

Training and Education for Human Rights at Mwatana-Yemen

Mwatana for Human Rights

THE BIRTH OF THE REPUBLIC OF YEMEN in 1990 led to the establishment of a constitution articulating the importance of democracy, political pluralism, freedom of the press, and the emergence of civil society organizations and unions. The government however became authoritarian and tried to control this emerging field by limiting activities and impact to prevent creating a “formal” democratic experience. Despite these repressive measures, many of the structures remained and the voices of organizations continued struggling to expand freedoms and defend democracy and human rights under an undemocratic Yemeni regime.

Sixteen years after the birth of the Republic of Yemen, the 2006 presidential election was held. This election was one of the most important landmarks in the emerging Yemeni democracy. During this time, two experienced human rights defenders, Abdulrasheed Al-Faqih and Radhya Al-Mutawakel, met. They agreed to establish a civil rights organization that would work to promote human rights and freedom. This organization was named Mwatana for Human Rights (Mwatana).

They tried to register the organization with the government in early 2007 but the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor refused to grant the permit due to their past human rights work, which encompassed working to rectify human rights violations against the peaceful Southern Movement, during the Saada wars, and generally of supporting press freedom. In one attempt to obtain the permit, a government official said,

even if you come trying to establish a dancing group, you will not be given the permit. These are orders from above.

Despite this, they continued their human rights advocacy, eventually establishing relationships with international organizations such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and Open Society Foundation. Through these experiences, they were exposed to various mechanisms in human rights work such as monitoring and documenting violations under international humanitarian law and international human rights law.

Their exposure to these pioneering international human rights strategies reinforced their conviction that Yemen needed a Yemeni human rights organization that would work with human rights standards and mechanisms. They imagined an organization that enjoyed independence, competence, commitment, and faith towards rights causes, free from professional and institutional barriers that weakened civil society and reduced its impact. They felt that the organization should work within a victim-centered framework with staff of both genders handling various cases. It should be governed by clear policies, procedures, and rules of conduct with a focus on achieving impact in the short, medium and long terms. It should be committed to specialization within clear and strict limits, and avoid confusing political work with other related fields on one hand, and the human rights field on the other hand.

They learned about the standards and mechanisms for documenting human rights violations within the framework of international humanitarian law and international human rights law through their work with various international organizations. They understood the importance of information for any human rights action aiming to protect victims and achieve justice.

As a result, field investigations subscribing to professional standards became the base of Mwatana's efforts in advocacy, accountability, awareness-raising, training and legal support.

During this time, many questions came up. The most prominent question, however, was what new and different human rights work Mwatana could offer in Yemen. Reaching a final answer to this question required a number of years and several important events and transformations within Yemen.

The most prominent of these events was the Arab Spring. In Yemen, the protests began in early 2011, aiming to overthrow the regime of President Saleh. The protesters involved in the demonstrations faced widespread human rights violations under conditions of severe political polarization. That period tested the competence and independence of the existing Yemeni human rights and civil rights organizations and revealed an urgent need for new human rights, civil rights, and media actors who would maintain their stance and responsibilities under any circumstances.

In April 2013, Mwatana finally obtained its permit and was able to expand its institutional capacities and intensify its activities. It also adopted

a Code of Conduct as standard of behavior and ethics for all levels of the organization to achieve a high level of efficiency and professional work in promoting and protecting human rights in accordance with international laws, customs and standards relevant to the field of human rights work.¹

Fieldwork research is the cornerstone of all activities of Mwatana and their outcomes are used and reflected in Mwatana's publications and other materials as well as in its lobbying, advocacy, accountability, and legal support work.

Vision, Mission and Objectives

Mwatana adopted the following vision and mission statements:

Our Vision

A society where justice and full access to rights is guaranteed to everyone.

Our Mission

Mwatana advocates for human rights through the verification and documentation of violations, provision of legal support to victims, lobbying, as well as awareness-raising and capacity-building.

Mwatana aims/strategic goals:

- To contribute to the creation of a database on human rights violations;
- To exercise pressure towards ensuring redress for victims of human rights violations and accountability for violators;
- To create an environment of awareness of the culture and principles of human rights;
- To build and strengthen the capacities of the most interested and influential groups in the field of human rights.

