁZQUEZ

On 25 July 2023, journalists Andersson Boscán, co-founder of social media-based outlet [La Posta](#), and his wife Mónica Velásquez, who also worked for La Posta, [left Ecuador](#) shortly after [publishing](#) a report on corruption and drug trafficking allegations involving the brother-in-law of President Guillermo Lasso and members of the Albanian mafia, part of a corruption scandal that led to impeachment proceedings against the president and a constitutional crisis in the country when the president issued a decree to dissolve parliament early to avoid the proceedings.

According to public information, the journalists said that European intelligence agency contacted La Posta about ‘a plan of attack’ against the outlet by the Albanian mafia.

In December 2023, Andersson Bocán and Mónica Velásquez published their La Posta reporting into a book entitled *El Gran Padrino (The Great Godfather)*.

## ■ EL SALVADOR

### HARASSED

Michelle RECINOS

In July 2023, the government of El Salvador [asked](#) a Guatemalan Book Fair to remove from its programme a book of short stories by writer and journalist Michelle Recinos, published a month earlier. The book, entitled *Sustancia de hígado (Liver Substance)*, addresses human rights abuses, disappearances and deaths in El Salvador through literature.

According to [F&G Editores](#), a Guatemalan publishing house, El Salvador’s foreign relations office asked its embassy in Guatemala to demand that the writer’s work be removed from the programme under threat of all El Salvadorean partners at the book fair withdrawing from the entire event

Michelle Recinos, born in 1997 in San Salvador, is a journalist and writer. In 2022, she won both the X Premio Carátula de Cuento Centroamericano and the Premio Centroamericano de Cuento Mario Monteforte Toledo prizes. In 2021, a story she wrote appeared in the Central American anthology *Territorios olvidados* and she also published *Flores que sonrían (Smiling flowers)*, with the independent Salvadorean publishing house Los Sin Pisto.

## ■ GUATEMALA

### HARASSED

Marvin DEL CID

Sonny FIGUEROA

On 19 June 2023, Guatemalan journalists Marvin Del Cid and Sonny Figueroa [announced](#) that their books *¡Yo no quiero ser reconocido como un hijueputa más! (I don’t want to be recognised as just another hijueputa!)* and *Así me convertí en un ‘hijueputa más’ (That’s how I became one more ‘hijueputa’)* were removed from the Sophos bookstore, one of the most important bookstores in Guatemala and Central America, due to pressure from the Guatemalan government.

On 14 October 2023, a [document](#) from the Guatemalan Ministry of National Defence was published in the Guatemalan media outlets, in which Del Cid and Figueroa were identified as threats to national security. According to the document, the reason for this profiling was because in the exercise of their investigative journalistic work, it was assumed that they had carried out ‘media campaigns against the Guatemalan army’. In fact, the journalists had only questioned and investigated actions or operations as a natural part of their investigations. In August 2023, both journalists went into exile to protect their safety and freedom, having been subjected to ongoing threats and harassment during the presidency of Alejandro Giammattei.

Marvin Del Cid, born in Guatemala City in 1976, is journalist and author specialising in investigative and political issues. Founder of the NGO Artículo 35, he has also worked as a

professor at universities in Chile and Guatemala. Sonny Figueroa, born in Guatemala City in 1992) is an investigative journalist and author specialising in political affairs. He is Vice-president of Artículo 35 and founder of the investigative online media outlet Vox Populi.

## ■ HONDURAS

### HARASSED

#### Dina MEZA

Journalist, human rights defender, and founding member of PEN Honduras Dina Meza faced continuing harassment during the year. Meza's security situation remained a serious concern. She regularly finds herself under surveillance – her home, office and movements are surveilled and she reports being followed by unknown persons. (For details of previous harassment see Case List [2017](#), [2020](#), [2022](#).)

Dina Meza and other activists highlighted a renewed smear campaign and threats during 2023, possibly linked to their work as human rights defenders. According to public reports, on 18 July, this smear campaign against Meza and well-known human rights defenders began to circulate on social media, linking them to former President Juan Orlando Hernández and the American Embassy in a diagram called 'Human Rights Defenders Corruption Networks Volume 1' with the names of the people mentioned, accompanied by derogatory nicknames and images.

PEN International has documented that Association for Democracy and Human Rights in Honduras (ASOPODEHU), of which Meza is Director, and PEN Honduras have been subject to harassment and persecution by the Directorate of Regulation, Registration and Monitoring of Civil Associations of the Ministry of Interior and Justice, who have systematically and repeatedly requested ASOPODEHU's financial statements for 2020 to 2022, without providing any explanation of the reason for the request, which the organisation has nevertheless provided, placing a heavy administrative burden on the organisation.

Meza, born in 1963, began her work as a human rights defender in 1989 and has worked for various human rights organisations and digital media outlets. In 2014, she was elected President of PEN Honduras. She also runs and writes for the website [pasosdeanimalgrande.com](http://pasosdeanimalgrande.com) which reports on freedom of expression and human rights in Honduras. She is the author of the Honduras chapter in *Vamos a portarnos mal: protesta social y libertad de expresion en América Latina (Let's misbehave: social protest and freedom of expression in Latin America)* (2011) and *Kidnapped: Censorship in Honduras* (2015). She is the recipient of the 2007 Amnesty International UK's Special Award for Human Rights Journalism Under Threat; the 2014 Oxfam Novib/PEN International Freedom of Expression Award; the 2016 Premio Letras in Periodismo y Derechos Humanos at Festival de Cine y Derechos Humanos de Barcelona; and the 2020 Sir Henry Brooke Award for Human Rights Defenders. She is an Honorary Member of PEN Català.

### SENTENCED

#### Cesario Alejandro Félix PADILLA FIGUEROA

Journalist, author, editor, student leader, and board member of PEN Honduras Cesario Alejandro Félix Padilla Figueroa, born on November 1992, is refusing to pay a fine, imposed in 2020 for 'illegal detention of public property', as he denies committing the alleged crime. As a result, he is facing a sentence of three years in prison, forced labour while in prison, suspension of his rights and payment for alleged damages that the authorities of the National Autonomous University of Honduras (UNAH) claim. He was tried on charges brought in July 2015 for his part in student protests at the Honduran National Autonomous University (UNAH) in the capital Tegucigalpa. PEN International believes that Padilla Figueroa was targeted for exercising his rights to freedom of expression and assembly.

According to reports, the charge brought against Padilla Figueroa is alleged 'usurpation' of UNAH property (to read the full report of the trial, charges and background, see Case Lists [2022](#), [2020](#), [2019](#), [2018](#), [2017](#) and [2016](#)).

In September 2023, Padilla Figueroa received a fellowship from UNESCO to develop work on community radio with Latin American journalists. However, he was not granted permission to leave the country to travel to Mexico for the training.

During 2023, amnesty was requested as a legal remedy to end the legal harassment against Padilla. PEN International held meetings with Honduran authorities on Padilla Figueroa's behalf, at which the abuse by the authorities was discussed and a request was made for the charges to be dropped. However, in December he was denied amnesty because of the type of crime described in the sentence and continues to face the possibility of a prison sentence.

Cesario Padilla Figueroa is the editor of the book *Carcelaria* and author of *Un pasito adelante, aproximación histórica del Comité Coordinador de Organizaciones Populares de Honduras (CCOP) (A little step forward, historical approach of the Coordinating Committee of Popular Organisations of Honduras (CCOP))*.

## ■ MEXICO

### HARASSED

#### Ricardo RAVELO GALÓ

On 2 December 2023, the launch of the book *El amo de Jalisco* by Mexican writer and journalist Ricardo Ravelo at the Guadalajara Book Fair was cancelled two days before the event without explanation. The publisher was also notified that the book could no longer be sold in bookshops. Following this cancellation, another book launch event for the same book, scheduled for 8 December in Puerto Vallarta, a city located in Jalisco, was also cancelled.

Previously, in 2021, Ravelo requested protection measures from the Mexican Federal Government's Mechanism for the Protection of Journalists and Human Rights Defenders (Mecanismo de Protección a Periodistas y Defensores de Derechos Humanos), fearing for his safety.

*El amo de Jalisco* is the most recent book by Ravelo. The book presents an investigation about Enrique Alfaro Ramírez, Governor

of the Mexican state of Jalisco, where the launch event was to take place.

Various investigations and books by Ricardo Ravelo have led to harassment by local authorities and threats to his safety. On 27 December 2021, the Governor announced during a press conference that he had filed lawsuits for moral damages against journalist Ravelo Galó.

Ricardo Ravelo, born 27 December 1966 in Veracruz state, is an investigative journalist and author of over a dozen books, among them: *Los narcoabogados*, *Crónicas de sangre*, *Herencia maldita*, and *Los narcopolíticos*.

#### Denise DRESSER GUERRA

In April 2023, political scientist, journalist and author Denise Dresser Guerra was victim of a smear campaign, threats, acts of harassment and digital violence on Dresser's personal social media. Since 4 April, there has been a marked increase in systematic attacks against the Mexican columnist, a critical voice of political power in Mexico.

These attacks began after she published a message regarding President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's latest statements about his children, who have been named in investigations by Latinus, Mexicanos Contra la Corrupción y la Impunidad, and *Reforma* for alleged conflicts of interest and influence peddling.

Following these publications, the journalist received, for almost four consecutive days, intimidating and threatening messages with misogynistic and sexist connotations; in addition, personal information about her family was made public, including unauthorised images of her children.

Denise Dresser, born on 22 January 1963 in Mexico City, is a Mexican political analyst, columnist and academic. Dresser is the author of numerous books including *¿Qué sigue? 20 lecciones para para ser ciudadano en un país en riesgo (What's next? 20 lessons for citizenship in a country at risk)*; *El país de uno (Own country)*; *Neopopulist Solutions to Neoliberal Problems: Mexico's National Solidarity Program*. She has published articles in the *Journal of Democracy*, *Current History*, *Harvard International Journal*



of *Press/Politics* and *Foreign Policy*. She writes a political column for the Mexican newspaper *Reforma* and the news weekly *Proceso* and was the host of the political talk shows *Entreversiones* and *El País de Uno* on Mexican television. She was a contributing writer at the *Los Angeles Times*, among other media.

## NICARAGUA

### DETAINED

#### Freddy QUEZADA

Writer, philosopher and academic Freddy Quezada was held at the end of the year without access to legal representation or being informed of the reasons for his detention.

According to public reports and information received by PEN International, Quezada was arrested at his home on 29 November 2023. The police did not inform the family of his whereabouts until five days after he was arrested.

On 5 December 2023, Quezada was transferred to the Jorge Navarro Penitentiary System in Tipitapa, known as 'La Modelo'. The family members have not had access to any official information as to Quezada's legal status.

Quezada was arrested hours after writing social media posts (under the pseudonym 'Uliteo') that were critical of the Nicaraguan government. In one of his last articles before he was detained, Quezada referred to the government as a 'dictatorship' and criticised its public narrative around its detention of a prominent bishop who is a vocal critic of the government. On 27 December 2023, the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights granted Freddy Quezada precautionary measures.

In 2018, Quezada is said to have been dismissed from his academic role at the National Autonomous University of Nicaragua (UNAN) due to his outspoken criticism of the Nicaraguan government's violent repression of student protests.

Freddy Quezada is a sociologist, academic and guide for several generations of university

students. Author of books such as *El Pensamiento Contemporáneo* and *Decolonialidad y Emancipación Como Jazz Epistémico*.

### HARASSED

#### Gioconda BELLÍ

On 12 September 2023, the Nicaraguan Police and members of the Attorney General's Office (PGR) confiscated the home of writer and PEN Nicaragua President Gioconda Belli. She was driven into exile in 2022, under threat of imprisonment and persecution.

In February 2023, she was declared a 'traitor and a fugitive', and was stripped of her nationality, assets, pension and all rights as a Nicaraguan citizen, after conviction of 'spreading false news' and 'conspiracy to undermine national integrity'. (See details of previous threats in Case list 2020). In addition to Belli's property, the home of her son **Camilo Castro Belli**, a journalist and documentary filmmaker, has also been confiscated. Castro lives in exile in Costa Rica.

Gioconda Belli is an award-winning Nicaraguan poet, writer, and activist. She is heralded as revolutionising Nicaraguan poetry with her 1972 collection *On the Grass* for having openly addressed the female body and female sexuality. Belli was the 2019 recipient of the Oxfam Novib/ PEN International Freedom of Expression Award and German PEN's Hermann Kesten prize. In 2020, she was the recipient of the Jaime Gil de Biedma Poetry Prize in Spain; in 2023, she received the notable Reina Sofía de Poesía Iberoamericana Prize.

#### Sergio RAMÍREZ MERCADO

On 15 February 2023, Sergio Ramírez Mercado was declared a 'traitor' and stripped of his nationality, assets, pension and all rights as a Nicaraguan citizen. Sergio Ramírez, together with another 93 people, was declared a fugitive from justice and, in addition to losing their nationality, he will not be able to hold public or elected office 'for life'. Sergio Ramírez was found guilty of 'spreading false news' and 'conspiracy to undermine national integrity'.

Sergio Ramírez (1942), writer, novelist and journalist, was the recipient of the prestigious Cervantes Literature Prize in 2017. His work includes *La Fugitiva (The Fugitive)*; *Castigo Divino (Divine Punishment)*; *Margarita, Está Linda la Mar (Margarita, How Beautiful the Sea)*; *Adiós, muchachos (Goodbye, Fellows)*; *Sombras Nada Más (The Shadows Behind Somoza)*, among others. He was Vice President of Nicaragua during the first government of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) between 1979- 1990. In September 2021, he was formally accused of ‘carrying out acts to incite hatred and violence’, and financing insurgent groups while he was travelling abroad. (See details in Case List [2021](#)).

## BANISHED

### Gloria Maria CARRIÓN CRUZ

Gloria Maria Carrión Cruz remained in exile in Costa Rica at the end of the year, after Nicaraguan immigration authorities prevented her from entering the country on 10 April 2023, when she was returning to Nicaragua after an eight-day visit to Costa Rica.

Libros para Niños, a non-profit organisation that Carrión leads and legally represents, was closed and its assets seized by the Nicaraguan State some weeks before, on 15 February 2023. Prior to its closure, the authorities obstructed its operation and refused to receive the documentation required for its proper functioning. Libros para niños published authors now considered enemies by the Nicaraguan government such as Sergio Ramírez, Ernesto Cardenal, and Gioconda Belli. Libros para Niños has also published the biography of Dennis Martínez, a baseball hero, now also considered an enemy of the government.

Gloria Carrión is a Nicaraguan writer, literature promoter and editor of children’s books in Central America. She is the director of the Festival Literario Centroamérica Cuenta, and has written for magazines such as Pórtico 21 and specialist journals such as IFLA (International Association of Library Associations and Institutions).

### Óscar René VARGAS ESCOBAR

On 9 February 2023, writer, sociologist and economist Óscar René Vargas Escobar was released from detention and deported to the USA, along with 221 other political prisoners, including Gabriel López del Carmen, the son of writer Andrea Margarita del Carmen who had been arrested in her place (see Case List [2022](#) for further details).

Arrested in Managua on 22 November 2022, relatives had reported that hooded police officers had detained him while he was visiting his sister, and taken him to a punishment cell in El Chipote.

The prosecutor’s office charged Vargas one day after his arbitrary detention in Managua with the alleged crimes of ‘conspiracy to undermine national integrity’ and ‘propagation of false news through information and communication technologies’.

The police report mentions four specific texts by the writer as the basis for his arrest: 1) ‘*El poder o la muerte*’, published on 12 June 2021; 2) ‘*El reflujo social y la unidad*’ of 15 June 2021; 3) a commentary on a publication by *The Economist* magazine and 4) another commentary entitled ‘Represión y negociación’ of 18 June 2021. Vargas has chronic health problems.

Vargas, aged 78, is a university professor, sociologist, economist, historian and author of at least 36 books. He was an advisor to the national leadership of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) in the 1960s, but became a strong critic of Daniel Ortega’s government, especially after the social rebellion of April 2018. In his last article before his arrest, published on 20 November 2022, he put forward a strategy for the release of all political prisoners.

## PERU

### JUDICIAL HARASSMENT

#### Paola UGAZ

Investigative journalist, editor and writer [Paola Ugaz](#) was facing a new investigation for alleged ‘illicit enrichment’ at the end of the year. An earlier investigation into alleged ‘money laundering’ was finally closed on 3 October 2023, for lack of evidence.

For over a decade, Ugaz has faced a [campaign](#) of harassment, threats and at least five defamation lawsuits, including allegations of crimes, due to her investigations into corruption as well as into physical, psychological and sexual abuse within the Peruvian religious organization Sodalicio de Vida Cristiana, which she has conducted since 2010. Ugaz began to receive complaints and lawsuits following the announcement she was publishing a new book about the group’s financial management. (See Case List [2022](#) for further details of the harassment she has suffered).

Patricia Benavides, Peru’s Attorney General, opened the new investigation against Ugaz in April 2023 by upon receipt of a legal complaint filed by Luciano Revoredo, director of the ultra-conservative website La Abeja, who has repeatedly attacked Ugaz’s work and, on many occasions, has defamed, insulted, and harassed her. The investigators are seeking to scrutinize her phone calls and messages, which risks compromising the confidentiality of her journalistic sources. The investigation has also [revealed](#) that the Sodalitium Christianae Vitae’s lawyer was one of the Attorney General’s de facto advisors. PEN International has seen legal documents confirming that, during the investigation, a witness testified that Sodalitium Christianae Vitae’s lawyer had an interest in the case against Ugaz not being closed.

On 6 December 2023, the Attorney General was provisionally suspended for six months by the National Board of Justice, due to an investigation for influence peddling.

Investigative journalist, editor and writer Paola Ugaz, born in 1974, is the co-author, along

with Pedro Salinas, of the book *Mitad monjes, mitad soldados* (*Half Monks, Half Soldiers*) which uncovered a huge scandal within Sodalicio de Vida Cristiana. A correspondent for the Spanish newspaper ABC, she was one of the recipients of the International Women in Media Awards in 2021.

## UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

### DEATH THREAT

#### Juan Alberto VÁZQUEZ ORTIZ

On 1 May 2023, New York-based Mexican writer and journalist Juan Alberto Vásquez Ortiz was riding the New York City underground on his way to the Yonkers community. During the ride, a former US Army Marine struggled with [Jordan Neely](#), a homeless African-American man in poor mental health, and killed him by placing him in an extended chokehold.

Vásquez documented part of the scene with his mobile phone and [wrote](#) a report about the event for *El Diario Nueva York*, later sharing the information and story on his social networks and with other media outlets.

From that moment on, the journalist began to be the victim of media harassment with people even coming to his home to pick him up. The harassment went on for a month. He received death threats and physical violence in messages on social media. PEN International and PEN America provided protection and security measures for the journalist.

Juan Alberto Vásquez (Mexico City, 1965) has been a journalist and writer since 1997. Since 2017, he has lived in New York and has been reporting on notorious criminals in court, writing about them in Mexico, Colombia and the United States. Author of *Los Padrotes de Tlaxcala* (2023), *NXIVM. La secta que sedujo al poder en México* (2020).

## BOOKS BANNED

Book bans in the United States of America have been steadily increasing, mainly in public schools during 2023. The US chapter of PEN International, PEN America, has documented this major setback for democracy, freedom of expression, and, above all, the freedom to read, through its documentation, research and advocacy project '[Book Bans](#)', seeking to push back against the intolerance, exclusion, and censorship that undergird such bans.

According to the 2022-2023 school year registry, and PEN America's public registry in the fall of 2023, the 10 authors whose books had the highest incidence of banning in 2023, are:

**Laurie Halse ANDERSON:** Books banned: *Shout; Speak; Speak: The Graphic Novel; Twisted; Wintergirls*. **Eleana K. ARNOLD:** Books banned: *Damsel; Infamous; Red Hood; What Girls Are Made Of*. **Margaret ATWOOD:** Books banned: *Oryx and Crake; The Handmaid's Tale; The Handmaid's Tale: The Graphic Novel; The Testaments; The Year of the Flood*. **John GREEN:** Books banned: *Looking for Alaska*. **Ellen HOOKINS:** Books banned: *Burned (EH); Closer to Nowhere; Collateral; Crank; Fallout; Flirtin' with the Monster: Your Favorite Authors on Ellen Hopkins' Crank and Glass; Glass; Identical; Impulse; Love Lies*. **Sarah J MAAS:** Books banned: *A Court of Frost and Starlight; A Court of Frost and Starlight; A Court of Mist and Fury; A Court of Silver Flames; A Court of Thorns and Roses; A Court of Wings and Ruin; Crown of Midnight; Empire of Storms; Heir of Fire; House of Earth and Blood; House of Sky and Breath; Kingdom of Ash; Queen of Shadows; The Assassin's Blade; Throne of Glass; Tower of Dawn. Hope; Maybe Not; November 9; Regretting You; Reminders of Him; Without Merit. Beneath; People Kill People; Perfect; Rumble; Smoke; The You I've Never Known; Tilt; Traffick; Triangles; Tricks*. **Yusei MATSUI:** Books banned: *Assassination Classroom Vol 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22*. **Toni MORRISON:** Books Banned: *Beloved; Love; Sula; The Bluest Eye*. **Lauren MYRACLE:** Books banned: *Kissing Kate; l8r; g8r; Rhymes with Witches; Shine; The Infinite Moment of Us; ttfn; tyl; yolo*. **Jodi PICOULT:** Books banned: *Change of Heart: A Novel; Handle with Care; House Rules; Keeping Faith; Leaving Time; Lone Wolf; Mercy; My Sister's Keeper; Nineteen Minutes; Perfect Match; Plain Truth; Salem Falls; Second Glimpse; Sing You Home; Songs of a Humpback Whale; The Pact: A Love Story; The Storyteller; The Tenth Circle; Vanishing Acts*.

In December 2023, a new list of 689 books, from classics to best-sellers, were removed from Orange County (Florida) classrooms for fear they violate new state rules. The following list of authors was taken from the nearly 700 censored books; however, in early 2024, another list of more than 1,500 emerged as part of the titles to be withdrawn. The names listed below are indicative of the worrying direction that censorship is taking in some US states.

Author | Books

**Jack Henry ABBOTT:** *In the Belly of the Beast: Letters from Prison*. **Gilles ABIER:** *The Pool Was Empty*. **Elizabeth ACEVEDO:** *The Poet X; With the Fire on High*. **André ACIMAN:** *Call Me By Your Name*. **Peter ACKERMAN:** *Things You Shouldn't Say Past Midnight: A Comedy in Three Beds*. **Chimamanda NGOZI ADICHIE:** *Half of a Yellow Sun*. **Ama Ata AIDOO:** *Changes: A Love Story*. **Rennie AIRTH:** *River of Darkness*. **Uwem AKPAN:** *Say You're One of Them*. **Becky ALBERTALLI:** *The Upside of Unrequited; Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*. **Sherman ALEXIE:** *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. **Isabel ALLENDE:** *The House of the Spirits; In the Midst of Winter*. **Anita AMIRREZVANI:** *The Blood of Flowers*. **Laurie Halse ANDERSON:** *Wintergirls*. **Jesse ANDREWS:** *The Haters; Me and Earl and the Dying Girl*. **Maya ANGELOU:** *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings; Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas*. **ANONYMOUS:** *Lucy in the Sky*. **Piers ANTHONY:** *And Eternity; On A Pale Horse*. **ARISTOPHANES:** *Four Plays by Aristophanes: The Birds; The Clouds; The Frogs; Lysistrata*. **Jennifer L. ARMENTROUT:** *Storm and Fury; From*

*Blood and Ash.* **Kelley ARMSTRONG:** *City of the Lost: A Rockton Novel.* **David ARNOLD:** *Mosquitoland.* **Elana K. ARNOLD:** *Infamous; Red Hood; Damsel; What Girls Are Made Of.* **Margaret ATWOOD:** *The Year of the Flood; Oryx and Crake; MaddAddam; The Handmaid's Tale; The Handmaid's Tale: The Graphic Novel; The Testaments; Alias Grace; Hag-Seed; William Shakespeare's The Tempest Retold; The Blind Assassin.* **Jean M. AUDEL:** *The Clan of the Cave Bear; The Valley of Horses; The Mammoth Hunters.* **Mary AZARIAN:** *The Tale of John Barleycorn: Or from Barley to Beer* **Derf BACKDERF:** *My Friend Dahmer.* **Leigh BARDUGO:** *Six of Crows.* **Clare BARRON:** *Dance Nation.* **Sean BEAUDOIN:** *Wise Young Fool.* **Saul BELLOW:** *Herzog.* **Aimee BENDER:** *The Color Master.* **Jessica BENDINGER:** *The Seven Rays.* **Stacey Wallace BENEFIEL:** *Glimpse: A YA Paranormal Romance.* **Alan BENNETT:** *The History Boys: A Play.* **Linda BERDOLL:** *Mr. Darcy Takes a Wife: A Deliciously Steamy Historical Romance that Starts After the Wedding Night.* **Laurien BERENSON:** *Best in Show.* **William BERNHARDT:** *Dark Eye.* **H.G. BISSINGER:** *Friday Night Lights: A Town, A Team, and a Dream.* **Holly BLACK:** *Geektastic: Stories from the Nerd Herd; Red Glove.* **Francesca Lia BLOCK:** *I Was a Teenage Fairy.* **Deborah BLUM:** *Sex on the Brain: The Biological Differences Between Men and Women.* **Judy BLUME:** *Forever....* **Chris BOHJALIAN:** *Midwives.* **Coe BOOTH:** *Bronxwood.* **T.C. 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Poems and Writing by Teenage Boys*. **James FRANCO**: *Palo Alto: Stories*. **E. R. FRANK**: *Dime*. **Charles FRAZIER**: *Cold Mountain*. **Tana FRENCH**: *The Likeness*. **Neil GAIMAN**: *Anansi Boys*. **Federico GARCÍA LORCA**: *The House of Bernarda Alba*. **Gabriel GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ**: *Chronicle of a Death Foretold; Love in the Time of Cholera*. **Nancy GARDEN**: *Annie on My Mind*. **Julie GARWOOD**: *Killjoy*. **Elizabeth GILBERT**: *Eat, Pray, Love: One Women's Search for Everything Across Italy, India and Indonesia*. **Allen GINSBERG**: *Howl and Other Poems*. **Kathleen GLASGOW**: *Girl in Pieces*. **K.L. Fat GOING**: *Kid Rules the World*. **Myla GOLDBERG**: *Bee Season*. **Arthur GOLDEN**: *Kenang-Kenangan Seorang Geisha (Memoirs of a Geisha); Memoirs of a Geisha*. **Laura GOODE**: *Sister Mischief*. **Robert GOOLRICK**: *A Reliable Wife*. **B. T. GOTTFRED**: *Forever for a Year; The Handsome Girl & Her Beautiful Boy; The Nerdy and the Dirty*. **Eva GRAY**: *Behind the Gates; Run For Cover; With the Enemy; Set Me Free*. **John GREEN**: *Looking for Alaska; An Abundance of Katherines; Paper Towns; Will Grayson, Will Grayson*. **Laci GREEN**: *Sex Plus: Learning, Loving, and Enjoying Your Body*. **Graham GREENE**: *The Quiet American*. **I. W. GREGORIO**: *None of the Above*. **Philipp GREGORY**: *The Other Boleyn Girl; Changeling*. **John GRISHAM**: *A Time to Kill; The Firm*. **Shannon GROGAN**: *From Where I Watch You*. **Sara GRUEN**: *Water for Elephants*. **Erin GRUWELL**: *The Freedom Writers Diary*. **David GUTERSON**: *Snow Falling on Cedars*. **Jane HAMILTON**: *A Map of the World*. **Jenny HAN**: *We'll Always Have Summer*. **Joshua HANAGARNE**: *The World's Strongest Librarian: A Book Lover's Adventures*. **Kristin HANNAH**: *Fly Away*. **Chad HARBACH**: *The Art of Fielding*. **Thomas HARDY**: *Jude the Obscure*. **Joanne HARRIS**: *Chocolat; The Girl with No Shadow (published in UK as The Lollipop Shoes)*. **A. S. A. HARRISON**: *The Silent Wife*. **Kent HARUF**: *Plainsong*. **Gwen HARWOOD**: *The Best 100 Poems of Gwen Harwood*. **Jordan L. 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HOLT**: *Watch Me*. **Colleen HOOVER**: *November 9; Heart Bones; Hopeless; It Ends With Us; It Starts With Us; Layla; Regretting You; Verity; Confess; Ugly Love; Losing Hope; Impulse; Identical; Burned (EH) ; Collateral; Crank; Fallout; Love Lies Beneath; People Kill People; Perfect; Tilt; Tricks*; **Laura HOPPER**: *I Never*. **Kate HORSLEY**: *The Changeling*. **Khaled HOSSEINI**: *The Kite Runner; A Thousand Splendid Suns*. **C. C. HUNTER**: *Taken at Dusk*. **Aldous HUXLEY**: *Brave New World*. **David HWANG**: *Henry M Butterfly*. **Gwyn HYMAN RUBIO**: *Icy Sparks*. **John IRVING**: *A*

