

JUSTICE AND ACCOUNTABILITY



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NEWSLETTER

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As evidenced by the first months of 2026, the global human rights landscape seems less like a series of isolated crises and more like a connected pattern. Across regions, similar tactics deployed in different contexts recur: dissent framed as destabilization, environmental harm entwined with political repression, amnesties proposed amid unresolved violations, and international justice mechanisms pushed to their limits. Yet accountability efforts persist, adapt, and break through.

This issue compiles the key developments from the past month to support informed reflection and strategy: mapping patterns, identifying leverage points, and highlighting deeds of sustained community work that offer pathways forward.

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GLOBAL OVERVIEW

Reports and forums painting the big picture

Human Rights Watch World Report

HRW released its 36th annual World Report (529 pages, covering 100+ countries).

Key findings:

72% of the world's population now lives under autocratic rule



Major shifts in U.S. foreign policy undermining the global human rights system



A sharp rise in attacks on human rights defenders and civil society

In his introductory essay “Will Human Rights Survive a Trumpian World?”, Executive Director Philippe Boloïon warns that the global human rights system is *“in peril”* due to coordinated efforts by governments acting as *“allies of convenience.”*

Despite the grim outlook, the report stresses that *“people power”* remains the vital engine for change and calls for a new global alliance of rights-respecting democracies to protect the architecture of international freedoms.

IHL at a Breaking Point: Geneva Academy Report

War watch: IHL in focus documents 23 major armed conflicts worldwide (12 international, 67 non-international) over an 18-month period ending late 2025.

Key findings:

- Documented genocide risks in Gaza and Sudan
- The rise of “drone wars” and systematic use of AI to target civilians
- The weaponization of hunger through destruction of croplands and water systems
- Warnings that international humanitarian law (IHL) is at a “critical breaking point”

Notable development:

Violence in Haiti between state forces and the Viv Ansanm gang coalition has been classified as a Non-International Armed Conflict **for the first time**, opening the door to war crimes prosecutions (though ICC jurisdiction remains limited).

The report urges states to use universal jurisdiction more consistently and to halt arms transfers to parties committing systematic IHL violations.

Tunisia-focused reports

- *“Between Freedom and Repression”* (Intersection Association - بين الحرية والقمع) documents the sharp decline in the right to peaceful assembly (March–Dec 2025). A period marked by diverse protest movements, including strikes by young doctors over deteriorating health sectors, student marches against university policies, and environmental protests in Gabès. In Gabès specifically, the report records a violent security response to anti-pollution protests, including the excessive use of tear gas in residential areas and the arbitrary arrest of at least 54 individuals, including minors.
- *“Living, Breathing, Resisting: Gabès and the New Political Landscape in Tunisia”* (Arab Reform Initiative) examines how ecological disaster in Gabès is reshaping Tunisia’s political landscape. Central to the findings is the “Stop Pollution-Gabès” campaign, which successfully transformed localized indignation into a structured social movement supported by the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT). This mobilization has redefined environmental demands as a “new political language” of social justice and a challenge to the “sacrificial” development model, rejecting the traditional trade-off between industrial employment and economic security in favor of environmental dignity and the “right to life.”

UN Human Rights Council: 61st session opens

The UN Human Rights Council convened its 61st regular session (23 February - 31 March 2026) addressing human rights crises across multiple regions.

The agenda includes High Commissioner reports on Myanmar, Afghanistan, Sudan, and the Occupied Palestinian Territory, alongside country situations requiring urgent attention: Venezuela, North Korea, Nicaragua, Belarus, Myanmar, Iran, Ukraine, and Syria.

This session features Universal Periodic Review outcomes for 13 countries and panel discussions on emerging challenges: using digital technologies to combat female genital mutilation, financing sustainable development consistent with human rights obligations, disability-inclusive infrastructure, and a full-day meeting on violations against children in armed conflict. Technical assistance programs for Ukraine, Georgia, Central African Republic, DRC, Haiti, and Mali are also under review.

While progress in many of these contexts remains slow, the recurring country focus on the Council's agenda reflects the importance of sustained international attention in laying the groundwork for future accountability.

