

**US Congress – House of Representatives
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission**

**Hearing: Transnational Repression and the U.S. Response
February 15, 2024**

Testimony of John Sifton, Asia Advocacy Director, Human Rights Watch

Thank you for inviting all of us to testify today about this increasingly worrying issue. For decades, Human Rights Watch and other groups have documented how various governments around the world have reached beyond their borders to engage in repression of human rights defenders, journalists, civil society activists, dissidents, political opponents, and others deemed to be a security or political threat. This is what has come to be labeled transnational repression: governments reaching over their borders to commit abuses against their citizens or members of their diaspora.

Transnational repression has taken the form of targeted killings, abductions and enforced disappearances, unlawful deportations, abuse of consular services, the targeting and collective punishment of relatives. It can also take the form of digital attacks, including threats, harassment, cyber-hacking, doxing, or swatting, ~~or publication of sensitive private information.~~

Understandably, some US policy makers are particularly concerned with transnational repression by governments that are hostile to US, such as China, Russia, and Iran. The reporting of Human Rights Watch, Freedom House, and other groups has documented abuses by these countries but also other governments in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Europe. We have heard from victims of transnational repression and friends and relatives of victims about its impacts, not only on those targeted, but also on entire communities who are intimidated or silenced by it.

Increasingly, we are also documenting transnational repression abuses by governments that enjoy close ties with the United States, countries with which the US is expanding economic, security, and intelligence ties.

At this hearing, Human Rights Watch wants to focus on two such countries in particular: Rwanda and India.

We would request that the committee place into evidence a written submission on issues in Rwanda of my colleague Lewis Mudge, of Human Rights Watch's Africa Division.

I will here focus on India and go into further detail.

Like Rwanda, India has relatively close diplomatic ties with the United States, and these ties have grown especially over the last 10 years. Yet during this period, India's human rights situation has been rapidly deteriorating. The worsening situation—and increasing incidence of the government misusing legal institutions as well as committing rights violations against perceived enemies—is well documented in recent reports by [Human Rights Watch](#), [Amnesty International](#), the [American Bar Association](#), the [US Commission on International Religious](#)

[Freedom](#), and an [especially disturbing report on India last week by the US Holocaust Memorial Museum](#).

And in recent years, we have seen this repression begin spilling over India's borders.

As the committee is aware, the government of India has been placed in the spotlight by the recent [indictment of an Indian national](#) in New York City for allegedly attempting to hire an assassin to murder a Sikh Indian-American resident there, which echoes earlier [accusations by the Canadian government](#) about a similar plot there.

These are extraordinarily serious allegations, but they did not occur in a vacuum. They are linked to the deteriorating rights situation back in India. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government's ultranationalist ideology promoting Hindu supremacy has [fueled and encouraged violence against religious minorities](#), especially Muslims and Christians, but also attempted to label [Sikh farmers protesting against government agriculture laws as Sikh separatists](#). Police and other authorities have failed to hold supporters of the BJP and members of BJP-affiliated groups to account for violence, often instead [targeting members of marginalized communities](#) or their advocates.

Within India, we have documented the BJP-led government's attempts to [silence dissent using](#) intimidation and harassment of peaceful critics through raids and arbitrary arrests, including under the draconian [Unlawful Activities Prevention Act](#), India's primary counterterrorism law.

Outside of India, the Indian government is increasingly intimidating people via various denials of basic consular services—such as [cancellations or refusals to renew passports or Overseas Citizenship of India \(OCI\) booklets](#) or [refusing to allow diaspora](#) members to enter the country. The government has a record of misusing OCI status to attack critics. Christine Mehta, a researcher with Amnesty International India, had her OCI status [revoked](#) in 2014 and was deported, apparently in retaliation for her work on an [Amnesty report](#), published the following year, on human rights violations by Indian security forces in Jammu and Kashmir. In February, the government [revoked the OCI status of Sweden based academic, Ashok Swain](#), because he has “persistently and willfully indulged in writings and inflammatory speeches that tarnished the image of the country and its institutions in the eyes of international community.”

