Human Rights Defenders
in Action

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Copyright notice
As far as possible I have tried to acknowledge all appropriate sources of information. If you notice any omissions, please let me know.

Useful links
A list of useful online resources for learning about human rights is included at the end of this book.

Other links to do with human rights defenders issues are available at:

http://c-faculty.chuo-u.ac.jp/~andyb/HR/HRDefenders.html
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The Universal Declaration of Human Rights</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Human rights defenders</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Burma</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Cambodia</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Nepal</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Looking back, looking forward</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Useful websites about human rights defenders</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Notes</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In the summer of 2010, during a weeklong visit to Burma, I had the opportunity to talk with a remarkable woman, Su Su, who runs a grassroots NGO in Burma that provides basic education resources for primary and secondary school children. The NGO uses recycled materials to make its educational resources, and it also organises teacher training for teachers to help them use the resources effectively. The NGO does everything it can to support children who cannot go to state-run schools and who would otherwise have no formal education whatsoever.

At the end of our meeting I asked Su Su what I could bring next time that would most help her with her work. “Globes, inflatable globes,” replied Su Su. She gave me a plastic inflatable model of the Earth that you can make round by blowing air into it. Su Su added, “Children find it difficult to imagine and understand what the rest of the world is like.” I smiled and said I would try to bring some of these inflatable globes next time I went to Burma.

Later in the same summer I accompanied a group of eight students to the International Labour Organisation in Geneva, Switzerland, for two weeks. In many ways, this experience was a world away from the situation in Burma. I was now in the splendidly resourced headquarters of a United Nations organisation, and each day the students were downloading documents on the computer, using online databases, reading beautifully printed books, visiting other international organisations and NGOs, and discussing their research with many different experts that they interviewed. We had, it seemed, literally all the resources in the world at our fingertips. And yet, something was missing. In Geneva, we were all struggling to imagine what the rest of the world is like.

In this era of globalization, how can we start to understand and make sense of how different people in different societies live? How can we open our eyes to the differences in the world—both in other societies, and also, closer to home, in our own? Just how can we manage to ‘act locally and think globally’ in a way that is respectful of others, but which also helps to change the world for the better? One possible way, I have come to understand since the summer of 2010, is to look at the work of human rights defenders.

Who are human rights defenders?

Human rights defenders are individuals, groups or organizations that act in a non-violent and peaceful way to promote and protect human rights. Like Su Su, the woman I met at the NGO in Burma last summer, most human rights defenders work at the local or national level. They advocate, educate and advise. They investigate and collect information on the human rights needs of others, and they take action to make things better. They acknowledge the lack of human rights in their communities and countries, and they do what they can to put right the human rights violations that they find. In a word, they support and help others who are often not heard or seen by the rest of society.
In this book you will read about many different human rights defenders, including:

- a Buddhist monk
- a group of women who established an anti-war museum
- a HIV/AIDS activist
- a human rights activist and lawyer
- a leader of indigenous people
- a media centre that trains people to create their own human rights media tools
- a people’s movement resisting a top-down development project and acting for the poor
- a democratic leader who was a political prisoner for 15 years
- a refugee who became a human rights spokeswoman and campaigner for the people of her country
- a student who became a social activist and leader of the poor
- a teacher who became a human rights issues reporter
- a teacher who became a social activist defending women and migrant workers
- a TV series that was created to defend the human rights of a social minority
- an AIDS and environmentalist activist
- journalists who are human rights defenders in different countries
- many different human rights NGOs who defend the human rights of those who often are not heard or seen by the rest of society
- NGOs that work to support human trafficking victims and do community-based awareness raising
- women who have established a network to promote non-violence and gender equality.

These are courageous and inspiring people. To understand their work within a wider framework of human rights, this introductory chapter gives you a general overview of the work of human rights defenders, while Chapter Two presents the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Then, in Chapters 3-10 we get to know the work of specific human rights defenders in different Asian societies from Burma, Cambodia, and China to Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Nepal and Thailand. Finally, Chapter 11, Looking back, looking forward, offers you the chance to review your understanding of human rights defenders, while Chapter 12 presents some useful websites to learn more about human rights defenders. The very last part of the book, Notes, may be helpful for you if you want to learn more about particular human rights defenders or aspects of their work.

As you read this book, I hope you will also gain insight and inspiration from the courage and compassion of the many other human rights defenders you meet, and come to understand a little bit more about what the rest of the world is like, and how it might be different in the future.