



Human Rights First 2021

# ANNUAL REPORT





From its opening days on the steps of the United States Capitol, 2021 showed us that we cannot afford to take human rights and democracy for granted anywhere – and reminded us of the power we have when we rise together to defend them. This has been a year of high stakes. We met them with bold action.

Human rights and democracy represent a vision for human society that rises and recedes within communities and across borders as a single dream, one whose very existence and possibility is an intolerable threat to autocrats and extremists alike. Only in a world that is safe for democracy will human rights be respected; only in societies that respect human rights can democracy flourish. Yet democracies around the world, including our own, are threatened by resurgent authoritarians and violent extremists who advance their agendas by exploiting rapid changes in information technology and vilifying refugees forced to flee their homes.

Together, we rose to the challenges of 2021. Our team saved lives in extreme circumstances, built and led unprecedented nationwide coalitions in response to urgent crises, shaped legislation on multiple issues, held abusers accountable at our own borders and around the world, developed and launched groundbreaking AI-driven technology, uncovered and rolled back dangerous extremist activity in our own country, and continued to set the standard for the American legal profession in representing refugees and asylum seekers.

As Afghanistan's government fell to the Taliban, Human Rights First surged to lead virtually every aspect of American civil society's response. We coordinated evacuations, helped to set policy, provided legal and immigration support, rapidly developed and fielded critical

protection techniques and technologies, and guided thousands of at-risk Afghans toward safety.

Our work is far from over. In 2022, we are surging again in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and their larger assault on democracy and human rights. Whatever the future brings, Human Rights First is committed to supporting human rights defenders, protecting rights and people, and holding oppressors accountable through this crisis and around the world.

Working with the Human Rights First team and our fearless allies around the world is truly the privilege of a lifetime. I am humbled every day by their relentless dedication, fierce creativity, and above all, steadfast commitment to a hopeful future for every human being. As you read this report, I trust you will share those feelings.

Our efforts are only possible because of the support of friends like you. Thank you for your partnership as we rise to meet the challenges of 2022 and beyond.

Onward,



**Michael Breen**  
President and CEO



# OUR FOUR PILLARS OF WORK

**Human Rights First works to create** a just world in which every person's intrinsic human rights are respected and protected, to build societies that value and invest in all their people. Reaching that goal demands assisting victims of injustice, bringing perpetrators of abuse to justice, and building institutions that ensure universal rights.

In this time of intense geopolitical competition, we know that the pursuit of justice at home and around the world is a core interest of the United States. While it is an imperfect nation with a history and current reality that fall short of true justice, America's pursuit of that ideal at home and abroad matters deeply in the lives of billions of people around the world.

Our organization uses our expertise and partners with skilled elements of American society to expand accountability, curb repression, and support human rights defenders in the U.S. and around the world. We spur Americans and our institutions into action in four areas where there are serious and growing challenges:

## Systemic Injustice

We work for an approach to forced mass migration that strengthens democratic societies and embraces human rights. We protect the rights of human rights defenders and refugee families, and provide technical support to human rights defenders around the world.

## Authoritarianism

We leverage a broad range of proven multilateral tools to target the world's worst human rights abusers and ensure that kleptocrats and authoritarians are held accountable for their crimes.

## Extremism

We help build civil society's capacity to investigate, confront, and defeat violent antidemocratic extremist movements in the United States.

## Use and Abuse of Technology

We build digital tools and leverage high-tech expertise to help defenders of democracy and human rights compete with adversaries of our ideals.

Concurrently, we are working to broaden and deepen support for systemic justice in American society so that it becomes the primary issue in our national discourse and main driver of every decision.

Human Rights First's work is dependent on the deep partnerships we have cultivated over the past four decades with communities of support that possess combinations of the influence, skill, and experience to address the challenges on which we work. These partnerships – with the legal community, military veterans and security experts, technologists, advocates, and human rights defenders – offer Human Rights First unique tools and connections to build that public support for human rights. These partners work with us across all our program areas.

Human Rights First has practiced this for more than forty years. Since our founding in 1978 we have pressed the U.S. government and private actors to respect human rights and the rule of law. When they don't, we have demanded reform, accountability, and justice.

