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HOUSE FOREIGN AFFAIRS SUBCOMMITTEE ON AFRICA, GLOBAL HEALTH, GLOBAL HUMAN RIGHTS, AND INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

Hearing on “International Human Rights and Closing Civic Space”

December 9, 2020

Good afternoon Chairwoman Bass, Ranking Member Smith, and Members of the Subcommittee. My name is Joanne Lin, and I am the National Director of Advocacy and Government Affairs at Amnesty International USA. Amnesty International is the world’s largest grassroots human rights organization, with 10 million members and supporters. We advocate against injustice in all forms and strive to create a world where human rights can be enjoyed by all people.

Today I am going to focus on three global trends, all which have the operative effect of closing civic space: (1) internet shutdowns or restrictions; (2) Big Tech complicity in censorship; and (3) government attacks on civil society.

My testimony will address three emerging global trends, followed by country-specific analyses, and will conclude with policy recommendations for Congress and the U.S. government. For purposes of this hearing and due to page limits and time constraints, I will be addressing only a sample of countries around the world experiencing assaults on civic space. For a full analysis of Amnesty International’s country-specific assessments, please visit this website: <https://2020elections.amnestyusa.org/countries/>

Two of the trends—internet restrictions and Big Tech complicity in censorship—relate to information technologies. These technologies have fundamentally reshaped and redefined what constitutes civic space. In the 21st century, virtual platforms and networks have become the new civic space. This had been cemented in 2020—the year of the COVID-19 pandemic—when the world shut down and was shut in, and online platforms became a principal means of engagement.

1) Trend #1: Increasing use of internet shutdowns

Since early 2019, Amnesty International has documented internet shutdowns in at least eight African nations as well as in [Iran](#), Myanmar, and Jammu and Kashmir. To illustrate the interplay of internet restrictions and human rights violations, let us look at the prolonged internet shutdown in Myanmar which lasted 14 months in [Rakhine and Chin](#) states.

Human rights activists rely on the internet—in particular encrypted messaging services—to document and share information. Without secure methods of communication, activists are forced to rely on less secure means of communication such as calls and texts, thereby increasing their risk of being surveilled, harassed, arrested, and prosecuted in connection with their work.

In June 2019 Myanmar authorities started to impose internet shutdowns, which lasted until August 2020 (over 14 months). During the internet shutdowns it became impossible to get information about the ongoing armed conflict between the Myanmar military and Arakan army. It also became impossible to get information about [COVID-19](#) on everything from the spread of the disease, to personal hygiene tips, how to wear a homemade mask—even as the coronavirus spread rapidly in Rakhine State. The internet blackouts also impeded the delivery of critical humanitarian aid. The prolonged internet shutdown took place at a time when [access to information](#)—whether about armed conflict, COVID-19, or humanitarian aid—could literally mean the difference between life and death.

Nearly [30 non-governmental organizations](#) (“NGOs”) urged authorities to lift the internet restrictions. Ten activists who called for an end to the internet shutdown were convicted of protesting without permission; nine were sentenced to one-month prison terms. One [poet activist](#) was convicted for putting up a banner that read, “Is the internet being shut down to hide war crimes and killing people?”

2) Trend #2: Big Tech complicity in censorship

While some countries have imposed internet shutdowns, other countries are censoring online content and turning to Big Tech as a partner.

Just last week on December 1, [Amnesty International](#) published a report finding Facebook complicit in “censorship and repression on an industrial scale” in Vietnam. The government reported that Facebook complied with 95 percent of censorship requests. This staggering figure demonstrates that Facebook is not just letting censorship unfold on its platform; Facebook is complicit in government censorship.

Facebook's actions have direct human rights impact. Vietnamese authorities often harass, intimidate, prosecute, and jail people for their social media use. Of the 170 prisoners of conscience in Vietnam, 69 prisoners—nearly 40 percent—have been jailed solely for their social media activity.

Big Tech complicity in censorship is not limited to Vietnam. Rather, what's happening in Vietnam is a sign of things to come. Across the world, from Thailand to Turkey, we are seeing governments co-opt Facebook and other social media platforms to limit freedom of expression and to censor people's voices at scale.

3) Trend #3: Civil society organizations under serious attack

In recent years a growing number of governments have begun to restrict space previously permitted for independent civil society. Government attacks on NGOs have been relentless and hard-hitting, and have reached Amnesty International sections around the world including Hungary, Turkey, and India.

Hungary: [Hungary](#)'s government has pursued a campaign to silence civil society. In 2018 a magazine with close ties to the government published a list of individuals described as “mercenaries” paid to overthrow the government. The list included staff of Amnesty Hungary as well as other civil society activists and academics. Individuals whose names were published on the list found themselves on the receiving end of a campaign of harassment that included threats of rape and death.