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K. REED:** *The Cute Girl Network.* **Kiley REID:** *Such a Fun Age.* **Taylor Jenkins REID:** *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo.* **Louise RENNISON:** *Stop in the Name of Pants!* **John REYNOLDER:** *Stone Fox.* **Jean RHYS** *Wide Sargasso Sea.* **Anne RICE:** *The Vampire Armand; The Witching Hour.* **Keith RICHARDS:** *Life.* **Gabby RIVERA:** *Juliet Takes a Breath.* **Francine RIVERS:** *Redeeming Love; The Atonement Child.* **Mary ROACH:** *Gulp: Adventures on the Alimentary Canal.* **Nora ROBERTS:** *Birthright.* **Elisabeth ROBINSON:** *The True and Outstanding Adventures of the Hunt Sisters.* **Sally ROONEY:** *Normal People.* **L. C. ROSEN:** *Jack of Hearts (and other parts).* **Philip ROTH:** *Portnoy's Complaint.* **J.K. ROWLING:** *The Casual Vacancy.* **Arundhati ROY:** *The God of Small Things.* **Michelle RUIZ KEIL:** *All of Us with Wings.* **Bill RUSSELL:** *Elegies for Angels Punks and Raging Queens.* **Carrie RYAN:** *The Dead-Tossed Waves.* **Pam Muñoz RYAN:** *Esperanza Rising.* **Steven SALVATORE:** *And They Lived...* **Alex SANCHEZ:** *Bait.* **Sheryl SANDBERG:** *Option B: Facing Adversity, Building Resilience, and Finding Joy* **John SANDFORD:** *The Fool's Run.* **Lynsay SANDS:** *Vampire, Interrupted.* **SAPPHIRE:** *Push.* **Julia SCHEERES:** *Blindness; Jesus Land: A Memoir.* **Erica SCHEIDT:** *Lorraine Uses for Boys.* **Bernard SCHLINK:** *The Reader.* **Robyn SCHNEIDER:** *The Beginning of Everything: Everyone Gets a Tragedy.* **Jim SCHUTZE:** *Bully: A True Story of High*



*School Revenge*. **V. E. SCHWAB**: *The Invisible Life of Addie LaRue*. **Katherine SCHWARZENEGGER PRATT**: *The Gift of Forgiveness*. **Elizabeth SCOTT**: *Living Dead Girl*. **Alice SEBOLD**: *Lucky*; *The Lovely Bones*. **David SEDARIS**: *Naked*. **Lisa SEE**: *Peony in Love*. **Shaka SENGHOR**: *Writing My Wrongs: Life, Death, and Reception in an American Prison*. **Peter SHAFFER**: *Equus*. **Sherry SHAHAN**: *Skin and Bones*. **Darren SHAN**: *Demon Apocalypse*. **Roger SHATTUCK**: *Forbidden Knowledge: From Prometheus to Pornography*. **Nic SHEFF**: *Tweak: Growing Up on Methamphetamines*; **Carol SHIELDS**: *The Stone Diaries*. **Anita SHREVE**: *Sea Glass*. **Kouyu SHUREI**: *Alichino*. **Nicky SILVER**: *The Food Chain (Play)*. **Ni-Ni SIMONE**: *If I Was Your Girl*. **Andrew SIMONET**: *Wilder*. **Jen SINCERO**: *The Straight Girl's Guide to Sleeping with Chicks*. **Nihad SIREES**: *The Silence and the Roar*. **Mark SISSON**: *The Primal Blueprint*. **Curtis SITTENFELD**: *Prep*; *You Think It, I'll Say It: Stories*. **Teddy SLATERGUESS**: *Stay In Line*. **Jane SMILEY**: *A Thousand Acres*. **Amber SMITH**: *The Way I Used To Be*. **Betty SMITH**: *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. **Joy in the Morning**. **Kirsten SMITH**: *The Geography of Girlhood*. **Tara SMITH**: *Bray Betwixt*. **Daria SNADOWSKY**: *Anatomy of a Boyfriend*. **Midori SNYDER**: *Sadar's Keep*. **Rachel SNYDER**: *Louise No Visible Bruises: What We Don't Know About Domestic Violence Can Kill Us*. **Fuyumi SORYO**: *MARS*. **Gary SOTO**: *Summer on Wheels: A Road Trip Like No Other*. **Muriel SPARK**: *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. **Beatrice SPARKS**: *It Happened to Nancy: By an Anonymous Teenager, A True Story from Her Diary*. **Nicholas SPARKS**: *At First Sight*. **Nicholas SPARKS**: *Message in a Bottle*; *Nights in Rodanthe*; *The Guardian*; *The Wedding*; *The Rescue*. **Lavyrle SPENCER**: *Small Town Girl*. **Jerry SPINELLI**: *Eggs*. **Danielle STEEL**: *The Gift*. **Danielle STEEL**: *Star (French Edition)*. **John STEINBECK**: *East of Eden*. **Chevy STEVENS**: *Still Missing*. **Jon STEWART**: *Earth (the book)* *A Visitors Guide to the Human Race*. **Tamara STONE**: *Ireland Every Last Word*. **Francisco X. STORK**: *Marcelo in the Real World*. **Bella STUMBO**: *Until the Twelfth of Never: Should Betty Broderick Ever Be Free?*; *Sophie's Choice*. **Josh SUNDQUIST**: *We Should Hang Out Sometime: Embarrassingly, A True Story*. **Amy TAN**: *The Kitchen God's Wife*; *The Valley of Amazement*. **Alan TAYLOR**: *American Colonies: The Settling of North America, Vo1. 1*. **Billy TAYLOR**: *Just Friends*. **Tim THARP**: *The Spectacular Now*. **Angie THOMAS**: *Concrete Rose*. **Lex THOMAS**: *The Loners*. **Jennifer THOMPSON-CANNINO**: *Picking Cotton: Our Memoir of Injustice and Redemption*. **Craig THOMPSON**: *Blankets*. **Meg TILLY**: *First Time*. **Phuc TRAN**: *Sigh, Gone: A Misfit's Memoir of Great Books, Punk Rock, and the Fight to Fit In*. **Adriana TRIGIANI**: *Milk Glass Moon*. **Terry TRUEMAN**: *Stuck in Neutral*. **Janwillem VAN DE WETERING**: *The RattleRat*. **John VARLEY**: *Red Thunder*. **Raquel VASQUEZ GILLILAND**: *Sia Martinez and the Moonlit Beginning of Everything*. **Brian VAUGHAN**: *K. Y: The Last Man*. **Elisabet VELASQUEZ**: *When We Make It: A Nuyorican Novel*. **Abraham VERGHESE**: *The Covenant of Water*. **VIZ MEDIA**: *Shojo Beat*. **Cynthia VOIGT**: *Dacey's Song*. **Cecily VON ZIEGESAR**: *It Had To Be You*; *All I Want is Everything*; *Don't You Forget about Me*; *Tempted*; *You Know You Love Me*. **Kurt VONNEGUT Jr.**: *Slaughterhouse-Five*; *Slaughterhouse-Five: The Graphic Novel*. **Alice WALKER**: *The Color Purple*. **Rebecca WALKER**: *Black, White & Jewish: Autobiography of a Shifting Self*. **Tommy WALLACH**: *We All Looked Up*. **Robert James WALLER**: *The Bridges of Madison County*; *A Thousand Country Roads: An Epilogue to The Bridges of Madison County*. **Jeannette WALLS**: *The Glass Castle*. **Jen WANG**: *Stargazing*. **Jesmyn WARD**: *Salvage the Bones*. **Rachel WARD**: *Numbers*. **Sandi WARD**: *Something Worth Saving*. **Charles WEBB**: *The Graduate*. **Michael WEINREB**: *Girl Boy Etc*. **Lauren WEISBERGER**: *Chasing Harry Winston*. **Rebecca WELLS**: *Little Altars Everywhere*. **Laura WHITCOMB**: *A Certain Slant of Light*. **Simon WINCHESTER**: *The Professor and the Madman: A Tale of Murder, Insanity, and the Making of the Oxford English Dictionary*. **Lolly WINSTON**: *Happiness Sold Separately*; **Tom WOLFE**: *A Man in Full*. **Meg WOLITZER**: *The Interestings*. **Jan WOLKERS**: *Turkish Delight*. **Cynthia WRIGHT**: *Brighter than Gold*. **Richard WRIGHT**: *Native Son*. **Lois-Ann YAMANAKA**: *Blu's Hanging*. **Richard YATES**: *Revolutionary Road*. **Jane YOLEN**: *Armageddon Summer*. **Nicola YOON**: *Everything, Everything*; *The Sun Is Also a Star*. **Cathy YTAK**: *Nothing But Your Skin*.

# PEN ACTIONS IN THE AMERICAS

In addition to its advocacy for the writers referred to in this list, PEN International also took action on behalf of journalists and others at risk in the Americas, some in collaboration with other organisations, details of which can be found in the links provided below:

## COLOMBIA

**Luis Gariel PEREIRA:** *journalist killed*

**Action:**

**November 2023:** Action: [DAY OF THE DEAD 2023 - Cause of death: impunity](#)

## CUBA

**Henry CONSTANTÍN:** *journalist released*

**Action:**

**September 2023:** Statement: [PEN welcomes release of Cuban journalist Henry Constantín](#)

## GUATEMALA

**César LEIVA, Gleymer VILLEDA:** *journalists killed*

**Action:**

**December 2023:** Statement: [PEN condemns the increasing violence against the press in Guatemala](#)

## MEXICO

**Carmen ARISTEGUI:** *journalist harassed*

**Action:**

**March 2023:** Statement: [Pegasus Spyware used on Journalists and Citizens](#)

**Jesús GUTIERREZ VERGARA, Nelson MATUS PEÑA, Marco Aurelio RAMÍREZ HERNÁNDEZ, Luis Martín SANCHEZ:** *journalists killed*

**Action:**

**November 2023:** Action: [DAY OF THE DEAD 2023 - Cause of death: impunity](#)

## NICARAGUA

**JAIME ARELLANO, Juan Lorenzo HOLMANN CHAMORRO, Miguel MORA, Miguel MENDOZA:** *journalists released and deported*

**Action:**

**February 2023:** Statement: [Authorities release and deport more than 200 political prisoners, including writers and journalists, in unprecedented move](#)

**Carlos Fernando CHAMORRO:** *journalist stripped of citizenship*

**Action:**

**February 2023:** Statement: [Authorities arbitrarily strip nationality and properties of PEN members, writers, journalists and critics forced into exile](#)

**Víctor TICAY:** *journalist imprisoned*

**Action:**

**April 2023:** Statement: [Authorities must release journalist Víctor Ticay](#)

## PARAGUAY

**Alex ÁLVAREZ:** *journalist killed*

**Action:**

**November 2023:** Action: [DAY OF THE DEAD 2023 - Cause of death: impunity](#)

## HAITI

**Dumesky Kersaint:** *journalist killed*

**Action:**

**April 2023:** Statement: [PEN International and PEN Haiti condemn the murder of journalist Dumesky Kersaint](#)

November 2023: Action: [DAY OF THE DEAD 2023 - Cause of death: impunity](#)

## HONDURAS

**Erick CRUZ, Oscar PEÑA:** *journalists harassed*

**Action:**

**May 2023:** Joint statement: [Democratic crisis puts freedom of expression and right to defend human rights under siege](#)

## USA

**Dylan Colby LYONS:** *journalist killed*

**Action:**

**November 2023:** Action: [DAY OF THE DEAD 2023 - Cause of death: impunity](#)

# ASIA/PACIFIC REGIONAL OVERVIEW 2023/2024

ROSS HOLDER, HEAD OF  
ASIA/PACIFIC REGION

In 2023, the freedom of expression environment has become increasingly dire, with further declines in two of the world's most populous countries – India and the People's Republic of China (China) – impacting the lives of billions. As in other regions, the long shadow of the war in Israel/Gaza reached Asia/Pacific, with authorities in **Malaysia** warning Meta and TikTok for allegedly blocking pro-Palestinian content on their platforms, while in **India** authorities have prohibited Pro-Palestine protests in the Muslim-majority region of Jammu-Kashmir.

## WRITERS IN PRISON

In countries across the region, writers continue to endure both long-term prison sentences for exercising their right to freedom of expression, with limited possibility of early release as well as shorter periods of arbitrary detention.

Across **China**, many writers, bloggers, journalists, and others are currently serving long-term prison sentences imposed in retaliation for their critical expression. Included among those detained are 11 members of the Independent Chinese PEN Centre (ICPC), including writer and veteran activist **Qin Yongmin** who in 2023 spent his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday in prison serving a 13-year sentence. By the time of his release in 2028, he will have spent the majority of his adult life behind bars. Among the most severe cases of repression are the imprisonment of Uyghur academics, with examples including **Rahile Dawut** and **Ilham Tohti**, both of whom are serving life sentences with appeals rejected. These grossly unjust sentences are illustrative of the PRC government's contempt towards independent voices and those who champion the country's rich cultural diversity at a time when the state is embarking on a campaign of cultural repression.

In **Myanmar**, those who express dissent towards the military junta are frequently subjected to long-term prison sentences. This includes imprisoned writer, activist and PEN Myanmar member **Wai Moe Naing**, who has had his prison sentence increased to a combined total of 54 years in prison in retaliation for his peaceful expression in opposition to junta rule.

In **Vietnam**, writers and online commentators continue to be subjected to long-term prison sentences for their peaceful expression, such as blogger **Nguyen Lan Thang**, sentenced to six years in prison on a charge of 'anti-state propaganda' on 12 April 2023. Included among those serving long-term sentences is writer, journalist and activist **Pham Doan Trang**, who is currently serving a nine-year prison sentence.

In **Afghanistan**, as the Taliban authorities seek to normalise relations with the outside world, they have demonstrated an increasing willingness to impose prolonged periods of arbitrary detention on writers, poets, and others whose expression challenges the Taliban's repressive policies. Recent examples include

the detention of educator and advocate for girls' education, **Matiullah Wesa**, who was arbitrarily detained for 215 days before he was released. PEN Afghanistan members **Zholia Parsi** and **Haseeb Ahrari** were also arbitrarily detained for several weeks before they were later released.

In **Thailand**, **Arnon Nampha** was sentenced to four years in prison after he was found guilty of violating the country's deeply problematic lèse-majesté (royal defamation) law and sentenced to four years in prison. Nampha faces over a dozen further lèse-majesté charges, each resulting in a potential 15-year sentence if convicted.

## FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AS A NATIONAL SECURITY THREAT

Throughout the region, national security legislation continues to be misused by governments to stifle dissent and silence critical voices.

In **India**, authorities continue to use the country's notorious national security legislation, called the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, or UAPA, to imprison government critics. The UAPA provides authorities with sweeping powers to detain individuals without evidence and with strict requirements for bail resulting in many being imprisoned for years without trial. Among those currently detained is linguist and activist **Hany Babu**, who has been unjustly detained without trial since 28 July 2020 despite several attempts to secure regular bail. In October 2023, Delhi police lodged a case against independent news outlet, NewsClick, under the UAPA, resulting in the detention of its founder, writer and journalist **Prabir Purkayastha**. Others targeted under the UAPA who have since been released on bail, including poet **Varavara Rao**, continue to face strict conditions limiting their movement and ability to participate in public life.

In **China**, national security legislation is routinely used by the authorities to detain dissidents without regard to due process norms established elsewhere in China's legal

system. Included among those detained on national security charges are poets and ICPC members, **Gui Minhai** and **Zhang Guiqi**. Recent amendments to the Counter-Espionage law provide authorities with broad discretionary powers to identify and investigate individuals for a wide range of activities. Included in the amendments are measures banning the transfer of any information ‘related to national security and national interests’, which would grant authorities the power to arbitrarily criminalize the sharing of information overseas. Included among those detained under espionage charges is writer and journalist **Dong Yuyu**, who was arrested while having lunch with a Japanese diplomat and now faces a potential life sentence after being charged with espionage.

In **Hong Kong**, the National Security Law (NSL) continues to have a devastating on the right to freedom of expression throughout the territory. Included among those facing NSL charges is writer, media publisher and activist, **Jimmy Lai**, whose trial commenced on 18 December 2023 and faces a potential life sentence if convicted. The chilling effect caused by the NSL has extended to educational and cultural spheres, including reports in April 2023 that a review of Hong Kong’s public libraries has been conducted to identify and remove ‘library books which are manifestly contrary to the interests of national security’. In addition to the NSL, the Hong Kong authorities have also increasingly resorted to the use of colonial-era sedition charges to silence critical expression, including charges against several Hong Kong booksellers for publishing and distributing a book about the Hong Kong protests.

In **Tibet**, writers, poets and others continue to languish in prison on trumped-up national security charges. They include writer and activist **Go Sherab Gyatso (aka Gosher)**, who is currently serving a 10-year prison sentence imposed following a secret trial after he was formally arrested on suspicion of ‘inciting separatism’. Language rights advocate **Tashi Wangchuk**, who was released in 2021 after being sentenced to over five years’ imprisonment on national security charges, was reportedly assaulted in his hotel room by unknown individuals in August 2023 while campaigning for Tibetan language rights.

## JUDICIAL HARASSMENT

Legal systems continue to be abused by authorities who use them to harass and intimidate those who have engaged in critical expression. In **Bangladesh**, journalist and activist **Rozina Islam** continues to face a probe against her in relation to her investigative journalism into corruption in the health ministry, despite the police calling for the case against her to be dropped. Photojournalist and activist **Shahidul Alam** also continues to face a probe for violating legislation that was repealed in 2018. In the **Philippines**, writer and journalist **Maria Ressa** also continues to face two active cases in what has been an ongoing state-sponsored campaign of judicial harassment against her.

In **India**, writer, journalist and activist **Aakar Patel** has been subjected to a campaign of intimidation since 2022 in connection to his writing and advocacy that have resulted in ongoing restrictions on his ability to freely travel abroad. Writer and activist **Teesta Setalvad** has continued to be harassed following her release on regular bail on 19 July 2023. On 3 October, Setalvad’s home was searched, and her phones seized at the same time that a mass raid was carried out against staff and others associated with NewsClick. Among those targeted is writer and journalist **Paranjoy Guha Thakurta**, who was questioned by Delhi police for over eight hours after his home was also searched.

‘NATIONAL SECURITY LEGISLATION CONTINUES TO BE MISUSED BY GOVERNMENTS TO STIFLE DISSENT AND SILENCE CRITICAL VOICES.’

## DIGITAL REPRESSION

In **China**, the government continues to restrict the right to freedom of expression through the introduction of new laws and policies, resulting in a further deterioration of the space to exercise this right across the country. This includes the implementation of new legislation governing online expression that bolsters the government's powers to investigate and monitor internet users. In 2023, the Central Cybersecurity and Information Commission proposed new regulations that would further tighten online content published by non-state social media accounts, including by requiring platforms to prohibit the publication and dissemination of 'negative information', which will result in further restrictions on freedom of expression, particularly if it involves criticism of the government.

In **India**, the mass raid in October that targeted journalists, writers and others who have contributed to online media platform, NewsClick, signalled an alarming escalation in the government's ongoing efforts to silence critical voices online. In August 2023, the Indian government blocked access to the website and social media accounts belonging to independent online media outlet The Kashmir Walla, resulting in its de-facto dormancy. The targeting of independent media coincides with government efforts to expand its controls over online content through draconian amendments to the already problematic IT Rules of 2021. The amendments include establishing a government-run 'fact-checking unit' to identify content concerning the government and seek its removal if deemed to be 'fake or false or misleading'. At a time when the space for free expression online is increasingly threatened, these overbroad censorship powers threaten to severely undermine the ability of writers, journalists and others to speak freely online.

In **Cambodia**, the government embarked on a campaign of censorship in the run-up to the country's 2023 elections. Examples include the forced closure of Voice of Democracy (VOD) in February 2023, one of Cambodia's last remaining independent media outlets, after it published a report concerning then Prime Minister Hun Sen's eldest son. In July 2023, the same month that the election took place, the Cambodian government issued an order to internet service

providers to block access to three high-profile independent media outlets. Just three days after then Prime Minister Hun Sen secured an eighth term in office, he announced that his eldest son would act as his successor.

In **Myanmar**, the military junta continues to impose internet shutdowns to limit communication and the transfer of information in areas already heavily impacted by conflict. Throughout 2023, the junta imposed several shutdowns in territories including Sagaing region, Kayah State and Chin State.

In **Bangladesh**, the government's decision to repeal its notorious Digital Security Act (DSA) is welcome news. However, its replacement, the Cyber Security Act, retains several of its problematic provisions that have been used to stifle freedom of expression and privacy. In May 2023, the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights noted his deep concern over the use of the DSA to 'suppress independent thought and voices including on the internet' following his official visit to the country.

## GOOD NEWS

Over 2023, several writers, poets and others have been released, including PEN **Afghanistan** members **Zholia Parsi** and **Haseeb Ahrari** who were released by the Taliban following several weeks of arbitrary detention. The Taliban also released **Matiullah Wesa** after 215 days detention. In **India**, writer and activist **Teesta Setalvad** was granted regular bail by the Supreme Court on 19 July 2023, albeit subject to ongoing bail conditions on her movement.

In **Sri Lanka**, poet **Ahnaf Jazeem** was acquitted on 12 December 2023 of charges filed against him under Sri Lanka's draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act, however he remains subject to restrictions under a government blacklist.

In **Myanmar**, we welcomed the news of the release of writers **Htin Lin Oo** and **Than Myint Aung** as part of a mass prisoner amnesty in January 2023, and the release of journalist **Kyaw Min Swe** on 7 July 2023.

# EMBLEMATIC CASES



## CHINA – HONG KONG

### JIMMY LAI

WRITER, ACTIVIST AND  
MEDIA PUBLISHER FACING  
POTENTIAL LIFE SENTENCE

A veteran human rights and pro-democracy activist, writer, and owner of the now-defunct *Apple Daily* newspaper, Jimmy Lai (see China section below) has been held arbitrarily since December 2020 following his initial detention in August 2020. His trial under Hong Kong's National Security Law (NSL) on multiple charges related to his journalism and peaceful activism commenced on 18 December 2023 and he faces a potential life sentence if convicted. Lai's ongoing detention is emblematic of the NSL's devastating impact on freedom of expression and press freedom across Hong Kong and is illustrative of the authorities' determination to use the legal system to silence dissenting voices.

Jimmy Lai. Photo credit: Pakkin Leung @Rice Post



## VIETNAM

### PHAM DOAN TRANG

AUTHOR AND JOURNALIST  
IMPRISONED FOR HER  
WRITING AND ACTIVISM

Author, journalist, and pro-democracy activist, Pham Doan Trang (see Vietnam section below) is currently serving a nine-year prison sentence after she was convicted of anti-state propaganda in December 2021. She was arrested at her home in October 2020 and was held incommunicado for over a year before her trial commenced. Trang's imprisonment is emblematic of the Vietnamese government's willingness to impose long-term prison sentences against writers, journalists and bloggers who dare criticise the authorities.

Pham Doan Trang. Photo credit: The 88 Project

# CASE LIST 2023/2024

## ■ BANGLADESH

### JUDICIAL HARASSMENT

#### Shahidul ALAM

During the year, photojournalist and social activist Shahidul Alam continued to face investigation into allegations of ‘giving false information’, ‘hurting the image of the nation’, and ‘causing deterioration of law and order’ by ‘making provocative comments’ from his Facebook ID under Section 57 of Bangladesh’s Information Communications Technology Act (ICT) 2006.

Alam was picked up by men in plainclothes on 5 August 2018, who raided his home just hours after his [interview with Aljazeera](#) where he recounted his experience documenting street protests on road safety. On 6 August 2018, Alam was brought before a court in Dhaka where he first learned of the accusations against him. Section 57 of the ICT Act was subsequently repealed in October 2018 by the Digital Security Act 2018, raising questions over the legality of continuing the investigations against him. Alam was granted bail in November 2018.

In March 2019, Alam challenged the legality of the continued investigations through a judicial review in the High Court of Bangladesh. The High Court stayed (paused) the investigations, asking the government to explain the legality of continuing the investigations. The government sought permission to appeal before the Appellate Division (highest court of appeal in Bangladesh) which the Court turned down, directing a High Court Bench to hear the matter. In [December 2021](#), a High Court Bench passed a judgment lifting the bar on the investigations, stating judicial review was not the appropriate forum to decide this matter. The Appellate Division dismissed his petition for permission to appeal against this judgment in November 2022, clearing the way for the authorities to continue the probe against him. As of the end of 2023, the investigation against Alam remained open; however, the police have yet to submit their report.

Shahidul Alam, born in 1955, is the founder and managing director of the Drik Picture Library and the founder of the Pathshala South Asian Media Academy, a photography school in Dhaka that has trained hundreds of photographers. Alam’s books include *Nature’s Fury* (2007), *Portraits of Commitment* (2009), *My Journey as Witness* (2011) and *The Tide Will Turn* (2019). In 2014, he was awarded the [Shilpakala Padak](#) by the President of Bangladesh for his significant contribution to Bangladeshi culture in the field of photography. In 2018, he received the prestigious, US-based [Lucie Award](#) in acknowledgement of his exceptional contribution to photography and society as well as the London-based Frontline Club’s Tribute Award and was named, among others, as *TIME Magazine’s* Person of the Year. In 2020, the Committee to Protect Journalists awarded Alam its [International Press Freedom Award](#).

## ■ CHINA

### IMPRISONED

#### Rahile DAWUT

A renowned anthropologist and leading expert on the study of Uyghur folklore. In late 2017, Rahile Dawut disappeared shortly after she had made plans to travel from Xinjiang to Beijing for an academic conference. Rahile Dawut was then held in secret by the PRC government without any confirmation of her detention for over five years, despite international media attention and a campaign led by her daughter [calling for her release](#). In September 2023, reports emerged suggesting that Rahile Dawut is currently [serving a life sentence](#) on charges of endangering state security. The report also confirmed that her appeal against the conviction was rejected by the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region High People’s Court.

Rahile Dawut, born on 20 May 1966, is an associate professor at Xinjiang University and founder of the university’s research centre on minority folklore. She is recognised around the world for her peerless contributions



to the study and cataloguing of Uyghur cultural heritage, including through her book *Uyghur Shrines (Uyghur Mazarliri)* published in Uyghur in 2001. Her work was also recognised and supported by the PRC government. In 2016, just a year before she was initially detained, Rahile Dawut received a research grant from the Ministry of Culture, reportedly the largest ever given to a [Uyghur research project](#). On 11 October 2023, Rahile Dawut was named as recipient of English PEN's Writer of Courage award.

## Ilham TOHTI

A writer, academic and public intellectual, Ilham Tohti was detained on [15 January 2014](#) by the police following a raid on his home in Beijing. During his detention, he was repeatedly denied access to his family or legal representatives. Despite the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention finding his detention to be arbitrary in [March 2014](#), Ilham Tohti was convicted of separatism and sentenced to life imprisonment following a two-day trial in September 2014.

