
Writers for Peace Committee

WRITING FOR PEACE



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FROM VENEZUELA, THE INTERNATIONAL ORDER HAS BEEN BLOWN APART

By Germán Rojas
Chair of the Writers for Peace Committee of PEN International
Vice-president of PEN Chile

At the end of the First World War, the League of Nations was established with the aim of preventing the atrocities experienced in that war from ever happening again. Due to the weakness of many, the arrogance of totalitarian powers and the absence of others, this first experiment in a global alliance for peace failed miserably.

Then came the Second World War, even more atrocious than the first, which culminated in the creation of the United Nations (UN), which became the backbone of the institutional architecture that has governed the international order for the last 80 years. It can be criticised from many points of view, but it has undoubtedly had the great virtue of establishing certain red lines that the great powers had not had the courage to cross, in order to avoid a new world conflagration. It was not established for the purpose of protecting the “good” against the “bad”, but to protect the weak by containing the powerful. This international order was based on three fundamental pillars: a) the aspiration to be a truly universal institution in which all countries of the world would participate through the democratic principle of “one country, one vote”; b) the importance of promoting international cooperation among all through a system in which multilateralism prevailed; and c) creating the conditions for peace to prevail and peaceful solutions to conflicts to be sought. The great Achilles heel of the system was to give the victorious great powers of the Second World War (the United States, UK, France, the Soviet Union and China) the

right to veto major political decisions, which ultimately rendered the UN ineffective on issues affecting peace.

With the United States' intervention in Venezuela's internal affairs on 3 January 2026, the international order has been blown apart. Four days later, the United States decided to withdraw from 66 international organisations, 31 of which belong to the UN system. In this regard, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio stated that these organisations are “wasteful, ineffective and harmful”, asserting that “they are redundant in scope, poorly administered, unnecessary, wasteful, poorly managed, are driven by the interests of actors who promote their own agendas contrary to ours, or pose a threat to the sovereignty, freedoms and overall prosperity of our nation.” Rubio went even further by proposing conspiracy theories, adding that “what began as a pragmatic framework of international organisations for peace and cooperation has been transformed into an extensive architecture of global governance, often dominated by a progressive ideology and disconnected from national interests.” The national interests are, of course, United States' interests.

A distinctive feature of the current US government policy is that it does not disguise its political and economic objectives behind polite words. What interests them is control of Venezuela's oil (the nation with the largest oil reserves in the world) and no reference is made to a return to democracy in that country. Furthermore, they confirm the Madurista

leadership as the administrators of Venezuela, which operates under the direct control of the United States. This was an unthinkable hypothesis before these events occurred.

Some analysts are beginning to talk about “naked imperialism”. This is nothing more than an updated version of the Monroe Doctrine coined in 1823, which stated that “America was for Americans”. Originally, it was a way of opposing European colonialism in the Americas and considering any foreign intervention from other continents as a hostile act against the United States. With the exception of a few isolated voices, President Monroe's formulation was well received by Latin American countries, which were just beginning their processes of independence from European powers at that time.

Over the years, America ceased to be for all Americans and became only for the United States. In 1904, President Theodore Roosevelt passed a corollary to interpret the Monroe Doctrine, which reformulated US foreign policy and ushered in the era of the “Big Stick”, inspired by an African proverb: “Speak softly and carry a big stick, you will go far” This policy justified the use of force as a means of defending US interests, which manifested itself in countless political and military interventions in Latin America. It was clear that the United States no longer had friends, only interests to defend.

Today, President Trump has revived the Monroe Doctrine, renaming it ‘Donroe,’ a contraction of Donald and Monroe, which represents a dangerous normalisation of US military interventions in Latin America, without the slightest concern for the consequences of such actions. This new doctrine seeks to legitimise an aggressive foreign policy without counterbalances which, on the one hand, weakens the role of multilateral organisations such as the Organisation of American States (OAS) and the UN, and also jeopardises regional alliances such as the North Atlantic Treaty

Organisation (NATO), by imposing a logic of unilateral domination that violates all current norms of international law.

An important strategic objective of the intervention in Venezuela is to expel China from Latin America and the Caribbean as an economic partner in many of the countries in the region that the US authorities consider their backyard. The Chinese government reacted by condemning the US action, describing it as “hegemonic abuse”. Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated that China “will not accept any country proclaiming itself judge of the world” and reiterated his defence of the United Nations Charter. Chinese leaders are aware that, despite their undeniable economic power, confronting the United States in this new international context is highly complex. Today, a group of countries governed by right-wing and far-right parties (Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Honduras and soon Chile, among others) is consolidating in Latin America, which are much more inclined to align themselves with Trump than to defend economic liberalism. In addition, this year there will be elections in Colombia and Brazil in which the United States will try to exert direct influence, as it did in the last elections in Argentina and Honduras.

In this context, China will most likely continue to act with its proverbial caution, based on the principles of non-interference, mutual benefit and cooperation, seeking to protect its investments (in addition to the billions of dollars granted in loans that are pending repayment), applying pragmatism over ideology, and preparing for the possibility that a scenario similar to that of Latin America could be replicated in Africa. China is likely to avoid direct confrontation with the United States. In theory, its priority should remain domestic, and it should not act rashly in Taiwan, even if it continues to threaten possible intervention. But it is not certain that Xi Jinping will rule out a military response in what he might consider “his” region. It is a highly unlikely scenario, but the fact that the international

order has become a brutal power struggle cannot be ignored.

It does not take a genius to understand that the consequences of what happened in Venezuela have clear repercussions not only in China, but also elsewhere in the world. Russia undoubtedly feels strengthened in its particular conflict with Ukraine and in its efforts to establish red lines with NATO that allow it to maintain a safety cushion with the rest of Europe. It also remains to be seen what will happen with NATO if Trump carries out his threat to occupy Greenland. Nor does it seem feasible that the European Union will take on a coherent defence of the rules-based international order it claimed to protect, while giving timid support to Denmark and saying very little about Venezuela in order to avoid a confrontation with Trump. Meanwhile, Canada, Mexico, Colombia, Cuba and Brazil, among many others, are trembling. And the disasters created or

encouraged by the US government in Syria, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Gaza and elsewhere remain unresolved.

What a year 2026 will be. And there we will be, the writers of PEN International, raising our voices against the undermining of international law, writing literature to promote dialogue and empathy, defending the ideal of a humanity that wants to live in peace and equality, rejecting the rhetoric of hatred and racism, defending the truth and supporting persecuted writers, and demanding that governments be held accountable for their actions. ¹

I conclude these reflections by expressing the solidarity of the Writers for Peace Committee with PEN America, which suffers daily from the attacks of the ogre who, like the god Cronos, wants to devour his children because he is afraid that they will overcome him.

