



Human Rights First 2022

PROGRAMMATIC OVERVIEW

Human Rights First exists to actualize free and equal societies, to protect freedom and promote equality at home and abroad. To do so, we lead actions that hold oppressors accountable, free people from injustice, and build institutions that ensure universal rights.

In these unsettled times, 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.

We spur Americans and our institutions into action in four areas where there are serious and growing challenges: resurgent authoritarianism; extremism; systemic injustice; and the abuse of technology.

We use our expertise and partner with skilled elements of society to expand accountability, curb repression, and support human rights defenders in the United States and across the globe. Concurrently, we work to broaden and deepen support for real, sustained, systemic justice in the United States so that it is the primary issue in our national discourse and main driver of every decision.

AUTHORITARIANISM

Autocratic leaders are gaining power around the world while many democracies are backsliding on human rights. To counter this trend, we are working to ensure that American and foreign institutions remain accountable to their human rights obligations and use their influence to uphold the rule of law.



AUTHORITARIANISM

Demanding accountability

Over the year, we continued to lead a growing, global coalition of NGOs advocating for the effective use of targeted sanctions as a means of seeking accountability for human rights abuse and corruption. Together with partners, we organized the submission of 34 high-quality, targeted sanctions recommendations to the U.S. government focusing on human rights abusers and corrupt officials from around the world. Our advocacy for the use of targeted sanctions to address human trafficking abuses contributed to the first-ever sanctions under the Global Magnitsky program explicitly focused on forced labor and sex trafficking.

To maintain the legal basis for our sanctions work, we led the effort of a tightly organized coalition of NGOs urging the U.S. Congress to pass legislation reauthorizing the Global Magnitsky targeted sanctions program. Our campaign succeeded in April 2022, when President

Biden signed a permanent extension of the underlying law.

In November, we organized our first “Magnitsky Month,” a series of reports and events honoring the legacy of Sergei Magnitsky and focusing on improving the multilateral use of Magnitsky-style sanctions in the U.S., Canada, United Kingdom, and the European Union.

Human Rights First partnered with Open Society Foundations, Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights, and REDRESS to release a first-ever joint report analyzing the use and shortcomings of targeted human rights and anti-corruption sanctions in all the major Magnitsky jurisdictions. We also published [*Friends Like These: U.S. Security Partners and Selectivity in the Global Magnitsky Sanctions Program*](#), a report that called on the U.S. government not to overlook sanctionable acts committed by governments in countries like Egypt, Equatorial Guinea, India, Mexico, and Philippines.



Global Accountability Guardian Award

In 2022, we honored Jamie Schafer, a partner at Perkins Coie, with the Global Accountability Guardian Award for her work with our team to promote accountability through awareness and compliance with U.S. targeted sanctions.



AUTHORITARIANISM

Protecting human rights defenders

Human Rights First's international efforts are directed, in part, on protecting human rights defenders and advocating in the United States for support of their work.

We have worked with human rights defenders and various groups in Northern Ireland since the 1980s, and we remain dedicated to supporting their work. In 2022, the Pat Finucane Center and the Committee on the Administration of Justice in Northern Ireland convened the International Expert Panel: State Impunity and the Northern Ireland Conflict. With experts from Argentina, Norway, and South Africa, our Senior Advisor Brian Dooley serves as a member of this ongoing panel.

In 2022, we advocated for the release of human rights defenders in many countries. We testified before the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission on the status of those arbitrarily detained in [Bahrain](#). We continued to advocate for human rights defenders who have long been incarcerated in United Arab Emirates, Hong Kong, and Russia.



Our colleague, Vladimir Kara-Murza

Vladimir Kara-Murza is a Russian democracy activist, historian, and *Washington Post* columnist, and has been a Senior Advisor to Human Rights First on human rights accountability since 2020. Before his April 2022 arrest in Moscow on trumped-up charges for opposing Russian brutality in Ukraine, he led and participated in some of our advocacy on Magnitsky sanctions.

Since Vladimir's arrest, we have worked with his U.S.-based family and other human rights organizations to demand his release and to keep attention on his case.

**On April 17, 2023, Vladimir was convicted of treason and spreading misinformation about the Russian military and was sentenced to 25 years in prison.*





Honoring activists

At our 2022 Spring Social in New York, we presented the annual William D. Zabel Human Rights Award to Grupa Granica, a Polish organization that unites 14 NGOs in a grassroots effort on the Polish-Belarusian border to conduct life-saving work, document human rights violations, and provide legal and social services to refugees.