Turkey: In Turkey, police arrested and detained Amnesty Turkey's board chair and Amnesty Turkey's director alongside other human rights activists in 2017. This summer they were convicted and sentenced to serve lengthy prison sentences. While the Amnesty Turkey leaders have since been released from detention pending the outcome of their appeals, others are not so fortunate. Renowned civil society leader and philanthropist Osman Kavala has just completed his third year in prison despite a massive international outcry demanding his release.

India: While Amnesty International has managed to survive in Hungary and Turkey, that has not been the case in India, the world's most populous democracy. In 2020 Amnesty India was forced to halt its human rights work after its bank accounts were frozen. Amnesty India had no choice but to lay off all staff and suspend all research, campaigning, and advocacy. This follows [two years of relentless threats](#), intimidation, and harassment by the Indian government, including raids of Amnesty India's offices and multiple interrogations of staff and board members, without counsel.

In sharing these three Amnesty International examples, I want to be very clear that Amnesty recognizes that as a global movement with an established brand and paid

professional staff, we are better situated and equipped to contend against government forces that seek to quash dissent and stifle civil society. We also recognize that today's hearing and Congress's future actions should not focus on Amnesty's concerns, but rather the concerns of human rights defenders and prisoners of conscience across the world who daily face risks of harassment and imprisonment, for the simple act of expressing their opinion.

Nevertheless, the forced shuttering of Amnesty International in the world's largest democracy, with a rich history and tradition of tolerance, pluralism, and nonviolent dissent—is devastating not only for the millions of Indians aided by Amnesty India, but also sends a very troubling message to human rights defenders and civil society around the world.

Power of peaceful protest movements: While the global outlook on civic space looks bleak, there has been one bright spot—and it is bright indeed—and that is the large-scale [protest movements](#) that exploded in 2019—in [Hong Kong](#), [Lebanon](#), Iraq, Chile, Bolivia, just to name a few places. These [protest movements](#) span urban and rural areas, represent diverse cross-sections of the population, and have shown tremendous staying power. Even after the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020, protest movements rose quickly in [Belarus](#), [Nigeria](#), [Thailand](#), [Egypt](#), and elsewhere. Many of these protesters have been met with police violence, sometimes lethal violence. Nonetheless, whether protesting against political corruption, economic inequality, police killings, or the climate crisis, these peaceful protest movements demonstrate that people across the world will not be deterred in their fight for greater government responsiveness, accountability, and justice.

Peaceful protesting is a human right. Yet the way many governments have chosen to respond to these protests has been disproportionate, unwarranted, and rife with violations of human rights standards. An Amnesty International investigation documented an alarming pattern of the [Hong Kong](#) police deploying reckless and indiscriminate tactics against demonstrators in the summer of 2019, as well as evidence of torture and other ill-treatment in detention. In October 2019 [Chilean](#) security forces deliberately injured protesters to discourage dissent, killing at least four people and seriously wounding thousands more. [Iraqi](#) security forces used excessive—and, in over 600 cases, lethal—force to disperse the demonstrators in October 2019. Demonstrators were brutally repressed by the security forces in [Mali](#), resulting in the deaths of at least 11 protesters and bystanders in July 2020. In [Lebanon](#), security forces shot at unarmed crowds in August 2020, causing severe injuries. Amnesty International researchers uncovered a widespread campaign of torture launched by authorities in [Belarus](#) in August 2020 against peaceful protesters in their custody. In October 2020 Nigerian authorities [suppressed](#)

protests calling for an end to police brutality violently and through unlawful arrests and detentions.

II. COUNTRY-SPECIFIC ANALYSES

Around the globe human rights defenders (“HRDs”) are routinely the target of judicial harassment, smear campaigns, intimidation, death threats, illegal surveillance, arbitrary detention, sexual violence, torture, enforced disappearance, and even assassination by governments, armed groups, and corporations.

HRDs who are imprisoned solely for their peaceful human rights work are also considered [Prisoners of Conscience](#) (“POCs”). A POC is any person who is imprisoned or otherwise physically restricted solely for the peaceful expression of their beliefs or identity.

Governments across the world are [increasingly attacking NGOs](#) by creating laws that subject their staff and members to surveillance, nightmarish bureaucratic hurdles, and the ever-present threat of imprisonment. In many countries, organizations who dare to speak out for human rights are being bullied into silence. Groups of people who come together to defend and demand human rights are facing growing barriers to working freely and safely. Silencing them and preventing their work has consequences for everyone

The U.S. government should recognize the role of civil society organizations and human rights defenders in protecting human rights and freedoms, as well as the unprecedented challenges they are facing in many countries.

Ethiopia: Starting in November 2020, the world has turned its attention to the crisis in Ethiopia’s Tigray region. The Ethiopian government has started to employ harsh tactics reminiscent of previous governments, including the [arbitrary arrest](#) of thousands of nonviolent protesters, journalists, and civil society leaders such as Bekele Gerba and Eskinder Nega.

