

The International Day of the Endangered Lawyer 2026: An attack on lawyers is an attack on the rule of law

Today, 24 January 2026, marks the International Day of the Endangered Lawyer. Established in memory of the five lawyers murdered in the [1977 Atocha massacre](#) in Madrid, the Day stands as a stark reminder that lawyers continue to face threats, intimidation, and retaliation for fulfilling their legitimate professional duties in upholding the rule of law and defending human rights.

The independence of the legal profession is a cornerstone of the rule of law. Yet, globally, lawyers face increasing threats to their professional independence, with governments and private actors undermining the autonomy of the legal profession through intimidation, harassment, and interference. The UN Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers has repeatedly [highlighted](#) these concerning trends, documenting violations that compromise lawyers' ability to represent clients freely and safely — ultimately hampering access to justice for all.

Each year, this Day highlights a country where lawyers face heightened risks. For the 2026 edition, the focus is on the United States of America, in light of unprecedented measures [targeting](#) law firms, including restrictions on security clearances, access to federal buildings, and eligibility for government contracts. These developments raise serious concerns about undue interference with the legal profession, particularly in politically sensitive cases and the representation of marginalised communities. It serves as a warning that threats to lawyers' independence can arise even in long-established democracies.

International standards are unequivocal. Under the United Nations Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers and the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, States have a duty to ensure that lawyers can carry out their work safely, independently, and without fear of reprisal. The adoption of the [Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of the Profession of Lawyers](#) on 13 May 2025, further underscores the urgent need to move beyond rhetoric and act against the growing threats faced by lawyers worldwide. As the first legally binding instrument designed to safeguard the independence and safety of the legal profession, we call on all CoE member states to promptly adopt and ratify it, subsequently ensuring its full implementation.

On this International Day of the Endangered Lawyer, we stand in solidarity with lawyers in the United States and worldwide. States must immediately end all persecution and harassment of lawyers, guarantee their independence and protection, and ensure accountability for those cases in which their rights are violated, in accordance with their obligations under international law. We further call on all professional associations of lawyers to resist measures that undermine their professional independence, take concrete steps to protect lawyers at risk, and fulfil their role in promoting the rule of law.

Because an attack on lawyers is an attack on the rule of law itself.