(1) Resolution on “The present international disorder and breakdown of peace: the role of writers”, adopted at the International PEN Congress in Krakow, Poland, 2–5 September 2025.

BORDERS IN THE TIME OF ARMED PEACE

Tanja Tuma, PEN Slovenia
Deputy Chair of PEN International Board, and President of PEN Slovenia
President of PEN Slovenia

In the Auschwitz Museum, there is a window display of a tiny shoe worn by a little boy who was murdered in the gas chambers with his mother. His name was Amos Steinberg. In another room, behind the glass, we can see tons of women's and men's hair, impossible to say whose. In a third room, also behind glass, we see thousands—millions—of glasses of all sizes and styles, worn by the inmates who came to the place of death and horror: the concentration camps Auschwitz and Birkenau.

Which borders did the little boy's feet cross before it ended as an exhibit in the museum?

How did peoples' hair move in the warm summer breeze before it was shorn, disinfected, and used to produce blankets, clothes, and U-boat insulation for the Nazis?

Could the bespectacled millions of men and women not see where humanity was heading in the 1930s?

Back to Europe of the 2020s. They build fences, they over-exploit the work of men and women, and their vision is blurred by hatred, so they cannot see where they are heading. Writers and colleagues of PEN are like the mad Greek prophet Cassandra—we can foresee social changes, disasters, wars, and personal fates with perfect clarity, but nobody believes us. Who listens to our cries? After all, we write fiction, not facts.

And what are the facts of today that create divisions among people, permit the law to exhaust the workforce, and fog the future for our young generation?

The first fact set restrictions on human rights defenders face in the Schengen area is the double standard. There are people

who have the European Union passport, and there are those who do not. For both, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights applies; yet it often does not. The EU does not protect the lives of third-country citizens even when, in their homelands, they are threatened with incarceration or death. It is a fact that few journalists in countries of so-called free speech report on. Even when these third-country citizens are being trafficked, dehumanised, used as a resource—like hair was once the raw material for Nazi blankets—many a pen stops mid-sentence, crashes against the wall of self-censorship, before it boldly reports the injustice.

If censorship sets the borders to freedom of expression, self-censorship poisons the soul and the very essence of writing. Psychological limits to what I can write—so as not to challenge the average social climate, religious sentiment, or national feeling—are well known to editors, publishers, and media owners. The potions are infused silently, and at first glance invisibly: through public financing, stipends for creators, loss of contracts, neglect by literary critics, and so on.

Every one of us, writers, is wearing Amos' little shoe. The question is whether we care to look at it or not.

For all of us who are short-sighted, glasses are essential. Without them, we cannot orient ourselves in space and cannot find the way forward. Before social structures understand where society is heading, writers can usually feel the changes. We detect the symptoms in language, particularly the language used by politicians. Lately, the EU, recipient of the Nobel Prize for Peace, has adopted bellicose expressions when speaking of armed peace.

Well, writers know that no armed peace can last long.

The future tries to glitter in the wonderful new world of artificial intelligence, and many colleagues hail it as the new brave world of knowledge and resources. Once again in human evolution, there seems to be no limits. Yet the landscape of AI is built (and not paid for) on our work, on the creativity of literary artists from the present and the past. If, for a moment, we put down the rose-tinted glasses, we can see that AI is a vast desert—no emotion, no compassion, no humanity. Only machines built to manipulate, exhaust, and kill people. AI warfare is used against innocent

civilians every day. It is the worst of all threats to free speech today.

So, when I ask myself which border Amos Steinberg crossed, the boy whose hair was used for clothing by the Nazis, and what spectacles we shall put on to see the future, time stops. Nothingness. I am alone with my morbid thoughts, an impotent prophet, a crying Cassandra in the night.

Perhaps the glimmer of hope lies in how PEN deals with linguistic borders, how it celebrates the richness of gender and other diversities. But can we stop the bombs with words? Tell me, please.

FAMINE: SILENCES AND ERASURES

By Alex de Waal
Executive Director World Peace Foundation
Research Professor at the Fletcher School, Tufts University, USA

Keynote Address, Writers for Peace Committee, PEN International 91st Annual Congress, 2 September 2025.

Thank you for inviting me to address this Congress. I have long been an admirer of PEN International.

It's remarkably difficult to write about hunger. But it is important not to be silent. There are very few memoirs of famine. Starvation has its own language, and its own silences.

One of the earliest reports I wrote on famine was in 1990, for *Article 19*, entitled 'Starving in Silence: A report on famine and censorship'. It was inspired by Amartya Sen's observation that a free press is critically important for famine prevention. That focused on media as a form of early warning of food crisis, and accountability after the fact. These are both vitally important.

In this presentation I want to take a different angle, focusing on the silences and erasures around starvation, and how the difficulty of writing about the human experience of starvation can play into the hands of those who want to conceal famine.

In the siege of Leningrad during World War Two, when more than a third of city's population starved to death, the authorities forbade mention of "starvation". People were permitted to speak only of "dystrophy".

The writer Lidiya Ginzburg, in her fictionalized memoir, *Notes from the Blockade*, wrote: *The well-fed do not understand the hungry, themselves included. Once having eaten his fill, a man gradually lost his understanding of himself—the way he had been in the months of the great hunger . . . The blockade people forgot their sensations but they remembered*

facts. Facts slowly crept out of the dimness of memory into the light of behavioural rules which were gravitating by now towards the accepted norm.

What she is referring to is the way that the rules of life changed under the extreme pressure of starvation. How hunger made a norm of abnormality, forced people to break the deepest social taboos to try to stay alive.

They were, she wrote, "hungry as beasts". And, in every account of a famine on record, is "eating like a beast".

In the German, *essen* is to eat like a person, *fressen* is to eat like a wild animal. This is the word used by Primo Levi for how the inmates in Auschwitz would devour food.

Human beings compelled to scabble in the dirt for food, to eat animal food, to hide food or steal food, to deny food from neighbours, friends, family members.

In the starvation camps of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, people would kill for a spoon.

Bare facts that are hard to clothe in words.

Ginzburg again: *The mists of dystrophy disperse and the one alienated from himself comes to face with the objects of his shame and remorse. For those who survived the siege, remorse was as inevitable as malnutrition changes the body. In its grimmest form too—uncomprehending remorse. A person recalls the fact but cannot summon up the experience of that piece of bread, or sweet, which had prompted him to cruel, dishonourable, humiliating deeds.*

This is the experience of famine: the dehumanization, the shame, the petty, quotidian cruelties. But dehumanizer is not in the story. Starvation is a crime committed remotely.

Famine denialism is a phenomenon that has yet to be studied. I made a start last year, with a lecture to commemorate the Holodomor in Ukraine.