Since taking office in 2018, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed’s government has overturned the repressive civil society law and released dozens of detained journalists and bloggers. In 2019 Ethiopia leapt 40 places up the World Press Freedom Index. With the recent wave of arrests, the Ethiopian government [risks rolling back](#) the progress it made on media freedom.

The U.S. government must press Abiy to allow unrestricted humanitarian assistance to the people of Tigray and internally displaced people (“IDPs”) and refugees, and provide increased technical and monetary support for urgent humanitarian needs of IDPs in Ethiopia; release civilian Tigrayans detained during the course of other government military

operations in Tigray; and allow an independent investigation into all alleged abuses committed during the military action in Tigray, with the aim of holding accountable persons responsible for abuses. This investigation must be part of ensuring accountability for intercommunal violence that has occurred since 2018. The U.S. government must also invest for success in Ethiopia by providing technical support in provision of civilian police training, including providing urgent capacity enhancement support for members of the security forces to respect, protect and fulfill human rights; and increasing support to local civil society, media and human rights defenders to defend and promote human rights in the country through monitoring, documentation, reporting, advocacy and campaigning.

Nigeria: The Nigerian government has been waging a sustained [campaign on independent media](#) and civil society organizations for several years. This crackdown has come in the form of repressive legislation, threats, attacks, and unjust [arrest](#) and detention. While the crackdown has focused on groups working on issues of corruption and the government's [counterinsurgency efforts](#) against Boko Haram, there are signs that groups and individuals involved in calls for police reform are now also being targeted.

In October 2020 Nigeria was rocked by a series of protests demanding police reform and accountability for the Special Armed Robbery Unit (“SARS”). The unit was infamous for facilitating corruption, arbitrary detention, extrajudicial execution, and torture throughout the country. Nigerian authorities [suppressed](#) the protests, both violently and through unlawful arrests, detentions, and other means. Despite being met with [violence by the police and military](#), causing the [deaths of at least 15 people](#), the student-led nonviolent protests continued for weeks before being paused as Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari and the governors of several states announced they would conduct investigations into the allegations of abuses.

Nigeria has a poor record on investigating and holding its security forces accountable: Of over two dozen commissions of inquiry over the last two decades, not one commission report has been published and no one responsible for abuses has been held accountable. More alarmingly, Amnesty has received reports of the arrest of protest organizers, the freezing of bank accounts, and the seizure of passports.

The U.S. government should urge the Nigerian government to release all peaceful protesters arrested for taking part in the #ENDSARS protests and give clear unequivocal instructions to all security forces to end abuses and exercise restraint, especially when policing non-violent protests. U.S. officials should press Nigerian authorities to publicly commit to allow an immediate, independent, and credible investigation with a clear timeline into human rights abuses committed by SARS and the police in general, ensure full cooperation with the investigation, and provide justice and compensation for the

families of victims. The U.S. government should encourage Nigeria to initiate discussions with a clear timeline for actions with civil society organizations, a commitment to a comprehensive review of elements of the security sector accused of excessive use of force and other human rights abuses, with the aim of implementing reforms and improving accountability.

Cameroon: Cameroon's restricted civic space could further be reduced if the government continues its counterinsurgency campaigns in the Far North against Boko Haram and in the Anglophone regions against armed separatist groups. Both of those campaigns have included arbitrary arrests of journalists and opposition members, with reported cases of torture and other ill treatment in detention. Those responsible for these human rights violations continue to enjoy complete impunity.

Independent journalist Samuel Wazizi was [arrested](#) on August 2, 2019 in Buea, South-West region. Authorities transferred him to a military-run facility in the same city on August 7. On June 2, 2020, reports began circulating that Wazizi had [died in custody](#) following torture on an undetermined date, and that the government had hidden this information for 10 months. Wazizi's case is consistent with numerous other cases of Cameroonian journalists.

The U.S. government should press Cameroonian President Paul Biya to allow an independent investigation in the death of journalist Samuel Waziz. Further, the U.S. government should maintain current restrictions on U.S. security assistance to Cameroon and, after determining whether the Cameroonian government has undertaken efforts to ensure accountability for documented abuses, consider expanding restrictions.

China: In recent years human rights defenders, lawyers, and activists have been increasingly subjected to monitoring, harassment, intimidation, detention, and imprisonment in China. In July 2015 state security agents detained or questioned nearly 250 individuals in an unprecedented [government crackdown](#) on human rights lawyers and activists, holding many incommunicado for months.

Police across the country summoned and detained dozens of lawyers and activists who attended an [informal gathering held in December 2019 in Xiamen](#), where they discussed the situation of civil society and current affairs in China.

