

Organisation of American States calls for increased protection for human rights defenders

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(New York) - The Organisation of American States has adopted a [significant resolution](#) affirming the 'essential contribution' of human rights defenders to democracy and development, and calling on Member States to support and safeguard their work.

The resolution urges States to adopt or harmonise national laws which recognise and protect the work of human rights defenders in line with international law. Welcoming the resolution, ISHR's Eleanor Openshaw said, 'The incorporation of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders into national law is a key element of a safe and enabling environment for human rights defenders.'

The resolution also calls on States to publicly promote the 'importance and validity' of the work of human rights defenders and non-governmental organisations and to educate public officials in this regard. 'Education on the legitimate role of human rights defenders, and high level acknowledgment of the importance of their role, is a key component of the protection of defenders,' Ms Openshaw said.

The resolution also recognises the gender-specific protection needs of [women human rights defenders](#) and acknowledges the importance of the empowerment of women. According to Ms Openshaw, however, whilst these are important statements, the resolution represents a missed opportunity to outline the concrete action States should take to make them a reality. 'As signatories to a recent [General Assembly resolution on the protection of women human rights defenders](#), OAS Member States should have taken the opportunity to use this resolution to articulate concrete regional commitments to implement their obligations at the national level,' she said.

Building on UN Human Rights Council Resolution 22/6, which focused on the criminalisation of human rights defenders, the OAS resolution expresses concern that 'measures governing national security, counterterrorism, association registration and functioning, and public security have been misused to incriminate human rights defenders or to undermine their work and safety'. The resolution also condemns actions that prevent or hinder the work of human rights defenders in the Americas and calls on States to ensure that defenders can engage in peaceful protest and undertake their important work free from excessive use of force, unwarranted restrictions, threats or abuse.

'This is a timely call which should be acted on at the national, regional and international levels. At the national level, States should ensure that all threats and attacks against defenders are fully investigated and perpetrators held to account. At the regional and international levels, defenders should be protected from intimidation and reprisals in connection with their engagement with human rights mechanisms. Consistent with this resolution, it is imperative that all OAS States support stronger UN action to protect human rights defenders and prevent reprisals. They have the opportunity to do just that in the next few weeks by [calling on the UN General Assembly to endorse and take action on UN Human Rights Council Resolution 24/24](#),' Ms Openshaw said.

In addition to calling on States to better protect and support the work of defenders, the resolution also urges the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights to strengthen the Office of the Rapporteur for Human Rights Defenders. 'States and the Commission itself should respond to this call by safeguarding the independence of the Office and increasing the resources, including financial resources, available to it,' Ms Openshaw said.

Finally, the resolution calls for intensified dialogue and cooperation between the Inter-American Commission and the UN Special Rapporteur Human Rights Defenders. 'Strengthening cooperation between regional and

UN rapporteurs is key to ensuring the human rights systems reinforce each others' efforts to increase and sustain protection for defenders,' Ms Openshaw said.

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Photo: Commissioner José de Jesús Orozco Henríquez, IACHR Rapporteur on the Rights of Human Rights Defenders

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