

UN to strengthen focus on 'widening democratic space'

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(Geneva) - The UN human rights office has identified the need to 'widen democratic space' and support the work of human rights defenders as a global priority.

The UN's human rights chief, Navi Pillay, will today launch a [major new report](#) to guide the work of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights over the next four years.

'Trends to restrict public liberties and curtail the role of civil society actors have been identified around the world,' the report says.

'In a number of countries, governments continue to use security policies, including counter-terrorism strategies, as a pretext to restrict public freedoms and the role of civil society. In such contexts, human rights defenders are often the primary targets of threats and attacks by authorities and increasingly, by the private sector.'

The report expresses particular concern about attacks against women human rights defenders and peaceful protesters.

'Rather than engaging in dialogue to address the root concerns of protesters, some governments are adopting measures to restrict public freedoms and resorting to violent repression of any forms of protest or criticism,' the report says.

Welcoming the report, ISHR's Director of Human Rights Council Advocacy, Michael Ineichen, said, 'Human rights defenders and other civil society actors have a critical role to play in fostering democracy, promoting accountability and upholding the rule of law. It is for this very reason that anti-democratic, corrupt and repressive governments so frequently target and attack their work.'

'However, the trend to restrict civil society space is not limited to these governments alone. Increasingly we see democratic governments using excessive force against protesters and justifying disproportionate restrictions on the fundamental rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association by reference to economic or national security interests,' Mr Ineichen said.

'In this context ISHR strongly welcomes the strengthened focus within the new [OHCHR Management Plan for 2014-2017 on widening democratic space](#) in all regions of the world.'

ISHR, which made a submission informing the development and content of the Management Plan, is particularly pleased that it will see a stronger OHCHR focus in key areas of ISHR concern, including:

- Protecting human rights defenders from [intimidation and reprisals](#);
- Supporting [women human rights defenders](#); and
- Developing [laws, policies and mechanisms](#) to more effectively support civil society actors and protect human rights defenders at-risk.

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