



HUMAN RIGHTS FOUNDATION • PROGRAM 02 OF 03

RESILIENCE

Strength for the long fight.

COSTA RICA RETREAT • 2026
RESEARCH WITH UCSF
REGIONAL RETREATS • 2027

WHAT WE DO

The people who stand up to dictators carry an enormous weight.

Prison, exile, surveillance and loss take a toll that rarely gets named. HRF's Resilience program strengthens the psychological resilience and leadership durability of democracy defenders confronting authoritarian regimes.

We bring frontline defenders together for trauma-informed rest, reflection and peer support — and, with researchers at UCSF, we are building the first systematic data set on activist mental health in authoritarian contexts.

IN THEIR WORDS

“I often feel guilty. I feel survivor’s guilt.”

“Sometimes it is hard to keep fighting. I feel helpless and hopeless and want to quit.”

“It is hard for me to trust anyone.”

“How can I manage the imposter syndrome that I feel?”

Concerns activists submitted, read aloud at the Oslo Freedom Forum 2026 panel “Resilience-Building for Activists and Dissidents.”

20

frontline defenders at the first retreat

1 week

of contemplative practice, trauma-informed training and peer support

6

faculty members leading sessions

1st

systematic data set on activist mental health under tyranny, with UCSF



Participants in a closing circle. Photo: HRF Resilience program.

THE FIRST YEAR • 2026

A new program, already moving.

MAY

BOSTON

HRF headlines the Trauma Research Foundation's International Trauma Conference. After opening remarks by Bessel van der Kolk, Jhanisse Vaca-Daza and Alexia Tovar introduce the Resilience program on the main stage.

JUNE

OSLO FREEDOM FORUM

Trauma expert Bessel van der Kolk joins a panel on activists' hardest questions: guilt, trust, hope and burnout.

AUGUST

NOSARA, COSTA RICA

The inaugural Resilience retreat at Blue Spirit convenes 20 frontline human rights defenders for a trauma-informed week of rest, reflection and peer support — with a research component run by Dr. Elissa Epel's team at UCSF.

RETREAT FACULTY



Annette Knopp



Dr. Vanina Waizmann



Gayle Karen Young



Lilian Tintori

With Dr. Aaron Aviera and Jamila Raqib.



Dr. Elissa Epel, UCSF
Research partner, running a study alongside the retreat.

“This program is only as strong as the defenders in the room.”

HRF RESILIENCE TEAM, 2026

HOW IT WORKS

Care, with the rigor of research.

01

NOMINATE

HRF's Regional Leads recommend defenders; our legal and policy team verifies every nomination.

02

RESTORE

A week of rest, movement, contemplative practice and trauma-informed training.

03

CONNECT

Peer support among people who understand the weight of prison, exile and loss.

04

LEARN

Research with UCSF, run alongside the retreat, turns care into evidence.

“One of the hardest things for activists is to take time off.”

BESSEL VAN DER KOLK, TRAUMA EXPERT
OSLO FREEDOM FORUM 2026

INSIDE THE WEEK

MORNINGS

Begin with movement, then the day's sessions.

SESSIONS

Real and difficult topics, always held with care and intention.

SETTING

Structured and restorative, grounded in trauma-informed practice.

2027

WHAT'S NEXT

REGIONAL RETREATS

Bringing the program closer to defenders, region by region.

Supported by a multi-year commitment from the Reynolds Foundation.

SUPPORT RESILIENCE

Your gift gives a defender a week to breathe — and the strength to keep going.

HRF.ORG

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