

KINGS DAY STATEMENT

We are pleased to convey our heartfelt congratulations and best wishes for health and happiness to Their Majesties King Willem-Alexander, Sovereign of the Netherlands, and Queen Máxima on the occasion of the Dutch national unity celebrations and King's Day.

African Defenders and DefendDefenders' core mission centers on safeguarding fundamental rights and freedoms. Our longstanding partnership with the Netherlands, its citizens, and governmental institutions has substantially enhanced our efforts, yielding a lasting impact over nearly two decades for thousands of human rights defenders (HRDs) supported across the continent. Notably, our strategic collaboration with Pax International, ABAAD and Amnesty International Netherlands leverages decades of expertise in solidifying civic space with a focus on advancing gender equality, uplifting youth leadership in peace and human rights initiatives, and advocating for the establishment of international regulatory frameworks addressing systemic external pressures.

As the King embodies the Netherlands' representation, promoting democracy and human rights, we express our gratitude for the political backing provided by the Netherlands to safeguard HRDs in Africa. The Dutch government demonstrates a strong commitment to protecting these defenders, evident in various policies and initiatives, including the provision of temporary relocation for at-risk HRDs. Our collaborative efforts have yielded significant outcomes for many HRDs and their families. For instance, we trace the genesis of initial protection interventions to the political support from the Royal Dutch Embassy.

Furthermore, insights gained from the Shelter Cities initiative by Justice and Peace Netherlands, (a partner in the Netherlands, with which we have a solid Memorandum of Understanding on protection of HRDs, to offer safe havens and support to at-risk HRDs), informed the development of the Ubuntu Hub Cities initiative across Africa. This initiative has emerged as a reliable protection mechanism for exiled HRDs or those forced to flee their countries, while also addressing the sustainability of HRDs in exile through socio-economic empowerment and social integration.

The Ubuntu Hub City initiative underscores the importance of African leadership in self-protection efforts. We posit that the most effective, cost-efficient, and sustainable approach for emergency relocation of HRDs is reinforcing their capacity within their home countries or subregions when protection is impossible; enabling them to remain relevant and push back against injustices and systemic human rights violations. It is also important to acknowledge the challenges many African HRDs face during relocation as an important factor to consider, such as cultural dislocation and language barriers, which may inhibit their ability to sustain their activism in exile. A limited social network can significantly jeopardise their psychological well-being, exacerbating their continued human rights work related challenges.

Holistic and well-thought-out support has impacted many HRDs in Africa. A notable case is a woman human rights defender (WHRD) from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), who advocates against using sexual violence as a weapon in conflict. Despite her bravery in raising awareness through radio programs, she faced dangers, including smear campaigns and violence, forcing her to flee to Uganda for safety. She was rapidly relocated through the Ubuntu Hub Cities initiative, allowing her time to recover. While AfricanDefenders helped her find permanent housing in Kampala, she also received seed funding to start a hair salon, creating a stable income and a community hub for fellow Congolese refugees.

The socio-economic integration program emphasizes economic empowerment for exiled HRDs, enabling them to secure livelihoods before returning to advocacy. The mass exodus of Sudanese HRDs has highlighted the urgent need for support networks. DefendDefenders initiated well-being camps and networking events to help rebuild community ties. Establishing the SudanDefenders' office in Uganda reflects a commitment to sustaining advocacy efforts, addressing the emotional toll of displacement. Many HRDs must shift their focus to championing the rights of fellow refugees, emphasizing the dual purpose of their activism: supporting peers while striving for conditions that allow them to return home safely. The program aims to empower HRDs in exile, helping them regain stability and maintain their advocacy for justice.