The authorities tightened its censorship further since the outbreak of COVID-19. Numerous articles relating to the virus were censored, and social media posts, sensitive hashtags and demands for free speech were quickly deleted or censored. [Chen Mei](#), an activist behind an online project archiving censored articles has been in police custody and out of contact with family since April 2020.

Since 2017 there has been a growing government campaign of [mass detention](#), intrusive surveillance, political indoctrination, and forced cultural assimilation against Uyghurs, Kazakhs and others in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (“Xinjiang”). It is estimated that up to [one million people have been held in detention camps](#) where they have endured a litany of human rights violations.

Congress should robustly support NGOs that assist HRDs including through prison visits, consultations with human rights defenders, provision of visas, and trial monitoring in China. The U.S. government should make the Xinjiang human rights crisis in a national security priority by calling for a UN fact-finding mission to Xinjiang, to hold accountable Chinese government officials responsible for human rights violations committed against Uyghurs and Turkic Muslims. Further, the U.S. government should provide protection opportunities to Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims to ensure humanitarian pathways to the U.S.

Hong Kong: On June 30, 2020, China’s top legislative body passed a [draconian national security law](#) applicable to Hong Kong. Immediately after the law passed, authorities began using the law to crack down on legitimate and peaceful expression. People were arrested for possessing flags, stickers and banners with political slogans. Four student activists were [arrested over social media posts](#) allegedly “inciting secession” under the national security law and are potentially facing life sentences. One of the student activists, [Tony Chung](#), was charged with secession, money laundering, and conspiracy to publish seditious material and denied bail.

In July, 12 candidates who advocate viewpoints at odds with those of the government were [disqualified](#) from running in Hong Kong’s Legislative Council elections. On December 2, Joshua Wong, Agnes Chow and Ivan Lam—all former members of the disbanded political party Demosisto—were sentenced to jail over their involvement in the 2019 Hong Kong protests, joining the many others who have received jail time despite only exercising their right to protest peacefully. Once again, the government used the politically motivated charge of “inciting others to protest” to prosecute people who have merely spoken out and protested peacefully. By targeting well-known activists from Hong Kong’s largely leaderless protest movement, authorities are sending a warning to anyone who dares to criticize the government that they could be next.

In August, Hong Kong police raided the offices of [pro-democracy newspaper Apple Daily](#) and arrested owner Jimmy Lai and five others for “collusion with a foreign country or external forces to endanger national security” under the new national security law. According to media reports, [Jimmy Lai](#) was charged with “fraud” on December 3 and denied bail.

In addition, in August the Chinese coast guard [arrested 12 Hong Kongers](#) for allegedly crossing the border between Hong Kong and China in secret in a speedboat. Two of them were under 18 years old when arrested. Held incommunicado, without access to their family and family-hired lawyers, they are at imminent risk of torture and other ill-treatment. Four family-hired lawyers from mainland China dropped the cases after they were threatened by authorities.

On November 11, China's National People's Congress Standing Committee passed a resolution on "national security" grounds to disqualify Hong Kong lawmakers. On that same day the [Hong Kong government directly disqualified opposition lawmakers](#) Alvin Yeung, Dennis Kwok, Kwok Ka-ki and Kenneth Leung, without any further formal judicial process.

In early December 2020 Hong Kong authorities arrested eight people who participated in a protest at Chinese University of Hong Kong, including three students who have been charged under the national security law. These arrests are yet another example of the Hong Kong government's attempts to silent opposing views on campus under the pretext of "national security."

Congress and the U.S. government should support the human rights of the people of Hong Kong in bilateral and multilateral dialogues with China, both publicly and privately. The U.S. government should closely monitor the treatment of individuals who are criminally prosecuted, detained, or imprisoned on the basis of the national security law and demand that authorities comply with international human rights standards.

Myanmar: In August 2017 the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army launched coordinated attacks on security force posts in northern Rakhine State, [Myanmar](#). In response, the Myanmar security forces, led by the Myanmar Army ("Tatmadaw"), attacked the entire Rohingya population in villages across northern Rakhine State. Over the next 10 months the Tatmadaw drove more than 700,000 Rohingya — more than 54 per cent of the Rohingya who lived in northern Rakhine State at the outset of this crisis in 2017 — into neighboring Bangladesh.

Crimes against humanity continue against the estimated 600,000 Rohingya who are still living in Rakhine State. Their rights to equality, a nationality, freedom of movement, and access to adequate healthcare, education, and work opportunities are routinely violated. Some 128,000 people remain confined to squalid detention camps within Rakhine State, reliant on humanitarian assistance for their survival.

The U.S. government should create a global coalition to respond to the human rights crisis in Myanmar, calling for multilateral targeted sanctions against senior military officials responsible for atrocities. Congress should increase and sustain its support for

humanitarian assistance—including funding that supports access to education—for refugees in Bangladesh and displaced people in Myanmar.