[Ilham Tohti](#), born on 25 October 1969, is an academic committed to the promoting inter-ethnic dialogue and advocating for the rights of Uyghurs and other minorities in China. An economics professor at Beijing's Minzu University, Ilham Tohti dedicated much of his academic work to the study of the role that state policy played in the systematic persecution of the Uyghur and other minority groups in China. Included in his writings, some of which have been collected in his book *We Uyghurs Have No Say*, are nuanced discussions of the [state of relations](#) between ethnic groups in Xinjiang and the role that ethnic policy played in exacerbating long-standing social and economic issues experienced by Uyghurs.

In 2006, he founded Uyghur Online, a bilingual website designed to foster mutual understanding by reporting on human rights issues and calling for fair treatment of China's minority populations. Despite repeated attempts by authorities to close down the website, it emerged as an important platform for inter-ethnic dialogue through its discussion forums before it was forced to close in the run up to Ilham Tohti's arrest. In 2020, the website was [partially restored](#) by the Ilham Tohti Institute.

## Jimmy LAI

A writer, publisher and activist with UK citizenship, Jimmy Lai has been imprisoned since December 2020 following his initial brief detention in [August 2020](#) on multiple charges for his journalism and pro-democracy activism. Jimmy Lai has already received four convictions of unauthorised assembly, and on [10 December 2022](#) Lai was sentenced to a total of five years and nine months' imprisonment for violating the terms of a commercial lease.

On 18 December 2023, a new trial commenced on two charges under the NSL of 'conspiracy to collude with foreign forces', with the prosecution alleging that these 'crimes' were committed through his writings published by *Apple Daily* and by posts on his Twitter social media account. In addition to the NSL charges, Lai also faces a separate count of 'conspiracy to produce seditious publications' under Hong Kong's [colonial-era sedition law](#), with the prosecution [citing 161 editions](#) of *Apple Daily* from April 2019 until its closure as 'examples of seditious publications[...] with a view to polluting the minds of the impressionable ones.' Jimmy Lai has pleaded not guilty to all three charges.

Jimmy Lai, born on 8 December 1947, is a veteran human rights and pro-democracy activist and owner of the now-defunct *Apple Daily* newspaper, which was once regarded as Hong Kong's most prolific pro-democracy news outlet before it was forced to close on [24 June 2021](#). Lai is also the author of over 20 books ranging from autobiographies to essays on entrepreneurship and his love of food.

## Go Sherab Gyatso (known as Gosher)

A prominent Tibetan writer, educator and public intellectual, Gosher is serving a [10-year prison sentence](#) reportedly imposed following a secret trial held in December 2021. He was detained by PRC security services on 26 October 2020, in the Sichuan province's city of Chengdu on [suspicion of inciting secession](#). He was subsequently transferred to the Tibetan Autonomous Region where he was formally charged on [3 February 2021](#).

There are ongoing concerns over Gosher's health and access to adequate medical care, following

reports that he was detained while seeking medical treatment for a chronic lung condition. On 15 November 2023, PEN International called for his release case as part of its annual Day of the Imprisoned Writer Campaign.

Gosher, born on 9 September 1976, is the author of over 10 books, including Wake Up (2007), General Knowledge & the Path (2011) and Insights of a Thinker (2013). Much of his writing centres on Tibetan Buddhism, language, and culture. An outspoken intellectual and advocate for Tibetan monastic education, this is the fourth time that the PRC authorities have imprisoned Gosher, who was previously detained in 1998, 2008 and 2011 for his criticism of government restrictions on Tibetan religious and cultural practices.

## GUI Minhai

A poet, author, publisher, bookseller and member of the Independent Chinese PEN Centre (ICPC), Gui Minhai is a Swedish citizen serving a 10-year prison sentence imposed after his conviction of national security charges on 24 February 2020.

Gui is one of five Hong Kong booksellers who were forcibly disappeared in late 2015. He was taken from his vacation home in Thailand by the PRC security services and was not seen in public until three months later, when PRC state media aired a forced confession video where Gui Minhai claimed he had voluntarily returned to China to turn himself for a 2003 traffic offence. Briefly released while under continued surveillance in late 2017, Gui was subsequently detained by plain clothes police officers on 20 January 2018 whilst in the company of two Swedish diplomats on his way to Beijing for medical testing, after showing symptoms of a neurodegenerative disease.

Gui Minhai, born on 5 May 1964, was the owner of Mighty Current Media and joint owner of its retail arm, Causeway Bay Books. Mighty Current Media was a Hong Kong-based publishing company best known for its sensationalist books about private lives of China's political leadership. Causeway Bay Books had a similar reputation before its closure following the forced disappearance of its staff and was a popular destination for those seeking to buy books that were banned or otherwise unavailable in China's mainland. A prolific author before his arrest, several poems written by Gui during his initial detention were published in 2020 as

a poetry collection titled, I draw a door on the wall with my finger (2020). In 2019, Gui Minhai was awarded PEN Sweden's Tucholsky Prize.

## ZHANG Guiqi (Pen name, Lu Yang)

A poet, teacher and member of the ICPC, Zhang Guiqi is serving a six-year prison term imposed on 26 July 2022 after a trial behind closed-doors where he was convicted of 'inciting subversion of state power'. He was also sentenced to a further three years' deprivation of his political rights. He has been detained since May 2020, just hours after he posted a video on social media where he called for President Xi Jinping to step down and for an end to the 'CCP's regime'. On 29 March 2023, Zhang was transferred from Liaocheng Detention Centre to Shandong Provincial Prison to serve his sentence.

Zhang Guiqi, born on 4 January 1971, is a poet and former teacher from the Shandong province in eastern China. He has acted as founder, editor and publisher for several online poetry platforms, including the Chinese Contemporary Poetry Platform, which was forced to shut down in 2007 following a directive issued by PRC government censors. In 2008, he became a signatory to the seminal Charter 08 document, which called for greater human rights protections and political reform in China.

Following the detention of one of Charter 08's authors, writer, Nobel Peace Prize Winner and former president of the ICPC, Liu Xiaobo, Zhang joined the PEN Centre as a member. Over the following years, he was an outspoken activist in support of free expression in China, supporting government critics who have been persecuted for their peaceful expression.

## DETAINED

### DONG Yuyu

A writer and journalist, Dong Yuyu is currently detained on charges of 'espionage'. Police initially detained Dong on 21 February 2022 at a hotel in Beijing while he was having lunch with a Japanese diplomat, who was also briefly detained. On 23 March 2023, authorities informed Dong's family that his case had been sent to court for trial on charges of 'espionage';

the hearing was reported to have taken place in late July. As of the end of 2023, the verdict announcement had been postponed twice, and was rescheduled for March 2024.

His family have been denied contact with him for the duration of his detention and he has only been granted limited meetings with his lawyer. For the first six months of his detention, he was held in ‘residential surveillance at a designated location,’ a form of detention which United Nations human rights experts have described as ‘tantamount to enforced disappearance’. If convicted, he faces between 10 years and life imprisonment.

Dong Yuyu, born on 21 April 1962, is a writer and journalist. He is the deputy head of the editorial department for *Guangming Daily*, a state-owned newspaper, where he has worked since 1987. In 1998, he co-edited the book *Political China: Facing an Era of Choices for a New System*, which contained essays contributed by liberal scholars about judicial independence. In addition to his writing for *Guangming Daily*, he had written columns for *The New York Times* Chinese website from 2012-2014, including the essay ‘I want to send my son to study in the United States’ which continues to circulate on Chinese media. Another essay of his, the book review ‘Viewing the Cultural Revolution from the Perspective of National Politics,’ later led to Dong being labelled as ‘anti-socialist’ in 2017.

## YANG Hengjun (legal name, Yang Jun)

A writer, scholar and political commentator with Australian citizenship, Yang Hengjun has been in various forms of detention since January 2019, after he returned to China from the US with his family. Yang was initially held at a secret location for six months in a notorious form of incommunicado detention called ‘Residential Surveillance at a Designated Location’, where he was reportedly tortured. In August 2019, Yang was formally arrested on suspicion of ‘espionage’ without any evidence supporting the charge disclosed to his family or consular representatives.

Throughout his more-than-two years of pre-trial detention, Yang was denied family visits and was granted limited access to legal counsel and consular visits. He was reportedly subjected to over 300 interrogations and his request for the dismissal of testimony he gave under

torture was denied by the PRC government. On 27 May 2021, Yang’s trial was held behind closed doors and reportedly lasted less than seven hours, with his consular representatives denied the ability to attend, a breach of both the Vienna Convention and the Australia-China bilateral consular agreement. By the end of 2023, the court had postponed the verdict announcement on at least 10 separate occasions.

Yang Hengjun, born on 18 April 1965, is a novelist, scholar and political commentator, said to be an ex-employee of the Foreign Affairs Ministry, who is committed to the advancement of human rights and greater freedoms in China. Yang is the author of the *Fatal Weakness* spy trilogy, which was reportedly banned in the PRC but has been shared widely online among Chinese diasporas. He also has a significant following on Chinese social media for his online blog posts, which frequently highlight democratic values, earning him the nickname ‘Democracy Peddler’ among his followers.

## INDIA

### DETAINED

#### Hany BABU

Scholar and anti-caste activist Hany Babu remained detained pending trial since his arrest in July 2020. He is one of 16 writers, scholars and activists, including poet **Varavara Rao** (see below in On trial section), who have been targeted under India’s counterterrorism law, the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA). The charges against the group, referred to as the BK-16, reportedly arose from their alleged association with the banned Communist Party of India (Maoist) organisation and involvement in ‘inciting violence’ at the Elgar Parishad, a public event held on 31 December 2017 by activists advocating for the rights of Dalits and other marginalised communities. One day after the event, riots erupted between Dalits and Hindu nationalists during a celebratory gathering to mark the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of Bhima Koregaon, a significant cultural event among India’s Dalit community. Hany Babu’s wife has flatly rejected Babu’s alleged connection to any such groups or the public event, and his family have issued an appeal asserting his innocence.

On 10 September 2019, Hany Babu's home was raided by police who seized his laptop, mobile phone and books on caste and social formations. The police did not provide hash values for the devices seized during the raid, raising concerns that his devices may have been hacked and subjected to evidence planting by the Pune police. He was subsequently arrested by India's National Investigation Agency (NIA) on 28 July 2020. Since his initial detention, Hany Babu has repeatedly had his application for bail denied, including by the Bombay High Court on 19 September 2022.

Held in grossly inadequate conditions in the notorious Taloja Central Jail, in May 2021, Babu was repeatedly denied adequate medical treatment after contracting a severe eye infection, eventually resulting in his temporary hospitalisation before he was forced to return to prison. On 15 December 2022, Hany Babu was permitted to undergo an operation at a private hospital at his own expense following loss of vision in his left eye.

Hanu Babu, born on 16 August 1966, is an associate professor of language and linguistics at Delhi University and an anti-caste activist and advocate for greater protections of marginalised languages. In addition to his academic work, he has regularly used his writing to highlight the relationship between human rights and linguistic plurality.

**Update:** In early January 2024, Babu lodged an appeal against the Bombay High Court's decision in the Supreme Court.

## Prabir PURKAYASTHA

Author Prabir Purkayastha, founder and editor-in-chief of online media platform NewsClick, was held in judicial custody at the end of the year, while the police continued a probe against him. On 3 October 2023, Delhi Police's Special Cell unit carried out mass raids targeting journalists, writers and others who contributed to the independent online news outlet, NewsClick. Included among the locations targeted was Purkayastha's home. During the raid, Purkayastha's electronic devices were seized by the police who did not provide seizure memos and hash values, a necessary means to mitigate the risk of evidence tampering, which has occurred in previous cases involving critics of the government. Purkayastha and a colleague were formally arrested under the UAPA.

On 11 October, several days after Purkayastha was taken into custody, the government's Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) carried out further raids on both his home and office after registering a case against NewsClick alleging violations of foreign funding regulations under the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA).

The raids were conducted as part of a broader investigation into NewsClick that, according to media reports, is connected to alleged funding it has received from entities associated with an individual purportedly connected with the Chinese Communist Party. However, Newslick staff have rejected these allegations. Purkayastha and NewsClick have previously been subjected to legal harassment, including a raid of his home carried out by officials from the Enforcement Directorate (ED) in February 2021. The raid reportedly lasted 113 hours, during which time he was effectively held under house arrest and prevented from leaving.

Born in 1952, Prabir Purkayastha is a journalist, writer and activist. A former engineer, Purkayastha is author of several books, including *Knowledge as Commons: Towards Inclusive Science and Technology* (2023). He is also the co-author of *Enron Blowout: Corporate Capitalism and Theft of the Global Commons* (2002) and *Uncle Sam's Nuclear Cabin* (2007). In 2009, he founded NewsClick to establish an independent platform for news reporting with a particular focus on progressive movements in India and elsewhere. In 2023, Purkayastha published his memoir titled *Keeping Up the Good Fight: From the Emergency to the Present*, which includes a detailed account of his first detention as a student protestor during India's state of emergency which took place from 1975-77.

## HARASSED

### Aakar PATEL

A writer, journalist and activist, Aakar Patel remained unable to freely leave the country at the end of the year. He had been due to fly from India to the US on 6 April 2022, to speak at several academic conferences on topics including attacks on civil society in India and the use of social media as a tool for social and political change. However, when he attempted to board his flight at Bangalore airport, immigration authorities

prevented his travel, citing a look-out circular (LOC) issued by CBI. Despite a Delhi court order directing the CBI to rescind the LOC against Patel, when he returned to the airport on 7 April 2022, he was again blocked from leaving the country. On 8 April 2022, a judge directed Patel not to leave the country without prior permission.

While the CBI initially refused to publicly comment further on the reason why it initially attempted to restrict Patel's travel outside of India, he was informed by the CBI that the LOC emanates from ongoing litigation against him in relation to his former role as former head and Chair of the Board of Amnesty International India. The human rights organisation was forced to cease its operations in September 2020 following a campaign of intimidation orchestrated by the Indian government that included multiple raids, a smear campaign, and the freezing of Amnesty International India's bank accounts after authorities accused the organisation of committing foreign funding violations under the FCRA. In December 2023, the CBI named Patel in a supplementary chargesheet it filed in connection to its ongoing probe against Amnesty International India.

Aakar Patel, born on 15 December 1969, is an activist, journalist and writer. He published his first novel titled *After Messiah* in September 2023. He has also authored four non-fiction works, including *Price of the Modi Years* (2021), which provides a critical examination of the performance of the Indian government since Narendra Modi's election as prime minister in 2014. In 2020, he published *Our Hindu Rashtra*, which charts the rise of Hindu majoritarian nationalism in India and how it has accelerated under Modi's government. In 2014 he authored *The Anarchist Cookbook*, a guidebook on the role of campaigning in effecting democratic change, and *Why I Write: Essays by Saadat Hasan Manto*, which Patel edited and translated into English.

## Paranjoy GUHA THAKURTA

Journalist, writer, publisher and documentary filmmaker Guha Thakurta's home was visited by police from Delhi Police's Special Cell unit on the morning of 3 October 2023 as part of the mass raids that took place targeting journalists, writers and others who contributed to the independent online news outlet, NewsClick (see case of Prabir

Purkayastha under 'Detained' above). After the police had spent approximately two hours at Guha Thakurta's home without providing a warrant, he was then further questioned for over eight hours at the Special Cell unit's office in Delhi.

The raids were conducted as part of a broader investigation into NewsClick that, according to media reports, is connected to alleged funding it has received from entities associated with an individual purportedly connected with the Chinese Communist Party. However, NewsClick staff rejected these allegations. The NewsClick raids took place in a climate of increasing hostility towards independent journalists and others who have criticised the government. On 18 December 2023, NewsClick's bank accounts were reportedly frozen, further impacting NewsClick's ability to operate and the livelihoods of its staff and contributors who are reliant on their salaries from the news outlet.

Paranjoy Guha Thakurta, born on 5 October 1955, began his career in print journalism in 1977 and has written for numerous news outlets including, *The Wire*, *The Telegraph*, and *India Today*. In addition to his work as a documentary filmmaker and political commentator, he has also co-authored eight books, with examples including *The Real Facebook in India* (2019). He has also published over 30 books authored by others, including the anthology, *India's Long Walk Home* (2020). In 2018, Guha Thakurta joined NewsClick as a consultant and was targeted by Pegasus spyware, revealed by a forensic analysis of his smartphone by organisations including Amnesty International's Security Lab.

## ON TRIAL

### Teesta SETALVAD

A writer and activist, Teesta Setalvad remained on trial at the end of the year. She was detained on 25 June 2022 by Gujarat anti-terror police at her home in Mumbai, the capital of the neighbouring state of Maharashtra, on allegations of 'criminal conspiracy' and 'forging evidence' as part of her efforts to seek government accountability for the 2002 Gujarat Riots, a period of inter-communal violence that led to the deaths of hundreds of Indian citizens. Setalvad has alleged that she was assaulted by two members of the anti-terror police when she requested

permission to speak with her lawyer. Just one day prior to Setalvad's detention, on 24 June the Supreme Court rejected a plea submitted by Setalvad and co-petitioner Zakia Jafri, whose husband, the former parliamentarian Ehsan Jafri, was killed during the riots. The plea sought to reopen an investigation into the potential involvement of local government officials in the violence. On 19 July 2023, Setalvad was granted regular interim bail by the Supreme Court.

In October 2023, members of Delhi Police's Special Cell unit carried out searches of Setalvad's home and seized her phones, without a warrant, at the same time that mass raids that were carried out against journalists and contributors connected with online independent news outlet, NewsClick.

Teesta Setalvad, born on 9 February 1962 is a writer, journalist and one of India's most high-profile human rights defenders. From 1983, Setalvad wrote for a decade for news outlets including *The Daily*, *The Indian Express* and *Business India*. In response to the 1992 demolition of the Babri Masjid by Hindu nationalists, Setalvad left mainstream journalism, to establish a monthly magazine called *Communalism Combat*, which sought to address issues of religious intolerance and the role of certain political parties which stoke inter-religious hostilities within Indian society. Over the following years, Setalvad mounted numerous campaigns for the rights of women and marginalised groups across India. In 2017, Teesta Setalvad published her memoir, entitled *Foot Soldier of the Constitution*, charting her career from journalist to civil rights activist and human rights defender.

## Varavara Rao

Varavara Rao, a writer, poet, and activist, remained on trial at the end of the year. He is one of 16 writers, scholars and activists, including scholar **Hany Babu** (see above under 'Detained'), who have been targeted under India's counterterrorism law, the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA). The charges against the group, referred to as the BK-16, reportedly arose from their alleged involvement in 'inciting violence' at a public event held on 31 December 2017 by activists advocating for the rights of Dalits and other marginalised communities. On 1 January 2018, one day after

the event, riots erupted between Dalits and Hindu nationalists during a celebratory gathering to mark the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of Bhima Koregaon, a significant cultural event among India's Dalit community. Rao has completely rejected all charges, with many viewing his detention as being politically motivated and part of a wider crackdown on activists across India.

Detained in abhorrent conditions for over two years after his arrest on 28 August 2018, Rao fell gravely ill with COVID-19 and other health complications but was repeatedly denied adequate medical treatment in jail until he was granted interim bail on medical grounds in February 2021, releasing him from prison and allowing him to receive much needed medical treatment. On 10 August 2022, the Supreme Court granted regular bail to Rao. However, he remains subject to strict bail conditions, which include restrictions on his movement and ability to make any public statements regarding his case. Following over a year of petitioning multiple courts, in October 2023, Varavara Rao was permitted to travel to Hyderabad for several days in order to receive cataract surgery on his right eye, albeit subject to strict restrictions which included him having to apply to a separate court for a separate operation on his left eye, which subsequently took place in December 2023.

Born on 3 November 1940, Varavara Rao is a poet and activist. An important figure in Telugu literature, Rao is a founder of the Virasam – the Revolutionary Writers Association. The author of 17 poetry collections, from 1966-1992, and 19 prose books, all in Telugu, Rao ran *Srujana* (*Creation*), a monthly journal focussing on modern Telugu literature.

## ■ MALAYSIA

### HARASSED

#### Uthaya SANKAR SB

At the end of the year, writer Uthaya Sankar SB remained under investigation by police since his arrest at home on 11 April 2022 by investigators who also seized his phone, which has not yet been returned to him. The police initially sought to detain Sankar for four

days. On 12 April 2022, the Magistrate's Court dismissed the police application and permitted Sankar's release after a night in detention.

Sankar is being actively investigated under Section 298A of Malaysia's Penal Code for 'causing disharmony, disunity, or feelings of enmity, hatred or ill will, or prejudicing the maintenance of harmony or unity, on grounds of religion', and Section 233 of the Multimedia and Communications Act for 'improper use of network facilities or network service'. The arrest and investigation stem from a complaint made to the police regarding a comment that Sankar posted on his Facebook account on 6 April 2022 that was considered to potentially insult the Prophet Muhammad, which is illegal under Malaysian law. In the post, Sankar referenced a prominent hadith collection within Sunni Islam when mocking Malaysian actor Iman Zulkarnain's comments regarding polygamy.

Sankar flatly rejects any claim that he criticised Islam or the Prophet Muhammad in his social media post, noting that he has a track record of writing numerous books and [articles](#) about Islam and other religions without issue. He is the author of over 20 books and has written extensively on topics including language, culture and religion in Malaysian society.

Born on 10 June 1972, Sankar has published numerous books in Bahasa Malaysia, including several retellings of revered Indian texts, including *Ramayana dan Mahabharata* (2019), *Bhagavad Gita* (2021) and *Katha Sarit Sagara* (2023).

## ■ MYANMAR

### IMPRISONED

#### WAI MOE NAING

A writer, pro-democracy activist and member of PEN Myanmar, Wai Moe Naing is currently serving a combined sentence of 54 years in prison.

Wai Moe Naing was initially arrested [on 15 April 2021](#) by junta forces that reportedly used an unmarked vehicle to ram Wai Moe Naing while he was driving on a moped as part of a protest rally in the Monywa region.

When he tried to escape on foot, a group of armed men disembarked and assaulted him and a female protestor before detaining them both.

On [12 August 2022](#), Wai Moe Naing was sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment on multiple counts of incitement, a charge routinely used against critics of the regime. On [20 October 2022](#), Wai Moe Naing was sentenced to a further four years in jail on an additional count of incitement and for violating [Article 25 of Natural Disaster Management Law](#), a charge that has been cynically used to clamp down on public rallies following the authorities' classification of COVID-19 as a 'natural disaster'. On 5 April 2023, Wai Moe Naing was convicted of several charges, including rioting, robbery and incitement, and sentenced to a further 20 years' imprisonment, resulting in a cumulative total of [34 years in prison](#). On [19 May 2023](#), Wai Moe Naing was convicted of high treason for his role as a protest leader and sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment under [Article 122 of Myanmar's Penal Code](#). Already serving a sentence of 34 years' imprisonment, this latest ruling results in a combined total of [54 years in prison](#).

A further trial for murder is currently pending. The [charge is reported](#) to relate to the killings of two police officers in the Monywa region, but no evidence has emerged that links Wai Moe Naing to the killings. Wai Moe Naing's friends and [family](#) have rejected the accusation of murder on the strongest possible terms.

Wai Moe Naing, born on 26 September 1995, is a youth activist, writer, and member of PEN Myanmar. He began writing as a student, with his first short story being published in Teen Magazine at the age of 13. His writing has since been published in several literary outlets, including *Khit Yanantthit Magazine* and *Pae Tin Tharn Journal*. In the immediate aftermath of the military coup, Wai Moe Naing rose to prominence as a [leader of the anti-coup protest movement](#) and was among those who popularised the idea of banging pots and pans as a non-violent act of resistance to the military junta's rule.

## RELEASED

### HTIN LIN OO

A well-known writer and political activist, Htin Lin Oo was released on 4 January 2023 as part of a prisoner amnesty. He was among the first of those detained as part of the military's initial wave of arrests after seizing power from Myanmar's democratically elected government on 1 February 2021. On 22 February 2022, Htin Lin Oo was sentenced to three years' imprisonment under Section 505A of Myanmar's Penal Code after he reportedly condemned the military coup during a live broadcast posted on his social media account on 1 February 2021.

Htin Lin Oo, born on 21 January 1967, was a frequent contributor to Myanmar's current affairs magazines and has also published several books. He was also a member of the Myanmar Writers Club and an editor of Myanmar's *D. Wave Journal*. He was previously arrested on 4 December 2014 by the then military-led government after giving a speech criticising the use of religion by some political groups to stoke inter-ethnic hostility in Myanmar. Charged with committing blasphemy, he was detained for 16 months and later acquitted and released on 16 April 2016 as part of a prisoner amnesty, following the establishment of Myanmar's first non-military government in over 50 years.

### THAN MYINT AUNG

Writer and philanthropist Than Myint Aung was released as part of a prisoner amnesty on 4 January 2023. She had been taken from her home by junta forces on the morning of 1 February 2021, the first day of the military coup, and was held at an interrogation centre in Yangon for a month before being transferred to Insein Prison. On 27 December 2021, she was sentenced to three years' imprisonment under newly amended provisions to Myanmar's Penal Code, reportedly in connection with speeches she gave at literary events in 2019.

Than Myint Aung, born on 25 September 1953, is a writer and philanthropist who has been celebrated for her charity work in support of disadvantaged children and the vulnerable elderly in Myanmar, resulting in her awarding of the Citizen of Burma award in 2014. She is also an

established writer who used fiction as a medium to highlight many of the social issues that she addresses. She has published several literary works including *Many lives with me*, *His sky*, and *The colours are moving slightly*. In 2002, Than Myint Aung was awarded Myanmar's National Literature Award for a collection of short stories.

## PHILIPPINES

### KILLED – IMPUNITY

#### Ericson ACOSTA

A poet, musician, journalist and activist, on 30 November 2022, Ericson Acosta was reportedly killed during a military operation in Kabankalan, located in the province of Negros Occidental in the Philippines. The Philippine Army claimed that two bodies were found following a clash with armed communist rebels. While the military did not initially identify those deceased, the National Democratic Front Negros (NDF-N), a political umbrella group, identified one of the deceased as Ericson Acosta, claiming that he was their consultant. On 29 July 2023, a forensic pathologist who performed an autopsy on Acosta publicised her findings during a press conference, raising further questions over the military's account of his death following a shootout.

Born in 1972, Acosta was a former entertainment editor for the *Manila Times* and was also heavily involved in theatre, having directed several plays, including *Monumento*, which he also wrote. He was also a dedicated environmental activist who carried out research in support of farmers facing land seizures and other issues affecting their livelihoods. Imprisoned in 2011 for almost two years on trumped-up charges of illegal possession of explosives, Acosta maintained a prison diary called the Jailhouse Blog containing poems, essays and sketches detailing his time in detention. Following his release, Acosta published a collection of his poetry, titled *Mula Tarima Hanggang at iba pang mga Tula at Awit*, which focuses on the struggle for social justice in the Philippines. In 2016, his poetry collection won the Best Book of Poetry in Filipino Award at the 35<sup>th</sup> Philippine National Book Awards.



## JUDICIAL HARASSMENT

### Maria RESSA

A journalist and writer, Maria Ressa has been the target of a campaign of legal harassment and intimidation since her initial arrest on 13 February 2019. As of the end of 2023, there were two active cases remaining, including Ressa and a colleague's appeal against their cyber libel sentence and an additional appeal against the shutdown order issued against Rappler, a news outlet which she co-founded, which was upheld by the Securities and Exchange Commission on 28 June 2022.

In July 2022, the Philippines Court of Appeal upheld a 2020 conviction for cyber libel against her and a colleague. Ressa is currently on post-conviction bail while she appeals a potential six-year sentence.