Human Rights First also announced Angelo Guillen, a human rights lawyer in the Philippines, as the winner of the 2022 Roger N. Baldwin Medal of Liberty. A prominent human rights defender and a leader in the National Union of Peoples' Lawyers (NUPL), Guillen's legal practice helps document human rights violations and educates farmers and indigenous communities on their human rights under domestic and international law.



SPOTLIGHT ON UKRAINE

Human Rights First has been engaged on human rights issues in Eastern Europe for decades, and particularly active in working with Ukrainian civil society since the first Russian invasion in 2014.

When Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Human Rights First was well positioned to respond. Our work in Ukraine aligns with our organization's overall strategic approach and in 2022, spanned four broad categories: sanctions and accountability, atrocity prevention, research and reporting, and support for human rights defenders.



SPOTLIGHT ON UKRAINE

Sanctions for abuses and corruption

Immediately after the invasion, we supported key partners focused on human rights abuse and corruption. We organized civil society working groups to exchange information about sanctions on Russian targets and developed other initiatives including successfully advocating for the Treasury Department to ensure sanctions did not impede online access to accurate information in Russia.

We worked with civil society partners in the United States, Ukraine, and the Russian diaspora to submit to the Treasury Department seven new sanctions case files related to abuse, corruption, and the war economy in Russia.



War crimes accountability

We sought to make the United States a stronger supporter of institutions with jurisdiction over war crimes in Ukraine. In December 2022, we helped enact legislation that fills major gaps in the U.S. War Crimes Act, allowing it to now be used to prosecute war criminals in Ukraine who subsequently come to the United States.

We also led calls for a change in U.S. policy toward the International Criminal Court. In March, *Just Security* published our argument for the United States to support the ICC's Ukraine investigation in "[Justice for Ukraine and the U.S. Government's Anomalous Int'l Criminal Court Policy.](#)"



SPOTLIGHT ON UKRAINE

Atrocity prevention

In May 2022, Human Rights First initiated a groundbreaking messaging campaign to prevent atrocities in Ukraine by raising awareness among Russian forces of international human rights obligations under the laws of war, and the consequences of violating these obligations. We collaborated with local partners to define the campaign's messaging, frequency, focus, and follow up.

With partners in the UK, EU, and Ukraine, we identified Russian and Russian-language mobile devices located in Ukrainian territory in order to reach potential combatants with our message in English, Russian, and Ukrainian. We also broadcast the message to selected military units through radio transmissions from unmanned vehicles.

Research and reporting

Human Rights First has taken regular trips to the country since the February 2022 invasion to provide solidarity with human rights defenders there and report about the situation facing these activists and others in Ukraine. Our senior advisor Brian Dooley produced 18 written commentaries on Ukraine over the course of four visits in 2022, reporting from cities under bombardment on how LGBTQI groups and other vulnerable communities are responding to the attacks.





Micro-Grants

Support from a key funder allowed Human Rights First to provide micro-grants of between \$4,000 and \$12,000 to relatively small organizations defending human rights in Ukraine. Grantees include:

ZMINA Human Rights Center: an advocacy organization that focuses on protecting human rights and documenting abuses, and is part of the “Ukraine 5 AM Coalition.”

Crimean House: an organization that preserves the heritage of Ukrainian cultures, such as Crimean Tatars who have been displaced since Russia occupied Crimea in 2014.

JurFem: an association of women lawyers that we assisted in producing [Practical Guide for Media: How to Responsibly Report War-Related Sexual Violence](#), a handbook for journalists on the responsible reporting of conflict-related sexual violence.

Grupa Granica: a Poland-based organization that promotes humane and legally compliant responses to Ukrainian and other vulnerable refugees entering Poland.



USE AND ABUSE OF TECHNOLOGY

Advanced technology is a tremendously powerful force that is transforming nearly every corner of society. Yet today, there is far too much investment in technology that violates our human rights, and not enough designed to protect them. Our Innovation Lab builds and shares technology-driven solutions that address this power imbalance – arming civil society with the powerful tools we need to protect human rights and democracy in the digital age.



