

UPR: Rise in defender recommendations welcome, but more to be done to ensure impact on ground

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In a [statement](#) to the Council (also available on ISHR's [youtube channel](#)), Ben Leather argued that 'If defenders are safe and active, States have a better chance of implementing their other UPR recommendations'. Mr. Leather applauded the increase in the number of recommendations on human rights defenders made at the 20th UPR and also underlined how strong recommendations on civil society space and freedom of assembly, association and expression will contribute to a safe and enabling environment for defenders.

A need for better quality recommendations

Meanwhile, to a backdrop of debates regarding the quantity of recommendations made at the UPR, a [coalition of 47 NGOs](#), led by [UPR Info](#) and including ISHR, suggested that this discussion was misguided. The focus, they said, should be on quality and specificity, whilst States should not be deterred from making all the recommendations they believe to be necessary. Indeed, a series of recommendations around the same issue can often be key to highlighting a crisis.

ISHR called upon States to act upon the [recent report](#) by the Special Rapporteur for human rights defenders and to use the UPR to echo his call for specific measures to protect the most vulnerable defenders. ISHR's submissions for the 22nd UPR recommended that the [USA](#) take steps to protect whistleblowers and those working on sexual and reproductive rights and that [Jamaica](#) implement measures to protect LGBT activists.

Defenders' champions

ISHR recently compiled a [table](#) of those States which have made the most recommendations related to human rights defenders since the UPR's conception. Norway, the Czech Republic, Ireland, Canada, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Spain, France, Slovakia and the United Kingdom top the list. At the Council, Mr. Leather called upon 'States who have championed human rights defenders elsewhere - as Botswana, Japan and Liechtenstein did in co-sponsoring resolution 24/24 on reprisals - should reinforce those actions by taking a similarly strong stance through the UPR'.

Rich debate on defenders, but Gambia no-show

ISHR had submitted reports on the situation of human rights defenders in [Angola](#), [Egypt](#), [the Gambia](#), [Iran](#), [Italy](#) and [Kazakhstan](#) for this 20th session, and each case was subject to debate at the Council, with the exception of the Gambia. Its session was postponed until the following week, given that the State has not yet responded to OHCHR communications regarding its report. The Council's President was clear that the Gambia's UPR outcomes could not be adopted without State cooperation. ISHR had highlighted grave issues in terms of official restrictions upon defenders and journalists in the country, as well as additional threats for women's rights defenders.

In response to numerous recommendations, the [Egyptian](#) government announced that it is open to dealing with those related to laws restricting civil society, peaceful assembly, freedom of expression, freedom of religion and anti-discrimination, reaffirming that civil society are considered a main partner of the

government. However, human rights groups raised a number of concerns indicating the contrary, with ISHR's Pooja Patel [intervening](#) to demonstrate that 'the violence, intimidation and harassment faced by women human rights defenders, which were raised during Egypt's UPR in November 2014, has only intensified'

ISHR's briefing paper on **Angola** highlights how dissenting voices, human rights defenders and investigative journalists come under routine and serious attack there. Therefore, the State's commitment to implement related recommendations should be celebrated. Nonetheless, implementation should be urgent if the government is to breach what the East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defender Project called a 'serious disconnect' between these commitments and the reality for activists on the ground. Just last week, two human rights defenders were [arrested](#) for their peaceful demonstrations in the province of Cabinda. They remain in detention.

Concerns were raised regarding **Kazakhstan's** rejection of 47 recommendations, including key recommendations relating to freedoms of expression and assembly. A new criminal code came into force 1 January 2015, retaining excessive custodial penalties for libel and defamation and providing for up to five years imprisonment for insulting the President. Human Rights Watch described recent developments in the country as a 'serious decline'.

Meanwhile, the **Iranian** delegation denied the evidence presented by numerous NGOs and member States regarding the imprisonment, threats and harassment of human rights defenders and journalists in the country. Iran rejected 189 out of the 291 recommendations it received.

Lamentably, the Council did not discuss the protection of journalists in **Italy**, despite the State having received recommendations on the issue.

Looking ahead and tackling reprisals

In the General Debate, several States – including Latvia and Paraguay – spoke out in favour of civil society participation in the UPR and condemned [reprisals](#) against human rights defenders who participate in the process.

Meanwhile the United Kingdom read a statement on behalf of 50 States, outlining what they see as the five key challenges to the UPR process, underlining the importance of multi-stakeholder participation, calling for better implementation of recommendations and committing to report on the status of implementation of their own UPRs.

ISHR will continue to work towards strengthening the UPR as a tool for human rights defender protection and has recently submitted briefing papers for the 23rd session on [Australia](#), [Myanmar](#), [Nauru](#), [Oman](#) and Rwanda.

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