JUSTICE IN MOTION

Accountability breakthroughs and setbacks

Long-awaited reckoning: Rodrigo Duterte faces ICC

From 23-27 February 2026, the International Criminal Court held confirmation of charges hearings against former Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, for crimes against humanity during the country's so-called "war on drugs." Pre-Trial Chamber I must now determine whether sufficient evidence exists to proceed to trial for murder and attempted murder allegedly committed between November 2011 and March 2019. It is expected to issue its decision within 60 days, either confirming charges and committing him to trial, declining to confirm due to insufficient evidence, or requesting additional investigation from the Prosecutor.

The proceedings represent a major test for international accountability mechanisms confronting large-scale abuses carried out under the guise of domestic security policies. Amnesty International described the hearings as a "a crucial opportunity for justice," noting that "Duterte's long-awaited day in court ... reminds the international community that nobody is above the law, no matter the ferocity of attacks, sanctions and threats..."

Small island, big stakes: Vanuatu pushes to enforce climate obligations

Vanuatu introduced a "zero draft" UN General Assembly resolution to turn the 2025 ICJ Advisory Opinion on climate obligations into binding action.

The Opinion unanimously clarified that states have a legal duty to prevent climate harm, and that breaches of this obligation could expose them to compensation claims

The proposal, co-sponsored by a cross-regional group including the Netherlands, Colombia, Kenya, and the Marshall Islands, would go further than the opinion itself: it demands "full and prompt reparation," and the creation of an International Register of Damage alongside a formal climate reparation mechanism.

Amnesty International urged governments to support the resolution and ensure its adoption in its proposed version, warning that it was "likely to trigger political pushback from higher income high emitting countries." That pushback came swiftly: a US State Department cable revealed the Trump administration "strongly objects" to the resolution as it is based on "speculative climate models to fabricate purported legal obligations..."

Informal UN consultations were scheduled for mid-February, with Vanuatu targeting a vote before the end of March. Its fate will be an early litmus test for whether climate accountability can overcome geopolitical pressure from major emitters.

Beyond borders: French court invokes extraterritorial jurisdiction over complicity in Gaza genocide

In early February 2026, it was made public that the Crimes Against Humanity Division of the Paris Judicial Court had issued summonses against two French-Israeli dual nationals on charges of complicity in genocide and incitement to genocide.

The summonses, issued in August 2025, stem from the two women's involvement in efforts to obstruct the delivery of humanitarian aid into Gaza during the 2024 famine.

The complaints were filed by a coalition of Palestinian and French human rights organisations, including Al-Haq, Al Mezan, the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights, and the French Jewish Union for Peace.

The summonses do not constitute arrest warrants, they legally require the individuals to appear before a judge. But both women have publicly stated they do not intend to comply.

The case marks the first time a French court has treated the deliberate blocking of humanitarian aid as potential complicity in genocide.

It significantly reaffirms extraterritorial jurisdiction and could set a precedent for how other jurisdictions handle the conduct of dual nationals implicated in crimes against humanity.

Filling the gap: EU advances Special Tribunal for Ukraine

On February 24, 2026, exactly four years after Russia's full-scale invasion, the European Parliament adopted resolution P10_TA(2026)0056, urging the European Union and its Member States to actively support the establishment and operationalization of the Special Tribunal for the Crime of Aggression against Ukraine. The resolution reaffirmed Ukraine's right to self-defense under the UN Charter and declared that "Russia's aggression must fail and Ukraine must prevail."

With €10 million in EU funding already secured and the Netherlands prepared to host preparatory work, this effort aims to close the gap left by the Rome Statute's jurisdictional limits on aggression.

Why Russia's political and military leadership remain shielded:

While the ICC has jurisdiction over war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide committed on Ukrainian territory, the crime of aggression has stricter rules. Despite investigating war crimes in Ukraine, the court lacks jurisdiction over the crime of aggression by Russian nationals. Under Article 15 bis(5) of the Rome Statute, the Court is explicitly barred from exercising jurisdiction over aggression committed by nationals of a non-State Party (like Russia), even on the territory of a victim state that accepts ICC jurisdiction.

To address this, efforts to create a dedicated Special Tribunal gained momentum in 2025. On June 25, 2025, Ukraine and the Council of Europe signed a bilateral agreement establishing the tribunal's framework and Statute, which Ukraine's parliament subsequently supported.