Included among the other charges brought against her and Rappler were five counts of tax evasion that were filed in 2018. On 18 January 2023, the Philippines' Court of Tax Appeals acquitted Ressa and Rappler of four of the charges. The remaining tax evasion charge was dismissed by a regional court on 12 September 2023, marking a significant victory for freedom of expression and the press in the Philippines.

Maria Ressa, born on 2 October 1963, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2021 in recognition of her efforts to 'safeguard freedom of expression, which is a precondition for democracy and lasting peace'. Since 2018, she has faced numerous bogus charges for carrying out her journalistic work - work which includes ground-breaking journalism that exposes government corruption and the horrific human cost of former president Rodrigo Duterte's 'war on drugs', which has resulted in thousands of extra-judicial killings. She is the author of two books on the rise of terrorism in Southeast Asia: *Seeds of Terror: An Eyewitness Account of Al-Qaeda's Newest Center* (2011) and *From Bin Laden to Facebook: 10 Days of Abduction, 10 Years of Terrorism* (2013). She is the founder and CEO of Rappler, an online news platform.

## ■ SRI LANKA

### RELEASED

### Ahnaf JAZEEM

A poet and former teacher, Ahnaf Jazeem was acquitted due to lack of evidence on 12 December 2023 of charges brought under Sri Lanka's draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act in connection to a Tamil-language poetry anthology called *Navarasam*, which he wrote and published in July 2017, as well as other unsubstantiated claims of exposing his students to 'extremist' content with the intention of turning them into followers of 'extremist ideology'. His arrest on 16 May 2020 and subsequent trial comes against a backdrop of increased marginalisation and discrimination targeting Sri Lanka's Muslim community.

The Sri Lankan authorities reportedly found copies of Navarasam at a school that was being investigated for its alleged links to bombings which took place on Easter Sunday 2019. Despite the fact the book is currently listed in Sri Lanka's national library, having never been banned, the authorities decided to detain Jazeem for its content, among other reasons.

After 18 months of detention without trial, where he was detained in squalid conditions on the basis of a case marred by numerous due process violations, Jazeem was released on bail on 15 December 2021. However, he remained subject to onerous restrictions, which included him being placed on the Sri Lankan government's 'Designated Persons' blacklist on 1 August 2022, preventing him from finding employment or accessing any government services under Article 5.(2)(a) of the United Nations Regulation No. 1 of 2012. Despite his acquittal, Jazeem remains on the Sri Lankan government's 'Designated Persons' blacklist as of the end of 2023.

## THAILAND

### IMPRISONED

#### Arnon NAMPHA

A poet and human rights lawyer, Arnon Nampha was sentenced to four years' imprisonment and a THB20,000 fine (approximately USD555) on 26 September 2023. He was found guilty of violating Article 112 (*lèse-majesté*) of the Thai Criminal Code for a speech he gave at a public rally on 14 October 2020 where he called for reform of the monarchy. This is the first verdict of 14 *lèse-majesté* charges Nampha faces in connection to his peaceful participation in demonstrations that took place throughout 2020, which can each result in a maximum sentence of 15 years' imprisonment, per count.

As an activist lawyer, Nampha has a reputation for taking on challenging cases involving the deprivation of human rights by the Thai government. He was first arrested on 7 August 2020 for his participation in peaceful protests calling for reform of the Thai monarchy and an end to the use of *lèse-majesté* (royal defamation) laws. Nampha continued to participate in public rallies and was frequently detained, ultimately spending 337 days in prison until his release on bail on 28 February 2022. In 2022, the Thai government stepped up its efforts to advance disbarment proceedings against Nampha, claiming that his behaviour would 'incite, intend to cause unrest, distort information and insult on the monarchy'.

The case against Nampha is a significant test of Thailand's legal system and its commitment to the right to freedom of expression, which is explicitly extended to lawyers under Article 23 of the UN Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers.

Arnon Nampha, born on 18 August 1984, has emerged as a leader of Thailand's protest movement, and also uses his poetry to shine a light on the struggles faced by those who have been marginalised within Thailand. A collection of his poetry, entitled *People are Blind and Mute No Longer* (translated) was released to coincide with the fifth anniversary of the 2006 military coup. In 2021, PEN International published English translations of two booklets which contain speeches made by Nampha during the 2020 protests.

## VIETNAM

### IMPRISONED

#### PHAM DOAN TRANG

An author, journalist, and pro-democracy activist, Pham Doan Trang remains in prison after her appeal against her nine-year prison sentence for 'conducting propaganda against the State of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam' was rejected by the Hanoi People's High Court on 25 August 2022.

On 6 October 2020, Trang was detained during a raid on her apartment in Ho Chi Minh city as part of a joint operation by Hanoi Police and officials from the Ministry of Public Security.

While detained, Pham Doan Trang was denied access to legal counsel and medical care for over a year and was finally granted permission to meet with her lawyer on 19 October 2021. Her ill-treatment by the Vietnamese authorities raises serious concerns in relation to her pre-existing health conditions, such as low blood pressure and chronic pain, resulting from her legs being severely injured after she was assaulted by the police in 2015.

On 25 October 2021, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention found her detention to be arbitrary and called for her immediate release. On 14 December 2021, the Vietnamese authorities sentenced Trang to nine years' imprisonment under Article 88 of the 1999 Penal Code. On 1 October 2022, Pham Doan Trang was transferred to a prison located approximately 100km north of Ho Chi Minh City, further hampering visits from her family and legal representatives.

Born on 27 May 1978, Trang's published works include *Chính trị bình dân* (*Popular Politics*), *Cẩm nang nuôi tù* (*Handbook on Supporting Prisoners*), *Phản kháng phi bạo lực* (*Non-Violent Opposition*) and numerous other works. She has also sought to publish her writing online, through her blog and social media, in order to overcome state censorship of traditional media and to raise awareness of human rights issues in Vietnam.

# PEN ACTIONS IN ASIA/PACIFIC

In addition to its advocacy for the writers referred to in this list, PEN International also took action on behalf of journalists and others at risk in the Asia/Pacific region, some in collaboration with other organisations, details of which can be found in the links provided below.

PEN International also continues to work intensively to provide protection to writers at risk across the Asia/ Pacific region. The ongoing crises in Afghanistan and Myanmar continues to demand intensive support for writers, poets, journalists, and scholars facing the threat of persecution within both countries. Working closely with PEN Centres, the PEN Emergency Fund and partner NGOs, PEN International has provided a range of life-saving supports, including emergency relocation, long-term resettlement and the provision of emergency financial aid. Since the Taliban take over, as of 31 December 2023, PEN International has worked closely with several PEN Centres in facilitating the emergency relocation and long-term resettlement of over 120 at-risk Afghans, comprising PEN Afghanistan members and their families. PEN International has also provided bespoke support to numerous at-risk Myanmar writers and journalists.

## AFGHANISTAN

**Various:** *At-risk Afghan journalists and media workers seeking emergency relocation*

**August 2022:** Joint letter [Open Letter To UK Government Calling For Clarity On Scheme For At-Risk Afghan Journalists And Writers](#)

## BANGLADESH

**Rozina Islam:** *Harassment of investigative journalist*

**February 2023:** Joint Statement [PEN International and PEN Centres join CPJ and other rights groups call on Bangladesh to cease harassment of Rozina Islam](#)

**Various:** Government harassment of journalists and others engaged in peaceful expression

**August 2023:** Joint Statement [Bangladesh: PEN International joins rights groups in calling on government to cease harassment of journalist and others engaged in peaceful expression](#)

## CAMBODIA

**Various:** *Forced closure of independent news outlet in run up to national elections*

**February 2023:** Statement [Authorities shut down one of the country's last independent media outlets, undermining free expression](#)

## CHINA

**Various:** *Joint Submission to CEDAW for its Periodic Review of China*

**May 2023:** Joint report [PEN International joins PEN Centres in submission to UN committee on women writers in China](#)

**Huang Qi:** *Wrongful imprisonment of citizen journalist and blogger*

**August 2023:** Statement: [China: Release citizen journalist Huang Qi](#)

## MYANMAR

**Nyi Pu Lay:** *Death of PEN Myanmar President, Nyi Pu Lay*

**June 2023:** Statement [Myanmar: PEN mourns the passing of PEN Myanmar president, Nyi Pu Lay](#)

# EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA REGIONAL OVERVIEW 2023/2024

AURÉLIA DONDO,  
HEAD OF EUROPE AND  
CENTRAL ASIA REGION

2023 was a year riddled by conflict, as the **Russian Federation's** war against **Ukraine** raged on and **Azerbaijan** assumed full control of **Nagorno-Karabakh**. Conflicts in other regions cast a shadow on freedom of expression in Europe, while renewed tension endangered stability in the **Western Balkans**. Writers remained at risk of harassment and imprisonment, with access to their writings restricted across the region. On a positive note, the **European Union** (EU) took much-needed steps to address the growing use of strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) to silence critical expression.

## TRUTH, THE FIRST CASUALTY OF WAR

PEN International repeatedly urged the Russian authorities to end their devastating war against **Ukraine**, which continued unabated. According to the UN, 10,191 civilians have been killed and 19,139 injured as of December 2023, although the actual figures are likely to be higher. Many are still reported missing. Over 6.3 million refugees from Ukraine were recorded globally at the end of 2023.

PEN International welcomed the arrest warrants issued on 17 March 2023 by the International Criminal Court (ICC) against **Vladimir Putin** and **Maria Lvova-Belova**, Commissioner for Children's Rights in the Office of the President of the Russian Federation, for the war crime of forcible transfer of children. PEN International urged that further arrest warrants be issued by the ICC as its investigations into crimes committed by the Russian forces unfold.

At least 15 Ukrainian and foreign journalists and media workers have been killed in Ukraine since 24 February 2022 while carrying out their professional duties. In territory controlled by Russian forces and affiliated armed groups, citizen journalists and human rights activists continued to be kept behind bars on politically motivated grounds. Notably, citizen journalist and human rights defender **Iryna Danylovysh**, from Russian-occupied Crimea, is servicing a seven-year prison sentence in the Russian Federation on trumped-up grounds, in flagrant violation of international law.

PEN International joined PEN Ukraine in mourning the killing of writer and PEN member **Victoria Amelina**, following a Russian missile strike in Kramatorsk, Eastern Ukraine on 27 June 2023. She was seriously injured and rushed to hospital. She passed away on 1 July 2023. Amelina was travelling to areas liberated from Russian occupation, recording the testimonies of witnesses and survivors, and working on a non-fiction book about her experiences. Deliberate attacks on civilian infrastructure amount to war crimes. PEN International called for all those responsible for the attack, and Amelina's killing, to be brought to justice (see entry under Ukraine below). According to PEN

Ukraine, at least 96 Ukrainian cultural figures have been killed since 24 February 2022, though actual figures are likely to be higher.

Museums, libraries, and archives across Ukraine remained under sustained attack. Russian forces deliberately destroyed historical sites and looted and smuggled cultural goods. UNESCO had verified damage to over 330 cultural sites by the end of 2023. A partnership with Book Aid International – together with PEN Ukraine, PEN International, and English PEN – in support of PEN Ukraine's Unbreakable Libraries project, saw 25,000 brand-new books, generously provided free of charge by leading UK publishers, dispatched from London to Kyiv in November 2023. The books will support libraries throughout Ukraine, including in frontline and liberated territories.

The shadow of the conflict in Gaza also reached deep into Europe. In **France**, the Ministry of Interior first imposed a blanket ban on pro-Palestinian protests, before the country's highest administrative court, the Council of State, struck it down on 18 October. In **Germany**, police responded to a rise in antisemitism by preemptively banning most pro-Palestinian protests. In the **United Kingdom**, then Home Secretary Suella Braverman urged the police to use 'the full force of the law' in pro-Palestinian protests, which she labelled 'hate marches'. She also suggested that waving a Palestinian flag could be a criminal offence. PEN International urged states to respect, protect and fulfil the right to peaceful assembly without discrimination of any kind.

There were also concerning reports of attempts by mainstream media outlets to suppress journalistic coverage of the Israeli's extensive bombing of Gaza, including distortion of its own reporting. In the **United Kingdom**, the Guardian notably fired its long-serving cartoonist Steve Bell for a cartoon depicting Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Palestinian and pro-Palestinian artistic and cultural voices faced sustained censorship and intimidation in Europe, while several literary events and cultural performances were cancelled or postponed after the war in Gaza began. In **Germany** on 13 October, LitProm, the awards administrator of the Frankfurt Book Fair, postponed an award ceremony for Palestinian writer Adania Shibli, during which Shibli was

set to receive the LiBeraturpreis for her novel *Minor Detail*, citing ‘the terror against Israel’ and adding that the book fair ‘stands with complete solidarity on the side of Israel’. In the **United Kingdom**, the Arnolfini International Centre for Contemporary Arts cancelled two events they were due to host in November as part of the Bristol Palestine Film Festival, including a screening of Palestinian film *Farah*, citing fears of being seen to be engaging in political activities.

## A REGION IN TURMOIL

On 6 February 2023, devastating earthquakes struck **Türkiye** and **Syria**, resulting in the deaths of over 58,000 people, and the destruction of critical infrastructure affecting hundreds of thousands of people. PEN International urged the authorities of Türkiye to lift all restrictions on freedom of expression and access to information. In the aftermath of the disaster, the Türkiye authorities detained several journalists, and launched criminal proceedings against some. They temporarily blocked access to X (formerly Twitter), just as vital rescue efforts were being coordinated through the social media platform. They also actively prevented journalists from covering the disaster; only those in possession of government-issued press cards were notably allowed in the affected areas. The Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTÜK) – which in recent years has been issuing fines as a tool to silence critical media – sanctioned broadcasters in response to their coverage of the Turkish authorities’ handling of the disaster. The Ankara 4<sup>th</sup> Criminal Judgeship of Peace also blocked access to several websites, YouTube channels and social media accounts critical against the government for allegedly disseminating terrorist propaganda and disinformation and undermining public trust. The prominent Avesta Publishing House was amongst the outlets affected by the temporary ban. Avesta Publishing House has been targeted by the authorities for years merely for producing titles in Kurdish.

**Azerbaijan** steadily cut off and then engulfed the Armenian enclave of **Nagorno-Karabakh** on 19 September 2023. As a result, over 100,000 ethnic Armenians were forcibly displaced, the vast majority to Armenia.

PEN International condemned Azerbaijan’s military attack against Nagorno-Karabakh and urged the Azerbaijani authorities to provide concrete guarantees that the human rights of ethnic Armenians choosing to return to Artsakh/Nagorno-Karabakh would be fully upheld. The organisation further called on the Azerbaijani authorities to protect – and not damage or destroy – Armenian cultural and religious heritage.

In September 2023, the Assembly of Delegates of PEN International adopted a resolution expressing serious concern over growing challenges to freedom of expression in **Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, and Serbia**, and the threats they posed to peace and stability in the Western Balkans region. The resolution was based on the findings of PEN International’s report *Toxic Narratives: Silencing Expression in the Western Balkans*, published on 18 October 2023, which details the myriad pressure, intimidation, and threats aimed at stifling independent voices. Writers, journalists, academics, and civil society activists face a range of challenges, including disinformation and smear campaigns, physical threats and violence, economic censorship, and abusive lawsuits, aimed at silencing their opinion and critical reporting. Notably, outspoken writer and journalist **Marko Vidojković** had to leave Serbia following persisting death threats.

The ongoing stigmatisation by political leaders of independent voices and the failure to prevent and sanction such acts fuel a climate of growing anxiety, fear, and insecurity. This divisive rhetoric is particularly dangerous in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, and Serbia – which continue to experience ethnic tensions – and directly threatens peace and stability in the region where, in the 1990s, nationalism and populism, fuelled by Slobodan Milošević and its Socialist Party of Serbia, tore apart the former Yugoslavia, claiming over 130,000 lives and displacing four million people. PEN International urged the authorities to immediately end the glorification of war criminals, revisionist narratives and hate speech, and the denial of war crimes and genocide, and to publicly, unequivocally, and systematically condemn all acts of violence and targeted attacks against writers, journalists, and activists.

## THE SCOURGE OF IMPUNITY

16 October 2023 marked six years since the assassination of investigative journalist and anti-corruption campaigner **Daphne Caruana Galizia** in **Malta**. Three men have been convicted for her murder and three other suspects were awaiting trial as of 31 December 2023. PEN International and partners urged the Maltese authorities to bring to justice all those responsible for the killing of Caruana Galizia and to implement in full the recommendations of the public inquiry into her assassination.

In November 2023, Sergei Khadzhikurbanov, who was given a 20-year prison sentence in 2014 for his role in the 2006 killing of prominent Russian investigative journalist **Anna Politkovskaya**, was pardoned by Vladimir Putin after fighting in Ukraine. According to *Novaya Gazeta*, where Politkovskaya worked, her family had not been informed about the pardon. PEN International continued to call for the masterminds behind her killing to be brought to justice.

In November 2023, the Ukrainian authorities announced they had identified two soldiers of the Russian army involved in the March 2022 murder of writer **Volodymyr Vakulenko**, and that an arrest warrant would be issued against them (see entry under Ukraine below).

## UNFAIR DETENTIONS AND PROSECUTIONS

**Belarus**, the **Russian Federation** and **Türkiye** remained the worst jailers of journalists in Europe and Central Asia, with respectively 28, 22 and 13 journalists held behind bars as of 1 December 2023, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists. On 28 September 2023, Türkiye's Court of Cassation upheld a life sentence against publisher **Osman Kavala**, blatantly ignoring the European Court of Human Rights' legally binding decision to immediately release him. Writer and opposition politician **Selahattin Demirtaş** also remained wrongfully detained, despite the European Court of Human Rights urging his release (see under Türkiye section below for more information on both).

According to PEN Belarus, 32 'people of the written word' – writers, translators, and academics – were among 152 cultural figures being held

in **Belarus** on politically motivated grounds as of 31 December 2023. Prison conditions there amounted to cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment, and torture, with prisoners routinely denied access to medical care and adequate legal representation and those detained on politically motivated grounds facing harsher conditions. Artist **Aleš Puškin** died in prison on 11 July 2023 after being reportedly prevented from accessing urgent medical care. Incommunicado detention was a growing concern; the family of lawyer and writer **Maksim Znak** – who is serving a 10-year prison sentence on spurious grounds – had not heard from him since February 2023 (see entry under Belarus below). On 21 May 2023, to mark the International Day of Solidarity with Political Prisoners in Belarus, PEN International released a letter signed by 103 Nobel Laureates, expressing solidarity with writer, human rights defender, Nobel Peace Prize winner, and PEN Belarus member **Ales Bialiatski**, and calling for the release of all those held for merely peacefully expressing their views (see entry under Belarus below).

In a three-page judgment issued on 6 June 2023, the **United Kingdom's** High Court rejected all eight grounds of Wikileaks founder and publisher **Julian Assange's** appeal against his extradition order to the US, signed by the UK Home Secretary in June 2022. Assange made a renewed application for appeal to the High Court on 13 June 2023; a public hearing will take place on 20 and 21 February 2024. No further appeals will be available at the domestic level, though an application before the European Court of Human Rights remains a possibility (see entry under United Kingdom below). On 15 November 2023, PEN Norway awarded Assange the 2023 Ossietzky Prize for outstanding contributions to freedom of expression.

## CENSORSHIP AND BOOK BANS

In **Türkiye**, the authorities continued to increase their influence on the media and publishing landscape, leading to a growing number of books being branded 'obscene' and vilified by pro-government media. On 14 March 2023, a court in Istanbul ruled that *Rüyası Bölünenler* (*Dream Divided*) by **Yavuz Ekinci** included content amounting to 'terrorist propaganda' and banned its publication, distribution, and sale. Copies of the book were also confiscated

(see entry under Türkiye below). Previously in January 2023, two books by writer and PEN member **Murat Kahraman**, *Bitmeyen Veda* and *Çığlık (Scream)* were banned from publication, distribution and sale, and promptly confiscated.

Authorities in Belarus have for decades been seeking to assert the dominance of the Russian language. Their stigmatisation and repression of the Belarusian language and literature, which stepped up after the Russian Federation launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, continued during the year. As documented by PEN Belarus, scores of independent publishing houses were shut down in 2023 for promoting books by Belarusian writers and in the Belarusian language.

In the **Russian Federation**, a December 2022 law banning 'LGBT propaganda' among adults, which criminalised any act regarded as an attempt to promote 'non-traditional sexual relations' online or in public, resulted in bookstores and cinemas withdrawing content with LGBTI themes throughout 2023. Moscow's Bolshoi theatre notably dropped a ballet about the Russian dancer Rudolf Nureyev from its repertoire. Similarly in **Hungary**, Lira Könyv, the country's second-largest bookstore chain, was fined HUF12 million (approximately USD36,000) in July 2023 for including a LGBTI graphic novel series in its youth literature section, and for failing to place it in closed packaging as required by the 2021 'child protection' law.

## REPRESSIVE LAWS

Authorities across the region sought to enact repressive legislation. In the **Russian Federation**, a 30 November 2023 ruling by the Supreme Court branded the 'international public LGBT movement' as 'extremist', effectively outlawing public LGBTI-related activity, with a maximum penalty of 10 years' imprisonment. The move was yet another violation of the right to freedom of expression, reinforcing stigma and encouraging discrimination, with raids on LGBTI clubs taking place a day later.

Attempts to replicate the Russian Federation's infamous 'Foreign Agents law' were ongoing in both **Hungary**, where a draft Sovereignty Protection Act submitted to Parliament on 21 November 2023 could see independent media

## 'AUTHORITIES ACROSS THE REGION SOUGHT TO ENACT REPRESSIVE LEGISLATION'

organisations and individual journalists targeted, and in **Republika Srpska** – one of two federal entities of **Bosnia and Herzegovina** – where a draft law on the Special Registry and Publicity of the Work on Non-Profit Organisations, adopted in a first reading on 27 September 2023, generated a national and international outcry. In **Georgia**, attempts to introduce a 'Foreign Agents law' that would have criminalized criticism and dissent were scrapped in March 2023 following intense street protests.

As documented in PEN International's 2023 resolution on criminal defamation and SLAPPs, the gradual, positive trend toward the decriminalisation of defamation slowed down. On 20 July 2023, the **Republika Srpska** National Assembly adopted amendments to the Republika Srpska Criminal Code reintroducing criminal penalties for defamation. On 12 October 2023, Italian writer **Roberto Saviano** (see below under Italy entry) was found guilty of defaming **Italy's** Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and sentenced to pay a fine. PEN International condemned the verdict as an alarming setback for free speech and urged the Italian authorities to repeal all criminal defamation laws.

## GOOD NEWS

In a 2023 resolution, PEN International welcomed efforts to adopt an anti-SLAPP EU directive – which would set up minimum standards for anti-SLAPP legislation in all **EU** member states – and later, together with partners, urged legislators to work towards the strongest possible set of rules. In November 2023, MEPs reached a deal with member states on anti-SLAPPs rules, with the directive expected to be adopted in April 2024.



# EMBLEMATIC CASES



SERBIA

MARKO  
VIDOJKOVIĆ

WRITER AND  
JOURNALIST FACING  
DEATH THREATS

Death threats against writer and journalist Marko Vidojković persisted in 2023, prompting him and his family to leave Serbia out of concern for their safety. The continuing threats against Vidojković came in the wake of sustained attacks against independent writers and journalists in Serbia, orchestrated by both state and non-state actors, who aimed to silence their work and critical reporting.

Marko Vidojković.  
Photo credit: Miroslav Dragojević



UKRAINE

VICTORIA  
AMELINA

PEN MEMBER  
KILLED IN A RUSSIAN  
MISSILE STRIKE

PEN Ukraine member, writer and war crimes investigator Victoria Amelina died on 1 July 2023 from injuries sustained in a Russian missile strike in Kramatorsk, Eastern Ukraine, on 27 June 2023. Amelina was travelling to areas liberated from Russian occupation, recording the testimonies of witnesses and survivors, and working on a book about her experiences. Deliberate attacks on civilian infrastructure amount to war crimes. PEN International called for all those responsible to be brought to justice.

Victoria Amelina.

# CASE LIST 2023/2024

## AZERBAIJAN

### KILLED – IMPUNITY

#### Rafiq TAĞI

Rafiq Tağı, journalist and short story writer, died in hospital in Baku on 23 November 2011 after being attacked while returning home from work four days earlier. Although the motive for the attack remains unknown, it is thought that it could be linked to Tağı's article published on 10 November 2011, entitled '*Iran and the Inevitability of Globalisation*', in which he criticised the Iranian government and described threats made against Azerbaijan by Iran as 'ridiculous'.

A criminal investigation was launched by the Khatai District Prosecutor's Office in November 2011 but was reportedly suspended on 8 January 2014, owing to the 'non-establishment of the person subject to prosecution'. On 8 January 2015, Tağı's lawyer announced on Facebook that the Prosecutor-General's Office had informed him in writing that the probe into the death had ended. No further information was given. In August 2020, Tağı's family called on President Ilham Aliiev to resume the investigation into his death, saying that the initial investigation had been 'superficial' and had not identified any possible suspects. On 7 July 2022, the European Court of Human Rights found Azerbaijan in violation of Article 2 under its procedural limb (failure to carry out an effective investigation) of the European Convention on Human Rights and ordered it pay EUR14,000 (approximately USD14,300) in compensation.

Rafiq Tağı, born on 5 August 1950, was previously arrested in November 2006 for an article entitled '*Europe and Us*' published in *Sanat* newspaper, for which he was accused of insulting the Prophet Muhammad. Following its publication, the then Grand Ayatollah Fazil Lankarani of Iran issued a fatwa calling for Tağı's death. Tağı was sentenced to three years in prison under Article 283 of Azerbaijan's Criminal Code for 'inciting national, racial and religious enmity'. He was granted amnesty on 28 December 2007 following significant international pressure.

## JUDICIAL HARASSMENT

### Akram AYLISLI

Writer, poet, and playwright Akram Aylisli faced charges of resisting the authorities with violence under Article 315.1 of the Criminal Code, which provides for up to three years in prison. The alleged incident took place on 30 March 2016. Akram Aylisli was detained at Heydar Aliyev airport in Baku, as he attempted to travel to Italy where he was due to speak at a literary festival. A young border official accused him of having punched him in the chest hard enough to bruise. Aylisli stated that the alleged punch was used as justification to deny him the right to leave the country.

Shortly after being detained, Aylisli signed a document compelling him to remain in Baku, thereby subjecting to a local and international travel ban. Since then, he has been unable to attend scores of cultural and literary events and to promote his books. As part of the investigation, the Prosecutor General's office confiscated Akram Aylisli's identity documents, which prevents him from accessing health care services. He is said to suffer from chronic bronchitis, heart and liver failure and is in need of medical care. The case was ongoing as of 31 December 2023.

Akram Aylisli, born on 6 December 1937, has for years faced harassment by the Azerbaijani authorities in connection with his writings. His 2013 novel, *Stone Dreams*, tackles the tense issue of Azeri-Armenian relations and included depictions of pogroms allegedly carried out by Azeris against Armenians in 1990. After the novel was published, he was stripped of his titles and medals and the President signed a decree also stripping him of his presidential pension; his books were also burnt. He was branded an apostate, expelled from the Union of Azerbaijani Writers while people organised rallies against him. His books were withdrawn from the school curriculum and his plays were banned.

## ■ BELARUS

### IMPRISONED

#### Ales BIALIATSKI

Writer, PEN Belarus member, human rights activist and Nobel Peace Prize winner Ales Bialiatiski is the founder of the Viasna Human Rights Centre, an organisation that campaigns for opposition activists who are harassed and persecuted by the Belarusian authorities. On 14 July 2021, Bialiatiski was detained alongside several Viasna colleagues following raids by Belarusian law enforcement officers on more than a dozen civil society and human rights organisations. He was transferred to pre-trial detention on 17 July on trumped-up charges of tax evasion, and subsequently charged with smuggling (Article 228.4 of the Belarusian Criminal Code) and organising and financing actions that grossly violate public order (Article 342.2 of the Belarusian Criminal Code). His trial opened at the Lieninski District Court of Minsk on 9 January 2023. Bialiatiski repeatedly asked that the prosecutor and the court conduct the trial in Belarusian, to no avail. He was sentenced alongside three Viasna colleagues to 10 years in prison on 3 March 2023. His sentence was upheld on appeal on 21 April 2023. He was subsequently transferred to a medium-security penal colony in Horki – a facility known for inmates being beaten and subjected to hard labour – and was reportedly held in solitary confinement as of 31 December 2023.