In 1980, we shepherded passage of the Refugee Act, the first legislation to protect refugees in American history. In response to the human rights abuses of the "War On Terror" in the first decade of this century, our work revealed and helped stop the CIA's illegal program of torture. In the Trump years, we led civil society's response to the U.S. government's cynical assault on immigration and asylum that defied both American law and our international treaty obligations.

In every case, we have brought profound changes that relieve suffering and expand respect for human rights and dignity. We make more than political points, we make tangible differences in the lives of people in the United States and around the world.

 **Human Rights First**



# PILLAR I: SYSTEMIC INJUSTICE

**Providing legal representation** to asylum seekers and challenging the United States to live up to its obligations under U.S. and international law is a central element of Human Rights First's work on systemic injustice.

We advocate for an efficient and humane asylum system as well as access to the asylum system. Our team includes experienced asylum lawyers, highly respected experts in international and domestic refugee law, refugee policy advocates skilled at navigating Congress, and talented communicators working to reframe the political debate around refugees.

## Refugee Representation

Human Rights First's refugee representation program is uniquely positioned to defend the rights of individual asylum seekers and advocate for systemic change. We provide direct representation and partner with pro bono lawyers to help refugees fleeing persecution access legal protections consistent with international law in the United States. We use that experience to advocate for laws and policies that protect refugees and their right to seek asylum so they are welcomed into their communities with dignity and legal protection.

In 2021, our refugee representation team partnered with 2,139 pro bono attorneys from 175 law firms, corporations, and law school clinics to provide standard-setting, life-saving legal representation to asylum seekers from around the world.

Despite ongoing court closures and other delays, our team won asylum or related relief for 89 clients, won adjustment of status for 66 clients, secured citizenship for two clients, reunited 21 families, and conducted 15 trainings for our allies in the legal profession.

## Honoring pro bono partners

At our 2021 Virtual Awards Celebration, we celebrated law firms that exhibited outstanding dedication to pro bono service with the Marvin E. Frankel Award for Pro Bono Excellence. The firms Crowell & Moring LLP, Davis Polk & Wardwell LLP, and Quinn Emanuel Urquhart & Sullivan, LLP were honored for helping Human Rights First achieve justice for refugees across the country.



## Refugee Advocacy

In 2021, Human Rights First focused on moving the new administration away from the inhumane and often illegal policies of the Trump administration toward a rights-centered approach to asylum and refugee protection. Two important issues we took on were the misuse of the Title 42 policy to effectively bar asylum under the guise of public health, and the misnamed "Migrant Protection Protocols" that send seekers of asylum to wait for adjudication of their cases in Mexico rather than the United States as the law provides.

Often working with partners in the Welcome with Dignity Campaign and the Asylum Working Group, Human Rights First in 2021 conducted extensive research, reporting, and policy analysis to generate multiple reports, recommendations, and public letters to advance our asylum advocacy objectives.

- We authored a letter with our allies recommending the Biden administration terminate the previous administration's MPP or "Remain in Mexico" policy, and our research was cited by the Biden administration in their memoranda to terminate the policy.
- We wrote a letter to the administration, signed by an array of advocacy groups that provide legal representation and assistance to asylum seekers, stating our refusal to cooperate with a renewed "Remain In Mexico" policy.
- We undertook extensive on-the-ground interviews and remote research on the harmful impact of the Title 42 policy, publishing reports in April, May, June, July, August, and November 2021. Some of these were issued with partner organizations working at the border: Al Otro Lado, Florence Immigrant and Refugee Rights Project, Haitian Bridge Alliance, Hope Border Institute, and RAICES.

- Throughout 2021, we wrote many recommendations letters from us and our allies calling for an end to use of Title 42. In our communications with the administration, we regularly recommended ways to safely process asylum seekers.
- We published an analysis and history of discriminatory treatment of Haitians seeking asylum and joined letters from civil rights and human rights leaders opposing the expulsion of Haitians and supporting the advancement of racial equality in immigration proceedings.



## Helping resettle Afghans

Human Rights First built and leads a coalition of over 190 organizations to help Afghans in the United States with their immigration-related legal needs. With 1,400 pro bono attorneys and 530 volunteer translators, we have responded to over 1100 requests for legal assistance from U.S.-based Afghans. At the four military bases that house Afghans resettling in the United States, PALA provides legal services, trainings, and advocacy.