This European-led push has become crucial amid reduced U.S. engagement in multilateral accountability efforts. Against this backdrop, Ukraine aims to complete key organizational work in 2026, with a view to enabling future prosecutions of those most responsible for the crime of aggression.

ESCALATING THREATS

Warfare, ecocide, and repression

Sudan: Rising civilian toll from drone warfare

Between February 15 and 16, at least 57 civilians, including at least 15 children, were killed in a series of drone strikes across four Sudanese states, in what the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights described as part of a recurring pattern of attacks on civilian objects and infrastructure.

The strikes hit a market in North Kordofan, a shelter for internally displaced persons in West Kordofan, two primary schools in South Kordofan, a hospital in Sennar state, and a market in West Darfur. Both the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) are implicated in separate incidents.

The pattern of strikes on markets, health facilities, schools, and displacement shelters points to a systematic disregard for international humanitarian law obligations that prohibit the military use of civilian infrastructure.

The strikes come as Sudan approaches the fourth year of a war that erupted in April 2023 and has already produced one of the world's most severe humanitarian crises.

In the same week as the attacks, a UN humanitarian convoy, led by the World Food Programme, UNICEF, and UNDP, finally reached the cities of Dilling and Kadugli in South Kordofan, communities that had been almost entirely cut off from outside assistance for more than two years.

Carrying supplies for over 130,000 people, including food, medicine, and water and sanitation materials, the convoy had itself been delayed more than 40 days due to intensified hostilities, and was ultimately forced to navigate a longer overland route to reach its destination.

Herbicide as a weapon: Israel's glyphosate spraying in Lebanon and Syria

Israeli military aircraft sprayed the herbicide glyphosate over agricultural land along the Lebanese and Syrian border areas, in what observers are describing as a continuation of a systematic "scorched-earth" policy.

In Lebanon, the spraying on February 2–3 targeted approximately 17 kilometers of borderland, covering the agricultural areas of 6 villages, at concentrations that national authorities found to be 20 to 30 times higher than normal use levels. In Syria, satellite analysis by PAX, identified at least 54 kilometers of sprayed border strips, with operations beginning as early as January 25.

The UN OHCHR flagged the spraying as posing a "serious humanitarian risk," noting that Israeli military activity north of the Blue Line (120-km UN line drawn to confirm the withdrawal of Israeli forces from southern Lebanon in 2000) violates UN Security Council Resolution 1701 (2006).

While Israel has not signed key international instruments, it remains bound by customary IHL, including the ICRC's Rule 76, which explicitly prohibits the use of herbicides as a method of warfare when they target non-military vegetation and cause severe environmental damage.

These operations do not take place in a vacuum. Israel has a documented history of herbicide spraying affecting Palestinian farmland in Gaza dating back to 2014. In southern Lebanon, the targeted areas already bear the ecological scars of the 2024 conflict: white phosphorus, heavy-metal soil contamination, and extensive deforestation.

The cumulative environmental impact risks making these border communities permanently uninhabitable.

