PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS UNDER THREAT THROUGH GERMANY'S ELISABETH SELBERT INITIATIVE

1. Human rights protection in Germany for human rights defenders from abroad

The Elisabeth Selbert Initiative (ESI), managed by Germany's Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations (IFA), was developed through long-term advocacy efforts in Germany aimed at protecting human rights defenders. Initial discussions about creating a protection program for human rights defenders began as early as 2000. Over the years, various stakeholders, including the German Institute for Human Rights and several NGOs, lobbied for a more robust and institutionalised protection mechanism within the German government. The idea gained momentum in 2017 when Dr. Bärbel Kofler, Germany's Human Rights Commissioner at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, championed the cause. Her commitment led to the formal establishment of the ESI, which included three program lines (lines 2 and 3 were launched only last year) aimed at supporting and protecting human rights defenders facing threats or persecution. The initiative's goal is to provide immediate and tangible support to human rights defenders at risk abroad. It is financed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The German Institute for Human Rights played a key role in the initiative's establishment. Prior to its official launch, the Institute and other civil society actors engaged in consultations and contributed expertise.

2. Impact on the protection of human rights defenders

The ESI has created a life-saving safety net for human rights defenders facing serious threats. One of the key components of the initiative is Programme Line 1, which enables at-risk human rights defenders to temporarily relocate to Germany, where they are hosted by partner organisations for up to six months. This allows human rights defenders to continue their advocacy work in a safe environment. Another significant impact has been the establishment of regional hubs (Programme line 2), where human rights defenders can find protection closer to their home countries, reducing the need for full relocation to Germany.

In addition, the initiative focuses on providing support in the home countries of human rights defenders through partnerships with European Union ambassadors and local civil society organisations (Programme line 3).

3. Collaboration between the IFA and German Institute for Human Rights

The selection body for the ESI comprises six members: two members are nominated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, two are nominated by the NGO network Forum Menschenrechte, and two are nominated by the German Institute for Human Rights.

A notable example of their work is the case of a human rights defender from Afghanistan. In the early summer of 2021, the German Institute for Human Rights – acting as a host organisation, in cooperation with the ESI – hosted a staff member of Afghanistan's national human rights institution. The staff member, based in Herat, was relocated to Germany under Programme Line 1 and accommodated by the Institute. Following the Taliban takeover, the Institute was able to mobilise the support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the evacuation of the staff member's close relatives as well as the evacuation of more than one hundred of other staff members and their families. While this evacuation was not under the ESI Programme line 1, ESI later established a fourth programme line specifically aimed at supporting the integration of evacuated human rights defenders from Afghanistan.

4. Challenges

While the ESI has successfully provided protection to numerous human rights defenders, several challenges persist. One significant issue is limited capacity, as it cannot accommodate all human rights defenders in need due to the growing shrinking space for civil society globally. Additionally, the six-month duration of the protection stay raises concerns about whether it is sufficient for human rights defenders to safely return to their home countries. Another challenge is the administrative burden placed on host organisations, as the extensive paperwork required can overwhelm those with limited capacity to support human rights defenders. Furthermore, the ESI operates without a dedicated long-term budget, meaning funds must be renegotiated each year. This creates complications in financial planning and requires host organisations to submit separate reports for each year of funding.

5. How to seek support through the ESI

Human rights defenders seeking support from the ESI can apply either directly or through a host organization.

ESI supports human rights defenders from all backgrounds, offering temporary relocation for those facing threats due to their peaceful advocacy, without regional or thematic restrictions. These include, for example, ethnic minority groups fighting for land rights, women defending themselves against discrimination and violence, LGBTIQ+ activists campaigning for their right to sexual identity, or journalists exposing cases of corruption.

For human rights defenders without a host organisation:

- The human rights defenders contacts ESI directly.
- ESI provides forms for the human rights defender to outline their situation.
- ESI matches the human rights defenders with a host organisation, which completes the remaining application process.

For human rights defenders with a host organisation:

- Human rights defenders or host organisation contacts ESI by email.
- ESI sends forms for the human rights defender to describe their situation and for the host organisation to complete an application and financial plan.
- Both parties submit the forms to ESI.

6. Germany's broader human rights obligations

The work of the ESI reflects the practical way that Germany seeks to uphold its international human rights obligations. Through the initiative, Germany has positioned itself as a leading state actor for the protection of human rights defenders, in line with international commitments under frameworks such as the UN Declaration on human rights defenders.

Read *Standing Strong* report at: https://bit.ly/StandingStrongReport

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