Viet Nam: Vietnamese authorities have been actively suppressing online speech amid the [COVID-19 pandemic](#) and have brought serious criminal charges against multiple internet users for their government-critical comments. Viet Nam is currently holding 170 prisoners of conscience, of whom 69 are behind bars solely for their social media activity.

In a December 2020 [report](#) Amnesty International documented the systematic repression of peaceful online expression in Viet Nam, including the widespread “geo-blocking” of content deemed critical of the authorities—meaning it becomes invisible to anyone trying to access it from Viet Nam—all while groups affiliated to the government deploy sophisticated campaigns on these platforms to harass everyday users into silence and fear.

The report found that tech giants Facebook and YouTube are allowing themselves to become tools of the Vietnamese authorities’ censorship and harassment of its population by complying with censorship demands, an alarming sign of how these companies could operate in other countries.

Everyone, regardless of their political opinion, has the right to participate in public life—both on and offline. The U.S. government should call on Vietnamese authorities to stop weaponizing online platforms and punishing people simply for exercising their right to freedom of expression.

Philippines: HRDs critical of President Rodrigo Duterte’s government are increasingly harassed, vilified and attacked. The prevailing climate of impunity has fueled an increase in the killings of activists for their political views.

In August 2020 peace advocate [Randall Echanis](#) and a neighbor were killed by unidentified individuals. Echanis had been involved in peace negotiations between the government and the National Democratic Front, a coalition of groups involved in an ongoing insurgency in parts of the country. A week later HRD [Zara Alvarez](#) was shot dead, becoming the 13th human rights worker of the group Karapatan killed during the Duterte administration.

In July 2020 President Duterte signed the “[Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020](#),” which puts HRDs, civil society organizations and members of the political opposition at greater risk under the government’s continuing crackdown against political dissent. The U.S. government should call on the Philippine government to reject the Anti-Terrorism Act which contains broad and dangerous provisions that risk further undermining human rights. The U.S. government should press the Philippine government to take measures to

stop attacks against HRDs critical of Duterte and seek accountability for those responsible for harassing, attacking, and killing HRDs.

Sri Lanka: Lawyers, HRDs, and victims of past abuses are being targeted by the police, intelligence agencies, and pro-government media. Following the November 2019 presidential election, a number of organizations—in particular, organizations in the war-affected Northern and Eastern provinces of the country—reported visits from intelligence officers who sought details of staff, programs and funding. Such visits are blatant attempts to harass and intimidate civil society.

In April 2020 Hejaaz Hizbullah, a lawyer who has represented victims of human rights violations, was arrested under the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act. He has had limited access to his lawyers and family members and remains in arbitrary detention. The day before he was taken into custody, Hizbullah joined others in submitting a letter criticizing the denial of burial rights to the Muslim community under Sri Lanka's COVID-19 regulations.

In the very near future the U.S. government should reengage with the UN Human Rights Council (“UNHRC”), with particular attention to the upcoming session on Sri Lanka (Feb. 22 to Mar. 19). The U.S. government must reiterate to the Sri Lankan government the importance of upholding human rights, including by attending court hearings in key cases such as the Trinco Five students, Prageeth Eknaligoda, Ramzy Razeek, and Shakthika Sathkumara. The U.S. government should urge the Sri Lankan government to drop all charges pending against Ramzy Razeek; release Hejaaz Hizbullah; repeal the Prevention of Terrorism Act; and ensure that the families of the disappeared, the activists campaigning with them, and lawyers acting on their behalf are protected.

Congress should substantially increase civil society assistance for human rights groups that are working on truth and reconciliation issues and protecting HRDs.

India: In September 2020 [Amnesty International India](#) was forced to halt its human rights work after the government froze the organization's bank accounts. This latest action follows [two years of relentless threats](#), intimidation, and harassment by the Indian government. But this time, Amnesty International India had no choice but to bring its operations to a grinding halt.

It was in the wake of two major human rights reports that Amnesty International India's bank accounts were frozen. The first report covered the February 2020 [Delhi riots](#), documenting police complicity in the death of 50 people, many of whom were Muslim. The second report addressed arbitrary detention and internet restrictions that [persist in Kashmir](#), one year after it was stripped of its special status.

This is a devastating setback for Indian human rights defenders, civil society organizations, and most alarmingly, the millions of people in India who have been aided by Amnesty's human rights work. U.S. officials should make clear that the freeze on Amnesty International India's bank accounts must be lifted immediately. The Indian government must guarantee the right of all civil society organizations to seek, receive, and utilize funding freely and safely. This is a first, necessary step toward helping to protect the rights and freedoms of all people in India, and to ensure that HRDs and civil society organizations can continue to work in a safe environment.

The U.S. government must call on Indian authorities to [stop](#) the harassment and intimidation of journalists through draconian laws that threaten the response to the COVID-19 pandemic and [create an atmosphere of fear and reprisal](#).