Venezuela amnesty frees political prisoners ... but not all

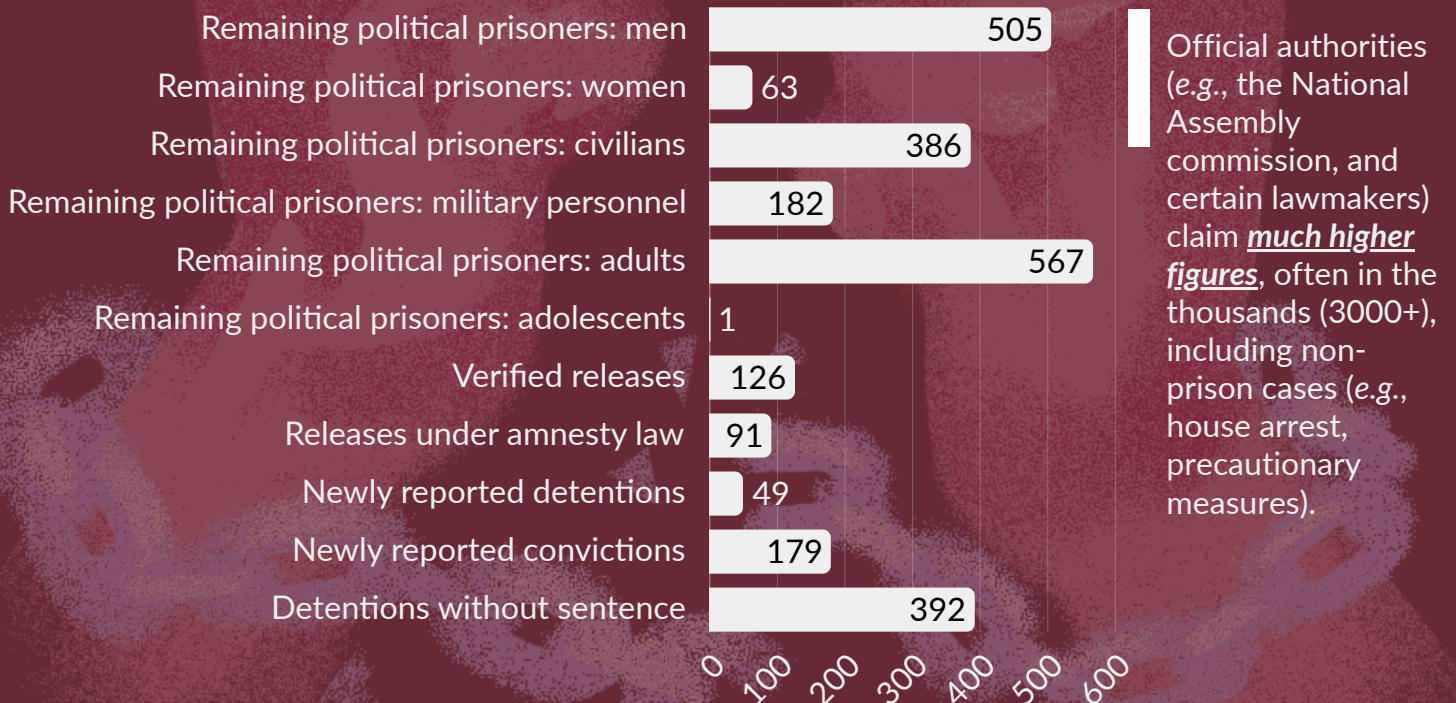
Venezuelan authorities initiated a significant wave of releases for individuals classified as political prisoners (500+ since January), aligned with the “Amnesty Law for Democratic Coexistence” (Ley de Amnistía para la Convivencia Democrática), published in the Gaceta Oficial on February 19, 2026, after National Assembly approval. Presented as advancing reconciliation and peace, the law, granting amnesty for certain political offenses from prior years, prompted some releases under its framework.

Local NGO Foro Penal, which has played a key role in tracking cases, verifying releases, and assisting victims with amnesty applications, continues to document hundreds of remaining political prisoners even as the process unfolds.

Historical context since 2014

- Arrests for political reasons (since 2014): 18,944 cases documented by Foro Penal
- People still arbitrarily subject to measures restricting their freedom: more than 11,000

According to the NGO's balance as of late February 2026:



International reactions have been cautiously positive but insistent on safeguards. The UN Fact-Finding Mission on Venezuela welcomed the legislative step, but expressed reservations about the process, noting the lack of "informed, inclusive, and safe public consultations", as well as the law's limited scope (potentially excluding cases under non-political charges or military jurisdiction).

UN human rights experts, Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch similarly welcomed the releases while emphasizing that the process must meet international standards.

Emphasizing that any amnesty must exclude perpetrators of serious violations and crimes against humanity, they additionally stressed that lasting progress requires broader reforms, encompassing judicial independence, accountability and reparations, without which the current steps risk amounting to little more than a superficial transition.

While the amnesty law and associated releases represent a tangible step toward alleviating the suffering of those arbitrarily detained, their success will ultimately depend on sustained political will to pursue the deeper institutional reforms needed to prevent renewed repression.

COUNTRY SPOTLIGHT

Tunisia in focus



Court sentences MP for social media posts

On 19 February 2026, the Tunis Court of First Instance sentenced Member of Parliament Ahmed Saidani to eight months in prison.

The conviction relates to Facebook posts in which he criticised the President's visits to areas affected by recent heavy flooding and commented on his practice of taking photographs with residents in these areas.