## Pillar 1: Systemic Injustice

### Protecting rights in our communities

Threats to the constitutionally-protected right to assemble and the impact of police violence in the United States were made clear in the summer of 2020. Human Rights First's responses continued into 2021 with advocacy to lessen the militarization of local law enforcement and to protect free speech and assembly.

Our focus on police militarization was designed to protect communities most affected by police militarization. At the grassroots level, we led a working group dedicated to police militarization to train and educate veterans on the issue, change the veteran narrative around law enforcement, and engender support for policy recommendations that could bring the respect for rights back to the center of policing.

In Washington, members of our Veterans for American Ideals (VFAI) program worked in coalition

with various organizations to educate Members of Congress on the importance of demilitarizing the police. We successfully advocated for the addition of provisions in the final FY2021 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) to reform the 1033 program that brings military equipment into our communities and to rechristen military bases named for Confederate leaders. We also endorsed the Stop Militarizing Law Enforcement Act and the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act, and continued our work to limit 1033 and 1122 programs.

Facing threats to public demonstrations and activism, Human Rights First worked with a cadre of military leaders to denounce limits on protest and peaceful assembly. Among other efforts, we organized a letter signed by more than 500 military veterans urging the government not to use the U.S. military as a tool to suppress protesters and deny Americans their First Amendment rights.

### Activating American veterans

Our Veterans for American Ideals (VFAI), a membership program of over 11,000 veterans active in defending and extending human rights in our communities and around the world, has been instrumental in many of Human Rights First's efforts. VFAI staff and members spearheaded our work through the Afghan crisis, at the border, in research on extremists, and advocacy for social justice.



## PILLAR II: AUTHORITARIANISM



**Human rights abusers and corrupt actors around the world** too often escape meaningful accountability for their actions. This has long been the case, but rising autocracy and backsliding among rights-respecting democracies add urgency to confronting this problem. Targeted human rights and anti-corruption sanctions programs offer the U.S. and other governments – and, through them, civil society groups – powerful new tools to challenge impunity and help bring perpetrators to justice.

In 2021, we led civil society's work to reauthorize the Global Magnitsky Act in the U.S. Congress, helped to protect the integrity of the program by successfully rolling back several harmful Trump-era policies and actions, and led efforts to expand Magnitsky sanctions to new international jurisdictions. We also grew our worldwide coalition to 275 partner NGOs in every region of the world, and integrated the U.K. and E.U.'s Magnitsky-style sanctions programs into our work.

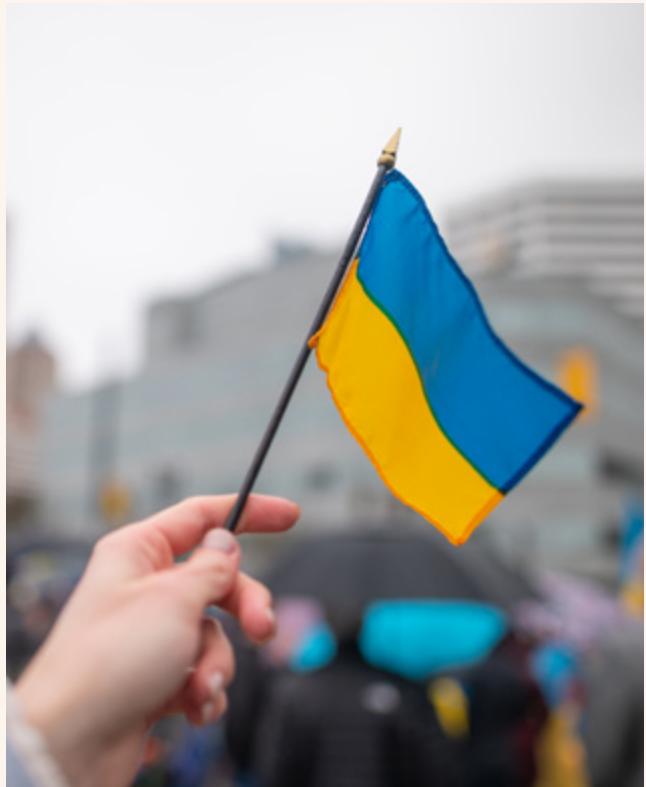
We are building awareness and expertise on accountability across our sector. Human Rights First organized the "Multilateralizing Global

Magnitsky Sanctions" conference in September and October of 2021, which featured major international advocates like Vladimir Kara-Murza and Bill Browder; political figures like U.S. Senator Ben Cardin and Australian Senator Kimberly Kitching; civil society partners; and representatives from the U.S., U.K., E.U., and Canadian governments.