The U.S. government should call for a human rights dialogue with India, and should fund and support international funding for civil society and human rights groups.

Pakistan: Authorities have repeatedly used [enforced disappearance](#) as an insidious form of extra-judicial punishment, silencing and intimidating political activists, religious minorities, and numerous others. Despite the protestations of Pakistani officials, cases of enforced disappearance are neither rare nor incidental; as of March 2019, the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances recorded 2178 unresolved cases.

In one emblematic case HRD [Idris Khattak](#) was forcibly disappeared in November 2019. In a cruel twist of irony, Idris had spent years working to shed light on enforced disappearances. After a sustained public outcry, the government acknowledged that he was in custody, but Idris has yet to be granted access to his lawyer.

Blasphemy laws continue to pose a profound threat to many religious minorities. These laws, which broadly proscribe actions, words, or expressions that may be interpreted as insulting to religious sensibilities, are broad, vague, and coercive. At varying times they have provided license for the government to persecute religious minorities, or for violent mobs to harm them. Lawyers and public figures who have defended people accused of violating blasphemy laws have been targeted by mobs and gunned down in the street.

The U.S. government should publicly call on the government of Prime Minister Imran Khan to follow through on its promise to end enforced disappearance, criminalizing the practice, and ratifying and implementing into national law the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance. Moreover, the U.S. government should call on Pakistan to identify and account for all victims of enforced disappearance and either release them or promptly charge and prosecute them in civilian court.

The Secretary of State and the United States Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom should express concern about Pakistan's blasphemy laws and urge for their comprehensive repeal.

Turkey: The government of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan responded to the failed coup attempt of 2016 by waging a sustained attack on civil society. Hundreds of NGOs have been shut down and hundreds more have faced bureaucratic measures that limit their ability to operate. Thousands of NGO workers have been arrested, held in pre-trial detention, or sentenced to lengthy prison terms simply for their peaceful political activities.

When students at the Middle East Technical University in Ankara participated in a peaceful sit-in in support of [LGBTI rights](#) in May 2019, the Turkish government put 17 students and one academic on trial for "unlawful assembly." Turkish officials continue to hold philanthropist Osman Kavala behind bars, despite repeated calls from the [State Department](#) and from [European bodies and courts](#) demanding his release.

Amnesty International Turkey is itself no stranger to the Turkish government's campaign against civil society. In the summer of 2017 Turkish police arrested Amnesty International Turkey's board chair Taner Kilic and Amnesty International Turkey's director Idil Eser alongside other human rights activists. While they have both since been freed, their legal ordeal continues. This summer they were [convicted](#) of belonging to or abetting a terrorist organization and, earlier this month, a regional court of appeals upheld the convictions against them. They face lengthy prison sentences.

Turkey's assault on NGOs has expanded well beyond civil society organizations that work on issues traditionally considered sensitive or controversial. Shuttered NGOs include leading children's rights and women's rights organizations.

As the incoming administration moves to negotiate various areas of strategic concern with Turkish authorities, Congress must ensure that the Turkish government's human rights abuses are part of the discussions. The U.S. government should publicly call on Turkish officials, including Turkey's Ambassador, to release jailed HRDs. The U.S. government must use all diplomatic opportunities to raise concern about the Turkish government's crackdown on dissent and provide financial and diplomatic assistance to civil society organizations.

Egypt: Amnesty International has [documented](#) the Egyptian authorities' routine and systematic use of counter-terror legislation to prosecute thousands of peaceful critics and suspend guarantees to fair trial. Multiple UN experts have [expressed](#) concern about how Egypt's terrorism laws facilitate rights abuses, and how imprisoned HRDs are at [grave](#)

[risk](#) of contracting COVID-19. Egyptian authorities have a history of [reprisals](#) against civil society for engaging with UN officials.

Most recently in November 2020, Egyptian authorities [arrested](#) three senior staff members of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (“EIPR”) over baseless terrorism charges, apparently in retaliation for a meeting with 13 diplomats. To our knowledge, this is the first case of reprisals against civil society for engaging with a group of diplomatic representatives, thereby representing an escalation in the authorities’ crackdown. After a global outcry the HRDs were released on December 3, but it is unclear whether charges have been dropped.

The U.S. government must urge the Egyptian government to end attacks on peaceful protestors, release all POCs, and ensure all courts follow international standards for fair trials.

Saudi Arabia: In 2018 Saudi Arabia arrested 13 women’s rights activists for exercising their rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly. Five remain in detention: [Loujain al-Hathloul](#), Samar Badawi, [Nassima al-Sada](#), Nouf Abdulaziz and Maya’a al-Zahrani. On November 25 a Saudi judge decided to transfer al-Hathloul's case to Saudi Arabia’s Specialized Criminal Court (“SCC”), an institution used to silence dissent and notorious for issuing lengthy prison sentences following seriously flawed trials. This is yet another sign that Saudi Arabia’s claims of reform on human rights are not genuine. The U.S. government should call on Saudi authorities to immediately and unconditionally release women’s rights activists and drop the baseless charges against them.