The men who make man-made famines conceal their crime, and if they cannot hide the fact of the crime, they deny their responsibility. It was true of the colonial powers, of Stalin, of Mao Zedong, of the rulers of Ethiopia and Sudan in more recent years.

When they acknowledged famine they called it an act of God, or they said it was unavoidable, even justifiable.

The 1943 famine in Bengal, India, has a special place in the annals of famine denialism. It was wartime and the British authorities strictly censored any mention of the words “starvation” or “famine”.

The editor of the *Statesman* newspaper in Calcutta, Ian Stephens, broke the censor’s ban by a simple expedient: he published photographs, without any captions. It had an effect. British opinion was galvanized, and policy changed.

But Winston Churchill was reluctant. He said that Indians were less deserving than other starving people, for example the “sturdy Greeks”, also facing famine because of the war. Churchill was a Victorian. And like many of his generation, when he saw pictures of starving Indians, he was moved not to pity but to revulsion. The degradation he saw, he blamed on the victims themselves, for their fecklessness and for having too many children.

Seeing people reduced to an animal-like condition, we want to distance ourselves. Dehumanization can become self-justifying.

There can be a subtle collusion between those who portray starvation and those who perpetrate it. Over the decades after World War II, there was a tension between those who took photographs, or commissioned them, and those who wanted to extend dignity to the victims of starvation.

The researcher David Campbell criticized the media and some of the aid agencies for their degrading pictures. I myself called it “disaster pornography”.

Let me show you two pictures from Sudan. The first shows a little girl and a vulture. The second shows a starving boy and a man carrying food. Those who perpetrate starvation are never—almost never—in the frame. This picture insinuates that the man carrying the food is cruel, perhaps a merchant who’s profiting from the starvation. We don’t know. It’s a simple fact that in all famines, it’s the poorest who starve; there are less-poor people who are less hungry, or not hungry at all. But it’s an insinuation common to many famine photographs. The true culprits aren’t in the frame. We see the outcome of starvation, not the act.

Here are two photos taken by a German soldier who visited the Warsaw Ghetto in 1941, and the captions he gave.

Heinrich Jost was an amateur photographer and his pictures were unstaged and were private — he only made them public 40 years later. What they show is the worldview of a German soldier in the Wehrmacht. *“Where would this rickshaw driver take this child who was obviously sick with Typhus? Was there still a hospital for Jews? No one among my German comrades could tell me.”*

You can almost hear the mockery in his voice. *“Next to a lady with a good coat and shoes that had heels, stood next to this broken-down man, barefoot, with his barefoot child on his shoulders.”*

This echoes Nazi propaganda pictures that showed starving Jews alongside well-fed Jews, blaming the suffering of the poor Jews on the avarice and cruelty of rich Jews.

This dehumanization even becomes internalized by survivors themselves. In the aftermath of the Great Famine in Ireland in the 1840s, came the Great Silence. So deep was the trauma, that generations of Irish people simply didn't talk about it. Like Lidiya Ginzburg, they could remember the bare facts— though they didn't want to— but they couldn't make sense of those facts.

The Irish writer Fintan O'Toole has written on this silence: “rage and grief fall between the cracks of a language which, stretched beyond breaking point, is unable to contain them”. In public language, certainly. In private, perhaps less so. We need to listen carefully.

Thus, in his history of the post famine years, Breandán Mac Suibhne provides neither any description of the starvation itself, nor any oral histories of the years of utter deprivation. Rather, starvation is a tacitly acknowledged and ubiquitous presence, a totem and taboo imprinted on every element of life.

It was only in the 1990s that the Irish began to publicly commemorate the famine. Representing what had been hidden.

This is the famine memorial in Toronto, Canada. It has a figurative representation of the loss of home. And a representation of the cliffs of the west of Ireland, and hidden in the crevices, the names of people who perished.

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, it is the Irish aid agencies that pioneered a code of conduct for how contemporary famines should be represented. The focus is on a combination of truthfulness and dignity. They adopted seven guiding principles.

There are cases of mass starvation around the world that demand our attention. Sudan, South Sudan, Yemen, the Rohingya, once again Ethiopia.

But above all, Gaza. Starvation in Gaza is unique because the capacity to end it exists—this is a catastrophe that could be ended, within a day or two, if Israel were to choose to do so.

Every kind of famine denial is there. Keeping out journalists. Suppressing humanitarian information data gathering and then accusing the UN of fabricating data.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's rejects the UN finding of “famine”. He claims that the UN changed its definition of famine to defame Israel.

It's not true.

Neither Israel nor Washington DC mentioned that on the same day, the US's own Famine Early Warning System, FEWS NET, came out with an independent report that said exactly the same thing: there's famine in Gaza.

But what really made the difference was pictures. Even President Donald Trump said that these children looked hungry. This picture was taken by the Palestinian photojournalist Miriam Abu Daqqa, who was murdered at the end of August.

Netanyahu said the pictures were “fake”, that the children had pre-existing conditions. As though that were an exculpation, not an aggravating factor in purposefully starving them.

He said that because there were people who weren't starving in the pictures, it wasn't a famine; that those who were dying of hunger were doing so because of other Palestinians, not because of Israelis.

We have heard this before. Netanyahu is joining an extremely disreputable list.

Israel is waging a war that will, it hopes, only ever be narrated in the words it chooses. It is destroying archives, blowing up universities. It is killing journalists, more so than in any other war.

The World Peace Foundation recently collaborated with Forensic Architecture to produce a report on what we called “The architecture of genocidal starvation”. In choosing that form of words, the point was not to indicate that Israel intends to kill every Palestinian in Gaza by starvation, but rather that it intends to break Palestinian society, and that starvation is a weapon in pursuit of that goal.

Key to the weapon is dehumanization. Degrading and humiliating people. Turning them against each other. Making them into the animals that their tormentors claim that they are.

Scrabbling in the dirt for food... and throwing the dust and grains in the air in frustration because they simply can't be separated. Rushing forward towards the ration stations of the so-called Gaza Humanitarian Foundation, in the far south of the Gaza strip, where they must brave

the live ammunition of Israeli soldiers and American mercenaries. This is the rarest image of a famine, as it includes a perpetrator of the crime of starvation. Not, unfortunately, the high-level perpetrators, just a single contractor.

As much as the biological trauma of starvation, it is this social trauma that will live on in Palestinian society for a generation.

Ginzburg wrote that in trying to recall, to re-live the experience of starvation—an experience that cannot be erased, but can never fully be expressed-- it is the written word that breaks the circle.

In writing the words “to starve” we must always be aware that we need to ask, not just who is being starved, but who is doing the starving. Similarly, we need to represent the brute degradation of starvation in images, always aware of what is absent from those images.

How to represent the perpetrator of starvation? How to narrate starvation as an act? These are the challenges for journalists, photographers, writers and artists.