Bialiatiski has been the target of the Belarusian authorities for years. On 4 August 2011, he was arrested on spurious charges of tax evasion and sentenced to four-and-a-half years' imprisonment in a high security prison colony on 24 November 2011. PEN members actively campaigned for his release; he was amnestied in June 2014.

Ales Bialiatiski, born on 25 September 1962, is a literary scholar, essayist, and human rights defender. He was a founding member of the Belarusian literary organisation Tutejshyja (The Locals) and formerly served as head of the Maxim Bahdanovich Literary Museum in Minsk. He founded Viasna in April 1996. Bialiatiski was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in December 2022 alongside the Russian

human rights organisation Memorial, and the Ukrainian human rights organisation Center for Civil Liberties. On 21 May 2023, to mark the International Day of Solidarity with Political Prisoners in Belarus, PEN International published a letter signed by 103 Nobel Laureates, expressing solidarity with Bialiatiski.

#### Aliaksandr FIADUTA

PEN Belarus reported losing contact with member, writer, political analyst, literary critic Aliaksandr Fiaduta on 12 April 2021, after Fiaduta travelled to Moscow. A day later, it was confirmed that he had been detained in the Russian Federation, and returned to Belarus by the Belarusian KGB, under Article 108 of the Belarusian Criminal Code, which allows for detention on direct suspicion of committing a crime. Fiaduta was subsequently charged under Article 357.1 ('conspiracy or other acts committed to seize or hold state power in an unconstitutional manner'), standing accused of taking part in a US-planned 'coup' and 'assassination attempt' against President Aliaksandr Lukašenka and his family. Fiaduta was diagnosed with acute heart failure in December 2021 and reportedly suffered an angina pectoris and arrhythmia attack that same month, after he stopped taking his heart medication in protest at restrictions on correspondence. In April 2022, Belarusian NGOs, including PEN Belarus, urged his release. On 5 September 2022, the Minsk Regional Court found him guilty and sentenced him to 10 years' imprisonment in a maximum security colony. The verdict was upheld by the Supreme Court in November 2022. The Ministry of Internal Affairs of Belarus included him in the official list of alleged 'extremists', thereby prohibiting him from holding public office and other activities.

Once an active member of Lukašenka's campaign team and later the President's press secretary, Aliaksandr Fiaduta – born on 3 November 1964 – resigned from this post in the mid-1990s and joined the opposition. He became a vocal opponent of the current government, and notably worked as a journalist for Russian and Belarusian independent newspapers (*Belorusskaya Delovaya Gazeta*, *Moskovskie Novosti*, *Imia* and *Narodnaja Volia*). In December 2010, Fiaduta was arrested while working on

an opposition campaign, and wrote *American Poems* while in pre-trial detention. He received a suspended two-year prison term in May 2011. *American Poems* won the 2012 Aleś Adamovič Award issued by PEN Belarus.

## Uladzimir MACKIEVIČ

PEN Belarus member and renowned philosopher Uladzimir Mackievič was sentenced to five years in prison on spurious grounds on 23 June 2022. His trial took place in Minsk behind closed doors. The Ministry of Internal Affairs of Belarus subsequently included him in the official list of alleged ‘extremists’, thereby prohibiting him from holding public office and other activities.

Detained on 4 August 2021 after the Belarusian KGB raided his house, Uladzimir Mackievič was transferred to a pre-trial detention centre on 15 August and charged with ‘organising and preparing actions that grossly violate public order’, under Article 342 (1) of the Criminal Code of Belarus. In February 2022, Mackievič went on hunger strike for 13 days in protest of his detention and demanding that a date for his court hearing be set. He was further charged with ‘creation of an extremist group’ under Article 361-1 (1) of the Criminal Code, and ‘insulting the President’ under Article 368 (1), after posting a video on YouTube.

Born on 14 May 1956, Uladzimir Mackievič is a prominent Belarusian philosopher, essayist, public figure, and broadcaster. He played a key role in launching Charter’97, a civic initiative working to restore democracy and human rights in Belarus. In 2011, some seven years after being stripped of the right to teach at Belarusian public universities for criticising Aliaksandr Lukašenka, he co-founded the Flying University, an independent platform that promotes critical thinking. Prior to his 2021 arrest, since 2012 he had been hosting ‘Talk of the Day’, a show on Belsat TV channel. A prolific writer, Mackievič has penned numerous articles and about 50 research papers on philosophy, politics, culture, and transformation of education. He co-authored a series of books on civil society, dialogue, and values entitled *Belarus for Beginners* (2006-2009) and published video courses on philosophy and social change.

## Andrzej POCZOBUT

A board member of the Union of Poles in Belarus, Andrzej Poczobut was detained on 25 March 2021 in Hrodna, Western Belarus, after the Union’s offices throughout the country were searched. He was taken to a detention centre in Minsk and charged with inciting hatred under Article 130 (3) of the Criminal Code in connection with his coverage of 2020 anti-government protests in Belarus, statements he made in support of the Polish minority in Belarus, and his labelling of the Soviet invasion of Poland in 1939 as an act of ‘aggression’. Poczobut was subsequently also charged with encouraging sanctions aimed at harming the national security of Belarus (Article 361 (3) of the Criminal Code) and added to the official list of persons allegedly involved in ‘terrorist activities’.

Poczobut was transferred to a pre-trial detention centre in Hrodna in September 2022. His trial opened on 16 January 2023 behind closed doors. He was found guilty and sentenced to eight years in a medium-security penal colony on 8 February 2023. His sentence was upheld on appeal on 26 May 2023. Reports that he had been placed in a ‘punishment cell’ after his transfer to a high-security penal colony prison first emerged in August 2023. As of 31 December 2023, Poczobut remained in solidarity confinement and was still denied access to life-saving heart medication.

Born on 16 April 1973, Andrzej Poczobut is an essayist, journalist, columnist, blogger, poet, and musician. He is a correspondent of *Gazeta Wyborcza* – a Polish daily newspaper – and works for several Belarusian media outlets. His book *System Białoruś* (System Belarus), published in 2013, explores Aliaksandr Lukašenka’s grip on Belarus. Poczobut is a prominent Polish-Belarusian minority activist and holds dual citizenship. The Polish authorities have repeatedly called for his release.

## Maksim ZNAK

Lawyer, academic, and writer Maksim Znak is serving a 10-year sentence in a medium-security penal colony on spurious grounds. Znak was the electoral campaign lawyer of opposition presidential candidates Viktor Babaryka and

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, and a member of the Coordination Council for the Transfer of Power, which called for the resignation of President Lukašenka following the disputed presidential election held in August 2020.

Maksim Znak was arrested by members of the main investigative department of the Investigative Committee of Belarus at Viktor Babaryka's election headquarters on 9 September 2020, and placed in pre-trial detention. He was subsequently charged with 'inciting actions aimed at harming the national security of the Republic of Belarus', 'conspiring to seize power by unconstitutional means' and 'creating an extremist formation', and tried alongside Maryia Kalesnikava, who headed Viktor Babaryka's campaign team. Their trial opened in Minsk on 4 August 2021 behind closed doors. They were both found guilty on 6 September 2021, with Znak receiving a 10-year sentence, and Kalesnikava 11 years in prison. Znak was added to the 'list of persons involved in extremist activities' in March 2022, and to the 'list of persons involved in terrorist activities' in May 2022 (in Belarus, there are six different lists associated with 'extremism', which are used by the authorities to target dissenting voices). That same month, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention called for his immediate and unconditional release. Znak was last seen by his lawyer in January 2023. He remained held incommunicado as of 31 December 2023.

Maksim Znak, born on 4 September 1981, is a lawyer, professor at the Law Faculty of the Belarusian State University, poet, and lyricist. While detained, Znak wrote *The Zekameron: One hundred tales from behind bars and eyelashes*, in which he poignantly details his new everyday life.

## JUDICIAL HARASSMENT

### Svetlana ALEXIEVICH

In August 2020, Svetlana Alexievich became a member of the Coordination Council for the Transfer of Power. On 20 August 2020, the Belarus Prosecutor General laid charges under Article 361 of the Belarussian Criminal Code – appeal to overthrow or change the constitutional order of the Republic of Belarus or to carry out crimes against the government – against members of the Coordination Council, including Alexievich. This

carries a maximum three-year prison sentence, increased to five years if the act is carried out through 'mass media'. On 26 August 2020, she was questioned at the Investigative Committee building in Minsk, telling the press as she left that she had refused to cooperate. On 9 September 2020, Alexievich reported that unidentified men had attempted to enter her home. This led to several diplomats from European embassies in Minsk staging a 24-hour vigil at her home to protect her from attack. Alexievich left Belarus for Germany later that month, pledging to return once the political situation allows. The case against her was still pending as of 31 December 2023.

Alexievich's name and books were removed from the school curriculum in Belarus in August 2021. According to PEN Belarus, libraries across the country removed her books from circulation in June 2023.

Svetlana Alexievich, born on 31 May 1948, is a world-renowned author, translated into numerous languages, and has won numerous international awards, including the 2015 Nobel Prize in Literature. She is a former President of PEN Belarus.

## ■ ITALY

### ON TRIAL

#### Roberto SAVIANO

On 12 October 2023, writer, journalist, and PEN award winner Roberto Saviano was found guilty of defaming Giorgia Meloni, Italy's Prime Minister, over a speech that criticized the far-right leader after she said that NGO boats attempting to rescue refugees in the central Mediterranean should be seized and sunk, and the migrants on board repatriated. Saviano was sued under Article 595 of the Italian Penal Code, which carries up to three years in prison, and ordered to pay a fine. Saviano's legal team said they would appeal.

This is not the only time Saviano has been targeted by the Italian authorities. A further trial opened on 1 February 2023 relating to charges, brought in 2019, of defaming Italy's then Deputy Prime Minister and Interior Minister Matteo Salvini over a speech in which Saviano accused

Salvini of ignoring the mafia stranglehold on Italy in favour of stirring up resentment against immigrants. The trial was ongoing as of 31 December 2023. Previously, in June 2018, Salvini threatened to remove Saviano's police escort. Saviano has been living under constant police protection since October 2006, after receiving threats from the mafia following the March 2006 publication of his bestseller *Gomorra*.

In April 2023, a court in Rome rejected a civil law suit brought by Italy's Minister of Culture, Gennaro Sangiuliano who had sued Saviano for a tweet in 2018 that criticized his appointment as head of news programme TG2, at the Italian state-owned television channel Rai 2. The judge ruled that Sangiuliano's claim was unfounded, on the basis that Saviano's social media posts 'represent a legitimate expression of the right to criticism enshrined in Article 21 of the Constitution'.

Roberto Saviano, born on 22 September 1979, is the author of *Gomorra*, an international best seller that has sold over 10 million copies worldwide. Other books include *La bellezza e l'inferno (Beauty and the inferno)* (2009); *Vieni via con me (Come away with me)* (2011), *ZeroZeroZero* (2013), *La paranza dei bambini (The children's boat)* (2016), *In mare non esistono taxi (There are no taxis at sea)* (2019), *Gridalo (Shout it)* (2020), *Solo è il coraggio (Only courage)* (2022). He has written several screenplays and theatre scripts and regularly contributes to newspapers and magazines.

## ■ MALTA

### DEATH THREAT

#### Robert AQUILINA

Robert Aquilina, a writer, activist, and the President of the NGO, Repubblika, renewed his application for police protection on 28 October 2023, detailing signs of an attempted forced entry into his family home, threats from an unknown individual seeking 'to get to him', and evidence of stalking by people 'close to the network of politicians of whom he is critical in his activism.' He was under partial police protection as of 31 December 2023.

Aquilina originally sought police protection in August 2021 after he had been warned to 'be careful' by a politician due to his criticism of the Maltese authorities. A few days earlier, the website of Repubblika was amongst several news and civil society websites targeted in a coordinated spoof attack, following the indictment of businessman Yorgen Fenech for complicity in the murder of investigative journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia. PEN International and Scottish PEN wrote to Malta's Police Commissioner in July 2022, after Aquilina had most of his police protection removed. Subsequent correspondence and a meeting between Aquilina, PEN Malta and high-ranking police representatives in April 2023 revealed that Aquilina's safety was no longer regarded by the police as being at significant risk, despite ongoing threats. Various court judgements have found individuals guilty of having threatened him. In one instance, an individual confessed to the police to following Aquilina, his wife, and their children into churches to get knowledge about the family, and then used that information to threaten Aquilina. Another individual stated under oath that he had personally heard a group of individuals speaking next to the parliament building in a way that indicates that they would harm Aquilina. A police officer threatened his safety then resigned from the force. Online harassment and vilification on media platforms of Aquilina, who is routinely branded a 'traitor', continues unabated.

Robert Aquilina, born on 10 June 1978, is a co-founder of Repubblika, a civil society movement set up in the wake of the assassination of Maltese investigative journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia, which aims to promote human rights and democracy in Malta. He is the author of *Pilatus: A Laundromat Bank in Europe*, published in 2023.

## ■ MONTENEGRO

### ON TRIAL

#### Boban BATRIĆEVIĆ

Academic, writer, and Vice President of the Montenegrin PEN Centre Boban Batrićević faced up to 60 days in prison for an article he wrote on the Serbian Orthodox church in Montenegro. His hearing was set for 22 January 2024.

On 11 August 2023, Batrićević published an article on the independent Montenegrin portal Antena M, in which he detailed examples of hateful narratives spread by priests of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro, including the glorification of war criminals. A lawyer affiliated with the Church, which holds a significant following in Montenegro, filed a criminal complaint against Batrićević, accusing him of inciting religious hatred. The Supreme State Prosecutor's Office of Montenegro subsequently initiated misdemeanour proceedings against Batrićević, accusing him of violating Article 19 of Montenegro's National Law on Public Order and Peace, which prohibits national, racial, or religious insults and carries a fine ranging from EUR250 to EUR1,500 (approximately USD270 to USD2700), or imprisonment for up to 60 days. Batrićević's statement and his ensuing prosecution came against the backdrop of a controversial population census, eventually begun on 3 December after several delays, which opposition parties had threatened to boycott over fears pro-Russian forces, including the Serbian Orthodox Church, would spread propaganda and inflate the numbers of people identifying as Serbian.

Boban Batrićević, born in 1988, is a prominent historian, civil society activist, and professor at the Faculty of Montenegrin Language and Literature in Cetinje, in the southwest of Montenegro, who specialises in the history of propaganda and totalitarian movements, as well as cultural identity theory. He was elected Vice President of the Montenegrin PEN Centre in 2022. Fellow PEN members have also been targeted by the Montenegrin authorities in recent years (see 2022 Case List).

**Update:** Batrićević's trial opened on 22 January 2024. The hearing was postponed to 26 March 2024.

## ■ NETHERLANDS

### KILLED – TRIAL IN PROGRESS

#### Peter R. DE VRIES

Dutch crime reporter Peter R. de Vries died on 15 July 2021 from injuries sustained in a shooting in Amsterdam nine days earlier. De Vries was shot five times, including in the head, while on his way to a car park after leaving the studio of RTL Boulevard, on which he appeared as a guest. Two suspects were arrested soon after the shooting; their trial opened in Amsterdam in June 2022. Prosecutors called for life sentences against them, but a verdict was postponed after new information emerged that judges said needed to be added to the case. Seven other suspects were subsequently arrested in the investigation. The nine men will go on trial in January 2024, with a verdict expected around June 2024.

Peter R. de Vries, born on 14 November 1956, was a well-respected investigative journalist and crime reporter, who won critical acclaim for his reporting on the Dutch underworld. He notably worked for *De Telegraaf* and had his own television crime programme: Peter R. de Vries, misdaadverslaggever (Crime Reporter). He is the author of *Kidnapping Mr. Heineken*, an international best seller. Before he was killed, de Vries had acted as an adviser to the key prosecution witness against alleged drug kingpin Ridouan Taghi. Derk Wiersum, the lawyer of a state witness in the case, was shot dead in Amsterdam in 2019.

Peter R. de Vries's death came in the wake of several killings of journalists in the European Union in recent years, including Daphne Caruana Galizia in Malta in 2017 and Ján Kuciak in Slovakia in 2018. Ursula von der Leyen, the European Commission president, condemned Peter R. de Vries's killing, stating on 15 July 2021 that 'Investigative journalists are vital to our democracies. We must do everything we can to protect them'.

## RUSSIAN FEDERATION

### IMPRISONED

#### Yuri Alexeyevich DMITRIEV

Historian and head of the Karelian branch of the human rights centre Memorial, North-Western Russia, Yuri Dmitriev, born on 28 January 1956, is serving a 15-year sentence in a high-security penal colony on charges his supporters in the Russian Federation and abroad say are punishment for his research unearthing human rights abuses of the Stalin era, which he has published in several books. Dmitriev was arrested on 13 December 2016 and charged with making pornographic images of his adopted daughter and possessing an illegal firearm. He denied the charges, saying that the purpose of the photographs was to monitor the health of the child for social services. He spent more than a year in pre-trial detention.

On 5 April 2018, Dmitriev was cleared of the child pornography charges but was sentenced to two years and six months of probation (three months after deducting time spent in custody) and community service for illegally possessing components of a firearm. On 14 June 2018, the Karelian Supreme Court overturned his acquittal and placed him under new charges of ‘violent acts of a sexual nature in relation to a person who has not reached the age of fourteen’ and underwent enforced psychiatric testing.

Both criminal cases against Dmitriev were merged in October 2018. On 22 July 2020, he was acquitted of the firearms charges and those of child pornography but sentenced to a three-and-a-half term for sexual assault against an underage child. On 29 September 2020, the Karelia Supreme Court overturned the July acquittal relating to possession of firearms and sent the charges of child pornography for further expert ‘consideration’. It increased his sentence by another 10 years. The appeal hearing took place behind closed doors, without the presence of Dmitriev or his lawyer. On 27 December 2021, a court in Petrozavodsk increased his jail sentence to a total of 15 years. The sentence was upheld by the Supreme Court of the Republic of Karelia on 22 March 2022.

## SERBIA

### DEATH THREAT

#### Jovo BAKIĆ

Writer and academic Jovo Bakić faced renewed threats and harassment by government officials and pro-government trolls. Bakić’s ordeal originally started on 13 June 2019, after the independent weekly NIN published an interview in which he denounced the nationalistic stance of the Serbian authorities, and connections between criminal organisations and government representatives. That same day, Serbia’s president Aleksandar Vučić smeared Bakić at a press conference, calling for a criminal investigation against him to be launched. The Serbian broadcaster RTS subsequently published an edited version of the interview, in which Bakić was falsely made to appear to be calling for violence. A pre-investigation procedure was launched on 14 June 2019 and promptly shelved after Bakić provided a copy of his interview to the police. Yet, attacks against Bakić by members of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and pro-government tabloids continued at the time, with Bakić receiving several anonymous threats online.

On 7 May 2023, following two mass shootings in the country within days, pro-government Pink TV broadcast a short film on social media quoting Jovo Bakić out of context, accusing him of stoking violence. A smear campaign by government officials and pro-government outlets and trolls ensued, with Prime Minister Ana Brnabić notably urging the University of Belgrade to take a stand against Bakić and an SNS MP starting a petition calling for his dismissal. Pro-government tabloids quoted Bakić as calling for ‘blood’ to be spilled in the streets of Belgrade – words he never used. PEN International has seen several anonymous messages sent to Bakić, threatening him and his family with rape. Alarmingly, his home address was disclosed on Pink TV. Bakić also reported being approached twice on 3 June 2023 by an unknown individual who threatened and insulted him.

Jovo Bakić, born on 23 March 1970, is a writer, sociologist and academic, who specializes in national conflicts in the former Yugoslavia. His



writings focus on theories of ethnicity, nation and nationalism, national minorities, refugees, conflict, and war studies, and he frequently contributes to daily independent newspapers. He currently works as Associate Professor at the University of Belgrade, Serbia.

## Marko VIDOJKOVIĆ

Death threats against writer and journalist Marko Vidojković persisted in 2023, prompting him and his family to relocate out of concern for their safety (see [2022 Case List](#)). Veran Matić, Chairman of the Commission for Investigating Killings of Journalists and member of the Working Group for the Security and Protection of Journalists of the Government of Serbia, publicly condemned in March 2023 the threats faced by Vidojković and pledged to raise his plight with the relevant authorities. Harassment by government officials and pro-government supporters continued as of 31 December 2023.

An outspoken writer and journalist, Vidojković is known for his stance critical towards the Serbian authorities. In 2021, Vidojković reported being publicly smeared on several occasions by politicians from Serbia's ruling party, including Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and Prime Minister Ana Brnabić, and has for years been routinely smeared by pro-government outlets. Death threats intensified since the publication of his best-selling novel *Djubre (Trash)*, in September 2020. Attacks against independent writers and journalists in Serbia, orchestrated by both state and non-state actors continued in 2023.

Marko Vidojković, born on 1 October 1975, is a writer, journalist, and TV host from Serbia, who regularly comments on political and societal issues, including in his podcast *Dobar, Los, Zao* (The Good, the Bad and the Evil). He contributes to the daily independent newspaper *Danas*, which in November 2022 received a threatening email drawing a comparison between *Danas'* staff and killed journalists of the French satirical paper *Charlie Hebdo*. Vidojković's dystopian novel *Djubre (Trash)* focuses on corruption and attracted the ire of pro-government media and members of the public. Anonymous threats depicted him being burned or beaten to death, hanged,

decapitated, having his tongue cut out, and having his arms broken so he could no longer write. Vidojković further told PEN International in January 2024 that he was facing at least three abusive lawsuits from public officials.

## ■ SPAIN

### SENTENCED

## Josep Miquel ARENAS BELTRÁN (stage name Valtònyc)

Valtònyc was first arrested on 23 August 2012 after Jorge Campos Asensi, President of the nationalist foundation Círculo Balear, complained that one of his songs, 'Circo Balear', incited violence against him and other members of the foundation. Valtònyc was released that same day. In the course of his investigation, the public prosecutor charged him with 'grave insults to the Crown', 'glorification of terrorism and humiliation of its victims', and 'threats'. Campos Asensi offered to drop the charges if Valtònyc issued a public apology, a proposition that the rapper declined as he pleaded not guilty. The charges brought by Campos Asensi were eventually dismissed in 2015, but on 22 February 2017 the National Court sentenced Valtònyc to three years and six months in prison after conviction of the additional charges. He was also ordered to pay a EUR3,000 (approximately USD3,300) fine to Campos Asensi as compensation for the threats. On 20 February 2018, Spain's Supreme Court upheld his sentence.

Valtònyc fled to Belgium, where a court in Ghent ruled against the Spanish government's request for his extradition in September 2018. In November 2019, the Advocate General of the Court of Justice of the European Union of Justice concluded that Spain did not apply applicable legislation to its request for Valtònyc's extradition. In December 2021, the Ghent Court of Appeal ruled that Valtònyc should not be extradited to Spain. However, Belgium's Court of Cassation ordered a new trial as *Lèse-majesté* was a crime in Belgium until 2021, when it was declared unconstitutional. In May 2022, the Ghent Court of Appeal once again denied his extradition. Valtònyc returned to Spain in October 2023 after

the crimes had expired. On 21 November 2023, a court in Seville handed him a two-year suspended prison sentence, in relation to comments made in March 2018 at one of his concerts, urging the crowd to kill a police officer. Valtòncyc apologized, stressing his words were taken out of context and were not meant to offend.

A rapper from Mallorca, born on 18 December 1993, Valtòncyc refers to himself as a poet and an artist, arguing that art should be provocative, and denied intending to threaten or humiliate anyone.

## ■ TÜRKIYE

### KILLED – IMPUNITY

#### Hrant DINK

Author and editor of the Armenian language magazine *Agos*, Hrant Dink was killed outside his office in Istanbul on 19 January 2007. In July 2011, 17-year-old Ogün Samast was sentenced to 22 years and 10 months in prison for Dink's murder. In January 2012, Yasin Hayal was sentenced to life in prison in solitary confinement and with no possibility of parole, for 'soliciting another person to wilfully commit a murder'. Two others, Ersin Yolcu and Ahmet İskender, were each sentenced to 12 years and six months in prison, for 'assisting in a felonious murder'.

In May 2013, the Supreme Court of Appeal accepted Hrant Dink's lawyers' call for the case to be considered as an organised crime, which opened the way for the several new investigations and trials, involving law enforcement and security officials, members of the prosecutorial services as well as members of criminal organisations. In July 2019, the Istanbul 14<sup>th</sup> Heavy Penal Court concluded that the murder 'was an organised crime' and sentenced seven defendants to prison, ranging from 99 years and six months to two years and nine months. In a separate trial involving public officials, 26 out of 77 defendants were given prison terms in March 2021 in relation to the murder; four were sentenced to life in prison, including two without the possibility of parole. Dink's family appealed against the verdict, arguing that the court did not expose the full conspiracy behind his killing. They requested a retrial from the Constitutional Court of Türkiye in July 2023.

On 15 November 2023, Ogün Samast was freed on parole after serving 16 years and 10 months in prison, triggering widespread criticism across the country and prompting the Ministry of Justice to issue a statement saying that it had followed the law. PEN International continues to call for full justice.

## IMPRISONED

### Selahattin DEMİRTAŞ

Selahattin Demirtaş, writer and former co-chair of the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), was arrested on 4 November 2016, alongside several HDP MPs, on charges of being a leading member of a terrorist organisation, spreading terrorist propaganda, praising crimes and criminals, and inciting public hatred and hostility. The Turkish authorities failed to implement a December 2020 ruling by the Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights, which ordered Demirtaş' immediate release.

In a separate case, on 7 September 2018, Demirtaş was sentenced to four years and eight months in prison for allegedly carrying out terrorist propaganda during a speech he gave in 2013. Shortly before the Grand Chamber hearing, Demirtaş' release from pre-trial detention was ordered, but he remained in prison due to this separate case. His sentence was upheld by the Court of Cassation on 26 April 2021 and became final that day. In March 2021, Demirtaş was further sentenced to three years and six months in prison for 'insulting' President Erdoğan. His sentence was upheld on appeal in February 2022.

New terrorism charges were brought against Demirtaş on 20 September 2019, as part of a probe into deadly protests that took place across Türkiye from 6 to 9 October 2014, which began over accusations that the Turkish army stood by as Islamic State militants besieged the Syrian Kurdish town of Kobane. Demirtaş stands accused of having organised those protests through his political statements and social media posts, and is being held responsible for all offences allegedly committed during the clashes. He faces life in prison without the possibility of parole.

Selahattin Demirtaş, born on 10 April 1973, wrote a collection of short stories while in prison

entitled *Seher (Dawn)* (2017), which instantly became a best-seller and was translated into scores of languages, notably being awarded a [PEN Translates award](#) in 2018 by English PEN. His latest book *Devran* was published in 2019.

## Mehmet Osman KAVALA

On 28 September 2023, Türkiye's Court of Cassation [upheld](#) a life sentence against publisher, civil and cultural rights activist, and philanthropist Osman Kavala. The court upheld 18-year prison sentences against his co-defendants Çiğdem Mater, Can Atalay, Mine Özerden and Tayfun Kahraman. Although the convictions of three other defendants – Mücella Yapıcı, Hakan Altınay and Yiğit Ali Ekmekçi – were overturned, their indictment was returned to a lower court for consideration of a possible retrial.