On October 1, 2018, Jamal Khashoggi, a Saudi journalist who went into self-exile in the U.S., entered the Saudi consulate in Istanbul to obtain marriage documents, never to be seen again. A transparent investigation into his killing has yet to take place. In December 2019 a Saudi court sentenced five people to death and three others to prison for Khashoggi’s murder. This verdict brought neither justice nor the truth for Khashoggi’s family. The trial was closed to the public and to independent monitors, with no information available as to how the investigation was carried out. The verdict failed to address the Saudi authorities’ involvement in this murder or clarify the location of Khashoggi’s remains. Congress and the incoming administration should call for an impartial U.N. investigation into the killing of Khashoggi.

Under the leadership of Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman, HRDs, women’s rights activists, writers, artists, religious clerics, protestors and bloggers have been persecuted, silenced, detained, tortured and handed lengthy prison sentences for demanding reforms and advocating for peaceful change. Several were sentenced to death and executed based

on so-called “confessions” extracted under torture. We urge the U.S. government to call on Saudi Arabia to release all detained HRDs.

Lebanon: The August 2020 blast in Beirut’s port killed at least 190 people, injured more than 6,500 others, and left some 300,000 displaced or homeless. Tens of thousands of peaceful protesters assembled in cities across [Lebanon](#), accusing the political leadership of corruption and calling for [social and economic reforms](#). While the protests remain overwhelmingly peaceful, [excessive use of force](#) by the Lebanese army and security forces, including beatings and the use of live ammunition against protesters, has caused hundreds of injuries.

The U.S. government should urge the Lebanese government to halt excessive use of force, end unlawful detention, and otherwise respect the human rights of protesters. The Lebanese government should halt excessive use of force, end unlawful detention, and otherwise respect the human rights of protesters. The Lebanese government should accept an independent, international investigation into the circumstances of the August 2020 blast.

Iraq: Protests demanding political reform also took place in Iraq starting in October 2019. Amnesty International has documented [Iraqi security forces](#) using excessive—and, in over 600 cases, lethal—force to disperse the demonstrators. This includes masked gunmen and snipers using live ammunition, hunting rifles and shotguns firing pellets and birdshot, batons used to mete out severe beatings, and [a host of other instances of unlawful weapon use](#). Overwhelming evidence points to a pattern of Iraq’s security forces deliberately using military grade tear gas canisters and smoke grenades to kill protesters, in direct violation of international human rights law.

The U.S. government should call for an independent and impartial U.N. investigation into the killing of Iraqi protesters to secure justice for victims and hold accountable those responsible for the abuses.

Chile: Amnesty International has [documented](#) worrying patterns of police violence during the period of social unrest that broke out in October 2019. The police committed serious human rights violations on a widespread basis. Recently and following a number of demonstrations in Santiago, [new episodes of police violence](#) have been recorded, such as the case of a 16-year-old who fell from a bridge after being pushed by a police officer, who is now being charged with attempted murder.

Far from being isolated acts committed by officials acting on their own initiative, these acts of violence are likely to have been committed because of a policy whose ultimate aim was to discourage social protest.

The excessive use of force and impunity for human rights violations committed by the national police are not exclusive to the events that took place since October 2019 but are part of a constant and historical pattern that highlights the need for a thorough, structural reform of the Chilean National Police, including effective and independent mechanisms for control and accountability. The U.S. government should urge Chilean authorities to adopt all measures necessary to provide reparation to the victims of human rights violations and ensure that public order forces strictly follow international standards governing the use of force.

Colombia: The frequent threats, attacks and killings of people defending land, territory and the environment have highlighted the government's failure to address the serious crisis facing [human rights defenders](#). For years Colombia has been one of the world's most dangerous countries for people who are defending human rights, territory, and natural resources. But the situation has deteriorated, particularly for those living in geographically strategic and natural resource-rich areas, since the Peace Agreement between the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces in 2016.

[Indigenous peoples' communities](#) suffer frequent attacks due to their defense of land and natural resources. In the department of Meta the failure to recognize the land rights of the Kubeo-Sikuani Indigenous community has left them unprotected and under threat on their lands.

Ecuador: Women HRDs defending the Amazon and Indigenous peoples' rights have faced a series of attacks and death threats. The Ecuadorian authorities' lack of capacity and will to provide protection and conduct criminal investigations into the attacks jeopardizes indigenous people's lives. They are thus forced to choose between risking their families' lives and defending human rights and the environment.