Let me conclude by quoting Bertholt Brecht

*And in the dark times, will there also be singing?
Yes, there will be singing, about the dark times.*

It has been a privilege to be able to address you.

RESOLUTION ON THE PRESENT INTERNATIONAL DISORDER AND BREAKDOWN OF PEACE – THE ROLE OF WRITERS

Proposed by the Writers for Peace Committee and approved at the 91st Congress of PEN International in Krakow, Poland, 5 September 2025

In recent years, a growing number of countries have abdicated their commitment to human rights principles and undermined the international order established under the United Nations system in response to the horrors of the Second World War. Authoritarianism is gaining ground, as if the painful lessons of the 20th century mean nothing, or they have been forgotten. This global shift is driven by opportunistic and authoritarian leaders and states whose autocratic policies as well as populist - at times hateful - rhetoric, has exponentially fuelled political instability, economic uncertainty and a deep loss of trust in institutions intended to provide democracy the necessary checks and balances critical to it, trends made especially visible during and after the Covid-19 pandemic. Authoritarianism consistently targets the most vulnerable—women, LGBTQI+ communities, religious, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic minorities, indigenous peoples, and migrants. Writers and journalists who expose these injustices often pay with their freedom or their lives.

Widespread frustration with institutional corruption, systematic inequality, coupled with ineffective and anti-people governance, has provided the breeding ground for a return to violent strongman politics, with leaders offering quick, authoritarian solutions. At the same time, deliberate disinformation, the weakening of legal protections, and shrinking spaces for civil liberties are enabling the rise of autocracy. The exploitation of fear and division to consolidate financial and political power, as well as the deliberate undermining of democratic norms and a sense of common values, are all escalating tensions and turmoil globally. Moreover, the failure to prevent the ongoing genocide in Gaza and hold its perpetrators and accomplices accountable, end the inhuman siege and the weaponisation of starvation, and protect Palestinians from mass murder and cultural erasure, is further undermining the belief in international law and the efficacy of international justice.

Not since the fall of the Berlin Wall has the world faced such a fragile and disordered global landscape. The crisis is nefariously reshaping international relations and weakening the multilateral institutions built to safeguard peace.

We are witnessing a surge in geopolitical conflicts, actions aimed at subverting international law, aggressive nationalism, climate change denial, and economic protectionism. Multilateral dialogue and diplomacy are severely polarised, where they have not broken down. Trade wars and unilateral decisions are harming the world's most vulnerable people. The framework designed to protect freedom of expression is under attack with letting, knee-jerk references to it being an absolute right, while unlawful surveillance, censorship, book bans, and AI-powered propaganda undermine its core value.

A new tripolar order appears to be emerging — dominated by the United States, Russia, and China — each seeking to exert predominant global influence, weakening the presence of effective actors at the global level. These actors include the United Nations (UN) and the International Criminal Court, institutions established to address threats to international peace and security, while the rise of global hard power dynamics will invariably undermine the influence and visibility of smaller states. We also note with concern how members of the UN Security Council misuse their Veto power, belittle, and undermine the UN institutions and

their vital role in maintaining global peace. US isolationism is driving Europe away from its socially progressive model towards militarisation, while the European Union has failed to assert an alternative vision on the world stage. History shows that societies defined by hatred, exploitation, division and disregard for the rule of law often descend into war. Writers understand that such conditions give rise to war profiteers—those who benefit from human suffering and exploitation through forced labour, organ trafficking, child abduction, and environmental destruction. Corruption flourishes behind the mask of populist slogans.

This decline is especially alarming in countries that still claim to promote human rights principles. Freedom of speech is being eroded in law, policy and practice, and writers face threats and persecution for speaking out (see *Identity on Trial: The Case of PEN International*, 2025).

Environmental collapse is fuelling mass migration as people inevitably search for habitable options. Historical and systemic inequality between the South and North remains the primary driver of migration from Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean towards Europe and the United States.

Far-right rhetoric – framing migration as a threat – is now echoed by mainstream governments, paving the way for damaging policies: outsourcing border control to countries with poor human rights records, as seen in the EU-Tunisia deal; detention centres proposed in Rwanda and Albania; and mass deportations to Latin America and other continents under Trump’s US policy.

The most alarming example is the deportation of Latin American migrants to El Salvador’s CECOT prison, where they face inhumane treatment. Such policies ignore human dignity and international law.

In response to these fast-escalating threats to peace, the Assembly of Delegates of PEN International calls on PEN Centres and all writers to:

- Speak up against undermining international law and oppose injustice, promote human rights values, and champion ideals of equality.
- Use storytelling to foster understanding, dialogue and empathy, encouraging readers to imagine more humane and compassionate futures.
- Champion the ideal of one humanity living in peace and equality, challenge cruelty and injustice, and remind political, economic, social, and cultural leaders of their responsibility for social justice in their communities. This can be done not only through confrontation but through the quiet power of a well-told story.
- Reject hateful and racist rhetoric. Cruelty, dehumanisation, repression, or intolerance must be exposed as unworthy.
- Hold governments accountable, not only to their supporters but to all people under their jurisdiction. Advocate for fairness, generosity, empathy, and justice, both within and beyond national borders.
- Defend truth and help persecuted writers by translating, publishing, and spreading their words that have been silenced by autocratic regimes.
- The Assembly of delegates of PEN International calls on all governments and the international community to:
- Make every possible effort to strengthen dialogue between States and peoples in order to reach consensual agreements, reinforcing both multilateralism within the United

Nations and the traditional principles that have for decades inspired diplomatic practices between nations, so that the rule of law, human rights and, in particular, freedom of expression are universally respected.

Democracy and peace are living entities. Their existence is not guaranteed and must be watered, nurtured, and defended by institutions, the press, and citizens who speak the truth and listen to one another, even in the face of disagreement and danger. We must return to the value of reasoned dissent and learn to hold the creative tension of many voices.

Writers are among the best practitioners and advocates for these ideals. They touch hearts and inspire minds across borders — and can help lead the way towards a more just and peaceful world.

SERBIA: EUROPEAN UNION MUST URGENTLY ADDRESS ALARMING CRISIS

In an open letter to President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Council António Costa, and Commissioner for Enlargement Marta Kos, PEN Centres from the former Yugoslav region and PEN International raise grave concern over the alarming situation for freedom of expression and other fundamental rights in Serbia and urge immediate and robust EU action.

September 12, 2025

Ms Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission
Mr António Costa, President of the European Council
Ms Marta Kos, Commissioner for Enlargement

We, members of PEN International and writers from the former Yugoslav region, urge you as EU leaders to take a firm and clear stance regarding the volatile and unpredictable situation in Serbia, where the authorities are brutally cracking down on freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and other fundamental rights, and intentionally stocking up violence – with entrenched impunity.