Beyond work on the systems for accountability, we also worked to see bad actors held to account. Our efforts accounted for well over 40% of the U.S. government's human rights and anti-corruption sanctions. Also in 2021, we catalyzed the first joint action by the four major international Magnitsky jurisdictions, who brought measures against Chinese officials responsible for abuses against Uyghurs in Xinjiang.

After five years of groundbreaking work, Human Rights First is the field's leader on targeted human rights and anti-corruption sanctions. Our leadership and expertise on accountability have positioned us to have a significant impact on the issue moving forward.

## Pillar II: Authoritarianism



### Emerging crisis in Ukraine

For years, Human Rights First has worked closely with civil society partners in Russia, Ukraine, and elsewhere to amplify the voices of Ukrainian human rights defenders. In 2021, we continued to work with these activists to detail and publicize the human rights situation in that part of the world.

It is likely that meting out the spoils of corruption helps keep President Putin and his cronies in power. In our sanctions work, Human Rights First has targeted Russian government officials who abuse human rights and corrupt oligarchs who enable the autocratic Putin regime.

With the Russian invasion of Ukraine in early 2022, Human Rights First, with our allies Redress and the Brookings Institution, used our expertise to create the Russian Sanctions Tracker. This tool offered policymakers and civil society a roadmap of current sanctions and places where the application of new sanctions could impact Russia's ability to continue their illegal war.

### Presenting the Global Accountability Guardian Award

The Global Accountability Guardian Award is a new honor from Human Rights First. It acknowledges champions of human rights who work to hold accountable human rights abusers around the world. In 2021, Human Rights First honored Randy Bregman's career-long commitment to fighting corruption through compliance with the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act, his leadership in using targeted sanctions to hold accountable human rights abusers and corrupt actors, and his efforts to put the protection of human rights at the center of Dentons' environmental, social, and governance (ESG) program.



### Protecting human rights defenders in Hong Kong

When pro-democracy protests broke out in Hong Kong, human rights defenders and activists in that city turned to Human Rights First for support. Some of our staff went to the area to research and report on the situation, and discovered that what was needed most were guides on how people could protect themselves. Human Rights First published these materials in English and Chinese languages. These resources later served as the basis for guides for Afghans when their country fell to the Taliban.

In May of 2021, winner of our 2020 Roger Baldwin Medal of Liberty, Hong Kong human rights lawyer Albert Ho, was jailed for his involvement in a 2019 pro-democracy march. After documenting attacks on Ho and other human rights lawyers in previous reports, Human Rights First urged the government to release Ho.

### Honoring Karapatan with the Zabel Award

Karapatan Alliance for the Advancement of People's Rights, an organization of human rights groups, programs, committees, and advocates, received the William D. Zabel Human Rights Award in recognition for their work protecting and advancing human rights in the Philippines. The award, presented annually for more than three decades, acknowledges the work of courageous activists on the frontlines of the struggle for freedom and human rights.



## PILLAR III: EXTREMISM

**Addressing extremism**, and its threat to democracy and human rights, has become a central focus of our organization. Our program to counter domestic anti-democratic violent extremism builds on the nearly two decades of research we have undertaken on the rise of extremism abroad.

We see the normalization of racism, bigotry, and antisemitism to be a grave issue in a pluralistic multi-racial society. We are concerned that the relative anonymity and depersonalization of social media and other internet communications help to mainstream hate in ways unseen in more than a generation. We believe the assault on the U.S. Capitol on January 6th was a disturbing illustration of how these forces lead to extremist violence.