USE AND ABUSE OF TECHNOLOGY

Innovation lab

Human Rights First's Innovation Lab, the most robust technology incubator in the field of human rights, harnesses advanced technology to protect human rights and democracy. Recent projects leverage AI-driven technologies including machine learning, computer vision, and object character recognition (OCR). They include:

Glimpse

Glimpse (previously known as SurvAI) automatically identifies and categorizes violent actions and objects in video. The tool is being used to build a case to de-platform a global white supremacist group, investigate human rights abuses against indigenous protesters in Peru, and build an archive of the protests in Hong Kong for journalists and lawyers.

RadiTube

RadiTube tracks and analyzes extremist narratives on Youtube, a hotbed of misinformation, and maps the ecosystem of users that spread these narratives. Raditube offers early detection of dangerous content. It has been used by media outlets including NBC, BuzzFeed, and *The London Times*, and by researchers on the January 6th Committee investigating the attack on the Capitol.

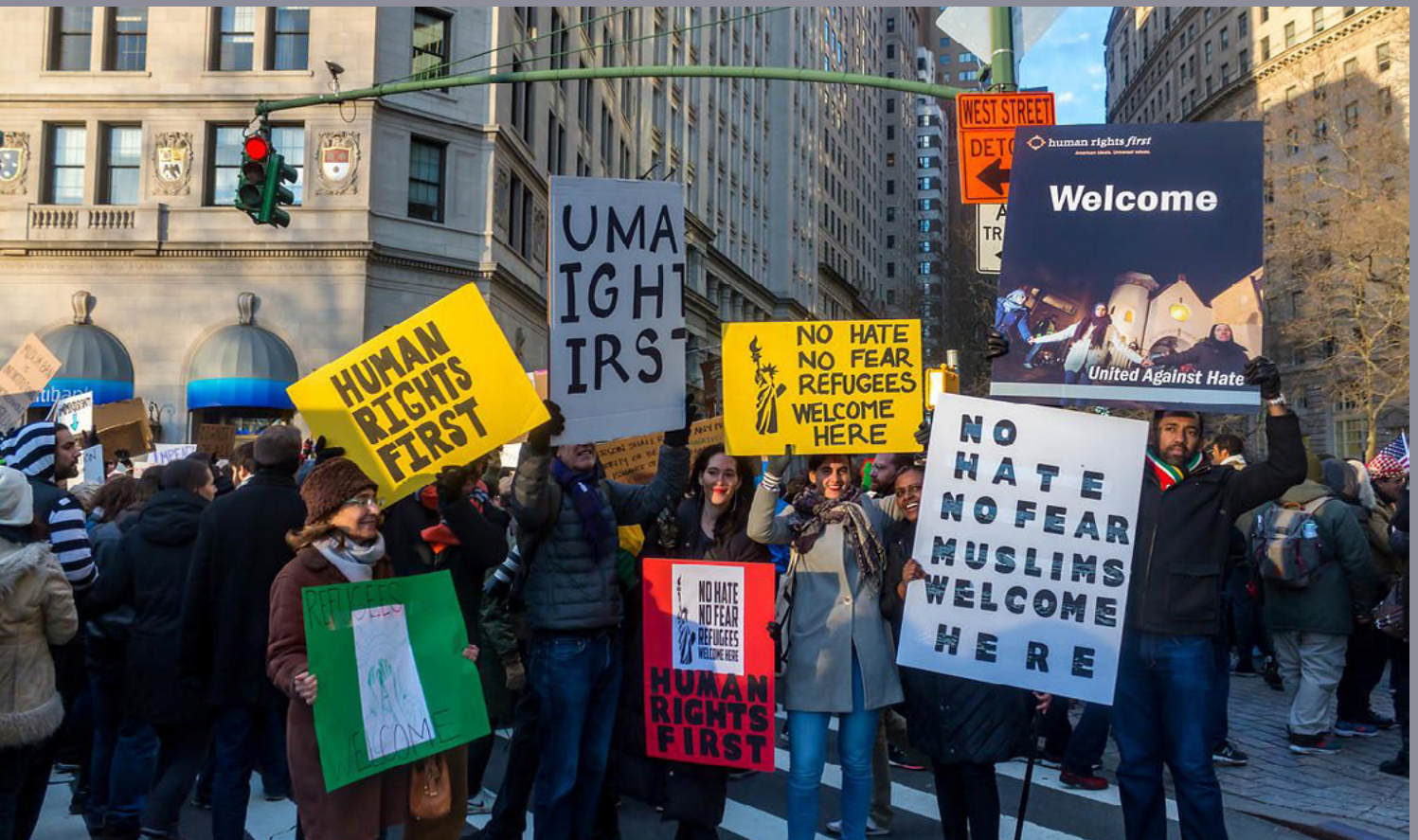
DocDB

DocDB allows large PDFs to be indexed and searched. While such technology exists in the market, DocDB is freely available to human rights defenders and includes security features and architecture necessary to handle sensitive data. DocDB is being used by the Pat Finucane Center in their investigation of torture and murder during the conflict in Ireland.



