

HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL – 55th SESSION

Interactive Dialogue with the Special Rapporteur on the situation with human rights defenders

12 March 2024

The Special Rapporteur on the situation with human rights defenders, Ms Mary Lawlor, focused on challenges faced by child and youth human rights defenders. They work with idealism, enthusiasm, personal commitment, and a burning quest for justice. She mentioned that, despite instigating and leading human rights movements, human rights defenders do not receive adequate support from traditional human rights allies; are often, not taken seriously, by other members of civil society, nor by older generations and society at large; and are not meaningfully consulted in matters that impact them.

She stressed the **important contribution of youth in the maintenance and promotion of peace**. However, children and girls face growing repression in many countries. This is often most visible among those working on the climate crisis, but the scale of work done by child defenders far exceeds just this issue. Child and youth defenders most often work at local, grassroots levels, outside the framework of formal organizations. This makes them adaptable, flexible, and quick to respond, but may also hinder them in accessing funding, and forums of participation, including at the international level, where not having a registered NGO and ECOSOC status may be barriers to being heard.

While social media and digital technologies have been widely embraced by young defenders to mobilize, advocate, organize and publicize, these platforms can also be the source of violations against them, including surveillance, hate speech, doxing, and other attacks. Girls and young women who are human rights defenders also face violence, including sexual violence, for their human rights work.

Moreover, she presented outcomes from her **two country visits in Tajikistan and Georgia**.

In Tajikistan, while some officials in the government are trying to engage positively with Human Rights Defenders, and there has been some legislative progress, many of those who peacefully defend the rights of others are under increasing pressure and are too often operating in a climate of fear. Lawyers, journalists, and others are targeted for their human rights work, confronted with a variety of difficulties ranging from onerous administrative burdens to harassment, threats, criminalisation, closed unfair trials and imprisonment. Corruption, the lack of independence of the judiciary, the fear of persecution and a stranglehold on defenders working on difficult issues have forced some to leave the country.

Finally, she mentioned that the country must radically improve the situation of their human rights defenders, dispel an intensifying climate of fear, and realise that it is in their own self-interest to promote and protect the work of defenders working to build just and fair societies. The Government must treat human rights defenders as allies, not adversaries, and I stand ready to engage with them on this effort.

Considering **Georgia**, the SR stating that the situation for human rights defenders is not good; urged the state to implement the recommendations made. In particular, the State should put an end to stigmatising statements against HRDs by Government officials; effectively investigate attacks against HRDs. Impunity for grave attacks in the past is ongoing, but those responsible must be held accountable; close the spurious investigations into HRDs and end the arbitrary surveillance of them; and ensure laws do not drop below the standards of international human rights law, in particular when it comes to freedom of assembly and expression.

Georgia (Country Concerned): shared with the Council, a number of national policies and strategies in order to effectively respond to challenges and protect human rights defenders. One of the four priorities of the *Strategy* is dedicated to ensuring the protection of human rights and freedoms without discrimination. The document envisages continuous empowerment of equality and antidiscrimination legislation. Consideration of the needs of minority groups including ethnic, religious minorities and persons with disabilities. The *Strategy* also contains a separate chapter on gender equality, women's rights and the fight against domestic violence. Special attention to environmental human rights. Separate attention to promotion of human rights education on different levels.

Tajikistan (Country Concerned): stressed the importance of the formation of a rule of law state and civil society. Without it, such basic values and principles of society as the rule of law, the supremacy of human rights and freedoms and the protection of legitimate interests of citizens could not be fully realized. In this regard, various legal and educational activities are carried out in the country on an ongoing basis and relevant programs and work plans are adopted: national program for human rights education and system of free legal assistance to the most vulnerable groups of the population. Informed the adoption of the law on protection of human rights and human rights defenders. Restriction of media and social network containing extremist and terrorist propaganda, in according with the procedures established by law on the fight against terrorism.

Interactive dialogue

52 country delegations took the floor during the interactive dialogue. **The majority of countries** welcomed the SR's report and took note of the outcomes. They recognized the results achieved by numerous human rights defenders in various parts of the world, including children and young people. They agreed on the importance of having inclusive and quality education, which contributes to the formation of values and instructs children and young people about issues related to human rights. **The UK** added the necessity of an improvement in monitoring to ensure violence against child and youth human rights defenders is recorded and can be used to facilitate justice and accountability. **Cuba, China, Venezuela, Costa Rica, and Colombia** reiterating its support for the work of human rights defenders, expressed concern about attempts to link this noble title with politically motivated disinformation campaigns, fake news, and distortion of facts, including on digital social networks. It is essential to carefully verify the information received by special procedures, in compliance with the obligations established in the Code of Conduct. **Pakistan** focused on the horrifying and targeted assassinations of numerous human rights defenders in the OPT; as well as on the grave human rights violations against civil society in the Indian Occupied Jammu and Kashmir.