Masked individuals, sympathisers of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (Srpska napredna stranka), are attacking peaceful protesters and journalists while the police, instead of protecting them, are resorting to excessive and unlawful use of force, further escalating tensions.

Actions being witnessed in Serbia are of the utmost concern: arbitrary arrests, everyday acts of violence by state and non-state actors, allegations of torture and other ill-treatment in police stations, systematic abuse of those who dare express dissenting views and of journalists seeking to report on the protests, including in home and worksite raids. We note with alarm President Vučić's recent letter to President von der Leyen, which implies that further escalation of violence by state forces is inevitable.

Serbia holds EU candidate status, yet wages repression and violence over dissenting citizens as well as independent writers and journalists. The EU, by remaining silent, risks being complicit in the dissolution of fundamental rights in Serbia. This is not only a betrayal of the citizens of Serbia, but also a betrayal of the European values on which the EU prides itself.

We therefore call upon you to:

Unequivocally condemn all human rights violations committed by the Serbian authorities and send a clear message that pressure and violence against peaceful protesters, writers, and journalists will not be tolerated.

Stress that Serbia's EU accession process is contingent on the rights of freedom of expression and peaceful assembly being upheld by the Serbian authorities.

Ensure that achieving progress on human rights is at the heart of any decisions to disburse EU funding. Further funding should be used to support civil society and independent media.

The EU must not be just an observer, but a guarantor of the basic human values it claims to cherish. In the name of solidarity, freedom and dignity, we urge you to act now.

Yours sincerely,

Burhan Sönmez, President, PEN International
Lila Cona, President, Armã PEN
Andrea Lešić-Thomas, President, PEN Bosnia and Herzegovina
Iva Grgić Maroević, President, Croatian PEN

Vladimir Martinovski, President, Macedonian PEN
Adnan Čirgić, President, Montenegrin PEN Centre
Vida Ognjenović, President, Serbian PEN / Vice President, PEN International
Tanja Tuma, President, PEN Slovenia / Vice Chair, PEN International Board
Urtzi Urrutikoetxea, Chair, PEN International's Translation and Linguistic Rights Committee
Judyth Hill, Chair, PEN International's Women Writers Committee
Germán Rojas, Chair, PEN International's Writers for Peace Committee
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STATE-SPONSORED BOOK BANNING ENTERS A DANGEROUS NEW PHASE

By Ira Wells

President of PEN Canada

Author of [On Book Banning](#) (Biblioasis, 2025) from which this essay is adapted.

Earlier this year, the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights [announced](#) that it was ending Joe Biden's "Book Ban Hoax." In a press release, the OCR revealed that it had dismissed 11 complaints related to "so-called 'book bans'" and was eliminating a "book ban coordinator" tasked with investigating local school districts. The meaning behind the announcement is impossible to miss: we are entering a new phase of state-sanctioned book banning in America.

For years, "parents' rights" organizations—*Moms for Liberty*, *No Left Turn in Education*, *MassResistance*—have argued that the presence of LGBTQI+ and "Critical Race Theory-inspired" literature on school library shelves represents a form of insidious indoctrination of America's youth; some liken the inclusion of LGBTQI+ narratives to pedophilic grooming. These and similar groups have directly bullied teachers into [removing books](#) from their reading lists, fought for the suppression of books in raucous, [7-hour school board meetings](#), even called for prosecution of owners of [Little Free Libraries](#) who distribute 'obscene' literature."

The efforts of these pro-censorship groups were already successful. The American Library Association (ALA) identified [4,240](#) unique book titles targeted for censorship; PEN America identified more than [ten thousand](#) instances of books being removed from U.S. schools in 2023-24, but is quick to clarify that the true number is likely much higher: One well-known study conducted by the ALA estimated that

between 82% and 97% of all library challenges go [unreported](#).

Still, until recently, parental rights groups have been fighting from the political and cultural margins. When polled, most Americans strongly [reject](#) book bans. Legal challenges against books, of the sort that once banned *Ulysses* and *Lady Chatterley's Lover* from American shelves, are costly and hindered by decades of First Amendment jurisprudence that steadily broadened the sphere of expressive freedom. Parental rights organizations target libraries precisely because they are soft targets. Any citizen can mount a challenge; the instructions for doing so are often posted on the institution's website.

In recent years, however, a host of recent state laws—such as [Florida HB 1467](#), which enhanced procedural mechanisms for mounting challenges and requires lists of challenged books to be broadcast throughout the state—greased the wheels for future challenges. And now, the Department of education (DoE) appears to have signalled that the pro-censorship orientation of *Moms for Liberty*—which the Southern Poverty Law Center characterizes as an "[anti-government](#)" extremist group—is now official policy the U.S. government.

DoE officials know full well that books are being suppressed: indeed, their [press release](#) lauds the "commonsense processes" established by parents and school districts "to evaluate and remove" materials they find objectionable. The notion that book banning is a simple matter

of common sense has long been a useful fiction for censors. “Pornography,” along with kindred categories like “obscenity,” “indecent,” and “scurrilousness”—has no stable, agreed-upon meaning. In 1930s America, 90% of those charged with obscenity were Jewish; more recently, the category became a cudgel with which to attack LGBTQI+ expression. Book banning is, among other things, a form of symbolic violence, where purged books represent what banners would purge from society itself—and where the act of purging constitutes a right of social belonging.

We sometimes regard “the law” as a rock-solid and immutable edifice. But the protean history of “obscenity” reveals how contingent, how fragile our free speech norms really are. For fifty years, First Amendment jurisprudence provided guardrails against much censorship and widened the scope of expressive freedom.

Now, pro-censorship arguments are resurgent in state legislatures and courtrooms. Georgia’s Senate [Bill 154](#) is one of several legislative efforts that could open librarians to prosecution under obscenity laws. In Llano County, Texas, officials recently argued that library collections constitute “[government speech](#)” and are thus not open to First Amendment challenges. Library advocates warn that the court’s acceptance of this argument would “upend everything that a public library is supposed to be.”

We should be clear on the stakes, particularly when it comes to schools. Book banning is a form of coercion, an attempt to control not only what children read, but

also what they think. Left unchecked, it poses two longer-term dangers. The first is that students will become habituated to the conditions of censorship. They will grow up to be uninformed and passive, easier targets for propaganda and (actual) indoctrination, primed for authoritarian rule.

The second is that they will internalize the methods of their censorious parents and educators and organize their own lives around a will to power. They will *become* the censors and the authoritarians.

To turn the tide of censorship, we must be able to recognize the Orwellian abuse of language and rhetorical legerdemain of those who dismiss book banning as a “hoax” and pretend that eliminating LGBTQI+ expression is “common sense.” To repeat: Obscenity is based on community standards, and standards change. In the postwar decades, law and culture tacked in the direction of greater expressive freedom, but there is no guarantee that future standards won’t veer in the opposite direction. Given the likelihood of one or two more Trump-appointed Supreme Court Justices, and conservative dominance of the Court all but assured for decades to come, state-sponsored censorship may be poised for a generational comeback.