He was prosecuted under Article 86 of the 2001 telecommunications law for "insulting others via public communication networks."

Saidani, who was elected in late 2022 and had previously supported certain policies of the president, had become more critical in recent months. His lawyer has indicated that an appeal is likely. Some fellow parliamentarians and human-rights organisations have raised concerns about the implications for freedom of expression and parliamentary oversight. Parliamentary immunity offers no shield against criminal charges, the authorities emphasised.

Tunisian lawyer Ahmed Souab released after ten months in detention

Prominent Tunisian lawyer and former judge Ahmed Souab was freed on 23 February 2026 by the Tunis Court of Appeal.

Souab, aged 69, had been arrested in April 2025 after publicly criticising what he described as political interference and lack of independence in the judiciary.

His comments came in the wake of heavy sentences handed down in the high-profile "conspiracy against state security" trial.

In October 2025, he was convicted in a brief remote hearing and sentenced to five years in prison on terrorism-related charges linked to his statements.

On appeal, the court reduced the sentence to ten months' imprisonment (already served) and imposed a two-year suspended term on the remaining charge. Souab was released the same day for time served.

The case had drawn strong international attention, including a June 2025 communication from UN Special Procedures (AL TUN 4/2025), to which Tunisia responded via Note Verbale No. 169/2025.

While his release marks a positive development, the underlying conviction stands, and observers continue to monitor the broader situation for lawyers and human rights defenders in Tunisia.

Gabès: Breathing poison, demanding justice

Further south, Gabès has become a symbol of environmental sacrifice.

Since the Groupe Chimique Tunisien (GCT) opened its phosphate-processing plants in 1972, **daily discharges of 15,000 tonnes of radioactive phosphogypsum** – laced with uranium, radium and heavy metals – have turned the Gulf of Gabès into what locals call **“Little Tunisian Chernobyl.”**

Air thick with sulphur dioxide, ammonia and fine particulates exceeds national and international limits; 70 million tonnes of waste have destroyed 90 % of the once-vast Posidonia seagrass meadows, collapsed fish stocks and contaminated soil and oases.

Health consequences are stark: soaring rates of cancer, asthma, chronic bronchitis, miscarriages and birth defects.

In September–October 2025 alone, 122 cases of asphyxiation and poisoning were recorded after gas leaks.

The economic trade-off is painful. The GCT provides roughly 4,000 direct and 20,000 indirect jobs in a governorate where unemployment exceeds 25 %. Yet the value of lost fisheries and agriculture now surpasses the phosphate industry’s contribution, activists argue.

This dilemma is summarised by the former regional coordinator with the UGTT and the LTDH:

“Here, every person has two dreams.

The first is to receive a job offer from the chemical complex.

The second is to wake up one morning and see that this nightmare has disappeared ...”

Stop Pollution campaign activists criminalised

Thirteen human-rights defenders and driving forces behind the Stop Pollution campaign were sentenced *in absentia* to one year in prison in February 2026. The case was initiated by a complaint from the GCT, which accused the defendants of “obstructing freedom of work” following a peaceful sit-in held outside the company’s regional offices in 2020.

According to the Tunisian League for the Defence of Human Rights (LTDH, Statement of February 20, 2026), the defendants were not properly summoned and had no effective opportunity to present a defence.

In a parallel development on 26 February 2026, a Tunisian court rejected an emergency request filed by the Gabès Bar Association (and supported by local medical and civil society actors) to suspend operations of the GCT’s polluting fertiliser units. The court ruled there was **“no sufficient proof of harm”** and that the pollution allegations lacked adequate technical and scientific evidence for urgent suspension. Lawyers announced their intention to appeal, with no date yet set for the full proceedings.

This rejection came despite a July 2025 audit commissioned by the African Development Bank, which reportedly highlighted “major non-compliance” with environmental standards regarding air and marine pollution from the GCT facility in Gabès.

February 2026 showed both the deepening of authoritarian tactics and the resilience of human rights defenders, communities, and international mechanisms.

From Gabès to The Hague, from Vanuatu to Kyiv, people and courageous institutions continue to push back against impunity.

The question remains: will the international community find the political will to support these efforts before the “critical breaking point” becomes irreversible?