Our current efforts to counter the rising tide of anti-democratic extremism in the United States bring together investigative, technological, legal, security, and policy expertise. Our focus is on combatting online hate speech, racism, and antisemitism; addressing racism, antisemitism, and bigotry in the law enforcement and military communities; and pushing for the demilitarization of domestic policing and immigration enforcement.

In 2021, our efforts began in research and expanded into advocacy.

- Members of our team infiltrated the white supremacist Three Percenters to understand the organization's strategy and structure.
- Our research discovered that almost two thirds of the membership of the Oath Keepers are veterans and active duty servicemembers.
- We worked with Twitter to de-platform an influential white supremacist who was one of the architects of the January 6th insurrection at the U.S. Capitol.
- Our research uncovered and our advocacy halted a coordinated extremist campaign to de-platform investigative journalists from Twitter.
- Our staff advised multiple congressional committees, including the Select Committee on the January 6th Attack on the Capitol, on threats to democracy and human rights.
- Our testimony helped shape new strategies to address extremism that have been adopted by the Departments of Defense and Homeland Security.



### Vets Power the Polls

With both Covid and the threat of extremist violence putting pressure on the fair administration of the 2020 general election, Human Rights First and our Veterans for American Ideals (VFAI) program undertook a project to protect polling places. Working with the organization "Power The Polls," more than a thousand VFAI veteran members served as poll workers to keep polls across the country open and running smoothly in the face of pandemic and potential upheaval. We plan to continue this important effort in upcoming election cycles.



## PILLAR 4: USE AND ABUSE OF TECHNOLOGY

Two years since its inception, Human Rights First's Innovation Lab is working at the intersection of technology and human rights and is the most robust incubator of technology in the field. Our portfolio of projects use AI, machine learning, and computer vision to protect human rights and democracy.

Some of the most powerful and exciting work to come out of the Innovation Lab in 2021 addresses issues of state-sponsored violence and online hate. A few examples:



### SurvAI

uses computer vision and machine learning to identify and analyze violence within videos. This tool is being used in the civil case brought by Black Lives Matter to chronicle the violence in the June 2020 attack on demonstrators in Washington DC's Lafayette Square.

### Blue Witness

collects and analyzes law enforcement use-of-force incidents. Using natural language processing to synthesize incidents as they appear on social media, Blue Witness informs journalists and human rights advocates about police violence across the United States.

### RadiTube

uses machine learning to discover extremism embedded in YouTube videos and applies AI to combat disinformation, misinformation, and extremist content there. Before the development of this tool, YouTube had proven difficult for rights groups to monitor for extremist content.

Having built a tool that needed to quickly scale to best impact the fight against extremism, Human Rights First at the end of 2021 undertook a unique strategy for a NGO: launching a venture-backed enterprise.

Pyrra Technologies grew out of a project incubated at Human Rights First called "Extremist Explorer." That tool processed material from multiple social media platforms to chart and understand in near real-time the extremist conversation happening online. Today, Pyrra works across the industrial and NGO spectrum to follow and understand extremists' digital output to help protect those threatened by that extremism.



### Helping Afghans protect themselves

The withdrawal of U.S. forces and the rapid and chaotic return of Afghanistan to Taliban rule created life-threatening dangers for Afghans who had committed to democracy and the extension of human rights across that society. Within hours of the fall of Kabul, Human Rights First created digital guides for at-risk Afghans, some based on our work for human rights activists in Hong Kong, that offered information on erasing digital identities, avoiding surveillance, evading sophisticated pursuit, and going into hiding. These guides, in English, Pashto, and Dari, were the first and some of the most important resources for Afghans facing uncertainty in their country.



# LEADING THE RESPONSE TO THE CRISIS IN AFGHANISTAN



**When President Biden announced** in April the intent to withdraw the U.S. military from Afghanistan in September 2021, Human Rights First immediately took action. Our response continues today:

## Operation Promises Kept

Human Rights First and our Veterans for American Ideals (VFAI) program developed a detailed evacuation plan that was embraced by leading Members of Congress and was promoted from April until the fall of Kabul by a Human Rights First-led coalition of hundreds of organizations. While the administration failed to adopt our plan, this effort led to the resettlement of more than 2,000 Afghan interpreters between July and the collapse of the Afghan government in August.