At the very minimum, given that community standards are open to debate, we must brace ourselves for the coming legal and cultural contest over expressive freedom. The fight against censorship is never over. Ours, it seems, is just getting started.

UKRAINE, A COUNTRY UNDER SIEGE FROM RUSSIAN BOMBS

By Enrique Yeves,
President of PEN Spain

Life appears normal in Kiev, the capital of Ukraine. Life goes on as usual, shops are open, traffic is heavy in this city of three and a half million inhabitants, restaurants are packed with customers, employees work in modern offices... it could be any European capital... but that normality is shattered as soon as the announcement of a possible Russian air strike arrives. The inhabitants' mobile phones (all of which have the 'Air Alert' software installed) sound an alarm with an apocalyptic message: go to the shelter now. People run to the 'bunkers', most of which are simple underground garages, classes are stopped in schools, in hospitals, patients are protected in shelters, and in apartments people run to somewhere less vulnerable places. This has been happening every day for almost four years, causing civilian deaths and injuries, hoping that you will not be hit by the Russian roulette – never better said – of the bomb in the building where you are. A daily nightmare that is difficult to get used to, a deadly drip whose regularity has removed it from the media coverage, where it is hardly news despite its seriousness.

Since the conflict began in 2022, at least 13,580 civilians, including 716 children, have been killed and more than 34,000 wounded, according to UN data. In this war, as in all modern wars, it is always the same people who pay the price: civilians trying to survive in an inhumane conflict in the 21st century, as if we in Europe had learned nothing from our not-so-distant past tragedies.

According to the UN (1), the civilian population in Ukraine bears the brunt of the war, not only in terms of casualties but also in terms of great difficulties in accessing food, water, electricity and

medical care. In October 2025, the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine presented a report according to which Russian forces had systematically used drones to attack civilians in southern Ukraine. In their report, the commission's experts point out that the attacks, which extend over more than 300 kilometres of the Dnieper River, constitute war crimes and crimes against humanity, as they were committed with the aim of spreading terror and forcing mass displacement. Investigations reveal that Russian unmanned vehicles have struck homes, hospitals, schools, markets, humanitarian distribution points and critical structures such as electrical substations and communication towers. The drones also reportedly attacked medical brigades, firefighters and repair crews, ignoring the protection afforded to these services and personnel under international humanitarian law.

The sacrifice and suffering of the civilian population of Ukraine under Russian bombs is undeniable, as we, a group of writers and journalists from various PEN centres in Spain, Belgium, Canada, Norway, Slovenia and the Basque Country, invited by PEN Ukraine, witnessed the brutality of war on civilians in buildings attacked in different parts of the capital and in towns such as Bucha (massacre of more than 400 civilians, most of whom were buried in a large mass grave in a park), Irpin (town completely destroyed) and Borodyanka. In Yahidne, a small town in the Chernihiv region, 66-year-old Ivan Polhui told us how the Russians used some 300 people as human shields, holding them in the basement of a school for over a month in inhumane conditions, where many slowly died of hunger and disease during the Russian occupation.

Ukrainian culture, the collateral victim

The Ukrainian PEN Centre is doing a great job of showing the world the horrors of this aggression and sending the message that this is not only a terrible war but also an attempt to suppress Ukrainian culture, a collateral victim of the war. From the outset, PEN Ukraine launched a monitoring project with the aim of assessing the victims in the world of culture, the project “People of Culture Taken Away by the War” in conjunction with various media outlets in the country and NGOs, seeking to map the impact of the war on culture. According to their records, 246 people from the world of culture have been killed in Ukraine since the start of the large-scale Russian invasion (2).

Looted museums, damage to heritage worth 2.4 billion dollars and a cultural sector that has almost disappeared, according to UNESCO data (3), is the balance sheet since the war began, a situation that its filmmakers, writers, artists and musicians have not ceased to denounce through their works. This is the case of filmmakers Sergei Loznitsa, Mstyslav Chernov and Maryna Er Gorbach, writers such as Andrei Kurkov and Victoria Amelina – who died in a Russian attack – and the Kalush Orchestra, which won Eurovision 2022.

Ukrainian heritage and museums have been one of the main targets of the Russian army. At least twenty Ukrainian museums have been bombed and partially or totally destroyed, according to UNESCO. Museums located in the invaded area have been looted: the most significant plundering has been suffered by the Fine Arts and Provincial Museums in Kherson and the Local History Museum in Melitopol.

The latter housed a valuable collection of Scythian gold, a symbol of Ukrainian culture.

“Russia’s war is not only an assault on our territory — it is an assault on our culture. By destroying museums, libraries, archives, and cultural landmarks, by killing our writers, actors, musicians, photographers the aggressor is trying to erase our identity. Ukrainian culture has endured centuries of repression, and it will endure this war as well. Every book published during the war is a testimony, every voice that continues to speak the truth is an act of resistance”, says Maksym Sytnikov, Executive Director of PEN Ukraine.

The relevance of literature in times of war was the subject of a very interesting dialogue between the visiting members of the PEN delegation and the audience, moderated by the President of PEN Ukraine, writer and philosopher Volodymyr Yermolenko, which highlighted the importance of supporting culture and the fundamental role it plays in denouncing and defending historical memory.

There are not many expectations among the population that the war will end soon, despite the announcement of the Peace Plan proposed by the United States (in full negotiation at the time of writing this article), nor are there any prospects for what the uncertain future of the country will look like. But amid the bombs and deaths, words are finding their way, and writers, poets, filmmakers and artists are seeking to denounce the barbarity of the 21st century in their works, using art as a vehicle to keep the flame of hope alive, even though it is becoming increasingly scarce. And in this endeavour, the work of PEN is crucial.

Notes:

(1) <https://news.un.org/es/story/2025/10/1540639>

(2) <https://killedculturemakers.pen.org.ua/en>

(3) <https://www.unesco.org/es/ukraine-war>

STATEMENT BY PEN CENTRES VISITING UKRAINE

Representatives of various PEN Centres - PEN Spain, PEN Basque, PEN Norway, PEN Slovenia, PEN International (WIPC), PEN Belgium, PEN Canada, and PEN Ukraine - gathered in Kyiv in October 2025. The meeting was organized by PEN Ukraine.

The visit of PEN Centres was a sign of solidarity with the Ukrainian resistance to the cruel Russian tyranny and war. The gathering took place despite regular Russian bombings of the Ukrainian cities, including Kyiv, and occasional shortages of electricity, water and heat. The meeting was also held against the background of continuous losses of human lives that the Ukrainian society, including its creative part, suffers every day from the Russian aggression, either on the frontline or in civilian life. We mourn the victims of this aggression every day.