EXTREMISM

Human Rights First is working to undermine extremist efforts to mainstream and institutionalize hate and extremism. Our work is informed by our deep expertise about the movement and our coalitions with civil rights organizations, extremism experts, and veteran organizations, including our in-house veteran membership program, VFAI. We innovate technology tools to challenge the movement's influence. We also leverage impact litigation to bring accountability to perpetrators of hate and violence.



EXTREMISM



Threats to Democracy

Our Extremism and Human Rights Program addresses threats to American democracy by the antidemocratic far-right extremist movement, which is working to mainstream and institutionalize hate through rhetoric and legislation. We focus on protecting local democratic institutions; addressing extremism in the military and law enforcement; undermining mainstream support networks; and supporting targeted communities. A central goal is

to increase awareness of and respond to the widespread embrace of extremist narratives and antisemitic, xenophobic, and white supremacist conspiracy theories.

In 2022, Human Rights First [testified](#) before the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee on the impact and normalization of the antisemitic “great replacement” conspiracy. We released [Digital Soldiers](#), a report examining how the QAnon movement exploits the U.S. military’s credibility to undermine American democracy. Our team researched the evolving election denial movement and its links to anti-immigrant networks.

Across these areas of work, we engaged with Congressional staff and Executive Branch staff including the Department of Justice, Department of Defense, Department of Homeland Security, and the White House’s National Security Council and Domestic Policy Council.

Partnering with Integrity First for America

Following her tenure with Integrity First for America (IFA), where she led the lawsuit against hate groups for their violence in Charlottesville in 2017, Amy Spitalnick joined Human Rights First as a senior advisor on extremism in September 2022.

After the victory by IFA’s plaintiffs on November 23, 2021, IFA wound down their operations and partnered with Human Rights First to engage their community of support in our work against extremism.



VETERANS FOR AMERICAN IDEALS

Veterans for American Ideals (VFAI) engages a membership of 12,000 veterans and allies to increase public confidence in democracy and build support for human rights.

VFAI mobilizes veterans in support of human rights issues ranging from combatting antidemocratic extremism at home to protecting communities abroad. From defending democracy to honoring our promise to Afghan allies, Veterans for American Ideals puts veterans to work in defense of human rights.



VETERANS FOR AMERICAN IDEALS



Extremism and human rights

On March 31, 2022, VFAI Director Chris Purdy testified before the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs on ["Helping Veterans Thrive: The Importance of Peer Support in Preventing Domestic Violent Extremism."](#)

In 2022, VFAI worked with partners to create Task Force Butler to detect and disrupt disinformation campaigns and domestic extremism. We conducted an analysis of candidates who espoused extremist rhetoric and the prevalence and impact of mis- and disinformation in 2022's primary elections in Georgia.



Election protection

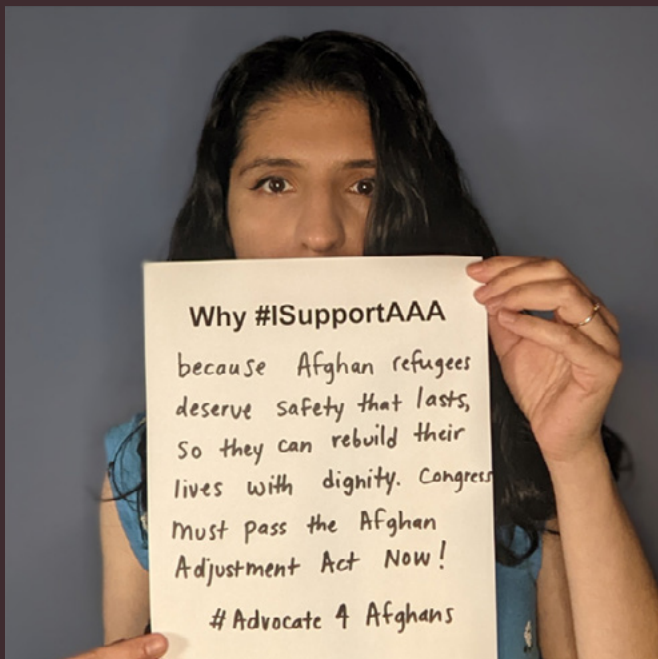
In 2020, VFAI engaged 1,000 veterans as poll workers in states affected by a COVID-related poll worker shortage. The effort was so successful that in 2022 we partnered with We the Veterans to launch Vet the Vote, in which 65,000 veterans signed up to serve as poll workers in the midterm elections.