## Evacuate Our Allies Coalition

Human Rights First created and now leads a coalition of over 250 veterans, immigration, resettlement, faith, and national security organizations that is the lynchpin of civil society's advocacy and resettlement efforts for at-risk Afghans. This coalition has led efforts to advance or pass several major pieces of legislation, including the authorization of 8,000 additional visas for Afghan allies, the creation of an Afghanistan War Commission, and crucial improvements to benefits for Afghan parolees.



## Evacuate Our Allies Operations Center

In addition to other ongoing work on the ground in Afghanistan and in the region, the Los Angeles-based Center was staffed 24 hours a day from the fall of Kabul onward. The Center provided critical support, capabilities, and coordination for ongoing efforts to evacuate and resettle at-risk Afghans. In 2021, the Center handled more than a thousand calls a month and had almost 10,000 email conversations, leading to hundreds of evacuations and thousands of referrals for support and services.

## Project Afghan Legal Assistance (PALA)

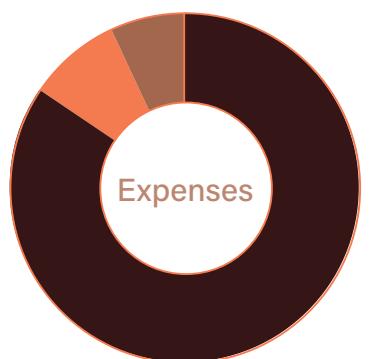
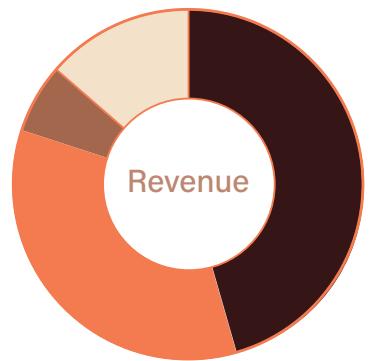
Human Rights First is leading the American legal profession's response to the crisis in Afghanistan, building and leading a coalition of over 190 organizations. PALA has recruited 1,400 new pro bono attorneys and 530 volunteer translators who have responded to over 1,100 requests for legal assistance from U.S.-based Afghans. Through PALA we have established presences at four U.S. military bases that house Afghans, where we provide legal services, trainings, and advocacy for Afghans entering the United States.

## Protection & Evacuation

As Kabul fell to the Taliban, we immediately developed and released life-saving guidance for at-risk Afghans. We created guides in English, Pashto, and Dari on erasing digital identities, avoiding surveillance, evading sophisticated pursuit, and going into hiding. Notably, we were the first to discover that the Taliban had acquired American biometric databases and detection equipment, and within 24 hours developed and released a series of field-expedient countermeasures in Afghanistan's local languages.

# FINANCIAL STATEMENTS

Fiscal Year 2021



## Statement of Financial Position

	12/31/21	12/31/20
<b>Assets</b>		
Cash and cash equivalents	\$1,715,916	1,022,039
Investments <sup>3</sup>	3,966,394	3,218,706
Prepaid expenses and other assets	121,132	102,439
Grants and pledges receivable, net <sup>4</sup>	2,504,165	3,876,230
Other receivables	58,806	158,153
Security deposits	349,651	350,034
Grants and pledges receivable, net – restricted for endowment <sup>4,10</sup>	4,225,000	4,445,000
Fixed assets, net <sup>5</sup>	209,316	338,368
Investments restricted for endowment <sup>3,10</sup>	5,314,592	4,816,634
<b>Total assets</b>	<b>\$18,464,972</b>	<b>\$18,327,603</b>
<b>Liabilities</b>		
Accounts payable and accrued expenses	\$1,210,915	\$76,548
Accrued payroll and related liabilities	357,302	363,469
Line of credit payable <sup>6</sup>	0	400,000
Paycheck Protection Program loan <sup>7</sup>	0	1,080,785
Deferred Rent	527,976	694,042
<b>Total Liabilities</b>	<b>\$2,096,193</b>	<b>\$2,614,844</b>
<b>Net Assets</b>		
Without donor restrictions	\$965,740	(280,426)
With donor restrictions	15,403,039	15,993,185
<b>Total net assets</b>	<b>\$16,368,779</b>	<b>\$15,712,759</b>
<b>Total liabilities and net assets</b>	<b>\$18,464,972</b>	<b>\$18,327,603</b>

