

United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6225

February 14, 2023

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden
President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear President Biden:

As we approach the second Summit for Democracy, I urge you to take deliberate action to enhance protections for human rights defenders by announcing a new limited visa category for them. Around the world, human rights defenders are our first line of defense against the rising tide of authoritarianism and democratic backsliding. Yet year after year, they are increasingly threatened or attacked for peacefully seeking to advance democratic principles and human rights. By providing those most at risk with a modest safety net, the United States can bolster the ability of human rights defenders to carry out their critical work.

The work of human rights defenders is essential to the health of democracy globally. They advocate for human rights and democratic principles, fight corruption, support good governance, seek to end impunity, and speak truth to power—creating safeguards against autocratic regimes and backsliding democracies. In every region of the world, however, human rights defenders face threats and violence in retaliation for seeking to peacefully advance fundamental freedoms. According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, hundreds of human rights defenders are murdered each year and thousands more are subjected to torture, enforced disappearance, sexual violence, detention, judicial harassment, digital surveillance, and forced exile. These threats and attacks severely limit the ability of human rights defenders to confidently carry out their work.

Given the dramatic increase in attacks on human rights defenders globally, the United States can and should do more to protect human rights defenders. A critical step your administration can take to enhance protections is to create a new limited visa category for select human rights defenders. This visa would provide a select amount of at-risk human rights defenders each year with a multiple-entry, multi-year visa to the United States that can be used at any time during a three year period if they face an urgent threat and need to flee their country of origin. What human rights defenders often need most is assured safe harbor if their lives are threatened, and this visa would allow those most at risk to continue to carry out their work in the face of mounting pressure.

In offering safe harbor to human rights defenders, the United States will not only be supporting those who receive the visa; it will send a powerful message to human rights defenders everywhere that the United States supports their efforts and stands ready to protect them if they are in imminent grave danger. Providing safe haven for human rights defenders will also serve as

a warning to autocrats and would-be autocrats that the United States is watching and willing to take action.

The second Summit for Democracy is an opportunity to demonstrate through tangible action the United States' commitment to democracy and human rights globally. I stand ready to work with your administration to advance protections for human rights defenders through a new limited visa category. I thank you for your attention on this urgent matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Robert Menendez". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized initial "R".

Robert Menendez
Chairman