Supporting Afghan allies

In 2022, VFAI continued advocating for U.S. support for at-risk Afghans, largely focused on the Afghan Adjustment Act. We facilitated meetings with Members of Congress, organized veterans for advocacy days in partnership with Refugee Council USA, and led op-ed campaigns for targeted elected officials to understand the depth of veterans' support for this important legislation.



SYSTEMIC INJUSTICE

Systemic injustice, especially against Black and brown people, has plagued America since its inception. Even as bigoted policies and global forces exacerbate preexisting problems, we continue to work to offer solutions through policy advocacy, strategic communications, research, litigation, and case representation.



SYSTEMIC INJUSTICE

Refugee representation



Human Rights First is uniquely positioned to defend the rights of individual asylum seekers and advocate for systemic change. Our refugee representation program helps refugees fleeing persecution access legal protections in the United States; we use that experience to advocate for laws and policies that protect refugees and their right to seek asylum.

In 2022, we partnered with 1,772 pro bono attorneys from 150 law firms, corporations, and law school clinics to provide standard-setting, life-saving legal representation to asylum seekers from around the world. Last year, our partners contributed 125,000 pro bono hours, at a value of \$96.5M, to serve more than 5,365 clients from 90 different countries.

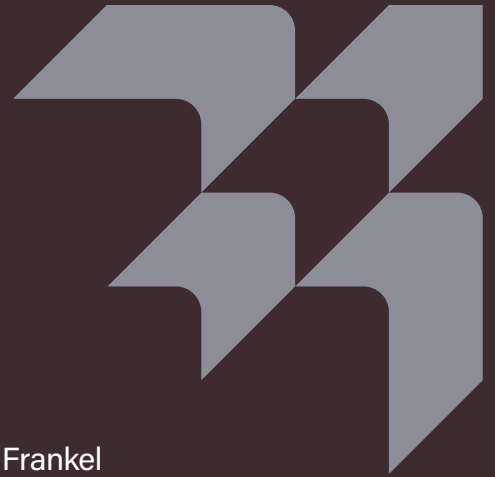
Saul's story

In Colombia, Saul was a renowned hair stylist who served as the president of a non-profit that advocates for LGBTQI people and people with HIV. Saul's leadership role, which included media interviews, made him well-known. He received death threats from a commander of a paramilitary group and had to flee Colombia to save his life.

Human Rights First and an outstanding pro bono team from Sheppard Mullin helped Saul win asylum, obtain a green card, and finally reunite with his daughter in the United States. Now Saul continues his advocacy work here.



SYSTEMIC INJUSTICE: REFUGEE REPRESENTATION



Honoring pro bono partners

In 2022, we honored three law firms with the Marvin E. Frankel Award for Pro Bono Excellence. We celebrated Greenberg Traurig LLP, Latham & Watkins LLP, and Morrison Foerster for their extraordinary leadership and commitment to supporting asylum seekers and refugees during a time of global challenges that included historic numbers of refugees fleeing Afghanistan, Ukraine, and the global south.

Additionally, we initiated an Award for Exceptional Corporate Partnership in 2022; the inaugural award was presented to Accenture for their strong partnership in the Welcome Legal Alliance, an initiative co-led by Human Rights First. Accenture led the corporate community's effort to provide legal representation to Afghans, providing critical pro bono legal assistance to more than 100 Afghan refugees.



SYSTEMIC INJUSTICE

Refugee advocacy

The continued failure of the U.S. government to protect people forced to flee persecution undermines human rights law globally and endangers the lives of people seeking asylum in this country. In response, Human Rights First uses research, analysis, and advocacy to defend the right to seek asylum and other rights of refugees and migrants.

Human Rights First's research, reports, and amicus brief submissions helped confirm the Remain in Mexico policy was [fatally flawed](#), paving the way for the Biden administration to end the policy following a Supreme Court ruling allowing its termination.



Advocacy in Washington

Human Rights First and our partners helped secured \$275 million in funding in the fiscal year 2022 consolidated appropriations bill to address the USCIS asylum and refugee processing backlogs, as well as funding for Afghan asylum cases so they would not prevent adjudication of other long-waiting cases.

