

Secretary-General's Message on the occasion of International Human Rights Day on 10th December 2010

Human rights are the foundation of freedom, peace, development and justice -- and the heart of the work of the United Nations around the world.

Laws to protect and promote human rights are indispensable. But quite often, progress comes down to people... courageous women and men... striving to protect their own rights and the rights of others... determined to make rights real in people's lives.

It is these human rights defenders to whom we dedicate this year's observance of Human Rights Day.

Defenders are a diverse group. They might be part of a civil society organization, a journalist or even a lone citizen, spurred to action by abuses close to home.

But they all share a commitment to expose wrongdoing, protect the most vulnerable and end impunity. They stand up, speak out -- and today they tweet -- in the name of freedom and human dignity..

Human rights defenders play a vital role in the fight against discrimination. They investigate violations and help victims gain justice and support.

Far too often, their work entails tremendous risk.

Defenders are harassed, stripped of their jobs and wrongfully imprisoned. In many countries, they are tortured, beaten and murdered.

Their friends and family members are also subjected to harassment and intimidation.

Women human rights defenders face additional risks, and therefore need additional support.

This Human Rights Day is an occasion to salute the courage and achievements of human rights defenders everywhere -- and to pledge to do more to safeguard their work.

States bear the primary responsibility to protect human rights advocates. I call on all States to ensure the freedom of expression and the freedom of assembly that make their work possible.

When the lives of human rights advocates are endangered, we are all less secure.

When the voices of human rights advocates are silenced, justice itself is drowned out.

On this Human Rights Day, let us be inspired by those seeking to make our world more just. And let us remember that everyone -- no matter their background, training or education -- can be a human rights champion.

So let us use that power. Let us each be a human rights defender.