Programs and Activities

Mwatana has been implementing several programs and activities including the following:

- **Monitoring and Documentation:** Mwatana undertakes field visits and research on incidents of human rights violations, takes the

testimonies of witnesses, scrutinizes and studies the pieces of evidence in accordance with local and international laws. The data collected is then used in the production of statements, reports, letters or short films that include summaries, recommendations, and demands;

- **Studies and Research:** Mwatana conducts research studies regarding human rights issues that aim to obtain a clear understanding of the research subjects in order to diagnose the issue and find solutions;
- **Legal Support:** Mwatana provides legal assistance to the victims of human rights violations in their cases before the relevant courts, public prosecution offices and other law enforcement agencies by deploying professional and qualified lawyers;
- **Accountability and Redress:** Mwatana seeks opportunities for international criminal accountability for all violators under international criminal law in order to provide redress for the victims. Mwatana keeps track of precedents in various countries and international mechanisms and files complaints where appropriate. In collaboration with other international organizations, Mwatana has filed a criminal complaint, submitted a communication with the Office of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, and filed a legal intervention;
- **Advocacy and Lobbying:** Mwatana lobbies relevant competent authorities through a specialized panel for advocacy to consider, accept and implement the recommendations and demands made in the studies and researches it conducted;
- **Awareness-raising:** Mwatana strives to raise awareness among people regarding their rights through different awareness-raising activities using modern tools that include films, the effective use of social media, brochures, and booklets. Such work is done to best serve the causes Mwatana works on;
- **Training and capacity-building:** Mwatana works on training qualified human rights workers and equip them with the necessary skills in order to work on human rights issues objectively and more effectively.

Mwatana has this core belief and mandate: “Accurate information is power.” This led it down the path of documentation and field research. Mwatana researchers conduct in-depth investigative fieldwork across all Yemeni governorates to uncover human rights violations, raise victims’ voices, and build a Yemeni human rights database as basis for accountability and redress.

Work Units

Mwatana carries out fieldwork through its Research and Studies and Legal Support units. It has several other units namely, Accountability and Redress, Media and Communications, Advocacy, Projects and Programs Management, Evaluation, Monitoring and Learning Management, Finance Management, Human Resources and Operations Management, and Data and Information Management. Mwatana is also working on establishing an eleventh unit: a training unit that will eventually become the nucleus of Mwatana Academy.

The results of the investigative research are subject to several rounds of review and scrutiny by specialists and experts. Mwatana uses the research data to produce reports, studies, statements, blogs, letters, and human rights documentaries.

Mwatana has been recognized for the accuracy of information in its documentation of human rights violations. Many international platforms, including the United Nations Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) on six grave violations against children in armed conflict, the United Nations Group of Eminent Experts formed by the Human Rights Council, and various international media outlets have used the reports of Mwatana.

Publications

Mwatana produces a number of materials: press statements, reports, studies, articles, blogs and videos.²

Mwatana published more than one hundred human rights press releases addressing events that occurred during the war and its aftermath in Yemen.

In 2023, Mwatana published two important reports, namely, *False Exonerations* (November 2023) and *Transit in Hell* (December 2023).

In *False Exonerations*, Mwatana rigorously examined the conclusions and findings adopted by the Joint Incidents Assessment Team (JIAT) regarding the Saudi/UAE-led Coalition's attacks including seventy-nine airstrikes.³ The report scrutinized the Coalition's adherence to international humanitarian law in its airstrikes and identified the civilian damages caused. It challenged the accuracy, credibility, and reliability of the conclusions and findings published by JIAT. It questioned JIAT's methodology and field investigation, even if they met minimal investigation standards. Based on documentation of its independent field researchers trained in accordance with the best international standards, Mwatana concluded that the Coalition's attacks on civilians and civilian objects must be regarded by the Coalition as violations of international humanitarian law. The Coalition should also take action to redress the victims and hold those responsible accountable.

