

Eric Holder  
U.S. Department of Justice  
950 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20530-0001

March 31, 2015

Mr. Holder -

The undersigned organizations call on the Department of Justice to establish a single point of contact to field inquiries and complaints about potential human rights violations, as required by Executive Order 13107. Your agency should also publish the name and contact information for that point of contact for the public.

On December 10, 1998, President Clinton signed Executive Order (“EO”) 13107, “Implementation of Human Rights Treaties.” EO 13107 reiterates the requirement that all executive agencies must comply with the legal duties imposed on the United States as a state party to various human rights treaties, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (“ICCPR”).<sup>1</sup> The U.S. State Department recently reaffirmed its commitment to the implementation of EO 13107.<sup>2</sup>

To ensure compliance with human rights treaties, EO 13107 mandates, among other things, that the head of each executive agency “shall designate a single contact officer who will be responsible for overall coordination of ... respon[s]es to inquiries, requests for information,

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<sup>1</sup> Exec. Order No. 13,107, 63 Fed. Reg. 68,991 (Dec. 10, 1998). Executive Orders are legally binding on executive agencies and remain in force during a change of administration. Legal Effectiveness of a Presidential Directive, As Compared to An Executive Order, Op. Off. Legal Counsel (Jan. 29, 2000). Civil society organizations have previously called on the Obama Administration to properly implement EO 13107. See, e.g., Written Submission of the ACLU on Domestic Human Rights Implementation (Aug. 1, 2014) *available at* [https://www.aclu.org/sites/default/files/assets/aclusubmissionaugust1consultation\\_0.pdf](https://www.aclu.org/sites/default/files/assets/aclusubmissionaugust1consultation_0.pdf). “[T]he Obama Administration has cited EO 13107 as ‘establishing a framework for implementation of human rights obligations by the executive branch agencies.’” HUMAN RIGHTS INSTITUTE, CLOSING THE GAP: THE FEDERAL ROLE IN RESPECTING & ENSURING HUMAN RIGHTS AT THE STATE AND LOCAL LEVEL 19 (2013), *available at* <http://web.law.columbia.edu/sites/default/files/microsites/human-rights-institute/files/State%20and%20Local%20Shadow%20Report%20%28ecopy%29.pdf>. The UN Human Rights Committee included the question as to whether the U.S. “intends to reinvigorate Executive Order 13107” in its list of issues to raise in relation to the country’s fourth periodic report. List of Issues in Relation to the Fourth Periodic Report of the United States of America (CCPR/C/USA/Q/4 and Corr. 1) (April 29, 2013) *available at* <http://docstore.ohchr.org/SelfServices/FilesHandler.ashx?enc=6QkG1d%2fPPRiCAqhKb7yhsijKy20sgGcLSyqccX0g1nk3FW%2by259hAHCqEMzpDNIQ9sSE6eSLqy1itbTJ2ydz%2bMwU%2bXhqqK4Tthl2nKE6Y0txqfn%2bdrvBdhrtyS1J0AEm>.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Dep’t of State, United States Written Responses to Questions From the United Nations Human Rights Committee Concerning the Fourth Periodic Report (July 3, 2013) *available at* <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/212393.htm>.

and complaints about violations of human rights obligations that fall within its area of responsibility...”<sup>3</sup> Complaints that fall within an agency’s area of responsibility must receive a response,<sup>4</sup> and an Interagency Working Group on Human Rights Treaties (also mandated by the EO) must direct an annual review of non-trivial complaints.<sup>5</sup>

As explained below, these procedural requirements are of great importance to ensuring the United States’ compliance with human rights treaties. However, despite the unambiguous responsibility given to designate a contact point, only a single agency, the Department of Homeland Security, has fulfilled its obligation to do so.<sup>6</sup> By failing to designate a contact point for complaints, federal executive agencies have avoided hearing from individuals in the U.S. and around the world about any failures to protect human rights.

One of the foundational international treaties on human rights, the ICCPR outlines rights that are “derive[d] from the inherent dignity of the human person.”<sup>7</sup> The ICCPR is an essential focal point for establishing international norms for the protection of the fundamental rights and freedoms necessary to ensure a free society, and is binding upon the United States.<sup>8</sup> An important component of U.S. legal obligations under the ICCPR is the

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<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., COMPLAINTS, <http://www.dhs.gov/complaints> (last visited March 3, 2015). The term “Executive Agency” means a “Executive department, a Government corporation, and an independent establishment.” The list of Executive Departments and agencies are defined at 5 U.S.C. §§ 101-105. 5 U.S.C. § 101 provides an exclusive list of Executive Departments. The U.S. government provides a list of all Independent Agencies and Government Corporations. INDEPENDENT AGENCIES AND GOVERNMENT CORPORATIONS, <http://www.usa.gov/Agencies/Federal/Independent.shtml> (last visited February 6, 2015)

<sup>4</sup> Exec. Order No. 13,107, *supra* note 1, at Sec. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Exec. Order No. 13,107, *supra* note 1, at Sec. 4(c)(vii); However, “[t]he duties of the Human Rights Treaties Interagency Working Group established in E.O. 13107 [have been] transferred to the PCC on Democracy, Human Rights, and International Operations.” NSPD 1 (Feb. 13, 2001), *available at* <http://www.fas.org/irp/offdocs/nspd/nspd-1.htm>. The status of the Working Group is unclear. “[T]here is no publicly available information on the mandate, membership or activities of [the Working Group.]” <http://web.law.columbia.edu/sites/default/files/microsites/human-rights-institute/files/State%20and%20Local%20Shadow%20Report%20%28ecopy%29.pdf> (page 10). Re-establishment of the Working Group is also essential to ensuring proper oversight of human rights obligations. [https://www.aclu.org/sites/default/files/assets/aclusubmissionaugust1consultation\\_0.pdf](https://www.aclu.org/sites/default/files/assets/aclusubmissionaugust1consultation_0.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> COMPLAINTS, <http://www.dhs.gov/complaints> (last visited March 3, 2015). The DHS designated the Officer for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties as the single contact officer. Memorandum from Daniel Sutherland to Secretary Chertoff, Sept. 11, 2006, *available at* <http://papersplease.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/chertoff-eo13107-11sep2006.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> International Convention on Civil and Political Rights, *opened for signature* Dec. 16, 1966, 999 U.N.T.S. 171, *available at* <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CCPR.aspx>.