Through a multiyear effort to reduce the inhumane detention of asylum seekers and to support the welcoming effort for individuals and families who arrive at the Southern border of the United States, Human Rights First and our partners secured \$785 million in funding in the fiscal 2023 appropriations bill for not-for-profit shelters that serve arriving asylum seekers and migrants.





Opposing Title 42

In 2022, Human Rights First continued to work with epidemiologists and public health experts on [a series of letters and public statements](#) explaining that the Title 42 expulsion policy was not justified on the basis of public health, instead it harmed public health and bolstered racist tropes that paint migrants as disease threats.

Human Rights First conducted research in Mexico and in the United States that documented the human rights abuses inflicted by the Title 42 policy, including reports issued in [January](#), [two in February](#), [April](#), [June](#), and [December](#) 2022. The December report tracked over [13,480](#) reports of torture, kidnapping and other attacks against asylum seekers and migrants in Mexico impacted by the Title 42 policy in the two years since President Biden took office. Human Rights First's research was [cited](#) by a federal court that ruled the policy was unlawful.

VFAI also [rallied veterans](#) to demand an end to Title 42.



SPOTLIGHT ON AFGHANISTAN

For over twenty years, Afghan human rights, civil society, and government leaders staked their lives, futures, and families on the international community's effort to build a rights-based democracy in their country. When that effort collapsed in August 2021, they faced deadly retribution by one of the world's most repressive and brutal regimes.



SPOTLIGHT ON AFGHANISTAN



From the earliest days of this crisis, Human Rights First was central to policy discussions inside the U.S. government. We built the Evacuate Our Allies coalition, which has grown to 300 members from veterans, human and civil rights, refugee, Afghan-American, and other organizations to advocate for efforts to evacuate Afghans and welcome them in the United States. Through our Project: Afghan Legal Assistance (PALA), we have also led the U.S. legal community's response to the fall of Afghanistan.

Human Rights First provided direct assistance to over 600 Afghan leaders, human rights defenders, and their families who faced specific, personal, active, and violent pursuit by the Taliban

regime. This was done by helping to direct them through crowds and chaotic airfield checkpoints to evacuation aircraft during the 2021 Kabul airlift. Through coordination with partners we facilitated evacuations of 1,883 at-risk Afghans, and working with our contacts inside the U.S. government, we referred over 95,000 Afghan allies to the State Department for evacuation and resettlement. Finally, for Afghans on the ground, our team quickly provided life-saving early warnings and security guidance on biometric tracking and other high-tech threats to all Afghans with internet access.

We also initiated a high-risk evacuation effort that brought to safety 654 Afghan leaders, human rights defenders, and their families who faced specific, personal, active, and violent pursuit by the Taliban regime. Were they caught, most or all of these highest-risk Afghans would be detained, tortured, or killed. Instead, the evacuation project was accomplished with no loss of life, serious injury, or violent incident.

We are justifiably proud that over the past 18 months Human Rights First was directly responsible for saving at least 3,000 Afghan lives, and contributed to rescuing at least 100,000 others — a strong addition to our organization's extraordinary legacy.



SPOTLIGHT ON AFGHANISTAN

Project: Afghan Legal Assistance

Through PALA, Human Rights First leads efforts to protect at-risk Afghans and support their welcome and resettlement in the United States. We coordinate U.S. legal organizations, law firms, resettlement agencies, and others to provide legal representation to Afghan refugees and SIVs. We also collaborate with law firms and non-profit legal organizations interested in representing Afghan refugees and asylum seekers pro bono.

In 2022, we coordinated over 1,100 pro bono volunteers at law firms and corporations to conduct more than 2,000 legal screenings, pro se plus asylum clinics, SIV Adjustment of Status clinics, full scope representation of hundreds

of asylum and SIV adjustment of status cases, and worked through more than 3,000 legal assistance forms. To further increase our impact, in October 2022 Human Rights First partnered with Google, Accenture, and Welcome.US to launch a pro se plus four-part clinic model.

Leveraging our expertise in refugee law, asylum, and the effects of the sweeping immigration laws that could unjustly block Afghan refugees from legal status in the United States, Human Rights First led regular online trainings and developed written training materials. We worked with partners to host nearly 60 trainings, roundtables, and presentations that provided guidance to volunteer lawyers, community-based organizations, and legal service providers.





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