Transit in Hell is a review and discussion of the horrific violations targeting African migrants during their journey across Yemeni territory.⁴ This report highlights the violations faced by African migrants in Yemen by shedding light on the abuses and those responsible for them, and conveying a true picture of the suffering experienced by this vulnerable group. African migrants are one of the most fragile and marginalized sectors of Yemeni society, lacking the means to express their suffering and being exposed to various violations. This reality makes them a forgotten community, with their suffering often invisible to many. In other words, this report represents an attempt to convey the voices of migrants, expose their tragedies, and uncover the violations committed against them by the conflicting parties. It not only presents findings on these issues, but also discusses ways to alleviate their suffering and contribute to solving their problems and holding violators accountable through a series of recommendations. Mwatana documented all violations regardless of the perpetrator. In the report, Mwatana documented one hundred twelve incidents involving violations perpetrated against African migrants by the parties to the conflict in Yemen as well as abuses by human trafficking and smuggling gangs. These documented incidents include thirty-two incidents committed by the Ansar Allah (Houthis) armed group, forty incidents committed by Saudi/JIAT-led coalition forces including thirty-six incidents committed by Saudi border guards, ten incidents by Southern Transitional Council (STC) forces in their various formations, and six incidents committed by forces of the internationally recognized govern-

ment. Human trafficking and smuggling gangs operating in areas controlled by different conflict parties bear responsibility for twenty-four incidents.

Mwatana and partners issue different reports.⁵ They also issue some studies such as the following:

- *Dynamics of Repression and Challenges*, 2023
- *Study on the Situation of Detention Centers in Yemen*, 2019
- *War of Ignorance - A field study of the impacts of armed conflict on access to education in Yemen, 2020-2021*
- *Courts for Abuse - A Case Study of Yemen's Specialized Criminal Courts*, 2015 - 2020
- *Fragile Walls - A study of domestic violence against women during the war in Yemen - 2014-2021*
- *Colored Coffins - recruitment and use of children soldiers in the armed conflict in Yemen - 2013-2018*.

Videos

Mwatana produces videos to highlight patterns of violations. The videos include documentary films, awareness films, interviews with Mwatana team, and visual content that highlight its work.⁵

Human Rights Education

Mwatana has for several years been building a professional team that works in accordance with high international standards in the field of human rights. Therefore, another important component of Mwatana's work is to build a community of effective human rights professionals.

Mwatana designed its courses and work environment as open workshops that have helped dozens of young women and men hone their knowledge and skills. The courses necessarily constitute a qualitative source of knowledge and skills for human rights work in the future, both within and outside Mwatana.

Mwatana promotes awareness of human rights values and issues to help create a culture of human rights (that includes opposing their violations) through positive communication with the public on various social media platforms. It engages continuously in constructive discussions with actors who influence the human rights situation in Yemen through available ad-

vocacy and pressure mechanisms (local and international). Furthermore, it creates strong partnership and cooperation with various parties and institutions that adhere to high professional and objective standards in order to convey the voices of victims of human rights violations in Yemen to active and influential parties. It also works to enhance its communication with the public by various means, and welcomes suggestions, observations, and questions with openness and positivity.

Mwatana aspires to create a generation of professional workers committed to the highest standards of human rights work. Therefore, it builds the capacities of its workers as well as those of other organizations through quality and specialized trainings. Mwatana's workers receive periodic training on the foundations and standards of research and investigation, legal support, advocacy, communication, accountability, and redress. The training includes the latest tools for documenting human rights violations; and periodic review, evaluation and verification of documentation mechanisms to ensure quality work, accuracy, adherence to the highest professional and objective standards, and effectiveness in achieving the desired impact.

Capacity-building and Trainings

Mwatana seeks to educate and raise the awareness of people in the tribal societies of Yemen on their rights and how to defend those rights despite the lack of formal education system and implementation of national laws in the areas of tribal societies.

Due to this important concern, Mwatana made significant impact during the previous years, including building the capacity of local activists in defending human rights, raising and conveying victims' voices and messages to proper authorities, and documenting human rights violations in order to hold the violators accountable and seek justice for victims.

The main work of Mwatana depends on investigative field research done by its well-trained and qualified teams. The members of these teams had undergone different training sessions by specialized experts from Mwatana as well as by other local and international specialists. As a result of the experience gained over the years, Mwatana always responds positively to changes in the work environment and strives to enhance its capability and effectiveness.