Detained on 18 October 2017, Kavala was officially [charged](#) 16 months after his arrest – accused of being responsible for crimes allegedly committed by protestors across Türkiye during the 2013 Gezi Park protests. On 18 February 2020, Kavala and eight co-defendants present in court were [acquitted](#) of all charges. The cases of the seven defendants residing outside Türkiye were separated from the case file. Hours after the verdict, the Public Prosecutor appealed against the acquittal and moved to reactivate investigation no: 2017/96115 against Kavala, claiming there was new evidence in relation to espionage (Kavala was acquitted of this charge in the verdict hearing).

In January 2021, the Istanbul regional appeals court overturned the acquittals, and a retrial began in May 2021. In February 2022, the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers voted to begin [infringement proceedings](#) against Türkiye over its failure to abide by a December 2019 ruling from the European Court of Human Rights urging Kavala's immediate release. In April 2022, Kavala was [convicted](#) of 'attempting to overthrow the government' and sentenced to aggravated life in prison. Seven co-defendants – Çiğdem Mater, Can Atalay, Mine Özerden, Tayfun Kahraman, Mücella Yapıcı Hakan Altınay and Yiğit Ali Ekmekçi – were sentenced to 18 years' imprisonment. Their sentences were [upheld](#) on appeal in December 2022.

Osman Kavala, born on 2 October 1957, has dedicated his life to promoting open dialogue and peace, human rights, and democratic values in Türkiye. He is a prominent businessman who helped establish a number of civil society organisations, including Anadolu Kültür. He also helped found İletişim Publishing in 1983, which has since become one of Türkiye's largest publishing houses.

## ON TRIAL

### Gulgeç AKDENİZ (pen name Gulgeç DERYASPI)

Writer and Kurdish PEN member Gulgeç Akdeniz – pen name Gulgeç Deryaspî – was [arrested](#) on 25 July 2019 following simultaneous raids across Bitlis province, eastern Türkiye, during which eight other individuals were also detained. She was charged with 'membership of a terrorist organisation' under Article 314/2 of Türkiye's Penal Code on 29 July 2019 and sent to Bitlis E Type Closed Prison. She denies any wrongdoing. The first hearing was held on 4 February 2020; she was released from pre-trial detention on 30 March 2020 in an effort by prison authorities to stem breakouts of COVID-19 in the country's overcrowded jails. Deryaspî was [sentenced](#) to six years and three months in prison on 3 December 2020. Her appeal before the Court of Cassation, lodged on 28 February 2021, was pending as of 31 December 2023.

Born in 1978, Gulgeç Deryaspî studied Kurdish Language and Culture at Muş University, eastern Türkiye. She has published three novels in Kurdish. *Tariya Bi Tav* (Darkness with Sunshine), published in 2010, portrays life in Kurdish villages and explores the concept of alienation. *Xezal* (Gazelle), published in 2013, depicts the struggle of a woman standing against patriarchy and state oppression, while *Ez Ne Ezim* (I am not who I am), published in 2018, explores existential and philosophical questions. She has been a member of Kurdish PEN since 2013. She [joined](#) German PEN's Writers-in-Exile programme in 2023.

## Can DÜNDAR

Can Dündar, then editor of the daily newspaper *Cumhuriyet*, is appealing against a lengthy prison term and is on trial on other charges. He was detained on 26 November 2015 alongside his Ankara bureau chief Erdem Gül on terrorism and espionage charges, in connection with a May 2015 story published by *Cumhuriyet* featuring photos and videos of Turkish intelligence agency's trucks allegedly carrying arms to Syria. President Erdoğan filed a criminal complaint accusing them of trying to manipulate justice with fabricated material and violating confidentiality by publishing the story. Dündar and Gül were released on 26 February 2016 following a Supreme Court decision that stated that their rights and that of the press had been violated. On 23 December 2020, Dündar was sentenced *in absentia* to a combined total of 27 years and six months in prison. The appeal process was ongoing as of 31 December 2023.

Dündar is also one of the defendants in the 'Gezi Park' trial case (see Mehmet Osman Kavala entry in the Türkiye section below). He stands accused of 'attempting to overthrow the government'; an arrest warrant was issued against him on 5 December 2018. On 18 February 2020, his case and that of six other defendants also residing outside Türkiye were separated from the case file. Proceedings were ongoing as of 31 December 2023.

Dündar is also facing several years in prison in relation to the 'Editors Watch' solidarity action with *Özgür Gündem* daily and for posting a video about arms shipments to Islamist groups in Türkiye on his news website *Özgürüz* (We are free) on 1 March 2017. Hearings continued throughout 2023; proceedings were ongoing at the end of the year. In December 2022, Dündar revealed he had been added to a database published by Türkiye's Ministry of Interior that identifies alleged terrorists and offers rewards for their capture.

Can Dündar is the author of *We Are Arrested: A Journalist's Notes from a Turkish Prison*, which the Royal Shakespeare Company in Britain turned into a play in 2018. He currently resides in Germany, where he launched *Özgürüz*.

## Yavuz EKINCI

On 31 March 2022, the Istanbul 34<sup>th</sup> High Criminal Court found Yavuz Ekinci guilty of 'making terrorist propaganda' and handed him a suspended sentence of one year, six months and 22 days in prison. The court suspended the sentence on condition that he be on probation for the same length of time. Ekinci was charged with 'making terrorist propaganda' under Article 7/1-2 of Anti-Terror Law No. 3713, for eight tweets published on his Twitter account in 2013 and 2014. The tweets, none of which promoted or incited violence, for the most part related to the Newroz (New Year) celebrations in Diyarbakır, south-eastern Türkiye, and to the 2014 battle of Kobane in Syria. The indictment came in the wake of a sustained social media crackdown in Türkiye that has seen tens of thousands of people investigated and prosecuted for their social media posts in recent years. Ekinci's appeal to the Supreme Court was pending as of 31 December 2023.

In a separate case, on 14 March 2023, a court in Istanbul ruled that Ekinci's novel *Rüyası Bölünenler* (*Dream Divided*) included content amounting to 'terrorist propaganda' and banned its publication, distribution, and sale under Article 7/2 of Anti-Terror Law No. 3713. Copies of the book were also confiscated.

Yavuz Ekinci, born in 1979, has received multiple awards for his short stories, including the 2005 Haldun Taner Award and the 2007 Yunus Nadi Award. His work focuses on the plight of Kurdish people in Türkiye and has been translated into English, German, and Kurdish. His draft novel *Cennetin Kayıp Toprakları* (*The Lost Lands of Paradise*) was turned into a film.

## Şebnem Korur FİNCANCI

Prominent academic, forensic scientist, and leading human rights defender, Prof. Dr. Şebnem Korur Fincancı was taken into custody on 26 October 2022 in relation to comments made in a live interview on the Medya TV channel regarding the possible use of chemical weapons employed by the Turkish armed forces against members of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Fincancı was restrained in her comments to Kurdish

media, asking for a full investigation to be carried out and declaring that she could not confirm the use of chemical gas unless she were to make a formal forensic examination.

Fincancı was arrested on charges of ‘disseminating propaganda for a terrorist organisation’ under Article 7/2 of Anti-Terror Law No. 3713 despite her comments clearly falling under the remit of freedom of expression. The Istanbul 24<sup>th</sup> Heavy Penal Court sentenced Fincancı to two years, eight months, and 15 days in prison on 11 January 2023. She was freed pending appeal. The case was ongoing as of 31 December 2023. In November 2023, a court in Ankara ordered the dismissal of the elected executive board of the Turkish Medical Association (Türk Tabipler Birliği – TTB), chaired by Fincancı – leading to a national and international outcry.

Former Chair of the Turkish Medical Association and board member of the Human Rights Foundation of Türkiye (HRFT), Şebnem Korur Fincancı has been judicially harassed for years, including in the *Özgür Gündem* case in which she and co-defendants Erol Önderoğlu and Ahmet Aziz Nesin are undergoing a retrial for acting as guest editors of the Kurdish daily during a country-wide solidarity campaign in 2016. This is despite the court ruling to acquit all three on 17 July 2019. Fincancı was also one of the ‘Academics for Peace’ – a group of 2,212 academics who were signatories of a petition calling for a restart to peace negotiations in the south-east of Türkiye. Fincancı was tried for her participation and acquitted of all charges.

## Pınar SELEK

Sociologist, feminist, writer, and PEN Türkiye member Pınar Selek has faced a decades-long trial over a 1998 explosion that killed seven and injured 100 in the Istanbul Spice Bazaar. Selek has been acquitted of all charges four times – in 2006, 2008, 2011 and 2014 – due to the testimony of expert witnesses that claimed that the cause of the explosion was a gas leak rather than a bomb, yet courts ordered retrials after each of these acquittals. Her fourth trial resulted in a conviction in January 2013 when Selek was handed an aggravated life sentence, although this conviction was overturned by

Türkiye’s Supreme Court of Appeals on 11 June 2014 on procedural grounds. The 15<sup>th</sup> High Criminal Court in Istanbul subsequently acquitted her of all charges on 19 December 2014.

On 21 June 2022, the Turkish Supreme Court overturned Selek’s fourth acquittal. Her trial before the Istanbul Criminal Court opened on 31 March 2023. The case was postponed to 29 September 2023, before being adjourned to 28 June 2024. She is the subject of an international arrest warrant. PEN International believes that her prosecution is linked to her work as a sociologist researching Kurdish communities in the mid-to-late 1990s, and that she is being pursued through the courts as a means of penalising her for her legitimate research and commentary. These concerns are intensified by the allegations that Selek, during her imprisonment from 1998-2000, suffered torture under investigation in an attempt to make her confess to the charges.

Pınar Selek, born on 8 October 1971, is a French-Turkish sociologist, feminist, writer, and member of PEN Türkiye. She has written extensively about the plight of women, the poor, street children, the LGBTI community and the Kurds in Türkiye. She is one of the founding editors of *Amargi*, a Turkish feminist journal. Her latest book *Azucena ou Les fourmis zinzines* was published in April 2022. She has been living in France since 2012 and holds both French and Turkish citizenship.

## Meral ŞİMŞEK

On 9 December 2020, anti-terror police detained writer, poet, and Kurdish PEN member Meral Şimşek in Malatya province, eastern Türkiye. She was released the following day pending trial and placed under a travel ban. In January 2021, she was charged with ‘membership of a terrorist organisation’ ‘making terrorist propaganda’. The indictment mentions Şimşek’s short story *Arzela*, featured in the anthology *Kurdistan + 100*, in which 12 contemporary Kurdish writers imagine a country they could call their own by the year 2046. On 7 October 2021, the Malatya 2nd High Criminal Court found Şimşek guilty of ‘making terrorist propaganda’ and sentenced her to one year and three months in prison. The court acquitted her of the charge of ‘membership of a terrorist organisation’ and lifted her travel ban. Her appeal was ongoing as of 31 December 2023.

Şimşek attempted to flee to Greece on 29 June 2021 but was apprehended by Greek police who reportedly stopped and strip-searched her before handing her over to masked individuals who forced her to cross the border back into Türkiye. On 30 June, she was detained by police at the Ipsala border crossing, north-western Türkiye, and sent to Edirne Prison, where she spent seven days before appearing in court. She was released and asked to report to the police station three times a week. On 20 September 2022, a court in Ipsala found her guilty of ‘entering a restricted military area’ and sentenced her to one year and eight months in prison. Her appeal was ongoing as of 31 December 2023.

Meral Şimşek, born in 1980, is the prize-winning author of three poetry books – *Mülteci Düşler* (*Refugee Dreams*), *Ateşe Bulut Yağdırın* (*Clouds on Fire*) and *İncir Karası* (*Black Fig*). Her novel *Nar Lekesi* (*Pomegranate Stain*), published in 2017, tells the story of Şimşek’s family and sheds light on the plight of Kurdish people in Türkiye in the 1990s. Her latest collection of short stories, *Arzela*, was published in April 2022. She currently resides in Germany.

## Merdan YANARDAĞ

On 4 October 2023, a court in Istanbul found writer and PEN Türkiye member Merdan Yanardağ guilty of ‘making propaganda for a terrorist organisation’ and sentenced him to two years and six months in prison. Yanardağ, who had been held since 26 June 2023, was subsequently released. The appeal process was ongoing as of 31 December 2023.

Yanardağ, editor-in-chief of TELE 1 broadcaster, was detained in Istanbul on 26 June 2023 by counterterrorism officers after the public prosecutor’s office launched an investigation into a 20 June broadcast on TELE 1. Yanardağ was formally arrested on 27 June on charges of ‘making propaganda for a terrorist organisation’ and ‘praising crime and a criminal’. A request for release pending trial was denied by the court on 5 July on the grounds that Yanardağ was considered a flight risk.

In the programme, Yanardağ spoke about the peace process between the Turkish government and the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which

broke down in July 2015. Yanardağ notably commented on the prison conditions of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, stating that his solidarity confinement, in place since 2016, should be lifted. Türkiye’s broadcast regulator RTÜK subsequently launched an investigation into TELE1 over Yanardağ’s remarks. Shortly before his arrest, Yanardağ said his words had been taken out of context and were not meant to praise Öcalan.

Merdan Yanardağ, born on 24 February 1961, is a prominent journalist, writer, and member of PEN Türkiye. He is the editor-in-chief of TELE1, one of the few remaining news outlets critical of the Turkish authorities.

## Ragıp ZARAKOLU

Publisher, human rights activist, and PEN Türkiye member Ragıp Zarakolu, was arrested in October 2011 and is facing a sentence of up to 15 years in prison in Türkiye on trumped-up terrorism charges in connection with a speech he made at an event by the now defunct pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy (BDP) party. Freed pending trial on 10 April 2012, Zarakolu, who has been living in Sweden since 2013 and holds Swedish citizenship, continues to be harassed by the authorities of Türkiye.

In May 2017, police officers raided Belge Publishing House, which he founded in 1977 with his late wife Ayşe and seized over 2,000 books. In July 2018, the Istanbul 3rd High Criminal Court submitted a request for an Interpol Red Notice, a mechanism used to locate and provisionally arrest an individual pending extradition. In December 2019, Sweden’s Supreme Court rejected an extradition request from Türkiye on the grounds that the allegations against Zarakolu would not be considered a crime under Swedish law, and that an extradition would breach Article 3 (prohibition of torture) and Article 6 (right to a fair trial) of the European Convention on Human Rights. The authorities of Türkiye subsequently confiscated all of Zarakolu’s assets in Türkiye and froze his pension. In September 2020, the European Court of Human Rights found Türkiye in violation of Article 5 (right to liberty and security) and Article 10 (freedom of expression) of the European Convention on Human Rights regarding Zarakolu’s arrest and ordered it to pay him EUR6,500 (approximately USD7,700) in compensation.

In May 2022, Zarakolu was named by Turkish state media as one of the individuals wanted for extradition by Türkiye in exchange for the country allowing Sweden to join NATO. The eventual memorandum signed did not list any individuals.

Zarakolu, born in 1948, is a well-known political activist who has been fighting for freedom of expression in Türkiye for over 30 years, publishing books on issues such as minority and human rights. He is an honorary member of Swedish PEN.

## HARRASSED

### Aslı ERDOĞAN

On 24 November 2022, the Karşıyaka High Court upheld the decision of the disciplinary board of Izmir No. 3 T Type Closed Prison, western Türkiye, to confiscate Aslı Erdoğan's book *Not Even the Silence Belongs to You Anymore*, on the grounds that the book defamed the Turkish state, military, and police, that it spread terror propaganda and that it offended the Turkish nation, amongst other things. Erdoğan spoke out against the ban in April 2023, stating that the *'the court decision is a punishment for all those who criticize state violence, that is clear. But also, I interpret this as an attempt to prevent all solidarity actions with political prisoners and between writers of Turkish and Kurdish.'* Erdoğan further described how imprisoned Kurdish poet Erdemir, who notably translated her novel *The Stone Building* into Kurdish in 2020, saw his handwritten translation of her novel *Kırmızı Pelerinli Kent (The City in Crimson Cloak)* confiscated by prison authorities in 2023. Restrictions against Erdoğan's book came in the wake of a growing number of books banned or sold subject to restrictions in Türkiye.

*Artık Sessizlik Bile Senin Değil (Not Even the Silence Belongs to You Anymore)* by Aslı Erdoğan is a prize-winning collection of essays and articles first published in France in 2016, when Erdoğan was wrongfully imprisoned. The book was subsequently translated into several languages. Aslı Erdoğan has previously faced persecution by the authorities in Türkiye over many years (see PEN International's Case Lists [2021](#), [2020](#), [2019](#), [2018](#), [2017](#), [2016](#)).

Born on 8 March 1967, Erdoğan is a prize-winning author of several books. Her short

story *Wooden Birds* received first prize from Deutsche Welle radio in a 1997 competition; her second novel, *Kırmızı Pelerinli Kent (The City in Crimson Cloak)*, received numerous accolades abroad and has been published in scores of languages. She won several awards, including the 2016 Swedish PEN's Tucholsky prize, the 2018 Simone de Beauvoir Prize for Human Rights, and the Vaclav Havel Library Foundation's 2019 Disturbing the Peace Award.

## UNITED KINGDOM

### KILLED – TRIAL IN PROGRESS

#### Lyra MCKEE

Journalist, writer and LGBTQI campaigner Lyra McKee was shot dead on 18 April 2019 by

a masked gunman as she was observing a riot on the Creggan estate in Derry, Northern Ireland. She was standing beside a police vehicle when a gunman fired on police officers and onlookers. She died in hospital soon afterwards. On 14 September 2022, Niall Sheerin, from Derry, was sentenced to seven years in prison for possessing the gun used to murder McKee. A total of 11 men from Derry have already been charged with, and have denied, offences arising from her killing. Their trial is set to start in April 2024.

The first killing of a journalist in Northern Ireland since that of Martin O'Hagan 2001,

Lyra McKee's death was met with outrage from political leaders and others in Ireland and worldwide. On 23 April 2019, the 'New IRA' paramilitary group issued a statement in which it issued 'sincere apologies' for McKee's death, adding that she was not the intended target. By the time she died, aged 29, McKee worked on numerous print and online publications including *Buzzfeed*, *Private Eye*, *The Atlantic* and *the Belfast Telegraph*. Her hugely popular blog, 'Letters to my 14-year-old self', chronicled her experiences as a gay woman. In June 2019, her book *Angels with Blue Faces*, based on her four-year investigation into the killing of an MP, was published posthumously. At the time

of her death, she was working on a second, *The Lost Boys*, about the disappearance of children in Northern Ireland, which remains under review. A collection of her writings, *Lost, Found, Remembered*, was published in 2020.

## DETAINED

### Julian ASSANGE

Wikileaks founder and publisher Julian Assange was arrested in April 2019 at the Ecuadorian embassy in London, where he had been given asylum for almost seven years. He was arrested for breaching his bail conditions in 2012, and further arrested on behalf of the US authorities under an extradition warrant for his role in obtaining and publishing classified military and diplomatic documents in 2010. In the US, Assange would face trial on 17 counts under the Espionage Act and one count under the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act, which combined could see him imprisoned for up to 175 years.

In March 2022, the UK Supreme Court denied Assange's request to appeal an earlier decision by the UK High Court that permitted his extradition to the US – which in turn had overturned a previous ruling by the District Court that found extradition would endanger his life. On 17 June 2022, the UK Home Secretary approved his extradition. His legal team lodged an appeal at the UK High Court. In a three-page judgment issued on 6 June 2023, the UK High Court rejected all eight grounds of Assange's appeal against his extradition order. Assange made a renewed application for appeal to the High Court on 13 June 2023; a public hearing will take place on 20 and 21 February 2024. No further appeals will be available at the domestic level, though an application before the European Court of Human Rights remains a possibility.

PEN International has repeatedly stressed that Assange's prosecution raises profound concerns about freedom of the press and sends a dangerous signal to journalists and publishers worldwide. PEN International calls on the US authorities to drop the charges against Assange and withdraw their extradition request. PEN International further calls on the UK authorities to refrain from extraditing Assange and to release him from prison immediately.

Julian Assange, born on 3 July 1971, is the first publisher to be charged under the US Espionage Act. On 15 November 2023, PEN Norway awarded Assange the 2023 Ossietzky Prize for outstanding contributions to freedom of expression.

## UKRAINE

### KILLED

### Victoria AMELINA

PEN Ukraine member, writer and war crimes investigator Victoria Amelina died on 1 July 2023, aged 37, from injuries sustained in a Russian missile strike in Kramatorsk, eastern Ukraine, on 27 June 2023. Amelina was travelling to areas liberated from Russian occupation, recording the testimonies of witnesses and survivors, and working on a non-fiction book about her experiences. At the time of the attack, she was accompanying writer Héctor Abad Faciolince, journalist Catalina Gómez Ángel and politician Sergio Jaramillo – all from Colombia – who were keen to visit the war-affected areas. They were dining together when a Russian missile struck their restaurant, killing 13 people and wounding 65. The Colombian delegates sustained minor injuries, but Amelina was seriously injured and was rushed to hospital in Dnipro. She was buried in her hometown of Lviv on 5 July 2023.

Born on 1 January 1986, Amelina was a prize-winning writer and poet, and founder of the New York Literature Festival in the Donetsk region, eastern Ukraine. Since the Russian Federation's full-scale military invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, Amelina had been documenting war crimes with the human rights initiative Truth Hounds, recording the testimonies of witnesses and survivors. She notably uncovered the war diary of Ukrainian writer Volodymyr Vakulenko, who was abducted by Russian forces in March 2022 and subsequently killed (see Volodymyr VAKULENKO entry). She took part in the first presentation of his war diary at the Book Arsenal literary festival in Kyiv on 23 June 2023. At the time of her death, she was working on her first non-fiction book in English, *War and Justice Diary: Looking at Women Looking at War*, which tells the stories



of Ukrainian women documenting war crimes by Russian forces, and their lives during the war. Her book will be published posthumously.

## KILLED – IMPUNITY

### Volodymyr VAKULENKO

On 28 November 2022, DNA analysis carried out by Ukrainian forensic and war crimes investigators confirmed that the body found in grave N.319 in the woods of Iziium, Eastern Ukraine, was that of Ukrainian writer Volodymyr Vakulenko. News that he had been abducted first emerged in April, but information about his fate was only made possible after the Ukrainian army recaptured Iziium from Russian forces in September.

According to Volodymyr Vakulenko's family, members of the Russian forces raided his home on 22 March 2022, seizing phones, documents, and books in Ukrainian. A day later, they took Vakulenko and his son Vitalii, diagnosed with autism. They undressed the writer to inspect his tattoos and beat him. Both were allowed to return home the following day. Vakulenko subsequently decided to bury his war diary under a cherry tree in his garden. Around 11 am on 24 March, a bus with a Z-sign drove up to Vakulenko's house and took him towards Iziium. His relatives never saw him again. In November 2023, the Ukrainian authorities announced they had identified two soldiers of the Russian army involved in the murder of Vakulenko, and that an arrest warrant would be issued against them.

Award-winning writer Volodymyr Vakulenko – pen name Volodymyr Vakulenko-K – was born on 1 July 1972. He had published 13 books by the time of his death, including *Monoliteracy* (2008), *You Are... Not* (2011), *The Sun's Family* (2011), and *We, the Province!* (2013). Vakulenko defined his own genre, with elements of postmodernism, modernism, neo-classicism, and logical absurdism, as 'counterliterature'.

# PEN ACTIONS IN EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA

In addition to its advocacy for the writers referred to in this list, PEN International also took action on behalf of journalists and others at risk in Europe and Central Asia, some in collaboration with other organisations, details of which can be found in the links provided below:

## BELARUS

**VARIOUS:** *persisting attacks against the rights to freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly*

**Action:**

**August 2023:** Statement [Belarus: End brutal crackdown on dissent](#)

## BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

**VARIOUS:** *recriminalisation of defamation in Republika Srpska*

**Action:**

**March 2023:** Statement [Bosnia and Herzegovina: Criminal defamation bill must be dropped](#)

**May 2023:** Statement [Bosnia and Herzegovina \(Republika Srpska\): Drop criminal defamation bill](#)

## CROATIA

**Robert VALDEC (m):** *journalist physically assaulted*

**Action:**

**May 2023:** Statement [Croatia: Violent attack against writer and journalist Robert Valdec condemned](#)

## EUROPEAN UNION

**VARIOUS:** *Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs)*

**Action:**

**November 2023:** Joint statement European Union: 'We refuse to let the Anti-SLAPP Directive be a missed opportunity'

## GEORGIA

**Nika GVARAMIA (m):** *journalist wrongfully detained*

**Action:**

**April 2023:** Joint statement PEN International joins partners in urging Georgian President to release journalist Nika Gvaramia

## GERMANY

**Andrei SOLDATOV (m) and Irina BOROCHAN (f):** *Writers and dissident journalists facing SLAPP case*

**Action:**

**November 2023:** Joint statement Anti-SLAPP campaigners from across Europe stand in solidarity with the Russian dissident authors after an injunction was secured against their publisher in Germany

## IRELAND

**VARIOUS:** *SLAPPs*

**Action:**

**November 2023:** Joint statement Ireland: Letter to Mary Lou McDonald about legal actions against the media

## MALTA

**Daphne CARUANA GALIZIA (f):** *journalist and anti-corruption campaigner killed in 2017*

**Action:**

**October 2023:** Joint statement Media freedom groups call for justice for Daphne Caruana Galizia and press safety in Malta

## RUSSIAN FEDERATION

**Elena MILASHINA (f) and Alexander NEMOV (m):** *journalist and lawyer physically assaulted for their critical reporting*

**Action:**

**July 2023:** Joint statement Russia must stop criminal violence against journalists now

## SERBIA:

**KRIK media outlet:** *SLAPPs*

**Action:**

**May 2023:** Joint statement Serbia: Legal harassment of investigative media outlet KRIK must stop

## TÜRKIYE

**Sinan AYGÜL (f):** *journalist physically assaulted for his critical reporting*

**Action:**

**June 2023:** Joint statement Türkiye: International groups condemn attack against journalist Sinan Aygül

**VARIOUS:** *Journalists detained*

**Action:**

**April 2023:** Joint statement Türkiye: International groups demand release of Kurdish journalists, lawyers, political party officials arrested in pre-election crackdown

**July 2023:** Statement Türkiye: Release and drop charges against wrongfully imprisoned Kurdish journalists in Diyarbakır

**July 2023:** Joint statement Türkiye: International and local groups condemn detention of journalists in Ankara, Diyarbakır, İstanbul and İzmir

**August 2023:** Joint statement Türkiye: International groups condemn fifth imprisonment order against journalist Barış Pehlivan

**VARIOUS:** *press freedom concerns*

**Action:**

**February 2023:** Joint statement Türkiye: Uphold freedom of expression and access to information following devastating earthquakes

**March 2023:** Statement Türkiye: Persisting Crackdown On Free Expression One Month Since Devastating Earthquakes

**April 2023:** Joint statement Türkiye: International groups condemn broadcast regulator role in punishing critical reporting ahead of elections

**June 2023:** Joint statement Türkiye: Media freedom and journalists groups call on the EU to prioritise media freedom reforms and human rights in relations with Türkiye following the May elections

## UNITED KINGDOM

**Carole CADWALLADR (f):** *SLAPPs*

**Action:**

**March 2023:** Joint statement UK Anti-SLAPP Coalition reiterates its support for Carole Cadwalladr

**November 2023:** Joint statement The UK Anti-SLAPP Coalition reiterates its support for Carole Cadwalladr following Supreme Court decision

**Ukraine**

**VARIOUS:** *condemnation of the Russian Federation's war against Ukraine*

**Action:**

**February 2023:** Statement Ukraine: A year of war crimes and resolve

**February 2023:** Joint statement On the one-year anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine

**June 2023:** Declaration of PEN International's Writers for Peace Committee on the Russian Federations' war against Ukraine

# IF I MUST DIE

BY REFAAT ALAREER

If I must die,

you must live

to tell my story

to sell my things

to buy a piece of cloth

and some strings,

(make it white with a long tail)

so that a child,  
somewhere in Gaza

while looking heaven in the eye

awaiting his dad who  
left in a blaze—

and bid no one farewell

not even to his flesh

not even to himself—

sees the kite, my kite you  
made, flying up above

and thinks for a moment  
an angel is there

bringing back love

If I must die

let it bring hope

let it be a tale

Writer and poet Refaat Alareer  
was killed in an Israeli air strike  
on 7 December 2023.

# MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA REGIONAL OVERVIEW 2023/2024

MINA THABET, HEAD OF  
MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH  
AFRICA REGION

Ongoing repression by autocratic governments continued as in previous years, but were overshadowed by the outbreak of war on **Gaza** in October, which risked spreading into wider conflict in the region at the end of the year. The war also affected free expression and assembly not only in the **Occupied West Bank** but also in other countries around the world, including **Egypt**. Once again, we have seen how war and conflict, particularly when civilians bear the brunt of indiscriminate attacks, decimate a writing community. At a national level, minority communities, with historical grievances of repression and discrimination, were targeted, for example in **Iran**, where authorities continued to violently repress protests calling for greater freedoms in the wake of the killing of Mahsa Amini in 2022. Elsewhere, governments as in previous years resorted to repressive laws, including criminal defamation such as in **Egypt**, where the ongoing crackdown on civil society intensified in the run up to the presidential election in December, as well as **Lebanon and Morocco** and security legislation including in **Saudi Arabia, Lebanon and Iran** to repress legitimate expression, including online.

# OCCUPATION AND CONFLICT AND THEIR IMPACT ON FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

The situation in the **Occupied Palestinian Territories** and **Israel** has slipped into unprecedented levels of violence, where harrowing violations of international humanitarian law have been committed, and unparalleled human suffering has been mounting amidst a historical context of oppression of the Palestinian people. Hamas's attack on 7 October in southern Israel resulted in around 1200 casualties, including civilians, as well as the abduction of 240 hostages. International human rights organisations have documented grave violations of international law that could amount to war crimes committed by Hamas and other Palestinian armed groups during the attacks, including summary killings, hostage-taking, and launching indiscriminate rocket attacks into Israel.

The Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) responded with an intensive military operation of indiscriminate bombardment, ground operations and total siege on the **Gaza Strip** that resulted in the killing of at least 22,000 people and 57,000 injured by the end of the year, around 70 per cent of whom were women and children. Among those who were killed, a staggering number of at least 14 writers and poets lost their lives in less than four months, marking the deadliest conflict for writers in recent history (see list of writers killed below for details). The IDF's military operation has had a devastating impact on most of Gaza's civilian infrastructure, including homes, roads, hospitals, schools, and cultural institutions and resulted in the mass displacement of 1.7 million Palestinians, representing 70% of all Gazans, while the entire population is at imminent risk of famine and the spread of deadly diseases. Over 20 UN Special Procedures warned in November of the risk of a genocide in the making, and on 29 December, South Africa filed an application before the International Court of Justice concerning alleged violations by Israel of its obligations under the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in relation to Palestinians in the

Gaza Strip, which in January 2024 resulted in the court ordering six provisional measures to protect Palestinians against the risk of genocide.

As a result, the future cultural and artistic community in Palestine is at risk. By the end of the year, some 69 per cent of the total school buildings in Gaza had sustained damage or been destroyed, with 100 per cent of students - over 625,000 - with no access to education. According to the Palestinian Ministry of culture, at least 24 cultural institutions, six public libraries, and eight publishing houses and printing presses have sustained damage or completely destroyed as a result of the bombardment. A generation of children in Gaza are not only at severe risk of loss of life from bombings, malnutrition if not outright starvation, and disease, but the disruption of their education and access to cultural services and facilities will impact their ability to develop and enjoy their creative expression in later life, depriving us all of a crucially important Gazan perspective on life and the world.

Somewhat obscured by the conflict in Gaza, 2023 was also the deadliest year on record for the Palestinians in the West Bank, where more than 507 Palestinians were killed, with 214 of them killed before the Hamas attack in October. The United Nations Office for Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reported an unprecedented rise in Israeli settler violence in 2023. These high levels of violence will have repercussions on the mental health of Palestinians, including artists and writers, for years to come.

The war in Gaza has taken an unprecedented toll on journalists and freedom of the press. A staggering number of journalists and media workers were killed during the conflict, making it the deadliest for journalists in recent history, with 68 per cent of all journalists killed in 2023, including Samer Abudaqa, an Al Jazeera cameraman, who was left to bleed to death for over five hours in December because Israeli forces prevented ambulances and rescue workers from reaching him. Press freedom organizations raised fears of deliberate retaliatory targeting by Israeli forces of journalists and their families, such as Al Jazeera bureau chief in Gaza, Wael Al-Dahdouh, injured in the same drone attack on 15 December in which Abudaqa lost his

life, after losing his wife, son, daughter, and grandson in an Israeli airstrike on the house they were sheltering in Nuseirat camp in October. On 8 January, he further lost his eldest son, journalist Hamza Al-Dahdouh, along with his colleague Mustafa Thuraya, in a missile attack on their car in southern Gaza while interviewing displaced families.

Journalists elsewhere covering the widening war were also affected. For example, a Reuters investigation concluded that its journalist Issam Abdallah was killed, and six other journalists from AlJazeera, Agence France-Presse and Reuters were injured in southern Lebanon on 13 October by two Israeli tank shells, despite wearing marked journalists' attire. Other journalists were injured or reported missing.

Ongoing Israeli bombardment has devastated Gaza's infrastructure, including its telecommunications, causing severe limitations to internet access, in addition to Israel's repeated days-long complete communications black-outs. Palestinians, the majority of whom have been forcibly displaced, struggle to use social media and communication apps to inform their families whether they remain safe, hampered by the long-standing inadequacy of Gaza's internet services.

Elsewhere in the region, the conflict in **Yemen** continue to take a huge toll on freedom of expression and press freedom in the war-torn country. Although the Huthi de facto authorities released four journalists who have been on death row since 2020 during a prisoner exchange in April, they escalated their assault on freedom of expression, arresting an alarming number of peaceful protestors in Septmber. In **Syria**, repressive laws restricting freedom of expression, including online, remained in place and thousands of people remained forcibly disappeared since the outbreak of protests in 2011, including poet Nasser Saber Bunduq, whose death in 2014, days after his arrest by Syrian security forces, was confirmed to his family in early 2024. De facto authorities in northern Syria also repressed freedom of expression. Syrian government and Türkiye-backed armed opposition groups also blocked vital humanitarian aid to Aleppo in the wake of devastating earthquakes in February.

## ARBITRARY DETENTION

**Israel's** arbitrary detention of Palestinians rose sharply after the October attack, resulting in unprecedented numbers of administrative detainees held without charge or trial at the end of the year. Among them was **Mustafa Sheta**, a researcher and journalist who is also producer and general manager of the Freedom Theatre, arrested after a raid on the theatre in December (see Palestine section below for details). International human rights organisations reported harrowing testimonies of widespread torture and ill-treatment of Palestinian detainees by Israeli authorities, including severe beatings, humiliating treatment, and starvation. We documented attacks on Palestinian writers such as Palestinian writer and activist Ahed Tamimi and writer, poet and librarian Mosab Abu Toha (see Palestine section below for details of both). Both writers were arbitrarily arrested in November and subjected to beatings and humiliation, before being released without charge. In December, we called for the release of Palestinian artist and cultural figure Ahmed Tobasi, writer Mustafa Sheta, and poet Jamal Abu Joas of the Freedom Theatre (see below for details).

2023 marked the tenth year since President Al-Sisi seized power in **Egypt**, launching one of Egypt's most prolonged and brutal crackdown campaigns against freedom of expression and press freedom in the country's recent history. The Egyptian authorities have maintained their repression against dissenting voices, expanding the arbitrary detention of thousands of activists, political figures, writers, and poets and sending many more to prison throughout 2023. Despite the longstanding support for the Palestinian cause in Egypt, the government enforced restrictions on pro-Palestinian protests and arrested hundreds of protesters who took to the streets in solidarity with the Palestinians.

## ABUSE OF CRIMINAL DEFAMATION AND NATIONAL SECURITY LAWS


In **Lebanon**, on 31 March, the Lebanese Cybercrimes Bureau summoned Lara Bitar, Editor-in-Chief of the Public Source, an independent Lebanese investigative media outlet, for interrogation concerning a defamation complaint filed by the Lebanese Forces (LF), a political party. The complaint stemmed from the outlet's investigation, published in 2022, into the environmental impact of dumping tons of toxic chemical waste during the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990). The investigation identified the LF militia, which later developed into the LF political party, responsible for the pollution. In July, journalist Dima Sadek was sentenced to one year in prison following a lawsuit brought by the Free Patriotic Movement, accusing her of libel, inciting sectarian strife and slander. The lawsuit came in relation to her comments on Twitter on a sectarian event involving movement members. In November, the Coalition for Freedom of Expression, a group of national and international organisations defending freedom of expression in Lebanon, raised concerns about a proposed new media law that, if passed, could pose a grave threat to press freedom.

Defamation charges also resulted in a six month prison sentence in **Egypt** for publisher and opposition figure Hisham Kassem who was detained in August and later sentenced after conviction of defamation in relation to his critical views of a former government minister. Before his detention and subsequent conviction, Kassem had harshly criticised President Al-Sisi and his failure to address the country's dire political and economic situation.

In some countries, national security laws were used to detain, imprison or even sentence people to death, a penalty which PEN International opposes in all cases. In **Israel**, individuals expressing solidarity with Gazans or criticising Israeli actions, faced reprisals. For example, on 16 October, Dalal Abu Amneh, a prominent Palestinian singer and neuroscientist,

was arrested from her home in Nazareth for alleged 'incitement to terrorism' because of her pro-Palestinian views on social media. Following her release, she said she was subjected to ill-treatment by Israeli police because of her views.

The situation in the Islamic Republic of **Iran** markedly deteriorated against the backdrop of continuously worsening socio-economic conditions and the authorities' backlash against the widespread protest movement that followed the 2022 death in custody of young Kurdish-Iranian woman Mahsa (Jina) Amini. Hundreds of political activists, workers, teachers, and students, were arrested, tortured, and killed. Dozens of writers, poets, and artists have also faced detention and often torture, in some cases for supporting the protest movement and in others because of their history of dissident writing or expression. Iranian authorities also continued to escalate their use of the death penalty following grossly unfair trials to crush and punish any dissent. In March, Amnesty International raised grave concerns about the chilling use of the death penalty as a tool of repression against ethnic minorities, after an Ahwazi Arab, 14 Kurds and 13 Baluchis were executed following grossly unfair trials and at least a dozen others sentenced to death, often on vague charges such as 'enmity against God'. The death penalty was also imposed for peaceful expression online in **Saudi Arabia**, where retired teacher Mohammed al-Ghamdi was sentenced to death in July.



'ONCE AGAIN, WE  
HAVE SEEN HOW  
WAR AND CONFLICT,  
PARTICULARLY  
WHEN CIVILIANS  
BEAR THE BRUNT  
OF INDISCRIMINATE  
ATTACKS, DECIMATE  
A WRITING  
COMMUNITY.'



## IMPRISONMENT

Writers and journalists throughout MENA region were sentenced, or continued to serve prison terms in relation to their writing. We joined dozens of civil society organisations in July in condemning the unjust three-year sentence against researcher Patrick Zaki following an unfair trial for his critical writings of the government in **Egypt**. In September, poet Galal El-Behairy, who spent over 89 days on hunger strike in June in protest at his prolonged detention, survived a suicide attempt while in prison, days after he exceeded the maximum legal limit of pre-trial detention without a trial (see Egypt section below for details). His family raised grave concerns over his severely declining health. Writer and activist Alaa Abdel Fattah remains in arbitrary imprisonment with no access to a lawyer or UK consular access.

Imprisoned writers in **Iran** faced additional retaliatory charges for their support of the 2022 protests. Since January 2023, new charges brought against writer and Noble Peace laureate Narges Mohammadi (see Iran section below for details) in retaliation for her activism while incarcerated, including her protesting against the government's brutal response to protests and for speaking up against the rise in executions and violence against women in detention facilities have resulted in two additional retaliatory sentences raising her combined sentence to 12 years and three months in prison. In November 2023, Evin prison authorities refused to transfer Mohammadi to a hospital to receive vital medical care because she refused to wear a headscarf. In October, an Iranian Revolutionary Court sentenced journalists Niloofar Hamedi and Elaheh Mohammadi to 13 and 12 years in prison, respectively, for their coverage of the death in custody of Mahsa Amini which sparked the 2022 protests.

In **Morocco**, the government continued enforcing strict censorship over the media and press and online expression. In August, a Casablanca court sentenced 48-year-old Said Boukioud to five years in prison, for allegedly 'undermining the monarchy' over his criticism on Facebook, while living in Qatar, of the King's decision to normalise relations with Israel.

His sentence was reduced to three years on appeal, after the charge was re-classified as an 'offence against the person of the king'. Journalists Omar Radi, Solaimane Raussouni, and Taoufik Bouachrine continue to serve prison sentences handed down to them following unfair trials. In July, the Court of Cassation rejected the final appeals of Raissouni and Radi, and upheld their respective five and six year sentences (see below for details).

## ONLINE REPRESSION CONTINUES

As in previous years, repression of free expression extended to digital spaces. **Saudi Arabia** escalated its crackdown on individuals using online spaces to express themselves, handing down harsh prison sentences of between ten and 45 years for writing a post or a tweet on social media. In January, the Specialised Criminal Court (SCC) increased activist and scholar Salma al-Shehab's sentence from six to 27 years in prison following a retrial in connection with her support of women's rights in Saudi Arabia on social media, and increased it further to 36 years after her appeal. The SCC sentenced Fatima al-Shawarbi to 30 years in prison for criticising the Neom megacity project on Twitter. As noted above, the death penalty was imposed for peaceful expression online.

In **Lebanon**, Jean Kassir, co-founder of Megaphone, an independent media outlet, was intercepted on 31 March 2023 while driving his car by two State Security officers and informed that the General Directorate of State Security had summoned him for investigation. Megaphone later disclosed that the summoning order came in relation to a post on their social media platform X, entitled 'Lebanon ruled by fugitives from justice,' in which they highlighted corruption allegations against government officials. Four days later, Lebanon's top public prosecutor dropped the investigation following protests by independent journalists supporting Kassir.

## HARRASSMENT AND INTIMIDATION

Journalists across the region were subjected to intimidation and harassment during the year. Palestinian journalists covering the war in Gaza, including [Anas al-Sharif](#), reported receiving threats from the **Israeli** authorities to stop their coverage of the war. Also in **Israel**, Alaraby TV reporter Ahmed Darawsha was [threatened](#) by an Israeli armed police officer during his live coverage from Ashdod in October. On the same day, BBC journalists Muhannad Tutunji, Haitham Abudiab and their BBC Arabic team covering the conflict were [assaulted](#) and held at gunpoint after Israeli police stopped and searched them in Tel Aviv. In October, Israeli journalist Israel Frey was [forced](#) to leave his house and hide after being [attacked](#) by an extremist mob after expressing solidarity with Palestinians in Gaza and criticising the conduct of Israeli authorities during the war.

'BORDERS WERE SOMETIMES NO BARRIER TO INTIMIDATION AND HARASSMENT.'

The situation of writers in **Egypt** continued to deteriorate against the backdrop of continuously worsening socio-economic conditions. Although [released](#) in January, award-winning writer and investigative journalist Ismail Alexandrani remain under an unofficial travel ban. Similarly, poet and activist Ahmed Douma remains under a travel ban despite being [released](#) in August and continues to face threats and intimidation because of his writings (see Egypt section below for details of both).

Intimidation also extended to the families of journalists in Egypt. In August, [Gamal Abdel Hamid](#), the father of exiled journalist and human rights defender Ahmed Gamal Ziada, editor-in-chief of [Zawia3 \(Third Angle\)](#), was detained at an undisclosed location and interrogated by National Security officers who sought information regarding Ziada's work as a journalist and his human rights activism. Although Ziada's father has no history of political activism or criticism of the authorities on social media, the Supreme State Security Prosecution (SSSP) ordered his pre-trial detention on charges of 'spreading false news', 'misusing social media', and 'belonging to a banned group'. Ziada believes his father was arrested in retaliation for his journalistic work around the country's appalling human rights record and the political scene ahead of the December election. In September, PEN International and English PEN hosted Ziada during a [UN side event](#) to highlight Egypt's dire situation of freedom of expression. Less than two days later, his father was [released](#) from prison.

Borders were sometimes no barrier to intimidation and harassment. PEN International investigated several cases of writers, poets, and journalists outside **Iran** who continue to receive threats from Iranian authorities. Many of them fled the country following the crackdown against the September 2022 protests due to fear of persecution for their writings and critical views of the government.

## GOOD NEWS

In August, the Egyptian poet and activist Ahmed Douma was [released](#) from prison in **Egypt** after receiving a presidential pardon following more than ten years in prison. However, Douma remains under an unofficial travel ban and continue to receive threats from security agents for his writings and activism following his release.

# EMBLEMATIC CASES



## EGYPT

### GALAL EL-BEHAIRY

#### POET IMPRISONED IN RELATION TO HIS POETRY COLLECTION

Galal El-Behairy is a young poet and lyricist known for his criticism of the authorities. He has been imprisoned since 2018 for his poetry critical of the government. He was sentenced to three years in prison on charges of 'disseminating false news and rumours' and 'insulting the Egyptian army' in his poetry collection, *The Finest Women on Earth*. In July 2022, he completed his sentence; however, authorities brought further bogus charges and placed him under pre-trial detention. El-Behairy suffers from severe physical and mental health issues.

Galal El-Behairy. Photo credit: permission granted by El-Behairy's family



## PALESTINE

### AHED TAMIMI

#### WRITER AND ANTI- OCCUPATION ACTIVIST ARRESTED AND BRIEFLY DETAINED FOR HER CRITICAL VIEWS OF THE ISRAELI OCCUPATION

Ahed Tamimi is young writer and anti-occupation activist who is know of her critical views of the Israeli occupation. She was arrested from her home in the West Bank, tortured and detained in dire conditions for weeks before being released without charge. However, she was threatened that her imprisoned father would be killed if she spoke out about her detention.

Ahed Tamimi. Photo credit: permission granted by Tamimi's family

# CASE LIST 2023/2024

## ■ EGYPT

### IMPRISONED

#### Alaa ABD EL-FATTAH

Arrested in September 2019, award-winning writer and Honorary Member of English PEN, Alaa Abd El-Fattah, is continuing to serve a five-year prison term, imposed in December 2021 after a grossly unfair trial before the Emergency State Security Court, on trumped-up charges including ‘joining an illegal organisation’, ‘spreading false news,’ and ‘misusing social media’. Prominent human rights lawyer Mohamed al-Baqer and blogger Mohamed ‘Oxygen’ Ibrahim each received four-year terms in the same case; Mohamed al-Baqer was released following a presidential pardon in July 2023. He is in poor health.

Abd El-Fattah has been subjected to torture and other ill-treatment and held in deplorable prison conditions, as well as prohibited from accessing books and newspapers, which have all impacted his health. The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention has recognised his detention as arbitrary and called for his immediate release and for access to remedy. In 2022, Abd El-Fattah underwent a lengthy hunger strike in protest at his conditions of detention and to call attention to the human rights situation in Egypt (see Case List 2022 for further details).

Born on 18 November 1981, dual British-Egyptian national Abd El-Fattah was a crucial voice of the 2011-2012 Arab Spring uprisings, during which he documented human rights abuses and advocated for democracy. His book, *You Have Not Yet Been Defeated*, which compiles some of his deeply influential writings, has received widespread acclaim. He won the 2022 Electronic Frontier Foundation Award for Democratic Reform Advocacy and PEN Canada’s One Humanity Award in 2023.

### DETAINED

#### Galal EL-BEHAIRY

Galal El-Beairy, born on 27 June 1990, is an Egyptian poet and lyricist known for his criticism of the authorities. Arrested in March 2018, he continued to be held without charge or trial at the end of the year. He has reportedly been beaten and tortured in detention.

El-Beairy was arrested on 5 March 2018 at Cairo International Airport on his return from travels abroad. He initially faced charges of ‘joining a terrorist group’, ‘disseminating false news’, and ‘insulting the President’ for lyrics he had written for the song *Balaha*, performed, and disseminated online by exiled Egyptian singer Ramy Essam. The song heavily criticised President Sisi and was deemed insulting to the president. This case was eventually dropped, but he was sentenced to three years in prison in a separate case for allegedly ‘disseminating false news and rumours’ and ‘insulting the Egyptian army’ in his unpublished poetry collection, *The Finest Women on Earth*.

In July 2021, after his sentence expired, he was subjected to enforced disappearance for three weeks before being freshly charged with ‘disseminating false news’ and ‘joining a terrorist group’ by the Supreme State Security Prosecution in case number 2000/2021 SSSP. Along with other detainees, he joined a collective hunger strike for several weeks in February 2022 to protest against their arbitrary detention.

On 5 March 2023, five years after his arbitrary detention began, El-Beairy started a hunger strike, which he later escalated on 1 June 2023, refusing to take fluids and medicines in protest against his continued detention. PEN International learned that he was forced to suspend his hunger strike on 6 June 2023 due to his declining health.

On 5 September 2023, El-Beairy exceeded the maximum legal limit of pre-trial detention without a trial, which should have led to his release. However, Egyptian authorities continue to detain him arbitrarily. In protest against his indefinite detention, El-Beairy resumed his hunger strike on 5 September and later attempted to commit

suicide four days after resuming his hunger strike after losing hope that he would ever be released. In December 2023, PEN International learned that prison authorities had confiscated all of El-Behairy's reading and writing materials.

El-Behairy's family has informed PEN International that his health has significantly deteriorated due to his imprisonment, poor prison conditions, lack of adequate medical care, and prolonged hunger strikes. He suffers from high blood pressure, joint pain and heart problems. His mental health has severely deteriorated in recent years.

## HARASSED

### Ismail ALEXANDRANI

Writer, journalist and researcher Ismail Alexandrani was unable to leave Egypt during the year, due to an unofficial travel ban imposed on him after his release in December 2022 after completing a seven-year prison term 'leaking military secrets' and 'membership of a terrorist group' following a grossly unfair trial. (See Case list 2022 for further details)

PEN International believes that Alexandrani's detention and conviction, and his ongoing harassment are linked to his work, which challenges the government's narrative on its counter-terrorism operations in the Sinai Peninsula. Alexandrani, a 40-year-old award-winning writer, investigative journalist and socio-political researcher, has worked with several research centres, including the Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights and the Arab Reform Initiative, and is best known for his research and writings on militant groups operating in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula. His work has been published in various regional and international media, as well as academic journals, including the independent Lebanese newspapers Assafir and al-Modon, and the American Arab Studies Journal Jadaliyya.

Ismail Alexandrani was awarded the 2015 Visiting Arab Journalist Fellowship at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. In 2014, he won the Open Eye - Hany Darweesh Award for Exceptional Essay. In 2009, he was one of the Global Winners in Youth Essay Contest on Democracy (World Youth Movement for Democracy), and the

winner of the National Contest for Spreading Understanding and Mutual Respect at the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies.

### Ahmed DOUMA

Poet, writer and activist Ahmed Douma, was released in August after over a decade in prison following a presidential pardon alongside four other political prisoners. However, at the end of the year, he remained under an unofficial travel ban, unable to obtain official documents, including passport<sup>1</sup>, and unable to use his bank account. He has reported that his emails and social media accounts have been hacked several times since his release, and he continues to receive threats of imprisonment from security agents for his writings and activism following his release. His poetry collection remains banned in Egypt.

Douma has been targeted for his political activism and leading role in the 25 January 2011 revolution, as well as his vocal criticism of successive Egyptian governments. Held since 3 December 2013, following his involvement in protests against the enactment of a draconian protest law, he was unjustly sentenced in separate trials to 18 years in prison and a hefty fines. The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention recognised his detention as arbitrary and called for his immediate release and access to remedy. Douma's health significantly deteriorated due to his poor detention conditions. (For more details about his trials and health concerns, see Case list 2022).

Ahmed Douma, born on 11 September 1985, wrote about his experiences, dreams, and aspirations during his prolonged imprisonment in his 2012 poetry collection Soutak Talee (*Your voice is Heard*). Security officials demanded Dar El Maraya, his publishers, to remove copies of his 2021 collection Curly at the 2021 Cairo International Book Fair.

**Update:** Since his release from the prison, Ahmed Douma has actively been raising awareness about the situation in Egyptian prisons. He also was on the forefront of the rare pro-Palestinian protests in Cairo in January 2024. Due to his chants during the protests he was subject to a smear campaign by pro-government media. A new complaint was filed against him by a pro-government lawyer, accusing him of endangering national peace and spreading false news.

## IRAN

### IMPRISONED

#### Nargess MOHAMMADI

Writer, journalist, human rights defender Nargess Mohammadi, imprisoned since 16 November 2021 and serving multiple unjust sentences, was sentenced to a further year in prison in August after conviction of ‘propaganda against the system’ following an unfair trial in connection with her writings from Evin Prison in January 2023 about violations against women in prisons and detention facilities in Iran on social media.

Mohammadi has faced reprisals by the Iranian authorities for her human right work for over 14 years, including multiple unjust prison terms after conviction of charges including ‘propaganda against the system’, ‘defamation’ and ‘rebellious conduct while incarcerated’. (For further details, see Case Lists [2022](#), and [2021](#)). Her family believes that her recent sentences are retaliation for her book, *White Torture*, in which she documents the experienced of imprisoned Iranian women. Between January and June 2023, Iranian authorities initiated five new investigations into Mohammadi’s activism in prison on 7 and 25 January, 13 April, 16 May, and 18 June 2023.

Mohammadi suffers from a neurological disorder that can result in seizures, temporary partial paralysis, and a pulmonary embolism for which she is said to be denied essential medication that could prevent further blood clots from forming. She has been denied adequate medical care on several occasions. In November, prison authorities refused to transfer Mohammadi to a hospital to receive vital medical care because she refused to wear a headscarf and comply with the compulsory veiling law which has been challenged in recent years after mass protests broke out against the death in custody of Mahsa Amini.

Mohammadi, born on 21 April 1972, is an Honorary Member of the Danish, Belgian, Norwegian and Swedish PEN centres. She is the former Vice-President and spokesperson of the Defenders of Human Rights Center (DHRC), co-winner of the [2013 Oxfam Novib / PEN Award](#), winner of the 2011 Per Anger Prize and the 2009 Alexander Langer Award.

In December 2022, Mohammadi was awarded the [RSF Prize for Courage](#) for her tireless fight for press freedom and human rights. In 2023, she was awarded the [PEN/Barbey Freedom to Write Prize](#), UNESCO’s [Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Prize](#) and in October, she was awarded the [2023 Nobel Peace Prize](#).

**Update:** In January 2024, Iranian authorities sentenced Mohammadi to a further 15-month prison term, in relation to her activism in prison resulting in a combined sentence of 12 years and three months in prison, 154 lashes, and two years of exile, and enforces a further travel ban and various restrictions on her social and political activism.

#### Mahvash SABET

Mahvash Sabet is a teacher and poet serving a 10-year prison sentence. She had previously spent a decade in prison due solely to her religious beliefs.

On 31 July 2022, Iranian authorities arrested Sabet and two other members of the long-disbanded ‘Yaran-i-Iran’ (or ‘Friends of Iran’), **Fariba Kamalabadi** and **Afif Naemi**, who helped to administer the Baha’i community’s affairs in Iran until 2008, over unfounded ‘spying’ charges. The authorities have sent Sabet to Evin prison in Tehran, where she was previously imprisoned. According to media sources, Iran’s Intelligence Ministry alleged they were linked to the Baha’i Centre in Israel and had collected and transferred information there. On 21 November 2022, following an unfair trial that lasted only one hour, the Revolutionary Court’s Branch 26 in Tehran sentenced Sabet and Kamalabadi to 10 years in prison. The judge rebuked the defendants for ‘not learning their lesson’ before handing down his harsh sentence.