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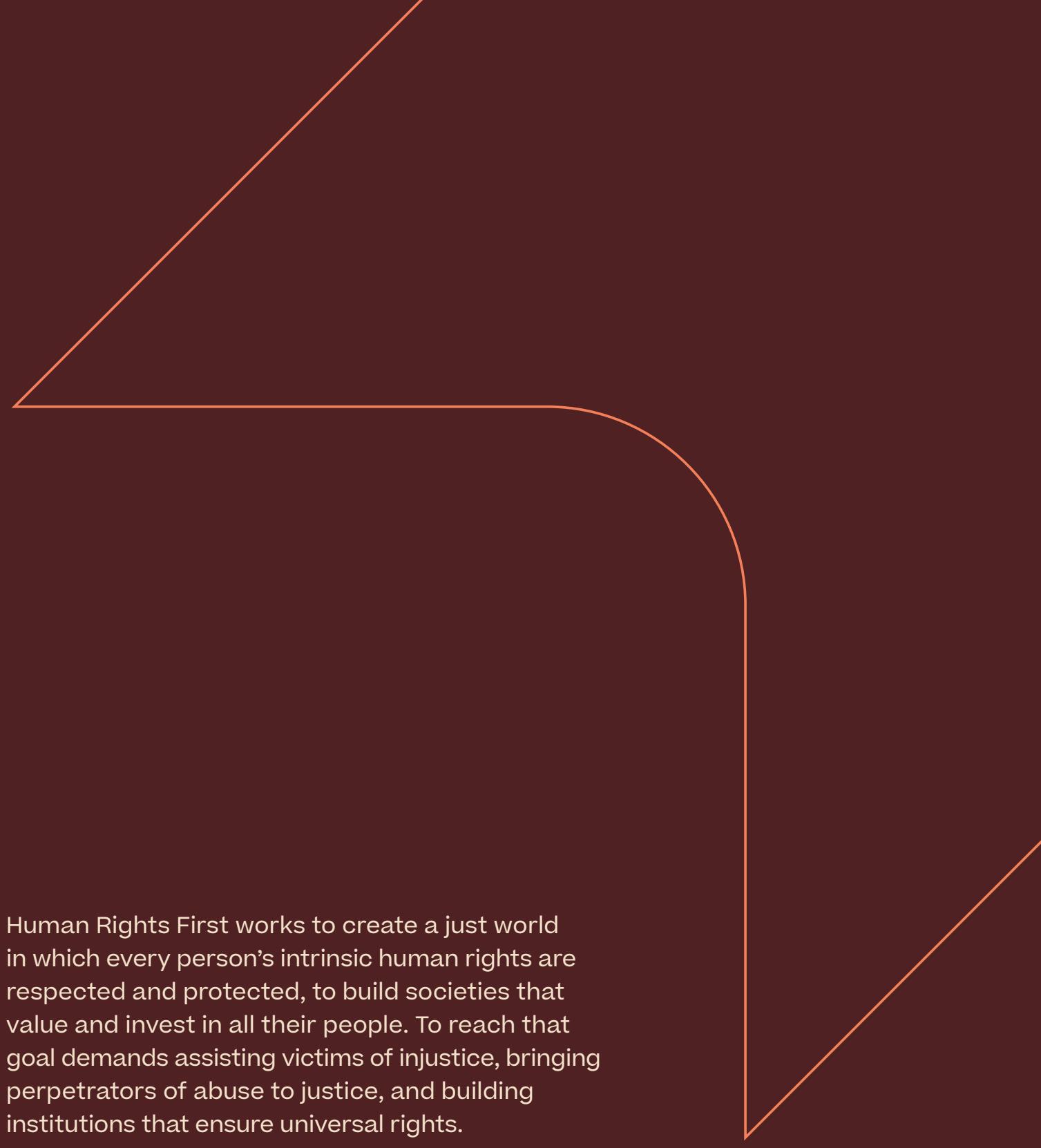
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