

# Working in the Human Rights Capital of the World

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*"The reason I have stood firm is to show that it is possible to stand against darkness and ruthlessness."*

- Akbar Ganji, July 2005

Akbar Ganji is an investigative journalist who wrote extensively about the Iranian government's involvement in the murder of intellectuals and writers in the 1990s and regularly denounced the regime's use of torture in prisons. Because of his criticism, Akbar was imprisoned for 6 years under the charge of 'acting against national security' and held under appalling conditions that posed a dire threat to his life (and were no doubt intended as a further punishment for his activism). Akbar's case raised substantial international scrutiny, which refused to die down. Akbar was released in April 2006. Despite initial fears that he would be rearrested on fresh charges, Akbar is enjoying his freedom and recovering his health.

From January to April this year, I interned with an organisation that advocated for Akbar's release and the release of others like him around the world. Human Rights First (HRF) is a leading NGO based in New York and Washington. It covers a wide range of human rights issues from legal representation of asylum seekers to crimes against humanity. I interned with the Human Rights Defenders Department, a team of staff dedicated to the protection of human rights defenders in danger of violence or persecution in their home countries. The way the department assists these defenders is tailored to individual cases. It may involve writing an alert to members of the Defenders Action Network (DAN) asking them to send an email to a political leader, a head of a department, a Minister or a UN body that is able to assist the human rights defender in some way. Members of the DAN number into the thousands and are ordinary individuals who are interested in assisting human rights defenders. The team may also write letters directly to the government in question, raise the matter with the media, or meet with influential individuals such as members of the US congress.

I realised the first day that I arrived at HRF, much to my pleasure, that my time there would not be spent photocopying bits of paper and correcting spelling errors in reports. When I arrived, there was a stack of reports, files and transcripts of the prosecution of a prominent human rights defender in Russia waiting for me. My first project was to draft a section of a White Paper report (which could be disseminated to all interested individuals including members of Congress and NGOs) regarding the case and its importance in the context of human rights in Russia. I encountered many similar cases where governments and prosecutors attempted to silence human rights advocates by arresting them on trumped up charges.

My internship with Human Rights First was extremely positive for many reasons. Firstly, I admired the organisation's emphasis on collaboration - with other international human rights organisations and of course, the local human rights defenders themselves. The input of local human rights organisations was crucial - not only was it important because local activists provided invaluable on-the-ground information, but also because they would be most vulnerable to government pressure that could occur as a backlash to advocacy strategies taken by international human rights organisations. It was therefore always important to make sure that the Human Rights Defenders team never inadvertently put activists in further danger. There was constant communication between the human rights defenders and the Human Rights Defenders team and many of the defenders (who were able to do so) visited the offices in New York.

Another great aspect of the internship was that I was made to feel part of a team. I attended regular meetings with the Human Rights Defenders Program, I was invited to go to dinner with them to celebrate the completion of new reports. My input and opinions were always welcomed and often incorporated in the work of the department.

The internship also gave me the opportunity to work with many different departments of Human Rights First. I assisted with Russian translation for the Asylum Seeker department, I attended brainstorming sessions for the Darfur team and I listened to lunchtime meetings where someone at HRF would speak about a particular field trip they had conducted. The people that I met at Human Rights First all had extraordinary life stories and a long list of achievements and getting to know them was inspiring to say the

least. I also met others working in the human rights field whose experiences I found fascinating. New York is a hub-bub of human rights activity so in attending meetings, lectures, discussions and conferences, I was able to meet some extraordinary people in the human rights community.

The Castan Centre provided me with an outstanding opportunity to get to know the inside of a human rights organisation and my internship with Human Rights First was not only a very enjoyable experience, but also one that had a formative impact on me and my career plans. It was only a small contribution to human rights protection, when compared to that made by human rights defenders (like Akbar Ganji) but it was a contribution that I am proud to have made.



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