During the meeting, PEN Centres reaffirmed their decisive support of the Ukrainian resistance. They underlined the importance of culture during the war, the importance of cultural creation during the most difficult moments of human existence, and the universal value of this cultural expression. They underlined that these difficult moments show us again that culture is not a “superstructure” of human existence, but its deepest and most internal structure and foundation. Therefore, Ukrainian literature and culture should be heard around the world.

They also emphasized the importance of the solidarity of writers, journalists, and cultural actors around the world to support Ukraine in its resistance. Our common goal should be the Ukrainian victory and a just peace.

They also called other writers around the world to continue telling the story of the Ukrainian struggle for freedom, get information about it from trustworthy sources, counteract the pro-Russian propaganda and disinformation, and come to Ukraine physically to learn about the Ukrainian resistance and lived existence from their own experience.

Signed by:

Enrique Yeves (PEN Spain)

Laura Mintegi (PEN Basque)

Maja Gudim Burheim (PEN Norway)

Said Khatibi (PEN Slovenia)

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REPORT ON PARTICIPATION IN THE IX REGIONAL MEETING OF PEN CENTRES IN KYIV, UKRAINE

Said Khatibi,
PEN Slovenia

Kyiv, Ukraine, 27-31 October 2025

1. Introduction

This report summarizes the participation of PEN Slovenia in the IX Regional Meeting of PEN Centers, held in Kyiv, Ukraine, from 27 to 31 October 2025. The event brought together representatives from several PEN Centers, including PEN Norway, PEN Basque, PEN Spain, PEN Canada, PEN Belgium, and the PEN International Writers in Prison Committee.

2. Purpose of Participation

The participation of PEN Slovenia represented an act of solidarity and support for Ukraine, a country facing ongoing military aggression from Russia. The delegation expressed its support for Ukrainian writers, artists, and the Ukrainian people during this difficult time.

3. Program and Activities

Throughout the meeting, participants visited several Ukrainian institutions working in the field of human rights, including the Center for Civil Liberties (recipient of the 2022 Nobel Peace Prize) and the Voices of Children Foundation.

Despite frequent air attacks, particularly at night, which forced participants to spend one night in a shelter, the program continued. During one such air raid, a meeting was held in a shelter, where PEN Slovenia presented its activities — emphasizing its role as a defender of freedom of expression, its support for writers in exile, and its efforts to promote literature.

PEN Slovenia also visited several liberated villages, some of which had experienced Russian occupation for months. There, the delegation met survivors and witnesses of the war, listening to their testimonies. In addition, a meeting was held with the Representative of the Government of Crimea in Kyiv, where PEN Slovenia expressed its support for the people of Crimea, who have lived under occupation since 2014.

4. Observations and Impressions

The meeting provided a first-hand understanding of the harsh living conditions faced by Ukrainians during the war. The resilience and determination of Ukrainian writers, artists, and human rights defenders were deeply moving. The solidarity expressed by PEN Slovenia was warmly welcomed both by Ukrainian partners and by other PEN Centers attending the meeting.

5. Outcomes and Future Steps

Upon returning from Kyiv, PEN Slovenia plans to publish a comprehensive report in the Slovenian press, highlighting the situation in Ukraine, the courage of its people, and the ongoing solidarity shown by PEN Slovenia.

This participation strengthened PEN Slovenia's commitment to defending freedom of expression, supporting writers in danger, and advocating for peace and justice in the region.

SYRIA'S NEW RULERS TURN HOPE INTO TURMOIL AS SECTARIAN TENSIONS BOIL OVER

By Yahya Alaous (PEN Syria)

Syria has been undergoing dramatic upheavals since the fall of dictator Bashar al-Assad late last year and the takeover of power in Damascus by the Sunni Islamist group Hay'at Thair al-Sham (HTS). The group and its leader—once a senior figure within al-Qaeda—were welcomed in Damascus as heroes. This was not only because Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, now known by his real name Ahmad al-Shar'a, seized power from Assad with international consent and Turkish backing, but also because he toppled an Alawite dictator—a sect historically aligned with the Shiites and long at odds with the Sunni majority. That sectarian element became the secret key that allowed the new leader to settle into the presidential palace while crowds of supporters chanted beneath its balcony.

Despite the rumours and unanswered questions surrounding his rise and the surprising ease of his military take-over, al-Shar'a has not turned his back on the hardline militants who fought alongside him. He rewarded his long-time jihadi comrades with influential military and political posts and promised foreign jihadists Syrian citizenship in recognition of their years of fighting by his side. Most of these fighters are Sunni extremists committed to reviving an Islamic caliphate, and they hail from countries unwilling to take them back.

The first months after Assad's fall were marked by widespread optimism and hopes for peace in a country exhausted by 15 years of war. But the new authorities quickly launched retaliatory campaigns against the Alawite community following limited attacks on their forces by remnants of the old regime. These operations resulted

in the killing of more than 1,400 civilians within months of HTS's rise to power. Although the transitional authorities appointed a government committee to investigate the massacres, the final report was evasive and avoided implicating key perpetrators. This fuelled deep fears among Syria's religious and ethnic minorities that further revenge attacks were looming—a fear that materialized in July 2025, when government-backed sectarian violence was responsible for a violent massacre against Druze civilians in Sweida, killing nearly 2,000 unarmed residents. Israel intervened militarily to halt the slaughter, further complicating an already volatile political scene.

The growing mistrust between minorities and the new rulers stems not only from revenge attacks but also from the administration's increasingly authoritarian mindset. Last March, al-Shar'a issued a constitutional declaration granting himself sweeping powers over judicial and legislative appointments—without any oversight. He also awarded himself the authority to appoint one-third of parliament's members, effectively ensuring his total control over the legislature. This raised profound concerns about the erosion of the rule of law and the protection of human rights. The president defended these extraordinary powers as necessary for Syria's transitional phase—even though, in practice, they pave the way for a new dictatorship rather than a democratic transition.

He further consolidated control over the judiciary by giving himself the exclusive right to appoint all seven members of the "Supreme Constitutional Court," without

parliamentary or institutional checks—eliminating any mechanism to ensure judicial independence.

In the education sector, the situation is even more troubling. Gender segregation has been imposed in schools, and the government continues building mosques instead of classrooms and laboratories. With loyalists appointed across public institutions—including unions and professional associations such as the Writers' Union and the Journalists' Syndicate—the interim authorities steadily tighten their grip on all state organs. Yet the most dangerous shift of all may be the rise of a Sunni leader with a jihadi background after decades of minority rule, which has emboldened thousands of conservative Sunnis. This has revived the dreams of a new Umayyad-style caliphate which is a hereditary monarchy where

power remained within the Umayyad family, with an emphasis on strong central rule, Arab leadership, and an imperial style of governance.

This surge in religious zeal has pushed many toward extremist Salafi ideologies—the hardline interpretations of Islam that go beyond mainstream Salafism, promoting rigid beliefs, intolerance, and sometimes the use of violence to enforce their views) and marginalizing secular voices and civil society activists.

In just one-year, Syrian society has shifted from relative moderation to a state of religious radicalization—an alarming trajectory that threatens to ignite new rounds of sectarian and communal violence.

PEACE IS A VERB; PEACE IS A MUST; PEACE NOW!

A statement by the Writers for Peace Committee of PEN International for Human Rights Day 2025

Every year on 10 December, the world marks Human Rights Day, commemorating the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. Seventy-seven years later, that promise is frayed but not broken. As we approach the end of 2025, more than sixty wars and armed conflicts are raging across the globe, driving millions from their homes, eroding the rule of law, and normalising a reality in which mass atrocities are livestreamed, archived and forgotten in the same digital gesture.

We, the Writers for Peace Committee of PEN International, speak from and to this world.

We speak against the deliberate targeting of civilians, the bombing of schools and hospitals, and the use of starvation and siege as weapons of war. We speak against ethnic cleansing and genocidal violence; against the criminalisation of dissent; against the persecution, imprisonment and murder of writers, journalists and artists who dare to testify. We speak against gender-based violence and inequality, and all forms of marginalisation based on race, religion, language, disability, or sexual orientation, and gender identity.

We speak also against the quieter architectures of harm: against the weaponisation of poverty and debt; against extractive economic policies that keep whole regions precarious; against digital platforms that amplify hatred and lies faster than a poem can travel; against corporate and political actors who treat truth as a negotiable commodity.

Yet we insist: **this is not fate.**

Human beings created these systems; human beings can unmake and remake them. We believe that humanity still has the power to resist the repetition of its own violent history. We stand together with the next generation to imagine – and to enact – a world that recognises and defends human rights for all.

We know. But how can we act?

As writers, we work with the most fragile and the most enduring material: language. We search for words, for stories, for poetry and prose that keep alive the truth that every human life is singular and irreplaceable. We know that literature alone cannot stop a bomb, but it can refuse the vocabulary that makes bombing thinkable. It can slow down the speed of hatred. It can build, line by line, a memory that resists erasure.

And yet our words are often drowned out by the noise of propaganda and polarisation. In the words of Margaret Atwood, “*War is what happens when language fails.*” When vocabulary collapses into slogans, when people are reduced to categories, when nuance is denounced as betrayal, the road to violence becomes frighteningly short.

Are we going to give in to apathy rather than confronting it with empathy?

No, we will not.

We reaffirm our commitment to defend those who are persecuted for their words, their silences and their refusals. We reaffirm the right to freedom of expression and the right to receive

information – rights that are not luxuries of peace, but essential conditions for any genuine peace to exist.

However, on this **Human Rights Day 2025**, we insist: **words must be joined by deeds.**

We therefore call on governments and international institutions:

- to **immediately cease the targeting of civilians** and civilian infrastructure, and to uphold without exception the principles of international humanitarian law;
- to **ensure the safe and unimpeded delivery of humanitarian aid to civilians in need**;
- to **guarantee the protection of writers, journalists, artists, and cultural workers** in all war and conflict zones, including through emergency visas, safe corridors, and shelter programmes;
- to **end the use of starvation, forced displacement and collective punishment** as tools of war and political control;
- to **support independent courts and mechanisms of international justice** capable of investigating and prosecuting war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide, regardless of the identity or political alliances of the perpetrators;
- to **allow and protect local and international journalists to safely report from conflict and war zones, and to adequately fund independent media, public broadcasting and cultural institutions**, which are essential defences against authoritarianism and disinformation.

We call on technology companies and media platforms:

- to **stop profiting from the algorithmic amplification of hate speech, incitement to violence, and disinformation**, and to subject their systems to independent democratic oversight;
- to **protect users who are at particular risk**, including writers, journalists, human rights defenders, and minority communities, from targeted harassment, coordinated disinformation campaigns, and digital surveillance.

We call on the arms industry and the states that license it:

- to recognise that **every contract signed in comfort reverberates in the ruins of cities and villages**, and
- to move towards binding international limits on the trade and export of weapons to parties involved in grave human rights violations.

We call on our fellow writers, readers, and citizens everywhere:

- to refuse the language of dehumanisation,
- to amplify silenced voices,
- to support organisations that protect those at risk,
- to turn private despair into public solidarity.

Peace is not only the absence of conflict written into a treaty and filed away. It is a daily practice of justice, accountability, memory, and imagination.

As Slovenian poet Boris A. Novak writes, *“Freedom is a verb.”*

We paraphrase: **Peace is a verb.** It is something we do, or it does not exist.

On this **Human Rights Day 2025**, we commit ourselves once again: to watch and to witness, to speak and to listen, to remember and to resist.

Peace is a verb. Peace is a must. Peace now.

PEN International Writers for Peace Committee

ABOUT THE EVENTS IN VENEZUELA

Germán Rojas
Chair Writers for Peace Committee
PEN Internacional

***Statement made by the author
on 4 January 2026 ⁽¹⁾***

Given the high level of uncertainty and lack of clarity in the information circulated by the press regarding the situation affecting Venezuela, it is important that PEN International remain on high alert and monitor the situation in that country in general, as well as the risk that could affect those imprisoned by Nicolás Maduro's dictatorial regime for exercising their right to free expression. All of this must be done in close coordination with our colleagues at PEN Venezuela.

Based on reliable information at my disposal, I would like to express my deepest concern about the events in Venezuela, as well as my absolute condemnation of the United States' military intervention in that Latin American country. The dictatorial nature of Nicolás Maduro's government, which I have condemned in no uncertain terms, in no way justifies foreign interference in the internal affairs of Venezuela, or of any country on this planet.

As a writer deeply committed to democracy, I reaffirm my adherence to the basic principles of human coexistence, such as non-violence, the search for peaceful solutions to international disputes, respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states, the rejection of the use of force, and compliance with the norms of international law.

It is essential to do everything possible to seek a peaceful solution to this conflict. The crisis that faces Venezuela must be resolved through dialogue, first and foremost between Venezuelans, since national sovereignty lies with the people. Additionally, we must request that the United Nations use all mechanisms at its disposal to prevent a military escalation of this conflict, protect the civilian population, and assist through multilateral bodies in seeking avenues for dialogue that will make it possible to overcome this tragic moment affecting Venezuela and all of humanity.

Peace is a verb – Peace is a must – Peace now!

Note:

1. Original publication on: <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1QvbyMCTzi/>

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