



Human Rights Institute



Recent targeting of legal professionals by the US Government

Joint Statement, 18 March 2025

The undersigned organisations are dismayed by the recent actions by the US government targeting legal professionals at both the international and domestic levels, which violate international human rights law and undermine the rule of law.

On 6 February 2025, the US President signed an executive order imposing sanctions on International Criminal Court (ICC) personnel and their immediate family members.

The International Criminal Court (ICC) is a permanent independent international tribunal established by the Rome Statute in 2002 in the Hague, Netherlands, to prosecute individuals for the most serious offences of international concern, including the crimes of genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and the crime of aggression. The ICC serves as a vital court of last resort, intervening only when national courts are unwilling or unable to prosecute suspected criminals. The ICC aims to ensure accountability for the gravest crimes, promote justice, and deter future atrocities, thereby contributing to global peace and stability. It currently has 125 member countries.

The executive order states that “tangible and significant consequences” will be imposed on ICC officials, which could include the blocking of property and assets, as well as the suspension of entry into the United States of ICC officials, employees, and agents, as well as their immediate family members.

The US actions against ICC personnel for carrying out their legal professional responsibilities constitute a violation of international human rights law and guarantees

against interference with the legal profession. The sanctions also have a chilling effect - threatening to undermine access to justice for victims of the most serious crimes under international law.

In a [statement](#) issued on 10 February 2025, independent UN human rights experts, remarked that “[i]mposing sanctions on court personnel for carrying out their professional responsibilities constitutes a flagrant violation of human rights and undermines the principles of judicial independence and the rule of law.” The UN experts consider that “the US sanctions against the ICC would appear to amount to offenses against the administration of justice under Article 70 of the Rome Statute. Article 70 punishes efforts to impede or intimidate an official of the Court or to retaliate against an official of the Court on account of duties performed by that official.”

States parties to the Rome Statute have publicly stated their ongoing support for the ICC in a cross-regional [statement](#), which our organisations endorse.

Furthermore, our organisations are gravely concerned about actions that interfere with the independence of the legal profession at the domestic level.

On 10 February 2025, the Acting Deputy Attorney General issued a memo instructing federal prosecutors to drop their corruption case against New York City Mayor Eric Adams. In protest against this instruction, to date, six prosecutors have resigned. In her [resignation letter](#) to US Attorney General, Danielle Sassoon, then interim US Attorney for the Southern District of New York, stated that there was no legal justification for dismissing the case, and noted that the instruction “raises serious concerns that render the contemplated dismissal inconsistent with my ability and duty to prosecute federal crimes without fear or favor and to advance good-faith arguments before the courts”.

Moreover, on 25 February 2025, an executive order was signed revoking security clearances held by employees of a prominent Washington, D.C., law firm because it had provided pro bono services to former Special Counsel Jack Smith, who had overseen federal criminal investigations into the events of 6 January 2021 and alleged concealment of classified documents, cases which have since been closed.

A similar executive order was signed on 6 March 2025, ending security clearances and restricting access to federal buildings by another notable law firm, which is representing clients in cases challenging the administration’s actions relating to transgender rights.

On 3 March 2025, the American Bar Association (ABA) issued a [statement](#) that details the disturbing hostile environment that now exists for legal professionals in the country, which has resulted in reported personal attacks, intimidation, firings and demotions for Justice Department lawyers and assistant U.S. attorneys simply for doing their job.

The ABA has also come under attack. On 14 February 2025, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) issued a memo denouncing the ABA. The ABA was founded in 1878 and is the largest voluntary professional association in the world. It is non-partisan and is committed to advancing the rule of law across the United States and globally. The FTC’s hostile rhetoric and accusations of political bias against the ABA are further evidence of a concerted effort to undermine the independence of the legal profession and those that stand to protect it.

In accordance with Principle 16 of the UN Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers (UN Basic Principles), lawyers must be able to perform all their professional functions without intimidation, hindrance, harassment or improper interference; and shall not suffer, or be

threatened with, prosecution or administrative, economic or other sanctions for any action taken in accordance with recognised professional duties, standards and ethics.

Furthermore, pursuant to Principle 18 of the UN Basic Principles lawyers shall not be identified with their clients or their clients' causes as a result of discharging their functions.

The actions outlined above, in respect of legal professionals at the ICC and those operating at the domestic level, demonstrate a contempt for the independence of the legal profession and violate long-standing international standards to ensure legal professionals can conduct their vital work without interference. Lawyers must be able to represent their clients without fear of retaliation and must not be punished because of who their clients are. The independence of the legal profession is fundamental to ensure respect for human rights and is a crucial element of the rule of law.

Accordingly, the undersigned organisations urge the US government to:

- Rescind the executive order imposing sanctions on ICC personnel and their immediate families
- Immediately halt all acts of intimidation, hindrance or harassment of legal professionals and any improper interference with their work
- Ensure respect for the fundamental principles enshrined in the UN Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers that protect legal professionals and ensure they can perform their professional duties without undue interference.

SIGNED:

Law Society of England and Wales

Law Society of Northern Ireland

The Bar Council of Northern Ireland

Faculty of Advocates

Bundesrechtsanwaltskammer / The German Federal Bar

Deutscher Anwaltverein / German Bar Association

Law Council of Australia

Ordre des Avocats de Paris / Paris Bar

Unione delle Camere Penali Italiane / Union of the Italian Criminal Chambers (UCPI)

LAWASIA

Commonwealth Lawyers Association (CLA)

European Criminal Bar Association (ECBA)

Fédération des Barreaux des d'Europe (FBE)

Institute for the Rule of Law of the Union Internationale des Avocats (UIA-IROL)

International Bar Association's Human Rights Institute (IBAHRI)

International Observatory for Lawyers in Danger (OIAD)

Lawyers for Lawyers

Lawyers' Rights Watch Canada