In May 2023, PEN International learned that Sabet has been suffering for months from broken kneecaps resulting from torture that she has been subjected to in August 2022 at Evin prison. The authorities have not provided her with adequate medical care and have subjected her to deplorable detention conditions. PEN International has also learned that she was repeatedly interrogated over the content of her unpublished book in which she details her previous prison experiences.

Sabet, born on 4 February 1953, began her professional career as a teacher and worked as a principal at several schools. She also collaborated with the National Literacy Committee of Iran. Following the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Sabet was fired from her job and blocked from working in public education, like thousands of other Iranian Baha'i educators. She served for 15 years as director of the Baha'i Institute for Higher Education, which provides alternative higher education for Baha'i youth.

Mahvash Sabet began writing poetry in prison, and a collection of her prison poems was translated into English and published in 2013. She is an honorary member of the Austrian PEN and Danish PEN and was awarded English PEN's 2017 International Writer of Courage. PEN International has campaigned for her release and featured her case in its 2014 Day of the Imprisoned Writer campaign.

## RELEASED

### Reza KHANDAN-MAHABADI

Iranian Writers' Association (IWA) board member Reza Khandan-Mahabadi was released on 15 February 2023, along with many other political prisoners, after Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's Supreme Leader, announced a 'pardon' on 5 February in the wake of months of protests in the country.

He had been sentenced to a six-year prison term, reduced to five years for legal reasons, in May 2019 for 'spreading propaganda against the system' and 'assembly and collusion against national security' in connection with his joint authorship alongside **Baktash Abtin** and **Keyvan Bazan** of a book about IWA history. In August 2022, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention concluded the three men were subjected to arbitrary detention. He was released on medical furlough in 2021, but returned to prison in April 2022. (For further details, see Case List 2022)

Reza Khandan-Mahabadi, born in 1960, is an author, literary critic, and popular culture researcher who has also written collections of short stories for children and adults. He is the editor of a 19-volume encyclopaedia of Iranian fiction, and of a multi-volume book of selected Iranian short stories from the past 80 years.

## MOROCCO

### IMPRISONED

#### Omar RADI

Award-winning investigative online journalist and documentary maker Omar Radi, born on 18 July 1986, exposes injustice, corruption and nepotism between political powers and business elites, and writes about human rights, and social movements, including for Le Desk news website. Detained in July 2020, his July 2021 sentence of six years' imprisonment for 'sexual assault with violence,' 'rape,' 'undermining internal state security by receiving foreign funding,' and 'undermining external state security through collaborating with foreign intelligence' was upheld in March 2022 and confirmed on 18 July by the Rabat Court of Cassation.

PEN International's research has documented clear irregularities in Radi's trial process. Also, trial monitors have highlighted clear breaches of fair trial standards. At the time of his arrest in 2020, Radi had already been under surveillance for more than two years by the Moroccan authorities using the notorious Pegasus spyware. Shortly before his arrest, a sustained smear campaign by the Chouftv news website known to have ties to security agencies accused Radi of receiving foreign funds to provide espionage services to foreign companies, allegations for which he was subsequently charged.

Radi's alleged sexual assault and rape charges followed a complaint filed in July 2020 by a work colleague. He maintains that the relationship was consensual. PEN International's examination of the case documents revealed that the evidence on both counts is highly flawed, leading it to conclude that Radi is being targeted for his criticism of the governments and to deter others. Although the two offences of espionage and rape were unrelated, they were tied together. His case is part of a pattern of government critics, including journalists, bloggers, human rights defenders, and academics being arrested and prosecuted on dubious charges of sexual offences, financial misdemeanours, or working for foreign governments.

On 10 December 2022, Radi joined other prisoners of conscience in a one-day collective symbolic hunger strike in protest against their arbitrary imprisonment. On 12 December 2022, he was awarded the RSF Press Freedom Prize for Independence.

In January 2023, the European Parliament adopted a resolution urging the Moroccan authorities to respect freedom of expression and media freedom, guarantee imprisoned journalists, in particular Radi, Raissouni and Taoufik Bouachrine, a fair trial and due process guarantees, secure their release and cease the harassment of all journalists, their lawyers and families. In June, Radi's family reported that prison authorities told him not to discuss politics with his family during their visits or he will be denied phone calls. The family also said that prison authorities confiscated all his prison writings.

## Soulaiman RAISSOUNI

Prominent Moroccan journalist and editor-in-chief of the now-closed opposition newspaper *Akhbar al-Youm* Soulaiman Raissouni is serving a five-year sentence, upheld on final appeal on 18 July by the Rabat Court of Cassation. On Human Rights Day, 10 December, Raissouni joined several other prisoners of conscience in a one-day symbolic hunger strike to protest his arbitrary imprisonment.

Raissouni has been held since May 2020, when he was arrested on charges of 'sexual assault' and 'enforced confinement', part of a pattern of the Moroccan authorities' intimidation of dissenting voices through the use of sexual assault charges. Raissouni, known for his editorials critical of the Moroccan authorities, denies the allegations. Prior to his arrest, he was targeted for surveillance by Pegasus spyware over a two-year period, starting in 2017. His prison diaries and a draft novel were confiscated in 2022, prompting him to refuse family visits for some weeks.

Born in 1972, Raissouni's July 2021 sentence of five years' imprisonment and MAD100,000 (approximately USD11,000) was upheld on appeal in February 2022. The trial was unfair, as he was prevented from attending several hearings, including the sentencing session from which his defence team was also barred. Throughout his pre-trial detention, Raissouni was

denied access to his family and legal counsel on several occasions, and he underwent a 122-day hunger strike in 2021 to protest against his detention. His health is poor, exacerbated by the lack of adequate medical care.

In July 2022, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention ruled that Raissouni is arbitrarily detained. In January 2023, the European Parliament adopted a resolution, urging the Moroccan authorities to respect freedom of expression and media freedom, guarantee imprisoned journalists, in particular Radi, Raissouni and Taoufik Bouachrine, a fair trial and due process guarantees, secure their release and cease the harassment of all journalists, their lawyers and families.

## HARASSED

### Maati MONJIB

Writer, academic, and historian Maati Monjib, has been a target of Moroccan authorities due to his critical writings and views of the government. He remains unable to leave the country after a ban imposed on him in October 2021, which he has protested.

Detained in December 2020, Monjib was provisionally released from prison in August 2021, after he went on hunger strike, as he was serving a one-year prison sentence with a fine of MAD10,000 (about USD960) on charges including 'undermining the internal integrity of the state' and fraud in connection with alleged embezzlement and money laundering. These charges apparently stemmed from Monjib's receipt of foreign funds to conduct training workshops for citizen journalists. Monjib believes the charges were brought to punish him because of a radio interview where he criticised the General Directorate of Territorial Surveillance for their role in suppressing political opponents. In October 2021, he was refused permission to leave to seek medical treatment in France.

Previously, in November 2015, Monjib had been charged alongside six other journalists and human rights defenders with 'undermining state security' and 'failing to report foreign funding' for participating in a foreign-funded project to train people in citizen journalism. He has also been a victim of an ongoing defamation campaign through



online articles. In March 2023, he received an official letter from the Ministry informing him that he had been suspended from his duties as professor of History at the Mohammed V University, with cessation of payment of his salary, in connection with his 2021 prison sentence, though he had stopped receiving payments in 2022. In September 2023, he lost his job as a historian at Mohamed V University following an interview with al-Araby21 news website in which he criticised the King. In July he was subjected to a smear campaign by pro-governemnt media who accused him of supporting a Quran burning in Sweden. The smear campaign pushed Monjib into hiding over fears of attack by people who believed the false news.

Monjib, born in 1962, is a writer, academic, historian and the president of Freedom Now, an association that works to defend freedom of expression and journalism in Morocco, and the founder of the Ibn Rochd Center for Studies and Communication. His books include: *The Moroccan Monarchy and the Struggle for Power*; (with Zakya Daoud) *A Political Biography of Mehdi Ben Barka*; and *Islamists Versus Secularists in Morocco*.

## ■ PALESTINE

### DETAINED

#### Mustafa SHETA

Mustafa Sheta, a researcher and journalist who is also producer and general manager of the Freedom Theatre in the Jenin refugee camp in the West Bank, was held in Megiddo Prison in Israel under an administrative detention order at the end of the year. On 13 December 2023, Israeli forces broke into The Freedom Theatre during a raid on the refugee camp, destroyed its offices, and later stormed the houses of three of its members, including Sheta (see **Ahmed Tobasi, Jamal Abu Joas** under Brief Detention below). On 22 December, a lawyer who was able to speak with Sheta for 10 minutes learned that the Israeli soldiers interrogated Sheta about his political affiliation and activities. On 31 December, an Israeli military court ordered his administrative detention for six months without any charges.

## BRIEF DETENTION

### Ahed TAMIMI

On 6 November 2023, a dozen Israeli soldiers stormed the home of Palestinian writer and prominent activist Ahed Tamimi in Nabi Saleh, occupied West Bank, handcuffed her and took her to an undisclosed location. According to media reports, the Israeli army arrested Tamimi on suspicion of ‘inciting violence and terrorist activities’ on social media. Her family recounted that in the days leading to her arrest, Tamimi had been the target of an online smear campaign by Israeli settlers, who accused her of inciting terrorism and the killing of settlers on social media.

Tamimi was later taken to an undisclosed location and not allowed to contact her family or lawyers. On 13 November, Tamimi appeared in court via video link from Damun Prison in Haifa, Israel, where she was being held. The court extended her detention to allow the authorities to bring charges against her. She was denied any form of communication with her family and was not able to communicate freely with the lawyer who volunteered to represent her during both court hearings. Tamimi’s lawyer told PEN International that during a visit on 20 November, she saw clearly visible bruises on Tamimi’s body, and that she was held in poor detention conditions, including limited access to adequate food, drinking water, clothing, and being held in overcrowded prison cells.

Following her release on 30 November as a part of a temporary truce deal between Israel and Hamas, Tamimi told media that she was threatened that if she spoke about her time in detention, her father, who had been arrested earlier and placed under administrative detention, would be killed. Tamimi also spoke of the abuse and the inhumane detention conditions Palestinians face in Israeli prisons, including assaults and being forced to sleep on the ground with limited access to adequate food and drinking water.

Ahed Tamimi is a prominent Palestinian activist and the co-author (with Dena Tahruri) of *They Called Me a Lioness: A Palestinian Girl’s Fight for Freedom*, in which she reflects on her personal experience and the daily struggles of life under Israeli occupation. She was previously arrested

in December 2017, at the age of 17, following dissemination of a video of an altercation with Israeli soldiers. She was later sentenced to eight months in prison after conviction of charges including ‘aggravated assault.’

## Ahmed TOBASI

### Jamal ABU JOAS

On 13 December 2023, Israeli forces raided the Jenin refugee camp in the occupied West Bank, and broke into the Freedom Theatre, destroyed its offices, and later stormed the houses of three of its members. Soldiers arrested prominent Palestinian artist, cultural figure and screen writer Ahmed Tobasi, the artistic director of the Freedom Theatre. Israeli soldiers broke into Tobasi’s house, assaulted and handcuffed him, and took photos of him after they placed military uniform on his body. Soldiers later took him outside and left him in the street in the rain with little clothes. He was blindfolded and taken to a nearby military checkpoint where he was intensively interrogated. He was released the next day without pressing charges.

Tobasi’s colleagues Mustafa Sheta, the Freedom Theatre’s producer and general manager (see under Detained above), and Jamal Abu Joas, a poet and theatre studies graduate, were also arrested from their houses during the raid. Abu Joas was released on 21 December,.

Ahmed Tobasi is an actor, director and educator who was born in Jenin refugee camp in the occupied West Bank. He was arrested at the age of 17 and spent four years in an Israeli prison before joining The Freedom Theater’s school and later became its artistic director. Tobasi is known for his roles in ‘*The Journey of the Others*’, ‘*200 Meters*’, and ‘*And Here I Am*’ in which he unpicks the plight of the Israeli occupation on Palestinians and their everyday struggle.

Founded in 2006, The Freedom Theatre is a theatre and cultural centre in Jenin refugee camp in the occupied West Bank, which stages professional theatre productions, holds theatre workshops, acting training, and exhibitions and short films.

## Mosab Abu Toha

On 19 November 2023, prominent Palestinian writer, poet and librarian Mosab Abu Toha was arrested by Israeli soldiers in the Gaza Strip while trying to reach the Egyptian border and taken to an unknown location. He and his family had been displaced from their home in Beit Lahia as the indiscriminate bombardment of north Gaza intensified, and Israeli authorities ordered the eviction of northern Gaza on 12 October 2023 into squalid conditions with other families at an UNRWA school in Jabalia refugee camp.

On 14 October, Abu Toha reported that 30 members of his extended family had been killed due to the Israeli bombardment. His family received approval on 4 November for emergency evacuation through the Rafah Crossing as his son holds American citizenship, but they did not leave Jabalia refugee camp until 19 November due to the dangerous situation.

While on their way, Abu Toha was stopped at a military checkpoint by Israeli soldiers, ordered to leave his family behind and arrested. Initially taken to an unknown location, he was later taken to a detention facility in Be’er Sheva in Israel. On 21 November, he was released without charges and returned to Gaza. On 3 December, he was able to cross the border with Egypt with his family.

Abu Toha told PEN International that soldiers called his full name and ordered him to fully undress and then allowed him to dress later but leave his jacket and shoes. Soldiers then confiscated his wallet and the entire family’s passports. He reported having been repeatedly assaulted by Israeli soldiers with slaps and kicks, including when he denied having any connection to Hamas. During his detention, he was kept permanently blindfolded and was forced to sleep without a pillow.

Mosab Abu Toha is a Palestinian poet, writer, and essayist who was born in Al-Shati refugee camp in Gaza. He is best known for his collection *Things You May Find Hidden in My Ear*, which was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award and won a Derek Walcott Poetry Prize and an American Book Award.

## NAMES OF WRITERS IN GAZA KILLED SINCE OCTOBER 2023

1. [Omar Abu Shawish](#)  
Writer and poet – Killed in an Israeli air strike on 7 October
2. [Saeed Talal al-Dahshan](#)  
Writer – Killed in an Israeli air strike on 13 October
3. [Yousef Dawas](#)  
Writer – Killed in an Israeli air strike on 14 October
4. [Abdullah Al-Aqad](#)  
Writer – Killed in an Israeli air strike on 16 October
5. [Jihad El-Masry](#)  
Writer and historian – Killed in an Israeli air strike on 17 October
6. [Heba Abu Nada](#)  
Writer and poet – Killed in an air strike on 20 October
7. [Abdul Karim Hashash](#)  
Writer – Killed in an Israeli air strike on 23 October
8. [Inas al-Saqa](#)  
Playwright and actor – Killed in an Israeli air strike on 31 October
9. [Nooraldeen Hajjaj](#)  
Writer – Killed in an Israeli air strike on 31 December
10. [Shahadah Al-Buhbahan](#)  
Poet – Killed in an Israeli air strike on 6 November
11. [Mustafa Al-Sawwaf](#)  
Writer – Killed in an Israeli air strike on 18 November
12. [Sufyan Tayeh](#)  
Writer and poet – Killed in an Israeli air strike on 2 December
13. [Refaat Alareer](#)  
Writer and poet – Killed in an Israeli air strike on 7 December
14. [Saleem Al-Naffar](#)  
Writer and poet – Killed in an Israeli air strike on 7 December

### Disclaimers:

\* PEN International was unable to communicate with the families of these writers due to the difficulty of communications and as many of the writers were killed along with their families.

\*\* This list does not include artists and cultural workers; it only includes writers and poets whose PEN International was able to obtain information regarding their deaths from at least two different sources, and it does not represent an inclusive list of all writers killed since October 7.

# UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

## DETAINED

### Mohamed Abdullah AL-ROKEN

Dr Mohammad Abdullah Al-Roken remains in detention since his arrest on 17 July 2012. At the end of the year, he was facing fresh charges after news broke during the [COP28 climate summit](#) in Dubai that Emirati authorities had begun a new mass trial of over 80 individuals, including Al-Roken, on bogus terrorism-related charges.

The defendants, including Dr Al-Roken, are [facing charges](#) of ‘establishing’ and ‘supporting’ a terrorist group, in relation to their alleged links to the Justice and Dignity Committee, a group of government critics who called for the respect of human rights’ values in the UAE between 2011 and 2012. Most, if not all, including Al-Roken, were previously been convicted of similar vague charges in the notorious ‘[UAE 94](#)’ case and many, including Al-Roken, were being held after expiry of their sentences under a law permitting indefinite detention for ‘rehabilitation’. (For more details, see Case List [2022](#)).

In June 2013, human rights organisations [revealed](#) that the state security officers had subjected Dr Al-Roken and the other ‘[UAE 94](#)’ defendants to systematic mistreatment, including torture, while in pre-trial detention. In April 2014, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (WGAD) [concluded](#) that the UAE 94 defendants, including Al-Roken, were held arbitrarily, raising concerns over grave violations of the right to a fair trial, including forced confessions and reports of torture and other ill-treatment, and prolonged solitary confinement. The WGAD concluded that the charges brought against them related to acts that fall under the rights to freedom of expression and of peaceful assembly, and urged the UAE government to release them and provide them with adequate reparation.

Dr Mohamed Abdullah Al-Roken, born 26 September 1962, is a prominent Emirati writer, academic and human rights lawyer specialising in freedom of expression and counter-terrorism. He was a member of the International Association of Lawyers (UIA), the International Bar Association, and is the former president of the [dissolved](#) UAE Jurists Association.

## PEN ACTIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

In addition to its advocacy for the writers referred to in this list, PEN International also took action on behalf of journalists and others at risk in the Middle East and North Africa, some in collaboration with other organisations, details of which can be found in the links provided below:

### BAHRAIN

**Dr Abduljalil ALSINGACE:** *imprisoned writer*

#### Action:

**January 2023:** Joint open letter: [Bahrain: Free Dr Abduljalil Al-Singace after a year and half of hunger strike](#)

### EGYPT

**Ismail ALEXANDRANI:** *released from prison after serving unjust sentence*

#### Action:

**January 2023:** Statement: [Egypt: Writer, researcher, and investigative journalist Ismail Alexandrani released from prison](#)

**Patrick George ZAKI:** *academic and researcher sentenced on trumped up charges*

**Action:**

**July 2023:** Joint statement: PEN International joins civil society organisations in condemning the sentencing of Egyptian academic and researcher Patrick George Zaki

**Alaa ABD EI-FATTAH****Action:**

**July 2023:** Joint statement: Egypt: PEN International and English PEN condemn the persistent failure of Rishi Sunak to secure the release of British writer Alaa Abd El-Fattah

## IRAN

**VARIOUS:** *persisting attacks against the rights to freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly*

**Action:**

**September 2023:** Statement: Iran: More than a year since Iranians' uprising for freedom, hundreds killed and tortured, and thousands remain in arbitrary imprisonment

## PALESTINE

**Shireen ABU AKLEH (f):** *journalist killed*

**Action:**

**May 2023:** Joint statement: Palestine/Israel: A year since the brutal murder of Shireen Abu Akleh, justice is yet to be served, while Israeli strikes kill more civilians in Gaza

**VARIOUS:** *persisting attacks against the rights to freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly*

**Action:**

**October 2023:** Statement: OPT/Israel: PEN International calls for an immediate halt of hostilities, protection of civilians, and a just resolution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict

**October 2023:** Statement: In response to LitProm decision to postpone award ceremony for Palestinian author Adania Shibli (f)

**October 2023:** Statement: OPT/Israel: PEN International calls for an immediate ceasefire, the protection of civilians, the release of all hostages and an end to the siege of Gaza

**October 2023:** Statement: PEN International Calls for Peace-Dispel all Hatreds

**October 2023:** Statement: OPT/Israel: PEN International condemns the systematic violations of freedom of expression since October 7

**Ahmed TOBASI and Mustafa SHETA:** *artists detained*

**December 2023:** Statement: OPT/Israel: PEN International calls for the immediate release of artists Ahmed Tobasi and Mustafa Sheta, and an end to Israel's targeting of writers and cultural figures

## MOROCCO

**Taoufik BOUACHRINE :** *journalist imprisoned after unfair trial*

**Action:**

**February 2023:** Joint statement: Groups call on Moroccan authorities to end persecution of Taoufik Bouachrine

# CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

‘Hate speech – including xenophobia, racism, antisemitism, islamophobia, anti-LGBTQI+ sentiments, misogyny, and other forms of intolerance – is on the rise, spreading rapidly via social media on a global scale. This is an insidious force that dehumanizes individuals and communities based on their identity, often manipulated by those with political motives. We must all stand firmly against hate speech, and be vigilant and proactive in countering it, protecting the principles of equality, dignity, and social harmony, which are necessary to ensure a more just and inclusive world. This is now more important than ever, as we are witnessing raging conflicts and the killing of innocent civilians trapped in senseless wars, globally.’

ROMANA CACCHIOLI, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR  
PEN INTERNATIONAL

As the world hovered on the brink of escalating tensions and conflicts at the end of 2023, such as those in Israel, the Occupied Palestinian Territories and Lebanon, Iraq, Sudan, Ukraine and Yemen, the work of PEN International, as outlined in its Charter and put into practice by its members around the world, remains as critical as ever. Without writers and artists, in all their diversity and languages, the space for effective dialogue between communities and nations withers and shrinks. Without dialogue, there can be no peace. Without peace, culture in its many tangible and intangible forms is at risk and individuals cannot become the best people they can be. Culture is an essential tool to help us address the multiple planetary crises of environmental degradation, climate change, biodiversity loss, ocean acidification, and pollution that we all face, and we must ensure that it can flourish, not allow it to be erased.

PEN members and their fellow writers across the world continue to speak truth to power, challenging authoritarianism and misinformation, often at great personal risk to themselves, as shown by the 122 individuals in this Case List ranging from murder to imprisonment and from banishment to harassment - which can often cause writers to flee their countries, putting their ability to write and reach their audiences in jeopardy. PEN International's advocacy and campaigning will continue through 2024 and beyond to seek an end to these human rights violations, provide and support protection and systems of refuge that can help support writers to continue their essential work, and to seek redress for harms suffered.

As outlined in PEN's Charter, literature knows no frontiers and must remain common currency among people in spite of political or international upheavals as unhampered transmission of thought within each nation and between all nations fosters mutual understanding and ultimately peace. In all circumstances, and particularly in time of war, works of art, the patrimony of humanity at large, should be left untouched by national or political passion.

## PEN INTERNATIONAL THEREFORE MAKES THE FOLLOWING RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY:

### TO FOSTER PEACE

- Do all within their power to bring about an immediate end to all armed conflicts;
  - As an urgent step, an immediate and long-lasting ceasefire between Israel and the Hamas authorities in Gaza and between the warring parties in Sudan must be established.
- Take urgent steps to prevent instances of genocide where there is evidence to suggest that it may be in progress, such as in Palestine and in the Darfur region of Sudan;
- Use all avenues to seek the release of hostages and work to ensure timely delivery of adequate humanitarian aid to civilian populations in conflict zones;
- Publicly call on all parties to armed conflicts to respect the right of journalists to report on the hostilities, ensure journalists' safety, allow all journalists seeking to evacuate from conflict zones to do so, abjure the deliberate killing of journalists, promptly and thoroughly investigate all attacks on journalists, and hold accountable individuals found to be responsible for them;
- Work to ensure that schools, cultural institutions, cultural heritage sites, and other civilian infrastructure are not targeted and that children's right to education during times of conflict is protected, including in situations of internal and cross-border displacement;

- Support all efforts to ensure accountability, at the national and international level, for violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law committed during armed conflicts, and work collectively towards provision of remedy, redress and reparation for past violations and the prevention of further violations.

**In post-conflict societies, such as in the Western Balkans, PEN International also calls on governments to:**

- immediately end the glorification of war criminals, revisionist narratives and hate speech, and the denial of war crimes and genocide.

## TO PROTECT WRITERS

- Immediately and unconditionally release all writers, journalists, activists, artists, bloggers and other cultural workers unjustly imprisoned or detained without trial, simply for exercising their legitimate right to freedom of expression, including all detained and imprisoned writers listed in this Case List, and drop charges against any writer facing trial solely on account of their work or the peaceful expression of their opinions;
- End the practice of banishment and ‘civil death’ through forced deportation, refusal of entry and stripping of citizenship and civil rights, which can amount to a crime against humanity if applied for political reasons;
- Repeal all legislation, including criminal defamation and insult laws, and desist from introducing new laws, that unduly restrict the right to freedom of expression, including online, and ensure adequate protections for a free press in all countries, in line with states’ international human rights obligations;

- Take measures to address the growing use of SLAPPs, which have become a significant threat to media freedom and advocacy rights. Specifically in relation to SLAPPs, all governments should adopt as a minimum:
  - Procedural rules to allow courts to early dismiss SLAPP claims;
  - Procedural rules ensuring a fair award of costs and relief to rebalance the position of the parties;
  - Rules providing for the possibility to impose penalties and/or punitive damages as deterrent, and also to counter libel tourism;
  - Provisions on assistance, support, and protection for SLAPP targets, including legal advice free of charge;
- Ensure a comprehensive, fair and systematic response to all writers fleeing persecution, including the provision of humanitarian pathways to refuge.

## TO ENHANCE THE CULTURAL ROLE OF MINORITIZED COMMUNITIES

- Recognise and celebrate the role of minoritized communities in advancing the culture of all states, including by:
  - Taking effective measures to stem and reverse the rising tide in many countries of xenophobia, antisemitism, islamophobia and anti-LGBTQI+ sentiments;
  - Facilitating mother tongue education, which enables members to celebrate their life, language, culture and heritage;
  - Promoting translation of literatures to and from minoritized languages;
  - Protecting the cultural heritage of minoritized communities;
  - Ending the persecution of any writer solely on the grounds of their background and protecting the right of writers from minoritized communities to advocate for their community’s rights without fear of reprisals.



## TO PROMOTE AND PROTECT WOMEN WRITERS

- Implement the calls of PEN International's Women's Manifesto, specifically by
  - Ending all forms of violence against women and girls;
  - Protecting women writers and journalists and combatting impunity for attacks against them, including online;
  - Eliminating gender disparity at all levels of education;
  - Ensuring full equality of women in both law and practice, including by addressing structural barriers to women writers and ensuring parity for them in employment and remuneration as writers.

## TO PROTECT CIVIC SPACE AS A BULWARK FOR THE REALISATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

- Reaffirm the importance of civic space as a foundation for an authentic democracy that respects, protects and facilitates the human rights of citizens and civil society organisations to safely speak out, organise, associate, participate and claim their rights, including the right to express their opinion, views and criticism of the political, social, economic and cultural structures around them, and put in place adequate measures to nurture and protect it;
- Develop and implement bolder and better coordinated responses to the global rise in authoritarianism and the widespread emergency of shrinking civic space that imperil and significantly threaten to erode gains made in many countries over decades of struggle, solidarity and emerging global consensus on democratic governance and respect for human rights as foundational for peaceful, open, and just societies;
- End the use of smear campaigns that put writers at risk of physical and digital harassment and attacks, and which disproportionately affect women.
- Desist from banning books and other forms of artistic expression that do not constitute hate speech.

# THANK YOU

We are grateful to so many people and organisations for their solidarity and support, crucial in helping us to protect persecuted writers, respond quickly in emergencies, and to challenge alarming threats to freedom of expression.

Our supporters include:

## PATRONS OF THE PEN INTERNATIONAL WRITERS CIRCLE

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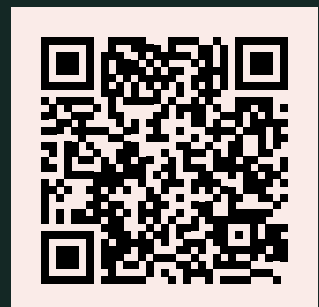
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And thanks to all of our 'Friends of PEN International'.  
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[pen-international.org](http://pen-international.org)