Mwatana's teams provide workshops at the national and international levels. These workshops contribute to the development of Mwatana's technical and administrative work and are reflected on the skills of members of the teams.

Mwatana also holds workshops and awareness sessions for large and diverse sectors of society, including university graduates, journalists, media figures, lawyers, human rights researchers, workers in civil institutions and organizations, judges, professors in universities and schools, as well as community activists.

Training workshops

Mwatana has provided training to different sets of people it works with including its own staff (consisting of those in the central office [central team], field lawyers, field researchers/data collectors/field monitors), trainees, members of community committees, NGO activists and representatives, and government officials.

The following section presents the training activities held from 2019 to 2023 for different groups.

a. Members of the central team of Mwatana

Mwatana held workshops on

- Provision of legal support services with more focus on developing mechanisms for documentation and follow-up (September 2019, five-day workshop for ten participants);
- Modes of liability, legal analysis and the required level of evidence for criminal litigation, international criminal law chapeau and elements of crime, and practical challenges on using evidence in Yemen (September 2021);
- Developing documentation forms for new patterns of violations, transferring the experience gained from the training and other courses to the rest of the central team, and working on solutions to gaps on field work (February 2021, twelve members of the central team);
- Interpersonal and business communication skills (November 2022, twenty central team members);



Workshop on strategic planning , August 2022.

- Practical guide to strategic planning in preparation for the development of a strategic plan of Mwatana (August 2022, twenty-five central team members);
- Research methods in the social sciences and humanities, trainees' skills in the field of research (October 2022, twenty-eight central team members);
- Digital data security (October 2022, four members of Information Technology and Data Management team);
- How to analyze war crimes and crimes against humanity, framework for gathering evidence of international crimes (focus on unlawful attacks), individual criminal responsibility (focus on chain of command) (May 2022, ten central team members);
- Documentation for accountability purposes and building files (March 2023, five-day online training workshop for the Legal Support and the Accountability Units).

b. Field lawyers

Mwatana held workshops on

- Legislations of Yemen, and concepts and case studies of arbitrary detention, torture, forced disappearance, and extrajudicial killing (October 2019, twenty field lawyers based in fifteen governorates);
- Skills on extraction of information consisting of interview and preparation of documentation reports. It also focused on expanding the field of lawyers' skills by covering the basic requirements of advocacy and accountability work (October 2020, seventeen field lawyers based in fifteen governorates);
- Enhancing the field lawyers' knowledge on the tools for scientific research and collecting data. The sessions were assisted by ICRC and law-





Workshop on tools of scientific research and data collection, October 2021.



yers who had long experience in providing legal support. (October 2021, five-day training workshop for eighteen field legal support assistants).



Workshop on reviewing the performance of the legal support field team, October 2022.



Workshop on reviewing the performance of the legal support field team, October 2022.

- Reviewing the performance of the legal support field team (October 2022, seventeen field legal support assistants from different governorates).

c. Field researchers/data collectors/field monitors

Mwatana held workshops on

- Skills on different topics including international accountability mechanisms, and impartial and independent international mechanisms (September 2019, twenty-seven field monitors from different governorates);
- Use of open online sources for investigation purposes, how to monitor and deal with sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) cases, and the concept of genocide and war crime (September 2020, twenty-seven field monitors);



Workshop on difficulties and challenges faced by field monitors, January 2020.

- Identifying the difficulties and challenges faced by field monitors, guidance on how to solve them, sharing among field monitors of their own experiences, and enhancing their monitoring skills on certain patterns of violations. (January 2020, twenty-seven field monitors);



Workshop on methodology on data collection, June 2022.



Workshop on methodology on data collection, June 2022.



- Different topics related to human rights violations and new investigation tools with practical exercises on what they had learned (March 2021, twenty-four field monitors);



Workshop on accountability mechanisms and the International Criminal Court (ICC), March 2022.



Workshop on accountability mechanisms and the International Criminal Court (ICC), March 2022.

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Workshop on understanding the situation in the field, March 2022.