Congress and the U.S. government should express public support for the work of Indigenous environmental land defenders in the Amazon and support the imposition of protective measures granted by international and regional bodies, including the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. Further, the U.S. government must ensure that any planned or future trade deals, development projects, and bilateral cooperation between the U.S. and countries in the Amazon region contain strong protections for Indigenous rights and for safeguarding of the environment, adhering strictly to the principles of free, prior, and informed consent, and include a consultation process with affected communities and human rights organizations.

Climate crisis: The catastrophic effects of climate change make protecting environmental activists such as the Indigenous land defenders of the Amazon more vital than ever. Climate change will compound and magnify existing inequalities across societies, worsen

the ongoing human rights crises, and produce new ones. However, its effects are likely to be much more pronounced for certain groups—for example, those communities dependent on agricultural or coastal livelihoods—as well as those who are generally already marginalized, disadvantaged, and subject to discrimination.

Indigenous leaders in countries including Colombia, Guatemala, Brazil, Mexico, and Honduras continue to be threatened and killed for their work defending rights related to land, territory, and the environment.

U.S. foreign policy must protect the rights of everyone to speak out and mobilize for climate action or the protection of land, territory and environment, including through civil disobedience. The U.S. government should support efforts by HRDs to access administrative, judicial, legislative or any other appropriate means to adjudicate claims of human rights violations resulting from climate change or climate-related projects and measures at home and abroad, including when conduct within U.S. jurisdiction harms the rights of people outside U.S. borders.

Conclusion:

U.S. officials must call on foreign governments to immediately investigate and promptly prosecute those found responsible for the killing of HRDs. The U.S. government should also call on foreign governments to repeal any legislation or practices that criminalize or restrict the work of HRDs, such as have been enacted in India, Turkey, China, Guatemala, and Russia. All countries should immediately and unconditionally release all POCs, and should investigate any allegations of torture or other ill-treatment. Governments must guarantee POCs access to legal counsel, medical attention, and family members.

U.S. lawmakers should be on guard when governments move to redefine human rights or to deny the legitimacy of certain human rights, as this, too, is a marker and a tactic of shutting down civil society. Those promoting women's rights, including sexual and reproductive health and rights, LGBTI rights, the rights of asylum seekers and refugees and the rights of ethnic and religious minorities are particularly targeted by government policies.

Amnesty International joins a huge outpouring of U.S. civil society in our strong opposition to the U.S. government seeking to redefine human rights through the so-called “Unalienable Rights Commission” and its report or through efforts like the “Geneva Consensus” that try to undermine sexual and reproductive human rights. These efforts not only weaken human rights protections, they work to discredit and silence civil society, and encourage the harm wrought by other governments who are hostile to human rights.

Without a concerted effort by the U.S. and the international community to strengthen human rights protections, abusers will continue to shatter human lives and stifle development with impunity.

III. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for Congress:

In relation to foreign governments:

- Call on foreign governments to restore full internet access; immediately lift all internet blackouts to allow for the unimpeded flow of information to at-risk communities.
- Press foreign governments to end harassment, arrest, prosecution, and imprisonment of human rights defenders and activists; drop all charges against those challenging internet restrictions; unconditionally release all prisoners of conscience.
- Urge foreign governments to repeal all repressive laws that criminalize or restrict the work of human rights defenders, or violate the rights to freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly. Press foreign governments to bring their laws in line with international human rights standards.
- Call on foreign governments to investigate and prosecute those found responsible for the killing of human rights defenders, and to investigate any allegations of torture or other ill-treatment.

In relation to Big Tech: Corporations have a responsibility to respect human rights wherever they operate.

- Press Big Tech to adopt new content moderation and community standards policies that are grounded in international human rights standards, particularly the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.
- Ensure that monitoring and oversight bodies such as Facebook's new Oversight Board are empowered to make binding policy changes with respect to content moderation and transparency, not merely in respect of individual cases.
- Expand the mandate of Facebook's Oversight Board to include the evaluation, grounded in international human rights law, of content moderation decisions that have been made pursuant to local law.

Recommendations for the incoming Biden administration:

- Institute a whole-of-government strategy review of its policy on freedom of expression, association and assembly which establishes a review board to respond as crises break out and to ongoing protests. This should culminate in a high-level

Presidential speech that enshrines the U.S. role in promoting and protecting the freedom of association and assembly across the world.

- Host a global forum at the State Department or the United Nations which includes civil society leaders and foreign governments to reaffirm the human rights to freedom of expression, association, and assembly.
- Issue State Department guidance on defending civic space to embassies, integrating civic space into diplomatic training and leadership briefings, designating a senior official to spearhead interagency coordination on civic space issues.
- Establish a foreign assistance fund that encourages actors promoting peaceful forms of protest, including documentation of human rights violations during police response to protests.
- Prioritize closing civic space in U.S. foreign policy agendas—linking civic space to other key foreign policy goals (economic, security).