A British journalist, [Aatish Taseer](#), had his OCI revoked after he wrote a [critical article about Prime Minister Narendra Modi](#) in *Time* magazine, ostensibly due to his father's Pakistani origins. In January 2024, the Indian Home Ministry sent a “[show-cause notice](#)” to French journalist Vanessa Dournac with OCI status “because her reportage allegedly created a ‘biased negative perception of India.’” Dournac, a resident of India for 22 years, [denied the allegations and said](#) she has “never engaged in any acts that are in any manner prejudicial to Indian interests as is being alleged,” and is cooperating with the “legal process.”

The ruling BJP is also increasingly using its online troll armies to harass and intimidate critics and journalists overseas, especially in the United States. A December 2023 Washington Post investigation on alleged online harassment [described](#) that an organization linked to Indian

intelligence agencies “combined fact-based research with unsubstantiated claims to paint U.S. government figures, researchers, humanitarian groups and Indian American rights activists as part of a conspiracy, purportedly led by global Islamic groups and billionaire George Soros, to undermine India.”

The online capacities of the BJP have also been used to intimidate critics.

The case of Sabrina Siddique, of the Wall Street Journal, provides an example. Last summer, during a White House press conference during Prime Minister Modi’s visit to Washington, Siddique asked Modi a question about India’s human rights record.

Within hours, she came under withering attack from various senior officials in India’s ruling party, including the head of its so-called IT Cell, which has a record of leading mass trolling attacks against critics of the government. The wave of online attacks, much of which was ad hominem, questioned her objectivity based on false statements about her national origins.

This online criticism, both publicly and in private messaging over social media sites, contained explicit threats, including to kill her, rape her, and kill her then 13-month-old baby, among others. At their height, tweets mentioning Sabrina were being posted on X, formerly Twitter, at the rate of one per second.

The orchestration of this online campaign constituted conduct that—provided other factors were shown—would meet the legal definition of criminal threats, harassment, and intimidation prohibited by the [federal stalking statute](#).

Siddique cancelled plans to travel to India in September 2023 during President Joe Biden’s trip to the G20 Summit, due to concerns about security.

These are apparent actions by the Indian government against a US citizen in the United States. And she is not alone. Other US citizens of Indian origin have faced online attacks of this kind, some in situations clearly indicating orchestration by the ruling party.

In recent months, I have spoken to several members of the Indian diaspora who have told me of concern about possible revocations of passports or OCI cards, which have increased in recent years, and feeling physically unsafe from mass online campaigns of threats and harassment. Even here, in Washington, or New York, over 7,000 miles from India, I have heard people tell me of feeling that they are at risk, that their children are at risk, on the grounds that the online harassment could inspire a JVP supporter to engage in violence against them.

People have told me that they have changed their behavior, kept a lower profile online, refrained from posting even innocuous comments about India—say, about its cricket team—for fear it might set off online attacks.

That is the impact on victims and their families and their personal security. But we should focus also on the other far-reaching effects of transnational repression, including its chilling effect on the rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly, which harms all of us.

Transnational repression leads to self-censorship. Even if some reporters and human rights defenders continue their work, others cannot afford to do so. As a result, intended research and reporting on a government's human rights record does not happen. Those who wish to report on incidents of abuse with which they are aware or investigated – and led them to flee their homeland – become justifiably afraid to report them.

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And this impacts US government interests in promoting human rights abroad. Because of the Indian government's transnational repression in the United States, information and debate about India's human rights record is stifled. Statements and letters of concern go unwritten. Congressional hearings do not happen. Legislation is not introduced. Proper reviews of military sales or assistance to India do not occur.

Transnational repression harms the ability of democratic governments to obtain and craft human rights policy toward other countries. And this is especially worrying with governments that enjoy close diplomatic ties with the US—not just India but Bahrain, Ethiopia, Thailand, and Rwanda: countries that have with some success used transnational repression to blunt Washington's criticism of their rights records.

What can the US Congress do about this? Human Rights Watch recommends that Congress should:

- Maintain awareness that transnational repression comes not only from more hostile governments, but even with some that are close US allies.
- Support recently proposed legislation to formalize State Department policy on transnational repression and assists victims and affected communities.
- Communicate formally and informally with governments with close ties, like India and Rwanda, to express serious concerns with reports of their involvement in transnational repression and by raising specific cases.
- Adopt targeted sanctions, including travel bans and asset freezes, on those implicated in the most serious abuses.
- Review extradition, legal cooperation, and intelligence-sharing agreements with governments involved in transnational repression. Identify agreements and processes that need additional oversight or that should be discontinued to prevent abuse.