

Christian Conference of Asia

Institute on Human Rights (IHR)–2021

“Being Defenders of Human Rights and Human Dignity”

17–28 May 2021

The Defenders’ Commitment

*“...And what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8)*

We, 25 young people from 10 countries in Asia, gathered for the Christian Conference of Asia’s Institute on Human Rights (IHR), a two-week training programme on human rights advocacy and action, from 17 to 28 May 2021.

Committed to the defence of human rights and human dignity in our own capacities and contexts, we convened under the theme, “Being Defenders of Human Rights and Human Dignity.” Coming from diverse and pluralistic regions, we learnt about the nature of the different human rights violations that currently plague Asia, as well as the mechanisms and systems in action to combat and prevent such violations.

As a united cohort of young Asian Christians, we are committed to following the footsteps of Christ, who incarnated “good news to the poor, freedom to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom from oppression, and the year of the Lord’s favour” (Luke 4:18-19). We affirm the image of God in every person we encounter, and we recognise the “neighbour” in the other (Hebrews 13:1-2).

Loving Kindness (what we have learned and commit to uphold)

We were taken under the wings of specialists on human rights concerns in the region and worldwide, from human rights defenders like ourselves to educators, social scientists, and legal luminaries. We were capacitated and motivated for the great—and sometimes deadly—work of human rights advocacy.

Among others, we studied and reflected on:

- Christian and interreligious notions on human rights and human dignity;
- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other standards of human rights from the global to the local contexts;
- Human rights mechanisms in the United Nations, and regional and national institutions focused on human rights work;
- Victories and challenges for human rights advocacy and action in Asia-Pacific;
- Prospects for human rights defence in Asia-Pacific;
- The specific rights of women, of children, of the family, of refugees, migrants and stateless persons, and of minorities and indigenous peoples; and,
- The role of the church and the ecumenical movement in promoting the rights and dignity of all people, and strengthening human rights advocacy and action everywhere.

We affirm that the long history of and work on the protection of every human right is, first, a manifestation of God’s faithfulness to the created world—“For the Lord is good, and God’s love is eternal; God’s faithfulness endures through all generations” (Psalm 100:5). Today, God still uses ordinary people who are humble and willing to participate in the ongoing salvific work of God through defending our sacred human rights.

Every effort by every human rights defender is a concrete expression of love and care for the “other” and/or “neighbour”. Upholding human rights today, for Christians, is in truth an act of discipleship answering the call and teaching of Jesus Christ to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your mind and to love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matthew 22:37–40).

We further commit our sincerest efforts to the global, regional, national, and local advances of our fellow human rights defenders, and align our hearts and hands to the cause that they pursue. The International Bill of Rights coupled with the Sustainable Development Goals and other Conventions and Covenants are proof that we collectively yearn for and seek a better world. As graduates of the IHR, we undertake this task of accountability and firmly commit ourselves and our work to fulfilling and living out these universal principles to achieve dignity and development for all.

Doing Justice (identifying and addressing injustices and inequality)

We are highly cognisant of and alarmed by the inhumane and degrading atrocities that continue to occur with impunity around the globe, and particularly in Asia. There is no peace without justice; there cannot be any durable and lasting development without the promotion of broad social progress and better standards of life for all. Rather than advancing to greater freedom, equality, justice, and peace, we are sliding backwards.

The COVID-19 pandemic has magnified social inequities and further plunged millions of people into stubborn and unrelenting poverty. Lack of access to and inequality in the provision of basic healthcare services has led to unnecessary suffering and loss of life. The rights of those with disabilities have been greatly curtailed. Food insecurity and reduced access to clean, safe and potable water further exacerbate the risk to good health. Despite the distress and hardship suffered by many, still a handful of rich and powerful people continue to profit from the pandemic.

With the curtailment of democratic liberties, the most basic rights of people in Asia are infringed upon. We continue to see discrimination based on one’s sex and gender, ethnicity, language, religion and caste, and ability, among others. State repression and extrajudicial killings have become commonplace in many countries. Dispossession and destruction due to business interests and corporate greed are threatening several Asian communities. The issues of ecological destruction and climate change do not get the attention and action they desperately require.

While we respond in our capacities as individuals and communities of human rights defenders, we call on the states to observe their responsibility as duty-bearers and as primary defenders of human rights where it is not upheld. They must create social conditions and policies that make human rights available to all. Furthermore, states should not simply pass laws on human rights but also implement them properly—clarifying ambiguities, outlining the roles of state forces and prosecutors, and administering justice on perpetrators of human rights violations. The government should ensure that administrative measures make responsible, good, wise, and caring use of the country’s resources (including human and financial resources).

Our “brother’s blood cries out to us from the ground” (Genesis 4:10), and we lament along with “the entire creation that is groaning in pain until now” (Romans 8:22). We commit ourselves to being the keeper of our siblings—we pledge ourselves to “speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves; protect the rights of all who are helpless, speaking for them and being righteous; and protecting the rights of the poor and needy” (Proverbs 31:8–9).

Walking humbly with God (our faith in action)

Actualising our faith in action and being the church for others, we “put on the full armour of God” (Ephesians 6:11) and take a stand in the struggle “against the rulers, against the authorities, against the

powers of this dark world” (Ephesians 6:12). “With the belt of truth buckled around our waist, the breastplate of righteousness in place, with our feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace, with the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit” (Ephesians 6:13–17), we stand ready as defenders of the dignity and rights of the oppressed, the vulnerable and the marginalised.

- We will accompany our neighbours who are victims of oppression, become a protective presence for them in the midst of injustices and violations, and empower them to speak their truth to power and in a spirit of love (Ephesians 4:15);
- We will become bridges between the secular and the spiritual spheres, inviting greater church involvement and commitment in social, economic and political issues;
- We will strengthen the international ecumenical networks we have formed through the IHR, learn from each other’s stories and histories, share solutions and best practices, and support each other in our struggles;
- We will support, empower and journey with victims of human rights violations towards healing and advocacy, address perpetrators with justice, and take both retrospective and prospective action to dismantle the systems that allow the violation of human rights and disrespect of human dignity;
- We will amplify and strengthen communication (both online and offline) and cooperation among government and nongovernment stakeholders to challenge the systemic barriers preventing the full realisation of dignity, peace and justice;
- We will become catalysts and continue to educate people on human rights and dignity; champion the respect, protection and fulfilment of human rights; and encourage them to join us in the quest to uphold human rights by facilitating similar training and advocacy programmes, thus “provoking one another unto love and good works” (Hebrews 10:24); and,
- We will commit to keeping each other constantly in prayer that “God may find us worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may fulfill every good purpose of ours and every act prompted by our faith” (2 Thessalonians 1:11–12).

In humility, we carry out God’s vision for justice, acknowledging that the ultimate saving action and redemption is still that of God.