Workshop on understanding the situation in the field, March 2022.

- Various topics such as aspects of accountability mechanisms and the International Criminal Court (icc) (March 2022, twenty-four field researchers from different Yemeni governorates);



Workshop on human rights principles, November 2021.



Workshop on human rights principles, November 2021.

- How to improve work, and understanding the situation in the field (March 2022, field researchers of the Research and Studies Unit including eighteen trainees, both male and female).



Workshop for data collectors, February 2023.



Workshop for data collectors, February 2023.

d. Community committees

Mwatana held workshops on

- Human rights principles (November 2021, sixteen male and female community members from different areas and governorates);
- Twenty-four data collectors in two training workshops under a UNICEF project (first group on 12 – 14 February 2023, and the second group on 19 – 21 February 2023).

e. Awareness sessions for trainees

Mwatana held training workshops and awareness sessions for trainees from the civil society. The sessions were held as part of different projects:



Workshop on monitoring and reporting documentation 1, January 2023.



Workshop on monitoring and reporting documentation 1, January 2023.

- Workshop on human rights work and principles consisting of four sessions with twenty-two trainees in each session for a total of eighty-eight participants from all governorates including lawyers, activists, engineers, teachers, and journalists held on 22, 23, 28, 29 November 2023;



Workshop on monitoring and reporting documentation 2, February 2023.



Workshop on monitoring and reporting documentation 2, February 2023.



Workshop on monitoring and reporting documentation 2, February 2023.

- Human Rights Capacity-Building Programme (HURICAP) project, Monitoring and Reporting Documentation 1 on the draft guide for monitoring and documenting human rights violations for sixteen male and female trainees from Sana'a held on 22-26 January 2023.
- Human Rights Capacity-Building Programme (HURICAP) project, Monitoring and Reporting Documentation 2 on a draft guide for monitoring and documenting human rights violations, for fifteen male and female trainees from several governorates held on 19 – 23 February 2023;
- German Embassy project on United Nations mechanisms for eleven male and female trainees from areas under the control of the Ansar Allah-Houthi held on 18 – 22 June 2023;



Workshop on German Embassy project, September 2023.

- European Union project on monitoring and documenting and United Nations mechanisms for twelve male and female trainees from several governorates held on 6-10 August 2023;
 - German Embassy project in cooperation with Pass Foundation for twelve male and female trainees from areas under the control of the internationally recognized Yemeni government (Aden, 10-14 September 2023);
- f. Activists and representatives of civil society organizations (CSOs)/ community activists from different non-governmental organizations (NGOs) Mwatana held workshops on



Workshop for activists and representatives of civil society organizations.



Workshop for activists and representatives of civil society organizations.

- Basic information about human rights, monitoring and reporting mechanism, skills on investigative research work (March 2019, twenty-four community activists from different NGOs from fifteen governorates).
- Monitoring human rights violations, monitoring and reporting mechanism and detailed documentation forms (July 2019);
- Starvation as a war tool, types of evidence used to monitor this phenomenon, basic verification criteria, and other related topics (February 2020, several activists and representatives of CSOs);
- Basic human rights (16-17 September 2023 for twelve male and female trainees from areas under the control of the internationally

recognized Yemeni government). This workshop was held in Aden Governorate under the German Embassy and the European Union projects.

g. Government officials

Mwatana held a training workshop to develop the capabilities and skills of members of a team, sixteen male and female officers, in the Ministry of Human Rights in Sana'a governorate (13-16 August 2023).

Public events

At the end of each year, Mwatana organizes an online event as part of its annual briefing on various violations committed by all parties to the conflict that have been documented by Mwatana field team during the year.

As part of the annual briefing, the documented violations are disseminated to all audiences including activists, journalists, those interested in the human rights and humanitarian situation, and to the parties to the conflict.

This annual briefing has continued till the present and is followed by an annual report for each year.

Annual briefings held over the last three years:

- Continued Violations During 2023⁶
- A Dark Year Despite the Truce, 2022⁷
- A New Year Added to the Age of Bloody Conflict, 2021.