<sup>8</sup> Guidance on a more detailed application of some of the broad principles found in the ICCPR is found in the International Principles on the Application of Human Rights to Communications Surveillance (“the Principles”), which have been grounded in well-established international laws and policies. The Principles have been endorsed by over 400 civil society organizations globally. International Principles on the Application of Human Rights to Communications Surveillance, *available at* <https://necessaryandproportionate.org/>.

ability for those denied their fundamental rights under the instruments to challenge the denial and obtain a remedy.<sup>9</sup>

When the U.S. ratified the ICCPR it included a reservation describing the treaty as non-self-executing, which the government argues to mean that without legislation individuals cannot bring a formal challenge in U.S. courts against the government's failure to respect its provisions. Accordingly, the informal process established by EO 13107 is essential to ensuring that individuals have the ability to assert the fundamental rights set out in the ICCPR.<sup>10</sup> However, so far heads of agencies have unlawfully avoided their responsibility in this respect, to the detriment of individuals.

As a matter of law, your department is required to establish a point of contact to process complaints about potential human rights violations.<sup>11</sup> We now call on you to fulfill your

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<sup>9</sup> In contrast to most other state parties of the ICCPR, the United States maintains that the Covenant does not obligate it to respect the rights of those not located within its territory. One such example is the chasm between the protections offered to U.S. persons with respect to electronic surveillance as compared to non-U.S. persons. *See, e.g.,* NATIONAL SECURITY AGENCY, UNITED STATES SIGNALS INTELLIGENCE DIRECTIVE 18 (2011) available at <http://www.dni.gov/files/documents/1118/CLEANEDFinal%20USSID%20SP0018.pdf>. This interpretation of U.S. obligations has been criticized as under inclusive by various authorities, including the Human Rights Committee and a Special Rapporteur to the General Assembly of the UN. *Compare* Harold Koh, Memorandum Opinion on the Geographic Scope of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Op. Off. Legal Counsel (Oct. 19, 2010) available at <https://s3.amazonaws.com/s3.documentcloud.org/documents/1053853/state-department-iccpr-memo.pdf> (outlining the current US policy of interpreting "individuals within its territory and subject to its jurisdiction" as a single group), and Charlie Savage, *U.S. Seems Unlikely to Accept That Rights Treaty Applies to Its Actions Abroad*, N.Y. TIMES, March 6, 2014, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/07/world/us-seems-unlikely-to-accept-that-rights-treaty-applies-to-its-actions-abroad.html> (stating that the agencies had "unanimously" decided that the current interpretation is correct), with UN Human Rights Committee (HRC), Concluding observations on the fourth periodic report of the United States of America, April 23, 2014, CCPR/C/USA/CO/4, available at <http://www.refworld.org/docid/5374afcd4.html> (HRC observations that US obligated to acknowledge extraterritorial application of ICCPR in certain circumstances), and General Assembly, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms While Countering Terrorism, Sept. 23, 2014, A/69/397, available at <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N14/545/19/PDF/N1454519.pdf?OpenElement> (arguing that extraterritorial surveillance may be subject to territorial restrictions and that asymmetric protections between nationals and non-nationals violates the principle non-discrimination found in Article 26).

<sup>10</sup> The First Optional Protocol to the ICCPR provides an individual complaint mechanism for treaty violations, but the U.S. has not ratified the Protocol. Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, *opened for signature* Dec. 16, 1966, 999 U.N.T.S. 302, available at <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/OPCCPR1.aspx>; see OPTIONAL PROTOCOL ON THE INTERNATIONAL COVENANT ON CIVIL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS, [https://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg\\_no=IV-5&chapter=4&lang=en](https://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=IV-5&chapter=4&lang=en) (last visited Feb. 10, 2015).

<sup>11</sup> We believe a properly processed complaint is reviewed and investigated by agency officials, and some responsive action is taken within a reasonable period of time. The number of complaints received should be reported annually. For a similar process, see the process established by the Department of Homeland Security Privacy Office under Section 803 of the 9/11 Commission Act of 2007. *See* DEP'T OF HOMELAND SEC., FIRST QUARTER FISCAL YEAR 2014 REPORT TO CONGRESS (2014) available at

legal obligations by establishing this point of contact and publishing the same in order to ensure that individuals have a path toward recognition of the U.S. failure to protect their rights.

If you have any questions or would like to further discuss the details of this letter, you can contact Amie Stepanovich at Access, and she will communicate with the other signatories.

Sincerely,

Access

Advocacy for Principled Action in Government

American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee

American Library Association

Center for Democracy and Technology

Center for Financial Privacy and Human Rights

Constitutional Alliance

Cyber Privacy Project

Electronic Frontier Foundation

Government Accountability Project

The Identity Project (PapersPlease.org)

International Modern Media Institute (IS)

New America's Open Technology Institute

Open Net Korea

OpenTheGovernment.org

Patient Privacy Rights

PEN American Center

Privacy Journal

Samuelson-Glushko Canadian Internet Policy & Public Interest Clinic (CIPPIC)

Web Foundation

Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum