

UN system for accreditation of NGOs must be reformed, Special Rapporteur tells General Assembly

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The Special Rapporteur on freedom of peaceful assembly and association says Member States working within multilateral institutions are legally obliged to ensure the full and effective participation of civil society in UN fora, including by guaranteeing a fair accreditation process for non-governmental organisations.



(New York) - Member States working within multilateral institutions are legally obliged to ensure the full and effective participation of civil society in UN fora, including by guaranteeing a fair accreditation process for non-governmental organisations (NGOs) seeking to participate at the Human Rights Council. This was the call of the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association during the annual presentation of his report to the UN General Assembly.

The Special Rapporteur expressed deep concern about the shrinking space for human rights defenders at the UN. In particular, he accused the UN's Committee on Non-Governmental Organizations, which recommends NGOs to the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) for consultative status, of acting contrary to its purpose by deferring the applications of dozens of human rights NGOs, several for many years.

One particularly troubling example is the case of International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN); despite applying in 2008 and having answered 64 questions from India, the IDSN has not yet received accreditation. Delays have also resulted in the systematic exclusion of NGOs working on issues such as women's rights, and sexual orientation and gender identity.

'ISHR agrees with the Special Rapporteur that a State's commitment to promoting and protecting human rights does not stop at its borders. States must also uphold their human rights obligations in multilateral institutions, including by providing a space for engagement by civil society organisations - free from intimidation and harassment,' said ISHR's Michelle Evans.

'It is regrettable that some members of the Committee on NGOs continue to use strategies to harass and intimidate organisations, by deferring their applications through asking irrelevant or repetitive questions that go far beyond the scope of what organisations are required to submit with their applications,' said Ms Evans.

To remedy the situation, the Special Rapporteur called for a reform of the Committee on NGOs, including by limiting the number of questions that a State can ask an NGO requesting accreditation and by assigning time limits on the process so NGOs did not have to wait so long to be accredited.

'ISHR agrees that a radical overhaul of the system for accreditation of NGOs is urgently needed. We urge States to fully support and implement the Special Rapporteur's proposal,' said Ms Evans.

'Human rights defenders need accreditation to the UN. For many, the international stage is the only place where they can speak out.'

Chile, Norway, the EU, Lithuania, US, Latvia and Switzerland echoed the Special Rapporteur's view that the Committee on NGOs was acting improperly and outside of its mandate when it badgered NGOs with unwarranted questions and unnecessarily deferred applications for consultative status.

Reprisals against human rights defenders carrying out advocacy at the international level was another area of grave concern for the Special Rapporteur. He cited the case of Cao Shunli, a Chinese human rights defender who died in custody of the Chinese authorities after being prevented from travelling to Geneva to participate in the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of China. Reprisals had also been reported in Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bahrain, Colombia, Cuba, Egypt, Guatemala, Israel, and Russia. The Special Rapporteur urged multilateral groups and agencies to act strongly when reprisals occur and to put sanctions on countries that commit reprisals against individuals and associations.

In the interactive dialogue, Latvia, Brazil, Switzerland, Ireland, the US and the EU shared their concerns about the disturbing pattern of attacks, harassment and reprisals against those who cooperate with the UN, calling for condemnation of such acts.

'ISHR welcomes the emphasis of the Special Rapporteur on combating reprisals and intimidation, and agrees that States need to take concrete steps to combat this trend, including by reaching consensus on Human Rights Council resolution 24/24,' said Ms Evans.

'Attacks, intimidation and reprisals against people who work to expose and seek accountability for human rights violations at the UN violate international law and undermine the UN itself.'

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