Annual reports issued during the last five years:

- *Continued Violations During*, 2023⁸
- *Tragedy Until Further Notice*, 2022⁹
- *A Country Falling Apart*, 2021¹⁰
- *A Tragedy Without Justice*, 2020¹¹
- *Without Accountability*, 2019¹²
- *Withering Life*, 2018.¹³

Also, Mwatana holds periodic online forums with experts and specialists in international law and human rights law from Yemen and other countries, discussing important issues related to the field of human rights work. These forums are meant to raise the human rights awareness of the public.

Training and Capacity-building Unit

The Training and Capacity-building Unit of Mwatana is a new unit that started to operate in 2023. This training unit cooperated with the Research and Study Unit in preparing a research and documentation manual/guide-line on the process of doing research and documentation.

The training program of this unit covers the first receipt of initial information, and the process of monitoring, verifying, documenting, gathering interviews and evidences at the field level. It includes the explanation of the main process of information verification and all the methods used for confirmation of information till their use in human rights statements and reports, etc.

This training unit is cooperating with an external consultant in developing an internal manual on the work processes of the Legal Support Unit at Mwatana.

Future Activities

Early this year (2024), the Training and Capacity-building Unit held its annual comprehensive meeting for all members of the field teams (researchers of the Research and Studies Unit and lawyers of the Legal Support Unit) and the central team to discuss the previous year's work and the current year's work on all projects.

In March 2024, the Training and Capacity Building Unit at Mwatana held meetings with an external consultant to prepare a technical manual for the Legal Support Unit for the coming training sessions. The training unit will be organizing more training activities within the current projects, including training for the field support team on providing legal support to victims of human rights violations, five awareness-raising sessions for several groups in local communities, a capacity-building training workshop for CSOs and human rights defenders, and a six-month fellowship program for two members of CSOs.

Within the current plan of the Training and Capacity Building Unit, Mwatana seeks to build capabilities in the field of human rights through a longer and more complete program consisting of a series of online courses on human rights knowledge and practical fieldwork. This will consolidate human rights knowledge and current experiences that are necessary to

building a generation of qualified human rights defenders in various regions of Yemen. A series of online courses will cover international humanitarian law, monitoring and documentation basics, the six grave violations against children in armed conflict, basics of advocacy, and writing humanitarian stories.

Endnotes

1 For more information on the Code of Conduct, please visit this page: www.mwatana.org/en/about/code-of-conduct.

2 Some of the publications include:

Reports:

- *"Returned to Zero": The Case for Reparations to Civilians in Yemen*, June 2022
- *Civilians with disabilities caused by the armed conflict in Yemen*, February 2022
- *Arms sales: France and the United Arab Emirates, partners in the crimes committed in Yemen?*, December 2021
- *A Tragedy Without Justice - Human Rights in Yemen in 2020*
- *Without Accountability - Human Rights in Yemen in 2020*.

Several videos and virtual content produced while working in the field or in the center are available on a special section of its website in a special tab (www.mwatana.org/en/videos?ffid5310_page=2) and other online platforms:

- "Mwatana: Here is the Story" - www.facebook.com/mwatanaen/videos/457742895698416
- "Amputated Life" - www.youtube.com/watch?v=TRpMRvqo28c&feature=emb_logo
- "Chalk Dust" - www.facebook.com/mwatanaen/videos/1412747022547216
- "Indelible Scars" - www.facebook.com/mwatanaen/videos/593337088799762.

3 Full report available at www.mwatana.org/reports-en/false-exonerations.

4 Full report available at www.mwatana.org/reports-en/transit-in-hell.

5 The videos are listed at www.mwatana.org/en/videos.

6 See www.mwatana.org/posts-en/continued-violations-during-2023.

7 See www.mwatana.org/posts-en/annualbreif2022.

8 See www.mwatana.org/posts-en/continued-violations-during-2023.

9 See www.mwatana.org/reports-en/Tragedy-until-further-notice.

10 See www.mwatana.org/reports-en/falling-apart-4.

11 See www.mwatana.org/reports-en/a-tragedy-without-justice.

12 See www.mwatana.org/reports-en/without-accountability-6.

13 See www.mwatana.org/reports-en/withering-life2018-o.