Afghanistan and the EU strongly condemned any acts of intimidation, violence, threat, harassment, or reprisal against all human rights defenders, both online and offline. These are collective failure of the international community. While human rights defenders of all ages undertake their work at great personal risk, it is important to acknowledge the distinct challenges faced by children and youth human rights defenders and the lack of existing specific protection mechanisms for this group of defenders. **The Russian Federation** attached great importance to protecting the family and preserving traditional family values. Parents and legal guardians bear the main responsibility for children's upbringing. Involving children in unauthorized demonstrations and even worse using young children as shields is unacceptable. **The Iraqi Ministry of Education** worked to integrate human rights values and principles into the school curricula. It also implemented the national strategy for positive education and spreading the spirit of tolerance and national belonging among students. Authorities are working to strengthen the role of civil society organizations and parent-teacher councils through seminars and increasing awareness and education programs to contribute to finding solutions to the problems facing children in the educational process.

State of Palestine affirmed that human rights defenders in the country encounter a grave number of human rights violations as well as daily harassment by the Occupying Power. Despite ICJ's provisions, the Occupying Power continues to enforce policies of intimidation, threats, arrests, and indefinite arbitrary detention of civil society organizations and human rights defenders. **Belarus** drew attention to the "geographical imbalance" of the report, which ignores the problems of individual Western countries, where human rights defenders face risks of persecution for criticizing government actions in the field of migration, speaking out against sanctions policies, or questioning the attitudes of the political mainstream. Regarding the report on the country visit to Tajikistan, it noted the lack of proper reflection in the report of the measures taken by the government to develop civil society.

UN Women deeply concerned by the increasing threats against child and young human rights defenders, including digital threats, hate speech and misinformation, and disproportionate attacks against girls, children and young people with a disability, and children and youth identified as LGBTQIA. **UNICEF** commended the report and its focus on child and youth defenders, in recognition of their role at the forefront of societal, economic, and political changes. It echoed the SR's deep concern that children face disproportionate barriers due to social norms that challenge their agency and right to participate in public life. **UNEP** affirmed that despite the vital role that child and youth defenders play in addressing the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution, they face harassment, intimidation, and many obstacles to exercising their rights including legal restriction on their participation. Important to ensure support and protection needed: the **UN guidance** on environmental human rights defenders developed.

NGOs urged all member states to respect, protect and fulfill the rights of human rights defenders, and do all they can to improve the meaningful and inclusive civic space for children and young activists from all regions and backgrounds. They affirmed that human rights defenders of all ages are threatened, harassed, attacked, prosecuted, imprisoned, tortured, or ill-treated because of their legitimate work and expression upholding human rights. **Right Livelihood** reported situations in *Cambodia and Belarus* where young activists are placed behind bars. Additionally, attacks and violations against human rights defenders in *Kenya, Honduras, Guatemala, and Colombia*, were reported by the **Peace Brigades International**. **Lawyers' Rights Watch Canada** remained concern about the situations in *Iran and Sudan*.

Delegations that took the floor during the Interactive dialogue (52 country delegations):

Lithuania (on behalf of Poland, Ukraine, and Lithuania), Norway (on behalf of the Nordic Baltic Country), Luxembourg (on behalf of Belgium, Netherlands and Luxembourg), EU, Australia (on behalf of Canada, Australia and New Zealand), Chechia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Brazil, Malta, Luxembourg, Pakistan, Austria, Switzerland, Timor Leste, Ireland, France, Armenia, Cameroon, USA, Malawi, Colombia, Egypt, Slovenia, Indonesia, Russian Federation, Togo, South Africa, Iraq, Romania, Peru, Venezuela, Cuba, Chile, Spain, Paraguay, China, Uruguay, Afghanistan, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, State of Palestine, Burkina Faso, Bulgaria, Cote d'Ivoire, Panama, Albania, Belarus, Marshall Island, Dominican Republic, Kenya, India, Germany.

NHRIs and NGOs that took the floor during the Interactive dialogue (9):

Amnesty International, China Foundation for Human Rights Development, Comité International pour le Respect et l'Application de la Charte Africaine des Droits de l'Homme et des Peuples (CIRAC), International Service for Human Rights, Lawyers' Rights Watch Canada, Peace Brigades International, Rawsam Human Development Center, Right Livelihood Award Foundation, Rutgers

International organizations: UN Women, UNICEF, UNEP.

To watch the full meeting refer to the [UN WEB TV](#).